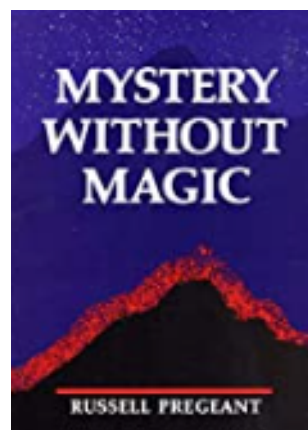


From the proceedings of ORTLine23, the International Open and Relational Theology Online conference, February 10-11, 2023



Mystery without Magic: Finding Faith in a Secular World By Russell Pregeant



Russell Pregeant is a retired professor of religion and an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. He taught at Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts for many years, where he also served as Chaplain. In addition, he was frequently Visiting Professor in New Testament at Andover Newton Theological School. Prior to his teaching career, he was Associate Pastor at Rayne Memorial United Methodist Church in New Orleans. His main fields of interest are New Testament theology and ethics, religion and politics, and process theology. A native of south Louisiana, he enjoys cooking Cajun and Creole dishes such as gumbo, crawfish or shrimp etouffee, jambalaya, and fish courtbouillon. As a boy, he became enamored with jazz by listening on the radio late at night to the New Orleans Jazz Club, and he likes to compare theological thinking, biblical interpretation, preaching, and the process of passing on religious tradition to the improvisation involved in both jazz and cooking. He now resides in Clayton, Georgia, with his wife, who is also an ordained minister the UMC.

**MYSTERY WTIHOUT MAGIC:
A SUMMARY FOR THE ORT CONFERENCE**

Are the values by which we live our lives just subjective prejudices with no grounding beyond our individual or collective wills? In this book I ask this question against the background of a secular consciousness that not only challenges the supernaturalism that has traditionally grounded values but undermines a purely humanistic assertion of them. If we

can't believe that the universe itself in some way sponsors those values, we are left to live life without an assurance that love, peace, and justice have any more validity than hatred, violence, and exploitation of others.

Despite the challenge it poses, however, this secular consciousness forces the recognition that I cannot find adequate warrant to believe in the supernaturalist claims of traditional faith. But neither can I accept the prospect of living life without some sense that the values that give life meaning have no more validity than those of Hitler, Stalin, or Vladimir Putin.

My way out of this dilemma is to ask what religious language actually asks us to believe. And I find that, wholly apart from its supernatural references, it points us toward an objective foundation of values by eliciting intuitions based solely on common human experience. I therefore explore some examples of how religious language does this, and I find similar examples in secular literature. My point is that ordinary experience points us to a depth dimension of life that suggests a cosmic grounding of the core values traditional religion promotes. These intuitions are that life has objective meaning that is found in a risky journey of self-transcendence and that our lives are supported on this journey by a power we can identify as grace.

Of course, intuitions prove nothing by themselves. But the question is whether we explain these value-intuitions away in mechanistic terms or take them to be the key to the actual nature of the universe in which we live. Because I choose the latter, my next step is to construct a worldview that takes account of these intuitions and can stand the test of viability within a secular framework. And I find that the process-relational thought of Whitehead and Hartshorne provides a conceptual model that offers a credible notion of God that avoids problems entailed in traditional theism and pantheism. It requires no belief in an unseen entity outside the universe, because it understands God as the self of the universe, and it requires no belief in supernatural occurrences, because it understands God's action as persuasive rather than coercive.

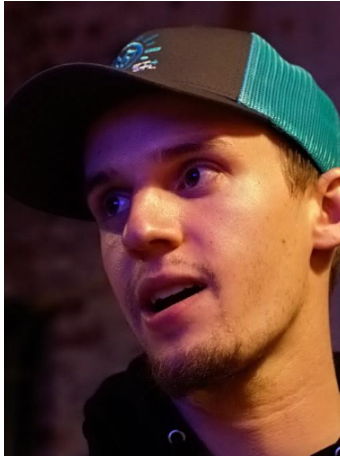
From this perspective, all things are in process and all things are related. This means that freedom and becoming are essential to human life and that fulfillment comes from understanding one's self as part of the cosmic whole. It also grounds an ethic of the common good in which we are called to enhance the freedom and self-fulfillment of others, and it underscores the importance of right action with the claim that all values pursued in this world are retained in the eternal life of God.

This point is essential. A vision of reality that promotes the common good faces enormous challenges in a world filled with violence and injustice. It is thus important to believe that our decisions matter, and matter eternally, as we act on behalf of economic justice, radical inclusiveness, and the integrity of creation, in recognition of our firm belief that all creatures and indeed all that exists, are ultimately one in the eyes of a loving God.

Josh Patterson

Host of (Re)thinking Faith) podcast

[Rethinking Faith on Apple Podcasts](#)



A Response to: *Mystery Without Magic: Finding Faith in a Secular World* By: Russel Pregeant

In his book, '*Mystery Without Magic: Finding Faith in a Secular World*', Russel Pregeant presents a compelling way to be a person of faith within our ever changing world and expanding universe by offering us a Process-Relational and Panentheistic understanding of said universe and of God.

For the purposes of this short essay, I want to specifically focus on ideas introduced in chapter 10 titled, "Becoming Who You Are: Reidentifying the Self". I personally was drawn to this chapter because it exemplifies a core conviction of mine and a key idea within Process thought; namely, the deep interconnection and interrelatedness of all things. The society I find myself living in is one shaped deeply by hyper individualism. Process thought challenges the notions of hyper individualism by recognizing that all entities are ultimately part of a single, organic whole. This means that each entity can only find its authentic fulfillment by functioning as a part of the organic whole.

Pregeant submits that "For human beings, this means that, as 'God is love,' so we ourselves are truly fulfilled only to the extent that we love—that is, to the extent that we live our lives and do our deeds on behalf of the whole universe itself, or God."

Now it is both necessary and imperative that as human beings, we each develop a healthy understanding of the self. It is not inherently wrong to give attention to our health, comfort and pleasure. Its ok to develop our minds and take care of our bodies. Where we go wrong however, and where Pregeant offers us an alternative, is when we fail to recognize that the

self does not exist in a vacuum. The African Philosophy of Ubuntu recognizes correctly that, 'I am because we are.', or as Pregeant puts it, "We are who we are only in relation to realities outside ourselves."

In other words, I can only be fully known and defined from within my relationships. I can only be fully known from within the larger organic whole. Once we recognize this, we must recognize that this is not only true of ourselves, but it is also true of all actual entities. In the same way that I do not exist in a vacuum, my partner Noelle also does not exist in a vacuum.

Outside of our personal relationships, we also exist within relationship to our natural environment. All of the universe as we know it exists as a deep and beautiful interconnected web of relationships. My own journey of becoming is a part of the larger and collective journey of becoming.

Now unfortunately for us, we are not able to see this interconnected web of relationships in the same way that God can. We can however, recognize the relationships and order our lives in such a way that takes seriously the unity of all things. To take this concept out of the abstract and into the more pragmatic, we can seek out ways of self-improvement and spiritual growth that take these ideas seriously.

Within the context that I come from, namely Christianity, the idea of self-sacrifice is prominent. Self-sacrifice within a healthy context is a good and noble thing, however it can be used in more nefarious ways. For example, the first Church I first worked at used the language of self-sacrifice to, manipulate me into working 6 days a week and to ring me dry of all my creativity all to the neglect of my family and personal life.

The total neglect of the self is exactly what we are NOT supposed to do because the neglect of the self is also the neglect of the larger whole. Pregeant puts it this way, "What is called for is not the literal destruction of the self but rather the reidentification of the self—the abandonment of one model of the human person for another. If all creatures are parts of a larger whole, then the individual self-fulfillment of any of these parts is also in some sense my self-fulfillment."

The target we are aiming at can be named as mutuality. When I recognize that I am a part of the larger whole, and so are you, my self-fulfillment becomes your self-fulfillment and vice

versa. This mutuality leads to a genuine solidarity amongst all beings. It recognizes that the pursuit for freedom and liberation of the other is also the pursuit of freedom and liberation for the self.

To seek genuine mutuality, therefore, is not to deny the self completely, but rather to seek out the development of the self in relation to all other selves and the larger, interrelated whole. This creates a space where we can learn to give up our own apparent desires to help meet the needs of the other.

Pregeant does point out that there will be times when the legitimate needs of the self comes into conflict with the legitimate needs of the other. It is precisely at this intersection that he says, "And at this point one has to reckon with the possibility that a genuine interest in the good of all, a genuine commitment to mutuality, demands a significant sacrifice."

When such moments arise however, if we have internalized and embodied this vision of the whole, whatever sacrifice one is called to make becomes an opportunity to contribute to the larger whole. A strange paradox arises and we realized that we are fulfilled in the act of rejecting a hyper-individualistic understanding of self-fulfillment. We are free to seek the good and the enjoyment and the freedom of the other because we know their self-worth and my self-worth are deeply connected and abide within and contribute to the same totality that I do.

To speak pastorally for a moment, this recognition of the radical interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all things has the power and ability to make the world a better place, or to use the words of Jesus, to usher in the Kingdom of God.

It is a deep conviction of mine that what we refer to as "sin" arises out of the myth of separation. When I believe that I am separate from creation, it gives me permission to rape and pillage the earth. When I believe I am separate from the other, it gives me permission to dehumanize, to be racist, to kill. When I believe I am separate from God, I deny the core of who I am. When I believe the myth of separation, I am going against the very stream and flow of the Universe.

The recognition and embodiment of this deep interconnectedness has the power to change the world... but perhaps first we might want to start with ourselves, and who knows maybe by starting with ourselves, the larger whole will benefit as well.

Ulrick Refsager Dam



Theological asylum seeker. Currently Open and Relational theology extends a warm welcome. Writing masters thesis on Open and Relational Ecclesiology Pulling myself together to dive into my next bookproject: "Stillborn Hells"

A Response to: *Mystery Without Magic: Finding Faith in a Secular World* By: Russel Pregeant

I have a coworker in a consulting company, where I work besides my role as a pastor. We help companies become more relational in leadership as well as in their business models.

So this coworker was a raving atheist, until one day where he decided to search for the some kind of structure and language, which could support his vision of helping companies become better and more relational.

He found that christianitys Golden Rule and the call to love your neighbour, as well as the image of an empathizing God, was clearly the most apt for building better leaders and better companies.

And in that he converted himself, he became a missionary in his own life. From being a raving atheist, to a devout christian. Today he has taken a bachelors degree in theology and as has a more burning faith than many other I meet.

So why this story?

My coworker's story is just one of many examples of the current search for meaning and value in our society. People are searching for something that makes sense in their lives, but the traditional church has struggled to meet these needs.

Instead of offering a connection to a caring, empathizing, and guiding God, pastors and missionaries often present a supernatural, magic-like deity who is distant and uninvolved in our daily lives.

I think Russel encapsulates this movement in our society. Never has there been a greater search for meaning and value that makes sense in our lives!

But never has the church been so inept to care for those needs.

Pastors and missionaries wants you to feel the magic, otherworldly power of God. But all I really need is something to make sense of this world I live in. A mystery to gaze into.

Devout christians wants to pray your stress and depression away. But I really need is a God who cares, empathizes and guides me.

Russel exactly addresses this need to find language, that let's us gaze into the mystery, and lets us be affected by the mysterious nature of the divine, without it being a magic trick.

I especially liked Russels way of contrasting traditional theism and the eastern pantheism. I really see that hits the nail on the head.

Seekers today are often met by a supernaturalist traditional theism, where God controls completely everything and often becomes the evil stepdad, that wants us to learn the hard way. Or they meet the pantheistic eastern traditions, where God isn't really God at all, and where all floating in a big divine soupbowl.

In the midst of those two, Russel presents us with a panentheistic God, that seeks true relationships with creation through its immanent character of Love, that flows through all of creation.

So what I wanted to challenge you on is: Can panentheism provide a fully meaningful and satisfying framework for religious and spiritual practice, or does it risk reducing the divine to simply being another force in the natural world? And maybe address what concerns you have about the practical implications of these ideas for religious and spiritual communities?

Tori E. Owens, MA, LPC, NCC
Therapist | Mediator | Parent Coordinator



A Response to: Mystery Without Magic: Finding Faith in a Secular World By: Russel Pregeant

I remember many a summer Saturday evening in Ohio.

My two brothers and I would have spent the day outside with Mom and Dad – cutting grass, raking clippings, pulling weeds, planting flowers – never because we wanted to, rather, because it was required. It was well and truly awful.

No matter the chores, after dinner, we would pile in the big, yellow station wagon, Big Bird, and head to the nearest Dairy Queen. My two brothers and I would be standing up, leaning forward against the back of that long front seat. All the windows were down with the wind rushing in and carrying the scent of fresh-cut grass.

Then it would begin.

“Right. Left. Or straight.” My dad’s low, rumbling voice.

We took turns answering between licks of ice cream. The goal was to get us lost, to stump Mom and Dad. To end up in the farthest reaches of the county on some open country road or tucked next to a quiet stream. Lost, but not lost. This was an adventure. Craning necks to see what was just beyond the next turn. Discovering a magnificent old barn, a gorgeous sunset, a hawk surveying the field from a telephone pole, a farmer with a roadside vegetable stand.

All of us in this together, captivated by the mystery of the journey.

I was reminded of these memories while reading Russell Pregeant’s *Mystery Without Magic: Finding Faith in a Secular World*, an invitation to a journey of mystery with guidance on how to live it out. In keeping with Pregeant’s ideas of stepping into risk, living life as a venture in the service of the whole, and taking up the challenge to be agents of liberation, I offer up resonances, co-created and inspired reflections and imaginative peepholes of light cracked open by the mysterious mix of Russell’s writings, God, myself, and all of us, today, as we gather in this one place on the journey.

Resonance #1: I can put into words, now, what I felt and why, as I was drawn, time and again, to Indigo Girls concerts and other safe spaces throughout the early 2000s before coming out to family and friends. I walked around most of the time in fear at being called out, shamed, and told, once more, I was going to hell. Being with authentic others, it was something I felt nowhere else, but should have felt in the church - a place of belonging, authenticity, acceptance, a self-among-selves, love, risk. In a most secular time and place, I felt a space of sacredness opening up, enveloping me in love and teaching me to be more myself so that I could carry that authenticity out into the world and to others.

Resonance #2: Working with trauma survivors, and, now, post-pandemic who of us is not, PTSD is the full-person equivalent of self-protection on steroids. First meeting clients who struggle to sit still, eyes darting about the room, nearly jumping out of their skin. Encouraging the slow grounding that allows for their flight-fight-freeze-fawn responses to calm, to break out of a pattern of self-protection that has concretized over time – a brutal cage of limitedness and seeming protection from others, God, and themselves. Here there is no openness, no imagination, no creativity. All of this is risk of the unknown and the unknown is only ever frightening.

Resonance #3: This leads me into the nature of the therapeutic relationship. Is it any wonder I define myself as an *anam cara*, a soul friend, a co-traveler on the journey with clients? Dr.

Pregeant has helped me more clearly articulate what is being done: the opening up of a sacred space within the secular, not a dichotomy but a new thing – or an original thing, maybe - offering a seeking soul the space to take a risk, to find another way, to try on becoming, and then take it out in the world ever so slowly.

Resonance #4: It's a ripple effect. Trauma ripples out in concentric circles, like a pebble thrown into the pond, vibrations impacting and reordering, and going and going and going. Maybe this is the impact of horrific traumas – terrible abuses being done one to another in some skewed and perverted form of connection – the ripple effect across the present moment, the ripple effect across time and space, the ripple effect inward and upward, quite truly changing every created being in its path. Epigenetics in real time.

Resonance #5: I end with a reflection on the parts of the whole, each of us as agents of liberation, working toward the fulfillment of the world. The Body of Christ. The description I heard so many times in church as a way of describing the parts of the whole yet never filtered through this sieve of understanding. Not only are we all parts of a whole, maybe we also see for others, walk for others, hold up others, become the parts for others until another can risk seeing they, too, are a part of the whole and always have been. We lure and love, too, just like God, to remind others of their worth, their authentic selves, and their rightful place in the whole.

Thank you, Russell.