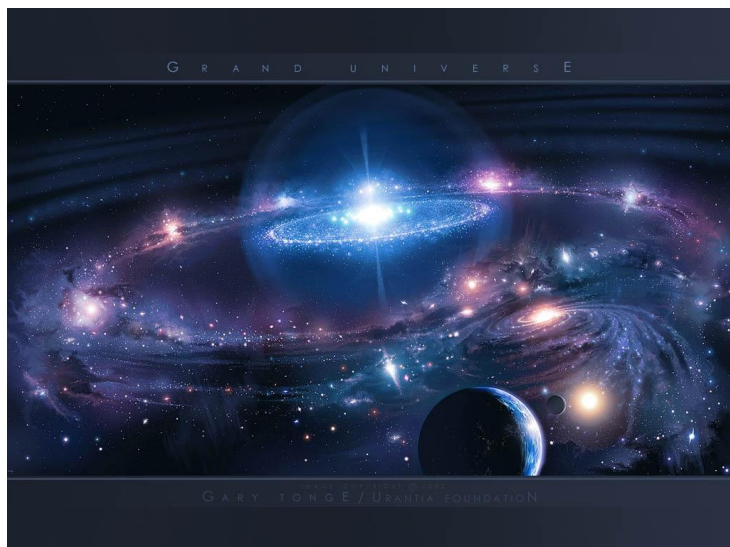


Parwez's view on God and the universe: a form of Muslim Process Theology

Written by:AY Mol
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What is Process Theology? It is a modern form of metaphysics philosophy that tries to understand God from a scientific cosmological point of view. It was first developed by the English philosopher A.N.Whitehead in the 1930's, who broke away from the traditional Jewish-Christian concept of God.



A small summary of the key ideas of Process Theology are:

- God is not omnipotent in the sense of being coercive. The divine has a power of persuasion rather than coercion. Process theologians interpret the classical doctrine of omnipotence as involving force, and suggest instead a forbearance in divine power. "Persuasion" in the causal sense means that God does not exert unilateral control.
- Reality is not made up of material substances that endure through time, but serially-ordered events, which are experiential in nature. These events have both a physical and mental aspect. All experience (male, female, atomic, and botanical) is important and contributes to the ongoing and interrelated process of reality.
- The universe is characterized by process and change carried out by the agents of free will. Self-determination characterizes everything in the universe, not just human beings. God cannot totally control any series of events or any individual, but God influences the creaturely exercise of this universal free will by offering possibilities. To say it another way, God has a will in everything, but not everything that occurs is God's will.
- God contains the universe but is not identical with it (panentheism, not pantheism or pandeism). Some also call this "theocosmocentrism" to emphasize that God has always been related to some world or another.
- Because God interacts with the changing universe, God is changeable (that is to say, God is affected by the actions that take place in the universe) over the course of time. However, the abstract elements of God (goodness, wisdom, etc.) remain eternally solid.

- Dipolar theism, is the idea that God has both a changing aspect (God's existence as a Living God) and an unchanging aspect (God's eternal essence).

The center for Process studies explains it as such:

'A philosophical tradition that emphasizes becoming and change over static being. Process thought helps to harmonize moral, aesthetic, and religious intuitions with scientific insights. It also grounds discussion between Eastern and Western religious and cultural traditions. Process thought offers an approach to the social, political, and economic order that brings issues of human justice together with a concern for ecology.'

The Islamic scholar G.A.Parwez (1903-1985) from Pakistan is sadly rather unknown among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The immense scope of his writings and insights are groundbreaking and created a new field of Muslim thought. Although a direct follower of Indian philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, Parwez was more inclined to the work of A.N.Whitehead, or better expressed, recognized a similarity to his understanding of the Qur'anic message, as to him Process Theology represented a more realistic understanding based on objective viewing the universe and how understanding the universe explains what God is, and not how tradition defines God, since according to him:

*'For ages men lived under the monarchical form of government. Having known no other type of political organisation, they naturally believed that the only alternative to monarchy was anarchy and lawlessness. Kings were usually tyrannical, oppressive and capricious. If a king fell a victim to the fury of his oppressed subjects, his place was usually taken by a tyrant who might be worse. People brought up under such conditions naturally associated power with wilfulness and capriciousness. Believing God to be all-powerful, they also believed that He was more wilful and irresponsible than any earthly king and that His actions were as unaccountable as those of a dictator. In short, God was regarded as a glorified King, or rather as a magnified Dictator. He differed from the earthly dictators only in possessing immensely greater power, and in no other respect. Men of immature mind are impressed by power, especially when it is exercised to satisfy a passing whim. They suppose that God destroys any one, good or bad, for no better reason than to demonstrate His absolute power.'*¹

But Whitehead's understanding of God lacked certain elements, as it still hinged to speculations and what the aspects of the universe means about understanding God. Reflecting on the Qur'an, Parwez's view of God was less abstract, more alive, and not less absolute in Power, but letting Its *Rahmah*, mercy and beneficence be dominant in Its Essence:

'God's Will is also free in the sense that it is above law. It is a law unto itself. It cannot be judged by an external criterion. Law, of course, flows from it and regulates its creation, but leaves it untouched. So the questions, why and whereof, cannot be legitimately asked of the Divine Will. It is accountable to none outside itself:

He will not be questioned as to that which He does, but they (everything in the universe) will be questioned (21 : 23).

*The sphere of pure will is the sphere of absolute freedom. To subject it to law is to rob the Creator of His creative freedom, and of His omnipotence, and to reduce Him to the status of a created being. Turning to the nature of His creative activity, we find that it consists in self-expression. The Divine Will in creating is really expressing itself. Out of the infinite reservoir of its being, the Will of God is ceaselessly projecting and sustaining a myriad forms sharing reality in some measure and reflecting, to some extent, the urge for self-expression which characterises their source. By regarding creation as an act of self-expression, we dispose of many questions which exercised the minds of former philosophers such as : What was God's purpose in creating ? What induced Him to create? And so on. It is in the nature of an ego to express itself, and as God is the Absolute Ego, in His case, every act of self-expression is, at the same time, an act of creation. The reason and justification for self-expression must be sought within the being concerned and not outside it. It is wrong to look upon the Divine Will as an impersonal force. Will can exist only as an aspect of some ego. The- Divine Will is really God engaged in disclosing the infinite riches of His being.'*²

Deists of the 18-19th century believed God created the universe, and then left it alone. But this view of God creates many ethical problems, as why would God leave us 'as rats stuck on a sinking ship'³? In Process Theology, God is part of the evolution of the universe, involved with it. But as a guiding Force, Guiding it to complexity, and not as a watchmaker, finishing the clock and leaving it alone, nor as a king constantly forcing his will just to show its power. The universe is an expression of creativity. A supernova explosion has immense force, but is not an expression of power, but an expression of progressive development. Without supernova's, there would be no spread of larger elements in the universe, and these are the elements needed to create life in all its complexity.

As Parwez expresses it from a Qur'anic view:

*'After creation, the Divine Will does not withdraw and leave the created world to shift for itself. Priests of the eighteenth century advocated some such view. However, it springs from a misconception of the relationship between God and the world. This relation is not by any means analogous to the relation between the producer of a mechanical device and his product. In the first place, the activity of the Divine Will is not intermittent : it is incessant. Secondly, the Will does not merely create the world but continues to sustain and foster it. These are not disjointed activities but aspects of the same composite, integral activity. Conceived in this way, the Divine Will is seen to be organically and vitally related to the world which literally exists and lives in God, the source of all being and the fountainhead of all life. The world, therefore, and all things in it are in direct and intimate contact with the Will every moment of their existence.'*⁴

It is thus clear that God, as He is conceived in the Quran, is far different from an arbitrary ruler or a wilful despot. Of course, God is omnipotent and His Will, in its creative activity, is not subject to and restrained by any external law or rule. His Will is not a blind force, terrific and irresistible, which sweeps over the universe, destroying everything in its tempestuous course. It is the Will of an omniscient, all-wise, compassionate and benevolent Being. As such, it is intimately associated with wisdom and goodness, compassion and benevolence. In short, the Divine Will does not exist and operate in isolation. It is an aspect of the Divine personality. It may seem presumptuous to apply the term 'personality' to God but there is no other word appropriate to the unique unity in the midst of infinite diversity which is God. The unity is transcendental and, to our finite mind, incomprehensible, but a few of its infinite aspects are accessible to our senses and reason.

To sum up, there are three distinct spheres in each of which God's Will works differently. In the realm of Amr, 'it is not subject to any laws : it is a law unto itself. In the universe which He has created, His Will assumes the shape of immutable laws to which all physical beings are subject. These laws—the Laws of Nature—are called Kalimat Ullah'in the terminology of Quran, and, as already stated, are immutable. There is no changing the Kalimat of Allah'(10 : 64). It is the unchangeability and immutability of these laws on which the entire edifice of science and the predictions we make in the realm of physical world are founded. So far as man, a being endowed with freedom is concerned, there are also laws governing the development of his self, but man is free either to obey them or go against them. In this domain, the will of man operates. Here the initiative lies with man and, in the words of Iqbal, God Himself cannot feel, judge and choose for me when more than one course of action are open to me. He has, by permitting the emergence of a finite ego capable of private initiative, limited the freedom of His own free will.³ There is thus no place for fatalism in Islam.⁵

Rabbi Heschel was known for his Process Theological thoughts⁶, and his idea of God being in need of man, Parwez's turned this around, but staying in line with the reasons of why there is a cooperation between Man and God:

The idea of God that the Qur'an presents is both simple and sublime. God is the creative force which is at work throughout the universe. God manifests Himself in the visible world of nature. The Qur'an says, Whithersoever you turn, you look at the countenance of God'(2:115). The Qur'an calls upon us to reflect and ponder over the grand natural phenomena—the earth and sky, wind and rain, sun, moon and stars. All nature reflects the beauty and glory of God. Special attention is drawn to God's attribute of Rububiyah, according to which He sustains and fosters every being, and thus the lowliest organism develops and attains maturity and relative perfection. Because God controls and governs the world, the world process is not purposeless and meaningless. God guides and directs the cosmic process to a grand destiny. In human history a Divine Plan is being worked out, slowly but surely, and a splendid destiny awaits man. In the Qur'an, God is presented as both Immanent and Transcendent. He works in the world as a creative urge and also exists outside it as its ground. He manifests Himself in nature and yet transcends it. He is eternal and yet in the changing world every day a new phase of His glory is presented to our view (55: 29).

The Qur'an sheds new light on the relation between man and God. It is one of partnership, although one of the partners is immeasurably higher than the other. The wide gulf that separates man from God is, however, not an insuperable obstacle to fruitful co-operation between them. Man is endowed with a self, and we have seen that a self can co-operate only with another self. By virtue of possessing a self, man can, in his humble capacity, work together with God in the carrying out of the Divine Plan. Man has a stake in the future of the world and as a free self has the capacity to determine, however slightly, what that future is to be. It gives man a new sense of dignity to feel that he is actively contributing to the success of the Divine Plan. The Qur'an earnestly appeals to man to work with God in bringing about a world in which justice and goodness are not merely ideas but realities. He can and should contribute to the sum-total of goodness in the universe. Man's acquisitive instincts make him selfish and greedy and bring him into conflict with his fellow beings. As such he cannot fit into the Divine scheme. However, by encouraging and fostering his creative instincts, which enable him to create values, he will be able to work in harmony with the moral order of the universe and will move steadily towards the goal of full self-realization and perfection. At the same time, he will be enriching the world with values and making it a fit abode for men, who are both free and good. He will be taking his modest share in accomplishing the Divine purpose. The Qur'an calls upon man to co-operate with other men in the pursuit of the good. Help one another in bir and taqwa," says the Qur'an (5:2).

Evolution proceeded at extremely slow pace in the past ages, and, often, a million years passed before a higher quality emerged in the animal world. With the emergence of a free conscious self, the prospect is

much brighter. When free men, under the Guidance of God, are participating in the world process and are deliberately furthering it, the pace of evolution is sure to be accelerated. By following the right path, which the Qur'an has shown us clearly, we can develop all our latent potentialities and march forward to the ultimate goal of perfection.

As man owns a self, he has a natural affinity with God, the Absolute Self. This affinity confers on him the right and lays on him the duty of working in harmony with the will and purpose of God. By working in this way man not only realizes himself but also gives an impetus to the progress of human society.

The way in which the Absolute Self manifests its attributes in the Universe evokes feelings of awe, reverence and admiration in man. As man naturally imitates what he admires, he strives to develop himself and be as like God as is possible for a finite being to be. God serves as a model and also as an objective standard with which man can compare himself and judge his progress in self-realization. Man needs God as a co-worker and as an ideal.⁷

When looking at Parwez's approach, it can clearly be defined as a Muslim form of Process Theology, whereby he uses the Qur'an and the evolution of Mankind within the universe as a reference to understand God and thus also how to approach the Qur'an:

'The Qur'an inspires a fervid faith (conviction) in us that a glorious destiny awaits man and the universe. We believe that the cosmic procession is moving steadily towards a grand goal. Mankind is in the vanguard of this procession. The directive force comes from God. In the case of nature this force acts mostly from outside, it acts, in the main, from within. It is internalized in man and appears as the urge towards self-realization. External compulsion is supplanted by the sense of duty. Animals are driven by blind instinct in the right direction. Man has to discover it for himself by using his intelligence and has to follow it freely and voluntarily. He can perceive his goal clearly and can, if he likes, bend his efforts to attain it. It is his duty to act as an intelligent, free and moral being. He must freely choose his goal and he must attain it through his own efforts. The only goal worthy of man, as man, is self-development. It means the full unfolding of the self or the actualization of all its potentialities. The aim of moral endeavour is to move nearer to this goal. All actions which lead to self-development are good, and immoral actions are those which hamper and impede the process of self-development. This is the criterion by which we can judge the worth of our actions. It can never fail us. This is the criterion which we derive from the Qur'anic view of human life. The entire system of morality set forth in the Qur'an is centered in the human personality. Right and wrong, good and bad are meaningful terms only in relation to the human self. Even political and economic questions can be settled only in the light of their effects on the self. By freedom we mean the individual's freedom to develop his personality, and subjection implies his inability to do so, for a man may be a member of a politically free society, but he is not free if, he has no scope for self-development and self-expression.'⁸

A few reflections on his approach to the Qur'an:

'The question as to whether every element in it can be logically proved is inadmissible, because, the teaching, if it is to be true to its nature, cannot avoid reference to realities which transcend reason. In this case, the rational test will take the form of determining whether or not the teaching is in direct conflict with reason and whether it furthers the interests of humanity. It is needless to say that the Qur'an has stood the test of reason and proved itself to be in harmony with the best in man :

Say (O Muhammad! to the unbelievers) : I say not unto you (that) I possess the treasures of Allah, nor that I have knowledge of the unseen, and I say not unto you : Lo I am malak. I follow only that which is revealed to me.

Say : are the blind man and the seer equal? Will ye not then take thought ? (6: 50 ; 11 : 24).

Secondly, the Qur'an invites people to judge it in the light of history. It asks them to ponder over the rise and fall of nations. It assures them that if they seek the causes of the downfall of a people, they will find that the people had contravened the principles of right conduct and permanent values which were communicated to them by the prophet of their age. Right belief and right conduct enable a nation to rise to power, and wrong beliefs and actions lead to its downfall. [...]

Finally we come to the pragmatic test. The unbelievers are repeatedly urged to apply this test and satisfy themselves about the truth and value of the Qur'an. A tree is judged by the quality of its fruit and creed by its effects on the life and conduct of men. The believers who had accepted the teaching and had regulated their lives in accordance with it, provided irrefutable evidence of its value to man. [...]

Again and again the Qur'an exhorts man to think and think hard. The man who uses his reason is held up to admiration:

The blind man is not equal with the seeing, nor is darkness equal to light, nor is the shadow equal with the sun's refulgence; nor are the living equal with the dead (35 : 19-22).

Those who think rightly can find the light of knowledge and can discover the path that leads to success:

Are those who know equal with those who know not ? But only, men of understanding will pay heed (39 : 9).

Again:

Surely those who strive for Us, We guide them to Our ways, and verily Allah is with those who lead a balanced life of goodness (29: 69). [...]

This is Iman ! Not to accept even God's revelations deaf and blind.⁹

Parwez's view of God is seeing Him/It as the Absolute, Absolute in everything from Power to Goodness, that created and uses the universe as Its self-expression, and put life into the universe as part of Its creativity and love. It guides the development of the universe towards complexity, and does the same to mankind's consciousness by guiding it through Revelation. As the Qur'an sees itself as the last revelation, it means Mankind is finally mature enough to stand on their own feet. Parwez views the universe as one giant process of evolution, following the Will of God. And this process is beautiful, and although a powerful process, its purpose is not to be a show of power but of mercy (which is why God calls Himself ar-Rahman and ar-Raheem, the provider of Rahma, mercy and providence). Thus Parwez views God not as a dictator, unreachable and impersonal. God can be approached, but He works through the laws of the universe, and thus we approach God by following the laws in the evolution of the universe and ourselves. We understand God through the universe which expresses His Will.

Process Theology and Philosophy is not a Western product perse, it is an outcome of questions about God which are asked in all religions and cultures. Process Theology uses modern science, a product of Islamic science (Ibn Haytham [965-1039] is considered the first ever modern and real scientist¹⁰), and looks at the goodness, evil and problems of the world and tries to understand why God allows this and what is says about God Himself. When looking at the cosmos, we see it is in constant process and development. It is an unfolding. When we look at these things it is clear God gave humans free will to commit good or evil as an expression of their own Self. We decide how we are part of the evolution of the universe. Having free will does not limit God, but is part of God's love. Just as He expresses Himself in the universe, so can we in our own actions. This is the Ruh God gave to Mankind (Qur'an 32:9), the power to move into any direction just as the wind (Rihun means strong wind or storm in Arabic).

Thus the Qur'an is also a Self-expression of God, but with the purpose of helping us in developing into the right direction. It is a guide to further evolution as a species within the immense universe and to explore our enormous potentials God has given us. Thus the Qur'an was not meant to create a religion, but to be a source of Global Ethics, or as Parwez called them, Permanent values¹¹ that are in line with universal global thoughts of right and wrong. And to be a source of reflection on how God explains Himself and how we should approach the universe. As the Qur'an says beautifully:

With the definition of the Absolute Force (Allah), the constant Provider and Fosterer of nourishments and creation (arRahman/the universal womb), the Provider of further development for all that is fit for further evolution (arRaheem).

Say; 'He/It is the Absolute Force (Allah), the unique (Ahad). The Absolute Force which is independent of everything (asSamad). He/It did not beget of something similar of sharing its uniqueness, nor is He/It the product of something. And nothing is equal or comparable in being (yakun/act of being) to Him/It. (112:1-4)

Indeed, in the creation of the universes and earth, and in the alternation of night and day, there are signs for men and women who will to understand. Those who remember God while standing, and sitting, and on their sides, and they ponder in the creation of the heavens and the Earth: Our Developer towards maturity, you did not create this without purpose, be You above all things, spare us the retribution of the Fire (by burning away our potentials)!"(3:191-192)¹²

To view God and His actions in these ways is a logical outcome of exploring the Qur'an, the workings and structure of the universe and the actions and experiences of Mankind. Thus Process Theology/Philosophy is a logical result of researching reality, and shows how Mankind's ideas is evolving positively and more in line with God's Reality. The universe and all of reality is a manifestation of God as Parwez pointed out by quoting this Qur'anic verse:

On Him depends all creatures in the heavens and on earth; [and] every day He manifests Himself in yet another [wondrous] way. (55:29)

Parwez did not try to confirm to Western ideas. He simply did what the Qur'an told him to do, explore the universe, think deeply, reflect on all things and see God manifesting Himself in the universe. That similar

conclusions were drawn by people from different cultures is a positive thing and something to be excited about. Muslims have developed a tendency to reject anything deviant from tradition, while never questioning if the traditional views are in line with the Qur'an or not. The great scholar Muhammad Abdu'h, mufti and head of the most important university of the Islamic world, Al-Azhar in Cairo, said that every generation must be authentic and true to their own understanding of the Qur'an to prevent being stuck in false ideas¹³. Parwez can be called the first Muslim Process Theologian, a fact unknown as Parwez is still a treasure to be discovered by most of the Muslim and non-Muslim world.

To end with the Qur'an's own words:

Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an, so that you might encompass it with your reason and intellect (ta'qluna from aql= intellect/to be endowed with reason/to comprehend). (12:2)¹²

Footnotes

Great works on Process Theology are *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Griffin&Cobb), *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (Mesle) and *Adventures of Ideas* (Whitehead). See also the Center for Process Studies [website](#).

1. Parwez, *Islam: A Challenge to Religion* (1968), page 160.
2. *Ibid*, page 163-164.
3. Voltaire, *Candide* (1759).
4. Parwez, *Islam: A Challenge to Religion* (1968), page 164.
5. *Ibid*, page 170-171.
6. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1950) etc.
7. Parwez, *Islam: A Challenge to Religion* (1968), page 75-77.
8. *Ibid*, page 100-101.
9. *Ibid*, page 141-144.
10. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Haytham
11. http://www.tolueislam.com/Parwez/qpv/QPV_.htm
12. Translations by Arnold Yasin Mol
13. Tafseer Al-Fatiha, Muhammed Abduh, Rashid Rida (ed.). Cairo: Al-Manar, 1330H, pp 35-53

You can read the full text of Parwez's *Islam: A Challenge to Religion* here:

[Parwez, Islam: A Challenge to Religion \(PDF\)](#)