

Process Theology, Politics, and Democracy
January 2006 Intensive Course
Meadville Lombard Theological School

Instructor – Rev. Dr. Kenneth A. Olliff
kolliff@uchicago.edu

Course Description

This course will attempt to answer two sets of questions: 1. What is process theology, and what are its strengths and weaknesses as a theological approach for religious liberals? And, 2. Upon what theological basis should religious liberals enter into current political debates?

In order to address these questions, the course will be divided into two parts. *Part I* will provide a constructive and critical introduction to process theology. We will explore the origins, development, and present-day expressions of process thought as a significant trajectory within American liberal theology and as a contemporary theological option for religious liberals. Part I will locate process thought within the development of an empirical orientation in theology, and then turn to Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysics as a philosophical framework for what was to become process theology. We will further take up two of Whitehead's major interpreters, Charles Hartshorne and Henry Nelson Wieman, whose work led to the development of major strands within process theology.

Part II will build on this overview of process theology to consider the relationship between theology and politics by examining significant topics in current political life, including the nature of liberal democracy, human rights, ecology, feminism, and economics. Part II will explore how theological commitments contribute to our political beliefs and ask what the role of religion should be in how we construct our public, common lives. We will assess the adequacy of process theology as a basis for engaging each of these topics, and students will refine their own theological basis for political participation in the process.

In addition to gaining facility with the basic concepts of process theology and exploring the relationship between theology and politics, emphasis will be placed on building skills in theological reflection. Students will discern and develop their own theological outlook in relation to the broader religious tradition and public context in which ministry takes place today.

Course Goals

- Gain a solid understanding of process theology as a theological movement along with two of its major interpreters.
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of process thought as a theological approach for religious liberals.
- Reflect together on the relationship between theology and politics and the role of religion in public life.

- Each student will develop and refine her or his own theological outlook in critical dialogue with the readings and with other participants in the course.
- Each student will begin to articulate his or her own theological basis for involvement in politics.

Part I – Process Theology

Session 1: Monday AM – Process Thought in Context: An Empirical Theological Tradition

1. Randolph Crump Miller, ed., *Empirical Theology: A Handbook* (Religious Education Press, 1992) – Chapter 1, “History of Empirical Theology” by Tyron Inbody
- *You may also find additional chapters useful as an overview of empirical theology, which is the broader theological tradition out of which process theology developed.*
2. Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (SUNY, 1998) – Chapter 1: “Prelude: Toward a Politics of Relationality”

Session 2: Monday PM – Whitehead’s Metaphysics

1. Donald W. Sherburne, ed., *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality* (University of Chicago Press, 1981)
 - *Start with the Appendix, “In Defense of Speculative Philosophy”*
 - *Read Chapters 1, 2, 3 (pages 36-39, 69-71 only), and 7*
 - *Skim Chapters 4 and 5 with particular attention to the italicized portions.*
2. *Kenneth A. Olliff, “A Summary Introduction to Whitehead’s Metaphysics”
3. *James Luther Adams, “The Lure of Persuasion: Some Themes from Whitehead,” *Unitarian Universalist Christian*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Winter 1975-76): 5-22.

Session 3: Tuesday AM – Charles Hartshorne

1. *Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process* (The Free Press, 1953) – Preface, Chapters 1 & 9
2. *Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (Open Court, 1973) – Chapters 1, 2, & 4

Session 4: Tuesday PM – Henry Nelson Wieman

1. *Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1946) – Chapters 1, 3, 10, and “Technical Postscript”

Recommended:

- Bruce Southworth, *At Home in Creativity: The Naturalistic Theology of Henry Nelson Wieman* (Skinner House Books, 1995), Chapter 4

Part III – Process Theology, Politics, and Democracy

Session 5: Wednesday AM – Liberal Democracy and the Political

1. Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (SUNY, 1998) – Chapter 6: “Corporate Governance and Democracy”
2. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso, 2000) – Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 4, and Conclusion (skim Chapters 3 and 5)

Session 6: Wednesday PM – Human Rights

1. “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (available online at www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)
2. Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (SUNY, 1998) – Chapter 2: “The Idea of Human Rights: A Communitarian Perspective” **and** pages 17-18.
3. Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (Oxford University Press, 2000) – Introduction, Chapters 1 and 3 (skim Chapters 2 and 4)

Session 7: Thursday AM – Ecology

1. Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (SUNY, 1998) – Chapter 14: “Ecology and Social Justice: Shattering the Boundaries of Moral Community” **and** pages 253-254.
2. Jay McDaniel, *Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (John Knox Press, 1989) – Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, and 4 (skim Chapter 3)

Session 8: Thursday PM – Feminism

1. Nancy R. Howell, *A Feminist Cosmology: Ecology, Solidarity, and Metaphysics* (Prometheus Books, 2000) – Entire

Session 9: Friday AM – Economics

1. Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future, Second Edition* (Beacon Press, 1994) – Introduction, Chapters 1, 4, 6, 19, 20 (Skim Chapters 2 and 5)
2. Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (SUNY, 1998) – Chapter 7: “Interlude: The Socialist Vision Revisited” **and** pages 71-72

Session 10: Friday PM – Conclusion: Process Theology, Politics, and Religious Liberalism

1. *John F. Hayward, “Process Theology and Liberal Religion,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3 (May & September 1985): 115-127.

Course Requirements

1. *Attendance, required readings, and participation in class discussions.* The course is limited to twelve students and will be conducted in a seminar format; thus, thorough preparation and active participation in discussions by each student are essential to the success of the course.
2. *One to two page (double spaced) biographical sketch.* This introduction should include a brief biographical statement, a summary of your theological outlook, and a bit about your interest in the subject matter of the course. These should be emailed to the class following the schedule outlined below.
3. *Nine two page (double spaced) response papers.* These short papers will respond to the readings for each class session (with the exception of the final Friday afternoon session) and are due at regular intervals before the beginning of the course. In writing these papers, you should concentrate on one or two specific issues in the readings that you feel are most significant. What did you find most exciting, frustrating, engaging, or promising?

Use the first page of each paper to answer the question, “What?”—this page should be expository or descriptive. What is the author’s claim and/or argument for the specific issue or issues that you are focusing on? The second page should answer the question, “So What?”—why do you feel this is important, why do you agree or disagree with the author, what is its broader significance, etc.? The response papers should be emailed to the class by the deadlines described below; they are required but will be graded only on a pass/fail basis.

Suggested Timeline for Posting of Response Papers:

November 4 - Biographical Sketch **and** Response 1: Process Thought in Context
November 18 - Response 2: Whitehead’s Metaphysics **and** Response 3: Hartshorne
December 2 - Response 4: Wieman **and** Response 5: Liberal Democracy & the Political
December 16 - Response 6: Human Rights **and** Response 7: Ecology
January 4 - Response 8: Feminism **and** Response 9: Economics – ***Deadline for completion of all response papers***

Please note: The purpose of the deadlines is to encourage you to read and reflect on the course material and write the response papers on a regular basis over an extended period of time. With this purpose in mind, try to follow the deadlines as closely as possible but recognize that there is flexibility so long as you are reading and posting response papers regularly. However, all response papers need to be completed and distributed by January 4.

After the October 15, registration deadline for the course, you will receive an email from me welcoming you to the course and establishing the **course listserv**. At that point, you can begin to distribute your biographical sketch and response papers to the other members of the course **by emailing the listserv** (you can do this initially just by “replying” to my introductory email.) To make sharing these as easy as possible, please simply paste the text of your response papers into the body of an email message rather than using attachments (although you’ll probably want to write these in a separate document first). Also, please include in the subject line of your emails

your last name and the assignment – for example, “Olliff – Response 1: Process Thought in Context”.

4. *Class presentation.* Each session (except the last) will begin with a short (20 minute) presentation to the class on the topic and readings for that session. The purpose of the presentation is to provide a framework for our class discussion. In designing these presentations you might think of them as an expansion and further development of the response paper that you have written on the topic.

Your presentation should include the following: A. Describe the author or authors’ central thesis (for sessions in which there are multiple readings, try to briefly say something about each although you may concentrate on one); B. Identify several themes addressed in the readings that you feel are especially important for the class to discuss; C. Give your own critical and/or constructive response.

These presentations do not need to be written out and are not due prior to the beginning of class. However, please prepare an outline of your presentation to be handed out to the class. ***Email me (kolliff@uchicago.edu) when you are ready with your top three choices for the session at which you would like to present and I will email you back to confirm which is available.*** If there are more students than sections, you may be working with a partner—if so, I’ll email you with her or his name and email address so that you can begin consulting with each other as your work progresses.

5. *Insights page for the final session.* The final session of the course will consist of a concluding discussion. In order to make the discussion as fruitful as possible, I would like you to write out *three* (3) key insights that you are taking away from the course to be shared with the class. I’ll collect your insights page on Friday morning (they can be handwritten but make them legible), and then will distribute copies in preparation for the afternoon session. Start brainstorming while you’re preparing for the course and take notes during our class time—then distill your thoughts down to the three points that you feel are most central.

6. *Ten page (double spaced) final paper.* This paper should focus on one of the figures (Whitehead, Hartshorne, or Wieman) or topics (democracy, human rights, ecology, feminism, or economics) discussed in the course and should be divided into two parts of roughly equal length. In part one, give an analysis and evaluation of the figure or topic that you have chosen. In part two, give a statement of your own theological perspective (your constructive position) *in engagement with* the figure or topic that you selected in part one. ***These papers should be emailed to me at kolliff@uchicago no later than March 10, 2006 (eight weeks after the end of the course).***

Readings

Required and recommended texts are listed under each class session. The *required books* are available for purchase through an online source such as Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble. You may also be able to find used copies through either of these websites or through American Book

Exchange (www.abebooks.com). Items marked with a * are included in sequence in the *course reader*, which is available for purchase from Meadville Lombard.

Some of the readings for the course, especially the Whitehead, Hartshorne, and Wieman selections, are quite dense (Whitehead in particular is notoriously challenging). I have assigned a limited number of pages for each, and you will want to read each selection carefully, make lots of notes, and then go back and review what you have read. Don't get bogged down in getting through these readings—jot down questions that come up as you read, highlight particular passages that you'd like us to discuss in class, and keep moving.

Contents of the Course Reader

1. *Kenneth A. Olliff, "A Summary Introduction to Whitehead's Metaphysics"
3. *James Luther Adams, "The Lure of Persuasion: Some Themes from Whitehead," *Unitarian Universalist Christian*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Winter 1975-76): 5-22.
3. *Charles Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process* (The Free Press, 1953) – Preface, Chapters 1 and 9
4. *Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (Open Court, 1973) – Chapters 1, 2, and 4
5. *Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1946) – Chapters 1, 3, 10, and "Technical Postscript"
6. *John F. Hayward, "Process Theology and Liberal Religion," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3 (May & September 1985): 115-127.

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2. Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (SUNY, 1998)
3. Donald W. Sherburne, ed., *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality* (University of Chicago Press, 1981)
4. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso, 2000)
5. Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

6. Jay McDaniel, *Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (John Knox Press, 1989)
7. Nancy R. Howell, *A Feminist Cosmology: Ecology, Solidarity, and Metaphysics* (Prometheus Books, 2000)
8. Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future, Second Edition* (Beacon Press, 1994) (Available at BarnesandNoble.com)

Secondary Resources on Process Theology

You may find the following texts useful as secondary or background material.

Delwin Brown, Ralph E. James, Jr., and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*

John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*

Ewert H. Cousins, ed., *Process Theology: Basic Writings*

Robert Kane and Stephen H. Phillips, eds., *Hartshorne, Process Philosophy, and Theology*

Elizabeth M. Kraus and Robert Cummings Neville, *The Metaphysics of Experience: A Companion to Whitehead's Process and Reality*

Ivor Leclerc, *Whitehead's Metaphysics*

C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction*

Creighton Peden and Jerome Stone, *The Chicago School of Theology: Pioneers in Religious Inquiry*

Marvin Shaw, "Assessing Wieman's Contribution: The Theistic Stance without the Supernatural God," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, vol. 20 (Sept 1999), 241-258.

Bruce Southworth, *At Home in Creativity: The Naturalistic Theology of Henry Nelson Wieman*