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A Commentary on “The Paradoxical Nature of Sin”

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Although it flies in the face of conventional religious wisdom, this thought-provoking article (Rector, 2002) convincingly argues that sin *can* (if humans cooperate with graciously offered divine help) play a positive role in a person’s spiritual development. Rather than focus on how the article makes its case, this short commentary calls attention to a rather unexpected parallel in theological conceptualization.

Setting aside certain distinctive Mormon doctrines (e.g., premortal existence), the article’s argument bears several striking parallels to the constructive postmodern theological perspective known as *process theology*. Based on the cosmological perspective of philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), this relational understanding of reality conceives of God and the world as mutually influencing one another’s evolution. Initially developed by Protestant theologians, this panentheistic¹ perspective has been embraced by Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, and other religious traditions. Indeed, *process* thought facilitates interreligious dialogue. The standard introductions are

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Cobb & Griffin (1976), Suchocki (1989), and Mesle (1993). Recently, Slettom (2003) edited a very readable collection of frequently asked questions.

Examples of the parallels between Dr. Rector’s article and process theology include the following:

1. The discussion regarding the paradoxical nature of life’s larger truths (pp. 68-69) is similar to process thought’s notion of the harmonious inclusion of seemingly contradictory elements of one’s experience in *the unity of a contrast*.
2. Assertions such as God works “to bring good out of evil” (p. 72) and “sin can with divine help ultimately be transcended, and thus play an essential part in the betterment of humanity” (p. 69) point to the same truth as the process notion of *creative transformation*.
3. The article’s assumption that the realities of life are “inextricably intertwined with each other,” that they are “entities-in-relation” (p. 70, applied to “good and evil”) agrees with the *relational world view* of process thought.
4. Dr. Rector’s excellent statement that compassion, not purity, is the most god-like quality clearly arises from the same *view of God’s character* as does that of process theology:

A striving for purity and holiness encourages separation and distance from everything deemed to be unclean. Compassion, on the other hand, encourages a striving for inclusiveness, tolerance, acceptance, and understanding. Compassion, in its literal sense, means to “feel with” ... Thus compassion becomes possible only by developing the ability to relate others’ difficulty, suffering, and pain to one’s own. But if one feels threatened by or disconnected from the reality of his/her own troublesome inner ‘shadow,’ there will be failure to acknowledge the reality of inner complexity and personal sinful tendencies, and then much more likely to project upon others a spirit of rejection and intolerance. (Rector, 2002, p. 74)

These and other parallels suggest that dialogue between Mormon and process theologians would prove fruitful.

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ENDNOTES

1. Editor's Note: In contrast to *pantheism*, with which *panentheism* is often confused: *panentheism* holds that the material universe is a part or aspect of God, whereas *pantheism* is the view that God is wholly immanent, synonymous with the universe. The pantheist God is not at all personal, being little more than a metaphor for the universe or nature. Unlike pantheism, panentheism maintains there is much more to God than the material universe – God is a personal transcendent deity viewed as both the creator and the original source of universal morality (Hutchins, 2003; Wikipedia, 2004).