

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

The Need for Systems-Based Process Philosophy in Religious Studies

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/01x2c6wj>

### Author

Trenkle, Anilda

### Publication Date

2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

The Need for Systems-Based Process Philosophy in Religious Studies

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Religious Studies

by

Anilda Theresa Trenkle

September 2022

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Michael Alexander, Chairperson

Dr. Pashaura Singh

Dr. John Fischer

Copyright by  
Anilda Theresa Trenkle  
2022

The Thesis of Anilda Theresa Trenkle is approved:

---

---

---

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Michael Alexander of the Department of Religious Studies, for his support during my sabbatical. His critical engagement of my work was invaluable in helping me evolve the topic more concisely. I would also like to thank my colleagues for the many stimulating conversations which inspired me towards the topic. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their love and steadfast support. It is to them that I dedicate this effort.

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Need for Systems-Based Process Philosophy in Religious Studies

by

Anilda Theresa Trenkle

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Religious Studies  
University of Riverside, September 2022  
Dr. Michael Alexander, Chairperson

This effort shows the advantages of adopting a systems-based process perspective for use within the study of religion to connect religious understandings to social phenomena by drawing on a range of systems theorists. By articulating the issues with the static paradigm induced by Aristotelian substance ontology, the application of systems-based process philosophy for evaluating social phenomena is explained through a broader discussion of emergence with special emphasis on Alfred North Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism. Highlighting the work of Islamic scholar Mustafa Ruzgar, this effort shows the ability for systems-based process philosophy to connect religious insights to secular studies through the language of process.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Problem with the Static Paradigm .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Philosophy of Organism and the Concept of God .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The Principles of Process and Islam .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Discussion .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>25</b>

## Introduction

Writing about the state of the discipline in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer highlights the current approaches to scholarship where he:

[shows] how different scholars and theologians typically negotiate the relationship between theology and genealogies of religion by closing off historicist inquiries in directions that either reduce or preserve the analytic value of the discourses of religion.<sup>1</sup>

Negotiating these choices, Jacobs-Vandegeer argues for a third option: to focus on “the procedures of multiplying networks of actors.”<sup>2</sup> Jacobs-Vandegeer notes the challenge of normativity where “a unifying judgement entails a certain closure to otherness and determines a range of analytic possibilities.”<sup>3</sup> He highlights Robert Orsi’s approach where the solution is left open.

By not fixing analytic principles, or prematurely linking contexts with evaluative judgements, he [Orsi] allows various and competing presences to register in the study of religious worlds... By slowing down description, letting actors of religious worlds register their presences, Orsi offer us a way into the complexities of human living.<sup>4</sup>

Jacobs-Vandegeer urges the focus towards developing procedures to describe reality. As description is the task, then the end goal would be to build upon the descriptive effort; to make the description intrinsically viable requires some tailoring no different than

---

<sup>1</sup> Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, “Theology and Genealogies of Religious Studies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol 90 Issue 1 (March 2022), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jacobs-Vandegeer, “Theology and Genealogies of Religious Studies,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobs-Vandegeer, “Theology and Genealogies of Religious Studies,” 3.

<sup>4</sup> Jacobs-Vandegeer, “Theology and Genealogies of Religious Studies,” 4.



the way statistics allows for wild point editing. How description is created is how it will be consumed and so how the description evolves matters just as much as the explanation for it and would, obviously, still contain within it, a normative position. While leaving description entirely open without qualification does allow for a variety of presences to indeed register, it is ultimately self-defeating as it cannot protect against counterfactual descriptions improperly developed or where diversity is lost when qualifications on multiplicity are not enforced.

As describing the world cannot be had non-normatively, is there a normative stance which might possibly be agreeable to both theologians and religious studies scholars alike to allow for ready dialogue between the two disciplines? I assert there is in systems-based process philosophy. By drawing on a wide range of systems thinkers, this effort endeavors to show how this philosophy can assist in describing reality addressing a need for robust approaches within the discipline to the end of describing social worlds. This approach describes the systems-based process worldview whose merits address difficulties with the static paradigm by focusing on the way emergence operates in social structure. This worldview is an intuitive and dynamic representation of how we process reality proper for evolving high quality technical descriptions of the social world. As religious systems are conceptual systems, they lend themselves to the process view as will be demonstrated in a description of the alignment of process philosophy with certain Islamic insights drawing on the work of Islamic scholar Mustafa Ruzgar to show how religion and process philosophy can mutually inform each other.

### The Problem with the Static Paradigm

Philosopher Nicholas Rescher locates the core of process philosophy in two basic concepts: “Whitehead’s appreciation of Leibnizian appetition—the striving through which all things endeavor to bring new features to realization” and the Heraclitean aphorism of ‘you can’t step in the same river twice’ rejecting the notion “that nature consists of changeable interrelations among stable, unchanging units of existence.”<sup>5</sup> Rescher observes Aristotle’s “difficulty of accommodating the self or soul into a substance metaphysic” where the concept of *entelechy* produces a host of intellectual difficulties.<sup>6</sup>

Rescher highlights three key difficulties regarding the conception of God within a material substance ontology from our human vantage point: 1) where matter must originate from substance, God is self-caused, 2) where substances have contingent properties, God is self-necessitated, and 3) where substances are in space-time, God resides outside our spatiotemporal reality.<sup>7</sup> Rescher notes that by conceptualizing God as a process at work in this world and beyond, we bypass these intellectual dissonances.<sup>8</sup>

To understand how the concept of God is handled in the process perspective, we must consult the most evolved understanding of process philosophy we have in Alfred North Whitehead’s *Philosophy of Organism*. However, before we proceed with a discussion of the systems-based process worldview, it is vitally important to recognize that

---

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Process Philosophy A Survey of Basic Ideas*, (USA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Rescher, *Process Philosophy*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Rescher, *Process Philosophy*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Rescher, *Process Philosophy*, 17

process philosophy is constructed around the systems concept of emergence. It is defined as: “the concept of ‘behavior or meaning of the whole not exhibited by the individual constituents’ is often referred to as ‘emergence’ and is the defining characteristic of ‘systems’ that distinguishes them from ‘non-systems’.”<sup>9</sup>

Biologist Robert Sapolsky explains that emergent phenomena can develop in complex systems because chaos forms simple-ruled rational structures given enough time and enough interactions.<sup>10</sup> The operative mechanism of these rational structures evolve by way of small differences which can combine due to high system complexity to amplify as emergent behavior manifesting as “butterfly effects.”<sup>11</sup> Sapolsky demonstrates emergence using Steven Wolfram’s visual study of cellular automata explaining that evolving cellular structures can produce complex patterns guided solely by very simple local rules which limit influence to only the formation of the succeeding next generation.<sup>12</sup> In this example, starting with an abundance of starting states in a large grouping of simple cellular relationships, a vast majority of the possible variations will not advance.<sup>13</sup> Over time, many of the starting states will begin to converge (convergence) and a novel variant will emerge

---

<sup>9</sup> Hillary Sillitto et al., *Systems Engineering and System Definitions Version 1.0*, (NP: INCOSE, 2019), at INCOSE, [https://www.incose.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final\\_-se-definition.pdf](https://www.incose.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final_-se-definition.pdf), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Sapolsky, “22. Emergence and Complexity,” YouTube video, from Stanford, posted 1 February 2011, at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o\\_ZuWbX-CyE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_ZuWbX-CyE), [1:10:22].

<sup>11</sup> Sapolsky, “22. Emergence and Complexity,” [1:19-1:54].

<sup>12</sup> Sapolsky, “22. Emergence and Complexity,” [2:00-3:20].

<sup>13</sup> Sapolsky, “22. Emergence and Complexity,” [3:25-3:45].

which can neither be predicted in evolution from the starting states nor traced when the mature form appears as we lack emergent insight.<sup>14</sup>

Biologist and systems theorist Len Troncale shows through empirical studies of astronomical and biological systems that the “naturally occurring entities of these systems are found in ‘clusters’...[where] the groupings or clusters of entities are called ‘levels’ in a hierarchy.”<sup>15</sup> As Troncale explains, scientists cannot quantify emergent phenomena as “[man’s] limited abilities at perception inhibits his ability to ‘see’ the less stable and transient entities and their dynamics which connect the various levels in hierarchies.”<sup>16</sup> Although the process of emergence is below our perceptive threshold, the evolutionary record attests to its existence in the formation process as it presents over a long time scale<sup>17</sup> as shown in the example of cellular automata and Troncale’s observations of natural systems.

Similarly, biologist and systems theorist James Grier Miller gives evidence of emergence in living systems. Miller, a pioneer in the field of systems theory, developed Living System Theory (LST) by examining biosocial evolution over the entire 3.8 billion

---

<sup>14</sup> Sapolsky, “22. Emergence and Complexity,” [4:13-5:05].

<sup>15</sup> Len Raphael Troncale, “Metacrescence Origins of Hierarchical Levels: An “Emergent” Evolutionary Process Based on Systems Concepts, at Len Troncale’s Lifework, [https://lentroneale.com/wp-content/uploads/Len\\_Troneale\\_Media\\_Library/Science\\_Papers/Duality-Theory-II-Metacrescence.pdf](https://lentroneale.com/wp-content/uploads/Len_Troneale_Media_Library/Science_Papers/Duality-Theory-II-Metacrescence.pdf), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Troncale, *Metacrescence*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Troncale, *Metacrescence*, 2.

year history.<sup>18</sup> This empirical data demonstrates that living systems are complex open systems with the following characteristics.

[Living systems] maintain within their boundaries their thermodynamically improbable energy states by continuous interactions with their environments [whose] inputs and outputs of both matter-energy and information are essential for living systems.<sup>19</sup>

LST demonstrates matter hierarchy in living systems structure “at eight levels of increasing complexity: cells, organs, organisms, groups, organizations, communities, societies, and supranational systems.”<sup>20</sup>

Miller notes that at each of the higher levels, there are similarities and differences where “higher level systems have emergent structures and processes not present at the lower levels” due to the high degree of complexity present in the system giving it the capability to exhibit emergence.<sup>21</sup> Further, Miller’s “LST identifies 20 essential processes which, together with one or more components, constitute the 20 subsystems of living systems.”<sup>22</sup> Miller provides descriptions of these processes<sup>23</sup> and examples of how to

---

<sup>18</sup> Jessie L. Miller, and James Grier Miller, 1995, "Greater than the Sum of its Parts: III. Information Processing Subsystems." *Behavioral Science* 40 (3) (07): 171-270, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830400302>, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/greater-than-sum-parts-iii-information-processing/docview/618935416/se-2>, 171.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, “Greater than the Sum of its Parts III,” 171.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, “Greater than the Sum of its Parts III,” 171.

<sup>21</sup> Miller, “Greater than the Sum of its Parts III,” 177-182.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, “Greater than the Sum of its Parts III,” 173.

<sup>23</sup> Miller, “Greater than the Sum of its Parts III,” 174-175.

evolve the agents in their process roles within these essential functions at each of the hierarchical levels.<sup>24</sup>

Scripture scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith gives that history attests to “the emergence of scriptural form”<sup>25</sup> and notes the following concerning the history of scripture.

Careful investigation into the history of scripture as a world process will probably conclude that it had three seemingly independent origins: in Indo-European Central Asia (and carried then with the Indo-European invasions into India); in the Semitic (and Egyptian) Near East... and in China.<sup>26</sup>

What can we make of scripture then? From the standpoint of complexity science, it is an emergent phenomenon in the material system of an emergent social structure. Scripture is an emergent phenomenon because religion is an emergent phenomenon where religious systems are immaterial, conceptual systems operating within a complex, adaptive system interacting in real time with other immaterial systems in a System of Systems (SoS) construct. The complexity of the system gives rise to its material culture issuing from the immaterial systems interacting in unfolding processes. ‘Things’ are components of systems which interrelate through processes. Where social systems are emergent structures, scriptural particularity arising independently in three separate instances is an emergent phenomenon borne from the essential processes of a living system. How it arose in each case which the historical record presents tells the event history but not the whole story as

---

<sup>24</sup> Miller, “Greater than the Sum of its Parts III,” 178-181.

<sup>25</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 199.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *What is Scripture?*, 201.

absent are the details concerning the full immaterial system interactions which include the rational structures of emergence.

Scripture emerged uniquely in three separate instances in three different complex adaptive systems showing the manifestation of butterfly effects in these systems where the essential processes involved in matter-energy and information exchange within a highly capable human living system produced, by way of emergence, religion and later scripture, in three unique ways. Thus, it is important to understand religions as conceptual systems interfacing and responding within a larger system environment of processes competing with other systems. As religion is an emergent feature of the human living system, we next discuss how process philosophy as an emergent approach incorporates the concept of God.

### **The Philosophy of Organism and the Concept of God**

Alfred North Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism is the most evolved process philosophy available to us. Whitehead captures emergence through his ontological scheme and his categories of processes which work with his theory of prehensions to capture emergence. Whitehead's four primary process categories are: 1 category of the Ultimate, 8 categories of Existence, 27 categories of Explanation, and 9 categories of Obligation.<sup>27</sup> The substance is process which Whitehead achieves by replacing Aristotle's primary substance with his process category of the Ultimate<sup>28</sup> as "the ultimate principle by which

---

<sup>27</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality Corrected Edition*, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 20.

<sup>28</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 21.

the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively.”<sup>29</sup>

In Whitehead’s world, the ontological principle is that “actual entities are the only reasons; so that to search for a reason is to search for one or more actual entities.”<sup>30</sup> The process category of Existence is constituted by the following eight subcategories: actual entities (creatures in the transient process of existence), prehensions (awareness process in the ground of emergence), nexus (self-organizing clusters of actual entities in the prehensive process), subjective forms (our subjectivities which evolve in the process of existence), eternal objects (pure potentials), propositions (processes that might be), multiplicities (processes with qualified unity) and contrasts (distinct process patterns).<sup>31</sup> The key takeaway is that the “actual entities and eternal objects stand out with extreme certain finality [where] the other types of existence have an intermediate character.”<sup>32</sup> These process entities work together with our nature and God’s to process reality by actualizing potentiality into actuality.

In the Philosophy of Organism, both humans and God are actual entities, and each has a three-fold nature. Although they are different, they are related. The construction of process relationships in the categorical scheme links the tripartite nature of God and humans through the prehensive process. In humans, our three-fold nature is as follows.

---

<sup>29</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22.



- Our past nature: “the efficient causes out of which that actual entity arises.”<sup>33</sup>
- Our subjective nature: “the ‘subjective aim’ at ‘satisfaction’ [which] constitutes the final cause, or lure, whereby there is determinate concrescence.”<sup>34</sup>
- Our superjective nature: “the pragmatic value of its specific satisfaction qualifying the transcendent creativity.”<sup>35</sup>

However, where God is an actual entity same as us, God is a special case of actual entity, a primordial one, where God’s three-fold nature, although different than ours, works companion-wise with ours as follows.

- God’s primordial nature: “the concrescence of [a] unity of conceptual feelings, including among their data all eternal objects.”<sup>36</sup>
- God’s consequent nature: “the physical prehension by God of the actualities of the evolving universe.”<sup>37</sup>
- God’s superjective nature: “satisfaction qualifying the transcendent creativity in the various temporal instances.”<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, **quoted in** Donald W. Sherburne (ed), *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 30.

<sup>34</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, **quoted in** Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality*, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, **quoted in** Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, **quoted in** Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, **quoted in** Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, **quoted in** Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality*, 30.

Creativity is a quality of the category of the Ultimate which instantiates novel particularity.<sup>39</sup> The primordial nature of God (outside space-time) constitutes the concrescence of all the feelings and data in the temporal world including eternal objects where within the various nexus of our associations, we develop a ‘lure’ of feelings concerning the potentiality we sense through our nature in the prehensive process where God also participates prehensively through his. Unlike Aristotle’s disembodied God directing reality from outside space-time, a primordial entity acting as an actual entity is both inside and outside of space-time making God temporally and atemporally relevant so as not to be an exception to the categorical scheme, but the organizing principle of it.<sup>40</sup>

We see in a limited range, we hear in a narrow range, we live but a limited set of experiences for exposure to a limited set of ideas. With this narrow range of understanding we engage temporal processes where we experience reality through our limited worldview governed by our subjective biases. Our relationship with God in the Whitehead world is through these processes where our feelings govern our actions which in turn factor back into these processes where in reciprocating fashion, we condition the process and the process conditions us.

Whitehead’s dynamic conception of reality allows for a new articulation of primary concepts. Creation becomes an event within an event-driven paradigm arising out of the qualified tri-partite nature of God. The omnipotence of God is now understood in the context of the interplay of the 8 process categories of Existence in a prehensive nexus of

---

<sup>39</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Donald W. Sherburne (ed), *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 29.

an evolving concrescence. Existence, in the Whitehead world, is a world where humans, as actual entities, meet other actual entities, including God, in the prehensive process filled with potentiality where reality is conditioned by these intermediate existence forms and our agency. Understood in this way, the potentiality of our emergent complex social system is dependent upon the companion-wise synergy of our natures with God's where novel metaphysical creativity manifests through processes by way of a field of pure potentiality and human agency operating in accordance with the categorical processes of Obligation and Explanation. To see how the categories work, we turn to a dialogue on similarities between religion and the process worldview.

### **The Principles of Process and Islam**

In a dialogue with process philosophy, Islamic scholar Mustafa Ruzgar examines the similarities between process theology and certain interpretations of Islam.<sup>41</sup> While Ruzgar does not offer an opinion as to which view is better,<sup>42</sup> he performs the descriptive task of detailing the various voices regarding the key concepts of the centrality of constant creation, God's omnipotence and omniscience as it relates to free will, and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, creation from nothing.<sup>43</sup> I highlight Ruzgar's description of how some Islamic positions align with process philosophy to illustrate the God concept at work in Whitehead's process categories which connect general processes to the level of organism.

---

<sup>41</sup> Mustafa Ruzgar, "Islam and Process Theology," *The Handbook for Whiteheadian Process Thought Volume 1*, eds. Michel Weber, Will Desmond (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2008), 601.

<sup>42</sup> Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 601.

<sup>43</sup> Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604-611.

Ruzgar notes that Indian philosopher and poet, Muhammad Iqbal, held views similar to that of Whitehead which emphasized events over substances.<sup>44</sup> Ruzgar shares how both Iqbal and Islamic philosopher, Mulla Sadra, have event-based views<sup>45</sup> where Mulla Sadra gives precedence to existence<sup>46</sup> as “Being is a unity but the existents are multiple”<sup>47</sup> and where Being “manifests itself in different ways in reality.”<sup>48</sup> For Sadra, the world aims at perfection<sup>49</sup> in a progression from potentiality to actuality<sup>50</sup> through a process which brings phenomena into existence.<sup>51</sup>

Seyyed Hossein Nasr elaborates on Sadra’s perspective adding that “all beings in the universe are seeking perfection and are in the process of becoming and change in order to overcome their imperfections”<sup>52</sup> going “from the more general and indeterminate to the

---

<sup>44</sup> Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

<sup>45</sup> Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

<sup>46</sup> Oliver Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 89-96, **quoted in** Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

<sup>47</sup> Zailan Moris, *Revelation, Intellectual Intuition and Reason in the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra: An Analysis of the al-Hikmah al-'Arshiyah* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 92, **quoted in** Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

<sup>48</sup> Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 92, **quoted in** Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

<sup>49</sup> Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

<sup>50</sup> Moris, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 96, **quoted in**, Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

<sup>51</sup> Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 29, **quoted in**, Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

<sup>52</sup> Seyyed Hossain Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, ed. Mehdi Amin Razavi (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), 284, **quoted in** Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

more concrete, determinate types of being.”<sup>53</sup> These insights align with multiple Whitehead categories of Explanation and while an exhaustive list of all possible alignments in Ruzgar’s work is beyond the scope of this effort, I share a few to facilitate the understanding of Whitehead’s approach from the secular side for the core concepts of change, agency, and process.

- The 1<sup>st</sup> category of Explanation gives that the world is a process<sup>54</sup> where humans as actual entities evolve within a larger process aligning with Sadra’s view. This is the SoS construct.
- The 2<sup>nd</sup> category of Explanation states an actual entity is a concrescence of potentials<sup>55</sup> similar to Sadra’s view where the process of becoming actualizes our potential.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> category of Explanation gives that in the process of becoming, all the forms of existence, except pure potentiality, also become<sup>56</sup> thus process brings new phenomena into existence consistent with Sadra’s view as well.

This idea of moving from the more general in potentiality to the more concrete in actuality is the essence of process philosophy or as Rescher explains: “processes are basic and things derivative.”<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, 94, **quoted in** Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 604.

<sup>54</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22.

<sup>55</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Rescher, *Process Philosophy*, 7.

Ruzgar notes how “Sadra’s model marks a significantly dynamic understanding of reality. Everything in the universe is in a constant process of becoming” where events, not things, constitute the system.<sup>58</sup> This idea of the permanence of the world as permanent change is consistent with the process view which does not fix outcomes but rather recontextualizes experience into the dynamic interplay of interrelated processes centered around the human experience of becoming.

In examining Iqbal’s writings, Ruzgar notes that Iqbal states that the Quran rejected a deterministic universe seeing it instead as God working alongside humanity: “God becomes a co-worker with [them], provided [they take] the initiative.”<sup>59</sup> This underscores Rescher’s third issue with Aristotelean substance ontology in the difficulty of understanding how God works alongside humanity dwelling outside space-time. To do so, God must operate both temporally and atemporally suggesting different orders of time as in the quantum view where time is not serial, but multi-dimensional. Philosopher Alam Khundmiri amplifies on Iqbal’s view of time in that there are “different orders of time and different levels of the experience of time.”<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, Iqbal’s view of multi-dimensional time is similar to that of Henri Bergson’s concept of *durée réelle*.

---

<sup>58</sup> Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 605.

<sup>59</sup> Sir Mohammed Iqbal, *Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: The Kapur Art Printing Works, 1930), 16, **quoted in** Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 605.

<sup>60</sup> Alam Khundmiri, *Secularism, Islam, and Modernity: Selected Essays of Alam Khundmiri*, ed. M.T. Ansari (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 188, **quoted in** Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 606.

Systems theorist and Bergson scholar David Kreps describes *durée réelle* as “the reality which unfolds during duration.”<sup>61</sup> Kreps explains Bergson’s articulation of time where “the idea of a homogeneous and measurable time is an artificial concept, formed by the intrusion of the idea of space into the realm of duration.”<sup>62</sup> This understanding of multi-level time gives the basis for an entity both inside and outside time and also explains the distortions in our perception of time. The relationship concerning the agency of God and humans is established in prehensive awareness of the pure potentiality of eternal objects which are outside space-time but accessible through the structure of the tri-partite nature of actual entities where the 7th category of Explanation states that actual entities are influenced by the pure potentiality of eternal objects to actualize their potentiality.<sup>63</sup> As eternal objects, pure potentials, are outside space-time yet accessible to us in the temporal process of becoming, they are also accessible to God’s primordial nature establishing the relationship between God and humanity in the process view.

If our nature’s have a companion-wise relationship with God’s nature, how does that accord with God’s power and our free will? It comes down to understanding how our natures work with God’s as conceived by Whitehead and his ideas on agency. Whitehead’s view presents actual entities as partially self-determined, partially actualized, and where further actualization of potentiality lays in our choices. However, our choices are dependent upon our feelings which are related to our subjectivity which must be

---

<sup>61</sup> David Kreps, *Bergson, Complexity, and Creative Emergence* (UK: Palmgrave Macmillan, 2015), 34.

<sup>62</sup> Kreps, *Bergson, Complexity, and Creative Emergence*, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 23.

accommodated for an eternal object of potentiality to actualize in an actual entity as a condition of the 1<sup>st</sup> category of Obligation, the category of subjective unity and the 9<sup>th</sup> category of Obligation, the category of Freedom and Determination where we are self-determined and externally free within these processes.<sup>64</sup>

Ruzgar cites historian and philosopher Mehmet Aydin who points out that just because “finite egos have partial self-determination does not mean that God is limited.”<sup>65</sup> Ruzgar adds that if there be any limitations on God it would be self-imposed.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, from the systems standpoint, Whitehead’s scheme of categories would collapse if there were an entity more powerful than God which Whitehead forbids straightaway in his Doctrine of Necessity in Universality.<sup>67</sup> Feelings delimit choices which delimit the potentiality of a process making human agency the limit condition, not God in prehension through his consequent nature and us in prehension through our subjective nature. In the various nexus of associations we engage, our ‘lure’ of feelings concerning eternal objects mediate human agency and determine the range of possible outcomes.

---

<sup>64</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Mehmet S. Aydin, *Allemden Allah'a* [From Cosmos to God], (Istanbul, Ufuk Kitaplari, 2001), 99, **quoted in** Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 609.

<sup>66</sup> Ruzgar, *Islam and Process Theology*, 609.

<sup>67</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 4.



## Discussion

In secular circles, the study of religion is held from the standpoint of absolute moral relativism stemming from the fact that we share no common metaphysics. This is leveraged to great effect to widen the discourse on religion and while it does allow for a wide range of perspectives, religious knowledge remains stove-piped within the traditions with no means of associating different views to advance a greater understanding of reality, something essential to the function of a living system. The mere fact that a religious studies program exists at a secular university implies a search for universals which logically extends to the study of religion. Further, naming such a program ‘religious studies’ also implies study, not only within religious traditions, but among them. For religious studies to live up to what its name implies, that is, to study religion among religions, it requires some means of building knowledge towards a greater understanding beyond the particularized origins of religion. We need to accomplish that.

Headlining in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Jacobs-Vandegerer makes a call for religious studies scholars and theologians to avoid judgements and instead aim at procedures to develop descriptions of reality as has been discussed herein. To this end, I assert the process view on the grounds that the descriptive task requires the responsible application of some analytical rigor to keep the descriptions viable as descriptive tasks will develop counterfactual representations of reality when qualifications on multiplicity are not enforced. This creates false crowds instead of diverse presences which is not only misleading but corrupts the wider description. To avoid that, one would

need an analytic framework to qualify the understanding of unity in the development of description.

Counterfactual descriptions will also result when descriptive understandings develop the entity list associating the particular towards the more general notion without basis. Social theories rooted in particularity project a more general theory of society opposite to the direction of unfolding processes. It's hard enough associating the more general to the more specific because of emergence which is why the ancestral link for Homo Sapiens remains an enduring controversy. However, approaching reality with this reverse tactic is fallacious and will lead to specious social theories which will generate many exceptions for which the theory cannot address. Data capture based on projection moving opposite to the evolutionary tide will associating entities arbitrarily and only serves to destroy data integrity when logical qualification on multiplicity is not enforced.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's scriptural work attests to scripture and religion as emergent phenomena. As we are dealing with emergent phenomena, then we must account for emergence in description. We live in a world of emergent systems, natural and social, which we process through our emergent minds. Ideas evolve and manifest in social systems emergently where the dynamic responses of human behavior are highly non-linear and unpredictable. Religions behave as a conceptual system within an emergent system. This requires scholars to have insight into how their religion functions in a social system defined functionally through the 20 essential processes. These are the system boundary processes, system reproductive processes, and so forth.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Miller, "Greater than the Sum of its Parts III," 174-175.

The religious system is an emergent product, a special kind of conceptual system, holding information critical to a culture's survival. Societal processes engage competing systems within these processes and so it behooves a scholar mightily to have the awareness of how their system functions within these sites where matter-energy and information are exchanged. Scholars of religions should understand their tradition in its full system context requiring them to have some grounding in systems concepts.

To illustrate the approach of process, let us consider Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectivism:

There is only a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival "knowing"; and the more affects we allow to speak about a matter, the more eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our "concept" of this matter, our "objectivity" be.<sup>69</sup>

The truth of this statement lays in our mode of perspectival seeing. This is effectively an articulation of Francis Galton's wisdom of the crowd effect where no single individual has the full insight into the total reality but where a set of unbiased perspectives will converge on this understanding in neural network fashion.<sup>70</sup> The key takeaway is that the wisdom of the crowd must be unbiased. It takes only a small amount of social influence to corrupt description undermining the wisdom of the crowd within a living system as research shows.<sup>71</sup> We were made to work together. Specious social theories which add corrupted

---

<sup>69</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark, Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), Kindle Edition, 85.

<sup>70</sup> Sapolsky, "22. Emergence and Complexity," [45:50-47:00].

<sup>71</sup> Jan Lorenz, et al., "How social influence can undermine the wisdom of crowd effect," at PNAS (16 May 2011), at <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1008636108>.

descriptions diminish what wisdom of the crowd naturally affords statistically large populations helping them to survive.

From our particularized vantage point, we are biased heavily by our past nature, by subjective forms, by the way we process time, all of which distort perceptions of reality. As Bergson writes in *Matter and Memory*: “Practically we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future.”<sup>72</sup> To transcend these limitations, describing the cultural context using LST’s essential processes combined with Whitehead’s method to describe the agents at the level of organism constitutes a fully emergent approach to frame social phenomena.

In any reckoning of history, there is only so much objectification possible owing to the missing layer of emergent understanding. The wider reality is informed by the unbiased wisdom of the crowd in volume, not the opinions of a few. Bias is removed by diversity coming from logically qualified multiplicity. As social structure has evolved in ways we cannot understand, social reform will draw Chesterton’s Fence<sup>73</sup> rebukes for attempting to destroy a system boundary by advancing a social theory which cannot keep sight of emergence in the emergent structure it seeks to condemn. This constitutes a break in first principles, the principles of process. The greater the Whiteheadian contrast, the greater the likelihood the system responds emergently as a living system. We are a species which has evolved to possess extinctive powers and the will to use them. This is the emergent nature

---

<sup>72</sup> Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer 1912 (London: Dover, 2004), 194, **quoted in** Kreps, *Bergson, Complexity, and Creative Emergence*, 25.

<sup>73</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton III*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 157.

of the world we are describing, and we must equip ourselves with systems understandings proper to the discipline. We need an approach for that.

### **Conclusion**

To address these needs, I advance systems-based process philosophy. We live in an emergent world, and we need an emergent framework which does not fix outcomes but enforces enough analytical rigor to add value to the descriptive product. Over the history of our species, the wise among us have amplified on what it's like to be human: birth, growth, change, death and the highs and lows of human experience in between. Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism offers interpretations of reality which account for subjectivity in a logical, coherent, and emergent framework which avoids the issues with the static paradigm and the Cartesian distortions which precipitate specious descriptions which do not advance a greater awareness. By employing Whitehead's process philosophy, the 16<sup>th</sup> category of Explanation regarding multiplicity requires that unity be qualified<sup>74</sup> thus ensuring diversity in the description mediating the risk of false crowds corrupting the descriptive effort.

Critical to the task of description is recognizing that normativity cannot be avoided and so it lays within the descriptive approach to mediate normative bias to ensure technical quality is preserved in descriptive products. This is the central focus of this effort. We require a method which allows us to further our understanding despite our past natures where the 'lure' of feeling combines with the intellectual drive for closure using a

---

<sup>74</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 24.

hypothesis derived from a narrowly circumscribed point of view. Without a proper understanding of basic systems concepts, specious descriptions issued either out of ignorance or malice will corrupt the wisdom of the crowd.

“Defer, therefore, the operation you contemplate until you have realized by ripe reflection what principle or prejudice you are violating.”<sup>75</sup> Describe from an emergent framework, for that will keep evaluative judgements at bay to allow the human living system to intuit a course of action in evolutionary fashion as description is converged on from all sides by all cultural systems. This will allow us to grow into a global supranational system which is our destiny. By focusing on evolving proper description, we avoid the demagoguery which impedes the wisdom of the crowd in the progression of our species awareness which is our prerogative. As Jacobs-Vandegier puts it: “if we lean into evaluative judgements at the start, then analysis tends to convert description into prescription out of a duty to explain.”<sup>76</sup>

Systems-based process philosophy is a way to frame dynamic content for a greater understanding of reality by pivoting from thing-based perspectives to that of processes with emergence considered. The approaches direct the understanding necessary to develop quality technical descriptions of social worlds answering a need in the discipline of religion. It also provides a common framework to extend the understanding of religions beyond its particularized origins and out of the stagnating intellectual climate of absolute moral relativism which gives rise to sophistry despoiling the wisdom of the crowd.

---

<sup>75</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton III*, 158.

<sup>76</sup> Jacobs-Vandegier, *Theology and Genealogies of Religious Studies*, 16.

The work of Islamic scholar Mustafa Ruzgar highlights how the process paradigm is informed by religion. The sharing of Islamic voices provide insight into universal processes where the understanding moves from the more general to the more specific. Indeed, Troncale observes that it is religion which informs us of the universal processes of creation, growth, and change, and where a fourth universal process is at work: that of emergence.<sup>77</sup> Ruzgar's examination of process philosophy and Quranic concepts demonstrates how theologians and religious studies scholars can have a mutually enriching dialogue and how this worldview is earning its way into the humanities as an appropriate and responsible method with which to engage social phenomena.

---

<sup>77</sup> Troncale, *Metacreescence*, 2.

## Bibliography

- Aydin, Mehmet. *Allemden Allah'a [From Cosmos to God]*. Istanbul: Ufuk Kitaplari, 2001.
- Chesterton, G.K. *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton III*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.
- Iqbal, Sir Mohammed. *Six Lectures on the Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Lahore: The Kapur Art Printing Works, 1930.
- Jacobs-Vandegeer, Christiaan, "Theology and Genealogies of Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol 90 Issue 1 (March 2022): 1-25.
- Khundmiri, Alam. *Secularism, Islam, and Modernity: Selected Essays of Alam Khundmiri*. Ed. M.T. Ansari. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 2001.
- Kreps, David. *Bergson, Complexity, and Creative Emergence*. UK: Palmgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Leaman, Oliver. *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
- Lorenz, Jan, Heiko Rauhut, Frank Schweitzer, Dirk Helbing. "How social influence can undermine the wisdom of crowd effect." Ed. Burton H. Singer. At PNAS (16 May 2011). At <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1008636108>.
- Miller, Jessie L. and James Grier Miller. 1995. "Greater than the Sum of its Parts: III. Information Processing Subsystems." *Behavioral Science* 40 (3) (07): 171-270. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830400302>. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/greater-than-sum-parts-iii-information-processing/docview/618935416/se-2>.
- Moris, Zailan. *Revelation, Intellectual Intuition and Reason in the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra: An Analysis of the al-Hikmah al-'Arshiyah*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossain. *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*. Ed. Mehdi Amin Razavi. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J Swenson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. 1998.
- Rescher, Nicholas. *Process Philosophy: A Survey of Basic Issues*. USA: University of Pittsburg Press, 2000.



Ruzgar, Mustafa. "Islam and Process Theology." *The Handbook for Whiteheadian Process Thought Volume 1*. Eds. Michel Weber, Will Desmond. Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2008: 601-611.

Sapolsky, Robert. "22. Emergence and Complexity," YouTube video, from Stanford. Posted 1 February 2011. At [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o\\_ZuWbX-CyE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_ZuWbX-CyE).

Sherburne, Donald W. *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Sillitto, Hillary, James Martin, Dorothy McKinney, Regina Griego, Dov Dori, Daniel Krob, Patrick Godfrey, Eileen Arnold, Scott Jackson. *Systems Engineering and System Definitions Version 1.0*. NP: INCOSE. 2019. At INCOSE, [https://www.incose.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final\\_-se-definition.pdf](https://www.incose.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final_-se-definition.pdf).

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

Troncale, Len Raphael, "Metacrescence Origins of Hierarchical Levels: An "Emergent": Evolutionary Process Based on Systems Concepts. At Len Troncale's Lifework, [https://lentrionale.com/wp-content/uploads/Len\\_Troncale\\_Media\\_Library/Science\\_Papers/Duality-Theory-II-Metacrescence.pdf](https://lentrionale.com/wp-content/uploads/Len_Troncale_Media_Library/Science_Papers/Duality-Theory-II-Metacrescence.pdf)

Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*. Eds. David Ray Griffin. Donald W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press, 1978.