

Insight, Beloved Community and Grace: Bringing Royce and Wesley Together

By Rick Barr for The Wesleyan Theological Society (3/16/2019)

Introduction:

In 1966, the cover of Time Magazine splashed the provocative headline “Is God Dead?” While quite a shocking proposition to mainstream America, the headline merely reflected a long running process of reflection on the nature of God and the cosmos. Three years earlier, *Honest to God* by J. A. T. Robinson hit the publishing world like a bomb, rattling the joints of Protestant and Catholic churches alike. Highly critical of the religiosity of the period, it challenged the notion of supernaturalism and theism where God, the almighty individual, super being, is in heaven somewhere “out there” and up there and replaced it with the symbol of loving depth and ground. He also quoted Bonhoeffer’s phrase “religionless Christianity”, recognizing that supernatural religion is no longer necessary to explain our existence.

This milieu framed the background for many Christian seekers, including Methodists, who came of age during the 1960s and early 1970s and has presented challenges for many ever since. Whether this perspective is seen as progressive, liberal, liberation or some other label, in the background is the nagging question of how one understands Christianity now that science and technology is ubiquitous throughout our culture. Where is the space for God to be affirmed, for God to act and for grace to become abundant? It is these questions that began my journey in science and religion.

This paper describes a few of the key concepts acquired from my personal engagement in the science and religion dialogue. Not being either a professional scientist or theologian or academic philosopher, the ideas presented here represent personal insights that enable me to

thread the needle between traditionalism and secularism. The focus is practical, providing a pragmatic framework comprised of concepts from science, philosophy and theology that help affirm the grace as offered within the Wesleyan tradition. The first section covers core concepts borrowed from science: evolution, complexity, emergence and the problem of novelty.

The second section focuses on selected ideas of the philosopher Josiah Royce. Royce, who died in 1916, taught philosophy at Harvard from 1882 until his death and is making a bit of a comeback these days. While Royce's writings are wide ranging, philosophy religion is perhaps the area of his greatest contribution. Central to his thinking is the notion of community as a purpose driven, dynamic set of relationships that develop, over time. Community, for Royce, goes beyond the limited understanding of human relationships to become a metaphysical concept that grounds all of reality. This perspective is summarized by the inscription on UCLA's Royce Hall which states "The world is a progressively realized community of interpretation". Also central to his metaphysics is the notion of God as the absolute knower and the possibility of salvation through community in God's presence. Salvation in community is a reinterpretation of the Christian notion of grace with a triadic structure similar to the Wesleyan notion of prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace which will be described in section three.

Section 1: Concepts from an evolutionary understanding of the universe.

The fundamental concept that ties together all the strands of inquiry that comprise the discipline of science and religion (DS&R) is evolution. In the popular press, evolution usually refers to biological evolution. While much of the focus over the past 100 plus

years has been on biology, for those involved in DS&R, evolution refers to a comprehensive understanding of the universe. Beginning with the Big Bang through the development of galaxies, stars and planets leading to life and eventually to us, science has discovered cosmic processes that combine “regularity and randomness” (Oord 27-49) in a dynamic movement from the highly energetic yet simple early universe to highly complex systems found in human life.

When one expands one’s vision to this cosmic scale, some significant issue arise that bring forth a variety of scientific, philosophical and theological questions. These issues are encapsulated in the concept of emergence. Emergence can be understood as the process by which unpredictable, irreducible and novel qualities appear through processes and structures derived from increased complexity while promoting increases in complexity at the same time. Harold Morowitz was one of the leading scientists researching this emergence and has had a profound impact on the direction of the science and religion dialogue.

A number of years ago, I attended a lecture on the book The Emergence of Everything given by Dr. Harold Morowitz, one of the leading scientists researching emergence. In that lecture, he presented a comprehensive perspective on complexity and cosmic emergence. His view, while still within a deterministic world view, focused on the necessity to loosen the dominant reductionism in the sciences and embrace the notion of comprehensive emergence on a cosmic scale. As Philip Clayton points out, Morowitz identifies “no fewer than twenty-eight distinct levels of emergence in natural history from the big bang to the present.” (Clayton 5). However, Morowitz also has a commitment to what Paul Davies referred to as the “cosmic

code” whereby all explanations reside in a platonic realm of mathematical forms. (Davies 240-241) These mathematical forms are reflected in the emerging patterns that scientists discover at the various levels Morowitz describes. Morowitz uses the term “rules of emergence” to describe the regularities found within nature as complexities give rise to qualitatively unique levels. From a theological perspective, it is difficult to see how a traditional understanding of God can have any impact on these processes. This is a core issue that continues to generate dialog, not only within the academic community but also within religious communities as well. It also points to another key concept that I wish to present.

As part of the question and answer session with Dr. Morowitz, I asked if there is anything that is really new, anything truly novel? His answer, though hedged in subtle qualifications and references to Spinoza’s understanding of God (that is another topic for another paper), was no, there is nothing really new under the sun. All of nature is just a recapitulation of the general patterns present in the mathematical laws of nature that science attempts to discover. While emergence makes simple reductionist approaches untenable, he still affirmed a deterministic view of the cosmos. This was neither the answer I expected nor an answer that I accepted. It was in that experience of incredulity that my own understanding of novelty, creativity and emergence developed.

My intuitive insight (as Royce would understand and is explained below) is that novelty does exist in the universe. There are dimensions of the new, the creative, and the unanticipated that exist side by side with regular, causally closed, and mostly theoretically predictable patterns. Novelty, by definition is always new and unpredictable while at the same

time capable of becoming repeatable, generalized, and recapitulated in nature's patterns. Once expressed, novelty becomes the background for further developments that combine regularity and change. If novelty were incapable of repetition and recapitulation, either chaos would eventually ensue as uncontrolled novelty overcame nature's laws or novelty would merely be the froth on nature's ocean, an inconsequential epiphenomenon devoid of lasting value.

Section 2: Royce's community of interpretation

Josiah Royce was born in 1855 in Grass Valley, California. He was the son of a near-do-well father and an extremely devout mother. Grass Valley was a rough and tumble place plagued by alcoholism, prostitution and violence. This experience of community, such that it was, would be carried with Royce throughout his career. In The Religious Aspect of Philosophy, his first major work after his move to Harvard in 1884, Royce presents the concept of the Absolute Knower. The All Knower provides the foundation for any and all knowledge and grounds his philosophy of idealistic personalism. Without the All Knower, there is no truth. In parallel fashion, Royce argued that one must posit an ultimate knower of that which is good or else be stuck with moral dogmatism or moral skepticism. This All Knower also provides the possibility of human error and of missing the mark, a reality which all humanity experiences.

In Sources of Religious Insight, Royce identifies sources of religious insights. For Royce, "insight is knowledge that makes us aware of the unity of many facts in one whole, and that at the same time brings us into intimate personal contact with these facts and with the whole wherein they are united." (Royce SRI 5) The three qualities of insight are breadth of range, coherence and unity of view and personal closeness." While Royce approaches his subject as a professional philosopher, by emphasizing the importance of personal closeness, he is speaking

to all persons in all walks of life. This intimacy of contact provides a personal perspective that touches a person at the deepest and yet most comprehensive level. Insight that maintains an objective distance may be of value but it is not insight. Ultimately, it is the terrible, awesome responsibility of individuals and their communities to interpret these sources as best they can and to live under the real likelihood of error both in understanding and in application.

Insight as Royce describes it has as its primary feature a sense of revelation and saving power. It is not about communication of a mystery that cannot be understood without divine intervention. Instead, it is the uncovering of the purpose in life that invites the individual to join a cause greater than him or herself. It is specific and personal, affecting both persons and communities that perceive it. The Christian faith calls this power grace which comes to the one experiencing it as a gift. It is at the same time, truly human, and capable of being fallible. Religiously, insight can supply the triggering event from which the unique presence of God in the world is felt and from which the world is transformed.

Josiah Royce also wrote that the community is the source of the self. It is comprised of a network of signs and interpretation. These interpretations affect the common understanding of the past and the future. Combined together, they become a shared story that binds a community together in common identity and purpose. To bind a community together, there must be loyalty. While loyalty can exist in trivial and petty forms, Royce emphasized loyalty that transforms has a “superhuman” aspect that transcends the individual. Causes worthy of devotion must transcend this human pettiness and as such are “too good to be visibly realized at any one moment.” (Royce PL 284- 285) The impact of the absolute, the “All Knower”

described in the Royce's earlier work is present in this superhuman feature of a cause, providing the context for comparison between causes and also recognizing that from our human perspective, the truth and goodness of all our causes will remain transcendent. We are fallen but, to the extent that our causes participate in superhuman, transcendent truth and goodness, we are given grace, true meaning and true purpose.

How one discovers their cause is as varied and diverse as are individuals but answers fundamental human questions. "For what do I live? Why am I here? For what am I good? Why am I needed?" (Royce PL p57) Once one's cause is revealed, one who is loyal desires to know the truth and goodness of the cause, not merely that it satisfies one personally.

A cause worthy of loyalty becomes an "ideal" and as an ideal, forms the foundation of conscience. But, as we all know, ideals differ from person to person and the call of conscience to one person may differ from the call of conscience to another. But all may be loyal. Recognizing this state, Royce emphasized the importance of respect for the loyalties of others. This respect, which he termed "Loyalty to Loyalty" affirmed the call to all for loyalty and respect for the loyalties of others to the extent that it does not undermine one's own loyalty. Furthermore, a cause is good if it aids the "furtherance of loyalty to my fellows" and it is evil to the extent that it tries to overthrow the loyalties of others. (PL p.119)

In his masterful work, The Problem of Christianity, Royce lays out what he means by an interpretive community using the Apostle Paul and the early church as an example. When individuals come together with a shared interpretation of reality, what binds that interpretation to each member is a shared view of the past and a shared view of the futures. Royce calls this

the community of memory and the community of hope. Interpretations of the past and the future come together in the present by framing and giving direction to each by providing a baseline understanding of the past and presenting actions for a hoped-for future. For Royce, Christianity is such a community.

We all have memories, both personal and communal, that gives meaning and definition to our lives. This ability to enrich and enlarge our understanding of the past is what Royce called the community of memory. “Each of its members accepts as part of his own individual life and self the same past events that each of his fellow-members accepts.” (Royce 248) The community becomes the repository of this memory and the individual within the community provides the ongoing vitality. In the Wesleyan tradition, scripture, tradition, moral practice and communal worship help members come together with a shared experience. Though localized expression of faith, faith also represents an interpretation universal reality. All events are seen from the view (in faith) of the crucified one who was raised and is still with us.

Community is not just about the past. In order to be vibrant and purposeful, a community must also share an ideation of the future. Royce calls this the “community of hope”. Again, Royce takes the Apostle Paul as his model and shows how the community, shares hope to its members while at the same time invites them into the hope that is greater than mere individual immortality.

Perhaps the most enduring and best-known concept developed by Royce is his notion of the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community focuses on the questions of salvation. The religious problem, according to Royce, is how one can be “saved” given that salvation is

dependent on superhuman powers beyond the control of any particular individual. It is a very naturalistic understanding, one that is consistent with the notion of an evolutionary universe, of a world of both regularity and creativity and one fully consistent with the discoveries of science, history and philosophy. The Christian message/insight is that salvation comes through community of truth seekers, moving towards the Kingdom of Heaven. It is an evolutionary process that takes time and any particular religious forms do not contain the full truth. "The true idea of the Church has not been forsaken; its, in a very real sense, still to be found, or rather, to be created. We have to do, in this case, not so much with apostasy as with evolution." (Royce PC 79)

For Royce, the scientific community is also a prime example of a community of interpretation. It is a community of memory, sharing a corporate understanding of the past by sharing the methods of scientific discovery and the results derived from them, communicating the hope of discovery in the future and providing a context for loyal action. For Royce, "in the concrete, then, the universe is a community of interpretation whose life comprises and unifies all the social varieties and all the social communities which, for any reason, we know to be real in the empirical world which our social and our historical sciences study. The history of the universe, the whole order of time, is the history and the order and the expression of this Universal Community." (Royce PC 340) He also states that "the world then contains its own interpreter. Its processes are infinite in their temporal varieties. But their interpreter, the spirit of this universal community – never absorbing varieties or permitting them to blend, compares and, through a real life, interprets them all... I need a counselor; I need my community.

Interpret me. Let me join in this interpretation. Let there be the community. This alone is life. This alone is salvation. This alone is real” (Royce PC 362)

Wesleyan Understanding of Grace

As a Christian protestant in the United Methodist Church, the foundation is grace through faith. In Christ, all are made new and all participate in the new creation. This transformation affects not only Methodists, not only Christians, not only persons of religious faith, not only humans but all creation. From sub-atomic particles to the farthest galaxies, the reality that is Christ makes everything new.

For Wesley, grace exists as a universal option for all. Termed prevenient grace, universal grace which is present everywhere at all times and all places is both universal and cruciform. It comes from God who is the universal creative source, from whom we come, and through whom all are sustained. Through Christ, the universal hope is given and all of creation is changed as a result. The gift of grace can be seen retrospectively as grace proceeding from the very creation of the universe, through all emergent levels to the present moment. This aesthetic, this perception, I term universal cruciform aesthetic, includes Wesley’s notion of prevenient grace.

Most Protestants relate to Wesley’s notion of justification by faith whereby, in one’s own experience they recognize themselves as fallen creatures in need of salvation and renewal. Royce agrees. In this experience, the dual perception of one’s self is both as hopeless sinner and as recipient of saving grace. The offer of salvation stands as a clear invitation to a new beginning. All one need do is get up and faithfully start walking with deliberate acts of loyalty.

All such offers of grace experienced by any individual in whatever form are a sign of God's creative, novel, cruciform action. No person can predict the time or place or form of these insights of grace. But wherever and however it happens, both the individual and the community in whom a person resides will be changed and enriched. Because, as Royce points out, we are all interpreters, we should not expect uniformity in the expressions of justification by grace. They do have something to teach us if we only move from mere tolerance to true appreciation and understanding.

The third form of Grace for Wesley is sanctification. Sanctifying grace is what enables one to live creatively with loyalty with the gift that has been given as justifying grace through Christ. It is a way of living out the new life that has lifted humanity beyond the limitations of our prior evolutionary history. Since this new life is an emergent reality, it is by nature complex and communal. It is a corporate response to a new aesthetic of unlimited love. It not only remembers what has been done in Christ (the community of memory) but what one waits for with anticipation (the community of hope).

Concluding Remarks

The triadic structure of Wesleyan grace and the triadic conceptual framework of community (memory, insight and hope) presented by Josiah Royce provide a practical, dimensional expression of the Christian doctrine of the trinity. Both focus on the immanent movement of God within the temporal world without denying the possibility of divine self-disclosure as proclaimed by the orthodox traditions. For many, orthodoxy has lost its hold on the intellect but, as both Wesley and Royce would affirm, there is still room for grace. This is a

grace as experienced transformation that leads to an on-going commitment and hope for a better world, for the Kingdom of God and the Beloved Community. This community is characterized by loyalty to loyalty, the acceptance and appreciation of difference while seeking understanding of ourselves, of others and the evolving universe. Within this relational process, one can construct numerous interpretations from many different angles. The task is never complete and requires the engagement with others who see differently and perhaps more deeply. But, here we are, just as we are looking forward to the journey ahead.

In closing, I would like to end with a prayer from The Religious Aspect of Philosophy, a prayer that has had a profound impact on me. For me, hope is being known, being accepted and being remembered by God, though my body may no longer be. Royce is not alone in this.

Thou All-Knowing One seest us, what we are, and how we strive. Thou knowest our frame, and rememberest that we are as dust. In thy perfection is our Ideal. That thou art, is enough for our moral comfort. That thou knowest our evil and our good, that gives us our support in our little striving for the good. Not worthless would we be in thy sight; not of the vile, the base, the devilish party in the warfare of this world. Thou that judgest shalt say that we, even in our poor individual lives, are better than naught. Thou shalt know that in our weakness and blindness, in our pain and sorrow, in our little days, in our dark world, ignorant as to the future, confused with many doubts, beset with endless temptations, full of dread, of hesitation, of sloth, we yet sought, such as we were, to be in our own fashion like thee; to know the truth as thou knowest it, to be full of higher life as thou art full, to be above strife as thou art above it, to be of one Spirit as thou art One, to be perfect as thou art perfect. This thou shalt see in us, and this record shall be eternal, like our knowledge. In thee what we vaguely aim to conceive is clear light. In thee the peace that we strive to find is experienced. And when we try to do right, we know that thou seest both our striving and our successes and our failures. And herein we have comfort. We perish, but thou endurest. Ours is not thy eternity. But in thy eternity we would be remembered, not as rebels against the good, but as doers of the good; not as blots on the face of this part of thy infinite reality, but as healthy leaves that flourished for a time on the branches of the eternal tree of life, and that have fallen, though not into forgetfulness. For to thee nothing is forgotten." (RAP 439)

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