

## NOTE

### DOES PROCESS THEOLOGY REST ON A MISTAKE?

The dynamics of proposing and assuming theological frameworks, or of questioning and rejecting them, are so labyrinthine that one can never hope to bring the entire transaction to light. The best we can try to do is to submit it to scrutiny, in the hope of becoming more conscious ourselves of the reasons for our preferences. When the issues are neatly philosophical, such scrutiny is difficult enough, as most of us find ourselves too easily moved by shorthand references to philosophical schools or movements. A chord (or discord) is struck with our own intellectual formation, firmly channeling the subsequent discussion for better or worse. When the issues are properly theological, however, an added complication renders disentanglement nearly impossible; for we must attempt to discern the mix of religious and philosophical motives which should decide the outcome, and many of us divide regarding the proper weights to be assigned, say, to a "faithful rendering of one's tradition" over against a "conceptualization adequate to one's time."

I have become convinced, however, that we do far better discriminating such issues in practice than we do in a more "principled" discussion. Hence faculty find themselves more in operative agreement in structuring a course introducing theology than in discussing questions of method. (This is not to say they agree in practice; it is only to remark that the transaction between faithful rendition and critical inquiry displays itself in such a course to be part of the very activity of doing theology, so that the penchant towards the simplistic and ideological in each of us is severely tempered.) So this essay attempts to identify those places in the recent discussions involving "process theology" where we might exercise the powers of discernment which we do in fact employ in theological discussions more generally. In that sense, of course, it is discourse in method. That is, it does not answer the question posed but seeks to highlight the joints of the discussion in a way designed to help readers answer it to their satisfaction. Not that method is a mere matter of choice; rather that we are all surer in practice than when we attempt to articulate our criteria.

The provocative title is deliberate; for I believe that the general outlines of the discussion have already been sketched, and admirably so, yet the points of divergence have not always been marked so clearly. So relying on these outlines, I intend to mark those points clearly enough to provoke the kind of inquiry which ought now to ensue. A recent article by Barry Whitney resumes the immutability discussion quite fairly, although his references to William Hill, O.P., and to W. Norris Clarke, S.J., need to be

amplified by a subsequent article and monograph, respectively, which have markedly advanced the discussion.<sup>1</sup> Each of these authors displays a command of traditional categories, theological and philosophical, as well as a scrupulous ear for dialogue. The tenor of their appreciation and critique of process thought regarding divinity shows how this debate can touch issues utterly central to both disciplines. While the majorly theological concern of Hill fills out the primarily philosophical orientation of Clarke, it is precisely at the intersection of these disciplines that the issues are joined—another sign of the force of the process critique, even if a certain theory about the relations between the disciplines renders it peculiarly vulnerable on second look.

The extensive references in Whitney's work, plus the mention of Hill's and Clarke's later contributions, spare me the need to resume the contents of the discussion, and allow me to concentrate on its form. I shall delineate four situations which, if true, would display misunderstandings endemic to the enterprise we know as process theology. If I am correct in my characterization, and if all the conditions are in fact realized, the answer to the question would be an unequivocal "yes"; if my characterization can be challenged, or if some of the situations remain unclarified, the response may waver from "probably so" to "probably not"; and if the characterizations can be discredited or the situations shown not to obtain, the verdict would veer more definitely towards "no"—barring more insightful critiques to come. I am taking such an approach, be it noted, not to discredit the venture known as process theology but in an effort to disengage argument from rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it should be noted that even a firm affirmative answer could not discredit the enterprise, for in philosophical theology significant mistakes may indeed advance the discussion—significantly.

Process theology would be based on a mistake if (1) its founding polemic against "classical theism" were discovered to be quite wide of the mark; (2) its claims to offer a superior philosophical synthesis for Christian faith were seriously questioned; (3) its capacity for illuminating central elements of the Christian tradition were shown to be deficient; (4) it were found to embody a conception of theological inquiry which, when made explicit, would diverge considerably from that accepted by

<sup>1</sup> Barry Whitney, "Divine Immutability in Process Philosophy and Contemporary Thomism," *Horizons* 7 (1980) 49–68. The further items are: William Hill, O.P., "Two Gods of Love: Aquinas and Whitehead," *Listening* 14 (1976) 249–64—in an issue of this DePaul University periodical devoted to "Process Thought in Theology and Ecumenism"; and W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The Philosophical Approach to God* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest Univ., 1979).

<sup>2</sup> The exasperation which Cathleen M. Going expresses in her review of Lewis S. Ford's *The Lure of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) must surely find an echo in every trained philosopher's response to much of this literature; see *Horizons* 7 (1980) 118.

practicing theologians, or at least divide them clearly into separate camps. Of these conditions, the first is more historical, the second philosophical, and the third theological—although they overlap in practice. The fourth we might call “internal”: it involves unraveling the presuppositions implicit in much of the discussion, notably by making moves *not* taken into regions where dialogue has quite inexplicably failed to join the issues. In exploring each condition, I shall indicate the respects in which current discussion has clarified the situation, as well as note those complications which continue to confuse the issue.

#### CLASSICAL THEISM

The first thesis displays both sides with dismaying clarity. Responses to Hartshorne’s caricature of classical theism have shown how a modicum of sensitivity to the earlier and later medieval contexts could have avoided his drawing the conclusions he did from Aquinas’ insistence that God was not *really* related to God’s world.<sup>3</sup> Norris Clarke’s explication of the accepted distinction between “real” and “intentional” being offers a positive assist in unraveling this misunderstanding.<sup>4</sup> Yet Hartshorne had struck a chord, and the caricature, like a good cartoon, nosed out an imbedded theological misconception. That the “greats” might be exempted from his charge did not make it less accurate as an indictment of a widespread theological attitude. If his “Hellenization” thesis was to meet the fate of most such generic theses, yet other elements had nonetheless conspired to concoct a more or less official notion of God which bore little relation to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures it was supposed to embody. One suspects these elements to be more cultural than conceptual, yet powerful they have been, leading directly to Blake’s “old Nobodaddy” and to Nietzsche’s demand that such a god must die if humanity is to live.<sup>5</sup> So Hartshorne’s historical misidentification—the first “mistake,” if you will—only serves to sharpen our lookout for the real culprits: the first indication how significant mistakes can advance an issue dialectically.

#### A SUPERIOR PHILOSOPHICAL SYNTHESIS

This claim is perhaps the most vexatious, especially since it is difficult to disentangle from the third. (In fact, a particular conception of theology

<sup>3</sup> The careful critical article of Harold Westphal, “Temporality and Finitude in Hartshorne’s Theism,” *Review of Metaphysics* 19 (1966) 550–64, proved as helpful to me in composing the fifth chapter of *Aquinas God and Action* (Notre Dame, Ind Univ of Notre Dame, 1980) as it did avowedly to Norris Clarke

<sup>4</sup> For the distinction between “real” and “intentional” as sometimes implicit but always operative in the medieval context, see Clarke (n 1 above)

<sup>5</sup> This is indeed the force of Langdon Gilkey’s review of Schubert Ogden’s *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York Harper & Row, 1966) in *Interpretation* 21 (1967) 447–59

surfaces here, as I shall note in discussing thesis four.) For it is a surveyable fact that philosophers have simply not been as impressed with Whitehead's revisionary claims as they were supposed to be. Historically, his polemic against a "substance ontology" has been shown to fall well this side of Aristotle or Aquinas; and most have found his alternative proposals to be quite baffling.<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps unfortunate that his earlier work in *Principia* seemed to carry greater philosophical consequences than his constructive philosophy, and that those consequences generally dampened enthusiasm for metaphysical proposals; yet the fact remains that a more recent renewal of metaphysical concerns has not found its way to him either. On purely philosophical grounds, therefore, any claim for the superiority of a Whiteheadian explanatory scheme will have to overcome purely philosophical scepticism. Perhaps this is the reason why theologians have tended to be more enthusiastic here than those expressly trained in philosophy.

Norris Clarke's studies display more patience with unraveling Whiteheadian categories than would most philosophers, and in his irenic way he raises one critical question after another to those who presume to have found a superior conceptualization of Christian faith or of divinity in a Whiteheadian philosophical scheme. Yet it is Hill who touches, I believe, the most serious philosophical deficiency in that scheme for theological discourse. Despite its constant reference to "relatedness," the notion of an "agent" remains underdeveloped in process thought: "the God of process theology in loving the world is not a person at all but only a principle."<sup>7</sup>

The best way to bring this point into relief is to ask which primary analogue one returns to in one's explication of divine activity. From the time of Augustine through the medievals, and despite their fascination with Aristotle, the prime analogate has been the self, the human person. The history of the people of God from Abraham forward has ever taken the narrative form of a response to a personal call. When God chose to be revealed perspicuously, it was in the person of Jesus. On a more reflective note, when theologians proceeded to elaborate the consequences of this revelation in calling on the conceptual resources available to them to delineate the inner life of God, they fleshed out the maverick category of relation with analogical reference to "persons." And when Augustine, followed by Aquinas, offered a more developed treatment of the triune God, it was with reference to the intentional capacities of human persons

<sup>6</sup> My essay on "A Performative View of Substance" will appear in Mary L. O'Hara, ed., *Substances and Things: Aristotle's Physical Substance in Recent Essays* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1982), yet the foundational work has been done by Wilfrid Sellars (Notre Dame Univ. of Notre Dame, 1977)

<sup>7</sup> Hill, *Two Gods* 262-63

to relate to their world through understanding and the love which follows upon it.

If one considers the complementary doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity, and notes how the history of their development acted to refine the notion of person in Christianity East and West, one wonders what might be gained by seeking illumination in a philosophical mode which takes its principal analogies from natural process, however sympathetically described, and resolves to endemically abstract notions like creativity, concretion, and even process, rather than return us to the individual agent as the prime analogate.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, these notions are proposed as explanatory, and so may justly remain themselves abstract, but the tortuous prose required to bring them into a position whence they can do their explanatory work leaves all but the most indefatigable believers weary—especially, I might note, those who have attained a fair mastery of metaphysical exercises.

Aquinas comes to mind at this point, as one also enamored of a philosophical system. A selective reading of his corpus might lead one to believe that he found Aristotle's analysis of change and causality more useful than the intentional schemes of Augustine. At times, no doubt, he did, and the way in which he responded to the query whether God was "really related" to the world represents one of these. Yet, however much he used such schemes for illuminating specific issues, he never *resolved* a discussion in their terms. His treatise on grace, for example, shows in its critical junctures how acutely he was aware that the "supernatural order" was through and through one of interpersonal exchange: divine initiative linked to human response. Nor was the so-called "natural order" any less gratuitous, even if its transactions tended to be impersonal—so much so that the doctrine of creation has been called the hidden element in Thomas' philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

If the founding polemics, then, of Whiteheadian metaphysics against a "substance ontology" have been shown to be wide of their mark by more recent analyses of classical philosophical positions, and if process theologians' predilection for Whiteheadian explanatory categories has lured them away from developing the notion of person so central to Christian theology, wherein lies the appeal? There can, no doubt, be several answers to such a question, and I shall return to it at the end. I raise it at this point by way of transition to the third point: process theology's capacity to illuminate central elements of the Christian tradition. Whitehead's program as announced is appealing: to offer an explanatory scheme for

<sup>8</sup> Hence Clarke: "It should be remembered, too, that creativity for Whitehead is not an actuality in and for itself, but only a generalized abstract description of what is a matter of fact instantiated in every actual occasion in the universe" (*Philosophical Approach* 72).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Joseph Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (New York: Pantheon, 1957) 48.

nature which includes elements of intentionality; and his language is suitably evocative. Indeed, it was this claim to have found a better way to render God's interaction with creatures, a specifically intentional exchange, which made it such an initially promising contender on the theological scene.

Yet its appeal was bound to be strongest, I suspect, with those who had either lost or deliberately renounced any other resources for relating God with the world; for those, that is, for whom the teachings of Incarnation and Trinity had become little more than vestigial myths. It was only at the end of a careful critique of some philosophical confusions in process theology that I came to suspect why otherwise well-instructed individuals might be tempted to stumble into such blunders both of historical interpretation and of philosophical analysis.<sup>10</sup> For a classical (nineteenth-century) liberal theologian who can no longer relate God intentionally to us through the Word made flesh in Jesus, or rely on the fully intentional inner life of a triune God, a new and promising conceptuality could be very tempting; for a logical consequence of the resulting "monotheism" is bound to be a remote and solitary divinity. From such a vantage point, classical treatments of divine transcendence, shorn of their intentional side as developed in the doctrines of Incarnation and of Trinity, could appear to be in need of radical revision. But in retrospect it might appear that so drastic a revision was required only because the earlier surgery had been so radical.<sup>11</sup> My suspicion is handily corroborated by the contention of leading proponents of this school that Christianity is indistinguishable from "monotheism." Clearly, for such a one, the doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity may be part of the inherited picture but are in principle replaceable by an appropriate explanatory scheme. Such is the role claimed for process theology by its principal advocates, and these may well be the reasons why it is given so grand a task.

#### ILLUMINATING THE TRADITION

Both Hartshorne and Ogden have consistently represented their theological task as one which is more faithful to the biblical view than classical theologians proved able to be, notably in portraying "God as related to the world, responsive to the appeal of prayer, and involved in human history, not by coercion but by persuasion."<sup>12</sup> Sceptics have

<sup>10</sup> Cf. chap. 5 in my *Aquinas* (n. 3 above).

<sup>11</sup> If this suspicion be correct, it should lead us to submit to careful scrutiny ventures that describe themselves as "process Christologies." It also makes suspect ritual deferences to "process theology" as they currently appear in American theological writing: e.g., if Leo O'Donovan's careful analysis of Jungel's development of the interpersonal relations appropriate to the Christian God renders the process maneuver otiose, why ask him to take it into consideration?

<sup>12</sup> John H. Wright, "Method of Process Theology: An Evaluation," *Communio* 6 (1979) 38.

continued to query whether the one they present can also claim to be divine. One test case—for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, at least—is creation.

Whoever confesses to “believe in one God, creator of heaven and earth,” is not usually making a philosophical statement but a religious affirmation. In so confessing our faith, we are reminding ourselves and one another that all this is gift, and indeed the gift of one “acting out of superabundant goodness with the unselfish purpose simply to share.”<sup>13</sup> This doctrine, Diogenes Allen has shown, anchors our conception of God and of ourselves in relation to God in an ontological context of free gift.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it is this doctrine—not something so irreducibly vague as “monotheism”—which links Christians with Jews at their very roots. (With Islam as well, but the linkage is less direct, so one cannot properly speak of a *doctrinal* connection.) Yet on this very confession process thought wavers, and that for systemic reasons.

The reasons are philosophical and have to do with Whitehead’s insistence that creativity, or creative process, reigns supreme. The role reserved to God can be described as “giving to all actual events the initial aims that are highest and best possible in their concrete circumstances.”<sup>15</sup> And in doing so “His aim for it is depth of satisfaction as an intermediate step towards the fulfilment of his own being.”<sup>16</sup> Certainly such a one cannot be described as the “beginning and end of all things, and of reasoning creatures especially,” except in a fashion so roundabout as to make one wonder why the circumlocution.<sup>17</sup> Interaction, then, is purchased at the price of an initiating, gratuitous actor, and the price is paid in the name of philosophical consistency.

Recent theological reflection carried out in exchange with Jewish thinkers helps one to see how profoundly the Christian teaching on grace and divine initiative is anchored in a common confession of God’s creating initiative. If there be two “orders,” the second is already adumbrated in the first: nature itself is gift—“Master of the universe, blessed be He!” The narratives of the Scriptures manage to offer poignant examples of divine-human interaction without diluting that initial affirmation. If process theologians are unable to do so, is it that they have allowed themselves to be more constrained by systemic demands than by fidelity to the central assertion of the Scriptures shared by Jews and Christians

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 52.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Diogenes Allen, *Finding Our Father* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1974), notably the chapters on human love and on perfect love.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, “Method” 48.

<sup>16</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Humanities, 1929) 161.

<sup>17</sup> The quotation is Aquinas’ shorthand device for introducing the God in whom Christians believe and for which he will offer a theological elucidation (*Summa theologiae* 1, q. 2, Intro.).

alike? This question, which arises throughout, will be met directly in considering the fourth and last hurdle.

With regard to the central doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, one should be able to formulate the question from observations already made. To what end offer a conceptuality where the notion of agent is underdeveloped, in an effort to shed new light on doctrines so instrumental in refining our very notion of person? More trenchantly still, if these refined notions of intentionality are linked with closer attention to narrative, as in Hans Frei's work, one need not fear to assert how, in Jesus, God shares our life and especially our human suffering as no other can.<sup>18</sup> Norris Clarke has shown how this line of reflection can be developed, as have Heribert Muhlen and Jean Galot in more explicitly theological terms.<sup>19</sup> What Diogenes Allen has accomplished with the doctrine of creation, these have developed with the Incarnation, and Eberhard Jungel with the Trinity.<sup>20</sup> By exploiting the claims in these doctrines to demand an eminently personal characterization of divinity, these authors have at once shown how powerfully the doctrines themselves elucidate the exchange between God and created persons, and done so precisely by the relational character of person. In the wake of these developments, it is hard to know what meaning one might attribute to the recommendation that one should develop the doctrine of the Trinity along process lines.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, one cannot but query, as does Norris Clarke, where process theology lands one on the issue of immortality and resurrection.<sup>22</sup> Here again, it is not a question of the need to revise earlier explanatory schemes, but of the tendency to presume that one is now in possession of one so adequate as to allow it to replace the underlying doctrinal assertions as well. It is indeed that very tendency—to accept consistency with Whiteheadian philosophy as the principal criterion—which leads us to the fourth and final test.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ The Hermeneutical Bases for Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1975), and John H Wright, "Divine Knowledge and Human Freedom," *TS* 38 (1977) 450-77

<sup>19</sup> Clarke offers the references to Heribert Muhlen, *Die Veranderlichkeit Gottes als Horizont einer zukunftigen Christologie* (Munster Aschendorff, 1969), and Jean Galot, "La realite de la souffrance de Dieu," *NRT* 101 (1979) 224-44

<sup>20</sup> For a splendid exposition of Jungel's thought, see Leo J O'Donovan, S J, "The Mystery of God as a History of Love Eberhard Jungel's Doctrine of God," *TS* 42 (1981) 251-71

<sup>21</sup> I have in mind the suggestion of David Tracy in *The Analogical Imagination* (New York Crossroad, 1981) "that a distinctively Christian systematic theological language would, in fact, prove to be trinitarian, yet a trinitarian language that would follow from the central metaphor 'God is Love' Hence [sic] a trinitarian understanding of God would employ process-language" (443, n 30)

<sup>22</sup> Clarke puts it nicely "For like creation, this is a non-negotiable belief of all streams of Christianity that still remain in contact with their roots" (*Philosophical Approach* 103) I believe his assertion would find general agreement among the Christian faithful

## CONCEPTION OF THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

I have already noted the remarkable affinities, in tenor and in purpose, with what we now think of as “classical” liberal theology. In fact, as my suspicious hypothesis put it: if process theology were in direct lineage with this movement, its strategies become readily comprehensible. All that remains is to identify a yet more decisive characteristic they share in common, to tease out the conception of theological inquiry endemic to process thought. For what, after all, led this loosely organized school to relinquish the doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity? A desire, certainly, to bring theological (and eventually religious) assertion within the scope of what could be intelligible to one’s intellectual contemporaries. Usually not linked with a specific philosophical system so much as with a temper and mood of inquiry, liberal theology has ever been inclined to seek first intelligibility in presenting the kingdom.

Our more acutely anthropological perspective may find so stark a use of “intelligibility” quite naive, and certainly some of the accommodations made in the name of modernity now seem to us rather quaint; but the strategy was clear. Yet I think one can just as clearly ask how *theological* it was; for one of the demands of an “adequate theological conceptuality” has always been to illuminate and recover the tradition—and where these are many, to try to make sense of the plurality.<sup>23</sup> When the manner of resolution neglects this dialectical exercise, however, in favor of the reigning “conceptuality,” then one is hard pressed to call the resulting developments theology in a more than archeological sense.

Such a strategy, moreover, often fosters ironic consequences, as appeal to a philosophical idiom in the name of universal intelligibility can often bring its own degree of insularity. Such proved to be the case with the Thomistic project, certainly, and we have noted similar results with process theology’s adherence to Whitehead. While it was conceived in a far less parochial climate than Thomism, the fact remains that one must overcome one’s philosophical difficulties with Whitehead to engage in fruitful conversation. A thoughtful and temperate critique of the venture in these very terms has recently appeared in Robert Neville’s *Creativity and God*, subtitled *A Challenge to Process Theology*. Neville examines its principal proponents to find them wanting in philosophical cogency. Yet even his critique fails to question the theological pertinency of the basic strategy, for it is one with which he is in sympathy.<sup>24</sup> My approach

<sup>23</sup> The phrase is Ogden’s, in *Reality of God* passim

<sup>24</sup> New York: Seabury, 1980. Neville’s easy adoption of David Tracy’s preferred term of “public” for theological inquiry begs many questions regarding the intrinsically historical and communal character of theological inquiry. By suggesting this to have been the greatest contribution of process theology (142–46), he aligns himself with its claims more than with its achievements. It is not clear at all, however, that the university has proven to be the most favorable locus for theological inquiry, and Tracy’s own modification of “public” to include the classics of distinct traditions makes this point with a certain poignancy, for it is

has been rather to concentrate on the claims for theological superiority made on behalf of the enterprise called "process theology"; for a more internal critique I can best refer the reader to Neville's work.

Do the four queries we have made offer a fair way of testing current efforts to extend theological inquiry which accept the label of process theology? One can only judge that by testing individual efforts against them to see whether any critical purchase results. To my mind, evidence on the first two points is already in and decisive: the founding polemic against classical theism exploded a caricature, and claims for a superior philosophical synthesis have floundered on philosophical grounds. Evidence against the third claim—capacity for illuminating the tradition—is mounting and increasingly negative. The fourth remains more controversial—theological method—yet the tendency of process theology to prefer explanation to careful historical and interpretative analysis either renders it suspect as theology or (if you prefer) places it squarely in a theological school which has not fared so well in more recent times. All of which leads one to ask why erstwhile theologians should show any interest.

Two reasons might be given after all—the first innocuous and the second frightening. One of a more philosophical temper might well ask: What is wrong with exploring such a scheme with an eye to theological understanding? To such a one the only answer would be: nothing, of course. Philosophers explore all sorts of things, and now and again even turn something up. So if exploration is your game, why not Whitehead? Or Quine? Or whomever. Theologians, however, are normally of a bit more practical cut, asking why rather than why not.

The other reason I hesitate to mention, but recent experience demands that I do so. Some may be driven to this new and promising field of inquiry because they have successfully negotiated an educational system, secondary, collegiate, and university, which leaves them singularly unequipped, both linguistically and conceptually, to deal with theological traditions. For them, classical theism is no caricature, for they have never encountered the original. Fortified with the GRE illusion that we must be more intelligent than whoever went before us, why not take the latest? If this observation sounds cranky, look to the ease with which slogans and trendy judgments dominate current theological writing, and ask what sort of educational standard that reflects. I have long treasured a colleague's warning that we would be reprehensible as teachers were we to

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not clear that the university will be fertile ground for future classics, any more than Tracy can offer his recent treatment as a more refined sense of "public." See my critical remarks in the Tracy symposium in *Horizons* 8 (1981) 319–23.

hand on to our students less than was passed on to us. Cultural shifts may sometimes make us reprehensible in spite of ourselves, but one wonders whether we may have given over to them too easily. Mercifully, it just may be "student demand" which recalls us to our vocations as teachers of theology, and should that occur I have no doubt that in the process our students will wonder why all the fuss about process—and alarums like this one will have been rendered otiose.

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