

**AFFIRMING GENDER QUEERNESS IN THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT:
PROCESS THEOLOGY AND CREATION FROM
CHAOS IN GENESIS 1:1-2**

by

Ella J. Johnson

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Patricia Duncan, Ph.D.

Department of Religion

Jan Quesada, Ph.D.

Department of Religion

Samuel Arnold, Ph.D.

Department of Political Science

ABSTRACT

Christianity has not been widely regarded as an inclusive, safe, and loving place for gender queer persons, who have often felt excluded and shunned by the church. This paper posits a new exegesis of Genesis 1:1-2 that creates space for the church to be more inclusive towards the LGBTQIA+ community and creates an avenue for gender queer persons to feel accepted by the church. One interpretation of Gen. 1:1-2 is that God created good creation from the chaos of the *tehom* and *tōhū-wābōhū*. God's initial good creation from chaos suggests that many subsequent instances of co-creation from chaos with God as a partner can also be considered good if the co-creator is tuned into God's good creative lure. So, considering that God's creation from chaos was good creation, and considering that gender non-conforming persons engage in co-creation alongside God when embracing their gender identity from the chaos of gender dysphoria, it can be supposed that this human creation from chaos can also be considered good and affirmed by God when co-created alongside God and God's lure. This exegesis of Gen. 1:1-2 demonstrates how gender queer persons are created in the image of God, and as such should have a beloved space in the church exactly as they are.

Affirming Gender Queerness in the Christian Context: Process Theology and Creation from Chaos in Genesis 1:1-2

During the 2024 Super Bowl, a commercial aired by the organization He Gets Us which contained a multiplicity of images of persons washing the feet of others. One of the more striking images was that of a clergyman dressed in traditional black robes and collar, with a crucifix necklace, washing the feet of a visibly queer person (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Captured Image from *He Gets Us* Commercial. From “What is foot washing and what does it symbolize” by J. Fullerton-Batten, 2023, https://hegetsus.com/en/articles/what-is-foot-washing-and-what-does-it-symbolize?gclid=CjwKCAjwkuqvBhAQEiwA65XxQDnO6Qyylo7AxWvyFRt426bKRR_dhPtnNEpO8liPte4OYI6g7WFGxRoCtdYQAvD_BwE. 2023 *He Gets Us*. Reprinted with permission.

When I saw this image (Fig. 1), as a queer Christian myself, I saw myself both in the queer person and the clergy person; I heard myself in the story of the Gospel where Jesus washes his disciples’ feet. I have had times in my life where I have felt seen and loved for my full identity after people have affirmed me after sharing my story, an affirmation which mirrors the vulnerability of having your feet washed. I have also had conversations with queer friends who have been broken and hurt by the church, attempting to be vulnerable by sharing my story to show that there can be a welcoming and loving place in the church for them by metaphorically washing their feet. Reflecting on my personal queer Christian experiences and my reactions to Fig. 1 shows the relationship between queerness and the church. There exists in our context a

continued relevance of the conversation of the question of queer inclusion in the church and whether the church can be worthy of gender queer people's presence.

This project is an entrance into this conversation regarding the relationship between LGBTQIA+ persons and the church. By providing a new exegesis from a scriptural story typically used to show that gender queer identity is “wrong,” this project provides a new lens into the conversation of Christian queer inclusion, a lens that allows gender queer persons to see that God¹ loves them, God does not judge them, and that God is with them and creating alongside them. The question my research focuses on is this: How can the Genesis 1 creation story –which has typically been interpreted as promoting the Divine propagation of the gender binary and used to justify the exclusion of gender queer people² from full and authentic participation in the church – be exegeted to create a hermeneutic that affirms gender queer persons inclusion and full participation in the church as part of the *imago dei*,³ and allow gender queer persons to see how the church can be worthy of them by being safe and loving space?

The scripture my project concentrates on is Genesis 1:1-2.

¹When God began to create the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep,

¹This paper uses non-gendered language for God. I regard God as beyond the human construct of gender, and God can even be regarded as a gender queer entity. For more reading on using diverse gender language for God, please reference *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* by Elizabeth A. Johnson

²Here, the term “gender queer” is meant to signify any persons who embrace a gender identity and embodiment that varies in any way from their sex-assigned at birth and the gender in which they were socialized into in early childhood. In addition to transgender and non-binary, some other identities persons may embrace that fall into this generalized label include gender queer, agender, gender fluid, gender nonconforming, and pangender. This is in no way an exhaustive list, and some people may not embrace a label at all to signify how they understand their gender identity. More information about each of these identities can be found at https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions?utm_source=ads_ms_HRC_20240311-HRC-AW-GS-Natl-GenderIdentityDefinitionRP_Responsive_a001-responsive-rst_b:gender%20identity&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwkuqvBhAQEiwA65XxOKCdOZV7h_KPrg1P29f47akAy-mED_p1aa0ymcT7-KFrpc1z2e9eUhoCxT0QAvD_BwE

³*Imago dei* translates from Latin to English as “in the image of God” taken from Genesis 1:27, which signifies the divinity in every human.

while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (NRSVUE)

My project enters the conversation of gender inclusion through these verses. The exegesis my research arrives at is as follows. In Gen. 1:1-2, one can interpret that God created good creation (the first creation) from the chaos of the *tehom* and *tōhū-wābōhū*. God's initial good creation from chaos suggests that in many subsequent instances of creation, creation from chaos can also be considered good, so long as the creation is consistent with God's lure. So, looking at the standards for good creation within the creation from chaos context, and considering that gender non-conforming persons engage in co-creation alongside God when embracing their gender identity (one's gender as framed by lived experience and knowledge of self) from the chaos of gender dysphoria, it can be supposed that this human creation from chaos can also be considered good and affirmed by God when co-created alongside God and in accord with God's good creative lure. My research arrives at this exegesis by examining the text through a process theological lens, relying on process understandings of reality, God, and creation.

Overview of Process Theology

Process theology is a lens and field born out of the philosophical work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Process philosophy originated as a response to the scientific developments of the fields of quantum physics and abstract mathematics, attempting to answer questions about the nature of existence, being, time, space, and relationality. Process theology seeks to apply these insights to the notion of the divine. The nature of reality from a process perspective envisions a world influenced by the flow and influence of time; human freedom and agency; and a relational interconnectedness between all things. For process theologians, God's omnipotence is redefined as radical and total relationality; the way God acts in the world hinges on said relationality; and God as morally perfect through a total longing for love. Process

theology, informed by the nature of reality and the nature of God, understands creation and the world as being an ongoing and co-creative process between humans, God, and the rest of creation; informed by the past experience of created beings and God; and in the process of transformation. The following sections will dive deeper into these elements of process theology, specifically examining the nature of reality, God, and creation.

Nature of Reality in Process Thought

Reality for process theologians depends on how the past influences the present and the future. For process theologians, the future is radically open, suggesting that the future and universe are “inherently open-ended and growing” each moment (Viney, 2022). Because of the possibility and reality of personal choice, down to the subatomic level given that electrons in each moment can “choose” to jump between atoms or stay put, the future is radically open, but can be constrained partially by the past. Every single moment from every single perspective impacts the shape of the future, and for Whitehead, these moments are called “actual entities” which “represent each moment of existence” and “are always in the process of becoming something different as they transform from moment to moment” (Gnuse, 2000, p. 30). The future cannot be fixed or predetermined even by God, because actual entities are never permanent, and existence and differentiation of each entity in each moment has the ability to shape a different future. The choice that each element of creation has in each moment to carry out an infinitely diverse array of actions is what creates the future’s radical openness. The possession of free will and personal choice to carry out any given action in each moment implies that, even in relationship with God, the future can never be predetermined. God has no coercive control over the future according to this view, which contrasts with the traditional theological view. For traditional theologians, “the creative or causal relation flows one way only, from God to the

world,” which suggests that God can have coercive power over the future, bringing about actual events (Viney, 2022, section 3). For process theology, God cannot coerce, but rather can influence the future. Whitehead explains God’s role in the future as being a lure. God acts as a luring figure, hoping and influencing a certain path through God’s relationship with creation, but being unable to guarantee the existence of that path in certainty (Whitehead, 1978). Process thought presents a God who does not possess major coercive power over the future, but rather possesses the ability to influence creation and lure beings into a given choice or action in each moment to shape the future how God envisions it. God can choose when and where to lure creation towards a certain choice but cannot make earthly choices Godself that directly impact worldly affairs. God impacts the future through the art of luring, and God’s relationality and love make this lure quite powerful, so God has a role on how the future unfolds if God’s influence is felt.

Process theology additionally understands freedom to be essential to the nature of reality. To process thinkers, humans and other beings have the ability to “self-create” every moment experienced in the universe from “quarks to the human mind,” and freedom becomes essential to the self-creation of each moment (Mesle, 1993, p. 59). The shape of reality becomes contingent on the freedom of all things to form each individual happening and moment. Freedom “depends upon and arises out of the experience of the billions of cells that form our bodies at any moment” (Mesle, 1993, p. 61). The freedom that leads to decisions and happenings that fundamentally make-up the whole of reality is deeper than simply the human mind and all its processes; the cells within our bodies and the bodies of other living beings interact in ways that can profoundly impact how we live out each moment. The cells themselves have freedom to impact each moment, making way for the freedom we experience to make decisions out of free will,

contingent on our history and goal for the future, that create and make up the larger reality that we exist in (Reeves, 1985). Freedom impacts reality from the smallest scale of subatomic action or inaction to the largest scale of communal decision making. Reality and the way it is created and sustained would be vastly different without the existence of this freedom.

Out of this freedom that is inherent to reality, the grounded existence of genuine personal choice emerges, and has ramifications for the existence and shape of reality. For process theologians, “choice is the exercise of creative freedom” (Christ, 2003, p. 100). The future, for process theologians, cannot be predetermined by God, and through genuine personal freedom, human beings have a large amount of agency in controlling what the future holds. The future only exists as a “range of possibilities that have not yet been chosen,” and as such, human beings, and other elements of creation, with their “genuine freedom,” have the ability, in tandem with God’s perfect knowledge, to impact what the future looks like (Mesle, 1993, p. 37). Freedom manifests itself for humans in the realm of personal choice, which changes and reshapes the paths the future can take. Personal choice, as a manifestation of the freedom inherent to reality, leads to decisions that change the scope of the present and future, which impacts the shape of reality. For example, if one made the choice to purchase a pet, their own future now with a pet would be different than without, and the future of that animal would also be radically altered. Although a silly and simple example, it still illustrates the point that one choice in one moment can profoundly impact the future. Freedom as inherent to reality has implications for the nature of reality and is fundamental for the radically open future.

Lastly, process theology views the interconnectedness of all creation and God through relationship as a component of the nature of reality. Charles Hartshorn writes that social relationships between all things characterizes the nature of reality of the entire world order

(Gnuse, 2000). As will be discussed later, God is the supremely related one according to process thought, which insinuates that all connections are initiated and maintained through the divine lens. Through this divine supra-relationality, process theology first emphasizes the interconnectedness of people. Humanity exists in a complex and fragile web of connections in the process view of reality, where every component has value, and each string of the web must be attended to through relationships in order to maintain the web as a whole (Mesle, 2000). Maintenance of human interconnectivity involves radical empathy; humans should consider the “values and feelings” of others before engaging in any action, suggesting that humanity’s reality rests on radical interconnections maintained through empathetic relationships (Mesle, 1993, p. 96). This relationality exists within each human. Process thinkers emphasize the interactions and relationship between individual minds and bodies which leads to healing within oneself (Mesle, 1993). Beyond just humans, this relationality extends to the natural world. Humans are inevitably connected to the entire order of creation, including conscious and nonconscious beings and objects, and have a responsibility and obligation to maintain those relationships as well (Gnuse, 2000). Lastly, process theologians extend this worldly interconnected relationality to God. There likewise exist empathetic, large scale, dynamic, and developing relationships between God and the created order (Christ, 2003). Relationality as a facet of reality is not restricted to creation; it extends to the divine. When considering the nature of reality from a process perspective, the fundamental interconnectedness between humans, non-human creation, and God defines reality. However, it is important to acknowledge that for some humans and other beings, some connections have more weight than others, and as such this radical interconnectedness is also practical. The weight that the connections with beings we are in closer proximity to, interact with more often, or have greater emotional relation with have greater weight than those that are

distanced (Mesle, 1993). I would have a weightier connection with my sibling than someone I have never met and would have greater connection to the tree that holds my childhood swing than a tree I encountered once on vacation, for example. It would appear that not all connections in the web of interconnectedness are created equal.

Overall, the nature of reality for process theologians includes freedom, the flow of time and radical openness of the future, and radical relationality.

Nature of God in Process Thought

Process theologians embrace a nontraditional view of God. For process theologians, God's omnipotence is refigured through the understanding of God's all-encompassing relationality because God is the supremely related one and because all of creation acts as co-creators alongside God (Christ, 2003). Additionally, process theology places an emphasis on the love of God over the power of God. In a similar vein to God's omnipotence, God's power is also reconceptualized through the lens of God's relationality, because God's overwhelming love enables God's radical relationality. For process thinkers, "God's power lies in patience and love, not in force," signifying how God's relational love defines God's power (Mesle, 1993, p. 14). God has power alongside and with creation, not over creation. Traditional power connotes that one has control over another. If God's power is understood as power over rather than power with, it would seem that God has a coercive power and could even possess power over instances where no love is present, insinuating that God's power can act without love. God is total love, which means that any power God possesses flows from God's love. So, the traditional understanding of power is difficult to reconcile with the understanding that God is total love, so process theology embraces a different understanding of power with.

Process theologians agree with the traditional claim that God is omniscient, but in the sense that God “knows everything there is to know, perfectly” (Mesle, 1993, p. 9). Because God knows only what there is to know, “this means knowing the future as open, as a range of possibilities and probabilities, not as fixed or settled” (Mesle, 1993, p. 9). God’s omniscience and knowledge allows the future to remain radically open for process theologians, because God only knows what there is to know, which does not totally include a vision of the future. Lastly, process theologians understand God as omnibenevolent. Through love, God can be fully kind to fully embrace the needs of all people and the world (Dombrowski, 2004). God’s love and kindness allow God to interact with the world that once again informs the understanding of power with rather than power over.

The view of God as relationally omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent informs the ways process theologians understand how God acts in the world. Process theology understand God as taking an active presence in the world, acting through humanity’s hands and feet; “God has no hands but ours” (Mesle, 1993, 14). God relates to humanity in a profoundly intimate way by being inside humans and performing Godly actions through humans. By acting with and through humanity, God embraces a relational power identity; “God’s power flows in all directions” (Farmer, 2021, p. 27). Some Christian process theologians acknowledge that God has acted on behalf of the Israelites from a distance and acted in the world through impersonal personifications like burning bushes or pillars of light, through God’s entrance into the world as a human through the life and death of Jesus Christ, God revealed another way of interacting with creation that is more directly relational. It is God’s most relational manner of interacting with creation that Christian process theologians embrace because this manner of God’s action most closely intertwines with the process idea of God as the supremely relational one. Given that

humans are and have always been co-creators themselves, already engaging in one facet of Divine work, God simply expanded humans' engagement and relationality with the Divine through the life of Jesus to be the Divine changemakers on earth (Mesle, 1993). God uses God's love, kindness, and benevolence to anticipate areas of need and Divine intervention, and calls on us as human being to address those needs and be Godly actors in the flesh. While God, having power with not power over, cannot act in the world directly or force humans to act, God can set examples in figures like Jesus on how to act in and through God, and can lure humans to act through God's love and kindness.

Additionally, seeing that God is love, God can use God's love to lure the world towards God's moral vision for the future; God can influence rather than control. God may only lure, rather than compel or coerce, because God's power does not include the ability to force humans to act in a way that brings about the love and morality that God envisions for the world. Process theologians conceptualize God's power through the lenses of love and patience, not force, even though God possesses a deep sense of passion for bringing love to creation. Due to God's complete relationality with creation, perfected when God came down to earth and directly experienced the human experience through the life and death of Jesus, God feels what humans feels and experiences what humans experience, and as such, "God can never sanction a state of affairs in which some are victimized, exploited, and oppressed, because God is one of the victims" (Mesle, 1993, p. 77). Given God's inability to force human affairs in a given direction and considering God's infinite relationality, process theologians posit that God seeks to lure humanity to use love to alleviate the victimization, exploitation, and oppression that puts God's creation – and as such God Godself – in positions of extreme injustice and hatefulness. God as

such is an “advocate for justice⁴ for all creatures” who possesses a radical vision for liberation and equity among creation (Mesle, 1993, p. 84). For process theologians, God would appear to feel the hate and injustice being done to God’s creation, and as an advocate, guide creation to act in ways that promote liberation and love. This guiding process is the way God lures. God modeled this life of justice through Jesus, and guides humans to use their hands and feet to become Divine purveyors of justice through love using the life of Jesus as a model. Process theologians advance the view that God relies on and trusts humans to bring about God’s vision of total liberation, equality, human dignity, and love in the world, and that God lures humanity to bring about this Divine love until the day it comes to fully be. Through the life and example of Jesus, God lures humanity to the morally perfect and restoratively just future that God envisions for the world. Additionally, to be God, God must be perfectly loving and good, as process theists reject the idea of a deity whose moral character is ever questionable” (Viney, 2022, section 1). God’s love and goodness convey that God fully encompasses the best of all things. God’s luring vision of the future should also then fully embrace God’s goodness and love, so additionally conveying the best of all things. God lures humanity towards a fully loving and good future centered, and this future and vision is central to the entity and purpose of the Divine.

Process theologians reframe God’s omnipotence to center around relationality, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, and show that God uses God’s love to lure humans to bring about God’s vision for the world, because God acts in the world through and by human beings.

Nature of Creation in Process Thought

For process theologians, creation is a constant act, starting from the point when God created the world from chaos in the 1 Genesis creation narrative, and continuing through the

⁴Justice as used in this paper connotes the restorative form of justice, which references making things whole again, and acts as a purveying force of love in the world.

entirety of earthly existence until the current moment, and moving into the future. (Christ, 2003). God plays an important role in this continued creation bringing forth change, but not as ultimate and only creator. God rather serves as a creative partner, affirming the changing nature of the world and imploring God's co-creators to further implement Divinely creative evolution (Gnuse, 2000). For process theologians, humans play a key role in creation, being co-creators with God (Gnuse, 2000). Process theology suggests that God works with humans to bring forth evolutionary change inspired by a Divine creative image.

For process theologians, all of creation is forever changing and evolving from the point of its creation onwards. This evolutionary nature of creation is true on the larger scale for the entirety of creation over the span of time and is true on a smaller scale for each individual entity that is created (Gnuse, 2000). On the macro scale, process theologians accept the theory of evolution to be accurate in tandem with their Christian religious beliefs (Gnuse, 2000). Evolution reflects the process idea that creation is always changing and adapting rather than staying continuous and stagnant, whereas the mainstream traditional view of creationism advocates that God created the entire world – including humans – all at once and gave humans only two distinct gender identities/roles. Evolution and process theology can coexist in respect to how the world was created and how it advanced. Additionally, on the individual scale, process theologians mostly hold an evolutionary view in respect to creation. Once each individual element of creation is created – whether that be a human, a bacterium, or a plant – throughout its lifespan, it has the ability to change, fluctuate, and grow. For humans, that means that “we are in constant change; we are not the small person we were as a child, or ten years ago, or even an hour ago” (Gnuse, 2000, p. 30). While humans or any other element of creation are originally created at one

point, they have the opportunity to change and grow at every moment. Creation, both in its totality and on the individual scale, is evolutionary in nature according to process theology.

God works in and through this evolution of creation as one of many creators. God births, guides, and affirms each creative moment as it happens, but is not in total control (Mesle, 1993). The evolutionary process of creation is not stalled by God, but rather is lured forward by God who creates a changed world with more complexity, freedom, and diversity of experience (Gnuse, 2000) God is an actor in the original moments of creation, and every moment thereafter in the changing and evolving of each element of creation. The past, present, and future are all shaped and affected by God, because each moment is a product of God's "creative becoming" (Reeves, 1985, p. 139). God also is not a temporary creator of our world; God was a creator at the birth of the world as is known now and will continue to be a creator "until the creation is consummated in the eschaton" (Peters, 1992, p. 252). God is a creator from the birth of the world until its end, who is actively involved in the start and the evolution of each element of creation; God shapes and affirms creation as it evolves and changes.

As previously mentioned, God is not the only actor involved in the process of creation according to process theology. Rather, each entity of creation is a co-creator with God (Gnuse, 2000). Human beings can act as co-creators alongside God in their own existence, identity, and embodiment throughout the course of their lives. Co-creation means that when creating tangible creation, for example children – or when creating non-tangible creation – for example human identity and experience – humans act in tandem with God to make the choices that spur the creative process which creates the existence and growth of all creation. The process conception of co-creation seems to suggest that co-creation is inherent to the human creation of identity and understanding of self that arises out of the relationship between the Divine and human. Because

creation exists on an evolutionary course in the process lens allowing for the affirmation and existence of change and fluctuation, and because the nature of reality allows for rich freedom and choice apart from divine predestination, humans are able to play an active role in their own self-creation and in the creation of others (Gnuse, 2000). Because humans and all other elements of creation are co-creators alongside God, “God cannot be omnipotent or all-powerful as asserted in traditional theism” (Christ, 2003, p. 104). For process theologians, God completes the continuous act of creation alongside human beings and other elements of creation, and seemingly cannot be traditionally omnipotent and all powerful, which implies that process theology is inconsistent with more traditional views. Creation involves co-creation in process theology, which means that humans have an active and free role in their own self-creation alongside God, playing an important role in the creation of their own lives and destinies. However, for this co-creation to be considered good and completed alongside God, one must listen to and act in accord with the lure of God in the co-creative process. The central element for good co-creation of self is hearing and acting with the lure of God.

Overall, for process theologians, the nature of reality, God, and creation all counter the beliefs long held and popularized by mainstream traditional Christian theology. Process views of reality, God, and creation allow for more emphasis on freedom, compassion, cooperation, and togetherness in the relationship between the Divine, human, and creation, and provide important implications for the interpretation and meaning of the Genesis creation narratives.

Process Biblical Hermeneutic

This paper now turns to the creation scriptures of the Bible in order to develop a hermeneutic of creative inclusion through a process theological lens. Before jumping into the specific text however, it is important to survey how one might approach scripture from a process

lens and with a process hermeneutic. A process hermeneutic is simply a theory of interpretation that is derived and dependent on the school of process theology. Process theologians approach the Bible with the understanding that scripture is not the word of God, but rather the words of humans working in co-relationship with God (Farmer, 2021). While process theologians acknowledge that scripture often reflects humanity's experience with the Divine, they also acknowledge that humans "struggle to express their encounters with the Divine," scripture reflects these encounters "filtered through [scripture writer's] conditioned humanity" (Mesle, 1993, p. 101). When a reader approaches the biblical text, they "will feel it differently from the author – and differently from one another – due to the unique tint in the lenses of their glasses" which suggests that "what the text might come to mean can theoretically be more important than anything the text has meant in the past" (Farmer, 2021, p. 21). The tint of the reader's glasses can also be thought of as the necessary presuppositions and personal experience that one brings to the text which impacts the way they read it. The first step of acquiring a process hermeneutic is acknowledging the presuppositions one possesses in order to determine what kind of meaning one may already be bringing to the text.⁵ Bringing one's personal presuppositions and assumptions to the text, however, does not make one's interpretations less valid because process hermeneutics are supposed to be a process of personal spiritual and experiential growth that "make the Bible into a living word once again" (Farmer, 2021, p. 23). A process hermeneutic

⁵When I approach the creation texts this paper will later survey, I acknowledge that as a queer woman, I bring certain life experiences and understandings that impact how I read and understand the biblical text. I acknowledge that as a reader and as an interpreter, my own personal queer identity and the queer identities of many close family members and friends drive my search for inclusion within the texts. Particularly, the fact that my sibling is non-binary is a primary drive for my search for gender inclusion in the creation narratives. These assumptions and presuppositions that I am bringing to the text do not make my reading of the text any less legitimate from a process lens, but rather bring my own personal element into the relationship I have with God through this interpretive process.

involves using process understandings of reality, God, and creation to bring about the living dynamics of a human-created text through personal experience.

This process view of scriptural interpretation starkly contrasts that of traditional theology. Rather than approaching scripture from the process Postmodern worldview, traditional theologians approach scripture from Medieval and Modern worldviews (Farmer, 2021). When reading the Bible, traditional theologians utilize scientific understandings from the Medieval age when carrying out interpretative tasks (Farmer, 2021). What results from the utilization of these worldviews is a biblical interpretation that relies on a view of scripture as the word of God or the inspired word of God. Because teachings are being used from older worldviews and schools of thought through traditionalist interpretation, the teachings and doctrine that result tend to be static, because the worldviews being used are unable to adapt and change with new developments in areas of morality, law, sciences, and more (Farmer, 2021). When the worldviews interpretations depend on are resistant to change and modernization, typically the teachings and doctrines that result are as well. Especially concerning sciences, traditional interpretations of scriptures – including the creation narrative – which conflict with postmodern and modern views of how the world came to be from a physical and evolutionary perspective are unable to adapt, which can mean that they seemingly exist merely in the realm of Medieval understandings of creation. Additionally, traditional interpretations largely regard scripture as the word of God or the inspired word of God, which lends less truth and conviction to the human voices and co-creation of scripture between God and humanity. These conflicting approaches and worldviews lead to vastly different understandings and interpretations of scripture from traditional and process schools. The creation scriptures of Genesis are at a paramount of differentiation between

traditional and process interpretation, and this paper seeks to explore this difference and breathe anew a gender affirming theology of creation into one of these texts.

Genesis 1:1-2

The creation scripture this paper examines from a process lens is Gen. 1:1-2 (NRSVUE).

¹When God began to create the heavens and the earth, ² the earth
was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep,
while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Traditionally, these verses have been understood to mean that God created the heavens and the earth from nothing, an understanding referred to as *creatio ex nihilo* (Anderson & Bockmuehl, 2017). According to this view, God began creating at the very beginning of time, and as such, God created the world from nothing. This understanding is consistent with the traditional translation of Gen. 1:1 found in the King James Version and the New International Version, which reads “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Theologians often point to other biblical texts, such as 2 Maccabees 7:28⁶, to support their idea that God created the earth from nothing, and as such nothing pre-existed God and God’s creation (Anderson & Bockmuehl, 2017). Some modern traditional theologians hold a *creatio ex nihilo* embracing the idea of creation from chaos, defining that chaos as “dark, unseen, motionless, dead” (Anderson & Bockmuehl, 2017, p. 64). The idea that God created the earth from nothing is still embraced, but the nothingness is defined as a dead chaos rather than nothingness. Both of these traditional understandings lead traditionalist theologians to contest process understandings of co-creation, the reframing of God’s omnipotence, and the relationality of God (Keller, 2003).

⁶ 2 Maccabees 7:28: I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being (NRSVUE)

Important implications for traditional theologies of gender also result from this text. When embracing the *creatio ex nihilo* understanding, if God and only God creates from nothing – or a chaotic nothingness – creation is mostly understood to be fixed and done only by God. Fixed creation can still change, showing the *creatio ex nihilo* understanding is consistent with the changing nature of creation inherent to being and growing, but this change is not instigated or controlled by God. God for the most part seems to not be in relationship with creation but rather omnipotent over creation. Co-creation is not fully consistent with this understanding because God alone creates, which entails that one would not be able to change and evolve into new understanding and identity of themselves in a way that is affirmed by God and within God's image without God instigating this change. For gender queer persons – co-creating an evolved self that more fully embraces one's gender identity (or the true essence of one's gender framed by lived experience and knowledge of self) is not regarded as a divinely affirmed act of creation and does not reflect the image of God (*imago dei*). This is because with God alone as creator and creation as being fixed, good creation is limited to one's originally created state by God. So, when gender queer persons embrace a gender identity that is different than their gender-assigned-at-birth, they are diverging away from their originally created self and thus no longer considered as fully part of the *imago dei* according to the *creatio ex nihilo* understanding.

However, approaching the text through a process lens and departing from the *creatio ex nihilo* interpretation enables a different understanding of Gen. 1:1-2 and supports a theology of gender affirmation, rather than challenging the status of gender queer persons as reflections of God's good creation. It is important to note that the first Genesis creation story is a poem, and as such diverse interpretations are possible, and scientific proof need not always be shown to legitimize comparison and exegesis. Process concepts of co-creation, the relational omnipotence

of God, and the radical openness of the future have major bearing on the interpretative foci highlighted in this paper. Using a process lens to approach Gen. 1:1-2 highlights the process understanding of creation from chaos. In Gen. 1:1-2, the process interpretation understands that the earth was not created from nothing, but rather God created the earth from chaos and darkness. The chaos from which God created is the “chaosmos,” and God’s cosmos was brought forth from this chaosmos (Keller, 2003, p. 12). This understanding is reflected in the NRSVUE of Gen. 1:1-2, which reads, “the earth was complete chaos.” This pre-creation chaos is referred to as *tōhū wā-bōhū* in the biblical Hebrew. *Tōhū wā-bōhū* means a chaotic state of total existence that was “unformed-and-void,” as *tōhū* is connected with the concept of wilderness and *bōhū* with emptiness and desolation (Von Rad, 1972). The chaos of the *tōhū wā-bōhū* can also be compared with the chaos-come-again from Jeremiah 4:23-26, which creates the imagery of “darkened and devastated earth, from which life and order have fled” (Skinner, 1951, p. 17). This linguistic choice of *tōhū wā-bōhū* lends textual authority to a creation from chaos hermeneutic, since it would seem to suggest that the author “assumed that the universe was created from primordial chaos” (Keller, 2003, p. xvii). The text goes on further to suggest that God created from *this tōhū wā-bōhū* chaos, because in verse two, “swept over” is “the verb attached to God’s breath-wind-spirit elsewhere describes an eagle fluttering over its young,” which can suggest that God played a nurturing role in the original creative process (Alter, 2004, p. 17). The spirit would not sweep over nothing, insinuating that the text suggests that something – chaos – predated God’s creation for which the spirit swept over.

The chaotic nature in Gen. 1:1-2 from which God created is also reinforced by the Hebrew term for “the deep” – *tehom*. *Tehom*, the dark face of the deep that the spirit swept over to start creating, can be translated as “sea of chaos,” which suggests that God began creating

from a “damp primeval element” (Von Rad, 1972, p. 49). To continue the natural metaphor, some biblical commentators even describe God’s original creative action as a “divine storm” which was “agitated” by the chaotic and restless deep sea (Von Rad, 1972, p. 49). All of this goes to show that God’s creation originated from the *tōhu wā-bōhū* chaos and from the natural and aquatic chaos of the *tehom*. God’s creation was brought forth out of this chaos, which signifies that God acts through darkness in the cosmos. By depicting creation as emerging out of chaos, Genesis 1 conveys the idea of a God who works within the “natural parameters” and forces of the universe, so God’s creation would not be outside the bounds of what is natural (Gnuse, 2014, p. 108). As Gerhard Von Rad put it, “unless one speaks of chaos, creation cannot be sufficiently considered at all” (1972, p. 48). Additionally, acknowledging the possibility that God initiated creation from chaos and later affirmed that this first creative act was good,⁷ later acts of creation from chaos can be in God’s good image, if the co-creator is listening to God’s lure in the creative process. The word ‘good’ as utilized in Gen. 1:4 “expresses the contrast of God’s work to the chaos of which darkness is an element” (Skinner, 1951, p. 19). This seems to suggest that most acts of co-creation occurring alongside God, brought forth from chaos and leaning into God’s loving and good lure, can be within the bounds of naturality and within light and goodness. Creation from chaos in Gen. 1:1-2 is the backbone of the gender inclusive hermeneutic that results from this text, which this paper explores.

Given that God originally created from chaos, one could exegete that co-creation occurring thereafter from chaos which tunes into God’s loving and good lure with God as a serious partner is modeled after God’s creative path and can be considered good creation. The creation is good because the co-creator is listening to God’s lure. Essentially, creation from chaos

⁷ Gen. 1:4 “And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.”

informs the thought that God and humanity can now co-create through goodness and love beautiful creation from chaos and discontent that already exists. While God may not have been co-creating in Gen. 1, the process co-creative framework and understanding is crucial to the exegesis and application of the creation from chaos interpretation to current examples of human creation. Humans are capable of co-creating elements of their lived identity and experience that mirror God's creative manner of creation from chaos when listening to the lure of God. As such, the process interpretation of Gen. 1:1-2 has significant implications for the inclusion of transgender, non-binary, and other gender queer persons exactly as they are into God's co-created order and affirming their participation in good creation. This paper posits a theology and hermeneutic from Gen. 1:1-2 that all genders, including those outside the realms of the constructed gender binary, are included in God's good creation. The co-creation of gender queer individuals is a Divinely affirmed co-creative journey from the chaos of gender dysphoria, a common state of existence for gender queer persons in the transition between identifying in accord with their gender-assigned-at-birth to their true and authentic gender identity, to the goodness of the embracing their gender identity and the experience of comfort, joy, and love existing in a body that truly feels their own. In the radical openness of the future that process thought posits, gender queer persons make the co-creative choice to embrace their gender identity, and God co-creates during this process because God is all loving and all relational. The process worldview would suggest that God sees, feels, and relates to the chaos that gender queer persons experience before embracing their gender identities in the full, and as such engages in co-creation alongside them to embrace the true gender identity. Because co-creation is taking place in tandem with God when gender queer persons embrace their gender identity, if gender queer persons are listening for God's lure, it can likewise be expected that these persons are

acting through the lure of God to God’s good and love-filled vision of the future, indicating that the act of co-creation of gender identity is divinely moral and loving. All of this suggests that their evolving journey of gendered co-creation is an embodiment of God’s creative journey in Gen. 1:1-2 of creation from chaos.

The chaos of the *tōhū wa-bōhū* from which God creates mirrors and reflects the experiences that some gender queer and gender queer persons⁸ have when experiencing gender dysphoria or general discontent with their gender-assigned-at-birth before fully living into their gender identity. Gender dysphoria is defined by the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)⁹ as “a marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and natal gender” (Zucker et. al., 2016, p. 220). Gender dysphoria is a common experience felt at some point by many gender queer individuals, so juxtaposing their dark experience with creation from chaos is meaningful. The chaos from which God created was dark. In the *tōhū wā-bōhū*, “darkness was superimposed” over the chaos (Von Rad, 1972, p. 49). In addition to darkness, confusion defined the chaos of the *tōhū wā-bōhū* (Skinner, 1951). Gender queer persons experiencing gender dysphoria likewise experience times of darkness in confusion amidst their chaos. Depression and clinically significant distress often accompany gender dysphoria, indicating how darkness exists in the chaos (Ristori & Steensma, 2016).¹⁰

⁸ While gender dysphoria is a condition experienced by some trans, non-binary, and gender queer persons before and during their transition to living into their gender identity as opposed to their gender-assigned-at-birth, this is not an experience that all gender queer persons have had, and some persons who are not gender queer have experienced gender dysphoria (Zucker et. al., 2016). The use of generalizations in this paper seeks to inform the experiences of a majority of gender queer persons who experienced gender dysphoria and is a necessity due to the brevity of this paper. However, this paper does not intend to undermine the fact that gender dysphoria is a diverse condition that is experienced differently in each different case, but rather to use generalizations to inform an inclusive theological outlook.

⁹ Within the field of psychology, the DSM-5 is the most recently updated and primary resource used to define, diagnose, and describe all mental health disorders. This paper utilizes its definition because it is the leading accepted source that researchers, therapists, and others consult when dealing with patients experiencing gender dysphoria.

¹⁰ It is important to note that the darkness of gender dysphoria goes beyond depression and depressive thoughts in some cases, seen in the fact that “about one in three adults with Gender Dysphoria has experienced suicidal ideation, attempted suicide, or engaged in suicidal or non-suicidal self-harm” (Zucker et. al., 2016, p. 229).

Confusion also is a defining characteristic of gender dysphoria for some persons. The DSM-5's definition highlights this confusion, seeing that gender dysphoria involves "an individual's affective/cognitive discontent with their assigned gender," and this disconnect is often very confusing for gender queer persons as they try to navigate their gender identity (Zucker et. al., 2016, p. 218). Confusion and darkness are characteristics of both the chaos from which God created and the chaos of gender dysphoria from which gender queer persons co-create.

Gender dysphoria is often also coupled with an experience of gender fluidity and experimentation for many gender queer persons, a reality which is shared by the *tehom* and the *tōhū wā-bōhū*. The DSM-5 attributes multiple behavioral criteria to gender dysphoria that also indicate gender fluidity including "a preference for cross-dressing, adopting cross-gender roles in fantasy play; a strong preference for toys, games, and activities of the other gender; and a strong aversion or rejection of typical gender congruent roles, interests, preferences, and behaviors" (Ristori & Steensma, 2016, p. 13). These behaviors signal gender fluidity because engaging in them involves one embracing the embodiment or role of a different gender identity whether through clothing, embodiment in play, utilization of toys, or the other behaviors highlighted. Gender fluidity and the behaviors that signal it are a potential defining reality for gender queer persons whilst experiencing gender dysphoria. Gender fluidity is also a characteristic of the *tehom*, and especially the sea of chaos from which creation is born (Keller, 2003). *Tehom* "is related to the name of the mother goddess Tiamat in the Mesopotamian creation myth *Enuma elish*," exhibiting how gender can be intertwined with the fluidity of the deep sea from which God creates (Niditch, 1998, p. 16). The specific language of Gen. 1:1-2 – "face of the deep" and "face of the waters" – incites imagery of the sea and moving water, which is in itself an image of fluidity. God created from "the fluid chaos" (Skinner, 1951, p. 18). The chaos from which God is

creating is a gendered and fluid sea, changing and fluxing with the tides and waves. In this fluid sea of chaotic energy, “gender itself iterates parodically, repeating sex-roles queerly, subversively” (Keller, 2003, p. 193). In the chaos of *tehom* and *tōhū wā-bōhū*, gender fluidity is present, which suggests that creative chaos in Genesis can mirror the felt chaos of gender dysphoria.

The fact that the chaos of the *tōhū wā-bōhū* mirrors the chaos of the gender dysphoria many gender queer persons experience before living into their gender identity informs the hermeneutic that the resulting creation from these chaoses can be affirmed as good by God if created in tune with God’s good lure. Seeing that God affirms God’s original act of creation from the chaos of the *tōhū wā-bōhū* as good in Gen. 1:4, one could posit that God and God’s creation were good even though they were created from a past of chaos. Also, seeing that the act of human creation was specifically said by God to be in the *imago dei*,¹¹ divinely affirmed and inspired acts of human co-creation from that point on that adhere to the good and loving creative lure of God can be affirmed in the *imago dei*. Seeing that the past states of chaos for biblical creation in Genesis and gendered continued creation for gender queer persons are intricately similar, the same theology about creation drawn from Genesis are able to be applied to the creation experienced by gender queer persons, if the gender queer persons hear and use God’s lure when co-creating. It can then be considered that the co-creative act for gender queer persons of creating and embodying their gender identity that differs from their gender-assigned-at-birth from the chaos of gender dysphoria and the incongruence of gender identity and gender-assigned at birth can be viewed as a co-creative act that is affirmed by God, in the *imago dei*, and part of God’s good creation when adhering to God’s good lure in the co-creative process.

¹¹ Gen. 1:27, NRSVUE

Genesis 1:27

In talking about gender queerness, gender identify, and Genesis, it is necessary to touch on Genesis 1:27, because while this scripture is not the center of my analysis, it has a deep history of use to justify the gender binary and exegete a theology that God created and affirms only 2 genders: man and woman. While this addition will not be a comprehensive analysis, it will provide some considerations and exegesis that inform my gender affirming theology. Gen. 1:27 reads as follows: “so God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (NRSVUE). This verse is especially poetic in nature, given that “the style loses something of its tense rigidity, and reveals a strain of poetic feeling,” so this analysis will be more poetic and conceptual (Skinner, 1951, p. 30). God creates the *‘ādām*, the Hebrew “generic word for human being” in God’s image: “the whole man is created in God’s image” (Alter, 2004, p. 19; Von Rad, 1972, p. 58). God’s image is God’s alone, seeing that “God refers to himself” in the verse despite the plural noun used in Gen. 1:26 (Speiser, 1964, p. 7). The image of God is being reflected upon in the creation of the human being. Gen. 1:27 constructs the image of God as both male and female; God’s image is multi-gendered and can include all genders between and outside the gender binary. The creator God appears to embody all genders in God’s image, so God and God’s image would seem to be gender queer based on Gen. 1:27. If the very God (and image of God) creating and co-creating human beings and all other life is gender queer, then gender queer persons would seem to be in the image of God when embracing their gender queer identity. Even when considering Gen. 1:27, it appears that Genesis creates space and love for gender queer persons in the Christian context, and that gender queer persons can and should regard themselves as created in the wonderful, beautiful image of God.

Discussion

This exegesis and interpretation has important implications for the acceptance and inclusion of gender queer persons exactly as they are fully within Christian community and fellowship, and implications for gender queer persons seeking love and affirmation from a Christian context. A trend among many (typically conservative) Christian churches in the United States – Protestant and Catholic alike – is to view deviations of gender identity from gender-assigned-at-birth as wrong. Thus, the co-creative process gender queer persons go through to embrace their true gender identity is regarded as largely wrong (Walker, 2017). This has widespread implications beyond the walls of the church. The political realm has been impacted by this theology, as can be witnessed in the transphobic laws passed in several states and in the Christian rhetoric being used by lawmakers to justify them. For example, on March 2nd, 2023, Governor Bill Lee of Tennessee signed into law Amended Senate Bill 3, also known as the Tennessee Adult Entertainment Act. The law “criminalizes drag performances on public property or any location where people under 18 could be present” (Human Rights Commission, 2023). The law’s express intent, as vocalized by multiple lawmakers and the governor himself, was “to place strict limits on drag shows,” expressly targeting gender queer drag performers (Mattise, 2023). Christian motivations, although covert, are still present with Tennessee’s bill, as expressed motivations include “protecting children and religious freedom” (Human Rights Commission, 2023). Given the traditional understanding of gender as a binary, and any deviation from one’s gender-assigned-at-birth as sinful, one can make the connection that the rhetoric supporting these bills in the name of children’s protection and human rights is Christian rhetoric targeting gender queer persons for existing in their gender identity and expression. Within the political scene as well as the religious, gender queer persons have a hard time finding belonging, are deemed

sinful, and can even be criminalized for embodying typical expressions of gender queerness like drag. In general, most gender queer persons have not been fully accepted by the church, and living into their gender identity has largely not been regarded as an act of good creation or affirmed as part of the *imago dei*.

This paper's theology of gender affirmation, through the process lens of creation from chaos, challenges the exclusion and encourages gender queer persons rather to feel that they can have a space in the by showing that gender queer people are co-created in the image of God throughout their process of gender affirmation and in embracing their gender identity. Many churches are moving in the direction of inclusion. For example, the United Church of Christ is an official open and affirming denomination, seeing that they "declare welcome and inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), same gender loving (SGL) persons into the full life and ministry of the church" (United Church of Christ, 2022). Additionally, at their 2023 General Assembly, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) voted to affirm resolution GA-1929 that invited "welcoming and receiving the gifts of transgender and gender-diverse people" (Gilger, 2019). There are more traditions and denominations around the world that are embodying this paper's hermeneutic of Christian gender queer inclusion, which displays promising application of my hermeneutic for the life and continuance of the church. There exist spaces in the church where gender queer people can see that they have a space to be loved and beloved exactly as they are, and the hermeneutic I propose is just another avenue by which gender queer persons can see how they can be wanted and loved in Christian contexts.

Conclusion

Gender queer persons should be included in the church and in Christian spaces exactly as they are because they are a part of the *imago dei* when embracing their gender queer identities.

By examining Genesis 1:1-2 through a process-theological lens, this paper recognizes that gender queer persons are a part of the *imago dei* and deserve inclusion in Christian spaces because, in the act of co-creation from the chaos of gender dysphoria, they mirror God's creation from chaos in the original act of creation. This conclusion has implications for Christian motivated transphobic legislation in American politics, and it provides an avenue within Christian discourse to show a path to inclusion and beauty rather than exclusion and sin. This paper provides an exegetical and theological framework on which queer inclusion in the church can rest, and it stresses the importance and necessity of welcoming gender queer siblings back into the church exactly as they are and showing them that the church can be and become in the future a place of love, acceptance, and value where they are fully beloved.

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