

## NOTE

### POSTLIBERAL PROCESS THEOLOGY: A REJOINDER TO BURRELL

In a recent Note<sup>1</sup> to this journal, David Burrell poses the question, "Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?" in an effort, as he says, "to highlight the joints of the discussion in a way designed to help readers answer it to their satisfaction" (125). Burrell characterizes "the enterprise known as process theology" by identifying "four situations" in which he thinks it finds itself (126). He also states how, in his view, such theology displays a misunderstanding in each situation. Burrell delineates the situations and the misunderstandings in this way: (1) Process theology is based on a "founding polemic" against so-called classical theism. However, this polemic is "quite wide of the mark." (2) Process theology "claims to offer a superior philosophical synthesis for Christian faith." This may properly be "seriously questioned." (3) Process theology claims to be capable of "illuminating central elements in the Christian tradition." Its capacity to do this is "deficient." (4) Process theology embodies a certain "conception of theological inquiry" which, when made explicit, is seen to "diverge considerably from that accepted by practicing theologians, or at least to divide them clearly into separate camps" (126-27). I take it that the misunderstandings Burrell attempts to exhibit in discussing the four situations constitute together the "mistake" on which he thinks process theology rests.

Burrell also proposes a way of evaluating his own approach and a spectrum of results to which he takes it to lead. If his characterization is correct, and if misunderstanding does occur in each situation, the answer is "yes": process theology does rest on a mistake. If the characterization can be challenged, or if some of the situations remain unclarified, the answer will range from "probably so" to "probably not." If the "characterizations can be discredited, or the situations shown not to obtain, then the verdict would veer more definitely toward 'no'—barring more insightful critiques to come" (126).

Burrell seems sensitive to the fact that "the enterprise known as process theology" is a broad and internally diverse one, since he suggests that one judge the fairness of his heuristic queries by "testing individual efforts against them to see whether any critical purchase results" (134). After all, one does not want to argue against an opponent of straw.

I shall follow Burrell's suggestion and test the work of Schubert Ogden by means of Burrell's approach. Indeed, this seems particularly appropriate, since Burrell himself refers to Ogden's work (and to that of Charles

<sup>1</sup> "Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?" *TS* 43 (1982) 125-35.

Hartshorne, which Ogden for the most part critically appropriates) more than that of any other individual process theologian.

#### CLASSICAL THEISM

Burrell's first claim is that process theology, particularly as represented by the doctrine of God of Charles Hartshorne, is founded in a polemic against a caricature of classical theism which Hartshorne mistakenly associates with Aquinas' doctrine of God. Since Ogden has consistently defended Hartshorne's position on this point, it seems fair to treat their work as a single whole in this respect.

Burrell's claim raises three questions: Is it true that Hartshorne's view of God is founded in a polemic against classical theism? What precisely characterizes "classical theism" according to Hartshorne? Is Aquinas a classical theist? I shall address these questions in turn in an effort to assess Burrell's claim.

I think we may take Burrell's claim to imply not a biographical point about how Hartshorne may have come to his view of God, but rather a systematic one about the logic of this view.<sup>2</sup> Yet in this sense the claim that Hartshorne grounds his view of God in a polemic against classical theism is at best a misleading one. For one thing, Hartshorne presents his position precisely as a correction of both classical theism and *pantheism*.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, this explains why he can speak of it as both "neoclassical theism" and "panentheism." For another, both Hartshorne and Ogden claim that it is distinctively religious aspirations that ultimately imply this new theism as a constructive position, not a merely theological polemic that could only ever display it negatively as a parasitical alternative. Thus Hartshorne argues from the concept of worship, Ogden from existential faith in the ultimate meaning of life.<sup>4</sup> In sum, there are both logical and religious reasons for not regarding Hartshorne's theism as systematically founded in a polemic against classical theism. In this respect it is Burrell's own characterization as a whole that is "quite wide of the mark."

Nonetheless, one may still rightly ask how Hartshorne does identify

<sup>2</sup> For such a biographical consideration, see W. L. Sessions, "Hartshorne's Early Philosophy," in *Two Process Philosophers*, ed. L. S. Ford (Tallahassee, FL: AAR Studies in Religion, 1973) esp. 29-34.

<sup>3</sup> *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953) esp. 499-514; *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (London: SCM, 1970) esp. 261-74. Thus Ogden can claim that "Because of this insistence, the new view discloses the older conceptions to be related logically not as contradictories, but as mere contraries, to which it is in each case the real contradictory or alternative" (*The Reality of God and Other Essays* [New York: Harper & Row, 1966] 63).

<sup>4</sup> Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1967) 1-28; Ogden, *Reality* 21-43.

classical theism. One basic feature of his analysis is the assertion that "common to classical theism and pantheism is the invidious nature of categorical contrast," a preference for one term of such contrasts.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for example, one may ask whether or in what sense God, who is perfect, is effect as well as cause. A classical theist answers either that God is cause only, in no sense effect (call this "simple monopolarity"), or that God is cause more properly than effect ("qualified monopolarity"). The justification common to both views is, to quote Aquinas, that "a cause is nobler than an effect."<sup>6</sup> Hartshorne argues that, to the contrary, (a) "Experience does not, we submit, exhibit the implied essential inferiority of the theologically despised contraries (except those that are themselves genuinely negative, like 'ignorant' and 'involuntary!')," and (b) "ultimate contraries are correlatives, mutually interdependent."<sup>7</sup> Since Hartshorne argues that God, the perfect One, is to be described in appropriate respects by both polarities of such basic contrasting terms, he can also call his doctrine of God "dipolar theism."

Is Aquinas a classical theist? As we have seen, he does exhibit a monopolar preference: causes are nobler than effects. And so with other choices: simple over composite, actual over potential, transeuntly active over receptively active. Yes, Aquinas is a classical theist. Sometimes he appears to assert simple monopolarity: "But God is absolutely impassible and immutable. . . He has, therefore, *no part of potency*— that is, passive potency."<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere his position is a qualified one: ". . . from among our affections, there is none that can properly exist in God save only joy and love; although even these *are not in God as passions*, as they are in us."<sup>9</sup> But then the questions arise (a) whether such simple and qualified forms of monopolarity are compatible and (b) whether either is warranted. In other words, one may ask whether Aquinas' monopolar preferences exemplify a monopolar prejudice or favoritism.

On this point mutual polemics have not conduced to clarity. The questions is not whether Aquinas is a classical theist (as if this were a label of abuse) but precisely what sort of classical theist he is (as a conceptual issue concerning the theological status of ultimate contrasts).

Finally, one can only welcome constructive attempts by Burrell and Norris Clarke (whose work Burrell commends) to utilize the distinction of "real" and "intentional" relations in Aquinas in an effort to interpret God as "the Supreme Receiver" (Clarke)<sup>10</sup> or on analogy with a paradigm

<sup>5</sup> *Philosophers 2*.

<sup>6</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975) 1, 18, 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Philosophers 2-3*.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa 1*, 16, 6; italics added.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 1, 91, 12; italics added.

<sup>10</sup> *The Philosophical Approach to God* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University, 1979) 93.

of "active receptivity" (Burrell).<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, one will want to ask Clarke just how a theory of "participation" permits one to grasp how God "knows not by being acted on, but through His own action in us."<sup>12</sup> Then, too, one may well be puzzled by the way in which the term "receptivity" actually disappears in Burrell's own treatment of this issue.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, one will want to discover how one is to derive from Aquinas even an analogous predication of receptivity to God when Aquinas himself, in explaining, for example, why commutative justice cannot befit God, simply asserts that "He does not receive anything from anyone."<sup>14</sup> "Barring more insightful critiques to come," as Burrell puts it, I think the verdict must be that Burrell's first characterization of Hartshorne's theism rests on at least one mistake.

#### A SUPERIOR PHILOSOPHICAL SYNTHESIS

Burrell now proceeds to direct our inquiry by asking us to consider whether the claim of process thought (here he emphasizes that of Whitehead) to offer a superior philosophical synthesis for Christian faith might not be seriously questioned. Burrell's primary strategy is again to identify process thought as founded in a polemic against something else—in this case, against "substance ontology" (129). Quite apart from whether this accurately exhibits Whitehead's own fundamental constructive concern, we are not told either precisely what a "substance ontology" is or why Whitehead's polemic against it is wide of the mark. We are rather assured that this has been shown by "more recent analysis of classical philosophical positions" (129).

The gravamen of Burrell's charge against the philosophical synthesis constituted by Whitehead's metaphysics is Burrell's contention that Whitehead finds the "prime analogate" for thought about God not in the self or human person, but rather in "natural process" (129). Thus, Burrell takes William Hill to touch "the most serious philosophical deficiency" in Whitehead's scheme, namely, that "the notion of an 'agent' remains undeveloped in process thought," and he quotes with approval Hill's assertion that "the God of process theology in loving the world is not a person at all but only a principle" (128).

Such claims affect Ogden's project in an oblique way; for he has consistently appealed to Whitehead's thought not for its doctrine of God as such, but rather for resources with which to clarify the experiential significance of language about God. Thus, Ogden takes as "the starting-

<sup>11</sup> *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1979) 121.

<sup>12</sup> *Approach* 96–97, where Clarke refers the reader to a brief discussion of this issue in his essay "A New Look at the Immutability of God," in *God Knowable and Unknowable*, ed. R. Roth (New York: Fordham, 1973) 67–70.

<sup>13</sup> *Aquinas* 120–30.

<sup>14</sup> *Summa* 1, 93, 11.

point for a genuinely new theistic conception" Whitehead's "reformed subjectivist principle," which "requires that we take as the experiential basis of all our most fundamental concepts the primal phenomenon of our own existence as experiencing subjects or selves."<sup>15</sup> It is this epistemological or, better, phenomenological consideration in which Ogden "founds" his constructive version of process theism. For a doctrine of God as such, he turns to the dipolar character of Hartshorne's thought as a whole, with its nuanced way of distinguishing absolute and relative, abstract and concrete, for resources that not only comprise a sophisticated advance on Whitehead's merely suggestive notion of God but also render his position immune from relatively crude charges such as Hill's, with its undeveloped distinctions of "person" and "principle."

Clarifications such as these, while necessary in order to keep the discussion on target, are nevertheless secondary. The main thing to see is that Burrell shows by the way he identifies the situation that he either ignores or is unaware of the whole point of Whitehead's treatment of the principal philosophical analogies. This is that (according to Whitehead) classical epistemology had committed the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" in mistaking an abstraction, namely, the supposedly temporally extensive "ego" or "person," for the temporally indivisible and properly concrete "actual occasion" of human experience as the basic datum for analysis. Thus, if "the notion of an 'agent' remains undeveloped in process thought" in the way in which Hill and Burrell think it should be, there are nonetheless reasons for this. On the one hand, Whitehead *identifies* the primary referent of the term "an agent" differently from the way classical philosophers like Aquinas do. On the other hand, what Whitehead identifies as "an agent" in the primary sense he *understands* differently from the way Aquinas does. Of course, Whitehead (and insofar Hartshorne and Ogden along with him) may be wrong about this. But one must refer to more than an alleged negative consensus of modern philosophers concerning Whitehead's work and an alternative way of posing the issue to show this. Such considerations do not amount to "serious questions."

#### ILLUMINATING THE TRADITION

Burrell now picks up on the theme of God's relation to the world in order to ask whether process theology's claim to throw light on central elements in the Christian tradition is not a deficient one. He suggests that it is their (mistaken) rejection of traditional conceptual resources for expressing this relation that has led process theologians to misinterpret

<sup>15</sup> *Reality* 57; see also "Present Prospects for Empirical Theology," in *The Future of Empirical Theology*, ed. B. E. Meland (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1969) 65-88, and "Lonergan and the Subjectivist Principle," *JR* 51 (1971) 155-72.

“creation” and to regard the doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity as “little more than vestigial myths” (130). He charges that they have ended up accepting “consistency with Whiteheadian philosophy as the principal criterion” of their theology (132). Does such an approach result in a “critical purchase” on Ogden’s theology?

Ogden explicitly acknowledges his work to be in the “direct lineage” with classical liberal theology that Burrell’s “suspicionary hypothesis” is meant to suggest (133).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, recognizing this fact helps one detect several deficiencies in Burrell’s analysis that Ogden’s own project is intended to bring to light.

The first point concerns what it is that the Christian theologian is to “illuminate.” For Burrell, it is “the tradition.” What is this? Since he speaks indiscriminately of being “faithful to the biblical view” or to “the central assertion of the Scriptures” (also to “the narratives of the Scriptures”) and of “illuminating the tradition” or “the central doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation” (also of “underlying doctrinal assertions” and of the “confession” expressed in the “doctrine” of creation), it is not possible to know (131–32). Such phrases serve to obscure important issues more than to raise them.

Yet it is just these issues that Ogden has attempted to identify and to clarify by following through on what he calls “liberal Protestantism’s characteristic commitment to a thoroughgoing historical approach to the theological task.”<sup>17</sup> For instance, he has argued that Protestant and Catholic historical-critical study “completely undercuts just that clear distinction between scripture and tradition on which both the traditional Protestant and the traditional Roman Catholic answers to the question [of the norm of the appropriateness of theological claims] in their different ways depend.”<sup>18</sup> As he points out, “the New Testament writings themselves are one and all precisely tradition.”<sup>19</sup> Yet this position is a matter of historical criticism, not “Whiteheadian philosophy.”

Moreover, one needs to address the issue of just which “tradition” it is that one needs primarily to illuminate. It would seem that the very logic of the process of traditioning (*traditio*), according to which one intends to hand on in a new situation a meaning that is congruent with that which one has received, implies that “it is precisely the earliest stratum of the church’s kerygma—the so-called Jesus-kerygma of the Synoptic tradition—” that is the real canon of the appropriateness of theological assertions.<sup>20</sup> This is a clear—and perhaps therefore controversial—reso-

<sup>16</sup> Ogden, “Sources of Religious Authority in Liberal Protestantism,” *JAAR* 44 (1976) 404.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 408.

<sup>18</sup> *The Point of Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982) 100.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> “Sources” 414.

lution of issues that Burrell's presentation obscures. Yet the key point in the present context is that, contrary to Burrell's suspicion, Ogden's conclusion about what stands most in need of illumination has nothing whatever to do with either a rejection of traditional philosophical resources or the acceptance of new ones—mistaken or otherwise. That conclusion is strictly a function of a commitment to the "thoroughgoing historical approach" of liberal Protestantism.

When one turns to the content of the emergent interpretation one calls "tradition" (*traditum*), one discovers that it is again Ogden's liberal commitment to thoroughgoing historical criticism that decisively shapes his treatment of doctrines such as Incarnation and Trinity. After all, "philosophical consistency" in clarifying the constructive import of a doctrine becomes an issue only once one is clear what one is to be consistent about (132). This is evident from Ogden's pointed comment that "even a 'process christology' must recognize the strictly existential character of the christological question and eschew claims about the person of Jesus that neither are nor can be warranted by the scriptural witness."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as he claims careful attention to the earliest apostolic witness reveals,

The far more serious difficulty with traditional christology, as well as with the usual efforts to revise it, is not its conceptual tools but rather, the use to which it puts them—or to interpret the metaphor, the wrong questions it asks and tries to answer by means of its conceptuality. Instead of asking, rightly, about the meaning of Christ for us, for our own self-understanding as human beings, it asks about the person of Christ in himself, in abstraction from our existence.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, it is not that, for Ogden, "the teachings of Incarnation and Trinity had become little more than vestigial myths," as Burrell suggests, but rather that these classical interpretations prove to be only doubtfully warranted by the evidently mythological language of the earliest Christian witness in the first place (130). In any case, if Ogden's theology be deficient, this is scarcely to be shown by assuming as central what he explicitly argues is not.

Once more, the issue is no doubt a radical one. I suspect it is more radical than Burrell understands. Ogden's analysis constitutes "something like a Heideggerian 'dismantling' (*Destruktion*)" not only of contemporary revisionary Christology, as he emphasizes, but also of the entire Christological (and hence Trinitarian) tradition of which it is a part,<sup>23</sup> for Ogden has proposed an interpretation of the point of Christology according to which the classical distinction of "person" and "work"

<sup>21</sup> "The Point of Christology," *JR* 55 (1975) 390.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Point* 86; see also Ogden, "On the Trinity," *Theology* 83 (1980) 97–102.

is undercut as completely as is that of "Scripture" and "tradition." Yet the motive force behind such doctrinal dismantling and reconstruction is not the search for a new philosophical scheme, but rather the commitment to a thoroughgoing historical approach. This is what constitutes his direct lineage with liberal Protestantism. Burrell seems to have no eyes to see this point, and so his analysis results in no critical purchase on Ogden's theology. More important by far is that this incapacity decisively discredits his analysis as a whole.

#### CONCEPTION OF THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY

It will not come as any surprise at this point if Burrell's failure to appreciate both the character and complexity of the issues at stake also affects his treatment of how a "process theologian" in the liberal tradition like Ogden conceives the nature of theological inquiry. Thus, it is clear that, if Ogden's work is a "process theology" with respect to the Christian doctrine of God, it is also a "liberal Protestant theology" with respect to both the canon of the appropriateness of theological assertions and the doctrine of Christ of which the doctrine of God is a function. Yet Ogden argues that a theological assertion must be not only appropriate but also "understandable, or as I now prefer to say, *credible*, in the sense that it is congruent with the truth disclosed at least implicitly in human existence as such."<sup>24</sup> Attending to this claim permits one to grasp precisely the sense in which Ogden's is a distinctively *postliberal* theology, as well as to identify the mistakes in Burrell's final heuristic suggestion.

Burrell suggests that process theologians have a tendency "to accept consistency with Whiteheadian philosophy as the principal criterion" of their work (132). He also claims that what decisively characterizes both liberal and process theology is a conception of theological inquiry that exhibits a desire "to bring theological (and eventually religious) assertion within the scope of what could be intelligible to one's intellectual contemporaries" (133). Thus, he implies that process theologians opt for a "conceptualization adequate to one's time" over against a "faithful rendering of one's tradition" (125). Finally, he refers in this context explicitly to Ogden's alleged demand for an "adequate theological conceptuality" (133). What is at stake here?

First of all, I would observe that nowhere, to my knowledge, does Ogden use the phrase "adequate theological conceptuality" in the unqualified sense in which Burrell claims he does. (Note that Burrell's reference is to "*Reality of God passim*.") Rather, Ogden implicitly differentiates several issues, using phrases such as "as intelligible as possible,"

<sup>24</sup> "The Concept of a Theology of Liberation: Must a Christian Theology Today Be So Conceived?" in *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response*, ed. B. Mahan and L. D. Richesin (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981) 132.

“an adequacy always beyond [theology’s] grasp,” “a relatively more adequate Christian theism,” “the most adequate conceptual form now possible.”<sup>25</sup> But this already indicates that his view is more nuanced than that by means of which Burrell misrepresents him. What are these nuances?

We have already noted that, on Ogden’s view, in order for a theological assertion to be “adequate,” it must be both “appropriate” and “credible.” Thus, to begin with, “adequacy” is not to be reduced to “credibility” alone, as Burrell implies. Secondly, the question arises, “credible by what standard?” Burrell suggests, without distinguishing, three alternatives: “Whiteheadian philosophy,” “one’s own time,” and “what could be intelligible to one’s intellectual contemporaries.” The first takes a system of thought as a standard, the second suggests an actual consensus, the third implies the possibility of such a consensus as the condition of the standard. Burrell does not note that each reflects a fundamentally different epistemological approach. Ogden explicitly rejects the first two and accepts a highly sophisticated version of the third.

Ogden argues that one tests the credibility of theological claims precisely by attempting to exhibit a mutual confirmation of “specifically Christian experience of Jesus as the Christ” and “universally human experience of the gift and demand of authentic existence.”<sup>26</sup> He is clear that the latter “is never given concretely” but only and always implicitly and at the “level” of “existential self-understanding.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, it is never a matter of looking for allegedly common religious experiences; for such a concrete datum is not what is at issue. But then neither is it an actual consensus, any more that it is a system of thought. One looks rather to the effort to elicit, somehow, a cognition that is also in a certain sense a recognition of “the truth disclosed at least implicitly in human existence as such.” The possibility of eliciting such assent, based on a mutual confirmation of explicit and implicit noetic sources of religious authority, is the condition of showing the credibility of Christian theological claims. That assent itself is the testimony to success.<sup>28</sup> It is this sort of sophisticated criteriological analysis that is at issue in Ogden’s theology.

One may now re-engage Burrell’s hypothesis directly by observing that it is precisely Ogden’s own insistence on avoiding just that “certain compromising of essential Christian truth” that plagued classical liberal theology which leads Ogden explicitly to reject the very systemic and consensual formulations of the standard of credibility that Burrell seems

<sup>25</sup> *Reality* 47, 56, 70.

<sup>26</sup> “Sources” 412.

<sup>27</sup> *Reality* 24, 78.

<sup>28</sup> For the distinction of “explicit” and “implicit” as well as of “noetic” and “ontic” sources, see “Sources” 406, 412–16.

to suspect are at the heart of the conception of theological inquiry endemic to so-called process theology.<sup>29</sup> And so it is that Ogden has pressed for a truly postliberal theology that can only follow the logic of mutual confirmation implied in Paul's claim that "we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:2).<sup>30</sup> It is only such a commendation that is, and that may therefore also prove itself, capable of eliciting the sort of assent that Christian faith implies.

It is not surprising that Ogden's approach "diverge[s] considerably from that accepted by [some] practicing theologians" (126-27). The practices of contemporary theologians do diverge. Yet it is less accurate to say that Ogden's approach "divide[s] them clearly into separate camps" than to observe that it attempts to clarify the reasons for division that are already there, however poorly most may understand them (127). In the event, it is difficult to see why such an effort at clarification should be considered a defect.

#### CONCLUSION

I have argued that Burrell's four queries are so posed as not to offer help in testing Ogden's postliberal Protestant process theology. Rather, Burrell's overall characterization is discredited to the extent that one discovers that none of the four situations he proposes to identify actually obtains in Ogden's case. One has a sense that his failure is due, at least in part, to his decision to take on an opponent whose only integrity may be that projected by the label "process theology." And one is ill-advised to seek sustenance from labels. Yet, at a deeper level, something more is at stake. It may well be true (and I for one suspect it is) that the work of individual process theologians other than Ogden does rest on certain (and ultimately debilitating) mistakes. Yet, if the above analysis can in any way qualify as an insightful critique, it may prove that the most basic of these mistakes will turn out to be very much more widely shared, indeed.

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<sup>29</sup> *Reality 4*; see also "Sources" 411; "Truth, Truthfulness, and Secularity: A Critique of Theological Liberalism," *Christianity and Crisis* 31 (1971) 56-60.

<sup>30</sup> Ogden frequently cites this verse in this connection; see "Sources" 413; "Concept" 133; "What Is Theology?" *JR* 52 (1972) 5.