The Authority of the Bible for Process Theology

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Introduction and Method

The three most frequent criticisms that I hear about Process Theology are: (1) it is way too complicated; (2) it is not Christian; and (3) its criticisms of the Christian tradition are straw-man arguments that fail to take into account the richness of the history of Christian theology. To various degrees, I agree with all three of these criticisms. Given the years I have spent studying the metaphysics of Bergson, James and Whitehead, I simply cannot deny the complexity of the system nor do I think a defense is necessary. Many non-Process Christian theologians do well without fully exploring their implicit metaphysics. The recent history of theology is one of being caught up—to various degrees—in the concerns of the philosophers; when philosophy catches a cold, theology gets pneumonia. The same kind of problem also surfaces in the areas of epistemology and hermeneutics. I do not think it an understatement to say that mainline Protestant and Catholic theology has been stuck in prolegomena for quite a long time. This is not an argument against the value of philosophy or a claim that theologians should ignore what philosophers are doing. Rather, I want to raise the question why we *need* to be entrapped by philosophy's concerns. The physicists, historians and sociologists do not seem to have this problem. Physicists do not wait for the epistemic problems to be sorted before they fire up the supercolliders; they set about their work and worry about the philosophy in the pub after the experiments are run. Theologians, like practitioners of other disciplines, should be able to use the results of philosophy without having to wait for (or work out) their solution before engaging in their own work.

As for the claim that Process *theology* is not Christian, it is both true and false. As Theodore Walker says, when explaining why he is reluctant to self-identify as a Process theologian, "there is a lot of junk in that bag." Process *philosophy* is primarily an ontological metaphysics that has a concept of God as a core component, but not all Process philosophers are theists.[1] There is also a strong ethical trend within those who claim to be a part of the Process tradition. Many theistic Process philosophers (and theologians) find the descriptions of God that are found in the Christian tradition to be immoral, evil and unworthy of worship. Whitehead, Bergson, Hartshorne and many other Process philosophers had connections to Christianity but did not claim to be Christian; e.g. Hartshorne's father was an Anglican priest. For the purpose of this paper, I will limit the scope to theistic Process theologians who self-identify as Christian. Attempting to formulate a view of the authority of all those (Christian and otherwise) who hold to a Platonic metaphysics would be an impossible challenge—likewise for those who hold to a Whiteheadian metaphysics.

The third concern, that Process theology presents a straw-man when attacking what it claims are the problematic teachings of the faith, has a lot of validity. One part of this is a response to the criticism of complexity; in trying to write books accessible by a (philosophically and theologically) lay audience, the tendency to simplify the Process position also leads to an over simplification of the position they are trying to refute. Another part of the straw-man argument is that Process theology has not been engaged with the wider work that has been going on in theology. Historically, metaphysics was a *bête noir* in the academy for most of the 20th century—especially during Process philosophy's nascency. Analytic Philosophy (the other major English philosophic tradition) was

1. C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993), 4-5.

decidedly atheist until the 1970's. As a discipline, Analytic theology is just now being defined.[2] Without strong conversation partners, Process theologians were (intentionally or unintentionally) able to pick the weakest arguments as their targets without much objection. The Neo-Orthodox theologians, with their explicit rejection of philosophy and natural theology, were not seen as a potential dialogue partner. Many Process theologians have had a rather dismissive attitude of huge swathes of the Christian tradition without seriously engaging it. Most Process theologians have been avowed Liberal Protestants, seeking to respect "all that is legitimate in modern secularity."[3] Some are on the far end of the liberal spectrum, willing to discard any part of the Christian tradition that does not cohere with the findings of science and their moral and metaphysical commitments.[4] In my assessment, this deficiency is not fatal to the tradition. A serious engagement with the deep riches of Christian theology through history would take time and effort, but it is not an impossible task; the moral and metaphysical insights of the Process tradition still have much to offer.

Initial complexity is not a criticism that should cause someone to reject a system of thought. I find, after years of working within the system, that the metaphysics are actually quite simple and elegant.[5] The fact that many Process philosophers are not Christian is not a worry, given that many Aristotelian philosophers are not Christian and yet many Christian theologians use Aristotle's

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2. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009).
3. Russell Pregeant, "Scripture and Revelation," in *Handbook of Process Theology,* ed. Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 67; Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity: 1950-2005* (Louisville, KT: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 293.
4. Donald G. Bloesch, "Process Theology and Reformed Theology," in *Process Theology,* ed. Ronald H. Nash, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 37.
5. A comment from the computer field about the UNIX operating system (a notoriously complex and difficult system to learn) applies here, "UNIX is extremely simple, it just takes a genius to understand its simplicity." I am not claiming to be a genius, but that one must, in a sense, be converted to the Process way of seeing the world to understand how simple it is.

philosophy without a worry. The fact that Process thought has not been in engagement with the full riches of Christian theology is a worry but not a fatal one. There is serious work by the current generation of Process theologians to explore the Christian doctrines in all their forms and discern their viability and applicability within the Process view of God and the world.

This essay will set aside the first two concerns and focus primarily on one tiny element of the third, examining the role of the Bible in Process theology. The guiding question is: *what does it mean for the Bible to be an authority within Process theology* ***for these theologians****?* There is not one single answer: some theologians give a very rich role to the Bible in their theological works; others see it simply as a historical document. The primary method of analysis will be to look at the explicit claims representative Process theologians make about the authority of the Bible and to evaluate how they actually use the Bible in their writings. I prefer to be credulous about claims people make, but often we fail to live into our own claims in spite of our best efforts. I do not think any of the authors I review intentionally violate their own claims. The theologians evaluated will be from the line connected with Whitehead through Cobb and Hartshorne. My own preference is toward Bergson and James and I would like to have evaluated non-Whiteheadian thinkers as well, but Christian theologians in this camp are a rare group indeed.

Common Themes

All the authors under consideration agree that we can come to some knowledge about God through the world and scripture is a part of the world. For some, but not all, the Bible is a unique locus of true information about God and God's activities in the world. The process notion that power—especially God's power—is convincing rather than coercive, engenders a way of

understanding scriptures authority as well. Ronald Farmer's discussion of the nature of authority helps make this point:

> The nature of authority arising from a process view of reality is persuasive rather than coercive: 'it is the attraction of an invitation, the appeal of intrinsic worth or the motivating vision of possibility." […] In the process model, then, authority is adequate, not absolute. Because partial knowledge and partial truth are all that is available, dogmatic claims on any subject are entirely inappropriate.[6]

Scripture's authority comes from its reliable ability to transform our understanding of God in positive ways, not its inerrancy. The Christian community preserves, transmits and uses the Bible because it is effective in the role assigned to it. There is a high value on understanding scripture as contextual and historical; the products of the historical-critical method are valued.[7] But, most of the authors do not limit their understanding of scripture to the products of the historical scholars. Most insist that it is necessary for us to re-appropriate the biblical material into our own lives.

The premium placed on reason and natural theology means that, on the whole, there is a "lower" view of the authority of scripture than in mainstream American Christianity (however that is construed). There is a general consensus that the Bible must be reasonable; historical or scientific facticity are not necessary or even important if the content is still vital and relevant without being *true* in a narrow understanding of what truth is. Since there is a general rejection of a strong distinction between natural and special revelation (examined more fully in the section on Suchocki, page 9), the claims made concerning God's nature or acts in the Bible may be seen as authoritative without overriding what we know of God through "natural" revelation. That is, if all other data

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6. Ronald L. Farmer, *Beyond the Impasse: The Promise of a Process Hermeneutic*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics, vol. 13 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 127. (quoting Lundeen, "The Authority of the Word in a Process Perspective,"291-296)
7. Pregeant, "Scripture and Revelation," 71.

points in an opposite direction from a scriptural claim, the scriptural claim can be set aside or read as a historical claim that has no bearing on our current work. Lewis Ford captures this line of thinking when he says:

> Our justification for the appeal of divine persuasion is broadly philosophical: its inherent reasonableness, its applicability to all we know about the world we live in, and its consonance with our best ethical and religious insights. […] We can recommend process theism […] for the hermeneutical task of translating these traditions into a systematic context appropriate for our temporary situation, without thereby losing Israel's peculiar witness to the action of God in history.[8]

That Israel's history reveals God is neither dismissed nor taken for granted. The same holds true for Jesus, and, for Hindu Process theologians, the *vedas.*[9] That God is revealed in the world, and therefore through histories of various peoples, is almost taken for granted by Process theists. What what kind and degree of authority these records of historical encounters with God have varies greatly within the Process tradition.

Representative Figures

John B. Cobb, Jr.

Given John B. Cobb, Jr.'s pivotal role in the development of Christian Process theology, it seems natural to start with his statements on biblical authority. Cobb seems to assume that the Bible does have authority, but he is concerned with how it arose, "we cannot go to the Bible to learn straightforwardly what kind of authority it has for us."[10] The authority of the Bible is not self-

8. Lewis S. Ford, *The Lure of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 27-28.
9. Jeffery D. Long, "A Whiteheadian Vedanta: An Outline of a Hindu Process Theology," in *Handbook of Process Theology,* ed. Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 262.
10. John B. Cobb, *Becoming a Thinking Christian* (Abingdon Press, 1993), 57.

validating. Cobb frequently claims that the only claim for authority of scripture to be found in the Bible is that it is useful for teaching, reproof and ascetic instruction (2 Tim. 3:16). Cobb uses this as an argument against biblicism or granting "absolute" authority to the Bible; the implied argument seems to be that if God wanted us to give absolute authority to the Bible, why didn't God convey that desire in the Bible? The notion of the Bible having absolute authority is non-biblical and therefore the position is incoherent. Cobb's position is that we should be modest in foisting authority on the Bible because the Bible is modest in its own claims to authority. But, this only identifies what kind of authority the Bible does not have; what about what authority it does have? For Cobb, the role of scripture is to form or maintain identity, "to abandon scriptural authority is to abandon Christian identity or, at least, an inclusive Christian identity."[11]

Cobb, a Methodist Elder, uses the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" as a model for getting at what he means by authority when he claims that, "authentic theological work always deals with Scripture, with tradition, with experience and with reason. All for are, for us Christians, internal—not external or imposed—norms. […] What Scripture is as authority and how it functions as authority only emerges in the actual course of theological work."[12] There is a relationship between our identity as Christian and our use of the Bible. We turn to the Bible because we are Christian and we are Christian because we turn to the Bible. It would not be reasonable to expect a Christian to turn to the Gita or for a Muslim to turn to the Bible for their theological work. What we call scripture and understand as God's (primary) revelation (for us) is, in part, what gives us our religious identity; "to choose Christian identity is to choose to share in a tradition that judges itself repeatedly in relation

11. Ibid., 58.
12. Ibid., 61.

to the Bible."[13] And, "the authority of one accords the Bible is a function of one's commitment to participating in and transmitting the Christian tradition."[14] That does not mean that Christians cannot find God revealed in the Gita or Koran, but that our primary locus of theological labor is mediated through our use of the Bible.

Identity-forming authority does not require agreement. The Bible gives us our Christian identity, as we are willing to engage with it and the tradition that has transmitted it to us. Authentic Christian belief, in Cobb's view, requires that scientific and historical knowledge be taken into account and allowed to critique and qualify biblical propositions; that is, Christians must find the Bible's claims to be convincing for them to have any authority. For Cobb, the authority of the Bible for theology is that we stand in relationship to it in our self-identity as Christians. That relationship can be one of agreement and disagreement with various parts. It cannot be one of apathy or non-engagement.

Using De George's helpful categories, Cobb's understanding of the authority of the Bible is *de facto* and arises from the community's identification of the Bible as central to their identity formation.[15] In some Christian communities this becomes a *de jure* authority—doctrinal positions on the authority of the Bible are formulated. A community having a *de jure* position on the authority of the Bible does not imply that the community construes that authority as absolute or even primary;

13. Ibid., 68.
14. John B. Cobb, *Process Perspective: Frequently Asked Questions About Process Theology*, ed. Jeanyne B. Slettom (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 70.
15. Richard T. De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1985).

Cobb's own use of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral or the Catholic Tridentine formulation of scripture and tradition being co-equal authorities are examples of *de jure* authority not being absolute.

In some of Cobb's writings, scriptural references appear as direct quotations but never with any frequency. In many works (*God and the World*, *A Christian Natural Theology*), any references to scripture are conspicuously absent. Quotes from Whitehead's books are far more frequent and extensive—this may be because it is unreasonable to assume knowledge of Whitehead's writings and more reasonable to assume that the reader has a knowledge of the biblical concepts being used. However, given the claim that "to abandon scriptural authority is to abandon Christian identity or at least an inclusive Christian identity," it seems odd that Cobb would neglect to demonstrate how scripture forms our identity.[16]

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki

Explicit statements are difficult to find in Suchocki's work. In my re-reading of *God-Christ-Church*, I was unable to find the words "Bible," "scripture" or "authority."[17] Her careful use of language leads her to show the degrees of intensity between natural and special revelation. Special revelation is not equated with the Bible, but rather it is "the unfolding of the character of God through the history of Israel and Jesus; this mode of revelation is redemptive, addressing the distortions of sin."[18] Suchocki is careful to not define special and general revelation as two opposing things; rather, they are different degrees of intensity of the same thing. This line of thinking, and deep appreciation for the possibility of natural theology, is prevalent in Process theology; indeed, it is

16. Cobb, "Becoming a Thinking Christian," 58.
17. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1982).
18. Ibid., 49.

one of the central concerns of Whitehead's system that it can be completely discernible without any appeal to special revelation—that God is knowable within the bounds of empirical and reasonable human knowledge.

The role of revelation, both special and natural, is to draw the world into the image of God. Given God's non-coercive power with the world, this is not a simple act of will on God's part. The world must respond. Revelation, likewise, is never completely clear. We are only able to understand the revelation as we are able to discern and make sense of it. The exceedingly clear moments are what we call special revelation. The authority that these moments have are their compelling, cogent and powerful nature. Their authority comes from their ability to resonate powerfully with what we already know about God through other revelation. The history of Israel and of Jesus are revelatory in how accurately they conveyed true *understanding* of God to people. However, this understanding must be translated into symbols and language to represent the revelatory event; the ability of the biblical authors to accurately transmit the event "makes impossible any equation of scripture with truth."[19] Authority, then, is tied to the revelation, not the resulting scripture. This is seen in how freely Suchocki references scriptural stories without directly quoting them or providing specific references.

In her theology of preaching, she often will quote a brief passage of a scriptural and give an exegetical comment. She does cite full references, in many cases. Her example of weaving traditions together is helpful in understanding how she can discuss Luther, Paul, Kierkegaard and Genesis in less than two pages—"The story of the tradition is the weaving of these symbols into now one

19. Pregeant, "Scripture and Revelation," 70.

configuration and now another in a variety of trajectories. Christian identity is largely a function of how the symbols have been woven theologically within a particular trajectory within the wider tradition."[20]

Schubert Ogden

For Ogden, the claims made by theology must meet the criteria of being both appropriate and credible. A theological claim is appropriate "only insofar as the understanding expressed by its concepts is that also expressed by the primary symbols of the *normative witness*." And a claim is credible if "it meets the relevant conditions of truth universally established with human existence."[21] This twin standard means that the normative witness of a given faith stands in judgement by universal criteria of truth. For a theological claim to have merit, it must be both faithful to its own normative framework and the normative framework of human existence. The goal then, for Ogden, is to isolate the normative witness that is most likely to meet the 'relevant conditions of truth universally established with human experience.' He locates this in the Jesus-*kerygma*—the collection of stories about the pre-resurrection Jesus that seem to most accurately reveal the historical Jesus. The products of historical biblical criticism and works such as the Jesus Seminar, then, are extremely important for Ogden's understanding of the *what* of the Christian witness. Anything that does not cohere with this normative core of the Christian witness is adiaphora or, worse, unnecessary baggage making the faith incoherent. The theological task is to refine the *kerygma* from the dross of scripture:

> The witness to which theological assertions must be appropriate is not the *scriptural* witness typically spoken of in most postliberal Protestant theology, but, rather, the *apostolic* witness, which is to be

20. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Whispered Word: A Theology of Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 39-40.

21. Schubert M. Ogden, *On Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1986), 4-5. Emphasis mine.

> discerned by critical interpretation of the earliest layer of Christian tradition or kerygma. But this means that the first essential procedure involved in the actual use of scripture as a theological authority is not so much hermeneutical as historical. Specifically, it is the historical procedure of reconstruction the history of tradition of which the writings of the New Testament are the documentation, so as thereby to identify the earliest layer in this tradition, from which alone the *true* "canon within the canon" is to be discerned.[22]

The authority of the Bible is as a resource which contains the Jesus-*kerygma*, which is the *true* normative source for theological work; "the canon of scripture retains a unique place with respect to the theological task […] it is the sole primary source in which the primary authority of Christian theology is to be found."[23]

The second criteria, a theological claim's credibility to universal human experience, is how Ogden explains the importance of science, especially historical research, in biblical studies. At the same time, it makes theological claims subject to a whole host of criteria absolutely foreign to theology as typically understood. That the kind of knowledge that theology gives is the same as that which science gives is a dubious claim at best. Science, when it is honest with itself, produces provisional explanatory theories to explain our observations. Theology seeks to provide valid truth claims about God and God's relation to the world.

Ogden seems to misplace his metaphysical commitments when it comes to his understanding of the revelatory power of scripture. Of course the historical witness to Jesus is the core of the Christian faith—few Christians would deny this—but to reduce the authority of scripture to its role as the sole primary source for the Jesus-*kerygma* is to forget the relation of the past to the present in

22. Ibid., 64-65.
23. Ibid., 68.

Process thought. As I will discuss below with Brown's understanding of the Hebrew midrash tradition (page 15), the process conception of the ongoing revelation of God in history implies that God can reveal God's-self through the history of a canon's redaction as well as through a nations' history or the life of a man. Ogden claims that God acts in the same manner in every event.[24] David Ray Griffen points out that this is incoherent if the claim to a normative Christian witness is the uniquely powerful revelation of God in the person of Jesus.[25] The reverse of the argument holds as well, if God's self-revelation in Jesus was not more clear than any other event, then the events of the redacting and compiling scripture must also be revelatory—as revelatory as the Jesus-*kerygma.* Suchocki's analysis of the degrees of revelation (above, page 9) seems far superior to Ogden's claims here.

Given this, one would expect that Ogden would not reference scripture in his writings with any frequency. However, in one chapter of *On Theology* his references to scriptural passages exceed all the references in Cobb's *Christian Natural Theology.*[26] Most of these references are to Paul's theological assertations, not the Jesus-*kerygma*. Granted, one of the references was quoting Luther making the reference, but the larger point stands. Given his low view of the authority of *scripture* he makes reference to it to make his points when expedient.

Delwin Brown

For Brown, the concept of biblical authority is similar to that of Cobb's in that "the authority of the Bible for the Christian is not its normativeness but its formativeness, its capacity continuously

24. Schubert M. Ogden, "Bultmann's Project of Demythologizing and the Problem of Theology and Philosophy," *Journal of Religion* 37, (1957): 169.
25. Discussed in Pregeant, "Scripture and Revelation," 69.
26. Ogden, "On Theology," 5,25,34,54.

to 'author' personal and corporate identity."[27] Brown's focus is on the canon, the body of texts that is authoritative for a given culture and how that culture uses or relates to that body of texts. The relationship between tradition (culture) and canon is dialectical, "Tradition creates canon and canon creates tradition. […] In some sense, canon and tradition are each open to change, and the change in either affects the definition of the other."[28] Authority arises out of how a tradition employs and relates to the canon in their identity formation; individual and communal identity arise from, are sustained by and are changed through the use and change of the tradition's canon. As we step into the boundaries of the canon and inhabit the world it creates, we learn to tell narratives (and thereby define ourselves) in its terms.[29] The authority of the canon is how we use it to understand and describe ourselves.

Whereas Ogden searched for a normative canon within the canon of scripture, Brown magnifies the value of the plurivocality of the canon, "unitary canons die; plurivocal canons endure. And plurivocal canons, as such, cannot be conformed to. Negotiating *within* the boundaries of a vital canon is always creative; it is never simply conformation."[30] Canons do not create identical people with identical experiences; they help diverse people with diverse experiences all share in a common framework for understanding those experiences—giving language and meaning to what would otherwise be chaos. Canons establish boundaries within which there is room to move and live, yet there is enough common ground to prevent anomie.

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27. Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Traditional and Theological Construction* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), x.
28. Ibid., 29.
29. Ibid., 85.
30. Ibid., 126.

Brown explores the concept of authority's roots and presents a thesis that it comes from Greek thought; notably Aristotle's teleological framework of the mature being destined to rule over the younger. When Roman ingenuity steps in and makes the foundation of a society a kind of permanent elder the concept of authority appears, "thus the foundation, now objective and historical, was transmuted into a canon, a standard of measurement and rules applicable to political, personal, and religious belief and behaviors."[31] This concept of authority, as a normative foundation, is clearly at odds with Process thought. Process thought takes history (the objective given of reality out of which new experiences are built) seriously, but that something was once real does not mean that it continues to be in any definitive way.

Brown sees in the Hebrew midrash tradition a more congenial sense of authority:

> Actually, the best alternative model for understanding authority comes from the Hebrew Bible, no from Plato. The function of authority in Hebrew religion, and thus implicit conception of authority, is made accessible to us through traditiohistorical research. Based on the conclusion that the Old Testament text is the result of a lengthy process of growth, tradition criticism seeks to research and construct this development. […] it allows us to see how each generation in the process treated its authoritative past, for how an authority is treated tells us better than words what it means in that context for something to be authoritative.[32]

The midrash tradition interprets, re-interprets, redacts, edits and revises scripture. This redaction process is not flippant or dismissive. It struggles with the text and takes it very seriously, but it also acknowledges that previous generations may have gotten it wrong. At some point, the Hebrew canon was closed and the midrash story of Moses' direct inscription of the Pentateuch was developed to

31. Delwin Brown, "Struggle Till Daybreak: On the Nature of Authority in Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 65, no. 1 (1985): 21.

32. Ibid., 22.

protect it from further redaction. So, even as the midrash process allows and encourages critical engagement, it also is a process that can become foundational in something akin to same sense the Romans developed in their concept of authority. Brown speaks of the "durative confrontation between each new generation and the witness of the past" but misses how the past can be conservative in how durative it is.[33] The dialogue between the present and the past, between a community and its canon, goes both ways; just as a canon norms and judges the present, the present judges and redacts a canon, "judges it, provokes and validates its reformulation—as often as the past norms the present."[34]

While superior to Ogden's search for a *kerygma* to act as a stable normative core, Brown's theory downplays the fact that canons do get closed. Midrash is the collection of *Halakhah* that gathers alongside the closed canon. *Halakhah* may itself be considered canonical, but always to a lesser degree than the text in the "fixed" canon. Ogden's attempt to reject the Bible in favor of the *kerygma* proves this point in a back-handed way. Ogden has no choice, given his role as a Christian theologian, but to acknowledge the Bible *in toto* as *The Bible*, even if he relegates its status to being the sole primary source for our archeological search for the *kerygma*. It is *these* texts, and no other, that establish the boundaries of our habitation.

Being so focused on the creative room that canonical authority grants—the "creativity appropriate to an action, not the conformity appropriate to a reaction"—he neglects that maximizing future creativity could include stifling present creativity.[35] While it is true that in Whitehead's

33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 23.
35. Ibid., 25.

metaphysics is the notion of creativity as the core of all reality and the goal of the process is maximization of intensity of feeling through maximization of creativity, this is not a linear process nor is it unguided. Since within the scope of theology, we are talking about God's self-revelation, it is not inconsistent to claim that God *could* desire God's self-revelation to be somewhat fixed in a "closed" canonical form—at least for the time being. God's lack of perfect knowledge of the future does not deny that God has probable knowledge of the future with a kind of precision that is impossible for humans to have. It may be in the best interest of future maximization of freedom and creativity for the canon to have progressed and become closed as it did. This is all speculation on what aims God has for humanity and the possibilities presented to the world—but it seems to be a point Brown overlooks.

Brown's use of the Bible is only tangentially covered in these sources. The titles of his works are scriptural references. A reference to Acts 17:26 appears on the cover of *Boundaries of our Habitations.* In an elegant passage in "Struggle till Daybreak" he uses the metaphor of the angel Jacob wrestled at the Jabok river to explain how we relate to authority:

> Authority is the angel with whom one struggles. But the angel is not always an opponent. That which authors, authors in many ways: not only as stubborn limits against which one strives and sometimes prevails but also as that which comforts, sustains, provokes, challenges, condemns, demands, confuses, unsettles and brings mercy and forgiveness. Thus providing authorization in the Roman sense is also a part of biblical authority; asserting norms is one of the ways the Bible seeks to author. But only one. There is much more to the Bible's authority than its capacity to be used as authorization.[36]

36. Ibid., 28.

The identity conveying nature of a community's canon (and thereby scripture) comes from our lived encounters with the canon and its various contents.

Synthetic and Constructive Comments

Not all Process theologians are as reluctant as the authors evaluated here to use scripture in their work. Ford's book uses so many scriptural references that they are given their own index.[37] The current generation of Process theologians seems to be following the previous generation in typically avoiding direct references to scripture as a review of McDaniel and Bowman's *Handbook of Process Theology* shows.[38] Farmer's application of his Process hermeneutic draws extensively on scriptural sources.[39] David Wheeler's essay discussing the similarities and differences between Open Theism and Process theology quotes passages from scripture with great skill and sincerity.[40]

All of the authors evaluated consider themselves to be fully committed Christians and most explicitly give a high value to the role of the Bible in our identity formation. Even Ogden, who shifted that value to the Jesus-*kerygma,* could not escape the pull of the Bible in doing his theological work, if only to have a means of accessing the *kerygma*. Yet, how they understand the role and authority of the Bible in forming our identity is very different than that of other theological schools. Only Ogden strongly appealed to a norm for Christian theology. In the dialogue with the Open Theists, their use of scripture as the normative foundation for Christian theology (as opposed to Process' use as identity formation) was clear. Making reference to Ogden's criterion of credibility,

37. Ford, "The Lure of God," 137-138.
38. *Handbook of Process Theology*, ed. Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006).
39. Farmer, "Beyond the Impasse," 135-193.
40. David L. Wheeler, "Confessional Communities and Public Worldviews: A Case Study," in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

"Pinnock characterizes liberal theologians as creative people less concerned about heresy and continuity with tradition and more concerned with making sense of Christianity for reasonable contemporaries."[41] Given that David Ray Griffen does not find being called a heretic a bad thing in light of the violent history of the Church, Pinnock's claim is valid. Whether Process theologians are concerned with this accusation of heresy or not is a completely different question.

The third criticism of Process theology (page 2)—that it fails to adequately engage the depth of the Christian tradition—seems to retain its force. Open Theism is an interesting but small movement within the evangelical movement. The engagement between the two is interesting, but only one step towards where I think Process theology needs to go. Obviously, the gulf between Neo-Orthodox and Process theology is very vast and I do not see an obvious point of contact. The analytic tradition could be a viable dialog partner and the interesting work taking place there could be informative. Interesting work has been done to develop robust Process understandings of Christian doctrines such as the trinity and the resurrection, but the legend of Ogden slamming his fist on the table shouting that the resurrection never actually happened looms large. There seems to be a disconnect between the liberal Protestant ideal of Christianity being credible by universal human standards and Paul's claim that God's wisdom is seen as folly. There is something intrinsically incredible about the Christian claims that I am comfortable with.

The Process understanding of God's power as persuasive and compelling (rather than coercive) is central to understanding how Process theologians relate to scripture and what they understand authority to be. Relational authority, where the authoritative agent can be resisted or

41. Nancy R. Howell, "Openness and Process Theism," in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 61.

challenged (wrestled with to use Brown's metaphor), directly relates to relational power. No authority is ever final. There is a kind of epistemic humility that arises from this framework that I find to be compelling. My major criticism of the Process group is that, in spite of their epistemic humility and Whitehead's own injunction, they cling too tightly to his metaphysics and are reluctant to risk a creative adventure away from strict adherence to *Process and Reality*; "There remains the final reflection, how shallow, puny, and imperfect are efforts to sound the depths of the nature of things. In philosophical discussion, the merest hint of dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement is an exhibition of following."[42]

42. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality (Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh During the Session 1927-28)*, ed. David Ray Griffen and Donald W. Sherburne, Corrected ed. (Chicago, IL: Free Press, 1979), xiv.

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