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## M. Douglas Meeks: Process Theologian

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MARJORIE HEWITT SUCHOCKI

The purpose of this essay may seem strange: I will argue that implicit within the work of Doug Meeks are assumptions that are grounded in process philosophy, so that to his titles—biblical theologian, liberation theologian, and theology of hope theologian—he should add a fourth: M. Douglas Meeks, Process Theologian. I proceed by comments on his work in *God the Economist*, followed by a description of process philosophy. Drawing out some of the theological implications of process philosophy as developed by process theologians, I then seek to show how Meeks, working explicitly with biblical and theological concepts, is also working implicitly with process concepts—enough to justify naming him a process theologian.

In *God the Economist*, Meeks accomplishes an astonishing feat in the history of theology by turning the long-dominant notion of omnipotence on its head. The primary notion of God within the Western Christian tradition has been that of omnipotence. Twice within the very brief and very early Apostles' Creed there is a reference to God's omnipotence, with nary a mention of the other two assigned characteristics of deity: omniscience and omnipresence. The creed was reflective of the sensitivities of its age that God, to be God, must assuredly be all-powerful. In this, Greek philosophy rather than biblical notions most strongly shaped the emerging Christian doctrine of God, and God's power then became the interpretive lens through which God's knowledge and God's presence were understood. Omniscience understood through omnipotence led to various theories of predestination (for how could so little a thing as human freedom shape

the activities of an omnipotent deity?), and divine presence was most often understood through the analogy of a king's power present throughout his realm.

Yet in *God the Economist*, Meeks very intentionally challenges omnipotence and its corollary, domination, as defining characteristics of God. In doing so, Meeks works primarily through biblical texts and traditional doctrines of the Trinity. His work finds its place within liberation theology, both in its North American forms and in their European counterparts, notably through Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope. In all forms of these theologies, the notion of God as omnipotent is so counter to the experience of oppression that the power of God must itself be transformed from a power over to a power with. Liberation theologians usually repudiate God as a dominating power, embracing instead God's empowering power that enables humans to resist dominating oppressions. So too, Meeks finds that the Bible, once one ceases to read it through the lens of Greek philosophy, is a loud cry for liberation from economies of oppression to the renewing work of the economy of God. Omnipotence crumbles; in its place omnipresence becomes the defining mark of deity, grounding the new understanding of God's power in an empowering power of presence.

In Meeks's brilliant analysis of biblical texts, God is economist in the biblical sense of the word, establishing and enabling communities as inclusive households, ever vigilant for the physical well-being of all inhabitants. Meeks thoroughly repudiates a God of coercive, dominating power. In its place, God is an economist, providing life-giving structures for society. The motif of the "stranger within your gates" extends such hospitality to those outside the household. Justice as well-being cannot be confined; to limit justice anywhere is to challenge justice everywhere.

When "power" is so radically restructured in and through omnipresence, implications follow for the other member of the "omni" triad, omniscience. When we begin with omnipresence as the basis of God's power and knowledge, then we find that the "omni" usually associated with these terms in reference to God becomes a term connoting "all-relational" instead of its usual function of ultimacy.

As a process theologian, I am interested in the implicit as well as explicit restructuring of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence that occurs through Meeks's work, finding process concepts rampant. He provides biblical and trinitarian arguments; but if we seek the philosophical grounding of his conceptual structure, we must turn to process thought.

Process, almost alone among philosophical alternatives, strengthens notions of God as engendering liberating power in society, primarily because God works through a power of presence. In order to explore these issues in relation to Meeks's work, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of process philosophy.

### Process Philosophy in Brief

Process philosophy provides a model for understanding existence within a radically relational world. Throughout Christian history, theologians have utilized philosophical models of reality in their explication of Christian faith. Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus were woven into Christian faith for much of Christian history, supplemented with models drawn from nominalism in the late Middle Ages, followed by the Enlightenment philosophers. Phenomenology, existentialisms, and linguistic philosophies played roles in twentieth-century philosophy. With few exceptions, "substance" was the basic philosophical category, with substance being that which needs nothing other than itself in order to exist. In a world of relativity physics, this becomes a category mistake: nothing exists apart from relation to that which is other to itself.

Henri Bergson in the nineteenth century and Samuel Alexander in the early twentieth began the process of reforming the philosophical understanding of reality, moving away from the classical notion of substance toward views of constant creativity. Emergence took the place of substance. Alfred North Whitehead, likewise, asked questions about reality that pushed toward answers of emergence, creativity, dynamism, and relationality. His *Process and Reality* was published in 1929; it represents his answer to questions raised by relativity physics: what must the fundamental nature of reality be, if at its most elemental level it occurs in droplets of relationality? Underlying our everyday experience of selves and tables and chairs and all that we construe as our "world," there is a radical indeterminacy of constant becoming, and this becoming is radically relational. Whitehead coined the term "actual occasion" (or, when the notion of God is included, "actual entity") to refer to each droplet of becoming. Most of *Process and Reality* is an exploration of what might—or must—be the case for these occasions to occur at all.

Because Whitehead was discussing reality at a level never before addressed in philosophy, he invented a vocabulary to describe what had not

been described before. On the one hand, his new vocabulary had the advantage of shedding suppositions built into all our philosophical concepts, thus allowing a keener analysis. Yet on the other, precisely because the language was new, Whitehead's philosophy defied easy access. His Gifford Lectures, which became *Process and Reality*, famously began with a rather large audience, but as the five lectures progressed, the audience became smaller and smaller—a mere five persons attended the final lecture. Despite the challenge of summarizing so complex a system, I do so because it provides an astonishing basis for understanding the theological concept of God's omnipresence and therefore allows further explication of how we might interpret God's power and wisdom as grounded in God's presence.

Imagine, then, this "droplet of experience," this "actual occasion," not before all existence but in the midst of existence, coming into existence in response to its particular past and in light of its possible future. Because the actual occasion presupposes a past of many actual occasions and a future of occasions that must take account of what this actual occasion has become, the oddity occurs that we must build its description even while presupposing its description. No wonder that Whitehead needed a new vocabulary to describe so relational a basis to all existence! So, then, imagine that each finished actual occasion demands an accounting of itself and that our now imagined droplet of experience, our actual occasion, emerges in response to these demands.

Notice at once that any emerging occasion out of an entire past's demands is faced with an overwhelming problem of selection from forced alternatives. Each occasion in the past demands its own repetition in the present; its own conclusion contains a strong appetite for some form of continuance in the emerging entity. This is the inescapable relationality of existence. The very emergence of the becoming occasion is predicated upon its responsive feelings of its past.

Whitehead insisted on the term "feelings," even though he was not discussing reality at the level of sentient beings. Indeed, he used his own term, "prehension," as a synonym for "feelings." By these words—feelings or prehensions—he indicated a kind of transfer of energy from one occasion that impels the becoming of another. From the point of view of the transmitting occasion, these feelings are an appetite for its future; from the point of view of the emerging occasion, these feelings are its initial formation that call it into being as it takes into its emergent self the appetitive feelings of the other. Relation is constitutive of reality.

If there were simply one occasion in the past calling forth a new becoming in a new present, then reality would simply be an everlasting continuance of itself with neither variation nor novelty. But the past is incomprehensively vast, which leads to the problem mentioned above of selectivity. Out of a multitude of feelings of a multitude of entities, each of which demands its own repetition, how is anything to become at all? Why does not the whole process break down into absolute chaos? How is there order? This very problem is why Whitehead is forced to include a notion of God in his system. He resisted recourse to God. He adamantly refused a sort of Molierean solution of the knight dressed in shining armor, arriving on stage at the last minute, mounted on a great white horse, unsnarling all the knots left over from the drama. If Whitehead had to use a notion of God to introduce order and novelty in the midst of chaos, then Whitehead thought he could only do so responsibly if the notion of God he developed was consistent with the whole of his analysis. God would not be an exception to the metaphysical principles laid down by the system as a whole but would in fact be their chief exemplification.

And so, apart from immediate recourse to Part V of *Process and Reality*, think of it this way. Each actual occasion will be described in terms of its emergence through physical feelings of everything in its past—including now its feelings of God's feelings for its possible future. Each actual occasion will then be analyzed as proceeding through a process of comparing its various feelings, negating some, adapting others, toward a vision of what it might become. This vision can be an inchoate sense of what might yet be, given what has been received. Yet in some basic sense it is a mental pole, balancing the physical pole of its beginnings. The process of becoming moves from a physical pole derived from its past and from God, through a process of comparisons, evaluations, and judgments that ultimately results in a satisfaction of the whole process. This satisfaction is Janus-faced. On the one hand, it is completion, looking back on itself. It has finished its task; it has become. On the other hand, it is appetite. Given that it has become, a new future can emerge in which its own subjectivity will be objectively included. Just as it has taken the past into itself, even so its immediate successors will take its own feelings into their becoming selves.

Notice the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity that occurs in the whole process. Subjectivity always refers to the becomingness of the present. Everything that becomes, every actual occasion, is its own subject, determining itself out of its past and its possibilities. Yet once it is finished,

its subjectivity is over. It now becomes data for a new subject; it is objectified by the becoming future. Relative to its own subjectivity, the entity is free to become as it will within its parameters. Still its freedom dies with itself; it is object relative to others. This facet of the process model leads to interesting permutations when taken to the level of our everyday world of being a self amidst others, where intensity of value calls on each to reckon with the subjectivity, not the objectivity, of all becoming others. Further exploration at this point would deflect us too much from the task at hand, which is to explore the process basis for insisting upon God's omnipresence as fundamental to all existence.

The point of these last two paragraphs is that each finite actual occasion begins with the physical pole and concludes in satisfaction with the mental pole. There is an inexorable procession from feelings of otherness to the satisfaction of one's own becoming through the mental pole. The problem of suggesting that God is required to provide a basis for novelty and order instead of random chaos and at the same time to keep the understanding of God within the metaphysical principles of the actual entity is that if God also progresses from physical pole to the mental pole, then God as well as everything else requires a basis for its future beyond the resources of the past alone. We have infinite regress, not resolution. So Whitehead played with this innovative notion: what if God, as an actual entity, exhibits all the metaphysical qualities of the actual occasion but in reverse order? What if God begins everlastingly in the mental pole and progresses through ever incorporating the world into the divine self through the physical pole? Would this solve the problem of infinite regress and at the same time provide a means for introducing novelty and order into the world—indeed, the universe?

Whitehead begins the arduous process of reconfiguring the notion of God in a universe like ours, where radical relationality at the most fundamental level produces a universe of stars and nebulae, comets and asteroids, planets and people and all manner of growing things in various combinations of order and chaos, stability and novelty. The mental pole is a vision of what might be, the home of possibilities. Suppose that God everlastingly "begins" in a mental pole, including the satisfaction that adheres to each mental pole. If God is everlasting, then God's mental pole, before and with all times, must be an infinite vision of all possibilities whatsoever, in infinite varieties of combinations, like a constantly moving panorama of ever-shifting combinations of possibilities but always exhibiting harmony: beauty,

order, zest, adventure, peace. An essential dynamism within satisfaction is necessary if God everlastingly “begins” in the mental pole. Nor would this be a beginning in the temporal sense; to the contrary, for metaphysical reasons, it would have to be eternal and intensely dynamic.

What, then, of God’s physical pole? Whitehead defines this pole as the feeling of others. Through these feelings, these “prehensions,” an entity takes that which is other into the becoming self. If God exemplifies the metaphysics, then God everlastingly feels every actual entity upon its completion, taking the feeling of that entity into Godself.

The physical pole is integrated into the mental through a process of comparisons and judgments, into the vision of what might be, which then yields a satisfaction that looks beyond itself toward possible futures in which it is included. Beginning rather than ending with the mental pole, God’s integration of the world within the divine self would be into a vision that is primordial, everlastingly actualizing it in infinite permutations of harmony. Because of the reversal of the polar structure, God is always complete and always in the process of completion. God’s satisfaction, likewise, undergirds the everlasting integration of all things within God and yields ever new possibilities for the becoming world.

Return, now, to the becoming occasion in the world. This emergent occasion must feel every entity in its relative past—but God is in that relative past as an everlasting satisfaction everlastingly feeling new possibilities for the world in every standpoint. Bear in mind that God has already felt every element in the becoming occasion’s past—God, and only God, knows everything the becoming entity has to deal with, and God has integrated all entities in that past within God, judging and transforming the past in accordance with the divine satisfaction. Emerging from this satisfaction are appetitive feelings for what possibilities are now relevant to the world, together with a valuation of those possibilities in terms of what can lead to the most complexity, the most intensity, the most good. Thus the possibilities God feels for the emergent entity are relevant to that past but provide possibilities for how that past might yield a novel future in the emergent entity. Thus the entity’s feelings of God along with its past is a feeling of ways that it might deal creatively with its welter of influences. So Whitehead calls this feeling from God an “initial aim,” a guiding influence in light of the past. God becomes the source of novelty that is (to adopt a phrase made popular in womanist theology) “a way out of no way.”



What the emerging occasion does with this initial aim from God is up to the occasion itself. It is a guiding influence, not a controlling influence. Its power is its relevance to the situation. Yet since this aim stems from God's own feeling of possibilities relative to the emerging world, depending upon the complexity of the emerging entity's location, the aim from God can be like a cluster of possible ways to deal with the past. Thus the emergent occasion can feel more than one compatible alternative within the guidance received from God. An irreducible freedom exists within every entity to become itself within relevant alternatives. The occasion is finally responsible for what it does with its alternatives. Thus God's power within this system is a persuasive power, not coercive power, and a guiding rather than a controlling power. It is ultimately a power based upon relational presence.

In a radically relational universe, God's omnipresence is the basis of God's power and God's knowledge. God continuously receives the newly completed entities of the world within Godself, there to do with the world as God will in the process of judging that world. God knows the world "feelingly," by feeling the world as it felt itself. As God integrates these feelings within the depths of the divine nature, the world is transformed within God according to God's vision. This, of course, becomes a basis for a process eschatology. God is the resurrection of the world, the judgment of the world, and the transformer of the world—in theological parlance, God is redeemer and perfecter of the world. Yet it also forms the basis of God's knowledge. In most of the Christian tradition, omniscience was an extension of omnipotence and as such it fell prey to conundrums such as requiring God to know things that had not yet happened as if they had happened. The temporal universe lost its temporality within the knowledge of God, who always saw the world as a completed whole. Finite freedom was either illusory or a mystery over against the ultimacy of God's power and God's knowledge.

When one starts with omnipresence instead of omnipotence, the whole equation shifts. Because of divine presence, God knows the world as it has known itself in its infinite variety of standpoints. God knows the past as past relative to the becoming world in all its standpoints. God knows what possibilities are currently relevant to the becoming world. God knows what probable trajectories could take place, given the choices taking place in the becoming world. God's knowledge is perfect because God knows reality as it was, as it is, and as it can be from an infinite variety of



perspectives. Because God is present to reality as it is, God knows reality as it is; and such knowledge is perfect.

The power of God's presence is, as discussed above, persuasive. Yet it is also enabling: God offers the world "a way out of no way," a possibility that is at the same time a power to become that possibility. Apart from the aim of God, there is only chaos; with the aim of God, chaos becomes the cradle for creative evolution—not simply once, in a long-ago past, but continuously.

The theological category most apt to describe the omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience of God in process thought is "grace." The "omni" in the words, of course, has shifted in meaning from "ultimacy" to "all-relational." Grace does not depend upon merit. God is not present to us because we deserve it. God is present to us because it is in the nature of God to be present to us and in the character of God to be present to us as an ever-present help in time of trouble and, indeed, in all times.

Theologically considered, God's grace goes before us; it is "prevenient." Grace calls us to conformity to God and enables that conformity—as is so, in process thought, with the initial aim. Theologically considered, God's grace is justifying or pardoning. The connotation is that grace is cleansing, a washing away of that which hinders us and a making of all things new. The basis of this justifying work is God's taking of our whole selves, including our sin, into Godself, along with its consequence of death. Within God, God overturns death into judgment and resurrection, from which new possibilities for finite life constantly stream.

Philosophically, God continuously takes finite existence, including its consequences, into Godself for the sake of judgment and transformation that can yield new possibilities for renewed life in the world. Theologically considered, God's grace is perfecting, sanctifying. Philosophically, God's aims are toward moving beyond debilitating pasts into new forms of intensity and complexity, toward the end of greater communities of well-being. "Grace" is a theological term expressing dynamics that are essential to process philosophy.

### **Process and *God the Economist***

This excursion into process philosophy and theology brings us back again to the issues so profoundly developed by Doug Meeks in *God the Economist*. Meeks uses biblical exegesis and the implications of God as triune to

make his powerful argument for justice in communities of well-being. Undergirding contemporary economic theories and practices are models of domination that gain wealth for the few at the expense of the welfare of the many. Models of domination, in their turn, reflect ideals embedded within the very notion of omnipotence as the ultimate symbol of supreme power. Meeks breaks the model of omnipotence, drawing instead from liberating implications found in biblical and Christian theologies of a very different kind of power: a power for communal well-being.

Meeks is not doing philosophical theology. Every theology, biblical or otherwise, has within it implicit assumptions about the nature of reality, and I am suggesting that the entirety of *God the Economist* rests upon assumptions developed explicitly within process philosophy and its counterpart, process theology. The most obvious of these assumptions, of course, is the redefinition of divine power. For Meeks, as for process, divine power is relational: it is a calling and enabling power. Further, it is a power that gives of itself. While Meeks develops this in and through biblical witness, process develops it through its analysis of the fundamental nature of existence. The initial aim is not only calling and enabling but stems from God's own being; it is a self-sharing aim. Neither in Meeks nor in process thought is God's self-sharing coercive.

In *God the Economist*, God's creative and empowering call is always toward communal well-being. Meeks is at pains to develop this in terms of the entirety of human life—our physical needs, our need for work, our relation to property, our relation to one another in communities seeking the welfare of all. Philosophically, God's aim is always communal in orientation. God aims at intensity of experience, and such intensity depends upon increasing capacities for reciprocal well-being. Aims are always given to individual actual occasions in light of the widest possible good in ever-wider communities of well-being. Aims are social, never individualistic. How could they be, given that all reality is relational through and through? Thus process philosophy undergirds Meeks's redevelopment of economics and community.

It is fairly simple to point out how the relational theology emerging from process philosophy underlies the work Meeks develops from biblical exegesis. Yet he also relies, throughout his work, on a particular notion of the economic trinity. For Meeks, as for the tradition, the economic trinity is the extra-trinitarian expression of the inner-trinitarian life of God. Process philosophy is not trinitarian in the usual Christian sense of the

term. Joseph Bracken is perhaps an exception here, developing out of process metaphysics a communal notion of God as trinity. While I also have a communal notion of God, neither my work nor Bracken's is traditionally trinitarian, whereas Meeks's is. Yet I think even here, if we look at Meeks's description of God as triune, there are foundational overtones in process philosophy. I refer specifically to the qualities Meeks attaches to God as creator, redeemer, and perfecter, traditionally called Father, Son, and Spirit. While the quality of suffering is usually attributed to God incarnate as Son, Meeks claims that the fullness of God is involved in suffering love. Creation involves suffering in God's struggle against the power of the *nihil*. Can this be so in process philosophy? Rooted in relativity physics, can one speak of creation not only as a self-giving act but as an act also involving suffering? In a profound sense, one can. God creates by feeling every element of creation as it has felt itself. In process parlance, this is not an option for God; it is essential to the very nature of God. It is the nature of God to feel every other as it has become and as its future might yet be. Out of these feelings, integrated by God into the depths of the divine nature, God generates new possibilities for the ongoing good of the world. Insofar as the world God experiences contains suffering, then God provides ways beyond that suffering by taking that suffering into the divine self. If we leap from process philosophy to Christian history, is this not the great revelation on the cross? Haven't Christians always said that God takes human sin within God's incarnate self for the sake of redeeming us from sin and evil?

Utilizing trinitarian theology, Meeks speaks of God's perfecting work as the work of the Spirit. This, too, involves the self-giving and the suffering of God. Within a process framework, saving the world is for the sake of perfecting the world within God and in the ongoing history of the world. Eschatologically, the world is perfected as it is taken into God's own self in a work of judgment and transformation that finally draws the world into conformity with God. Yet as Whitehead notes, that which is done in heaven feeds back into the ongoing possibilities for the world. Out of the world's integration within God come transforming possibilities for the ongoing world, reflecting as much as possible under conditions of finitude the very nature of God. God's nature is fundamentally self-giving, empathic, relational. The reflection of God's nature in history is exemplified most fully in communities of inclusive well-being. Process philosophy does not use trinitarian language. Yet the qualities attributed to God in Meeks's thoroughly trinitarian *God the Economist* are philosophically grounded most fully within process philosophy.

For both Meeks and a process analysis of existence, apart from the presence of God there would be no world. Apart from the presence of God there would be no redemption, no moving from destruction to resurrection. Apart from the presence of God there would be no resolution to the world's sorrows beyond the tragedies of history. Apart from the presence of God, there would be no presence at all. With the presence of God there is creation, redemption, perfection. With the presence of God, there is a power for justice in the world.

On the basis of the deep consonance between the theological vision Meeks develops in *God the Economist* and the philosophical vision developed by Alfred North Whitehead, I suggest that we recognize this consonance by giving Meeks a new title. He is indeed a biblical theologian and a trinitarian theologian. He can be called a liberation theologian, and a theologian in the tradition of Moltmann's theology of hope. He is also M. Douglas Meeks: Process Theologian.