

PROCESS THOUGHT AT A NEW THRESHOLD

Date: October 31, 2020

Time: 9 am to 12 noon

ZOOM Meeting

An Invitation from John Cobb

In the forties and fifties, the neonaturalist faculty in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago provided a community in which a process understanding was nurtured. By the sixties, the Divinity School joined the mainstream, and the academic disciplines tightened their control of university curricula. There seemed to be no future for the study of Whitehead.

In the avoidance of disappearance there have been two thresholds. The first was institutional. We established a journal (1970) so that scholarly discussion could continue. And we established an official Center for Process Studies (1973). The journal, edited by Lewis Ford, emphasized philosophy and philosophical theology. The Center, co-founded by David Griffin and me, focused on important topics from the process perspective. It cultivated an interest in process thought in many fields.

All of this was extremely marginal in every field. Nevertheless, it created a unique community, directly contrary to the disciplinary fragmentation of the university. Whereas the university disciplines prided themselves on their academic purity, the process community had, as its primary concern, “saving the world.” It adopted from China the term “ecological civilization” to name the alternative (saved) world for which Whitehead’s thought called. It included philosophy and theology, but its greatest success was in officially atheistic China.

By 2015, I thought we could reasonably claim to have an alternative to the university. We held a conference showing that on 80 topics process thinkers were working at the cutting edge, dealing with their assumptions. I thought we could also show that what we offered was urgently needed for practical purposes as well as theoretical.

In the following five years, the urgency of change became more widely manifest. Society needed to move away from the value free

compartmentalized academic disciplines to a passionately committed holistic vision of the world we need to create. This could happen only with the change of key assumptions offered by process philosophy. Our conference had shown we were ready to help, but the number (outside of China) who cared enough to look were in the thousands.

Nevertheless, we made real progress toward a public role. Process organizations began working with cities, counties, and even states. Locally they gained public visibility and their contributions have been appreciated. But in the national public arena, we remained largely invisible and unheard.

Despite our still marginal status, can we help? Can we reach millions? That possibility may be emerging as the global crisis forces itself on the world's attention. Many of us feel that the cultural climate is changing dramatically, and that many more people are ready to hear what we have to offer if we find ways of getting the ideas to them. This is the threshold that we now may have the opportunity to cross.

Our chances of crossing may be increased if many of us working in different fields and in diverse ways work together as one community to make the needed changes. That is why I have planned with the heads of major American process organizations a mini conference to help us shift our thinking and perhaps our priorities in ways that increase chances of success.

First, we will hear from leaders of four process organizations. What have they achieved in the last five years? In my view, quite a lot. I think we have become ready for "the big time." Is "the big time" ready for us? We will hear from astute observers in ten fields whether the time for process thought has come.

We'll begin with philosophy. In recent years it has certainly improved on the European continent. In the non-academic community of thinkers, it has improved in the United States. Even the American philosophical guilds are more open to ideas important to process thought. Can we hope for a major breakthrough in the U.S.?

I propose that we hear about the thinking of church people, and here I consider the success of Tom Oord's "God Can't" as a real breakthrough. We also need to hear from those with spiritual interests separate from the

Christian churches. Finally, among liberal religious thinkers who are interested in interfaith, political, and cultural matters, Jay McDaniel will tell us where process thought stands.

The physical sciences have an immense influence on our world view. They contribute especially to cosmology. Whitehead thought the time had come for a changed science and cosmology. The scientific guilds have not changed, but their limitations have become more apparent. Might they shift from substances to events? Is there anything the process community can do to increase the chances of change? Matthew Segall will share his expectations.

The survival of whole populations depends on the products of agriculture. The modernization of agriculture has been a catastrophe. Awareness of the destructiveness of factory farming and raising animals for meat has increased. Interest in regenerative farming has increased. Process thought can undergird this interest philosophically. Has the time come to show the importance of how we think for what we eat?

Most Americans are not, today, enthusiastic about the American or the global economy. Some of them recognize that the problems are partly rooted in the dominant economic theories. Although academic economics still largely supports the current neoliberal economy, that concentrates wealth in fewer and fewer hands, there is much greater openness to call for changes that were barely discussable in the past. Can we hope for an economics that strengthens local communities?

Our minds are largely shaped by our many years in schools. Schooling has been shaped by modern beliefs such as the Kantian separation of facts and values. Dissatisfaction with the results increases. Is there a chance for a different kind of education oriented to the needs of students and of the world?

For generations young people have known that collective human behavior has been unsustainable. But more important for them has been doing well in the present context. The present young adult generation seems to be aware that it is their future that is at stake. Their commitment to change seems deeply rooted. Can process thinkers form an alliance with this community of shared concern?

We will conclude by considering quite directly the question of access to the determinative media. Even if there is change, those who control the media may contain by excluding it from widespread knowledge. Might process thought circumvent this in some way? The news that Philip Clayton's ECI had partnered with a major organization gives promise that the idea, and even the content, of ecological civilization may get a wide public hearing.

If the news is good on many of these fronts, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to find new ways to spread the word. To conclude the conference, we will break up into smaller groups to start the conversation about how in any and all these fields to reach a much larger audience. The goal is to arouse enough people that politicians will pay attention. In conclusion, I will mention three possible projects that might help us reach more people.

We might form alliances with other organizations that are already contributing to that goal in ways we are not. This could make clear that ecological civilization is an inclusive vision of the world we need. It would certainly not be racist or sexist, but other organizations are doing much more on those fronts than are we. We think all humans should have rights, but we may be critical of the excessively individualist emphasis. Is there an organization working for individual rights that recognizes the importance of community? We certainly favor peace, and we can probably find a peace organization that is very congenial to our understanding of ecological civilization.

I have been thinking for some time about a website that invited wide participation in proposing how ecological civilization would differ from modernity: a kind of Wikipedia of ecological civilization.

Universities may be in a vulnerable situation and willing to consider a change in curriculum. Some of them may consider that the global crisis is so serious that they should allow it to affect what they teach and the way they teach it. There have been encouraging developments at Willamette and LaVerne. We might work together to persuade other universities to experiment. We think there are students who would be attracted to a university that was working to save the world and to prepare students to take part.

Our meeting will be on Saturday, October 31, from 9 to 12. Please join us. We are called to do what we can to save the world. Maybe, at last, the thinking we have done about this will capture the imagination of millions and make a real contribution to radical change of collective behavior. It's worth trying.