

Process, emergence, and the multiverse

By [David Williams](#)

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There it's been, resurfacing over the last couple of weeks.

First, in a conversation with the pastor of the church where I grew up, as we sat and caught up about life and faith. "How does that play against process theology?" he asked, as I recounted my reflections on the nexus between faith and the multiverse.

Process theology, in the event that line of God-thinking hasn't crossed your path, is the idea that God is made manifest in the processes of our time and space. Meaning, it is God, evolving, living, growing, and becoming more aware. "The world creates God, just as God creates the world," or so the concept tends to be expressed. It rises out of the process philosophy of [Alfred North Whitehead](#), one of the most incomprehensibly brilliant thinkers of the 20th century.

The second, in a blog post by one of the more ... er ... interesting sorts within my denomination, a pastor who tells everyone and anyone who will listen about how atheistic he is. God's just made up! Jesus is mostly a fictional fabrication! Belief is something we should all outgrow! Sigh. It's good to have a niche, I suppose.

What struck me, in glancing at a short post, was that he was dabbling with the idea of an "emergent" god, one that rises out of human experience. The idea of an "emergent" God is a recent prog-Christian phenomenon, a kind of anthropocentric process-theology-lite. God is the best possibility of human beings, which is being made more and more manifest. Therefore God—defined in that way—must exist.

Huh, I thought. There it is again.

To each of these lines of thinking, a multiversal creation adds an interesting spin. For the theologies arising out of Whitehead's process philosophy, the multiverse resolves several of the more pointed rebuttals. Casting process theology out into a multiverse eliminates any conflation of God with one linear time or space. God is in process, sure. But that process is complete, and that process is just starting, and that process includes all processes that could ever possibly be processed.

And as a Presbyterian, all this thought of process almost gets me excited. Almost.

It also eliminates the moral helplessness of the God of process theology. If there is just one time and space, then a God that is delimited to our timeline is justifiably condemnable for moral horrors. Holocausts and killing fields are a little hard to justify, if they are the only thing a fumbling, [nascent](#) deity can manage. Such a being would be conceptually interesting, sure. But it's hardly worthy of worship, or of being the focus of a transformational faith.

But the God that includes all possibility, that can tell every story, that is both emergent and complete? That being is suitably awesome.

For the shallow anthropocentrism of "emergent" understandings of God, multiversality provides a gentle but pointed nudge out of the parochial boundaries of our selfishness. Sure, human beings carry within themselves the seeds of the divine. Quakers have been on that one for years. That was the whole foundation of Stoic philosophy, if you bother studying the history of faith.

But the "I am the god that is being born" schtick needs to take into account the reality of other sentient life. Because sure you are, honey, but so is every other living thing. I'd expect cetaceans are more on top of that "being the god you can be" thing that we are.

And what of the life that must inevitably exist on other worlds in our vast space-time? There must be ... must be ... beings of deeper awareness and perfection in this 13.8 billion-year-old, 28 gigaparsec-and-expanding universe.

If one understands the divine in terms of emergence, they are more divine than thee, puny human.

And further, cast out into the infinite churning yarp of the inflationary, quantum-branching multiverse? There must be ... must be, by probabilistic necessity ... a being of such indescribable perfection that it's "emergence" is functionally complete.

It's not that either process or emergent thought are wrong. It's that they need to go bigger, and go deeper, if they're to keep pace with the new metaphysics implicit in the multiverse.

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