

# *Creative* **Transformation**

Volume 20 Numbers 3-4 ISSN 1062-4708 Summer/Fall 2011



Advent in a Pluralistic Age

# God-in-the-World: Transformation in a Pluralistic Age

Editorial	1
Christ in a Pluralistic Age <i>by John B. Cobb, Jr.</i>	4
<i>From a Christian Perspective . . .</i>	
Driven by Dreams <i>by P. David Wilkinson</i>	7
<i>From a Jewish Perspective . . .</i>	
Clay in the Potter's Hands: Human Evolution in a Self-Creating World <i>by Bradley Shavit Artson</i>	9
<i>From a Muslim Perspective . . .</i>	
God and the World: A Dynamic Relationship in the Qur'an <i>by Mustafa Ruzgar</i>	13
<i>From a Hindu Perspective . . .</i>	
The Role of the Avatar in the Process of Cosmic Transformation <i>by Jeffery D. Long</i>	15
<i>From a Buddhist Perspective . . .</i>	
Quanyin Talks about Creative Transformation <i>by Gene Reeves</i>	19
<b>Advent Resources</b>	
Calls to Worship <i>by Jessica Petersen</i>	22
Opening Prayers <i>by Timothy Murphy</i>	24
A Candle Liturgy <i>by Jeanyne B. Slettom</i>	25
Pastoral Prayers <i>by Sarah Bloesch</i>	28
Critic's Corner: Books <i>Love's Availing Power: Imagining God, Imagining the World,</i> <i>by Paul R. Sponheim</i> <i>reviewed by Nelda Kerr</i>	30

## **Creative Transformation . . .**

takes its name from the belief of process theologians that God's work is always creative and always transformative; and that wherever creative transformation is occurring, God is there.  
~John B. Cobb, Jr.

## **Creative Transformation**

*exploring the growing edge of religious life*

**Volume 20.3-4 Summer/Fall 2011**

### **Publisher and Editor**

Jeanyne B. Slettom

### **Staff**

Timothy Murphy  
Claudia Ponting

### **Editor 1991-2000**

William A. Beardslee

### **Editor 2001-2009**

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki

### **Cover Art**

*Starry Night*  
Vincent Van Gogh  
Oil on canvas

*Creative Transformation* is an online quarterly publication of Process & Faith. Process & Faith seeks ways for people interested in process thought to share ideas and resources, especially in local congregations.

To subscribe, join Process & Faith!  
Basic membership: \$50  
Students & Seniors: \$35

Members must be registered on the P&F website to access the journal.

**PROCESS & FAITH**  
1325 North College Avenue  
Claremont, CA 91711-3199  
909-447-2559  
Fax: 909-621-2760

E-mail: [office@processandfaith.org](mailto:office@processandfaith.org)

Web site: [www.processandfaith.org](http://www.processandfaith.org)



# Process & Faith *EDITORIAL*

The liturgical season of Advent begins November 27, a time when Christians contemplate the central importance of incarnation in Christian thought. It is also a season when nonChristians in America endure an inundation of Christmas carols, exhortations to holiday gift buying, and Santas ringing bells in front of one store after another.

I think that many of us genuinely appreciate the festive celebrations of other religious traditions. We know from our own experience that holiday family gatherings involve special food traditions, the poignancy of loved ones' presence or absence, and, eventually, a lifetime of holiday memories. Although such celebrations as Christmas, Diwali, Eid al-Fitr, and Passover arise out of different religions, we can recognize in each others' traditions a common urge to examine our lives in relation to the divine, and to celebrate with thanksgiving the divine compassion for this world.

However, the complications with Christmas that may arise for nonChristians have to do not simply with cultural hegemony but with the fact that this person whose birth we celebrate has been used by so many as the justification for persecution, oppression, and absolutist claims that make interfaith conversations difficult, if not impossible.

In its classic formulation, the Christian doctrine of incarnation claims that God is uniquely present in the person of Jesus, who is therefore called the Messiah or Christ, the annointed one. Incarnation and resurrection become both the demonstration of and explanation for how God acts in the world, and "Jesus Christ" becomes the sole prism through which all divine action is to be understood and appropriated. Readers can appreciate that, as a conversational opener in interfaith dialogue, this was a non-starter. The problem for Christians working in interfaith settings was this: how to argue for uniqueness without invoking exclusivism?

In 1975, John B. Cobb, Jr., published *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, which offers an answer. Arguing from a process perspective, Cobb uses "creative transformation" to describe God's dynamic interaction with the world. What Christians call "Christ," he wrote, can be understood as the "principle of creative transformation," which they recognize uniquely in the person of Jesus. But just as a panentheist argues that God is in the world but not limited to the world, Cobb argues that "Christ" (the principle of creative transformation) is in Jesus but not limited to Jesus. The life of Jesus uniquely informs the Christian about the nature of creative transformation, but the principle itself is not exhaustively thus defined.

Cobb's proposal almost immediately begs the question: what, then, does creative transformation look like in other faiths? It also raises a caution: *can* we presuppose this principle in other religions?

It is the confluence of all these ideas that gives birth to this issue of *Creative Transformation*: the Advent season itself, with its emphasis on incarnation as God's way of being in the world, the need for inter-religious understanding—even more strongly felt today than in 1975—the inter-religious vision of our new über-parent organization, [Claremont Lincoln University](#), to say nothing of our very name, *Creative Transformation*.

In broad strokes, this issue reflects on the God-world relationship from the perspective of several faith traditions. It challenges readers to think think more expansively of "creative transformation" as a divine mode of being in the world. And because many of you are Christian clergy, it also offers liturgical resources for the season.

Blessings to all!

# CHRIST

## in a pluralistic AGE

by JOHN B. COBB, JR.



**O**ne major commitment of process theology has long been to affirm the importance of Christian faith in its distinctiveness in such a way as not to depreciate or ignore the importance of other traditions in their distinctiveness.

Of course, to do this requires that we formulate the faith in ways that omit or directly challenge other formulations that have played major roles in Christian tradition. There can be no doubt that in much of Christian history the faith has been formulated in ways that directly conflict with Jewish and Islamic commitments and have pejora-

*We celebrate diversity and are especially interested in those features of other traditions that are lacking in our own.*

tive implications for others. We believe that in criticizing and changing those formulations we are being more, not less, faithful to the one in whom all Christians see the supreme revelation of God. We call our fellow Christians to reexamine all beliefs that lead to negative attitudes toward others, asking how these can be expressions of Christian love. Given the omnipresence of Christmas in our commercial culture, the season of Advent may be

an especially appropriate time for Christians to engage in these reflections.

At the same time, we are troubled that many of those who, like us, repudiate negative judgments of others, seem to feel that this requires us to water down our distinctiveness. They seem to think that wholehearted commitment to our scriptures and to the Christ to whom they witness inherently leads to negative judgment of others. They therefore emphasize only those aspects of our unique tradition that are shared by believers in other communities. In this way they seek friendship and mutual support by abandoning much of the wisdom that they could bring to these relationships. This becomes especially poignant in the season of Advent, if the idea of incarnation is avoided or abandoned. Such a move leaves the season bereft of religious meaning and turns Christmas into a secular holiday.

The implication of *our* program is quite different. We celebrate diversity and are especially interested in those features of other traditions that are lacking in our own. We constantly reexamine the tradition that forms us, seeking to purify and transform it. We can do this best in dialogue with those in other communities who help us to understand ourselves better and offer us insights and wisdom that is lacking in our own tradition. We rejoice that in learning from others we continue a tradition that is strongly evidenced in our scriptures and in our later history. To stop

learning from others would be as much of a break with our tradition as is the abandonment of any of its other central commitments.

I once wrote a [book with the same title](#) as this essay trying to communicate this understanding of our faith and of our task. I hope I showed that we could affirm Jesus as the revelation, indeed, the incarnation, of the *Logos* in a way fully faithful to the gospels but that involves no affirmations that directly contradict what participants in other traditions positively affirm. Whitehead enables us to understand the *Logos* as the “Primordial Nature of God.” This Nature participates in the constitution of everything, in Whitehead’s terms, in every actual occasion. When we reflect with Whitehead on the role it plays, we can describe this, in living things, as creative transformation. This description works especially well when thinking of human experience. For us to be faithful to Christ is at once to open ourselves to the transforming work of God within us.

In Christian language we are talking about the Holy Spirit, grace, providence, and guidance. We are led by our scriptures and traditions to focus ourselves on this present work of God. We do not claim to be alone in doing this. This working of God in all human lives is noted and celebrated in other traditions as well.

But we recognize that this working of God in other traditions has led some of them to focus their attention in other directions. There is creative transformation everywhere, but there are traditions that do not treat this as the most important thing. Whitehead points out that, in addition to God, there are the world and creativity. Each of these is nothing without the other two. But they are not three names for the same feature of reality. And the spiritual life that develops among those who focus on the world gains wisdom that those who focus on God are likely to miss. Both groups may miss much that is experienced and learned by those who focus on creativity.

Just as we process theologians will interpret much that happens among people who use quite different language as “creative transformation,” and thus as the work of the living Christ; so we will interpret what some other traditions experience and say in terms of our

Whiteheadian understanding of “creativity” and “the world.” But we do not intend to impose our terminology on them. We want to listen to how they describe what they most prize and what they have learned, whether or not this fits neatly into the categories through which we now understand it. Whitehead’s system is also subject to being creatively transformed.

This summarizes the argument of the book, and I continue to affirm it. But it is not only through these specifically Whiteheadian moves that Christians can recognize that they need to learn from others and work with them. They can learn this quite directly from Jesus. Jesus proclaimed “gospel,” that is “good news.” But Christian proclamation is not good news if it involves depreciating traditions that mean so much to others.

For Jesus the good news was that the *basileia theou* was at hand. I like to translate this as the Divine Commonwealth. That new order is where God’s purposes are fulfilled. It is open to all, but Jesus recognized that those who have a stake in the now established order have the greatest difficulty in entering the new one. In the new order all are accepted and appreciated. Participants in other traditions

*But in our Christian perspective, the creative transformation in which we recognize Christ is not limited to the Christian community.*

are not asked to give up their distinctive understanding and practices and become like us. Nor are we asked to give up our distinctive understanding and practices and affirm only what everyone else already believes. In all our differences we jointly contribute to a richer community in which the first in the now existing *status quo* are last and the last are first.

We in the process community rejoice in the remarkable venture initiated by the Claremont School of Theology. Together with Jewish and Muslim institutions it has launched a new institution, named, Claremont Lincoln University, in which men and women will be prepared for leadership in the several traditions side by side. Their

programs of study will be determined by leaders in the communities from which they come and in which they are preparing to lead. The distinctiveness of each will in no way be challenged. But where distinctive traditions find that there are some studies which they approach in much the same way, students will take courses together. And they will have the opportunity to take courses in one another's programs as well. The context will encourage discussion of differences and learning from one another.

Just as important, and perhaps even more so, is that Claremont Lincoln University will seek to serve the world. It

*We are particularly interested in the way that what we call "Christ" has operated in communities where other terminology is used and where the focus of attention and devotion may not be on creative transformation.*

will make no pretense of being "value-free." The evidence is now clear that "value-free" higher education functions in the service of Mammon (that is, money). CLU will seek to prepare not only religious leaders, but also others, to serve humanity and the world.

The launching of this university, so richly embodying the ideals of process theology, emboldens us to creatively transform *Creative Transformation* so as to make its affirmation of "deep religious pluralism" more evident and effective. At least for the present it will remain a Christian magazine serving Christ as creative transformation as we have come to understand Christ through the revelation of God in Jesus in our Christian community. But in our Christian perspective, the creative transformation in which we recognize Christ is not limited to the Christian community. Sometimes it is more evident elsewhere. And we are particularly interested in the way that what we call "Christ" has operated in communities where other terminology is used and where the focus of attention and devotion may not be on creative transformation. Christ

calls us to learn not only from the work of Christ in other contexts but also from those who attend most strongly to other features of reality.

To say this again in terms of Jesus' own teaching, we want to be and work together in fellowship with all who seek to live in that which we call the divine Commonwealth. That is a community whose values are quite the opposite of the imperial ones that now dominate our society. It is a community of people who seek to serve the common good even at personal cost. That good will be best served by persons who have been formed in communities that have clear distinctive ideas about the common good and encourage their members to seek it. We come to this quest as disciples of Jesus. Others are inspired by other leaders. We look for wisdom and insight from one another. We need the contributions of all if the divine Commonwealth is to establish itself in the unwelcoming soil of American empire.

Practically and specifically this means that we will include in every issue contributions by those in other traditions who participate, or want to participate, in this counter-cultural community and can help us understand both those other traditions and ourselves better. We will ask our writers to address us as Christian seekers who want their help. They need to tell us frankly how our teaching and behavior function as obstacles in their path and what insights from their own traditions they believe can help us. It is our conviction that our Christian faith calls on us to listen to the voices of others. We hope that there are others ready to address us.

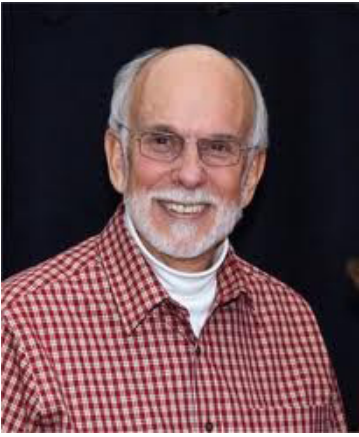
*JOHN B. COBB, JR.* is Emeritus Professor of Claremont School of Theology and Claremont Graduate University, co-founder of the Center for Process Studies, and the author of many books, including the re-issued classic, *A Christian Natural Theology*.

*We come to this quest as disciples of Jesus. Others are inspired by other leaders. We look for wisdom and insight from one another.*

# Driven by DREAMS

## *A Christian perspective*

by P. DAVID WILKINSON



*As we approach the Advent/Christmas* season it is imperative, in these days of “Arab Springs,” Wall-Street protests, global warming, and a growing awareness of our interconnectedness with our Planetary Village, that we ask the question: “What is being born amidst these radical perturbations?” William Butler Yeats asked a similar question amidst the turmoil and political upheaval in the aftermath of the first World War. I will not quote the full poem, but certain lines jump out as timely:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.<sup>1</sup>*

The final stanza relates so pointedly to this season that it must be understood in the context of the theme of this edition of *Creative Transformation*: the idea of “Christ in a Pluralistic Age.” Here is this timely final stanza.

*The darkness drops again but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?<sup>2</sup>*

Amidst the anarchy, the lack of conviction, and the somnambulist stupor in which we find ourselves, there is something being born that warrants not only our attention but our awakening. It is THE CHRIST! Not a Christ that is exclusively Christian, nor a sweet innocent babe in a manger (though the setting has profound significance, especially for those in our world who have been marginalized), nor a Messianic human avatar that will

lead us through this time of turmoil into a new paradigm of . . . of . . .

And therein lies the rub, for we don’t know what is being born that will cause us to awaken to a future that is not based on religious narcissism. What is this Christ for whose birth we long? I will humbly attempt a response to my own question.

Controversy certainly arises between “creationism” and evolution. I side with the evolutionists and the scientists of this 21st century, many of whom confirm that we are evolving, and that evolution is incomplete. Even theologians acknowledge that some Force, some mystery is pulling us forward into what some are describing as the birth of the Image of God in which we were created. Andrew Cohen, in his recently published book, [\*Evolutionary Enlightenment\*](#),

*What is this Christ for  
whose birth we long?*

defines this pull as an “evolutionary impulse” that is relentlessly nagging at us to become more conscious.<sup>3</sup>

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest and paleontologist, reinforces what Cohen is saying through his “Law of Complexity Consciousness” (as creation evolves it becomes more complex and increasingly conscious).<sup>4</sup> Teilhard writes that the ultimate destiny of our conscious evolution is what he defines as “Cosmic Consciousness,” or Christ Consciousness. Could this be the birth which we anticipate? And could this not also be what Jesus of Nazareth awakened to and taught: that we too could become consciously aware of our oneness (“*May they all be one.*” ~Jn. 17: 21)?

I believe that Teilhard was on to something. I also believe that recent scientific discoveries support this notion that we continue to expand in consciousness and awareness to the point that we rediscover, and know it again for the first time, that we all (all expressions of creation, including human beings) had our origins in Oneness, and we fell asleep to it. That sleepwalking state might very well be called, as do some Christians, “original sin.”

What are those origins? It has been an accepted premise that all of creation, including the origins of the universe, started as a “Big Bang.” There are so many scientific sources that confirm this that the reader might [google](#) it rather than for me to recite the vast number of references. Nor can I adequately describe the mystery of this evolution from cosmic dust to human beings. It might be sufficient for this article to say that we are evolving in

## ***Christ is the evolutionary impulse to journey forth in responsiveness.***

complexity and in consciousness.<sup>5</sup> I can, however, recite a biblical reference that describes a parallel mystery.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God.  
All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.  
In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.  
The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.  
(John 1: 1-5, NRSV)*

When asked to explain the invisible force that orchestrated this miraculous evolution, most scientists will say that they don't know. They describe it as a mystery that they cannot define. Though they might not describe it as such, these scientists might be open to describing this mystery as “the power through which we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). When people of faith are asked the same question they will quickly respond by naming that force as God, with a slight suggestion on their part that they understand what God is. Perhaps we could settle on a combination of the two: that this creative

Force is a Mystery that many faith traditions call God. I would suggest that this guiding and mysterious Force (a.k.a. God, Allah, Yhwh, Brahman) was incarnated in the flesh of that “Babe of Bethlehem” whom we know as the “incarnate Word of God.” He, for Christians, made manifest that mystery in his birth, his form, his teaching, and his death and resurrection. The Apostle Paul spoke to the universal nature of that mystery that has “been hidden throughout the ages . . . Christ in you the hope of glory” (Col. 1:24ff.).

In so saying, is it not conceivable to assume that the Birth of The Christ for which we await is not only the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem, but the “Birth of the Christ” that lies dormant and asleep within each of us, that is at the very core of our being (the Image of God in which we are created) and for which “all of creation waits with eager longing” for its revealing (see Romans 8:19ff.)? This birth is intended not just for Christians. It is an all-inclusive awakening that is gifted by God to all. One needn't accept certain belief systems in order to be eligible for being “born in Christ.” One need only awaken “to the wild and impersonal nature of the evolutionary impulse”<sup>6</sup>

in order to awaken to that “Cosmic Christ” that is the Force that pulls us into new birth. Our beliefs certainly assist us in defining a direction for this process. But if the beliefs become an end in themselves they can become an obstacle rather than a catalyst. Christ is the evolutionary impulse to journey forth in responsiveness. Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new (2 Corinthians 5:17)! Or what John of Patmos wrote in his ecstatic vision: “See, I am making all things new (Rev. 21:5)! The Birth of the Christ is not an isolated event that happened only in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. It is a Cosmic event toward which we are evolving. That birth, given this evolutionary impulse, is inevitable.

The reader might be questioning my Christian credentials in terms of what I have written. It seems the litmus test for being a Christian is whether or not you accept Jesus as savior. I pass the test. Jesus is my savior because he demonstrated to all what it means to awaken to the evolutionary impulse (a.k.a. God's Call) of being fully

# CLAY in the Potter's Hands: Human Evolution in a Self-Creating World

*A Jewish perspective*



by BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON

In the waning days of the kingdom of Judah, surrounded by enemies intending to attack, corrupted from within by a lack of will, a lack of clarity, a lack of identity, the prophet Jeremiah addressed the people of Israel time and again, calling us back to who we are meant to be. On one occasion he says,

*Then I went down to the potter's house, and found him working at the wheel. And if the vessel he was making was spoiled, as happens to clay in the potter's hands, he would make it into another vessel, such as the potter saw fit to make. Then the word of the Holy One came to me, 'O House of Israel, can I not deal with you like this potter?' says the Holy One. 'Just like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.'"*

These famous lines of the prophet Jeremiah make their way as a poem (*piyut*) into the Rosh Ha-Shanah *Mahzor*, "As clay in the hand of the potter who thickens or thins it at will, so are we in Your hand, O God of love. Recall your covenant and show Your mercy.

In the course of this *piyut*, we, the Jewish people, will be compared to clay, to stone, to iron, to glass, to cloth, and to silver. I would argue that this *piyut* has been misunderstood more than almost other poetic image in the *Mahzor*. The way most commentaries speak about it, we are completely inert and absolutely in God's control. God molds us according to absolute will, untrammelled coercive power, and we are simply the passive recipients of God's might, omniscience, total knowledge and force.

However ubiquitous it may be, this interpretation is wrong, scientifically and religiously.

## *The wisdom of every thing*

Anybody who has worked with clay knows there are things you can do with clay, and there are things the clay will not let you do. Anyone who has worked with cloth, or with metal, or with jewelry, knows that the matter you are doing your work with, constrains the results you are able to achieve. The material has, if you will, its own *hokhmah*, its own wisdom. And what you work in creates a partnership with you. We do not like to think of our interactions like that; we like to think that when we do something we are in control. How many of you can guarantee that your brisket turns out perfectly every time? Obviously, it has a mind of its own, as does the oven, as does the material you work with. How much the more so then, when it comes to living beings? If the clay has its own property which it embodies in the world uniquely, how much the more so human beings, or any of God's creatures?

What this amazing *piyut* is telling us, then, is that God kneads clay as *clay*, mindful of clay's nature, working through and with that distinctive way of being. And God works with metal appropriately for metal, mindful of its metallic nature. And God needs us, and works with each of us, and all of us, in our uniqueness, as we each are. This poem does not portray oppressive domination. It is not about an all-powerful God and wormlike human beings to be ruthlessly crushed at divine will. We call God in this very poem a "God of love." Love is when you know someone well enough that you know what it is they need highlighted; when you know how to coax them into something truly magnificent. A great potter is not

someone who crushes the clay; a great potter intuits the clay into magnificent functional art. And so this poem, and the liturgy we recite on this holiest of days is really a song about God's uncanny ability to know us from the inside; to know what we can bear and what we cannot; to know what are our strengths and what are our needs; and to urge us, to invite us, to take the next step into our own becoming, our own greatness: *La-brit habet*, look to the covenant. What is the covenant if not a relationship between two responsive individuals? If one crushes the other, that is not a *brit*, that is a *milchamah*, a war! Life is not about God attempting to conquer us. Life is about God calling us into relationship.

### *We are who we are*

So the message for us is very simple: we are nothing less than who we are! Each one of us—clay in God's hands—is unique and different from each and every other one of us. And it is God's greatness to recognize our uniqueness. And it is our frailty to forget. So we all assume that every one is just like us, and if they are not, that they should be. But it's not true; other people are not simply duplicates of each other. Some are clay, and some are wood, and some are stone, and some are precious jewels. And every one of them is worthy in their own unique way.

Everything that comes into the world brings novelty into the world; brings something that has never before been seen.

Let's start with the first great novelty—14 billion years ago, with the world exploding into existence at the very moment of the Big Bang. For the first 2 billion years, all there was, as the Torah tells us, all there was, was light; all there was, was energy. We are the product of that light. Out of the Big Bang came only two elements—hydrogen and helium. That is all that was created at the beginning! These two elements each brought its own *hokhmah*, its own way of reacting into the world. As they collided and mixed, collided and mixed and congealed, they formed intense burning fireball stars. After two billion years of darkness, the entire cosmos turned on, and there was

light everywhere. The cosmos was expanding at an unprecedented rate as these stars lit up the night sky for the first time ever.

And then, as if that illumination were not miraculous enough, some of these stars became so overheated, so big, so dense, that they collapsed in on themselves, exploding out into the world material that had never before existed: Nitrogen and carbon, and all sorts of elements of complexity that had never previously existed, that spit out into the sky and ultimately make possible me and you. We would not exist without carbon; we would not exist without iron. We would not exist without these elements that were not created in the beginning. If God's work had stopped in the first moment, we would not be here. But God's creation is a continuing creation, an unceasing creation. So round 2, is the explosion of the supernovae that donated themselves to life; that give of themselves to the cosmos.

Then, more miraculous yet, billions of years later, in one of these swirling galaxies, on one of its outermost rings, is a star of just the right size, just the right density, just the right heat. And around it, a circle of dust keeps going around and around, and gradually the particles of exploded stardust gather into little balls—those little balls becoming the planets of our solar system.

And on one very lucky planet, the third rock from the sun, there is pervasive thunder and lightning. But not lightning like you and I see today. The lightning of ten billion years ago is a lightning that is constant and everywhere! The entire earth is nothing but molten heat that spits up to the surface, hardens into rock and dives back down, so that—unique on any planet—the heavier elements do not remain buried in the core, they ascend to the surface; they mix with the air and the planet's crust. And in that lightning/water/frothy mix, life emerges. Do you know what powers our consciousness? We are packets of lightning. Our nervous systems are electrical systems. The flash of lightning that burst into life, bursts inside of you at this moment. I am writing words thanks to bottled lightning. And you understand me for the same reason, because this essay—you can share with others—this essay is electric!

***And it is God's greatness to recognize our uniqueness. And it is our frailty to forget.***

Little packets of channeled lightning start to mingle and mix, and we have been mingling and mixing every since.

And then, as if that were not miracle enough, these little packets of lightning—without prior organization or planning—they learn how to take other matter in and use it to build their own continuity. Life learns to eat. Life learns to digest life. Life learns to grow by building more life, and the miracles continue as cells learn how to convey information. (We are not the first to do it: there was instant messaging 10 million years ago! That is what genetics is all about; the ability of one cell to tell another cell what to do.) And so cells master the capacity to convey information. We get some backbone in ourselves, and then we do something astonishing, unprecedented: We leave our mother, the ocean.

I told you before that you are portable lightning, but that is not the whole story. You are also portable bags of ocean; the saline solution of your blood is closer to the content of ocean water than you might care to know. We are living, walking puddles of ocean, powered by lightning. In our bodies, in our self, is the entire story of the universe's creation. You yourselves contain the energy of the Big Bang, the primordial lightning out of which life emerged, the salty life-giving mix of the sea, the sociabil-

ity of primates—all of that millennial history is in you, in each of us. All of creation is in each of us.

Paul Valéry says, “The universe is built on a plan, the profound symmetry of which is somehow present in the inner structure of our own intellect.” Our minds, our bodies, our emotions, our way of being in the world, are the universe itself organized into consciousness. Or, the universe organizing itself and erupting into consciousness.

### *Prepared for the world from the beginning*

So here is what I want to remind us: We have everything we need for the journey. We are already packed. In fact, the packing has been done for us!

Picture, if you will, our cousin, the bear. Picture specifically a mother bear in the dead of winter asleep in her lair, under a layer of ice and snow. And inside the warmth of her body, picture little bear twins waiting to be born. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry remind us in [The Universe Story](#) that inside their mother's womb, those baby bears have paws that already know how salmon swim. Those paws have been shaped, sculpted and caressed by millions of years of development, so that when that cub is born, he already has the feel of salmon at the end of his paws. He has been honed over millions of years, so

### *Praying for the coming of the Messiah . . .*

Consider an odd aspect of Jewish belief and eternity: we pray in the *Machzor* and elsewhere for the coming of the Messiah. We say in the *Ani Ma'amin*, “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah.” Notice that it does not say, “I believe in the Messiah.” What we Jews pledge allegiance to is not belief in the Messiah, but we must believe in the coming of the Messiah. But here's the catch: a Messiah, to be coming, can never arrive. Once the Messiah arrives, he is no longer coming. At that point one could no longer believe in his coming. But Jewish beliefs are timeless affirmations. God is always One, the Torah was given to Moses—these beliefs do not become false over time. So if we are to believe in the eternal coming of the Messiah, then the Messiah must be eternally on the way. Because we know that the Messiah is always on the way (hence, never arriving), our job is to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah, doing what it takes to make the world that much more messianic. We must engage in acts of justice and compassion so that even though the arrival is never completed, the work of the Messiah is advanced, a world with somewhat greater justice; somewhat greater compassion; somewhat greater inclusion; somewhat greater welcome.

A Messiah always on the way reminds us of our goals and aspirations, but it is up to us to work for justice.

that his fur already knows the feeling of the first snows, and of autumn air turning crisp and cold and the time to sleep. His sister's tongue, never yet in the world, is already

*We have been walking and wandering ever since—  
little portable bags of ocean powered by lightning.*

a tongue that tastes the sweetness of berries; that knows what it is like to have fruit juice dripping down her chin. Those bear cubs have never yet been in the world, and yet they have everything they need for the journey. And so do you.

In our mother's womb, we also were equipped with everything we need. God is indeed like a potter, but not a tyrant. God is a loving potter who has fashioned us across hundreds of millions of years, so that by the time we reach this world, the moment we come into this world, we already emerge social, curious, interested, connected, outraged by injustice, delighted by joy. We do not teach babies to smile at a smile; they remind us to smile! We carry in our very bodies our cosmic and evolutionary history.

Years and years ago, our ancestors decided, not with their minds, but with their bodies, that human beings would have unusually large brains. And this collective choice has made all the difference. Creatures with crania the size of ours have to be born early. One cannot carry such babies to term; their heads are too big. But if they are going to be born early, and their heads are going to be that big, then one needs a certain voluptuous wide hip among their females. And, we are going to need a certain protective machismo among the men, because those women are going to get stuck holding those babies for an awful long time! Our ancient ancestors' bodies adapted, exaggerating the gender differences that existed in other primates, so that men would be protective dads, and women would be resilient mothers.

With those babies in our arms, we stood up so that we could scan the distance. And that standing up made all the difference. Not just backaches, but it developed for us the need and the ability to walk the long distances that we did. We walked out of Eastern Africa; we walked into the

Middle East; we walked over to Asia; we hoofed it over to Europe; we even made it by way of Russia into Alaska and down into the new world. We have been walking and wandering ever since—little portable bags of ocean powered by lightning.

So this day, and every day, do not be depressed. This moment is not sad. This is a day for us to remember that we have been given everything we need. We do not have to work on it or for it; it is already in us. It is us. We have it. The prophet Jeremiah, conveying God's words, says to us, "Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you; and before you came forth out of the womb I sanctified you." We have been sanctified by God over billions of years, through miracle upon miracle; by fortuitous and unlikely chance that has led to this moment, right now. Astonishing! I want you this very moment to exult in joy; to celebrate the crescendo of the cosmos that is us, that pulses through us, to celebrate it in each other, in who we have become, in what our promises are.

We have everything we need. This is not a time for mourning. This is not a season for fear. We are in the hands of a potter who seeks to understand us well enough to let us become the glorious pottery we actually are.

I close with the words of the poet, Denise Levertov:

*A certain day became a presence to me;  
there is, was, confronting me—a sky, air, light:  
a being. And before it started to descend  
from the height of noon, it leaned over  
and struck my shoulder as if with  
the flat of a sword, granting me  
honor and a task. The day's blow  
rang out metallic—or was it I, a bell awakened,  
and what I heard was my whole self  
saying and singing what it knew: I can.*

[RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON](#) is the Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University, where he is Vice President. His most recent book is [The Everyday Torah: Weekly Reflections and Inspirations](#) (McGraw-Hill).

# GOD and the World: a DYNAMIC relationship in the Qur'an

*A Muslim perspective*

by MUSTAFA RUZGAR



In this essay, I shall reflect on the concept of *dynamism* as being one of the central ideals in the Qur'anic vision of the relationship between God and the world. Dynamism implies change, creativity, and the power of self-determination in responding to concrete actuality. It contrasts with fixity, repetition, and non-relationality. In itself, the word *dynamism* does not necessarily suggest a normative content. The Qur'an, however, presumes a type of dynamic relationship that includes the actualization of the best possibilities in a given condition. To illustrate this, I will focus only on a few core concepts including God, the universe, religiosity, and society. The way one concept is interpreted bears significant implications upon the way other concepts are understood. For instance, an utterly transcendent God devoid of immanence will render the world insignificant, religiosity vacuous, and society chaotic.

In the Qur'an, God is portrayed as the creator of the universe, transcending (*tanzih*) everything in it—conceptual or physical. No part of nature can be equated with God and no conceptual characterization fully captures the infinite nature of God. Exclusive transcendence, however, does not do full justice to the Qur'anic conception of God. With equal force, God is also described as immanent (*tashbih*)—in the sense of being closely related to the world, humanity, and the course of history. God acts purposively in the natural and human world. God wants human beings to possess the strongest faith and moral responsibility, which is implicit in God's incessant guidance through prophets and scriptures.

The Qur'anic conception of God, then, reveals a balanced view of transcendence and immanence, informing a dynamic relationship between God and the world. Any distortion of this balance will also be a distortion of this dynamism. Denying immanence to God will establish a movement of single-directionality where God is conceived either as being estranged to the world or as unilaterally determining the world's affairs. In the former case, one needs to deny the institution of prophecy as well as many names of God, such as mercy and guidance. In the latter case, the world becomes fully passive and this passivity puts God's justice/goodness and power in severe tension with the abundance of suffering in the evolutionary history of the universe. Denying transcendence to God, on the other hand, will make God undifferentiated from and subservient to natural events and human actions.

The balance between transcendence and immanence points to an important aspect of the universe as being both contingent and autonomous.<sup>1</sup> Any possible conceptualization that will inhibit such a balance is outright rejected in the Qur'an. Losing sight of one at the expense of the other will lead to various misconceptions, such as full passivity of the universe or its sheer purposelessness. To counter these fallacies, the Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes that God does not create in vain—the entire creation is considered as a sign (*ayah*) of God, indicative of God's orderly and purposeful creativity. Likewise, the Qur'an admits a certain degree of spontaneity to nature by using active verbs in describing its acts, such as “s-j-d,” “s-l-m,” and “s-b-h,” meaning “bowing down in worship,” “submission,” and “praising and glorifying,” respectively.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of such descriptions, it is possible to say that the whole universe is Muslim (i.e., doing the act of submission), indicating a sense of dynamism in nature and its responsiveness to God's call.

Among Muslim intellectuals, Muhammad Iqbal represents a unique approach to systematically work out the implications of such a dynamic structure of the universe in the Qur'an. He conceives the entire universe being composed of event-like "egos" gradually rising in spontaneity towards greater degrees of self-actualization. In elaborating such a structure, Iqbal vehemently opposes

of God's purposiveness, are not some actual things that are ready out there to be imposed upon or appropriated by humans without the exercise of their creative response. Only in and through such a response is there the possibility of actualizing these ideals, hence transformation.

It would hypothetically be possible to argue a unilaterally one-dimensional relationship between God and human beings if the Qur'an was shown not to be relevant to the actual context within which it was revealed. There is much evidence that suggests otherwise. That many of the Qur'anic passages respond to actual events in the lives of

***The higher ideals, which are indicative of God's purposiveness, are not some actual things that are ready out there to be imposed upon or appropriated by humans without the exercise of their creative response. Only in and through such a response is there the possibility of actualizing these ideals, hence transformation.***

early Muslims, as evidenced by the Occasions of Revelation (*Asbab al-Nuzul*), that some of the practices have been *gradually* eliminated from the society, such as the consumption of alcohol, and that the lives of disadvantaged groups have

any characterization of the universe as static, fixed, a-dynamic, non-relational, and finished.<sup>3</sup> In Iqbal's interpretation, the Qur'an envisions different degrees of spontaneity in the human and non-human world, without allowing any unsurpassable gap between the two. This is the reason why the Qur'an describes the entirety of nature as doing the act of submission, but not all human beings.<sup>4</sup> Based on greater degrees of spontaneity, autonomy becomes more intensified in humans, which also highlights a more dynamic and critical relationship between God and human beings.

The insight into the dynamic structure of the universe bears significant implications for religious and social life, ranging from theology, morality, and law to hermeneutics and civilization, to name a few. The underlying theme to all is God's relation to human society in such a way that the concrete actuality always plays a crucial role. In other words, the teachings of the Qur'an always intend to transform the society by taking the concrete actuality into serious consideration. The higher ideals, which are indicative

been gradually improved by the Qur'anic and prophetic teachings, such as slaves and women, are only a few examples that underlie the importance of the concrete situation in social transformation. These examples also presuppose a dynamic relationship between God and human beings—actualizing higher ideals are possible only if humans exercise their spontaneity responsibly.

In further elaborating this dynamic relationship between God and the society, the Qur'an offers an insightful passage in 13:11, where it says: "Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves."<sup>5</sup> In elucidating this verse, Iqbal encourages the exercise of human spontaneity to its fullest potential, and adds that "in this process of progressive change God becomes a co-worker with him, provided man takes the initiative."<sup>6</sup> In this never-ending process, when Islam's relation to any social, moral, or theological element is inquired, it is crucial not to anticipate the past as a finished project that could un-differentially apply to the present or future.



# the role of the AVATAR in the process of COSMIC transformation

*A Hindu perspective*

by JEFFERY D. LONG

## *Theological background: the systems of Vedanta*

Hinduism is a vast and complex tradition—or rather, a family of traditions—about which it is nearly impossible to say anything that will be authoritative or binding in every case, for all Hindus, or even all Hindu communities. This statement would of course be true of all widespread and ancient religious traditions. It is, however, even more pronounced in the case of Hinduism, which includes traditions nearly as different from one another in belief and practice as Christianity is from Buddhism. Everything said in this article is therefore a generalization, and should not be taken as an accurate description of all forms of Hindu thought and practice, or of the beliefs of all Hindus.

The first broad generalization that can be made is that the relationship between God and the world according to most Hindu traditions seems to be more intimate than has typically been perceived in the Abrahamic traditions. It is, in fact, much more akin to the relationship between God and the world affirmed in process thought than in the classical forms of Christian theology. If one were to draw a comparison between Hindu thought and Christianity in particular, in this regard, it would be as if the world, for Hindus, were to be regarded as part of the Holy Trinity, rather than as a separate entity that the Trinity transcends. One could say that, for Hindu thought, the cosmos itself is an incarnation of the divine.

This idea of the world as divine incarnation can be seen as early as the *Purusha Sukta* or “Hymn of the Cosmic

Person” found in the *Rig Veda*, the oldest of Hindu texts (which most contemporary scholarship dates to roughly 1500 BCE, but which a number of Hindu scholars take to be even older than this). According to this text, the world is the body of God, who offers himself as a sacrifice so the world can be created from his parts.

Similarly, in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, a late Vedic text dating from around the fifth century BCE, God—or more specifically, *Brahman*, the divine ground of being—projects the cosmos out of Itself, saying, “Let me become many.” Various theological systems based upon the Vedic texts—a set of systems known collectively as *Vedanta*, or “the end of the *Veda*”—developed in ensuing centuries that gave differing interpretations of this idea of the One becoming Many. The earliest of these systems of Vedanta, known as the “Difference and Non-Difference” school of thought (*Bhedabheda*), interpreted this concept

*For Hindu thought,  
the cosmos itself is an  
incarnation of the divine.*

more or less literally: that Brahman actually becomes the cosmos, functioning as its material substratum, as well as its creator, in the sense of being a conscious agent who engages in a deliberate act of projecting the universe out of Itself. According to this idea, in other words, Brahman, or God, is both the material and the efficient cause of existence. Creation, it should be noted, in all of the systems of Vedanta, does not refer to an event at a certain point in time—and certainly not to a *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation from nothing. Creation is an ongoing process, with no beginning and no end—again, very much as it is conceived in process thought.

The next system of Vedanta to arise, and the one best known in the West, is the Advaita system, or system of “Non-Duality” or “Non-Dualism.” Advaita’s most famous exponent (though not necessarily the founder, in a strict sense, of this school of thought) is Shankara, who most probably lived from 788-820 of the Common Era. According to Advaita Vedanta, there is no entity other than Brahman. The projection of the universe out of Brahman, of which the Hindu scriptures speak, is therefore not to be taken as the coming into being of an entirely distinct second entity, truly distinguishable from its basis in the divine, but as a mere appearance (or *maya*) that is superimposed upon Brahman by Brahman’s creative power. “Creation” is, according to this view, not the emergence of a genuinely novel reality, but is something more akin to a magic show, or an illusion. The world is like a snake which, upon further inspection, proves to be actually a rope. Where we believe we perceive a cosmos of distinct and separate entities, there is only Brahman.

Although, as just mentioned, Advaita is the system of Vedanta that is best known in the Western world, it has many critics from within the Hindu traditions. Historically, the first of these critics to develop a new system of Vedanta in response to Advaita is the theologian Ramanuja (1077-1157). Ramanuja’s system of “Qualified Non-Dualism,” or *Vishishtadvaita*, is probably the form of Vedanta that is the closest to process thought in its view of the relationship of God and the world, as noted by such process philosophers as Charles Hartshorne and David Ray Griffin.

Ramanuja, an adherent of the Vaishnava stream of Hindu religious practice, was troubled by what he perceived as Shankara’s denigration of the relationship between God and the world. By affirming that Brahman alone is real and the world a mere appearance, Shankara, according to Ramanuja’s interpretation, loses sight of the real distinction that obtains, metaphysically, between the divine reality and the beings that make up the world of our experience—including of course ourselves. According to Ramanuja’s Vaishnava soteriology, the intense, loving, and unutterably real relationship of devotion, or *bhakti*, that the spiritual aspirant has with the personal God is what makes salvation, or *moksha*, possible—salvation being liberation or perfect freedom from the cycle of rebirth, followed by a blissful and everlasting

existence in union with the divine. Shankara, however, sees Brahman as an ultimately impersonal reality, with which no ultimately real relationship is possible, except the relationship of perfect identity. The personal God, for Shankara, is a part of the appearance, or *maya*, that makes up the world. For Ramanuja, this granting of a merely derivative and provisional reality to the personal God is unacceptable.

At the same time, however, that Ramanuja wishes to affirm a real distinction that obtains between God and the world, he also wishes to affirm, along with Shankara, the Vedic scriptural insight that the world emerges from and is, on some level, one with the divine reality. Ramanuja teaches, like Shankara and the Vedic scriptures, that Brahman is the sole reality. He also affirms, however, that real distinctions obtain *within* Brahman between the divine reality and the reality we know as the world of living beings.

The relationship that Ramanuja conceives between God and the cosmos is thus an organic one—again, with close correspondences to process thought. Ramanuja claims that the world is the body of God, and that God is the soul of the world. In this way, those Vedic scriptural passages that teach the unity of the world and Brahman and other Vedic passages that teach a distinction between God and the world, and the existence of a God who is a person, with whom real relations are possible, can all be affirmed. *Brahman*, as Ramanuja understands this category, refers to the whole, or the totality, the God-world complex (for which I have coined, in my own writing, the Greek neologism *theocosm*). *God*, on the other hand, properly understood (a translation of the Sanskrit term *Ishvara*), refers specifically to that aspect of Brahman that is the soul of all beings, the soul of the cosmos, the coordinator (but not the creator in any absolute, *ex nihilo* sense) of the order of existence. It is to this understanding of God that the *Bhagavad Gita* refers when God, in the form of Krishna says, “The beings making up this world rest upon me like pearls upon a thread.” (*Bhagavad Gita* 7:7) It is also the understanding to which modern Hindu sages such as Swami Vivekananda refer when they call God “The soul of our souls.” The concept of God operating here, and in much of Hindu theology, is not simple pantheism, in which God is or literally becomes the world,

but *panentheism*, in which God is *in* all beings, at their inmost core, and all beings are in God, as the sustaining ground of their existence.

### *Cosmic transformation and the role of the avatar*

To summarize, then, Brahman is the totality from which all of existence emerges—divine and cosmic. Internally to

Brahman, real distinctions obtain between the divine entity and the entities making up the cosmos. The relationship, however, between the divine reality and the cosmos is an intimate one, which can be likened to the relationship

between soul and body, or the thread running through a string of pearls and the pearls themselves. If a string of pearls is one thing, it is a thing that is dependent on—that subsists as—the relation of interdependence between the thread and the pearls.

In other words, if either the thread or the pearls were taken away, there would be no string of pearls. There would only be a piece of thread or there would be a disordered and random pile of pearls. *String of pearls* is a reality that emerges from the relations of mutual dependence between the thread and the pearls.

To return to the analogy with which I began, if we were to compare Hinduism to Christianity, it is almost as if we could conceive of a Hindu Trinity made up of Ishvara—the personal God—the cosmos, and the relations of mutual dependence between these that make up Brahman, the totality. Or, alternatively, this Trinity might be made up of God, the cosmos, and the totality that they form—Brahman, the theocosm. Or, finally, as I have done in some of my earlier writings, bringing both Shankara and process thought even more fully into the picture, we might conceive our Trinity as consisting of God, cosmos, and cosmic ideal—the eternal principle of creativity that God and cosmos together embody and which Shankara’s non-dualism conceives as the original nature of Brahman: *nirguna Brahman*, or Brahman with no limiting qualities whatsoever.

As a reality that is so intimately bound with the cosmos as God is conceived to be in Hindu thought, one might

imagine that God has a very strong role to play in the cosmic transformation. This, of course, is the divine role that is so strongly highlighted in John Cobb’s process interpretation of the Christ principle. According to a traditional Christian understanding, God transforms the world in a decisive way by manifesting in the world in the person of Jesus Christ. The divine incarnation is

***The Hindu concept which corresponds most closely to the creatively transforming event of divine incarnation is the concept of the avatar.***

a creative event. Given that creation is understood, in process theology, as an ongoing process, rather than as having happened only “in the beginning,” the presence of God in the world as and through the person of Jesus can be viewed in a pluralistic light as one creative moment among many, with the Christ principle, the principle of cosmic transformation, manifesting in many ways and in many forms. What makes a particular interpretation of this process *Christian* is its focus on the Jesus event as in some way definitive and uniquely revelatory of the nature of this cosmic principle. But this need not preclude other such creative events or revelations.

While a pluralistic interpretation of the Christ event is certainly possible, as Cobb demonstrates, and is—as he and I would both argue—an interpretation more authentic to the spirit of that event than an exclusivist interpretation, in which those who do not explicitly embrace this specific historic event as definitive of their understanding of their own self-transformation in some way fail to participate in the saving reality to which it points, it is the case that the weight of the Christian tradition has been in the direction of emphasizing the uniquely revelatory character of this event over its universal availability in a variety of forms.

The emphasis of the Hindu traditions has, however, been in the opposite direction. The Hindu concept which corresponds most closely to the creatively transforming event of divine incarnation is the concept of the avatar. Unlike the singular Christ event, which the Christian tradition

emphasizes, avatars are many in number, appearing whenever they are needed to shift the tide of cosmic history in a more positive direction.

An avatar is a physical manifestation in the world—an incarnation—of the divine reality which takes place for a specific transformative purpose. Although the word itself—which literally means “descent”—does not actually occur there, the classic definition of an avatar is found

*The Hindu idea that God is both one and many is not all that different from the Christian teaching of the Trinity.*

in the *Bhagavad Gita*, cited earlier, a text that forms a portion of the epic *Mahabharata* and was most likely composed some time in either the first century BCE or the first century CE: “Whenever there is a decline in *dharma* [goodness, righteousness, the sacred cosmic order], I manifest myself in order to re-establish *dharma* and to destroy evil” (*Bhagavad Gita* 4:7-8).

One cause of widespread misunderstanding in the West about Hindu concepts of divinity is that the various functions that God performs are identified, in Hindu traditions, with distinct deities, with different names and attributes. This has been misidentified and vilified as polytheism, given the strong emphasis of the Abrahamic traditions on the unity of God. Theologically, however, the Hindu idea that God is both one and many is not all that different from the Christian teaching of the Trinity.

God, in the role of maintaining the cosmic order, is called in Hindu traditions by the name *Vishnu*, “the one who is all-pervasive,” “the omnipresent one.” It is *Vishnu* that descends into the world for the purpose of maintaining and preserving *dharma*. This act of preservation is typically represented symbolically in the form of the slaying of demons that represent forces of blind egotism and chaos. Rama, one of the most celebrated of the avatars, thus slays the dreadful ten-headed monster Ravana, with the aid of the forces of nature, symbolized by an army of apes, eagles, and other animals who help Rama to build

a bridge to Ravana’s island fortress of Lanka and then assist him in laying siege to it. In a similar vein, *Varaha*, the avatar in the form of a wild boar, and *Narasimha*, the avatar in the form of a powerful creature who is half man, half lion, slay the demons *Hiranyaksha* and *Hiranyakashipu*, respectively.

But the cosmic transformation effected by the avatars is not always violent. The *Matsya*, the giant fish avatar, for example, saves humanity from a great flood, similar to the biblical flood. The Buddha avatar, modeled on the historical founder of Buddhism, is successful in ending the sacrifice of animals, which was a part of ancient Vedic ritual, but which contemporary Hindus reject as a most repugnant form of violence against innocent creatures. And in modern times, the nineteenth-century Bengali sage, Sri Ramakrishna, is viewed by many Hindus as an avatar whose purpose was to teach the harmony and unity of all religions, which was a central theme of this saintly man’s life and spiritual practice.

The avatar, like the incarnation, is a symbol of creative transformation. Operating out of an understanding of the God-world relationship as one of profound intimacy, it is a concept that presupposes, much like process thought—and much like that dimension of the Abrahamic traditions which process thought has helped to recover—a God with an intense love for and interest in the world, who participates in the events of this world, and who is willing even to experience suffering and death in the process.

*JEFFERY D. LONG is Associate Professor and Chair of Religious Studies and Co-Director of Asian Studies at [Elizabethtown College](#), in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School in the year 2000. He is the author of *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (2007), *Jainism: An Introduction* (2009), and the *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism* (2011), as well as a variety of articles, papers, and book reviews. He is the former chair of DANAM (the Dharma Association of North America) and the current co-chair of the North American Hinduism group of the American Academy of Religion. He is also an active member of the Hindu community in North America, affiliated to the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society and acting as a regular consultant for the Hindu American Foundation.*



# Guanyin talks about creative transformation

*A Buddhist perspective*

by Gene Reeves

Recently I went to dinner here in Beijing with a group of university students. Among them was a woman I thought to be a bit older than typical students. Since she was especially attractive, I managed to sit next to her. We talked at some length. What made her immediately distinctive was a white robe with kind of hood over her head and an image of a buddha in her hair, something that Buddhists, Chinese Buddhists at least, recognize as an appearance of Guanshiyin. Her name, which is usually shortened to just Guanyin, means “Regarder of the Cries of the World.” She is the embodiment of compassion in our world.

After more or less proper self-introductions in which she mumbled something I couldn’t understand, of course I soon asked if she was indeed Guanyin. “Yes,” she responded, “I often go by that name, especially when I’m in this costume, but I’m also known by many other names, actually an unlimited number of other names, and have been for a long time.” She was so pleasant that the idea that I might be talking to a lunatic never even occurred to me. I simply took her at her word and had a long conversation with Guanyin.

“Why so many names?” I asked. “Well,” she replied, “I have to take on different forms, or appear in different ways, in order to help different people. Helping people,

helping people in whatever way works best for them, is my job. Well, not my job exactly, but my vocation, my calling. It is what I do.”

“Wow!” I said, “What kind of forms do you take on?” “Any form you can imagine,” she said. “Sometimes I embody a god, sometimes a doctor or farmer, sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, usually an adult, but sometimes a child. It all depends on circumstances. Why, when I initially came to China from India I was an Indian prince, and looked like one for nearly ten centuries. But ordinary Chinese people don’t always relate well to royalty, even when they have to obey them. So I changed, was given some new clothes, and related more intimately with ordinary people.”

*“I often go by that name, especially when I’m in this costume, but I’m also known by many other names, actually an unlimited number of other names, and have been for a long time.”*

“But,” I said, “Aren’t you supposed to be a Buddhist? What would the Buddha think of running around all over the

place in such a variety of forms? Besides you are obviously a woman, and everyone knows that a buddha is always male.”

“I am the Buddha,” she said. “Even in the Indian text of the Lotus Sutra it is said that that among the many forms I can take on, the first is that of a buddha. I keep that in mind, and when someone needs a buddha to help them, I don’t hesitate to be Buddha for them. Actually, most people in East Asia prefer that the Buddha be a woman,



as a woman is easier to relate to. Monks and scholars of course do not like the idea of Buddha being a woman, and they do most of the talking, but ordinary people, and even some nuns, will tell you that I am Buddha.”

“I can be the Buddha because the Buddha is in me. As you know, the Buddha is also in you, and in every living being. If we practice seeing the Buddha both in ourselves and in

others, if we learn to see the Buddha in our mean boss, or disrespectful children, or in our mother-in-law, then it is no problem at all to see the Buddha in those we meet who are Christian or Jewish or something else. In this process we do not lose our distinctiveness. We don’t lose anything. We only gain by being enormously enriched.”

“Can we say,” I asked, “that transforming yourself creatively is a kind of way of life for you?” “Not really,” she said, “by myself I am nothing; not a buddha, a bodhisattva, a god or a human of any kind. I can only be someone in relation to someone else. It isn’t so much that I transform myself as that we transform one another. Creative transformation is mutual. This is what I call Buddhism.”

“But isn’t Buddhism supposed to be the truth that Shakyamuni Buddha discovered and taught in India a long time ago? I asked. “No,” she said, “Buddhism is just one of the many ways, the skillful means, with which buddhas help people. Temples and stupas, monastic robes and bowls and traditions, sutras and other kinds of teaching, stories and poetry, philosophical commentaries, meditation and recitation, statues and paintings and other forms of art, all these things are wonderful aides for helping people gain a better understanding of who they are and what kind of world this is, but none of them is necessary. What’s necessary is that there be some appropriate tools, stories, religious practices and institutions.”

“One of my favorite transformations, ways of being for others, is with a thousand arms and hands. In each of my

hands I hold a tool or device of some kind, a pen, a drum, a hammer, a flower, etc., symbolizing the many ways in which people can be helped. Some people think that I should do all of the helping, but I try to persuade them that those tools of mine should inspire others to develop a thousand ways of helping others.”

“Does that mean that Buddhists can borrow elements from other religious traditions?” I asked. And she replied, “Where I live primarily, in East Asia at least, Buddhists have always shown great respect for other religious traditions, especially by sharing concepts, institutional forms, texts, etc. with them. When Buddhists came to China they borrowed some Taoist terms and spiritual practices for example, and began to adopt and use Confucian values, both at the individual ethical and moral level and at the political level. Similarly, both Taoists and Confucianists borrowed freely from Buddhist ideas and practices that had been brought from India. Of course there were rulers and other elites who tried to put one tradition against the others, but ordinary people were very flexible in their religious beliefs and practices, making use of all three of the major Chinese traditions. As a result Buddhism itself has been transformed in China through its relations with non-Buddhists. In Japan it was similar, as Shinto gods often became Buddhist bodhisattvas, and Buddhist bodhisattvas were worshipped as Japanese gods. Respect for others, including their religious convictions and practices is a strong part of our natural sensibility. Christianity and Islam, with their antipathy, even antagonism, toward each other and toward East Asian religions is very puzzling to me. Why did people in the West despise each other’s religions so much?”

“It’s a complicated matter,” I said. “Christians, at least, until very recently, thought that Christianity alone, especially their own brand or sect of Christianity, held the truth of salvation. And the stakes were thought to be very high, as a few would spend eternity with God while everyone else would suffer everlasting punishment in hell. This meant that other religious traditions were not only inadequate or poor, but positively evil, something to be destroyed. In many cases people were not allowed even to enter the places of worship of traditions other than their own. For many Christians this has now changed. And in the United States, for example, Buddhism is beginning to

flourish. But in some places there is still a lot of disrespect for other traditions.”

“Yes,” she said, “we too have often put other traditions in a lower or subordinate role. Even within Buddhism we have a distinction between the Great Way and the small or lesser way. We have not always been as respectful as we ought to be. And Buddhists have sometimes portrayed

dhist flag. I can be a Christian or a Muslim, or a person of no religion at all. I only want those who love me to be compassionate toward everyone they meet. Then I will surely be there with them.”

“You too should come and visit me some time,” she said as we got up from the table to leave.

When I woke up, Guanyin was still here!

*“I can be the Buddha because the Buddha is in me. . . . The Buddha is also in you, and in every living being. If we practice seeing the Buddha both in ourselves and in others . . . then it is no problem at all to see the Buddha in those we meet who are Christian or Jewish or something else.”*

*GENE REEVES is an American process philosopher and theologian who has lived in Tokyo for over 22 years studying, teaching, and practicing Buddhism. He is a founder of the [International Buddhist Congregation](#) with*

people suffering terribly for their sins and crimes in Buddhist purgatories. But we only know that we have a variety of skillful means for leading people to the joys of awakening. For all I know, others may have even better methods unknown to me. If so, we are happy to learn from them and thus be changed by them. It would seem to be a very natural thing to do. It is also a very Buddhist thing to do, consistent with our sutras and history.”

“In the West now,” I responded, “many are experiencing blessings of meditation. Some become Buddhist or Hindu, a few even become both Christian and Buddhist, but most remain Christian. I think that is wonderful. We Buddhists sort of learned meditation from Hinduism and now we give it to Christians and others. We learn from one another and are transformed in the process. That seems very natural to me.”

“Yes, she said, “but beyond meditation there has to be some kind of compassionate service to others. That is what we call the bodhisattva way. I myself have always wanted those who love me to find me primarily in the low places of this world, the places where people are down, suffering and in trouble. And I want them to know that I do not always look this way and wear this robe. They might find me in the body and clothes of a doctor or nurse or someone who just holds the hand of another. There is no reason to think that I will be carrying a Bud-

*headquarters in Tokyo, part of the much larger Rissho Kosei-kai lay Buddhist organization. He is the translator from Chinese into English of The Lotus Sutra: A Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic. His most recent book is The Stories of the Lotus Sutra. He is a regular contributor to the magazine Dharma World. A frequent speaker on Buddhism and the Lotus Sutra in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States, Reeves is now a distinguished professor at Renmin University of China in Beijing as well as an International Advisor at Rissho Kosei-kai. He has taught at the University of Tsukuba in Japan, the University of Peking in China, and at the University of Chicago and Meadville Lombard Theological School, Wilberforce University, and Tufts University in the United States.*

*“I can only be someone in relation to someone else. It isn't so much that I transform myself as that we transform one another. Creative transformation is mutual. This is what I call Buddhism.”*



# CALLS to worship

by JESSICA PETERSEN

## *Advent 1*

*Mark 13:24-37*

We know not at what hour we will experience our God,

**whether in the middle of the night or at the  
break of day,**

**at a time to come or in this very hour.**

We know not in what place we will experience our God,

**whether in the darkness of a city alley or on  
a beach warmed by the sun's rays,**

**in a far-off, distant land or in the stillness of  
this place.**

We know not through whose face we will experience  
our God,

**whether in the tired eyes of a stranger or in  
the warm embrace of a loved one,**

**within a people yet unknown or within this  
community of faith.**

Ever-present God, we come together today  
with the hope that we will encounter you.

**Keep us awake; keep us alert**

**that as we pray and as we sing,**

**as we make a joyful noise and as we keep holy  
silence**

**we might encounter you**

**in this time, in this place, within this com-  
munity. Amen.**

## *Advent 2*

*Mark 1:1-8*

A voice cries out in the wilderness,

**"Prepare the way of our God."**

**We hear God's voice and so we come**

**to proclaim God's justice for all.**

A voice cries out in the wilderness,

**"Prepare the way of our God."**

**We hear God's voice and so we come**

**to announce peace to all our neighbors.**

A voice cries out in the wilderness,

**"Prepare the way of our God."**

**We hear God's voice and so we come**

**to live out God's unconditional love.**

You cry out to us, O God,  
calling us to come to you.

**Open our ears to hear your voice of love**

**that we might experience your unending grace**

**as we are gathered here today.**

**Open our ears to hear your voice of justice**

**that we might boldly work to realize your peace**

**throughout all of your creation. Amen.**

### Advent 3

Luke 1:46b-55

God invites us to engage in ministry with her,  
to share the good news of God's unconditional love.

**What a joy it is to work with our God!**

**What a joy it is to share the good news!**

Through the power of love,

*Right: through the work of our hands,*

**Left: those who were hungry are filled.**

Through the power of love,

*Right: through the work of our hearts,*

**Left: Through the power of love,**

*Right: through the work of our minds,*

**Left: those who were oppressed are freed.**

We rejoice in your amazing love, O God.

We rejoice in the life-changing ministry you call us to.

**Out of that joy, we offer our thanks and praise**

**as we gather to meet you in this place.**

**Challenge us, encourage us, and empower us**

**to live continually as your joyous partners**

**in creating a world filled with your love**

**and ruled by your justice. Amen.**

### Advent 4

Luke 1:26-38

In the presence of God, amazing things can happen.

**In the presence of God, we, though many, are made one.**

Through the love of God, miraculous things are possible.

**Through the love of God, peace wins out over violence.**

Trusting in your presence, O God,

**may we dare to go where you call us**

**proclaiming your peace with every step.**

Trusting in the unsurpassable power of your love,

**may we boldly follow where you lead**

**spreading your justice all along the way.**

**We open ourselves to your presence, O God—**

**eyes, ears, hands, and hearts opened wide to you.**

**We are here; we are yours;**

**with your help, we will travel the challenging road ahead. Amen.**

*REV. JESSICA PETERSEN, a graduate of [Eden Theological Seminary](#), is the pastor of Congregational United Church of Christ in Newton, Iowa. Like us on Facebook at [facebook.com/NewtonUCC](#).*



# opening prayers

by TIMOTHY MURPHY

*These prayers may be used in one of two ways: they may be said together as an extended prayer or they may be divided into the sections as they appear here. If said separately, simply add an appropriate closing to each, such as the phrase that concludes the Christmas prayer below, “In your name we pray,” or another contextually fitting closing.*



## *Advent 1*

Source of Life, who inspires the diversity of the planet, help us become open to your presence this day. As we prepare ourselves during this season, we look in hope to the possibilities you continue to offer us. As we live in you, may you live more fully in us, that our growing together within all your creation may more fully reflect the beauty of your people.

## *Advent 2*

Divine Wisdom, manifest in our brother Jesus and in one another, we seek to know you more fully. Help us to realize your love, most fully expressed in right relationships with one another, is the wisdom we so often ignore. In seeking the wellbeing of our sisters and brothers, infuse your steadfast love in all our paths, that what is hidden may be revealed.

## *Advent 3*

Matrix of Becoming, in joyous expectation we prepare ourselves for those moments where we encounter your realm. Help us to be ready to joyfully proclaim the good news of Christ’s birth in us wherever your revelation bursts through. Enable us to listen for the surprising places and voices where you are revealed, that we may receive you in joy.

## *Advent 4*

Empowering Spirit, breathe in us the desire for your transforming peace. As we seek to be faithful partners with you, point us in the directions where signs of your peace are the most in need. Affirming our worth, unafraid of those who violently resist your lure, give us the courage to lovingly resist all oppression in our lives and our communities.

## *Christmas*

Holy Weaver of the world, in hope, love, joy, and peace you are binding us in the web of our own mutual weaving. Through our interconnections, with you and with one another, inspire us; guide us; redirect us that we may participate in the healing that you bring to our hurting world. We pray all these things through the one who shows us your saving presence, Jesus, Mother and Friend of all, Amen.

*TIMOTHY MURPHY, a Ph.D. student in Process Studies at [Claremont Lincoln University](#), began working at Process & Faith this fall. An ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), he has served in student intern and associate minister positions among congregations of the Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ.*

# a candle liturgy paired with benedictions

by JEANYNE B. SLETTOM

## *First Sunday of Advent*

### *Candle liturgy*

The Gospel of John speaks of Christ as the true light coming into the world. In commemoration of that coming, we light candles for the four weeks leading to Christmas and reflect on the coming of Christ. It is significant that the church has always used that language—the coming of Christ—because it speaks to a deep truth. Christ is coming. Christ is always coming, always entering a troubled world, a wounded heart. And so we light the first candle, the candle of hope, and dare to express our longing for peace, for healing, and the well-being of all creation.

*[First candle is lit. Optional: sing one verse of "O Come, O come Emmanuel"]*

**Loving God, as we enter this Advent season, we open all the dark places in our lives and memories to the healing light of Christ.**

**Show us the creative power of hope.**

**Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you,  
That we may walk in the light of Christ.**

### *Benediction/Commission and Blessing*

Take time, in the busyness of this season, for quiet reflection—

For the light of God's love is discernible everywhere.

**We will let ourselves be surprised by wonder,  
And set aside time to offer quiet thanks.**

The good news of Advent is this:  
Christ is coming. Christ is always coming.

**We will welcome Christ into our hearts.  
We will let ourselves be guided by his ministry.  
We will go forth from this place in hope.**

## *Second Sunday of Advent*

### *Candle liturgy*

Last Sunday we lit the first candle—the candle of hope. Today we light the second candle, the candle of peace. We light it knowing full well that peace is elusive, and in some parts of the world, it is almost completely absent. Yet in this season of Advent, we trust that God is never absent from us. God is always preparing something new. And even where there is war and discord, whether between countries, within families, or within our own hearts, God is present, gently leading us to new possibilities.

*[Two candles are lit. Optional: sing one verse of "O Come, O come Emmanuel"]*

**Loving God, in this time of preparation and planning,  
We thank you for the hope and peace you unfailingly offer us.**

**Show us the creative power of hope.**

**Teach us the peace that comes from justice.**

**Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you,  
That we may walk in the light of Christ.**

### *Benediction/Commission and Blessing*

Take your encouragement from Christ,  
that your joy may be complete.

**We will share in the Spirit;  
We will find consolation in love.**

Practice a ministry of humility and compassion,  
For God is at work in you, empowering you.

**We will welcome Christ into our hearts.  
We will live lives worthy of the Gospel.  
We will go forth in hope and in peace.**

## Third Sunday of Advent

### Candle liturgy

We have lit the first two candles, one for hope and one for peace. Today we light the third candle, the candle of joy. This should be the easy one, because joy is all around us—in the children, the lights, the music, the gathering together. But how often do we let our preparations—or our memories—push joy to the side? Joy is like an underground spring that wells up within us, but joy is also a choice, an attitude. Like a muscle, it needs to be exercised. So today we open ourselves to joy, trusting that God has already planted it in us. All we need to do is give it care and offer it to share.

*[Three candles are lit. Optional: sing one verse of "O Come, O come Emmanuel"]*

**Loving God, we open ourselves to you,  
trusting that this is how you made us:  
you created us for joy-filled hearts and lives.  
Show us the creative power of hope.  
Teach us the peace that comes from justice.  
Fill us with the kind of joy that cannot be contained,  
but must be shared.  
Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you,  
That we may walk in the light of Christ. Amen.**

### *Benediction/Commission and Blessing*

Rejoice in God always, and again I say, rejoice  
For God has created you with the capacity for joy.

**We will find what makes us joyful,  
And make that our gift to the world.**

Trust in God's good will for all of creation  
and open yourself to God's gentle, transforming love.

**We will welcome new possibilities in our lives.  
We will offer ourselves to God's goodness.  
We will go forth in hope, and peace, and joy.**

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

### Candle liturgy

We have lit three candles—for hope, for peace, and for joy. Today we light the fourth candle—the candle of love. With this flame we signify the love of God that surrounds and fills us at all times, but that we recognize in a special way in the Christmas story. There is no greater power than love. It is stronger than rulers and empires, stronger than grief or despair, stronger even than death. We love, because God loves us.

*[Four candles are lit. Optional: sing one verse of "O Come, O come Emmanuel"]*

**Loving God, we open ourselves to you this Christmas season.**

**As these candles are lit, light our lives with your imagination.**

**Show us the creative power of hope.**

**Teach us the peace that comes from justice.**

**Fill us with the kind of joy that cannot be contained,  
but must be shared.**

**Magnify your love within us.**

**Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you,  
That we may walk in the light of Christ. Amen.**

### *Benediction/Commission and Blessing*

Depart in peace, and take with you the certain knowledge  
That God is always coming into the world.

**We will seek God, not in a long ago stable or ancient manger,  
But in the people we meet and the depths of our own hearts.**

May the blessing of Christmas make you a blessing to others;

May the peace of the season pervade all that you do.

**We will welcome the challenge of discipleship.**

**We will offer ourselves as God's ministers.**

**We will go forth in hope, peace, joy, and love.**

## *Christmas eve*

### *Candle liturgy*

Hope, peace, joy, and love. Four candles, four promises continually offered to us by God, and all of them manifest in this one we light tonight: the Christ candle. In Christ we find the hope of transformation, the peace that follows justice, the joy of self-fulfillment in community, and the love that encompasses us in all our diversity, empowering us to make our own unique contribution to this world. In Christ we find light and life, and the courage to be like him, answering his call and following in his footsteps.

*[All candles are lit.]*

**We rejoice in God's steadfast presence in our lives,  
and in God's unique presence in the life of Jesus of  
Nazareth—**

**born of Mary, growing through childhood into an  
adult ministry,**

**in all his life manifesting the peace, love, and justice  
of God;**

**his voice undimmed by the centuries**

**his call and his promise as clear to us as it was to his  
disciples so long ago.**

**Come to us, Lord Jesus,**

**Be born in us this night, in our hearts, our minds, our  
lives.**

**May the light of your life be kindled in us,**

**And lead us to the shining truth,**

**of God with us, God for us, God in us. Amen.**

*[Conclude service with distribution of candles to congregation, "Silent Night," and one of two options: a silent dismissal or a reading of the Magnificat.]*



# pastoral prayers

by SARAH BLOESCH



## *Advent Week 1, Year B*

We give thanks to you, our God, for your presence and your faithfulness. You, God of Word and water, God of vine and soil, God of bone and breath, you are the one to whom our hearts turn in collective anticipation and longing. We watch the mountains, we wait by the fig tree, we walk among those who scorn us, and search for your face. We believe, we want to believe, you have not abandoned us, yet we fear. Tear open your hiding place so that we might search no longer, make your face, your

hands, your feet shine upon us so clearly that we have no doubt it is you, and strengthen us for the journey.

You, O God, shape us as the potter touches clay into life, and you, O God, draw your hand over us that we may lean into the fullness of your presence with every step and every interaction. We are a people marked by yearning, confusion, and hope. Remind us daily that you ask our response to and desire our participation within your never failing presence; we fumble but know that this season of beginnings is a season that stretches through our whole relationship—for you are our beginning. We are your people and you are our God. Call us anew to see, hear, interpret, expect, demand, compromise, act, rejoice, weep, and pray. Call us to trust and to be made bold by such trust.

## *Advent Week 2, Year B*

God Who Is whom we cannot yet know, reveal yourself to us in our longing and seeking and waiting, so that we may praise you and worship your name, your being, your shape which ever slips just beyond us. Find us and hold us close even as we cannot yet find you; and answer us when we ask: For what shall we cry out? To whom should we cry? And why must we cry so long?

Comfort, O Comfort, please speak comfort to us, to creation, to the bounties of you, our God, who ushers in the beginning. Abundant and nurturing God, who is the good news, and who reveals the Word, let us see, let us hear, let us taste, let us follow your Word who beckons us so that we too may be empowered to name, to fumble, to seek, to try, to fail, to find, and to be found ever anew.

Even as you, O God, are ever just before us creating a new heaven and a new earth, we search for the places where righteousness and peace kiss, where love and faithfulness embrace. We confess, O God, that we do not always have eyes to see the possibilities of these divine manifestations and that we, more often, actively create against such moments. Call us forth from our baptisms to be the bodies you need for the reality you want, the reality centered around the worship, justice, peace, and praise you evoke.

### *Advent Week 3, Year B*

O God, who teaches us to pray without ceasing and rejoice always, make us like those who dream and like those who move into the waves of your sea change, for you are always at work among us; make us like those who dream the creative ever-pressing ways to bear good news to the brokenhearted, to listen to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to all the ways we hold ourselves captive, to loosen our grip and release the prisons we erect for others in our fear, our selfishness, and our institutional unknowing. It is to you we turn, always in awe, searching for the Spirit who judges and tests the motives of the faithful.

It is you we encounter in the holy kiss uttering the words, Beloved, pray for us. O Beloved God, pray for us to be open to finding your presence in surprising manifestations, unexpected positions, hidden movements, and buried truths. Pray that we hear the messenger who points to the hope, who points to the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Pray that we put on the garment of trust so that we have an answer for those who ask us why we are here. We continue to wait, here in this place O God, for the moment you meet us in our despair and bring us home with shouts of joy.

### *Advent Week 4, Year B*

Nomadic and wandering God who comes to us through the womb and in flesh, we sing of your steadfast love and faithfulness to us, your creation, with all our breath, all our bodies, all our convictions. We try to pin you down, to build houses for you, to contain you, to control you; and you send us prophets to gently chastise that your ways are not our ways. You move with us, in us, around us, and yet ever just before us. We want to hold you, to prove to you that we are worthy of your love, to lure you toward us by our material goods. We

still have not learned that you love us in our fullness and in our fractioned pieces simply because you are our God. We praise you, thank you, dedicate ourselves anew to you knowing that even in these activities we fall short of expressing our complete gratitude.

Ever mysterious God, as you called to Mary to bear Christ to the world, call each of us, we pray, to bear Christ also. Find us in our weakness, in our places where the world despises us, in the moments when we feel we have nothing of value to offer and reveal to us the possibilities of being your disruptive presence, your comforting presence, your healing presence. As we encounter Christ, as we meet God among us, give us the perseverance, the humility, and the strength to carry that reality, to carry Christ, beyond ourselves.

*SARAH BLOESCH is a graduate student of religious studies at [Southern Methodist University](#) with a focus on constructive, systematic Christian theology. She is a member of the United Church of Christ.*



Peace  
on  
Earth

# Critic's corner: BOOKS

## *Love's Availing Power: Imagining God, Imagining the World* Paul R. Sponheim (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011)

reviewed by NELDA KERR

This newest book by Paul R. Sponheim focuses on the works of Alfred North Whitehead and Søren Kierkegaard. Sponheim weaves together these two libraries with a strong command of the material and an accessible tone. Detailed endnotes, scripture and name/subject indexes make this book a powerful resource for anyone interested in writing, preaching or teaching from the intersection of ideas between these two great thinkers.

The two thinkers, clearly differentiated, provide key elements in Sponheim's picture of love as the highest availing power. Sponheim maintains that Kierkegaard's individual (self-relating self) needs Whitehead's relational world ("community of becoming") and visa-versa. We need them both, he argues, to grasp a Johannine picture of God that *is* love. "Love is what gives us the power to believe in the face of finitude and to live resisting evil, even while (to the point of) loving the enemy."

The framework of self-and-world within the question of power contextualizes Whitehead and Kierkegaard in the modern era. Sponheim holds, however, that his two heroes rightly resist the polarization of these contrasting themes, unlike Descartes and Hume. The self and the world bring each other into existence, always already in relationship to an ever-present God. Though he does "not claim that all power is an expression of love," love is "the kind of power that needs to be attributed to both Creator and creature." An *image* of a loving God helps us to *imagine* a world infused with this power of love. This love is truly free. A



Kierkegaardian self is free to determine itself in the hope of acting out that love ethically in the face of the other.

The first chapter takes up this understanding of freedom. Kierkegaard maintains that to choose to be oneself is the ultimately free and freeing choice. All true anxiety and despair is aimed toward that end. Hints of process theology can be perceived quite easily as Sponheim relays Kierkegaard's contemplation of existence through choice, which gives rise to existential continuity and contemporaneity. Freedom comes from love, and in the act of choosing to be oneself, one is free to love. For this freedom to be real for both God and the self, a God *for* us is required.

This means that God's omnipotence is anchored in an "unbreakable commitment to relationship."

Though Kierkegaard is known for radical subjectivity ("subjectivity is the truth"), Sponheim argues that *Works of Love* allows us some understanding of relationality, where love is seen as duty. Kierkegaard's method of "indirect communication" recognizes that the self becomes within a system of signs and symbols, and within the paradox of belief, Kierkegaard requires a leap of faith.

The second chapter relates Kierkegaard's image of the self to Whitehead's metaphysic. The solitary individual is woven with the ever-present God, and contextualized in a "universe of meaning." Sponheim declares "Whitehead's contention is that if we truly understand the world, we will find ourselves speaking of God within the world." He maintains that God is required for the presence of novelty within Whitehead's system. This chapter explains

why Whitehead's God is a richer depiction than others, focusing on themes of immanence, time and spatial relationships, creativity, harmony, and power that does not require conscious acknowledgement.

Whitehead's mental and physical poles are seen in both God and humans as the oscillation between potentiality and actuality. God maintains a Kierkegaardian "infinite qualitative difference," in that God uniquely carries no individual past as the "primordial actual entity," has no derivative feelings, and thus is able to provide the world with pure potential. The last section defends a Whiteheadian God and the concept of unified experience in the face of French post-structuralism (or "deconstructive postmodernism"), which he states, borrowing from Edith Wyschogrod, has "xenophobia," or "fear of the one."

After setting this stage, Sponheim takes us through three chapters in which Whitehead and Kierkegaard are brought together on the themes of trust, the power of

love against evil, and the importance of recognizing limits in respect to actual evil, due to our individual finitude. These themes move toward illustrating a Whiteheadian God as *hopeful* and *helpful* to the Kierkegaardian individual, as well as a world that requires an individual to act against evil and for love. In Kierkegaard's stages on life's way, the individual moves from an aesthetic to an ethical state, which, though relative, is required for the self to freely relate to itself, and is taken up into the third stage of religiosity.

Sponheim arrives at a constructivist postmodernism that empowers the creator and creature through the radical freedom of love. "To that end, the creature, imaging God in believing in the face of finitude and living against evil, can claim power that avails in a truly creative life."

NELDA KERR is an M.A. student in philosophy, spirituality, and the arts at Claremont School of Theology, with an emphasis on Whiteheadian thought. She was a 2011 Summer Fellow at the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN.

---

Wilkinson, continued from page 8

expressive of the Image of God in which we were created. Jesus *is* the incarnate Word of God. Jesus is my savior precisely because he awakened to the Word and to the Oneness of all creation: to the Cosmic Christ. All of creation is pulling us forward to such a birth. All of us! That is ample reason to sing "Joy to the *World!*"

### Endnotes

1. "The Second Coming," William Butler Yeats, 1919.
2. Ibid.
3. Cohen, Andrew, *Evolutionary Enlightenment: A New Path to Spiritual Awakening*, Select Books, Inc. N.Y., 2011.
4. De Chardin, Pierre Teilhard, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Harper & Row, New York, 1959.
5. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Ibid.
6. Cohen, Andrew, Ibid., p. 93.

DAVID WILKINSON is a 7th-generation Methodist minister His great, great, great, great grandfather was a circuit rider who emigrated from England's Lake District to Ontario, Canada. He has a Doctor of Religion from Claremont School of Theology. For 30 years, he has been senior pastor of St. Francis in the Foothills United Methodist Church in Tucson, Arizona.

---

Ruzgar, continued from page 14

### Endnotes

1. In using "autonomy" and "contingency," I was partly inspired by Fazlur Rahman, who uses the same terms to describe the natural world according to the Qur'an. See Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 2-3.
2. See, for example, 22:18, 3:83, and 57:1.
3. For a fuller account of Iqbal's views, see his *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: The Civil and Military Gazette, LTD., 1944).
4. 22:18.
5. Translation is quoted from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Beltsville: Amana Publications, 2006).
6. Iqbal, 13.

Born in Turkey, MUSTAFA RUZGAR completed his B.A. in Islamic Studies at Uludag University in Bursa, Turkey. He has an M.A. (2001) and Ph.D. (2008) in Philosophy of Religion from Claremont Graduate University. He is currently an assistant professor at California State University, Northridge. His research interests include Islamic thought, philosophy of religion, theology, process thought, religious pluralism, and interfaith dialogue.

January 13-16, 2012

Faith & Film  
CLASS

with

Marjorie Suchocki

*January 13-16, 2012*

*11th annual*  
WHITEHEADinternational  
filmFESTIVAL



celebrating films that promote  
the common good