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Process Theology

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In *Religion in the Making* Alfred North Whitehead wrote that 'Christianity has always been a religion seeking a metaphysic'.¹ He meant that since the Bible records God's revelation and man's responses, it mainly records religious experiences without clearly enunciating a general explanation of reality. In contrast, Whitehead saw Buddhism as a metaphysic generating a religion. It begins with certain dogmas about the nature of reality which explain the world of experiences and how to respond to them.²

While Scripture certainly presupposes a certain world-view, no metaphysic is explicitly stated in Scripture. Claims that the OT exemplifies a Hebraic mindset and the NT a Hellenic one (supposedly antithetical to one another) merely underscore the lack of an explicitly stated metaphysic in Christianity's foundational document. Throughout the centuries theologians and philosophers have adopted various understandings of reality for communicating the Christian message to their own period. Whitehead purported to do the same for our day.

Had Whitehead never turned his attention to metaphysics, he would still be extremely important for 20th century philosophy. His monumental *Principia Mathematica* (co-authored with Bertrand Russell) and his work in physics make him very significant in the philosophy of science. However, Whitehead applied his understanding of current developments in science and his perceptions of philosophy and religion to constructing a new understanding of reality, process metaphysics. His system, most thoroughly expounded in *Process and Reality* (1929), did not try to set forth a totally secular understanding of reality, for he intended his system to cover all of reality, including God. In fact, *Process and Reality* ends with a chapter on God and the world.

Though Whitehead planted the seeds of process theology, his successors have developed it. The term 'process thought' was first used by Bernard Loomer as a title of a seminar he taught at the University of Chicago Divinity School.³ However, Loomer is only one of the key figures in the development of process theology. Others are Henry [p. 292](#) Nelson Wieman, Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, Schubert Ogden, Bernard Meland, Daniel Day Williams, Norman Pittenger, Lewis Ford, and David Ray Griffin, to name a few. These names represent two distinct approaches within the process tradition. Those two approaches are the rationalist approach (exemplified by Henry N. Wieman) to Whitehead. Hartshorne believed in using reason to probe a *priori* truth. He restructured the ontological argument for God's existence which he believes works. Of course, it is a Whiteheadian God that he has in mind. Followers in the rationalistic tradition have tended to be more concerned with the logical rectitude of their theology.⁴ The empirical strain of process thought is less concerned with conceptual knowledge of God and rational proofs of his existence. This does not mean that process thinkers are anti-rational or irrational, but only that they emphasize what can be known through empirical data. For Wieman,

¹ Alfred N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), p. 50. Hereafter cited as *RIM*.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

³ Norman Pittenger, 'Understanding the World and the Faith', *Theology* 90 (1987): 179–180. Loomer ('Process Studies 16 [Winter 1987]: 245) claims that though others attribute the term's origin to him, if he did originate it, he is not pleased with it. He prefers the designation 'process/relational thought'.

⁴ Loomer, pp. 248–249.

whatever can be known of God must be known empirically (not through speculative reasoning), and for him 'God' means 'whatever it is in human experience that redeems us from sin'.⁵ The empirical approach went more in the direction of American pragmatism.⁶

Since the eclipse of the Barthian trend in contemporary theology, process thought (along with various political theologies) has become the major movement within non-evangelical theology in the later half of the 20th century. Its particular attraction to many is its claim to render biblical data and Christian theology more intelligible to the modern mind than historic orthodoxy. Even some evangelicals have tried to accommodate various aspects of orthodoxy to process thinking.⁷

In this paper, I intend first to describe process theology. This is no p. 293 small task since it is not a monolithic structure. Nonetheless, I shall set forth the background of process theology and then look at its basic conception of God and the world. The descriptive section will be followed by critique. I shall attempt to show that process thought is detrimental to orthodox Christianity generally and to missions in particular.

BACKGROUNDS OF PROCESS THEOLOGY

No conceptual system, including process theology, arises in an intellectual vacuum. Four main factors help to understand the development of process thought and (to some extent) its appeal. They are: (1) developments in science; (2) an attack on classical orthodoxy as inadequate; (3) philosophical concerns; and (4) the theological and religious climate of the times. These were especially significant for Whitehead, but the whole movement shares many of the same concerns.

Developments in science

Of particular import was the breakdown of Newtonian mechanistic physics. According to Newtonian physics, the physical is matter which in itself is changeless, inert, 'stuff-like'.⁸ Each thing has its own spatial-temporal location independent of everything else, so that bits of matter are essentially discrete and discontinuous with other bits of matter.⁹ On this view, the only change possible is locomotion. In the 17th century, it was thought that God occasionally intervened in the world to stimulate such locomotion, but by the end of the 18th century scientists had discovered a way to explain locomotion which rendered divine intervention in the natural order unnecessary.¹⁰ By the end of the 19th century-the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249. See also Gene Reeves and Delwin Brown, 'The Development of Process Theology', in Delwin Brown, Ralph James, and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 24 for Wieman's and the empirical tradition's rejection of Whitehead's more speculative approach to God.

⁶ Brown and Reeves (pp. 24–25) suggest that ultimately John Dewey with his emphasis on empiricism and pragmatism was more influential for Wieman than Whitehead was. Indeed, the empirical approach to process thought has been more inclined in this pragmatic direction. For a detailed discussion of process theology's origin and the different approaches of the empirical and rationalist strands within it, see Bernard Meland, *Introduction: The Empirical Tradition in Theology at Chicago*, in Bernard Meland, ed., *The Future of Empirical Theology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969).

⁷ Randy Basinger ('Evangelicals and Process Theism: Seeking a Middle Ground', *Christian Scholar's Review* 15 [1986]) explains the major ways in which evangelicals have responded to this theology.

⁸ Ivor Leclerc, 'The Problem of God in Whitehead's System', *Process Studies* 14 (Winter, 1985): 303.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

system's implications were fully worked out, but anomalies were noticeable. Whitehead astutely noticed implications of some new discoveries in science and applied those implications in constructing a new metaphysic.

Whitehead focused first on the new discoveries about energy and electromagnetic theory. He saw that in Clerk Maxwell's hands, electromagnetic theory demanded that there be electromagnetic occurrences throughout all space. Hence, electromagnetic effects p. 294 were conceived as arising from a continuous field.¹¹ This meant, of course, that the idea of discrete, unrelated bits of matter could no longer be sustained.

As to energy, the key was the doctrine of the conservation of energy which entailed 'a quantitative permanence underlying change'.¹² All of this meant that matter was not the only kind of permanence; but it also meant that there could not only be change in place (locomotive change), but change in energy. Since energy change is not reducible to locomotive change, there could be other kinds of change in the physical realm than locomotive. Both the theory of energy and electromagnetism led Whitehead to reject the notion of the physical as changeless, inert matter. Instead, he claimed that the primary physical entities must be basically 'event-like'.¹³ Leclerc explains what Whitehead meant by 'event' as follows:

For 'event' does not mean a mere or sheer 'happening'. Whitehead used the word 'event' in its primary etymological sense of 'to come out' (from the Latin *evenire*), which implies 'something' which comes out. This entails that the 'something' must necessarily be *continuous* with that out of which it comes. And it also entails that the 'something' must have an essential *discreteness* as itself different from that out of which it comes.¹⁴

These 19th century scientific discoveries suggested that something was wrong with Newtonian physics; but only in the 20th century did the new physics emerge. Relativity theory and quantum mechanics have shaped scientific understanding in this century. To summarize the point on relativity, Whitehead explains that under mechanistic physics, time and space each have a unique meaning. Hence, whatever meaning is given to spatial relation as measured on earth, the same meaning pertains when measured on a comet or by an instrument at rest in the ether. The same is true of temporal relations. Relativity theory denies these assumptions.¹⁵ Instead, what a thing is and how it should be understood can never be determined in isolation from its relations to other things. The notion of simple location in space and time (devoid of relation to other things) could no longer be p. 295 retained. Whatever exists, does so in virtue of its relation to other things.

As to quantum mechanics, Whitehead's key point of interest was that according to quantum theory, 'some effects which appear essentially capable of gradual increase or gradual diminution are in reality to be increased or decreased only by certain definite jumps'.¹⁶ The net result is revision of concepts of physical things. In particular, a theory of

¹¹ Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), pp. 144–145. Hereafter cited as *SMW*.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 147.

¹³ Leclerc, p. 303. See also Whitehead, *SMW*, p. 151, 'We must start with the event as the ultimate unit of natural occurrence.' This follows his discussion (pp. 147–150) of energy.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* The implications of the last portion of the quotation will become clear when discussing process metaphysics.

¹⁵ Whitehead, *SMW*, pp. 171–172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

discontinuous existence is needed. 'What is asked from such a theory, is that an orbit of an electron can be regarded as a series of detached positions, and not as a continuous line.'¹⁷ When coupled with the aforementioned items of scientific theory, this means everything in the world is interrelated in a continuous process of change (atomic theory shows that, even in the most solid bits of matter, at the atomic and sub-atomic level things are not static, but in motion). However, that does not mean there is such continuity between individual entities that they blend together so as to be indistinguishable. Each entity, while continuous with all other entities, is at the same time a distinct thing. Each phase or state of a given entity is distinct from other phases so that there are distinguishable events, moments in the 'life' of each existing thing. These notions became foundational for Whitehead's process metaphysics.

A final item of import from science is evolution. Whitehead noted that one of the major scientific changes in the 19th century was the rise of evolutionary theory, the doctrine which 'has to do with the emergence of novel organisms as the outcome of chance'.¹⁸ Though some argue that neither specific evolutionary theories nor any overarching evolutionary cosmology played a significant role in Whitehead's metaphysics,¹⁹ his metaphysics presuppose some form of the theory and do not contradict it.²⁰ Moreover, other process theologians [p. 296](#) do not hesitate to admit acceptance of evolutionary notions of upward biological development. So, while process metaphysics is not necessarily generated from evolutionary thought, nothing in process thinking contradicts *per se* its fundamental notions.

Attack on classical theism

Invariably, process thinkers begin by attacking traditional theism. Its conceptions reflect outmoded Aristotelian and Newtonian physics. Moreover, some of its fundamental notions present God in ways that are both logically incoherent and morally repugnant.

Process thinkers claim that in our modern scientific world, secular man simply cannot accept many ideas of traditional theism. For example, the notion of a created universe ([Genesis 1–2](#)) is today seen as myth, not history. Belief in biblical accounts of miracles is no longer essential, because many can be explained by naturalistic processes and others are expressions of faith, not actual occurrences that produced faith. Moreover, Scripture's eschatological perspective must be rejected. The notions of 'last days' and an end to the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁹ George R. Lucas, Jr., 'Evolutionist Theories and Whitehead's Philosophy', *Process Studies* 14 (Winter, 1985). On page 288 Lucas differentiates an evolutionary theory and an evolutionary cosmology as follows: 'Evolutionary cosmologies may begin simply as rival evolutionist *theories*—alternative causal explanations for these observed phenomena of development, change, and transformation. An evolutionist theory becomes an evolutionary *cosmology* whenever the favoured evolutionist theory is extrapolated from its original context as an account of geological or biological change, and made to serve as an overarching cosmological category, such that 'evolution' in some idiosyncratic sense becomes the basis for a systematic and unified interpretation of a wide array of diverse phenomena *beyond* the domains of biology and geology.'

²⁰ Even Lucas (p. 297) admits that while 'there is little explicit influence from the field of biology, from biological evolution, or from evolutionist theories generally', all of them are 'unsystematically presupposed'.

world must be denied. Those promised events, along with the literal return of Christ, have never happened in over 1900 years, and there is no serious reason to think they will.²¹

In addition, the God of classical theism (which usually means process thinkers' interpretation of Thomistic theism) is deemed problematic. Classical theism supposedly relies on the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle. Plato and Aristotle believed in two types of reality. On one hand, there is the present world of becoming, time, change, and real relations. On the other, there is another 'world of timeless, changeless, and unrelated being, which is alone "real" in the full sense of the word and so alone worthy of the epithet "divine"'.²² When traditional theism tied these ideas to God and the world, and unaffected by what happens in it ('impassible'). God was the totally transcendent absolute with whom no relation is possible. Moreover, if the 'real' is not in this world but in another, what happens in this world is insignificant.²³

None of this sits well with process theologians. If God dare not enter into real relations with his creatures because that would cause him to p. 297 change (God as immutable cannot change at all), then the God of traditional theism is really irrelevant to modern man. Hartshorne adds that to say God is love and to speak of him as Lord (all of which suggests he can express emotion and enter relationships) and then to call him absolute, immutable, and impassive is to contradict oneself.²⁴

A special bone of contention is the classical doctrine of divine impassibility (a logical corollary to immutability). If God cannot change, he cannot feel emotions like compassion, because that would constitute a change in him. Arguing from analogy, Hartshorne explains that we would not praise a parent who was indifferent to his child's actions or who responded the same whether the child was happy or sad. 'Yet God,' Hartshorne complains, 'we are told, is impassive and immutable and without accidents, is just as he would be in action and knowledge and being had we never existed, or had all our experiences been otherwise.'²⁵ Hartshorne cites Anselm's claim that God is passionless and *feels* no compassion toward man, though he can *express* compassion in terms of *our* experience. That is, he can do things to comfort us to show he cares, but he cannot feel that compassion himself.²⁶ Hartshorne claims this means we should love God, not because he can sympathize with us (if he could that might mean his moods and feelings depend in part on us; and classical theism will not allow that), but because he can do things which benefit us. Hartshorne remarks:

²¹ Schubert Ogden, 'Toward a New Theism', in Delwin Brown, Ralph James, and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 177–178.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 179–180.

²⁴ Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven: Yale, 1948), p. 26. He says, 'To say, on the one hand, that God is love, to continue to use popular religious terms like Lord, divine will, obedience to God, and on the other to speak of an absolute, infinite, immutable, simple, impassive deity, is either a gigantic hoax of priestcraft, or it is done with the belief that the social connotations of the popular language are ultimately in harmony with these descriptions.' According to Schubert Ogden (*The Reality of God and Other Essays* [New York: Harper & Row, 1963], pp. 48–49), the attributes of pure actuality, immutability, impassivity, aseity, immateriality 'all entail an unqualified negation of real internal relationship to anything beyond his own wholly absolute being'.

²⁵ Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, p. 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54—Hartshorne citing Anselm.

Anselm's God can give us everything, everything except the right to believe that there is one who, with infinitely subtle and appropriate sensitivity, rejoices in all our joys and sorrows in all our sorrows. But this benefit which Anselm will not allow God to bestow upon us is the supreme benefit which God and only God could give us.²⁷

If God is unaffected by us, and our world is not the real world, then p. 298 nothing we ever do or suffer ultimately makes any difference to God, and nothing that happens in this world is of significance.²⁸ Moreover, it is useless to speak of man's aim as to glorify God, for God as absolute is beyond our power to contribute to his greatness.²⁹ Likewise, one cannot speak meaningfully of serving God, for, as Hartshorne claims, 'if God can be indebted to no one, can receive value from no one, then to speak of serving him is to indulge in equivocation'.³⁰

The ultimate problem in all of this, according to process theists, is that it contradicts the biblical portrayal of God as changing his mind ([Ex. 32:14](#); [2 Sam. 24:16](#); [Jer. 26:19](#)), entering into relationships with people (e.g. covenants with Abraham and David), and showing emotions like anger and compassion (all of which must be anthropomorphism at best, and mythology at worst, if classical theism is correct). Moreover, if God cannot enter time because that would mean changing, then God is locked out of the world; but Scripture portrays Him otherwise. And, if this world is really insignificant, then why the biblical emphasis on God's acts to redeem fallen man and a fallen world? Both Scripture and common sense suggest that what happens in his world is very significant, both to us and to God.

Process theists also complain that the God of classical theism is a God of power and force. He is portrayed as an absolute sovereign who determines and accomplishes his will in the world, regardless of whether his creatures want to obey him or not. This monarchical God who removes man's freedom is pictured as a 'cosmic bully'.³¹ By destroying freedom, this God cannot hold his creatures morally accountable for what they do, but he does, anyway. This God is utterly repugnant, and it is ludicrous to think modern man can believe in (let alone love and worship) him.³² p. 299

Philosophical background

Many philosophical concerns influenced Whitehead, but I shall note several of the more significant ones. First, there is the connection with Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ogden, *Reality of God*, p. 51.

²⁹ Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, p. 58.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See Pittenger, p. 183. See also David Basinger, 'Human Coercion: A Fly in the Process Ointment?', *Process Studies* 15 (1986).

³² Another complaint is that classical theism's God is totally transcendent, and so we cannot completely know him. We may attribute to him our characteristics, but as Aquinas says, only analogically. As to other divine qualities which we in no way possess, we must try to discover what they mean. This means that in traditional theism there is a limitation on knowing and naming God (Eugene Peters, 'Theology, Classical and Neo-Classical', *Encounter* 44 [Winter 1983], 8-9). Theists, when facing the limitations of knowledge about this God, like to say he is shrouded in mystery and paradox. Hartshorne calls this a typical theologian's ploy, and says, 'A theological paradox, it appears, is what a contradiction becomes when it is about God rather than something else, or indulged in by a theologian or a church rather than an unbeliever or a heretic' (*Divine Relativity*, p. 1). The process answer is to reconstruct the concept of God so that process categories apply to every level of reality, including the divine being (Peters, p. 10). Such a God can be understood.

introduced the notion of Prime Mover (God) in order to complete his metaphysics. He did so not for religious reasons, but to complete his own cosmology. In Aristotle Whitehead did not see how to do this, but that it must be done and could be done without thereby making religion foundational to metaphysics.³³ Hence, Whitehead invoked God to round off process metaphysics.

Whitehead also needed a way to relate the multiplicity of all physical entities. He concluded that they ultimately depended on what he called formative elements. Following Plato and Aristotle (who called these items *archai*, principles), he saw three elements. In addition to all acting physical entities, he saw a general activity underlying all occasions of individual acting as their ultimate source. This notion was analogous (though not identical) to Aristotle's notion of substance. Whitehead's second formative principle was the eternal objects. Eternal objects are like Plato and Aristotle's notion of forms, though Whitehead's conception is closer to Plato than to Aristotle. In Plato and Aristotle the third formative element was God. Whitehead agreed, though his concept of God differed from that of Plato and Aristotle.³⁴ He did agree, however, with Plato that if there was to be a way of choosing between the many possibilities (some good and some evil) which an entity could become, one of the formative elements (God) had to be the source of the distinction between good and bad, better and worse. Without such narrowing of options it would be difficult to make actual choices. For both Plato and Whitehead God was (in Whitehead's terms) that principle of limitation.³⁵ p. 300

Second, some note the influence on Whitehead of the British empiricists Locke and Berkeley.³⁶ Berkeley's theory of perception was especially important. Berkeley noted the difference in appearance of an object like a tower from a distance as opposed to nearby. He concluded that the difference is not in the tower itself but in the act of perception. Hence, sensory perception depends more on the act of perception on the thing perceived. As Whitehead noted, Berkeley said in his *Principles of Human Knowledge* that 'what constitutes the realization of natural entities is the being perceived within the unity of mind'.³⁷ Adapting Berkeley's insight for his own uses, Whitehead wrote that 'we can substitute the concept, that the realization is a gathering of things into the unity of a prehension; and that what is thereby realised is the prehension, and not the things'.³⁸ The relation of prehension to Berkeley's notion of perception becomes even clearer when one sees Whitehead's notion of perception becomes even clearer when one sees Whitehead's definition of 'prehension'. Whitehead explains:

The word *perceive* is, in our common usage, shot through and through with the notion of cognitive apprehension. So is the word *apprehension*, even with the adjective *cognitive*

³³ Leclerc, p. 304.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 305–306.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 314. There were other influences from Plato and Aristotle, but Plato's *Timaeus* was especially significant for Whitehead. His acquaintance with Plato was greater than his knowledge of Aristotle. Indeed, some say Whitehead probably misunderstood the 'process character' of Aristotle's natural philosophy as set forth in his *Physics* (See Ernest Wolf-Gazo, 'Editor's Preface: Whitehead within the Context of the History of Philosophy', *Process Studies* 14 [Winter 1985], 217–218). In fact, Thomism is heavily indebted to Aristotelianism and yet process thinkers are usually negative toward Thomistic theism. One wonders if Whitehead and his followers properly understand Aristotle or Thomas' use of him.

³⁶ See Wolf-Gazo, pp. 220–222, for example.

³⁷ Whitehead, *SMW*, p. 103, referring to Berkeley.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 101–102.

omitted. I will use the word *prehension* for *uncognitive apprehension*: by this I mean *apprehension* which may or may not be cognitive.³⁹

Others have traced Whitehead's relation to Coleridge and Wordsworth (through their relation to Kant) and Schelling.⁴⁰ In particular, Braeckman shows the correlation between Whitehead's concepts of creativity and imagination and Schelling's philosophy.⁴¹ Moreover, p. 301 Whitehead's interest in Romantic writers like Wordsworth also suggests Whitehead's concern for the aesthetic.

Finally, to understand process theology, one must understand contemporary epistemology. Since the empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, and Hume) the prevailing epistemology has been empiricism. Within that tradition, Kant argued that all knowledge comes ultimately through experience, by which he meant interaction with the empirical world. Hence, Kant distinguished two levels of reality, the noumenal and the phenomenal. The latter is the realm of what appears to us, and we can know things in this realm. The noumenal realm is beyond sensory experience. Thus Kant argued that whatever is in this realm cannot be an object of knowledge.⁴² Given this distinction, Kant claimed to put an end to traditional or speculative metaphysics which deals with things that belong to the noumenal. Included in the noumenal realm are God, the immortal soul, and things in themselves apart from our perception of them. Kant later invoked God as a necessary postulate of practical reason in order to ground morality, but strictly speaking, God is not an object of knowledge. There is no empirical way to know he exists or to know anything else about him.

Reactions to Kant have been varied, but his fundamental empiricist insights have not been abandoned. By the 20th century logical positivism with its empiricist foundation was very influential. Logical positivism held the verification theory of meaning, a theory resting firmly on empiricism. According to the theory, the meaning of a sentence is its method of verification. The positivists meant that unless one can specify verification procedures for a sentence (i.e. a method of discovering whether a sentence is true or false), the sentence is meaningless. Furthermore, if a sentence is meaningless, that of which it speaks is non-existent. The key, of course, is the kind of verification procedures envisioned, and positivists held that the only methods available for verifying assertions of fact are empirical methods. Since one cannot specify methods of verification for claims of theology and ethics, those statements are meaningless, and that of which they speak is non-existent. This position clearly went much beyond Kant. For Kant, God was not an object of knowledge, for empirically nothing could be demonstrated about him. Nonetheless, speech about him was not meaningless and Kant postulated his existence.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101. See also Wolf-Gazo's explanation of the relation of Berkeley's theory of perception to Whitehead's theory of prehension. He writes (pp. 222–223) in reference to the passage from Whitehead I cited in the text: 'This passage, applied to the Berkeleyan situation, means that the "prehending" here and now is a mode of grasping the unity of the things perceived. The objective reality is constituted through the relations between the two locations which relate to two entities. Whitehead emphasizes not merely the entities perceived, but the realization of the entities manifested through the unity of the act of prehension. Berkeley's conception of mind is thus translated into a Whiteheadian "process of prehensive unification" '.

⁴⁰ Antoon Braeckman, 'Whitehead and German Idealism: A Poetic Heritage', *Process Studies* 14 (Winter, 1985).

⁴¹ Braeckman, pp. 278–281. Braeckman argues that with respect to the structure of imagination and creativity three ideas were shared by Schelling and Whitehead. In Whiteheadian terms they are: (1) the revised subjectivist principle; (2) the creative advance; and (3) a philosophy of organism.

⁴² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman K. Smith, (trans. (New York: St. Martin's 1965), pp. 269–272.

Carrying out the implications of this epistemology, logical positivists said that of p. 302 God was meaningless, and hence, there was no God. Apparently, metaphysics of any kind was dead.

Though not everyone in the 20th century agrees with either Kant or the logical positivists, this basic approach to knowledge continues to be pervasive. One can see partly why so few have tried to create a metaphysic in the 20th century, and why orthodox theology with its reflections on things beyond the empirical is considered so outmoded. Despite all this, Whitehead set out to structure a new metaphysic. He concluded that contemporary epistemology destroys metaphysics that go beyond the empirical, but not all metaphysics. Whitehead's metaphysics rely heavily on the findings of science, but since science handles the empirical, Whitehead's metaphysics are rooted in the empirical, the observable. Whether Whitehead and all his followers are always consistent empiricists is debatable, but unquestionably their metaphysic reflects the epistemology of the times.⁴³

The theological and religious climate of the times

In the late 19th and early 20th century non-orthodox theology was fundamentally in the grasp of 'old line' liberalism. Whitehead's *Process and Reality* with its comprehensive new vision of reality was published in 1929, but initially had little impact on theology and the church. Non-orthodox theology turned from the bankruptcy of old liberalism to embrace Barthianism. Of course, Barthianism with its dependence on existentialism had little use for metaphysics. No metaphysical system could possibly capture the most important thing, a person in the act of existing and becoming. Moreover, for neo-orthodox thinkers personal encounter with God (not reasoned argument or lengthy descriptions as one might find in a metaphysic) confirmed his existence and revealed his nature.

Though the influence of neo-orthodoxy still lingers, its domination of the theological scene has abated. However, part of its legacy is its notion of God as totally transcendent and wholly other. As this conception was elaborated in the work of existentialist theologians like Tillich, it meant that God became more remote and impersonal. Some theologians, reading the signs in Tillich's work and sensing that the classical Christian God was equally remote and impersonal, declared shortly after mid-century that God was dead. If he was to be revived p. 303 at all, he could no longer be an impersonal, remote God to whom what was happening in the world made no difference. If there was to be a gospel, it had to be a secularized one. Classical theism was presumed incapable of filling the bill, but neo-orthodoxy seemed little better. Though one supposedly could encounter God in his Word Jesus Christ, such encounters left God remote. While they might affect the individual, they had no effect on God, and since the private encounter was not available for public verification, no one could guarantee that God was encountered. As Schubert Ogden argues, the time was clearly ripe for a new vision of reality and of God.⁴⁴

Process theology has risen to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, though process thinkers have been at work through much of the century. Until now, process

⁴³ See for example, Ogden's discussion (*The Reality of God*, pp. 25–27) of the relation of logical positivism to theological discussions.

⁴⁴ Schubert Ogden, *Reality of God*, pp. 44–56. We also should not underestimate the significance of World War I and II on the thinking of the times. The old belief in the basic goodness and brotherhood of all men could not be upheld, especially after World War II. Moreover, many asked how there could be a God in view of the holocaust. Those inclined to believe in God could not believe in (let alone worship) a God whom many traditional theists said foreordained the holocaust and was totally unmoved by all the suffering it brought. If God would be trusted, he had to sympathize deeply with (even suffer with) man's afflictions. He could not have predestined events like the holocaust.

theology has had its primary influence in an Anglo-American context, though it is already becoming a significant factor among Asian theologians. Given its openness to world religions as evident in its understanding of Christ and redemption, its influence can be expected to increase. Moreover, the other major theological movement among serious theologians during the last thirty years or so has been liberation theology. It would not be surprising to see a growing *rapprochement* between the two kinds of theologies, for while process metaphysics are foreign to liberation theology, the practical outworking of the process God's relation to the world is entirely compatible with insights of political theologies.⁴⁵ p. 304

MAJOR CONCEPTS IN PROCESS THOUGHT

Key Definitions

Actual entities. For Whitehead, these are the 'final real things of which the world is made up'.⁴⁶ There is nothing behind these entities or occasions which is *more* real, such as an underlying substance. According to Whitehead, the world is a process, and that 'process is the becoming of actual entities'.⁴⁷ Moreover, he claims that '*how* an actual entity *becomes* constitutes *what* that actual entity *is* ... Its "being" is constituted by its "becoming" '.⁴⁸ Actual entities are neither static, for they are always changing and developing (becoming), nor are they isolated from other actual entities, for each actual entity can be incorporated into another entity and is capable of incorporating other actual entities into itself. In fact, entities are frequently a nexus, a set of actual entities united by their grasping of one another.⁴⁹ Hence, each person is an actual entity, a complex one. that is, he is one actual entity, but one composed of many actual entities. The same is true of most things in the world. Moreover, as Lowe explains, each actual entity, though in the process of becoming, at each stage of development is a unique individual entity.⁵⁰ Finally, actual entities are subjects.⁵¹ They are centres of feeling, a feeling being 'the appropriation of some elements in the universe to be components in the real internal constitution of its

⁴⁵ For excellent sketches of the main theological and religious trends of the 20th century see Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), ch. 1–3, and Ogden, *Reality of God*. See also Loomer's ('Process Theology: Origins, Strengths, Weaknesses') and Meland's ('Introduction') descriptions of the influences and trends leading to process theology, as well as Pittenger's, 'Understanding the World and the Faith'. For an excellent discussion of the history of process theology in the 20th century in its various phases see Gene Reeves and Delwin Brown, 'The Development of Process Theology'. I must add that it seems more than purely coincidental that one of the major centres for process studies, the Claremont School of Theology, is also a major centre for study in comparative religions.

⁴⁶ Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 27. Hereafter cited as *PR*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.

⁵⁰ Victor Lowe, 'Whitehead's Metaphysical System', in Delwin Brown, Ralph James, and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 4.

⁵¹ Daniel Day Williams, 'How Does God Act?', in William Reese and Eugene Freeman, eds., *Process and Divinity* (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1964), p. 166.

subject'.⁵² This means that all actual entities, including animals, trees, and rocks, have qualities of mind and are in some sense persons. They are not mere objects.

Prehension. This is Whitehead's term for the acting of one actual entity on another to relate the other to itself. Each prehension (literally, grasping) or feeling is a taking of an item of the many into the arising unity of a new actual entity synthesized from the old.⁵³ Whitehead p. 305 speaks of *physical prehensions* and *conceptual prehensions*. A physical prehension is the grasping of an actual entity, whereas a conceptual prehension is the feeling of an eternal object.⁵⁴ Whitehead also speaks of *positive prehensions* (graspings which incorporate objects into the emerging entity) and *negative prehensions* (choices not to incorporate things into the becoming entity).⁵⁵ Whitehead also speaks of *hybrid prehensions*. He says that while a physical feeling is feeling of another actual entity, if that entity is objectified by its conceptual feelings, 'the physical feeling of the subject in question is termed "hybrid" '.⁵⁶ On the other hand, when the actual entity which is the datum for prehension is objectified by one of its own *physical* feelings, prehension of the datum is a *pure physical feeling*.⁵⁷

In every prehension, Whitehead claims there are three elements: (1) the prehending subject (an actual entity); (2) the prehended datum, whether a physical or eternal object; and (3) the 'subjective form' of prehension which is how the datum is prehended. There are varieties of subjective forms such as emotions, valuations, purposes, aversions, aversions, consciousness, etc.⁵⁸ Hence, if I prehend a new car, the subjective form of my prehension might mean I cry over its beauty (emotion), consider it a poor car and determine not to buy it (valuation), or make it my intention to raise money to purchase it (purpose).

Eternal objects. For process thinkers, these are the corollaries of Platonic forms or eternal ideas. Eternal objects are the pure potentials of possibilities which represent the range of possibilities for specific things which actual entities may become.⁵⁹ Prehension of an actual entity in order to synthesize a new stage in an emerging entity occurs in virtue of the possibilities for enhancement of the prehending entity which are represented by the datum (the prehended object). According to Whitehead, God does not create eternal objects; they are just there.⁶⁰

Concrescence. A concrescence is the process of composition of prehensions.⁶¹ As Whitehead explains, 'in the becoming of an actual entity, the *potential* unity of many

⁵² Whitehead, *PR*, p. 353 as quoted in Williams, p. 166.

⁵³ Lowe, p. 6. See also page 7 for Lowe's further characterization of the nature of a prehension.

⁵⁴ Whitehead, *PR*, p. 35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 375–376.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 34.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

⁶¹ Lowe, p. 6.

entities—actual and non-actual—acquires p.306 the *real* unity of the one actual entity; so that the actual entity is the real concrescence of many potentials'.⁶²

Subjective aim. The goal of an actual entity in its becoming.⁶³ In Aristotelian terms, it is the final cause of a thing. Whitehead calls it the 'lure, whereby there is determinate concrescence'.⁶⁴ He says, "The "subjective aim", which controls the becoming of subject, is that subject feeling a proposition with the subjective form of purpose to realize it in that process of self-creation.'⁶⁵ Not only is there an ultimate aim for each actual entity, but also a subjective aim for each stage in the emerging entity's becoming.

The ontological principle. The Whiteheadian principle that

Every condition to which the process of becoming conforms in any particular instance, has its reason *either* in the character of some actual entity in the actual world of that concrescence, *or* in the character of the subject which is in process of concrescence ... it means that actual entities are the only *reasons*; so that to search for a *reason* is to search for one or more actual entities.⁶⁶

Central Concepts

Though there are many interesting process notions, I shall focus primarily on those of import for theology. Most in one way or another relate to the process notion of God.

Reality as process, Becoming. Process thinkers maintain that ours is a world of events (i.e., a coming out of) and becoming. Actual entities are not unchanging objects. Each thing becomes, but also perishes (i.e., its present states slip from subjective immediacy, even as prior states already have). As events in process, all things can be characterized in four ways: (1) as *objective* results of events from which they arose, they reflect the qualities of those prior events; (2) nonetheless, they are 'subjects', i.e. distinct centres of feeling; (3) each stage of each actual entity perishes from subjective immediacy and is swallowed up in the following events. As such, it becomes a permanent given in the data of history which influences new events coming to be;⁶⁷ and p.307 (4) though the actual entity maintains continuity with its past, at each stage it is a new unique entity.⁶⁸

When process thinkers insist that theirs is a metaphysic of events and becoming, not a metaphysic of being and substance, ⁶⁹ we must not misunderstand them. One might

⁶² Whitehead, *PR*, p. 33.

⁶³ William C. Tremmel, 'Comments on God, Neo-Naturalism and A. N. Whitehead's Philosophy', *Iliff Review* 45 (Spring 1988): 28.

⁶⁴ Whitehead, *PR*, p. 134.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

⁶⁷ John Hayward, 'Process Thought and Liberal Religion', *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 6 (May & September, 1985): 118.

⁶⁸ As Tremmel explains (p. 26), 'Every occasion in time is a *new* occasion. It is an occasion that has just come into being. There is nothing like it anywhere else, or ever has been, or ever will be again.' Again, we see both continuity and discontinuity.

⁶⁹ Pittenger, 'Understanding the World and the Faith', p. 182. See also Charles Hartshorne's detailed explanation of the problems with a philosophy of substance in 'The Development of Process Philosophy', in Ewert H. Cousins, ed., *Process Theology* (New York: Newman Press, 1971). If this sounds strange to Western minds with their predilection for substance philosophies, Hartshorne reminds us that Buddhism has espoused a philosophy of becoming. Buddhists rejected the notion of substances, including the notion of the

think they mean that the most fundamental realities are events, happening; but one wonders what it is that becomes. Must there not be things (beings) which are in the process of becoming? In espousing a metaphysic of becoming, process thinkers are not rejecting substances altogether. Indeed, Whitehead believed the fundamental realities are actual entities. Moreover, process thinkers typically claim matter is eternal. Their point, however, is that one must not think of a world of beings which *qua* beings are static, unmovable, unchangeable. That kind of substance metaphysic is what they reject. Atomic theory, let alone simple observation, shows that everything is dynamic in a process of motion, even the most solid piece of matter. Hartshorne's explanation is especially helpful here:

'Being' is here defined through becoming: That may be said to be which is available for memory or perception, for integration into ever new acts of synthesis, and in this sense is a potential for all future becoming. *To be is to be available for all future actualities.*

It is to be noted that the foregoing doctrine literally defines 'being', or permanent reality, in terms of becoming. Thus it is a misconception to suppose that process philosophy, siding with becoming, rejects being. Rather, it is a doctrine of being *in* becoming, permanence in the novel.⁷⁰

Another point in understanding reality as a becoming is Whitehead's belief in two kinds of processes. The first focuses on the movement of an actual entity (occasion) from one stage to another, becoming at each stage a new entity. This temporal process is called the process of transition. The Other kind of process is the coming into being of an occasion itself, i.e., its subjective arising. This process is called the genetic process.⁷¹ The genetic process emphasizes becoming from the perspective of the actual entity subjectively experiencing that beginning. The process of transition emphasizes the move from one stage to another without focus on the subjective experiencing of any stage. Hence, the change involved in genetic process is directly experienced only by the changing actual entity. A process of transition in an actual entity may be observed by other actual entities, but what happens 'inside' the changing entity can be experienced only by the entity itself.

A final point on reality as becoming is that everything said heretofore about reality as process applies to all actual entities, from the smallest 'puff' of existence to the highest level of being. Whitehead maintained that 'though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level'.⁷² Accordingly, process thinkers hold Whitehead's classic dictum that 'God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification'.⁷³

God as Bipolar. Though process thinkers disagree on some aspects of their notion of God, they uniformly affirm that God, as all actual entities, is dipolar or bipolar. God has a primordial nature (his conceptual pole) and a consequent nature (his physical pole).

soul as substance. They claimed that the fundamental realities are momentary experiences which are in a process of becoming or generating new experiences (Hartshorne, 'Development of Process Philosophy', pp. 49–50).

⁷⁰ Hartshorne, 'Development of Process Philosophy', pp. 61–62.

⁷¹ See Bowman Clarke, 'Process, Time, and God', *Process Studies* 13 (1983): 249–250 and Robert C. Neville, *Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), p. 21.

⁷² Whitehead, *PR*, p. 28.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 521.

God's primordial nature is permanent and unchanging. It is the envisaging of the realm of possibilities, the eternal objects, but even Whitehead understood this in various ways.⁷⁴ Since all metaphysical principles pertain to all actual entities, God and all other entities envisage eternal objects. Each actual entity sees its own possibilities as well as the entire realm of possibilities. In God's case, of course, the two are coterminous, whereas for other actual entities they differ. As John Cobb notes, on this understanding of God's relation to the eternal objects (espoused in Whitehead's *Religion in the Making*), the eternal objects belong no more to God than to any other actual entity.⁷⁵ Of course, God both knows the possibilities more fully than p. 309 other entities can, and organizes them according to their respective values and their possible joint actualization in any given occasion.⁷⁶ This portrayal of God's primordial nature makes it nothing more than the ordering of eternal objects, preparing them for ingression into the world.⁷⁷

In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead presents God's relation to the eternal objects differently. In *Process and Reality* he claimed that everything, including the possibilities for the universe, must be somewhere; that is, all things must be actual entities. The 'somewhere' for eternal objects is the non-temporal actual entity (Whitehead's designation for God). The primordial mind of God is the eternal objects. On this view, God still does not create eternal objects, and he still orders and evaluates them, but they are his primordial nature.⁷⁸ Whitehead says of God, 'Viewed as primordial, he is the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality. In this aspect, he is not *before* all creation, but *with* all creation.'⁷⁹

If God were only primordial, he would be pure possibility without any reality. Thus, he must have a concrete, physical pole to complete the vision of the possibilities. God's concrete pole is his consequent nature. In speaking of God's primordial and consequent natures, Whitehead says, 'His "consequent nature" results from his physical prehensions of the derivative actual entities.'⁸⁰ This means, given p. 310 Whitehead's other doctrines, each actual entity *arises* ('derivative') from synthesis of physical and conceptual

⁷⁴ I mention both understandings of God's primordial nature, because I intend to argue that on either conception, the notion is problematic.

⁷⁵ John Cobb, 'A Whiteheadian Doctrine of God', in Delwin Brown, Ralph James, and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 230.

⁷⁶ Williams, p. 171.

⁷⁷ See for example, Williams's description (p. 171) of God's primordial nature as the 'envisagement of the realm of possibility' and the order which characterizes the world so that it can be one determinate world. Nonetheless, he says that primordial nature is something actual, for 'there is a definite *structure* [italics mine] of possibility which characterizes every existing reality'. See also Bernard Loomer's (Christian Faith and Process Philosophy', in Delwin Brown, Ralph James, and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971], pp. 83–84) claims: 'The primordial nature of God is the conceptual ordering of all eternal objects and possibilities such that a graded scale of relevance is established between each possibility and each actual entity. Because of this unchanging order in the world, each possibility has a different relevance or significance for each actuality. This ordering of all possibilities constitutes the abstract and not the concrete nature of God. This is Whitehead's "principle of concretion".'

⁷⁸ Cobb, p. 230. As with the other conception of God's primordial nature, there are those who seem to follow this perception. See, for example, Pittenger's description of God's primordial nature. He writes ('Whitehead on God', *Encounter* 45 [Autumn 1984]: 329), 'To call God 'primordial' is to say that God contains the whole continuum of possibility as the basis for all actuality.'

⁷⁹ Whitehead, *PR* p. 521.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

prehensions of other actual entities and eternal objects. The passage just quoted claims God's consequent nature results from physical prehensions of those actual entities. How many? All of them, but that means the world! Hence, process thought often labels the world God's body. God's being and that of the world interpenetrate one another. Since the world changes and develops, so does God. Changes in the world enrich his being.⁸¹ Moreover, even as actual entities in the world are perishing, in a sense God also perishes. On the other hand, to perish is not to be annihilated. It is to pass from subjective immediacy to objectivity where the subject has no direct apprehension of it. For example, as I write this sentence, the ideas and words are immediately before my mind. As I continue, the previous sentence is objectified in the world (written on paper), but it is no longer immediately before my mind (or the exact focus of my eyes). With this notion of perishing, process thinkers call God's consequent nature 'everlasting'. 'This means that it involves a creative advance, just as time does, but that the earlier elements are not lost as new ones are added.'⁸² In other words, God's physical pole will always exist, but not necessarily in the same form as before.

God, then, is dipolar, a synthesis of his physical and mental poles. In so being, he is like all other actual entities. Reality is bipolar.⁸³ A final point about God's being stems from a problem Whitehead left his followers. According to Whitehead, God, as all actual entities, is in the process of becoming (concrecence). Since at each moment [p. 311](#) some entity in the world is changing (though at any given moment, many entities may be at rest), and since God's consequent nature is the world, God is always changing, never at rest. However, Whitehead held that whatever is becoming (subject) cannot also be object, but only objects can be prehended. This means that when an actual occasion is in the process of concrecing (undergoing genetic process), nothing can grasp it. It can be prehended only once it has reached its new stage of development and is some determinate objective thing. This creates the following problem: for Whitehead, God, in virtue of his being, provides the initial aim for each entity. But, if things in process cannot be prehended, and if God is always becoming, he cannot serve his appointed function for the world. Though it mustprehend him, the world cannot, for entities can only causally interact with something completely determinate, but God never is.⁸⁴

To address this problem, in *The Divine Relativity* Charles Hartshorne offered a modification to Whitehead which many process thinkers have adopted. He suggests

⁸¹ Cf. Pittenger, 'Understanding the World and the Faith', p. 184, as exemplary of this notion.

⁸² Cobb, p. 223.

⁸³ As Cobb notes (pp. 216–217), Whitehead had a habit in *Process and Reality* of abstracting the two divine poles from one another and speaking as though they function independent of one another. Cobb maintains that though God may do one thing in virtue of his physical pole and another in virtue of his mental pole, it is always God as a totality, the actual entity, who acts. Whitehead also speaks of God's superjective nature. He calls it (*PR*, p. 135) 'the character of the pragmatic value of his specific satisfaction qualifying the transcendent creativity in the various temporal instances. This is the conception of God, according to which he is considered as the outcome of creativity, as the foundation of order, and as the goal towards novelty.' These comments are cryptic and the notion opaque, but the superjective nature is often taken as basically equivalent to God's consequent nature viewed from the perspective of the achieved goals of the creative process. Hence, it is the repository of all value produced, ready to be used in further creative activities (cf. Norman Geisler's discussion of it in 'Process Theology', in Stanley Gundry and Alan Johnson, eds., *Tensions in Contemporary Theology* [Chicago: Moody, 1976], p. 247).

⁸⁴ Lewis Ford, 'The Divine Activity of the Future', *Process Studies* 11 (Fall 1981): 169. See also Neville, *Creativity and God*, for a fuller explanation of the same difficulty from the perspective of God's inability to know anything in the entity's subjective immediacy as it is becoming. He raises the problem initially in chapter [1](#), but repeatedly discusses it throughout the book.

conceiving of God as a personally ordered *society* of divine occasions. As such, God could be both subject and object. Each new divine occasion achieves objectivity as God moves to the next occasion, and all objective occasions are available for prehension by the world. Of course, since God is always becoming, at any moment some new occasion will be subjectively immediate to him. Hence, God as a society of occasions can be both subject and object and apparently solve Whitehead's problem.⁸⁵

Lewis Ford claims even the societal model is inadequate,⁸⁶ and offers another solution. The Whiteheadian model sees God as an everlasting present activity of becoming. The societal model views God as largely past and thus able to effect causally new becomings of other entities. The only alternative is to see God as some activity of the future. Ford explains, 'God is to be seen as a future activity creating conditions for the present.... God prehends every actual occasion p. 312 as it becomes past from every future standpoint.'⁸⁷ This means God prehends the past actual world (i.e., past from any and all future standpoints), unifies it in all ways possible, and then presents it to the nascent occasion of any actual entity. The entity then chooses (prehends) specific items it wants for its emerging self.⁸⁸

God as Personal, Mutable, and Passible. In contrast to traditional theism, process thinkers portray God as personal, mutable, and passible. Hartshorne's treatment of these issues is representative. In *The Divine Relativity* he argues that the process God is personal, but 'personal' means 'to be related'.⁸⁹ Hartshorne explains,

A personal God is one who has social relations, really has them, and thus is constituted by relationships and hence is relative—in a sense not provided for by the traditional doctrine of a divine Substance wholly nonrelative toward the world, though allegedly containing loving relations between the 'persons' of the Trinity.⁹⁰

Hartshorne's thesis is that God, of all beings, is supremely related or 'surrelative'.⁹¹ This logically follows, since God's being interpenetrates the being of all else.

As to immutability, it follows from God's consequent nature that he is mutable. Traditional theism sees this as a defect, but Hartshorne disagrees. He says divine mutability has typically been rejected, because if God changes, he would have to change for better or worse. If worse, he would be unworthy of admiration. If for the better, then how could we speak of him as perfect, lacking nothing, as we typically do?⁹² Hartshorne dismisses the idea that God could change for the worse, because he thinks one can never prove there is ever more sorrow than joy in the world. Hence, a net increment of value

⁸⁵ Ford, pp. 169–170. Hartshorne (*Divine Relativity*, pp. 22–29) makes it clear that his perception of God as a society of occasions is also true of all other actual entities. For Hartshorne this not only means that God and other realities are an aggregate of actual occasions, but also the social aspect of being means that God is related to all things.

⁸⁶ See Ford, pp. 170–171, for his arguments against the societal model.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, pp. vii–viii.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. viii. See a somewhat similar definition of 'personal' in David R. Mason, 'Reflections on "Prayer" from a Process Perspective', *Encounter* 45 (Autumn 1984): 349.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. vii and throughout the work.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

accrues to God at any moment. As to apparent imperfection if he changes for the better, Hartshorne replies:

My reply is that, as we are here using the term, perfect means completely worthy of admiration and respect, and so the question becomes, is such complete admirableness infringed by the possibility of enrichment in total value? I say it is not. We do not admire a man less because we know he would be a happier man if his son, who is wretched, became well and p. 313 happy, or because we anticipate that when a child is born to him it will enrich his life with many new joys. Admiration is not directed to happiness, except so far as we feel that a person does or does not attain the happiness appropriate to the state of the world as known to him. We admire not the amount but the appropriateness of the joy.⁹³

Though process theologians claim God is fundamentally mutable, in one sense they see him as immutable. That is, whatever qualities God has, he has immutably. Hence, God is immutably mutable, immutably surrelative, immutable passible, etc.⁹⁴

Since God is personal and mutable, it follows that he is affected by the world. He experiences our sufferings and joys as we experience them.⁹⁵ What we think and do affects him, and that also means we can enrich him and add value to his being by our actions.⁹⁶ Hartshorne says true religion is serving God, but serving God is not merely admiring or obeying him. It involves contributing benefit to God which he would otherwise lack.⁹⁷

God's Action. If God is as immanent to the world as process thought holds, it would appear that he is very active. However, this is not so. Miracles are denied as vestiges of a mythological vision of reality, and as we shall see, God's creative activity and his action in Christ are really quite passive.

Does God act at all? Daniel Day Williams says God exercises causality in the world, but always in relation to beings with their own measure of causal self-determination (freedom).⁹⁸ This ultimately p. 314 means that whatever God does will not infringe upon the freedom of other actual entities. In his *God, Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy* David Griffin distinguishes two senses of omnipotence, 'I' omnipotence and 'C' omnipotence. 'I' omnipotence is an omnipotent being's ability unilaterally to effect any logically possible

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 46. For further discussions of the question of divine immutability in traditional and process theism see Barry Whitney, 'Divine Immutability in Process Philosophy and Contemporary Thomism', *Horizons* 7 (1980): 50–68, W. Norris Clarke, 'Christian Theism and Whiteheadinn Process Philosophy: *Are They Compatible?*' in Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 234–242, and Thomas Morris, 'God and the World', in Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology*, pp. 286–294.

⁹⁴ For an excellent discussion of the whole issue of immutability in process theology see Bruce A. Ware, 'An Exposition and Critique of the Process Doctrines of Divine Mutability and Immutability', *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985).

⁹⁵ Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, pp. 42–59. See also Ogden, *Reality of God*, pp. 44–70 *passim*.

⁹⁶ Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, p. 133. Ware (p. 183) citing Hartshorne writes, 'It is just because God's nature is constantly in the process of acquiring new value as it experiences the world that we humans are, in turn, capable of fulfilling our deepest religious longing, i.e., "literally to contribute some value to the divine life which it otherwise would not have".'

⁹⁷ Charles Hartshorne, 'The Dipolar Conception of Deity', *Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1967): 274.

⁹⁸ Williams, p. 170.

state of affairs.⁹⁹ 'C' omnipotence means it is logically impossible for God unilaterally to control the actions of self-determined beings, even if those actions are logically possible.¹⁰⁰ Griffin opts for 'C' omnipotence. Hence, God can do anything that is 'doable', but controlling acts of free, self-determining beings cannot be done.¹⁰¹

What, then, does God do? In his primordial nature, God acts 'by presenting to the creatures the unity, the richness, and the limits of possibility as ordered by his vision'.¹⁰² in his primordial nature, God acts not by acting, but by being. Process thinkers say that this means God supplies each actual occasion its initial subjective aim.¹⁰³ God presents the possibilities for becoming, but even if he has a preference among them for the specific actual entity, the individual entity decides which aim to actualize. God does not limit freedom of choice.

As to God's consequent nature, though the world is God's body, it is composed of multitudes of actual entities which themselves are becoming, and God cannot limit their freedom. Consequently, as Williams explains, God's consequent nature acts by being prehended, felt by the creatures.¹⁰⁴ That is, God's body (the world) is objectively present to each actual entity so that as it becomes, it prehends from its particular past history (part of God's body), from other actual entities (other parts of God's body), and from eternal objects. Williams likens this to depth psychology's notion of one person absorbing the p.315 feelings of another and then reflecting them back with transformed meaning.¹⁰⁵

If knowing is considered an action, then, process thinkers agree that God acts in that way. In fact, he knows all things. All past events, person, and the like, are forever preserved in God's memory, and in that sense, never perish.¹⁰⁶ Of course, knowing everything means God knows whatever there is to know, but the future is unknowable. If it were there to be known, actual entities could not avoid doing what is known, but that would limit freedom to do otherwise. Hence, the future is unknowable.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁹ David R. Griffin, *God, Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 270, as cited in David and Randall Basinger, 'Divine Omnipotence: Plantinga vs. Griffin', *Process Studies* 11 (Spring 1981), 13.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 269ff.

¹⁰¹ While this may sound equivalent to the classic free will defender's notion of free will, it is not entirely so. With respect to the proposition 'Not all possible worlds contain self-determining beings other than God', the indeterminist traditional theist Alvin Plantinga affirms it, while Griffin denies it (D. and R. Basinger, 'Plantinga vs. Griffin', p. 16.). Otherwise, the position of process theologians on the notion of human free will in relation to God's power is not substantially different from that of traditional Arminian indeterminists.

¹⁰² Williams, p. 171.

¹⁰³ Sometimes this idea is presented as though God merely lays out all possibilities without any instructions on the best choice, while on other occasions God is portrayed as consciously pointing out (while presenting all other possibilities) the ideal aim for each individual entity.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, p. 176.

¹⁰⁵ Arthur Holmes, 'Why God Cannot Act', in Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987). Holmes offers a helpful explanation of Williams' comments on pp. 176ff. of 'How Does God Act?'

¹⁰⁶ Morris, pp. 300–304.

¹⁰⁷ God knows all the eternal objects, and at any given moment he knows how those objects relate to actual entities, but it seems impossible for God to know how those objects will relate to the world even ten minutes from now since that would entail knowing what will happen in the next ten minutes. To know that would eliminate self-determining beings from doing anything other in the next ten minutes than what they are foreseen to do.

Does God, then, do anything unilaterally in the world? Williams thinks we cannot know; for there is now way to separate God's act from their involvement in the world's activities. Williams explains:

To assign any particular historical event to God's specific action in the world is to risk ultimate judgment on our assertions. Faith leads us to take that risk. We say God sent his Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He spoke to Jeremiah, he heals diseases, he will send the Lord again. But all such assertions in so far as they conceivably refer to historical events require us to acknowledge the limits of our sight and our knowledge. In specific assertions about what God is doing now, or precisely how he has acted, and how he will act, we surely can be mistaken.¹⁰⁸

God and Creativity. Given the process description of God and his relation to the world, there clearly must be a world, and process thinkers affirm this. However, while God needs some world, it need not have been this particular world. This world as a totality and each thing in it are contingent, though it is necessary that there be some world.¹⁰⁹

Although there must be a world, God cannot create it *ex nihilo*¹¹⁰ for the same reason he cannot perform any other act unilaterally. To p. 316 create *ex nihilo* is not only problematic scientifically, but it allows God too much power over the world. Process thinkers repeatedly claim that God's action is persuasive, not coercive.

The process notion of God also necessitates that God is being created. In fact, he is the prime case of creativity. As Whitehead explains, 'Neither God, nor the World, reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty. Either of them, God and the World, is the instrument of novelty for the other.'¹¹¹

As to God's specific creative activity, God creates by providing each actual occasion its initial and ideal subjective aim. The occasion, of course, has its own subjective aim and may decide to reject God's ideal, but still, it prehends God in virtue of a hybrid physical prehension. God's aim is realized not by force, but in respect to how successfully he persuades actual entities to adopt his aim for them.¹¹² As Cobb says, 'the only power capable of any worthwhile result is the power of persuasion'.¹¹³ With respect to God's creative activity, Whitehead concludes:

In this sense, God can be termed the creator of each temporal actual entity. But the phrase is apt to be misleading by its suggestion that the ultimate creativity of the universe is to be ascribed to God's volition. The true metaphysical position is that God is the aboriginal

¹⁰⁸ Williams, p. 180.

¹⁰⁹ William Power, 'The Doctrine of the Trinity and Whitehead's Metaphysics', *Encounter* 45 (Autumn 1984), 293.

¹¹⁰ Cobb, p. 236.

¹¹¹ Whitehead, *PR*, p. 529. See also Tremmel, p. 30.

¹¹² Lewis Ford, 'Divine Persuasion and the Triumph of Good', in Delwin Brown, Ralph James, and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 290. For an excellent discussion of the question of coercion as it relates to process thinking in general, see David Basinger, 'Human Coercion: A Fly in the Process Ointment?', *Process Studies* 15 (Fall 1986).

¹¹³ John Cobb, *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 138.

instance of this creativity, and is therefore the aboriginal condition which qualifies its action.¹¹⁴

As Cobb explains, Whitehead's doctrines clearly curtail God's creative activity even with respect to provision of initial aims. For example, the initial aim is not the ideal in some abstract sense, but God's ideal *given the situation*; that is, God must adapt his purposes to the world as it is. Moreover, though the initial aim greatly influences the emerging occasion, the occasion makes its own decision. In that sense it creates itself (*causa sui*).¹¹⁵ p. 317

The preceding discussion of creation suggests that something other than God ultimately causes creation. For Whitehead that cause is creativity. In his metaphysical categorial scheme, Whitehead has one category called the ultimate. It contains 'creativity', 'many', and 'one' (Whitehead refers to them as notions) which are 'presupposed in all the more special categories'.¹¹⁶ He defines creativity as that 'ultimate principle by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively ... "Creativity" is the principle of *novelty*'.¹¹⁷

Though this sounds like saying that creativity is creator in the sense of efficient cause, as Cobb explains, Whitehead's ontological principle demands only actual entities as efficient or final causes, and creativity is not an actual entity. Hence, creativity is for Whitehead what prime matter was for Aristotle, the material cause.¹¹⁸ As such, Cobb notes that creativity can never explain what things are, why they are, or why there is anything at all. It can never answer ultimate questions. In fact, creativity appears to be another word for the change itself.¹¹⁹ Of course, if neither God nor creativity is the efficient cause of creation, process systems seem in serious trouble. Thus Cobb thinks that Whitehead's God must be given a more fundamental and radical role in creation than Whitehead allowed.¹²⁰

God and Evil. Process theologians believe their handling of the problem of evil far superior to that of traditional theism. Of course, one must accept the process notion of evil in order to buy their answer. According to Whitehead, 'The ultimate evil in the temporal world is deeper than any specific evil. It lies in the fact that the past fades, that time is a "perpetual perishing"'.¹²¹ As Peterson notes, this undercuts the moral aspect of evil in favour of evil as the metaphysical principle that everything perishes.¹²²

¹¹⁴ Whitehead, *Pr*, pp. 343–344. See also Joseph A. Bracken, 'Process Philosophy and Trinitarian Theology—II', *Process Studies* 11 (Summer 1981), 85–86.

¹¹⁵ Cobb, p. 236. Also, though the initial aim presents the eternal objects, God has no control over what they are, for he did not create them.

¹¹⁶ Whitehead, *PR*, p. 31.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Cobb, p. 237.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 237–241.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 241ff. For a thorough handling of the whole issue of God and creativity see Neville's *Creativity and God*. Neville presents a variety of problems with the process conception of God and repeatedly argues that what is needed is a stronger notion of God as Creator.

¹²¹ Whitehead, *PR*, p. 517.

¹²² Michael Peterson, 'God and Evil in Process Theology', in Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 131–133.

Despite their emphasis on a metaphysical rather than a moral notion of evil, process thinkers do handle God's culpability for moral evil. They simply argue that God's power is finite. God does nothing evil p. 318 himself. Evil arises from the free choices of his creatures, and God can stop such choices only by limiting their freedom; but he will not do that. God's role is to present each actual occasion with its ideal subjective aim and to lure it (persuade it) to choose the ideal; but he cannot guarantee that good will be chosen. Nonetheless, God is not guilty for evil (and hence the traditional problem of evil is solved), because he is powerless to stop it.¹²³

Though God cannot remove evil, we should not reject him, for he is deeply sympathetic toward our plight. In fact, he suffers with us, and so he clearly cares deeply. Schubert Ogden says:

... our sufferings also may be conceived as of a piece with a reality which is through-and-through temporal and social. They are the partly avoidable, partly unavoidable, products of finite-free choices and, like everything else, are redolent of eternal significance. Because they, too, occur only within the horizon of God's all-encompassing sympathy, they are the very opposite of the merely indifferent. When they can be prevented, the responsibility for their prevention may now be realized in all its infinite importance; and, when they must be borne with, even that may be understood to have the consolation which alone enables any of us to bear them.¹²⁴

To paraphrase [1 Pet 5:7](#), 'Cast all your cares upon him, for though he cannot do anything about them, he cares for you.'

Process Theology and Pantheism. Though process theology seems to be pantheism, process thinkers deny that it is. Two of the clearest explanations of why it is not come from Hartshorne and Ogden.

Ogden claims process thought differs from both pantheism and traditional theism in that process notions are dipolar while both other views are monopolar. Hence, both traditional theism and pantheism deny 'that God can be in any way conceived as genuinely temporal and related to others'.¹²⁵ Ogden means that traditionally there have been only two apparent answers to God's relation to the world. Either God is totally independent from it (traditional theism) or identical to it (pantheism). This means for traditional theists that God is neither related to the world nor in any sense temporal. For pantheists, since God is the world, he cannot be related to anything outside it, and this particular world becomes necessary if God himself is a necessary being. But that just means that this world had to be actualized p. 319 (contingency is ruled out in that respect). It also means that whatever God does, the world does, but in that case free action of individuals is an illusion.¹²⁶ Ogden says a dipolar view solves the problem, for it allows God to be really related to the world but independent of it so as to insure freedom and contingency in the world.

One might respond that being dipolar merely means God has an eternal as well as physical pole, and that is the only real difference between process views and pantheism. Process thinkers disagree. Hartshorne claims the difference between pantheism and panentheism (his term for process views) is that the former identifies God's being with

¹²³ See Jeffrey Rada, 'Problems with Process Theology', *Restoration Quarterly* 29 (1987), 32, Power, p. 294, D. & R. Basinger, 'Divine Omnipotence: Plantinga vs. Griffin', and Peterson.

¹²⁴ Ogden, *Reality of God*, pp. 64–65.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62.

the world's being, but panentheism claims 'that deity is in some real aspect distinguishable from and independent of any and all relative items, and yet, taken as an actual whole, includes all relative items'.¹²⁷ This means more than just that God has a mental plus a physical pole. It means that in both poles God's being encompasses all reality while remaining distinct from it. In other words, God is present with an inter-penetrates everything so that the world and he are mutually inter-dependent, but not present so as to be literally identical to the world. As Hartshorne explains, panentheism agrees with traditional theism that God must be logically independent of the world (and hence necessitates no particular world—contingency is maintained), but it also incorporates the insight from traditional pantheism that God cannot 'in his full actuality be less or other than literally all-inclusive'.¹²⁸

In sum, panentheism is not pantheism, for it is dipolar, not monopolar. But this means more than merely having a physical *and* a mental pole. It means that even in his physical pole God must be distinct from all else while including it all.¹²⁹

Immortality. Despite claims that everything is perishing, process thinkers speak of immortality. However, they distinguish between subjective and objective immortality.

Subjective immortality (continuation of the present stream of consciousness after death) is usually denied by process thinkers, though not always. For example, Cobb at times leaves open the logical possibility of such immortality. Likewise, Peter Hamilton in *The Living* p. 320 *God*, while not affirming it, at least thinks it is logically possible.¹³⁰ On the other hand, when discussing Christ's resurrection, he generalizes about all resurrections that 'all I can do here is to suggest that there is a place today for a general concept of resurrection that sees permanent meaning and value in our lives without *depending upon* belief in individual life after death'.¹³¹

On the other hand, process thinkers uniformly affirm objective immortality. Each occasion as occurring has subjective immediacy to the actual entity. Once the occasion is complete, the entity moves on, and the previous occasion perishes (leaves subjective immediacy), but, as explained earlier, not in the sense of being annihilated. It has objectivity as part of the entity's past. It is also stored in God and remembered by him as part of his superjective nature. That is objective immortality, and it clearly differs from subjective immortality (conscious life after death). As Tremmel explains:

Because God prehends all the past, and thus preserves all past occasions (all actual entities and systems of actual entities), God embodies the past. Immortality is in God. Things in their perishing, as we observed, do not cease to be. They continue to exist as influence in

¹²⁷ Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, p. 89.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90, but see his overall discussion on pages 88–92.

¹²⁹ Space does not permit discussion of the process conception of the Trinity, but see articles by Power, Bracken, and Bruce Demarest, 'The Process Reduction of Jesus and the Trinity', in Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

¹³⁰ Brown and Reeves, p. 63.

¹³¹ Peter Hamilton, 'Some Proposals for a Modern Christology', in Delwin Brown, Ralph James, and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 379. On p. 380 he says with respect to Christ's resurrection (God's representation to us of the finite sequence of events known as Christ's life) that 'this sequence lives on in God, continually re-created afresh in God's living memory and re-presented to Christ's followers as they turn to God in prayer and sacrament. But it is the sequence as a whole that is re-presented; *no new subjective experiences are added* [italics mine]—or if they are, that is another story.'

the ongoing creative advance of the world, and they continue to exist in the prehensions of God. All is eternally preserved in the 'rememberings' of God.¹³²

Christ and Redemption. As one might expect, process theologians uniformly deny that Christ was anything but totally human ('inwardly as well as outwardly, a *man*'¹³³). Hence, the doctrine of two natures in Christ, one human and one divine, is rejected. Cobb says this is so, because substances are spatio-temporally located, and no two of them can occupy the same space. For God literally to enter Jesus would p. 321 entail displacing something of his humanity. Thus he could not be fully human and fully divine at the same time.¹³⁴

Despite these denials, process thinkers usually like to retain traditional language about Christ, though they reinterpret its meaning. For example, Christ's resurrection is understood along the lines of objective immortality just explained.¹³⁵ Christ as Logos is retained, but the Logos is defined as nothing more than the phenomenon of 'creative transformation'.¹³⁶ As Cobb and Griffin say, 'Christ has been defined as the Logos incarnate which operates as creative transformation. Christ in this sense can be found in all things and especially where there is life.'¹³⁷ Of course, since all entities are involved in the creative activity of becoming, Christ as Logos is not only found in all, but in a sense all are the Logos.

Process thinkers also claim God was in Christ, but not in a way that is not in principle true of all of us.¹³⁸ As Hamilton explains it, 'God in Christ' is just Whitehead's idea of divine immanence. Hamilton explains:

Whitehead's theory of 'prehensions' here offers a significant contribution: it attempts to describe the manner in which one entity is actually, not just metaphorically, immanent in another—actually immanent in that it contributes to and *is* constituent in the other's subjectivity. For Whitehead there is actual immanence, yet each entity, each experience, retains its own subjectivity.¹³⁹

Hamilton likens this to a husband's entering into his wife's joys and sorrows. As she rejoices, joy is central to her experience, and insofar as her husband makes this joy his own, he makes an element of his wife an element constitutive of himself. How much a man

¹³² Tremmel, pp. 34–35. See also Hamilton, pp. 378–379, and Brown and Reeves (pp. 62–63) who on p. 63, quoting from Whitehead (*PR*, p. 532), say, 'Since God's consequent nature "passes back into the temporal world and qualifies this world", our lives being elements in God, also "reach back to influence the world" even apart from our direct social immortality.'

¹³³ Hamilton, p. 368.

¹³⁴ John R. Cobb, 'A Whiteheadian Christology', in Delwin Brown, Ralph James, and Gene Reeves, eds., *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 384.

¹³⁵ See for example, Hamilton's discussion (pp. 378–380) of Christ's resurrection and immortality. See also David Griffin, *A Process Christology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), p. 12, to the effect that the resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as belief in life beyond bodily death are optional.

¹³⁶ Rada, pp. 34–35.

¹³⁷ John R. Cobb and David R. Griffin, *Process Theology: An introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 106.

¹³⁸ Some claim that God's indwelling in Christ differs not only in degree but in kind from the way he indwells the rest of us, but Hamilton (p. 373) denies this.

¹³⁹ Hamilton, p. 370.

identifies with his wife's experience depends on how sympathetic and compatible he is to his wife. Hamilton concludes that 'thus the belief that p. 322 God's self-expressive activity was supremely present in the person and the decisions of the historical Jesus implies the belief that Jesus was supremely *sympathique* to God, and that God is supremely compatible to Jesus'.¹⁴⁰

The preceding suggests that Christ is apparently not unique, but process thinkers claim otherwise. Interpretations of that uniqueness differ.¹⁴¹ Cobb's exposition is especially thorough. He says God's uniqueness in Christ can be explained in four respects. First, the content of God's initial aim for Christ was radically different from that of anyone else. Second, Jesus realized ('obeyed') divine expectation more completely than anyone else. Third, God's aim for Christ was not only that he prehend God's aim for his life (the content of the aim), but also that he prehend the source of that aim, God as a concrete entity. Finally and most unique, prehension of the divine aim was not experienced by Christ as one aim to be synthesized with others, but was 'the centre from which everything else in his psychic life was integrated'.¹⁴²

What, then, of Christ as Saviour and the whole issue of redemption? In [1 Cor. 15:1 7](#) Paul says that without Christ's resurrection there is no forgiveness of sins. However, David Griffin says that belief in Jesus' resurrection is optional for Christian faith. His claim betrays the fact that if process theology has a concept of redemption, it will look little like the biblical notion.

Pittenger is especially explicit on this issue, and his views are generally held by process thinkers. He claims the atonement must be understood along the lines of Peter Abelard's moral influence theory.¹⁴³ Moreover, the human condition is one of alienation, lovelessness and loneliness. Sin is failure to choose God's subjective aims for ourselves. Since his aims are the ideal, if we would choose them, it would transform our reality. How, then, can God get us to choose what we should? In Christ God shows how much he loves us, despite our feelings of loneliness and lovelessness. Of course, God always enters into all that we do, and so he is always demonstrating p. 323 his love for us and to us. But Pittenger calls Christ the 'classical instance' of this, 'a peculiarly intensive release of the divine love-in-act'.¹⁴⁴ Hopefully, this expression of divine love in Christ's life and death will move us to see 'that our deliverance, our "being set right" and our coming to realize concretely what it is in us to become with and under God is a clue to how redemption is effected'.¹⁴⁵ Put simply, God's act in Christ should move us to see that God loves us, and in response we should express love to him by following his aims for us. Those aims are ideal, and if chosen, will transform (redeem) our lives.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ See Demarest's fine discussion (pp. 70–72) of the different approaches to this issue and also Brown and Reeve's discussion (pp. 59–60).

¹⁴² Cobb, 'A Whiteheadian Christology', p. 393. See also his whole discussion (pp. 388–394) of Christ's uniqueness. See also David R. Griffin's explanation of the person of Christ and Christ's relation to God in *A Process Christology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), chapter 9.

¹⁴³ Norman Pittenger, 'Redemption: A "Process Theology" Interpretation', *Theology* 88 (1985), 447–448, 451.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 452, but the whole flow of interpretation is set forth on pages 449–452.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

¹⁴⁶ See Demarest's helpful discussion (pp. 72–74) of salvation in process theology.

What is the Church's mission with respect to this message of redemption? As Rada explains, Cobb sees the body of Christ concept as best explained in terms of Whitehead's notion of 'field of force'. Thus for Cobb the Church is 'the community whose purpose is to maintain and perpetuate the field of force generated by the person and life of Jesus'.¹⁴⁷ What the Church must remember in fulfilling its mission is that Jesus in no sense is an exclusive saviour. He is the classic example of God's love, but that simply means that he is not the only example. There is no finality to Christ.¹⁴⁸ If this sounds preparatory to universalism, it is. Pittenger quotes Ogden approvingly as follows:

The phrase 'only in Jesus Christ' must be taken to tell us not that God acts to redeem in the history of Jesus and in no other history, but that the only God who redeems any history—*although he in fact redeems every history*—is the God whose redemptive action is decisively re-presented in the word that Jesus speaks and is.¹⁴⁹

The Church's mission, then, is not to save from hell those who otherwise would go there if they never heard of nor accepted Christ. Instead, the church, those who have responded to God's love as displayed in Christ, must tell others of that divine love and help them make a similar response to God. But we should not think that others have no inkling of this idea, for 'God has "nowhere left himself without witness" '¹⁵⁰ Pittenger suggests as follows the appropriate attitude toward other religions: [p. 324](#)

Should we not then be prepared to see in the non-Christian religious faiths and in the various non-religious orientations of men and women genuine channels or avenues which God delights to use? And may we not even say, with the Roman Catholic thinker Paul Knitter in his recent book *No Other Name?* (SCM Press 1985), that in all such movements God is indeed active and that many non-Christian movements in history, with their prophets and seers, serve God as the divinely elected instruments for bringing deliverance to men and women in their given circumstances and each through its or his or her own way?¹⁵¹

CRITIQUE OF PROCESS THEOLOGY

Process theology purportedly corrects classical theism's defects, and better synthesizes philosophy and the Christian doctrines than does classical theism. Nonetheless, I believe it is replete with problems, all of which cast serious doubts on the process claim of superiority.¹⁵² *Flawed Conception of God's Being*. Though process theism's God supposedly reflects contemporary science and philosophy, I contend that the process God is either nothing/non-existent or the God of pantheism after all, despite claims to the contrary. This becomes apparent by looking individually at the notions of God's primordial and consequent natures.

¹⁴⁷ Rada, p. 36.

¹⁴⁸ Pittenger, 'Redemption', pp. 451–452.

¹⁴⁹ Ogden, *Reality of God*, p. 172 as cited in Pittenger, 'Redemption', p. 452.

¹⁵⁰ Pittenger, 'Redemption', p. 453.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² See David B. Burrell, 'Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?', *Theological Studies* 43 (1982) for assessment of how process theology claims to be superior but is not. As Burrell shows, process thinkers argue for a new theism because of supposed inadequacies of the old, but what they offer is hardly an improvement, let alone adequate in itself.

When discussing God's primordial nature, I noted different notions of it in process thought. On the first conception, God's primordial nature is merely the perceiving and ordering of eternal ideas. But without *someone* to do the ordering, how can the ideas be ordered? The ordering is not an actual entity, and on this interpretation of the primordial nature there is no actual entity to do the ordering. If that is so, then God's primordial nature is nothing more than an idea. Even on Whiteheadian principles, the notion is inadequate. He says the only real things and real causes are actual entities, but since the ordering of eternal ideas is not itself an actual entity, it must be unreal. Moreover, Whitehead offers no one to do the ordering other than saying that God does it. However, God is defined solely in terms of primordial and consequent natures. To say that the primordial nature does the ordering begs the question, since the question is whether the [p. 325](#) primordial nature is any kind of actual entity (only actual entities act). To say that the consequent nature does the ordering misunderstands Whitehead's notion of God's consequent nature as the world. Hence, if God's primordial nature is just the ordering of possibilities, it is hard to see how possibilities become ordered, and harder yet to see the primordial nature as anything other than an idea.

On the other interpretation of God's primordial nature (the ordered eternal objects themselves), there is still a problem at least as old as Western philosophy. Are the eternal ideas anything other than generalities abstracted from the concrete world (hence, in Whitehead's terms, not actual entities), and where are they? Anyone unconvinced by Plato's doctrine of forms can hardly find Whitehead's notion of eternal objects compelling. Moreover, since eternal objects represent only possibilities, not actualities, it is hard to see how on either a substance metaphysic or on Whitehead's actual entity metaphysic the eternal ideas are real things. Of course, if that is so, and if God's primordial nature just *is* the eternal ideas, it must be a something that is nothing.

As to God's consequent nature, the trick here is to avoid pantheism. Process thinkers claim God's consequent nature inter-penetrates and contains the world while remaining distinct from it. This doctrine surely avoids pantheism if true, but is it true? If so, it is not demonstrably so. Let me explain. God's consequent nature is said to be physical and attached to the world, and the world is physical and attached to God. The problem is: where does God's physicality end and the world's begin, and *vice versa*? If one must decide on empirical grounds (as Whitehead's epistemology demands), it is impossible to know what aspect of any physical thing is the entity itself, and what part is part of God's consequent nature. The net result is that if God's consequent nature-really is distinct from the world, it is impossible to prove it, and so, for all we know, there is no God after all distinct from the physical world.¹⁵³ On the other hand, if one insists that God really is there, then since the only thing empirically observable is the physical world, the view lapses into pantheism where God and world are equivalent. In sum, God's consequent nature is either just a concept but not a real thing (or if real, its existence, is unprovable, and [p. 326](#) thus, a something as good as a nothing), or he is demonstrably real, but only as pantheism claims.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ I find it most interesting that Cobb complains about the doctrine of two natures in Christ, because one would have to dislocate the other spatio-temporally, but he and other process thinkers seem to have no problem with the idea that two physical things (the world and God's consequent nature) are spatio-temporally located in the same place!

¹⁵⁴ In response to my critique, process thinkers may say the problem here is that God's natures have been abstracted, whereas he must be thought of as a unified being. However, that still does not help. If his primordial nature is really a nothing (regardless of how it is conceived) and the consequent nature is a nothing or unprovable as a something, it should be clear that when one joins nothing to nothing, one does not wind up with something. On the other hand, if God in his consequent nature just is equal to the world,

Inadequate Philosophy of Mind. This objection stems from the preceding, and relates to God and all of reality. My contention is that process theology has an inadequate account of what sort of thing mind is.

As to the process God, what is his mind? Is it mental, physical, or a combination of both? One is tempted to see God's primordial nature as mind. This would make mind immaterial, but it would also make God's mind non-existent for reasons argued above. Should mind be associated with God's consequent nature, instead? If so, then God's mind is apparently material, unless, for example, one says humans (part of God's body) are both material and immaterial. Of course, if humans are both material and immaterial, why the process hesitancy to affirm conscious existence after physical death? Moreover, things like rocks and trees (also part of God's consequent nature) can hardly be at all immaterial. But, then, if God's mind is associated with the world, it must be both material and immaterial (an odd philosophy of mind), unless one opts for only a materialist theory of mind for everything in the world. If one adopts a purely materialist account of mind for the world (God's consequent nature), it seems difficult to fit that with God's primordial nature which is in no way physical.¹⁵⁵

Problems with mind in regard to the world are also serious. One suspects the account of human and animal minds is materialist (though p. 327 we are not told), but there are, of course, serious problems with materialist theories of mind. However, the further problem is what to do with inanimate objects. Process thinkers demand that the same principles of metaphysics apply to all of reality, so rocks and plants must also think and in some sense be conscious. The only kind of mind reasonably attributable to such things is material, but where is the mind in inanimate things? Strict materialism with respect to humans means that the mind just is the brain, but a rock has no brain. Empiricism shows us that rocks have no brain nor anything that functions like it. So, then, they apparently do not have minds, but the process doctrine that even inanimate things must feel andprehend means they must have minds in some sense.¹⁵⁶ This is problematic in itself, but it also seems to contradict the process belief that there are no exceptions to the ontological categories.

Can God Feel or Be Felt? Robert Neville raises the problem about prehending God while he is generating a new occasion. No actual entity can be prehended while generating a new occasion, but God is always in the process of becoming.¹⁵⁷ Hence, he can never be

then that is something, but when it is added to the notion of his primordial nature, it is hard to distinguish what results from the pantheists' God. Hence, despite process protestations, their God is either nothing (or at least nothing provable) or a something which is hard to distinguish from pantheism.

¹⁵⁵ Here the problem would seem little different from the problem of mind's relation to body as philosophers have wrestled with it at least since Descartes. The issue is how something conscious, but not extended and bounded causally, interacts with what is extended and bounded, but not conscious. The process notion of God seems to entail that God's primordial nature (if it exists at all) is immaterial, while his consequent nature is material (on an interpretation of the world as only physical). Though all philosophers wrestle with the relation of the material to the immaterial, those who hold a rigorously empiricist epistemology (as process thinkers seem to, and if they do not, they open they door to traditional theism's notion of God as spirit) have an impossible time trying to explain the relation of the two. In the case of process theology, that would be especially devastating, since it could not, then, make sense of the revelation of God's two poles (physical and mental).

¹⁵⁶ Process thinkers might reply that notions like thinking, feeling, prehending must be metaphorical, but it is had to discern what the metaphors stand for in the inanimate world. That is, metaphors compare two known quantities in ways not usually compared, but in this case, the notion of mind for inanimate objects is *unknown*. And so how can the comparison be understood?

¹⁵⁷ Neville, pp. 15, 17, 19–20.

prehended, but actual entities mustprehend both his primordial and consequent natures in order themselves to become. Hartshorne saw this problem and addressed it by saying God is a society of actual entities, but Neville claims that this still does not solve the problem. Since only God's past occasions can be prehended, God (the totality of the occasions) still cannot be prehended. Moreover, if one can onlyprehend his past occasions, he cannot be prehended in those parts of his being most subjectively immediate to himself, the parts that are becoming.¹⁵⁸

I believe this creates even further problems. Specifically, no one canprehend God in his subjective immediacy. Likewise, the Whiteheadian doctrine that actual entities cannot be prehended while in genetic process means God cannotprehend us in our subjective immediacy. If no actual entity can experience another's experiences as the other is undergoing them, then we really have no way to know what God p.328 is feeling, nor can he experience what we do. However, one of process theology's complaints about the traditional God is that he is aloof, removed, and neither knows nor cares about what we undergo. In contrast, the process God not only cares about us, but he suffers with us, for it is his experience, too. However, the problem just raised shows the process God does not feel with us nor experience what to do. Process concepts make it impossible for him to enter our subjective immediacy (nor can we experience his); but then he does not know what we feel, nor does he suffer and rejoice with us. Once our events ends, God can experience its results, but not before. The only way around this problem seems to be for process theism to adopt pantheism. Then as we suffer God would suffer; but process theists staunchly reject this solution. In sum, the process God can no more suffer as we suffer and rejoice as we rejoice than the classical theistic God allegedly can.

Divine Freedom and Power. In analyzing the process account of God's action, one reaches the conclusion that God is entirely impotent. It is not that God could act but that he refuses to do so, in order to persuade rather than coerce. Rather, the process metaphysic will not let him act, for humans must be indeterministically free. One might think God could still act when his deed does not effect the acts of others. However, with the process notion of God, this is impossible. His consequent nature is entwined with the world in such a way that (process thinkers say) whatever the world does immediately affects God and *vice versa*. Of course, then, if God acts, the world acts, but then whatever he does must affect the freedom of others. In that case, the only way to maintain creaturely freedom is for him not to act at all. The only way around this is to say God's only acts are the acts of all entities, but that sounds like pantheism again, and if not, God is totally impotent. Process thinkers say instead that God acts by being felt; but of course, that is totally passive and hardly qualifies as action.

All of this is truly problematic for process theism. Process thinkers say God more accurately fits the biblical picture of God than does the God of traditional theism. However, Scripture portrays an active God, not a passive God who acts by being felt. Process thinkers say their god really cares about his creatures, but since he cannot show he cares by helping them in their time of need (even that would curtail freedom), what difference does it make that he cares? Moreover, the most troublesome problem is that everyone and everything in the universe can decide and act (actively, not passively), except God! This God is impotent. He is worse than the deists' God. Both process theology and deism keep God from acting in history, but at least the deists p.329 allowed God to 'wind up the clock'. The process view of creativity will not even allow that. Despite

¹⁵⁸ See Ford, 'Divine Activity of the Future', pp. 170–171 for difficulties in the social conception of God. See also Neville, chap. 1 for further problems with it in general.

protests from process thinkers, their God is in practice irrelevant to this world and might as well be dead!

Inadequate Account of Divine Attributes. In addition to problems with the process account of divine omnipotence, views of other attributes are flawed. I shall focus on three. First is the matter of divine omniscience. Not only does process thought deny God's knowledge of future events,¹⁵⁹ but its God cannot even know the present state of affairs. Of course, if God cannot know what is happening, it is hard for him to care. Two empirical facts from science make it impossible for the process God to know everything simultaneously. As Gruenler explains:

The incontestable fact is that if God moves necessarily in time he is limited to some rate of velocity which is finite (say, the speed of light, if not the faster rate of some hypothetical tachyon). This means, unfortunately for Process theism, that it is impossible for such a finite deity to have a simultaneous God's-eye view of the whole universe at once, since it would take him millions of light years or more to receive requisite data from distant points and places.

The other problem is peculiar to relativity theory. The doctrine is that no finite being (including God) could possibly embrace the whole universe simultaneously because there simply is no finite position that is not relative. Hence no possibility of simultaneity exists from any possible finite vantage point. Time does not advance along a well-defined front but processes in all sorts of relative patterns which cannot be correlated into any one finite system. That is what relativity means. There is simply no privileged position in the finite world.¹⁶⁰

Second, there is reason to question the goodness and holiness of the process God, despite claims to the contrary. In the world, there is obviously much evil. However, God is tied to the world, so in some sense what happens there is his act as well. As Bruce Ware explains in commenting on Hartshorne's views:

Now, if God's concrete nature is determinative of the abstract, and if God's concrete nature is what it is as a result of taking to itself all the activities of the universe (both of which are held in process theology), then one is p.330 left to wonder, for example, why God is always and only loving in the unchangeable abstract nature when God's concrete nature constantly experiences much that is unloving and evil. Unless God's moral nature stands as immutably independent of the world (which is not the case in process theism), then there seems to be no basis for the confidence that God is always loving and holy as Hartshorne insists.¹⁶¹

Moreover, Neville notes that Whitehead's views make actual occasions the cause of evil. However, to the extent that those choices are hedged in by the divinely presented evaluations of the possibilities, God apparently must also be responsible.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, William Craig, 'Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingency', in Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), and his 'Process Theology's Denial of Divine Foreknowledge', *Process Studies* 16 (1987).

¹⁶⁰ Royce Gruenler, 'Reflections on the School of Process Theism', *TSF Bulletin* 7 (1984): 8. For his thorough exposition and critique of process theology, see *The Inexhaustible God: Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Process Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

¹⁶¹ Ware, p. 192.

¹⁶² Even if choices are made totally independent of God, this does not prove that God is off the hook. As Neville explains (p. 11), 'Why should we want in the first place to exempt God from responsibility for evil? Because of an antecedent commitment to God's goodness. But to deny God responsibility by denying divine

One becomes even more suspicious of the goodness of this God when one realizes the process God will not use force even to curb the actions of a Hitler! This becomes very strange when process thinkers reject orthodox theists' free will defence in answer to the problem of evil. They object that free will defenders will not let God inhibit freedom, even if doing so would prevent horrendous evils. Process thinkers are surely inconsistent in this demand. If process theists are right to reject the free will defence, because they think God could coerce on occasion, then why do they, when stating their own views about God's action in the world, deny that God can use coercion even to stop a Hitler?¹⁶³ p. 331

Finally, what of divine immutability and impassibility? Here we really see the process God's impotence. He is powerless to resist detrimental changes. Hartshorne's claim that change could not be for the worse trivializes the evil in the world and is overly optimistic about the impotent process God's ability to turn evil into good.

What is most troublesome is the reason process theology felt compelled to suggest a mutable God. I do not believe process thinkers have shown that all orthodox theists interpret God's immutability and/or impassibility as they claim.¹⁶⁴ Nor have they shown that orthodox theists cannot make sense of immutability.¹⁶⁵ Orthodox theists like myself hold that God's nature is immutable (he is always loving, just, and so on, and will never become more or less so), and so are his purposes and promises. That, however, does not mean that he cannot enter relationships. Those relationships do not change his being (nature), purposes, or promises. Moreover, to say that God changes his attitudes (at one time he grieves, at another he rejoices; at one time he is angry and at another he forgives the one angering him) is not to say that he changes his being. In fact, because he is holy and just, for example, he must be angry at unrepentant sinners but forgiving when they repent. In that circumstance, no change in attitude would be inconsistent with his unchangeable holy and just nature. In sum, one can be orthodox without holding that God is unmoved by events in the world. Process theists err in assuming the orthodox theists' immutable God cannot change in any possible way.

Creativity and God. Though it is consistent with the process notion of God's action in general, the process concept of creativity is problematic. As already noted, neither God

causal agency is not to lend *support* to the doctrine of divine goodness; it only strikes down a counter argument. And the price of this move is to make the actual course of events *irrelevant* to God's moral character; this goes counter to the religious feeling that God's moral character is *revealed* in events, for better or worse.'

¹⁶³ David Basinger, 'Human Coercion', pp. 164-165. The argument is Basinger's, and he has laid it out in great detail. Moreover, process theology does solve its problem of evil, but in an objectionable way. It is not that the process God could get rid of evil, but just doesn't for some morally sufficient reason (as orthodox theists argue). The process God, poor soul, literally is impotent to do anything, despite the fact the evil committed is harmful to himself (via the consequent nature). Likewise, having seen what process theists say about God's ability to act, one is hardly optimistic about God's ability to harmonize every evil with good so as to maximize good as Hartshorne thinks he does. For examples of what orthodox theists do with the problem of evil, see my *Theologies and Evil* (Washington: Univ. Press of America, 1979). They argue that God has the power to get rid of evil, but does not because there is a morally sufficient reason for not doing so. Hence he is not guilty for removing evil. See also Peterson's article. Among his other objections to process theism, he correctly complains (pp. 131-133) that it does not take seriously enough the moral dimension of evil in the world, that is, its account of sin and evil is inadequate.

¹⁶⁴ Burrell (p. 127) is not convinced they have even understood Aquinas on this matter, and he explains why.

¹⁶⁵ As Nash argues ('Process Theology and Classical Theism', in Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987]), process theists have a habit of presenting only two options (process theology or their caricature of traditional theism). Once one recognizes the false dichotomy, the process option is much less appealing!

nor creativity is the efficient cause of creation.¹⁶⁶ Instead, actual entities other than God are. In fact, the world is involved in creating God, which logically follows if his consequent nature is wrapped up in it. Here again process thinking is inconsistent. All reality supposedly exemplifies the same metaphysical principles, and yet God alone cannot create. Allegedly, he prehends the world and continues to develop, but this must be meaningless p. 332 metaphor because of what we know about how God acts in both primordial and consequent natures, and because he cannot be efficient cause even in his own creation. To be such would limit freedom of other entities (given the world's relation to God's consequent nature), and God cannot do that.

In addition, Neville correctly objects that with Whitehead's view of creation, the ontological principle explains why things are the specific determinate things they are, but it in no way tells why anything should become at all. That is, granting that the creative process is in operation, Whitehead's views explain why entities have the specific qualities they do, and also how the becoming process works. What his views cannot explain is why the creative process goes on at all and does not simply stop. Appeal to creativity does not answer that question!¹⁶⁷

Inadequate Account of Christ and Redemption. Process thought has a deficient understanding of Christ, and the problem is not just that it is unbiblical. Even in the light of process' own claims there are severe problems.

First, we are told that Christ, despite being totally human, had a special relation to God, though in principle all can be as obedient to God and exemplify his love to the same extent as Christ. However, if Christ has no literal divine nature, and if, as I have argued, we cannot distinguish God in his consequent nature from the world, then how do we know that what we see in Jesus is God at work? For all we know, we may not be seeing God at work in Jesus, but only a human being (Jesus) who was a brilliant moralist and very loving individual. But, then, how does that differ radically from Mohammed or Buddha? Moslems and Buddhists may applaud equating Jesus with their leaders; but that misses my point. My point is that despite process claims, we have no evidence that Jesus was special *because of God's special presence in him*. He may have had no special relation to God, but was simply a religious and moral genius. In that respect, he may be no different from Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius or any other great religious leader. If Christ really is different, i.e. if *God* really is at work in Jesus as process thinkers say, process views offer no way to verify that. Process thinkers say it is so, but cannot prove it!

A second problem stems from the first. The process doctrine of redemption demands that Christ exemplify God's love. However, if Christ is nothing more than an unusually gifted human (and there is p. 333 no way to prove otherwise), then his life and death are not an exhibition of divine love. He expresses only his own love. Of course, if that is so, there is no reason why Christ's life or death should move anyone to obey *God*. Perhaps the Christ event can move us to respect and appreciate (even love) Christ, but in the process system that means we respect a man. It need not have any relevance to our relation to God.

Third, denying the objectivity of the atonement and asserting man's freedom to disobey God's aims gives no adequate notion of redemption on either orthodox or process grounds. The orthodox notion of redemption necessitates payment for sin, but process thinking rejects that. On process notions, redemption involves choosing God's aims so as

¹⁶⁶ As noted, Cobb ('A Whiteheadian Doctrine of God', pp. 235–243) shows the inadequacy of creativity as the driving force behind creation. Material causes effect nothing. Hence, Cobb argues for giving God a more active role.

¹⁶⁷ Neville (ch. 3) sets forth this problem. See also Cobb, 'A Whiteheadian Doctrine of God', pp. 235–243.

to transform one's reality. However, if divine love can only nudge but never force us to choose what is right, there is no guarantee for man's redemption in even the process sense. Moreover, since we cannot be sure that Christ's life or death (or anyone else's) expresses God's love, what would motivate man to obey God? Process thinkers assure us that God will redeem every reality, but since he cannot guarantee that any will choose his will, this is just wishful thinking. Furthermore, empirical observation shows that many people's lives are not 'redeemed' in the process sense in this life. When, then, will they be transformed? In the afterlife, after resurrection? That is not the process position, and anyway, process theology denies bodily resurrection and is uncertain about conscious disembodied existence. So when does it happen? Saying it will does not make it so. On process principles, then, there is no redemption in an orthodox sense; nor any guarantee of it in a process sense.

Finally, given the process view of Christ as one among many in whom God works and the claim that God works in many religions, there is no compelling reason to embrace Christianity as opposed to another religion. Pittenger says Christ is the classic example of God's love, but why should a Buddhist or Moslem agree? From their perspective their leaders are the classic examples. Some may respond that only Christ dies for us, thereby showing God's love. However, for all we know that may have been nothing more than a man dying his own death. If so, Christ's death is no example (let alone a classic instance) of God's love. Indeed, the claims of Pittenger, Cobb and the like about Christ as special sound like little more than the expression of predilections based on their cultural and religious upbringing. Since on process notions one cannot prove Christ had a special relation to God, claims about Christ as special sound like a classic case of religious imperialism. Adherents of other religions should not be [p.334](#) persuaded. In fact, even for those raised in so-called Christian societies, there seems little reason to choose the process Christ and Christianity.¹⁶⁸

In conclusion, though process theism tries to be contemporary in its understanding of God and the world, it is tremendously flawed. In fact, it is important to note how many process claims are postulated but never proved. For example, mind is postulated of the inanimate, God's consequent nature is supposedly independent of the world while encompassing it, and Christ is said to be specially related to God, but none of this is ever proved. Moreover, it is dubious that any of these claims (and many more as well) are empirically demonstrable. That is a serious defect in an empirically based theology and philosophy! Indeed, for a so-called empirical theology, it is not merely an underlying deficiency; it is the final irony.

¹⁶⁸ Implicit in my critique is belief that the process God is also religiously inadequate. That is, at the end of all the theory, process theology does not have a God one can live with or worship. I suggest that to be religiously adequate a God would have to be at least as powerful, holy, and just as we are. He would not only have to care about us but would be able to do something for us to express that concern. Moreover, to ensure a moral universe, he would have to be capable of moral governance. But then the process God is religiously inadequate. He is not more powerful than man, but less so, for he cannot act. Since his consequent nature is the whole world, he must somehow be responsible for the evil in it. Since the evil of the whole world is greater than that of any part, it seems any individual must be more holy than God. Furthermore, we are told that God cares for us, but he can do nothing to help us. All he can do is show us the possibilities of a better way, but he cannot actualize any of them for us. And, how can he be a moral governor? If we sin (reject his initial aim), what will he do? How can he do anything to us? Finally, how does life end? God stores us in his memory bank, but there is no guarantee that physical death does not end all conscious existence. Of course, if God will immortalize us in the same way he has stored up the billions of forgotten people who have gone before us, that is not good enough!

Process Theology: A Response

Rodrigo D. Tano

There have been recent attempts to reformulate classic Christian concepts. In many instances, these attempts reflect a sincere desire to render the Christian faith more intelligible and appealing to modern mind. It is regrettable however that in some cases, the effort to make the Christian faith more relevant and fashionable has resulted in compromise. With the supplanting of divine revelation by human reason and the canons of naturalistic science as the basis of ultimate authority, the God of the Bible has been reduced and made subservient to the creative process in nature (process theology), to the vague regulative principle of the universe (Kant), to an impersonal ground of being (Tillich), and the God who is 'dead' (Nietzsche, Altizer, *et al.* No longer is he the living, loving sovereign Creator and Sustainer, Judge and Saviour of the world who is revered, trusted and obeyed by mortal men. In the name of modernity and scientism, some philosophers and theologians have created gods in their own image.

John S. Feinberg's paper on process theology represents a sincere and thorough effort to expound and evaluate this school of thought from the evangelical perspective. Sufficient background material is supplied to assist the reader to arrive at a clear understanding of the underlying developments in science and philosophy that influenced process thought. Due to the abstract nature of the concepts and technical terminology employed by Whitehead to formulate his metaphysical system, the average student may find process thought extremely complicated. Feinberg does well in presenting a detailed description and orderly exposition of the major concepts in process thought.

What we will do by way of comments is, first, to interact with Feinberg over selected points of the paper. The discussion will then be carried further, particularly on the question of God in interaction with some process and evangelical thinkers. We will conclude with an attempt to recast the classical Christian concept of God in the light of Scripture and the challenge of process theology.

As a general reaction to the paper, it should be pointed out that in his critique of process thought, Feinberg simply dismisses the ideas of Whitehead and the rest of process thinkers as altogether without any positive value. Whatever may be the motivation for this reaction, it is obvious that he fails to find in their work significant contribution to the contemporary discussion on God. This is in great contrast to the favourable reaction of some evangelicals to some features of process [p. 336](#) thought. In a major evaluation of process theology, for example, Geisler recognizes several positive contributions of process thought (see *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, pp. 237–82), despite making a devastating criticism of it. For one thing, Geisler readily acknowledges that process theology points to the need for a comprehensive and coherent philosophical and theological framework through which the biblical understanding of God may be formulated. The need for evangelicals to account for *all* the biblical data about God is further recognized. The Scriptures do speak of God as 'foreknowing', 'repenting' and

acting *in time*. To a great extent, Geisler agrees with some points made by Hartshorne and Pike, specially in connection with the reality of God's relation to the world. For indeed, 'a God who cannot act or interact with the world would be less significantly personal'. Geisler admits that 'the doctrine of God's relationality is a biblical and vital teaching which is neglected or lost in some expressions of traditional theism'. Thus process thought 'is to be thanked for reviving this emphasis'.

The other value of process thought lies in its responsible critique of 'purely essentialistic Greek categories' employed in classic formulations on the nature of God.

Notwithstanding the serious deviations of process thought from orthodox beliefs, evangelicals should recognize the value of modern attempts to recast the traditional concepts of God in a way that intentionally interact with present day thought, and to render biblical faith more intelligible to modern man. Furthermore, in spite of the serious problems raised by process theology (like the notions of God's interdependence with the world, the presence of evil, and that the world can actually frustrate and limit God), evangelical theologians should rethink theological formulations of the doctrine of God for purposes of clarity, accuracy and faithfulness to the Scriptures. This is not seen in Feinberg's paper except a brief indication that God 'changes', that is, adjusts his attitude toward those who repent and turn toward him. There should have been a more vigorous and specific interaction in the paper with the ideas of Hartshorne, Pike and Ogden on God's nature and relation with the world.

It also seems to this writer that Feinberg misunderstands some elements in process thought. One has to do with Whitehead's notion of God's primordial nature in conjunction with the concept of eternal objects which Feinberg relates to Plato's 'forms'. Feinberg does not agree that the platonic forms had actual existence; hence, he concludes on this account that 'God's primordial nature is nothing more than an idea' (p. 41). Feinberg contends that 'the only real things and real p. 337 causes are actual entities, but since the ordering of eternal ideas is not itself an actual entity, it must be unreal' (p. 41), that Whitehead 'offers no one to do the ordering other than God does it' (p. 41). So, 'if God's primordial nature just is the eternal ideas, it must be something that is nothing' (p. 42).

This needs clarification. This writer believes that in the Platonic system, though the 'forms' were in the realm of ideas, they were as real and basic (if not more) than actual material objects as they undergirded the latter. Though abstract, the forms as universals cannot be separated from the actual world. In Whitehead, eternal objects are like a colour that comes and goes but does not perish. It is in the eternal objects that (in contrast to constant flux in the world) or 'forms of definiteness' are found. For, in the 'philosophy of organism it is not "substance" which is permanent but "form" '. Eternal objects are pure potentials but are actualized in objects. How then can actual objects ingress from non-existing determinants?

To Whitehead, then, 'God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space.' The process of creativity (or ordering) itself cannot account for the actual becoming of objects; it is God who grounds eternal objects and causes ingression into the world of becoming. It is for this reason that Whitehead introduces God as a nontemporal actual entity. As he puts it,

The ontological principle can be expressed as: all real togetherness is togetherness in the formal constitution of an actuality. So if there be a relevance of what in the temporal world is unrealized, the relevance must express a fact of togetherness in the formal constitution of non-temporal actuality (God in his primordial nature).

Behind the process of ordering is the Orderer of external objects. Nevertheless in Whitehead, God is not different from the order of eternal objects. For, on the side of his

primordial nature, 'he is the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentially. In this aspect, he is not before all creation, but with all creation.' So then, in process thought, God is finite though 'primordial creature' and does not create external objects; for his nature requires them in the same degree that they require him. And so it is not accurate, as Feinberg contends, to conceive of God within process thought as a non-entity.

As an attempt to explain the creative process in the universe, Whiteheadian metaphysics, to my mind, is both attractive and intriguing. It seeks to supply a model of the process of ingression, conspescence and differentiation of objects, as well as their bonding p. 338 in clusters and unities. While the Bible clearly teaches that God created the heavens and the earth and all that there is, it does not provide any details on how it was done. Not everything came into being *ex nihilo*. The book of Genesis implies that God did not create all entities directly or immediately (without means). The innate forces set by the Creator in nature were at work in the generation of forms and classes apparently under divine superintendence. Process metaphysics provides a model and explanation of the dynamics of creativity, the emergence of new forms in the world, as well as the disappearance (perishing) of objects. It offers an explanation for the interrelatedness and interdependence of every entity in the world.

We now turn to the specific objections of process theologians directed at the classic formulations of the doctrine of God. This will extend the discussion on God beyond the scope of Feinberg's presentation. The critique by process theologians of the classic theistic formulations (particularly those of Thomas Aquinas) has led Geisler and others to recognize the need to rethink, if not to reformulate or expand, the classic formulations in order to connect inadequate or misleading points in the traditional understanding of God and to take account of all the data of Scripture on the subject.

Following Aristotelian categories (potentiality and actuality), Aquinas argues for God's timelessness or eternality as a logical consequence of the immutability of his essence. Aquinas advances three arguments for this.

Argument One

Everything that changes has potentiality, for change is a passing from a state of potentiality (for change) to a state of actuality; hence, there is no potentiality in him, and therefore he does not change; otherwise he is not a necessary Being.

Argument Two

Whatever changes is composed of what changes and what does not change (Change requires a changeable and unchangeable element). But God is a simple, not a composite Being; if he were composite, he would be a creature. Therefore, God cannot change in his being.

Argument Three

Whatever changes acquires something new which it did not possess p. 339 before the change. As a perfect Being, God cannot acquire something new, as though he reads something outside his Being to perfect him. Thus God is immutable.

Aquinas' argument for God's timelessness may be stated thus: Whatever changes is in time (temporal). That which changes requires a successive series of different states. But as a necessary Being, God is immutable, hence eternal or timeless.

It should be pointed out that for Aquinas, eternality though timeless is not the same thing as endless time. Eternality is a unity, an essential whole, concurrent. Endless time is

temporal and involves successive, enumerable moments, broken up in endless parts. In God eternity is 'immovable and innumerable', and all moments are seen concurrently. Therefore God is qualitatively different from all creatures.

Pike and Ogden severely criticise this manner of understanding God. For Pike timelessness would eliminate God's foreknowledge (everything is an eternal *now*). God cannot act in time since he can act only in eternity as a timeless Being. This would jeopardize the doctrine of creation since the Bible describes creation as occurring in time. Further, immutability makes God an impersonal, impassible Being since he would be incapable of responding intellectually, emotionally and volitionally. Such a God cannot be an object of worship and trust. Pike also contends that the Bible depicts God as changing his mind in answer to prayer, in responses to repentant men or due to their wickedness.

In a somewhat similar vein, Ogden contends that the essentialistic view of God leads to some antimonies or paradoxes. The act of creation occurred in time and the temporal world is a contingent product of God's creative act. If 'God's act of creation is one with his own eternal essence, which is in every respect necessary', Ogden concludes that we are caught in a 'hopeless contradiction of a wholly necessary creation of a wholly contingent world'. Moreover, to understand God as perfect and absolute is to render service and relationship unnecessary since God cannot respond or relate to finite humans whose callings and activities obtain in the temporal space-time order. It also follows that service and worship have no value or significance to an infinite and absolute Creator—God.

In response to these criticisms, we make the following statements.

First, the God of the Bible is unchanging in his nature but not in his relations or dealings with his creatures. Bruce Wray speaks of God's 'ontological immutability' with reference to 'the supreme excellence of his intrinsic nature', or to 'God's external and self-sufficient being'. This is the way the biblical authors describe God's unchangeableness ^{p. 340} ([Ps. 102:25–27](#); [Mal. 3:6](#); [Isa. 1:17](#)). Wray also affirms God's 'ethical immutability' which relates to God's faithfulness and reliability in performing his promises.

Secondly, the ontological immutability of God need not detract from his involvement in the world. On the contrary, as Dorner stresses, 'our conception of the immutability proper to God must *account for rather than conflict with* God's vitality'. The God of the Bible is dynamically active in history and creation and is sovereignly and lovingly involved in the affairs of men and nations. To quote Dorner again, 'God constantly changes in his affairs with people as he encounters new happenings and responds to changing situations, but God's changes always express rather than deny his unchangeable moral nature'.

Thirdly, the element of mutability in God has to do with 'relational mutability', that is, as men change in their attitude toward God, he in turn adjusts his dealings with them in conformity to his moral nature. We can also in this respect speak of change in God's emotions; hence, he is not impassible. He can be angry ([Num. 12:9](#); [Josh. 7:1](#); [Isa. 42:25](#)); jealous ([Exod. 20:5](#); [Josh. 24:19](#); [Zech. 1:14](#)); compassionate and merciful ([Ps. 103:8](#); [145:8](#); [Jer. 3:12](#)); patient and longsuffering ([Exod. 34:6](#); [Num. 14:8](#); [2 Peter 3:9](#)).

Fourthly, regarding the act of creation, we need not assume that a necessary Being must necessarily create. God's act of creation (flowed from his free choice and could therefore involve him in time (aspect of his creative act).

For all its inadequacies and flaws, process thought has suggested ways by which the concepts and categories employed in traditional theism may be corrected, expanded or clarified. Evangelical thinkers should not merely react to what they consider unorthodox or unbiblical. Since theological formulations are the product of our creative efforts, they are ever in need of improvement, if not modification.

There is need to explore the implications and relationships between the concepts of the essential and economic Trinity; God's *ad intra* and *ad extra* relations with regard to

time, eternity, immutability and the incarnation; his transcendence and immanence. Further study on these ideas will enrich our understanding and experience of our God, who is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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The Gospel and Religious Pluralism

Klaas Runia

We are living in a world that is characterized increasingly by religious pluralism. At the beginning of this century most people in Western world would have regarded non-Christian religions as demonic phenomena and their adherents as destined for hell.¹ It was seen as the great task of the Christian world to evangelize the non-Christian world and to save all those millions from eternal perdition. Today the situation is quite different. Many church people believe that there is truth in all religions and that they all provide their adherents with a way to God and to salvation. By means of dialogue we are all called upon to share our spiritual riches with others, whether we are Christian or non-Christian. At any rate we should work together towards a better world and most certainly refrain from all attempts to convert the others to our particular brand of religion.

Why did all these changes take place? A great number of factors could be mentioned here and we could spend a great deal of time on them. We shall restrict ourselves, however, to a brief enumeration of the main factors, without going into details. First of all there is the fact that we know much more about the other great religions than people did at the beginning of this century. Due to increased international travel, the development of modern means of communication, the growth of religious studies in many universities and in particular also the presence of people of other faiths in our own countries, all of us are aware that the other religions are living realities. None of us today would dare to say what Temple Gairdner wrote in his official account of the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh, 1910: 'The spectacle of the advance of the Christian Church along many lines of action to the conquest of the five great religions of the modern world is one of singular interest and grandeur.'² Not only have we witnessed a strong revival of these great religions, but today their adherents live next door to us. Thousands upon thousands of people from other countries, taking their own religion with them, have settled in the USA and in Britain; on the European continent we daily meet with the many guest labourers, immigrants and refugees, coming from non-Christian p. 342 lands.³ Most of

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith tells us in one of his articles that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has its first article on 'Buddhism' in its ninth edition, in 1875. Cf. 'Mission, Dialogue, and God's will for us', *International Review of Mission (IRM)*, 1988, 360/1.

² Quoted from John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 1977, 64.

³ Cf. Max Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission*, 1976, 148. 'It is a new experience in Europe to have some schools in which fifty percent or more of the children are Hindus or Muslims.'

these people are Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist and they often put us to shame by their piety and firm adherence to their traditional beliefs and rites. At the same time we see in our own Western world a strong decline in the number of church members and a tragic weakening of fundamental convictions in those who still go to church. Our Western world is no longer the 'Christian' world; nor can we still call the rest non-Christian. We are in the West are living in a post-Christian era, while in other continents we not only witness the revival of the old religions, but also see that, for instance, sub-Saharan Africa is more Christian than our own so-called Christian continents.

THEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Some historical comments

Undoubtedly it is not the first time that the Christian church has encountered religious pluralism. The early church lived in a similar world and had to find its own place among the various existing religions.⁴ The apostle Paul, in his letters, points out that it was a world of many lords and many gods, over against which the Christian church had to confess that in fact Jesus alone is Lord and his heavenly Father alone is God (cf. [1 Cor. 8:4–6](#)). The ancients themselves reckoned that there were more than thirty thousand gods!⁵ But many philosophers of those days (such as Celsus, for instance) believed that in actual fact people served one God, each approaching him through different intermediaries, by different rituals, using different names. Celsus wrote: 'It makes no difference if one invokes the highest God or Zeus or Adonai or Sabaoth or Amoun, as the Egyptians do, or Papaïos, as the Scythians do.'⁶ For the Christians this was totally unacceptable. Both the Old and the New Testament clearly profess the uniqueness of God and of Jesus. [Deuteronomy 4:39](#) states: 'Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that the lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.' And Acts [p. 343 4:12](#) states: 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.' Throughout the centuries this has been the classical view of the Christian church. The Council of Florence (1438–1445) speaks for the classical Roman Catholic Church, not just pagans, but also Jews or heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before the end of life they are joined to the church.'⁷ Luther speaks for the Protestant Churches when he calls Christianity the *vera et unica religio* (the true and unique religion). This very same view is still held by many Christians, as appears from the statement by the congress on World Mission at Chicago in 1960: 'In the years since the war, more than one billion souls have passed into eternity and more than half of these went to the torment of hell fire without even hearing of Jesus Christ, who he was, or why he died on the cross of Calvary.'⁸

Actually it was only in the days of the Enlightenment that in the Western World the absoluteness of the Christian Gospel was really challenged again. One of the best known

⁴ This is denied by W. C. Smith, who asserts that the nascent church had to deal only with two spiritual movements, namely, Greek philosophy and the Roman Empire, *art. cit.*, 361, note 1.

⁵ Cf. Robert L. Wilken, 'Religious Pluralism and Early Christian Theology', *Interpretation*, October 1986, 380.

⁶ *Art. cit.*, 383.

⁷ Denziger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*. 35th edition, 1965, no. 1351.

⁸ *Facing the Unfinished Task*, ed. J. O. Percy, 1961, 9.

challenges is issued by G. E. Lessing in his famous parable of the three rings. A father has three sons whom he loves equally. He can give his ring with magic power to only one of them. Since he does not want to offend any of his sons he has two perfect imitations of the true ring made and before he dies he gives each son his blessing with one of the rings. Each of the three believes that he possesses the true ring and considers the others false. So they all go to the wise judge Nathan who speaks for Lessing himself and for the whole Enlightenment when he offers the following judgment: 'Let each think his own is the true ring' and in the meantime show forth 'gentleness, a heartfelt tolerance, good works and deep submission to God's will'.⁹ Since that time, the question of how we should regard other religions has been with us, and we all know that there are no easy answers.

The time is past when Christians could say with Fielding's Parson Thwackum: 'When I mention religion I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion but the Church of England.' Many Evangelicals too realize that we face a host of difficult questions here. Some of these questions have been formulated by the Theological Consultation on Dialogue in Community that was organized by the [p. 344](#) World Council of Churches and held at Chiang Mai, Thailand, April 18–27. We shall mention a few of them. What is the relationship between God's universal action in creation and his redemptive action in Jesus Christ? Are we to speak of God's work in the lives of all men and women only in tentative terms of hope that they may experience something of him, or more positively in terms of God's self-disclosure to people of living faiths and in the struggle of human life and ideology? How are we to find biblical criteria in our approach to people of other faiths and ideologies? What is the biblical view and Christian experience of the operation of the Holy Spirit, and is it right and helpful to understand the work of God outside the church in terms of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit?¹⁰ As a matter of fact, when one surveys the great variety of answers that has been given to these and similar questions during this century only, one feels at times completely at a loss. In this section of the paper we shall look at some of these answers. Naturally this survey has to be brief, and a certain degree of superficiality is unavoidable; but if we really want to gain a proper perspective we have to pay at least some attention to the various answers given so far.

Roman Catholic views

After the period of the Middle Ages, in which the Roman Catholic Church adopted a triumphalistic ecclesiology, based on a virtual equation of the Roman Catholic Church with the Kingdom of God, Roman Catholic theology espoused the so-called 'conquest theory'.¹¹ Christian kings who tried to conquer countries outside Europe were expected to apply the Augustinian dictum '*compelle intrare*' (compel people to enter¹²). In the 19th century this 'conquest theory' was replaced by the 'adaptation theory'. Although the natural knowledge of God in itself is not sufficient for salvation and must be complemented by the special revelation in Christ, all truth contained in it must be preserved and in its mission work the church should adapt itself as much as possible to the religious truths that are present in the other religions. Others went even further and

⁹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*.

¹⁰ 'Dialogue in Community' (containing the text of the statement of Chiang Mai), *Ecumenical Review*, July 1977, 263.

¹¹ Cf. J. Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology. An Introduction*, 1978, 342.

¹² Based on a misinterpretation by the Church Fathers of [Luke 14:23](#).

saw in the other religions, in as far as their adherents live by the '*lumen naturale*', the forecourt of the true church of God, the Roman Catholic Church.¹³ p. 345

In our century these ideas were further developed into the 'fulfilment theory'. This theory is strongly advocated in several documents of the Second Vatican Council.¹⁴ In section 16 of *Lumen Gentium* we read: 'Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them, through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to his grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as preparation for the gospel. She regards such qualities as given by him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life' (35). The document is still cautious. It does not state unequivocally that Christ is present in the other religions or that these religions in themselves are ways of salvation. It does intimate, however, that the qualities of goodness and truth which these non-Christian religions may possess come from Christ ('Him who enlightens all men', cf. [John 1:9](#)). A similar caution is found in *Nostra Aetate*. Here we read: 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men' (662). *Ad gentes* seems to go even further when it says that 'whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, this [missionary] activity frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker' (595/6).

Individual Roman Catholics have taken this lead and gone much further. Karl Rahner, for instance, has strongly advocated the idea of 'anonymous Christians'.¹⁵ Although maintaining that Christianity is the absolute religion, being founded on the unique event of the incarnation of the Son of God, in his approach to the non-Christian religions he takes his starting point in God's will that all men be saved. Every man is destined for the beatific vision of God and has been created with a view to his grace. Even though creation may not be identified with grace, grace always accompanies it. Even those who p. 346 have never heard the gospel are nevertheless confronted with God's grace by virtue of their being destined for grace. The faithful adherent of other religions can be saved through the faithful practice of his religion. Actually he has to be seen as an 'anonymous Christian' and his religion as lawful and salvific, at least up to the time when the gospel is brought to him. The Christian missionary therefore 'does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian'.¹⁶

¹³ Cf. Verkuy, *op. cit.*, 344.

¹⁴ *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, 1966, 660–668; *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, *op. cit.*, 14–101; *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes)*, *op. cit.*, 584–630.

¹⁵ Cf. *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (the German edition was issued in 1962).

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the Chang Mai consultation cautioned against misuse of the idea of the 'anonymous Christian'. In the part on Dialogue we read: 'In particular we should avoid using ideas such as "anonymous Christians", "the Christian presence", "the unknown Christ", in ways not intended by those who proposed them for theological purposes or in ways prejudicial to the self-understanding of Christians and others', *Ec. Review*, July 1977, 262.

A Roman Catholic scholar from India, Raymond Pannikar, goes even further. 'Because the human person is not just an individual, but also has a sociological and a historical dimension, salvation, through an inner and personal act of Christ, is prepared and normally carried out by external and visible means which we call sacraments. The good and *bona fide* Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the sacraments of Hinduism, through the message of morality and good life, through the Mysterion that comes down to him through Hinduism, that *Christ* saves the Hindu normally. This amounts to saying that Hinduism has also a place in the universal saving providence of God.'¹⁷

In a similar vein Hans Küng makes a distinction between the ordinary way of salvation in the world religions and the extraordinary way in the Church. Says Küng: 'A man is to be saved within the religion that is made available to him in his historical situation. Hence it is his right and his duty to seek God within that religion in which the hidden God has already found him.' Thus, according to him, the world religions are 'the way of salvation in universal salvation history; the general way of salvation, we can even say, for the people of the world religions: the more common, the 'ordinary' way of salvation, as against which the way of salvation in the Church appears as something very special and extraordinary.'¹⁸

All these views are based on the idea that the gospel is the fulfilment of that which, though in a hidden manner, is already p. 347 present in the non-Christian religion itself. In turn, the fulfilment theory itself is based on the well-known Roman Catholic distinction of nature and grace, or the natural and the supernatural. The latter is a kind of superstructure, built upon the former and restoring and elevating it, so that what is hidden in the natural revelation and obscured by the onslaught on sin may be brought to light and thus to its final fulfilment.

The World Mission Conferences

In the first half of this century several important World Mission Conference were held and all of them have dealt with the problem under discussion. Again it is not possible to discuss them at great length. As a matter of fact there have been many publications about them.¹⁹

As we have seen already, Edinburgh (1910) was rather optimistic about the future of Christian missions and of Christianity as a whole. Here too the 'fulfilment' idea played an important role. Some saw a continuous evolution from the non-Christian religions to Christianity as the summit of the religious development of the world. Others (e.g. A. G. Hogg) were of the opinion that both the Christian and the Hindu live in an equally real relationship to God. The report itself, however, although integrating many of these ideas, fully maintained the absoluteness and finality of the Christian gospel.²⁰

At the Conference of Jerusalem (1928) the idea of the fulfilment was still strongly present. Evangelical participants wanted to maintain the uniqueness and the universality of the Christian gospel. Some Anglo-Saxon theologians (e.g. W. E. Hocking), however,

¹⁷ Raymond Pannikar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 1964, 54.

¹⁸ Hans Küng, *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, ed., Joseph Neuner, 1967, 52/3. Cf. also Küng, *On being a Christian*, 1978, 91.

¹⁹ Cf. Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 350ff.; *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, 1954, 353-373; Eric S. Fife and Arthur F. Glasser, *Missions in Crisis*, 1962, 118ff. Cf. also the doctoral thesis of J. J. E. van Lin, *Protestantse theologie der godsdiensten. Van Edinburgh naar Tambaram (1910-1938)*, 1974.

²⁰ Cf. Van Lin, *op. cit.*, 32ff.

proceeded from the starting point of a world religion, in which all religions (including the Christian religion) are rooted. The conference report again contained many of these elements, without achieving a real synthesis. On the one hand, it stated that Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of the Father and that there is only one way of salvation; on the other hand, it also stated that rays of the light, which Christ is, are to be found in other religions (169ff.). Bishop Stephen Neill p. 348 later on concluded that the deliberations of the Jerusalem Conference could be regarded as 'the nadir of the modern missionary movement'. 'This was the moment at which liberal theology exercised its most fatal influence on missionary thinking, the lowest valley out of which the missionary movement has ever since been trying to make its way.'²¹

In the preparations for the third World Conference (to be held at Tambaram in 1938), two documents played an important part. In 1932 W. B. Hocking, a Harvard philosophy professor, wrote the report *Re-Thinking Missions* (1932). Under his leadership a group of prominent laymen had made a tour of world mission fields, later on known as the Laymen's Missionary Inquiry. The resulting publication strongly propagated the idea that all religions are ways to God and that Christianity, in co-operation with the non-Christian religions, should seek for the ultimate truth. Missionaries should be 'co-workers with the forces that are making for righteousness'.²² The report suggested that 'the relation between religions must take increasingly hereafter the form of a common search for truth' (47). In his report Hocking wrote: 'The missionary will look forward, not to the destruction of these religions, but to their continued existence with Christianity, each stimulating the other in growth toward the ultimate goal, unity in the completest religious truth' (443/4).

At the request of the International Board of Mission, the Dutch missionary Hendrik Kraemer wrote his book *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*.²³ Deeply influenced by the theology of Karl Barth, who opposed religion to revelation as man's religiosity over against God's Word, Kraemer strongly emphasized that there is a deep gulf, a fundamental 'discontinuity', between the religions of man (including Christianity!) and God's revelation in Jesus Christ. 'To *decide* for Christ and the world he stands for implies a break with one's religious past, whether this past is "Christian" in the qualified sense of the word or non-Christian' (291). Kraemer emphatically rejected the 'fulfilment' idea. 'It will no more be permitted to call, as so often is done undiscerningly, sublime religious and moral achievements the pure and unmistakable evidence of divine revelation of the same sort and quality as the revelation in Jesus Christ' (122). Consequently Kraemer was a strong advocate of Christian mission. 'The great pathfinder [for every missionary] is the apostolic p. 349 urge to pave the way for Christ and stimulate the growth of communities consisting of Christian men and women, who in the way they express Christianity are not clumsy imitations of Western Christianities, but have the flavour of their own environment' (324).

Kraemer's book received rather mixed reactions. Some, especially those coming from the European continent, wholeheartedly supported his main line of thought. Others, in particular Anglo-Saxon and Asian theologians, rejected his strong emphasis on the idea of discontinuity and opted for continuity. A. G. Hogg, who for very many years taught in Madras, spoke for many belonging to the latter group, when he emphasized the reality of 'non-Christian faith'. 'Why ... am I so convinced of its actual existence? Most of all because

²¹ Stephen Neill, *The Unfinished Task*, 1957, 152.

²² W. F. Hocking, *Re-Thinking Missions*, 1932, 40.

²³ Cf. Van Lin, *op. cit.*, 276ff., 300ff.

I am sure I have already met with it. I have known and had fellowship with some for whom Christ was not the absolute Lord and only Saviour, who held beliefs of the typically Hindu colour, and yet who manifestly were no strangers to the life "hid in God".²⁴ He even goes so far as to reject the necessity of conversion for such people. 'If within non-Christian faiths, such fine levels of spiritual life [as in the case of Mahatma Gandhi] can be reached, why should Christian effort be directed towards getting men to change their religion instead of to make progress within the religion they possess?'²⁵

Liberal theology

To anyone who studies the history of the World Mission Conferences it is evident that already after Jerusalem a parting of the way was taking place. Liberal theology could not accept the traditional view of the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ and of the rejection of the other religions as legitimate and genuine ways to God. The report *Rethinking Missions* gave clear evidence of this. After Tambaram the same line of argument was presented by many Anglo-Saxon and Asian scholars.

In 1940 W. E. Hocking himself wrote a book entitled *Living Religions and a World Faith*, in which he advocated the idea that each person should remain in his own religion, but should also be willing to accept good elements from other religions. In this way this p. 350 person would arrive at a 'reconception', a new conception of his own religion, complemented and enriched by his contact with other religions.

In more recent days W. Cantwell Smith has ably defended the idea that the adherents of other religions are also 'people of faith'.²⁶ They too seek and find God. In one of his later publications he stated: 'I do not say that God was revealed in Jesus Christ, just like that, absolutely, impersonally; and I suggest that it is not a good thing to say. I do say that God has been revealed to me through Jesus Christ, and has been to many millions of people throughout history ... I suggest that in the future theology may profitably learn to speak a different language. God is not revealed fully in Jesus Christ to me, nor indeed to anyone that I have met; or that my historical studies have uncovered.'²⁷ Smith also made a contribution to the 1988 issue of the *International Review of Missions* that commemorated Tambaram 1938. He stated his belief that a new day has dawned in the world's religious history (373). In the 'one world' in which we live today we realize that the great religions are 'great movements of the human spirit', each 'of great spiritual depth, and many would now add, salvific force' (361). Today mission work can only be seen as sharing in God's great mission in this world. What began in Bethlehem is not God's only mission, but just part of it. 'Few of us Christians know much about God's mission in the Islamic venture; God's mission to India, and nowadays ... to the world, through the Hindu complex; God's mission to East Asia, and nowadays to the world, in the Buddhist movement' (366). This entire mission of God is the work of the Holy Spirit. Everyone who denies this is disloyal to Christ and is blaspheming God (367)!

Similar ideas are to be found in the publications of John Hick. He is of the opinion that we are witnessing a Copernican revolution in theology. This revolution consists in a shift

²⁴ A. G. Hogg, 'The Christian Attitude to Non-Christian Faith', *The Authority of the Faith*, Vol. 1 of the Tambaram Series, 1939, 101.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, 106. It must be pointed out, however, that in a book that he wrote in 1947, *The Christian Message to the Hindu*, Hogg said to a Hindu 'caste-convert': 'The injunction "Follow Me" includes the further command "Join My Church"' (1942).

²⁶ Cf. W. C. Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 1979.

²⁷ W. C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 1981, 174.

‘from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realization that it is *God* who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him.’²⁸ In a more recent publication he states: God ‘is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways.’²⁹ But what then about Jesus Christ as the true incarnation of God? According to Hick p. 351 we must take these expressions not as statements of fact, but as poetic or symbolic or mythological language (55).³⁰ It means that Jesus is ‘our sufficient, effective and saving point of contact with God’, but we are no longer forced to say that he is man’s ‘one and only effective point of contact with God’ (56).³¹

The Ecumenical Movement

How did the ecumenical movement, especially as it is embodied in the World Council of Churches, deal with the issue under discussion? in many ways the WCC is a continuation of what had started in the great World Mission Conferences.

In the first period of its existence the WCC was dominated by postwar biblical theology, which stressed the authority and unity of Scripture. An able expositor of this biblical theology was the first general secretary, Dr. W. Visser ‘t Hooft. His was a Christ-centred biblical theology, which was well expounded, for instance, in his book *No Other Name*. In this book he turned against all forms of syncretism and in particular rejected the syncretism that was expressed in the Sufi-hymn:

O God, in every temple I find people that seek thee
In every language I hear spoken, people praise thee ...
Sometimes I frequent the Christian cloister and sometimes the mosque
But it is thou whom I search for from temple to temple.³²

Over against this syncretism he sets the claim of the Christian gospel. In line with the view of H. Kraemer he states: ‘Christianity understands itself not as one of several religions, but as the adequate and definitive revelation of God in history. To classify this faith as one of the expressions of a general phenomenon called religion is to set it in a framework Which is foreign to its nature ... It is high time that Christians should rediscover that the very heart of their faith is that Jesus Christ did not come to make a contribution to the religious storehouse of mankind, but that in him God reconciled the world unto himself’. (95) p. 352

Gradually, however, the necessity of a sincere dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies came increasingly to the fore within WCC circles. Already in the very first paragraph of the introduction to the report on ‘Witness’, adopted by New Delhi (1961), we read: ‘Christ loves the world, which he died to save. He is already the light of the world, of which he is the Lord, and his light has preceded the bearers of the good news into the darkest places. The task of Christian witness is to point to him as the true light, which is already shining. In Christ was life, and the life was the light of men, the light that

²⁸ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 1973, 131.

²⁹ John Hick, *God has Many Names*, 1980, 52.

³⁰ In defence of this view Hick appeals to the result of modern biblical criticism, cf. 54.

³¹ Carl E. Braaten has rightly pointed out that Hick’s view is nothing but ‘a popularized reissue of Troeltsch’s Copernican revolution’, but lacking the fullness and complexity of Troeltsch’s vision. ‘It is a sheer return to a pre-Barthian theology of the History-of-Religions School.’ Cf. ‘The Problem of the Absoluteness of Christianity’, *Interpretation*, October 1986, 348.

³² *Op. cit.*, 1962, 84.

enlightens every man. The work of evangelism is necessary in this and in every age in order that the blind eyes may be opened to the splendour of light.’³³ On the following pages we read that Christians will go forth with joyful confidence, ‘knowing that the Holy Spirit will lead them *to where Christ already is*’ and that they must be sensitive to ‘the ceaseless work of the Holy Spirit *among men*’. The report affirms the necessity of missions, but also states: ‘We must take up the conversations about Christ with them, knowing that Christ addresses them through us and us through them’ (82). It is not at all surprising that in the last part the word ‘dialogue’ suddenly appears. ‘Dialogue is a form of evangelism which is often effective today’. (84)

At the World Mission Conference at Mexico City (1963), much attention was given to the idea of dialogue. The term was not seen primarily as the indication of a certain method or technique, but rather as the description of an basic attitude that characterizes the Christian in his encounter with people of other faiths. At the Kandy (Sri Lanka) Consultation in 1967 the themes was ‘Christian Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths’. At Uppsala, 1968, the term played an important part in the report on ‘Renewal in Mission’. Already in the first part we read: ‘The meeting with men of other faiths or of no faith must lead to dialogue.’ The report immediately adds: ‘A Christian’s dialogue with another implies neither a denial of the uniqueness of Christ, not any loss of his own commitment to Christ, but rather that a genuinely Christian approach to others must be human, personal, relevant and humble.’ In other words, the emphasis is again on the basic attitude.

The Assembly of Nairobi (1975) meant another step forward on the same road. Section II dealt with the theme ‘Seeking Community: The common search of people of various faiths, cultures and ideologies’. At the invitation of the Central Committee some representatives of other religions were present at the Assembly (a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim, and a Sikh) and they all took part in the p.353 deliberations of the section. The report itself shows much confusion, mainly owing to the fact that various concepts and levels of dialogue were mixed together. When the first draft was presented, it created quite a chaos. Several delegates wondered whether there were not a tendency toward syncretism! After much discussion the draft was augmented by a preamble that clearly rejected syncretism.³⁴ But this only applied to crude forms of syncretism. What about the more refined forms? In the second round of discussions the Indian theologian Russell Chandran openly stated that he rejected Kraemer’s view and continued: ‘In a genuine sense, our knowledge and experience of Christ is enriched by the response of people of other faiths. Witnessing to Christ is, therefore, a two-way movement of mutual learning and enrichment. The Church which evangelizes is also evangelized in the sense that its knowledge of Jesus Christ and his gospel is deepened by the response of those to whom the gospel is proclaimed ... Therefore those who preach Christ to people of other faiths should also be willing and expectant to learn about the fullness of the reality of Christ by listening to what they have to say in witness of their faith’ (71). The chairman of the Central committee, Dr. M. M. Thomas, made a plea for a ‘Christ-centred syncretism’ (236). The report in its final form could not agree about the answer to the question whether or not Jesus Christ is at work among people of other faiths. Several answers were enumerated, without a choice being made.

The Theological Consultation on ‘Dialogue in Community’, held at Chiang Mai, Thailand, 1977, produced a cautious document. Paul G. Schrotenboer, the retired General

³³ *The New Delhi Report*, 1961, 77.

³⁴ *Breaking Barriers*, 73.

Secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Council, is of the opinion that this document is 'better than anything that the WCC produced previously on the subject'.³⁵ There is a clear awareness of the danger of syncretism in both its crude and its more refined forms. As we already have seen the document asks some very pertinent questions with which we all have to grapple. As a matter of fact, the document as a whole contains more questions than answers! Some of these questions and statements, however, are rather disquieting for Evangelicals. What should we think of the idea, held by some, that there is 'a sense of communion with all peoples and everything which is made holy by the work of God in communities of faith and ideology beyond our own'?³⁶ Or of the assurance given to the partners p. 354 in dialogue 'that we come not as manipulators but as genuine fellow pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue' (261)? Or of the statement that problems concerning the authority of the Bible remain unsolved and of the need to give much closer attention to the problem of relating Christian worship and the meditative use of the holy books of other faiths (259/60)?

At Vancouver (1983) a real problem arose, when one of the first drafts contained the sentence: 'While affirming the uniqueness of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus to which we bear witness we recognize God's creative work in the religious experience of people of other faiths.' At the plenary many interventions centred their comments on this phrase. Ultimately the last part of it was altered as follows: 'We recognize God's creative work in the seeking for religious truth among people of other faiths.'³⁷ I believe that Schrotenboer is right when he concludes about the position of the WCC on dialogue: 'There seems to be an unresolved tension on the one hand between their claims of the truth of the gospel and on the other the acknowledgment of redemptive truth in all religions.'³⁸

Some 'ecumenical' theologians

Theologians who play an important role within the WCC sometimes go much further, in particular theologians from Asia. In an article from 1977 on the topic 'Towards a Theology of Dialogue'³⁹ S. Wesley Ariarajah, a Methodist minister from Sri Lanka, very bluntly states that Christians in Asia, Africa and Latin America must extract themselves out of the 'Teutonic captivity' of Christian theology. This means the recognition that one of the sins of our past has been to absolutize the Christian religion and theology, implying that the other religions were false or, at any rate, 'not true'. Ariarajah rejects such an absolutization emphatically. The 'stories' of the other religions are just as valid as that of the Christian tradition, which has taken the form of the creation-fall-redemption story. But we all know that this too is not more than a 'story'. As Christians we should not try to break down the stories of the others, but rather try to express the Christian experience within their conceptual framework. In order to be able to do this we need a much broader concept of revelation than is customary in Protestantism. p. 355 He also condemns the attitude of Christians who oppose dialogue by quoting such words as: 'No man can come to the Father except through me', or: 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. Such an opposition is based upon an outmoded understanding of the Bible. In the line of Bultmann

³⁵ Paul G. Schrotenboer, 'Inter-Religious Dialogue', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, July 1988, 213.

³⁶ *Ec. Review*, July 1977, 259.

³⁷ Emilio Castro, 'Mission in a Pluralistic Age', *IRM*, 1986, 198.

³⁸ *Art. cit.*, 214.

³⁹ *Ec. Review*, January 1977, 3-11.

he makes a radical separation of faith itself from the outmoded forms and languages in which it is presented. The 'faith statements' about Jesus are still important but have no binding authority. 'No Scripture is more valid or more true than another ... There is no reason why the Hindu Scriptures should not be meaningful and provide the context of faith in Jesus Christ for an Indian Christian' (9). There is no reason either to see the church as an exceptional, unique community. The divine love for all humankind and the divine Lordship over all life completely exclude any idea 'that salvation occurs only in one stream of history, which is limited in time to the last nineteen centuries and in space to those areas to which the missionaries went' (10). The only thing that is particular about the Christian community is 'that it has come to accept the event of Jesus Christ as a decisively significant event in the whole history of humankind' (11).

Similar ideas are propounded by Stanley J. Samartha, the former director of the WCC Unit on Dialogue.⁴⁰ He is also a typical representative of the post-Kraemer theology. In the present situation it is no longer possible to start from the exclusivity of the divine revelation in Jesus Christ. Although we as Christians firmly believe in the Lordship of Christ, we should not see the particularity of his lordship in terms of the rejection of other lordships but rather in terms of relationships.⁴¹ Only God is Absolute, all religions are relative. Therefore, 'Mount Sinai should look at river Ganga; and river Ganga at Mount Sinai. There is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the Sinai desert is superior to that developed on the banks of the Ganga' (99).⁴²

Here ecumenical and liberal theologians close their ranks.⁴³ And the consequences are undeniably very serious. Jesus becomes 'a' significant event in God's dealing with humankind. There is no place for the concept of 'salvation history', as used in Christian theology and indicating the special place of the Jewish nation and of the Christian church in God's self-revelation to this world.⁴⁴ The authority of Scripture is given up, for 'no one Scripture is more valid or true than another' (9). This actually means that there are no criteria by which different concepts of God may be tested. We arrive here at pure subjectivity and pure relativity⁴⁵ and the final upshot may even be unadulterated polytheism. As a matter of fact we find just that in the following statement of Tom Drive: 'God has different "natures". In pluralist perspective, it is not simply that God has one nature variously and inadequately expressed by different religious traditions. It is that there are real and genuine differences within the Godhead itself, owing to the manifold involvement that God has undertaken with the great variety of human communities.'⁴⁶ The final answer that is given here to the question what to think of the non-Christian religions is that of pure syncretism. The Sufi hymn, part of which we quoted before, has won the day!

⁴⁰ Cf. his article 'Mission in a Religiously Plural World', *IRM*, 1988, 311–324.

⁴¹ Stanley J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue*, 1981, 97.

⁴² Cf. also the essay 'Ganga and Galilee: Two Responses to Truth', *op cit.*, 142–157. Here he states that 'the Hindu and the Christian have their own particularly distinctive contribution to make to the common quest for truth' (153).

⁴³ In the essay mentioned in the previous note Samartha openly joins in with such liberal theologians as John Hick and Paul Knitter (142, 153f.).

⁴⁴ Cf. Ariarajah, *art. cit.*, 11.

⁴⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 1989, 161ff.

⁴⁶ Tom Drive, in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, edited by Paul Knitter and John Hick, 198, 212.

Evangelical Theology

Evangelical theology has always rejected all forms of syncretism. It strongly upheld the uniqueness of Jesus of Christ as the only saving revelation of God and generally regarded the other religions as false religions, in which sinful man seeks to save himself on the basis of his own piety and religiosity.

Again I must restrict myself to a few names which I regard as important. In 1950 the British Inter-Varsity Fellowship published a collection of essays under the title *The World's Religions*. The editor, J. N. D. Anderson, wrote an epilogue in which he acknowledged that the Christian 'will find much in those who follow other religions which will rebuke, instruct and inspire him, as, for instance, the Muslim's fidelity in prayer and fast, the Buddhist's dignified self-discipline and the Sadhu's detachment from the things of time and sense' (190). But these matters regard practice rather than dogma. 'In regard to the content of faith, the Christian will neither want nor dare to meddle ..., for he knows that his faith is not man-made but God-revealed, and therefore of universal validity; and he bases this conviction on the deity, authority, and exclusive claims of the historical Christ.' He cannot see the other religions as 'forerunners or harbingers of the full p. 357 revelation in Christ' (191). Although the Christian will trace all that is best in non-Christian religions to its ultimate source and origin (Christ, who said: 'I am the truth' and who is 'the light that lighteth very man'), he nevertheless must regard these religious systems as 'Satanic substitutes, however, good they may be in parts' (192).

We find the same line of argument in the works of my own former teacher, the late Dutch missiologist J. H. Bavinck. In his *Introduction to the Science of Missions*⁴⁷ he has a section on 'elenctics', by which he understand the science that is concerned with the conviction of sin. Its task is to unmask to heathendom all false religions as sin against God and to call heathendom to a knowledge of the only true God (222). He does not deny that each person, however deeply fallen, is within the reach of God's common grace, but fallen man is 'always secretly busy escaping from God' (228). We should also be very cautious in speaking about moments of truth in the other religions, for we may not forget that these moments always function within a framework that is intrinsically evil and therefore have a content different from the same words in the Christian religion. The only one who can really reach the heathen and convict him of sin is the Holy Spirit himself (229).

Bishop Stephen Neill, who may not have regarded himself as an evangelical in the strict sense of the term but who shared many of the evangelical convictions, wrote in his book *The Unfinished Task*: 'We must not let sympathy, or respect, or personal friendship, blind us. Christ is a destroyer as well as a fulfiller. In him every partial or measured truth will find its full and perfect radiance, but only by passing through the experience of death and resurrection. Christianity is not identical with other faiths. If Jesus is the truth, and his Gospel the message for all men, then the Word of God as it comes to us through him is unique, and there is literally no other name under given among men whereby we may be saved. On that we have no right to compromise.'⁴⁸

In the famous Lausanne Covenant of the International Congress on World Evangelization (1974), evangelicals from all over the world professed: 'We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one Gospel ... We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ

⁴⁷ Published in English in 1960, but the Dutch edition was from 1954.

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, 1957, 193.

speaks equally through all p. 358 religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only Godman, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved.’⁴⁹

Johannes Verkuyl, Bavinck’s successor to the chair of missiology in the Free University of Amsterdam, has made a deep study of the *theologia religionum* in several of his works. He fully maintains the finality of Jesus Christ. ‘He is unique, incomparable, irreplaceable and decisive for all ages and peoples’.⁵⁰ Yet he also tries to do as much justice as possible to the non-Christian religions. He does reject, however, the theological *a priori* of such Roman Catholic theologians as Rahner and Panikkar, who regard the other religious systems as ways of salvation, as long as they have not yet met Christ (480). But with W. Pannenberg he does believe that the indestructible urge to religiosity in man manifests that no human being is detached from the transcendental reality of God (479). He himself approaches the problem of the other religions within a trinitarian framework. At times he goes far in his positive appreciation of what he finds in these religions. We give a quotation from each part of his trinitarian approach. From the part about God the Father: ‘How was God involved when the Vedas were being transmitted? What went on between God and Gautama Buddha when the latter received the Bodhi? What transpired between God and Mohammed when he meditated in the grotto?’ (356) From the part about Christ: ‘A theologian of religions who remembers this christological dimension will keep looking for evidences of this Christ who is ceaselessly active; he will be alert for signs of the messianic kingdom in the religious life of mankind both inside and outside the church’ (359). From the part about the Spirit: the convert need not leave everything of his former life behind: ‘His manner of being, living, and thinking may well contain much that stems from God himself, which, when placed within the context of a Christocentric universalism and directed toward Christ can shoot forth in new blossom’ (360). It is not surprising that Verkuyl is strongly in favour of dialogue with the adherents of other religions. At the same time he believes that every successful dialogue is dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit.

In his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World* John Stott, who was also the principal drafter of the Lausanne Covenant, closely follows J. H. Bavinck and fully approves of his idea of elenctics. ‘No p. 359 Christian who accepts the biblical view of the evil of idolatry on the one hand and of the finality of Jesus Christ on the other can escape [the very concept of elenctics].’⁵¹ It is therefore no wonder that in the final chapter of his book he strongly advocates the need for conversion. ‘It is our solemn duty to affirm that those to whom we announce the gospel and address our appeal are ‘perishing’. We proclaim to them the good news of Jesus not because they are saved already but in order that they may be saved from perishing’ (111).

Canon Max Warren also strongly stresses the great need for us today to obey the Great Commission. He utterly rejects all facile talk of ‘different roads to the summit, as if Jesus were in no particular and distinctive sense “the Way, the Truth and the Life” ’.⁵² But he is also close to Verkuyl, when he believes that we need a conversation with the people of other faiths at the foot of the cross of Calvary and that there and then ‘we may expect to discover a Jesus *incognito*’ (151). We are therefore not surprised that he closes the

⁴⁹ *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas, 1975, 3/4.

⁵⁰ J. Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 358.

⁵¹ *Op. cit.*, 1975, 60.

⁵² Max Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission*, 1976, 150.

chapter on 'The Christian Response to Religious Pluralism' with the words: 'How exciting it is to live in a world of religious pluralism such as we are experiencing today. What a wonderful opportunity that religious pluralism offers to Christians and to everyone else to make a new discovery of Jesus Christ. How gratefully we should accept God's providential challenge.'⁵³

In 1982 the First Conference of Evangelical Mission Theologians was held at Bangkok. Its papers and findings were published in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, edited by the Indian theologian Vinay Samuel and the English Chris Sugden. In the introduction they state that many of the participants 'questioned the adequacy of the European and North American missionary understanding of the gospel'.⁵⁴ In its findings the conference expressed its deep concern that 'the churches of the Two Thirds world are in danger of bondage to alien categories' (277) and recognized that 'our Christological task is carried out in dialogue with people from other religious traditions' (278). In their own paper the editors deal with the 'dialogue with other religions' (122–140). They believe that it is time for evangelicals to put this dialogue on their agenda (128, 131). With approval they quote the statement made at Nairobi, 1975, by Lynn A. de Silva (Sri Lanka): 'Dialogue, far from being a temptation to syncretism, is a safeguard against it, because in dialogue we get to know one another's faith in p. 360 depth. One's own faith is tested and refined and sharpened thereby. The real test of faith is faiths-in-relation.' (132) They see, among others, the following questionable assumptions underlying the fear of dialogue on the side of evangelicals: (1) the assumption that both Christianity and paganism are closed systems which are both already clearly defined; (2) the stress on the uniqueness of God in Christ at the expense of the universality of God at work throughout all history; (3) the assumption that all religions are primarily a matter of faith and belief, and that we must confront them with our own belief system (132f.). At the close of their paper they formulate an agenda for dialogue, in which many of the burning issues that call for further reflection are enumerated (135ff.).

The last author I want to mention is Lesslie Newbigin. As early as 1968, when he was still Bishop of Madras, he wrote the fine booklet *The Finality of Christ*, in which he stated: 'To claim finality for Christ is to endorse the judgment of the apostles that in this [Christ's] life, death and resurrection God himself was uniquely present and that therefore the meaning and origin and end of all things was disclosed; it is to join with the apostles in making this judgment.' (76). Last year he wrote a new book on the same topic, but in a broader perspective: *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Here he strongly opposes the views of Paul Knitter, John Hick and the authors of the essays that were published in the July 1985 issue of *IRM*, in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Tambaram. Again he firmly upholds the finality of Christ (159f.) and denies that this idea is culturally conditioned. 'The gospel is not just the illustration (even the best illustration) of an idea. It is the story of actions by which the human situation is irreversibly changed' (166). At the same time he rejects the 'exclusivist' view which holds 'that all who do not accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour are eternally lost' (173). But the 'inclusivist' position which 'acknowledges Christ as the only Saviour but affirms that his saving work extends beyond the bounds of the visible church' does not satisfy him either. His own view is well summarized in the following convictions: 'I believe that we must begin with the great reality made known to us in Jesus Christ, that God—the creator and sustainer of all that exists—is in his own triune being an ocean of infinite love overflowing to all his works in

⁵³ *Op. cit.*, 170.

⁵⁴ *Op. cit.*, 1983, ix.

all creation and to all human beings ... I believe that no person, of whatever kind or creed, is without some witness of God's grace in heart and conscience and reason, and none in whom that grace does not evoke some response—however feeble, fitful, and flawed' (175). p. 361

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I begin with some preliminary remarks.

1. As evangelicals we have given *comparatively scant attention* to these problems. Quite often we dismissed them as 'unreal', for it was quite clear to us that only those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved. Full stop! When other theologians spent much more time and energy on these problems, we usually agreed to disagree with their solutions and left it at that. Full stop! If we did pay attention to the problems involved we were usually much better in asking questions than giving answers.⁵⁵

2. We should take as our starting point the *authority of Scripture*. The main weakness of the greater part of the ecumenical discussion of our subject is that it does not recognize this authority. It is impossible to find an answer to the difficult questions under discussion if one agrees with S. Wesley Ariarajah's statement that 'no one Scripture is more valid or true than a reflection of 'the faith and belief of the people who composed reflection them'.⁵⁶ Chiang Mai did not help much either. It did ask some pertinent questions on this point, but did not give any answer to its own questions.⁵⁷ For us as evangelicals the authority of Scripture is decisive. I think we all agree with what H. Kraemer said in his paper after Tambaram: 'In all my reasoning and in all my efforts to formulate my opinion, I take my starting point *within* the realm of the Christian revelation. From it I take my standards of judgment and evaluation. The Christian revelation is my authoritative guide and no other principle or standpoint.'⁵⁸ But I think we also agree with him when he acknowledges that his great problem is that he has only a partial and imperfect understanding of this revelation and that he needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

3. However, Scripture is not the only factor that determines our thinking. Every text, including that of Scripture, is always written in the particular *context* in which the writer finds himself and it is read and interpreted in the particular context in which the reader finds himself. It is striking, for instance, that the way in which the apostles preach the gospel to the Jews is different from their preaching to the non-Jews. It is the same gospel, but they use a different terminology, p. 362 and the emphasis is also different. When one compares Peter's 'sermons' in [Acts 2](#) and [4](#) with Paul's 'sermons' in [Acts 14](#) and [17](#), they appear to be quite different in approach and structure. For instance, while Peter emphasizes that Jesus is the Christ, the God-given Messiah, Paul does not use this term. Today we are living in an entirely different historical and cultural setting. This new setting does not mean a changed gospel, but it does mean that we come to the very same gospel with different questions and that we have to listen with fresh attention, expecting new answers from this inexhaustible source.

⁵⁵ Cf. the agenda for dialogue given by Samuel and Sugden, *op. cit.*, 135ff. and Schrotenboer, *art. cit.*, 224f.

⁵⁶ *Ec. Review*, 1977, 9.

⁵⁷ *Ec. Review*, 1977, 163.

⁵⁸ H. Kraemer, 'Continuity and discontinuity', in *The Authority of Faith*, Vol. 1 of *The Tambaram Series*, 1939, 7.

4. This is not to say that we may come to the gospel with any question we like. Certain questions may even put us on the wrong track! An example is the question often asked in evangelical circles: *Will all who do not believe in Jesus Christ be lost for ever?* Many evangelicals are inclined to answer this question with a quick and straightforward affirmative. I remember that when in 1968 I attended the World Congress on Evangelism in Singapore we had a special conference hymn that spoke of the billions that were lost. After one or two days I felt unable to sing that hymn any more. How can one praise the Lord with full dedication, while in the same breath one expresses the judgment that billions are lost? We already encountered something similar in the statement of the Chicago Congress, 1960, which I quoted before: since the Second World War about half a billion people have gone to the torment of hell fire, because they did not hear of Jesus Christ. I believe such statements go beyond what we are allowed to say. In his *Reformed Dogmatics* the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck rightly wrote: 'With regard to the salvation of the heathen and of children dying in infancy, we can, on the basis of Scripture, only refrain from a definite judgment, in either a positive or negative sense.'⁵⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, who for many years worked as a missionary in India and later on served as a bishop of the Church of South India, also finds it hard to believe that all who do not consciously accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour are eternally lost.⁶⁰ His main ground is the same as that of Bavinck: it has not been revealed to us. Says Newbigin: 'It is a question to which God alone has the right to give the answer' (177). He further adds that the question is wrong because it starts with man instead of starting with God and his glory (179). 'The gospel ... shifts the centre from the self and its desires to God and his glory.' Summarizing his argument p. 363 he says: 'Who is going to be saved at the end? That is a question which God alone will answer, and it is arrogant presumption on the part of theologians to suppose that it is their business to answer it. We have to begin with the mighty work of grace in Jesus Christ and ask, How is he to be honoured and glorified? The goal of missions is the glory of God' (180).⁶¹

5. My last preliminary remark is that all parties in this debate agree that man is 'incurably religious'. This is due to two factors. (a) Man was created in the image of God and therefore designed for communion with God. (b) God himself continues to reveal himself to man, even after the Fall. J. Blauw rightly says: 'A man without "religion" is a contradiction in itself. In his "religion" man gives account of his relation to God. His religion is reaction upon the (real or pretended) revelation of God. Man is "incurably religious" because his relation to God belong to the very essence of man himself. Man is only man as man before God.'⁶²

But how to evaluate this 'religiousness' of man? In my opinion there are two 'solutions' that lead us into a *cul-de-sac*.

The exclusivist view

This is the traditional evangelical view, as we noted in our brief survey of evangelical theology. Only those who know the gospel and consciously believe in Jesus Christ will be

⁵⁹ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 4, 708.

⁶⁰ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 173f. and 177ff.

⁶¹ In a discussion with W. Visser 't Hooft, Dr. Ariarajah called this view 'theological neutrality', which can no longer be maintained in our age (*IRM* 1, 1985, 420/1). In reality, however, it has nothing to do with neutrality. It is the attitude of faith which respectfully leaves the secret things to the Lord (cf. [Deut. 19:29](#)).

⁶² J. Blauw, 'The Biblical View of Man in his Religion', in H. G. Anderson (ed.), *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, 1961, 32.

saved. It is also the traditional view in my own Reformed tradition. J. H. Bavinck speaks for it when he states that we must distinguish between the general and the special revelation. In his general revelation God has revealed and still is revealing himself to every human being. Ever since the creation of the world he makes known 'his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity' ([Rom. 1:20](#)). This very formulation shows already that this general revelation does not impart saving knowledge. Yet this revelation in itself is not defective. If man had not fallen into sin, it would be sufficient for a believing relationship with God. But man *has* fallen and by his wickedness he now 'suppresses' the truth of this revelation ([Rom. 1:18](#)) and consequently falls into the sin of idolatry, which is foolishness. It is such, because [p. 364](#) behind it 'there lies hidden rebellion against God, vain illusion, and self-deceit'.⁶³ John Stott follows this same line of thought. After dealing with such passages as [Acts 10:34, 35](#); [Acts 14:16, 17](#); and [John 1:1-3](#), he summarizes his interpretation as follows: 'The witness ... of Peter, Paul and John is uniform. All three declare the constant activity of God in the non-Christian world. God has not left himself without witness. He reveals himself in nature. He is not far from any man. He gives light to every man. But man rejects the knowledge he has, prefers the darkness to light and does not acknowledge the God he knows. His knowledge does not save him; it condemns him for his disobedience. Even his religiosity is a subtle escape from the God he is afraid and ashamed to meet.'⁶⁴

Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer had similar views. On the basis of his so-called Christomonism, Barth in the first volumes of his *Church Dogmatics* rejected all divine self-revelation outside Christ and declared all religion, even the Christian religion, to be sheer 'unbelief'.⁶⁵ Kraemer followed him on this path. He, too, stated: 'The Christian revelation testifies to the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen Lord, which is a "stumbling block" to the Jew, "sheer folly" to the Gentiles, and only adorable and saving mystery to the eye of faith. Revelation in Christ is a free divine act of redemptive irruption into the life of man and of the world. This is an offence to man, because all philosophy, all idealistic religion, all consistent mystical religion, all moralism meet in one point. They constitute various endeavours for self-redemption, and instinctively reject the truth that God and God alone can work redemption.'⁶⁶ In one of his last books he repeated this same view and wrote that in the light of Christ (and not in that of Christianity!) 'the first thing we must say *point-blanc* about the "other" religions is that in their deepest and most essential intentions all of them are errors'.⁶⁷

In this exclusivist view all emphasis is on 'discontinuity', to borrow Kraemer's famous term. But is this really all that is to be said? It is striking to see that many of the authors whom I just quoted also acknowledge that there is more to it. Bavinck, for instance, also quotes with approval a missionary who for many years worked in a prison in Pretoria, South Africa, and who wrote: 'I have frequently found God in the soul of the South African Bantu [= the black]. [p. 365](#) Certainly it is not the full revelation of the Father. But nevertheless, God himself is the one who lies hidden behind a curtain, as a shadowy figure, but the main outline is visible. A surprising and glorious experience! And when I experienced the moment that a soul surrenders, I understood that the Master had been

⁶³ *Introduction*, 228.

⁶⁴ *Op. cit.*, 69.

⁶⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I 2, 299ff.

⁶⁶ *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 70.

⁶⁷ H. Kraemer, *Why Christianity of All Religions?* Dutch edn., 1960, 88.

there earlier.' (227) And after Tambaram Kraemer felt compelled to admit that Barth's view did not wholly satisfy him. Barth left unanswered too many questions that cannot be ignored. Such as: 'Were those who lived under the sway of the non-Christian religions entirely left to their own devices, or has God also somehow worked in them? If it is true that there is much that is true, good and beautiful in the non-Christian religions, what is their relation to God and his working in man?'⁶⁸ In his later book Kraemer also states emphatically that he does not mean to say that the 'other' religions are erroneous in their totality and in every aspect.⁶⁹

The inclusivist position

Must we then go to the other extreme and adopt the inclusivist position? As we have seen in the first part of this paper, this solution is very current in present-day theology. We discovered it in the 'fulfilment' idea which is so popular in Roman Catholic theology, especially since Vatican II. We found it in Rahner and Küng. We recognized it in the writings of Hick and Cantwell Smith. It is almost everywhere. To mention one more example, the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama is of the opinion that the Christian mission should not only be ready to respect the tradition of the other, but also to hear speaking through it the voice of the Christ who stands outside our understanding of him. 'For Christ names his own name ... Our joy is simply to acknowledge that name wherever we recognize it, be it in a Presbyterian Kirk or a Buddhist temple.'⁷⁰

Naturally all these theologians try to find some theological foundation for their inclusivist position. It is striking, however, how varied these arguments are. Without aiming at completeness I mention the following. 1. The *christological* argument. This often takes different forms, but generally it amounts to some kind of cosmic Christ or Christ-principle. The unknown Christ is present in Hinduism (Pannikar). Christ's work of salvation is the completion of his work of creation p. 366 (Camps⁷¹). We should search for a Christ-centred syncretism (Thomas⁷²). 2. The *pneumatological* argument. W. Cantwell Smith argues that God through his Spirit is constantly and everywhere at work. We should therefore not set ecclesiastical frontiers to his activity.⁷³ 3. The *theocentric* argument. According to Hick we should go through the Copernican revolution of moving from the christocentric to the theocentric perspective. 'The universe of faith centres upon *God*, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion ... This means that the different world religions have each served as God's means of revelation.'⁷⁴ 4. The *soteriological* argument. Christopher Duraisingh, general secretary of the Council for World Mission, rejects the dilemma of 'theocentric' or 'christocentric' and opts for a 'soteriocentric' approach.⁷⁵ We should engage in 'a common search for salvation'. Paul Knitter also prefers this 'salvation-

⁶⁸ H. Kraemer, in *The Authority of Faith*, 22.

⁶⁹ *Why Christianity of All Religions?*, 93. Cf. also L. Newbigin, *op. cit.*, 172ff.

⁷⁰ *One World*, July/August, 1977, 9.

⁷¹ A. Camps, *Christendom en de godsdiensten der wereld*, 1976, 37ff.

⁷² M. M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faith*, 1975. Cf. also his paper at the National Assembly, 1975, and the article: 'The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-centred Syncretism'. *Ec. Review*, 1985, 387-397.

⁷³ *Op. cit.*, 366.

⁷⁴ *Op. cit.*, 52.

⁷⁵ 'Issues in Mission and Dialogue: Some Reflections', *IRM* 1988, 398ff.

centred' approach, for it would call on the different religious believers to work for a 'shared liberative praxis'.⁷⁶ 5. The *kingdom-perspective* argument. Emilio Castro, the general secretary of the WCC, believes that our mission work should not be done as 'a limited movement from one centre, the remembrance and adoration of Jesus Christ', but 'within the wider frame of the kingdom of God and especially of the eschatological perspective of that concept'.⁷⁷ We should not forget that 'in the biblical revelation we have the names of people who were part of God's overall plan, totally outside of the direct history of Israel'.

All these arguments, however well they may be intended, are not convincing. Some are based on the old idea of a *theologia naturalis*. Others are new forms of the old 'fulfilment' theory. But whatever their form, underlying nearly all of them is the idea that somewhere in the depth of all religions there is a fundamental unity of divine self-revelation, a unity that later on has become manifest in an exemplary way in Jesus Christ. In other words, the basic line of thought in most of these views is that of 'continuity' between the essential tendencies and aspirations of the great religions and the p. 367 divine self-revelation of Kraemer's great book P. Chenchiah admitted: 'If we take the "revelation" claimed in different religions, we have to confess that they do not piece together or form an intelligible whole. The Vedas, the Koran, the Gospel do not make a coherent scheme. They do not even answer the same questions.'⁷⁸ He maintains that it is simply untrue that Christianity satisfies the Hindu search for salvation. 'Jesus kindles new hopes *not* felt before and kills some of the deepest and persistent longings of man.' (6) Kraemer himself pointed out that even the *bhakti* religion, which does know of grace and experience, is 'fundamentally anthropocentric, as all good monistic, mystic Hindu religion is'.⁷⁹

Each solution mentioned so far appears to be a *cul-de-sac*. But which way should we go then? Or are we facing an insoluble dilemma? Let us turn to the biblical evidence and try to find out where it leads us.

Old Testament

We start with the Old Testament. From the very outset we notice a strong tension at this very point. It is the tension between the universal and the particular. In the Old Testament we find the broad panorama of the history of salvation, in which God is dealing with mankind. It starts on a universal level. After creation and fall God continues to deal with the whole of mankind. He does the same after the Flood, making in Noah a covenant with all of humankind. But when new generations arise they deviate from the living God and fashion gods after their own image. Then God calls Abraham and the era of particularism starts.

But how did Abraham know that it was God who called him? There are many obscure points here, which we can hardly understand. Christopher J. H. Wright has pointed out

⁷⁶ 'Theocentric Christology: Defended and Transcended', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 24 (Winter, 1987), 47.

⁷⁷ 'Mission in a Pluralistic Age', *IRM*, 1986, 203.

⁷⁸ H. Kraemer, 'Continuity or Discontinuity', in *The Authority of Faith*, 5.

⁷⁹ *The Christian Message*, 171. For the same reason Bavinck warns against facile talking about 'moments of truth' in non-Christian religions. He does not deny the existence of such moments, but points out that they always function within the total framework of the religion and therefore usually have a different meaning. 'Concepts such as sin, grace, redemption, prayer, sacrifice, which we encounter in other religions, all have a different content than in the Bible' (*op. cit.*, 228).

that the patriarchs worshipped the Mesopotamian and west Semitic high God, El, who was often called El Shaddai. 'They receive commands and promises from him directly (without prophets) and they build altars and offer sacrifices to [p. 368](#) him (without priests).'⁸⁰ The writer of Genesis clearly identifies El, as the patriarchs know him, with Yahweh. Johannes C. de Moor has shown that this development accords with what happened in that same period in Egypt and Babylonia. There Amun-Re and Marduk were exalted as the one god above all other gods.⁸¹ In the stories about the patriarchs we see that 'the living God is known, worshipped, believed and obeyed, but under divine titles which were common in the rest of contemporary semitic culture' (Wright). But something special must have happened. God himself took the initiative and revealed himself in a special way to Abraham, calling him to a very special service and making a very special covenant with him, containing some very special promises. The era of particularism sets in, but from the very beginning it has universal overtones, for the God who calls Abraham out of his country and his father's house, also says: 'By you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' ([Gen. 12:3](#)).

The period of particularism covers the remainder of the Old Testament. Abraham's descendants grow into a nation and at Sinai God makes a covenant with the entire nation. But the struggle with baalism continues and the nation again and again surrenders to baalism and its concomitant idolatry. In the prophets we then see the idea of the 'remnant' gradually arising. The 'funnel' of particularism becomes very narrow. But at the same time the prophets cling to the idea of a universal outcome of history. In the future the *goyim*, the nations, will share with Israel in the universal salvation of Yahweh. They will all come to Jerusalem and share in the blessings of Zion (cf. [Is. 2](#); [Micah 4](#); [Zech. 8:20ff.](#)).

The New Testament

In the New Testament we see that the funnel of particularism narrows itself to one human being: Jesus of Nazareth, who is called the Christ, the Messiah. As the suffering servant of the Lord he gives his life as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, in that sacrifice on the cross the entire history of a salvation seems to come to an end. But God raises him from the dead and before his ascension he himself gives his disciples the Great Missionary Command. Forty days after the ascension the outpouring of the Holy Spirit takes place and the church is born. And immediately we see that is an evangelizing church. At first this [p. 369](#) evangelistic activity is limited to the Jews, but the Spirit himself takes care that the gospel of Jesus Christ goes to all the nations. The Book of Acts shows us how it moves on and arrives at the very heart of the pagan world: Rome. The most extreme particularism issues in the widest possible universalism!

But in the New Testament, too, particularism and universalism are related in such a way that they are in constant tension. On the one hand, there is the uniqueness of Christ; on the other there is the universality of Christ.

The uniqueness of Christ

We find this throughout the entire New Testament. It is connected with the very essence of Jesus, He is not just one in the long line of prophets (although he is a prophet too), but he is the only-begotten Son of God who became man and dwelt among us, 'full of grace and truth' ([John. 1:14](#)). W. Visser 't Hooft summarized the teaching of the New Testament well, when he wrote: 'This person is completely unique. There is only one teacher, the

⁸⁰ 'The Christian and other religions: the biblical evidence', *Themelios*, January 1984, 6.

⁸¹ Cf. *The Rise of Yahwism. The Roots of Israelite Monotheism*, 1990.

Christ ([Matt. 23:10](#)), one Lord ([Eph. 4:5](#); [1 Cor. 8:6](#)), one shepherd ([John 10:16](#)), one mediator ([1 Tim. 2:5](#)). He has a name which is above every name ([Phil. 2:9](#)). He is the only Son ([John 3:16](#)). Every one of the christological titles signifies that he has a mission that no one else ever had or will ever have. "There is no other name granted to men, by which we may receive salvation" ([Acts 4:12](#), NEB).⁸²

It is evident that in speaking of him we are not dealing with an idea of principle, nor with a religious human experience (although faith in him does create its own experiences), but with a fact of history. It is the stupendous fact that 'almighty God, the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists in heaven and on earth, has, at a known place and time, so humbled himself as to become part of our sinful humanity to take away our sin and to rise from the dead as the first-fruit of a new creation' (Newbigin⁸³).

In our day this claim of uniqueness for Christ meets with widespread protest and resistance. We only need to refer to the names of Stanley J. Samartha, John Hick and W. Cantwell Smith. At times theologians try to escape from this uniqueness by stating that it is limited to the faith community that believes in Jesus.⁸⁴ But this will not do. The p. 370 terminology used throughout the New Testament is too explicit: 'there is *no other name under heaven given among men* by which we must be saved' ([Acts 4:12](#)).⁸⁵ To say it again in the words of Verkuyl: 'He is unique, incomparable, irreplaceable, and decisive for all ages and peoples.'

The universality of Christ

But this unique Christ is also the universal Redeemer. His coming is not only a *moment* of history, but it is the very *centre* of history.⁸⁶ It happened not only 'once upon a time', but also 'once for all'. For this reason, 'there cannot be other incarnations'. In [Romans 5](#) Paul calls Christ the second Adam. He is the centre of a new humanity. No wonder, therefore, that Paul in this chapter constantly speaks in universal terms. 'Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be saved' ([Rom. 5:18, 19](#); cf. [Mark 10:45](#)). In his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul says: 'One has died for all; therefore all have died' ([5:14](#)). There is no essential difference between the words 'all' and 'many' in these passages. In my own Reformed tradition there has been much discussion about the extent of the atonement. Eventually there came about the idea of 'limited atonement'. But in this way the tension between particularity and universality is solved in a one-sided manner. 'Many' in these and other New Testament passages (just as the word 'world' in [John 3:16](#) and [1 John 2:2](#)) has the force of 'all'. This universal intent of Jesus' coming and his atoning work does not mean universalism in the sense that eventually all people will be saved. The gospel of Jesus always calls for faith, as Paul writes to the Romans: 'There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon *all who call upon him*' ([Rom. 10:12](#)). Here the tension between universality and particularity is fully maintained.

⁸² *No Other Name*, 1963, 96.

⁸³ Quoted by Jean Stromberg, 'Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World', *IRM*, 1988, 422. Cf. also Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 1969, 76f.

⁸⁴ Cf. C. Duraisingh, *art. cit.*, 406.

⁸⁵ Cf. C. J. H. Wright, *art. cit.*, 13f.

⁸⁶ W. Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.*, 97.

Visser 't Hooft draws two important consequences from these data. The first one is that Christ is the centre of two concentric circles: the circle that represents the church and the circle that represents humanity. But these circles are not in a static equilibrium. The smaller circle must become wider and wider (101). The second consequence is that the attitude of the church to the religions of the world can only be the [p. 371](#) attitude of the witness who points to the one Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of all (116).

Those outside the circle of the gospel

But what about those who stand outside the circle of light produced by the gospel? What does Scripture say about them? Before we look for the biblical data I want to point out that many conservative theologians, who do maintain that only the gospel of Jesus Christ brings salvation, nevertheless are not willing to deny that there is some work of God in adherents of the other religions too. After Tambaram Kraemer asked the question: 'Were those who lived under the sway of the non-Christian religions, entirely left to their own devices, or has God somehow worked in them?' He said he believed that there are indications in the Bible pointing in that direction.⁸⁷ Bavinck says that his missionary experience has taught him 'that God has had a great deal to do with [the converts from non-Christian religions] before their contact with the missionary'.⁸⁸ In another of his books he writes: 'On the mission field we again and again encounter the surprising fact that God guides people on the way to the gospel by dreams or visions, and in such cases one wonders whether one has to do with "general revelation" or with something very special.'⁸⁹ And Lesslie Newbigin writes that in his opinion there is a genuine self-disclosure of God in non-Christian religious experience⁹⁰ and there is a real communion between God and the believer in non-Christian religious experience (38). Yet he also maintains that the acceptance of Jesus Christ means 'radical repentance and conversion from pre-Christian religious experience' (57). This repentance and conversion, however, does not alter the fact that these converts very often have the strong conviction afterwards that 'it' was the living God who was dealing with them in the days of their pre-Christian wrestlings' (59). In other words, there is real discontinuity, but also some form of continuity.

What does the Bible say about all this?

When we study the *Old Testament* it is quite obvious that it does not in any way regard the heathen nations as 'anonymous Israelites' (to borrow Rahner's term). The entire Old Testament condemns all idolatry and fights a continuous battle against it. Idols are false gods [p. 372](#) which human beings have fashioned from the created world, idolized and used for their own purpose. Think, for example, of the Baals and Ashtarothe, whose worshippers elevated nature, the tribe, the state and the nation to divine status. God fights against magic and astrology which, according to Deuteronomy, bend the line between God and his creation.⁹¹ Psalmists and prophets poke fun at those who fashion 'gods' out of wood or silver and gold ([Ps. 115; 135; Jer. 10; 51:17, 18](#)). But does this strong condemnation mean that there is no salvation for people who do not belong to Israel? The remarkable

⁸⁷ *The Authority of Faith*, 22.

⁸⁸ *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 227.

⁸⁹ *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof*, (1949) 1989, 180/1; cf. also 176.

⁹⁰ *The Finality of Christ*, 36.

⁹¹ J. Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 95.

thing is that this question is never explicitly asked in the Old Testament. It is a question of *our* time, not of the Old Testament. The faith of Israel is entirely particularistic.

And yet there are some strange and striking universalistic 'edges' to the particularistic witness of the Old Testament. On the fringes we meet some people who do not belong to Israel and nevertheless do have a relationship with the living God. After the defeat of the kings Abraham encounters Melchizedek, the king of Salem, who is called a 'priest of God Most High' (El Shaddai) and who blesses Abraham ([Gen. 14:18-20](#)). There is Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who is called the 'priest of Midian' ([Ex. 3:1](#); [18:1](#)). After the exodus from Egypt he meets Moses again at the Horeb, praises Yahweh (note the use of this Name!) for the deliverance of his people and offers a burnt offering and sacrifices to God ([18:10-12](#)). When Israel is about to enter the promised land there is suddenly the strange figure of Balaam, to whom Yahweh speaks ([Num. 22:19](#)) and who prophesies in his name ([23:5ff.](#)). There is that strange man Job, who lives in the land of Uz and about whom God himself says to Satan: 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?' ([Job 1:8](#)) Finally, there is the remarkable answer Elisha gives to Naaman, the Syrian, when the latter asks whether he is allowed to bow in the house of Rimmon. Elisha replies: 'Go in peace' ([2 Kings 5:19](#))!

What do all these examples mean? That there are other ways of salvation? That the non-Israelite religions are just as valid and saving as Israel's faith in Yahweh? This would be a preposterous conclusion. There is no indication whatever in the Old Testament that there is salvation apart from the grace of Yahweh. All we can say is that apparently this grace is not strictly limited to the descendants of Abraham. There is an extension of grace also to some people outside Israel. [p.373](#)

When we now turn to the *New Testament* and ask the question whether there is salvation outside the Christian gospel we discover again that this question is neither asked nor answered in the New Testament. What is evident, however, is that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Paul writes to the Ephesians: before you became Christians, you 'were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind' ([2:1-3](#)). A little later he writes that before their conversion they were 'alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world' (verse [12](#)). These are strong and harsh words, making it quite clear that apart from Jesus Christ there is no salvation and no hope for the future. But do these words also mean that the grace of Jesus Christ is strictly limited to those who hear and accept the gospel? Such a conclusion might be correct, but it is not the only possible answer. We should not forget that Paul is speaking here to people who now are believers and have broken with their pagan past. Whether his words also mean that no one outside the circle of light of the preached gospel is under the sway of God's gracious action in Jesus Christ, is still debatable.

At any rate, it is noteworthy that the New Testament is entirely free of the panicky attitude: 'Let us as quickly as possible preach the gospel everywhere, for otherwise all these people are eternally lost'. The moving force behind the strong missionary movement in the early church is rather: 'We have received such a treasure of grace that we cannot but share it with those who do not yet know it'. Or to put it in Paul's own words: 'The love of Christ constrains us, because we are convinced that one has died for all' ([2 Cor. 5:14](#)). That is the glorious message of the gospel: we have a Saviour who died for our sins, indeed for the sins of the whole world. Of this gospel Christians are ambassadors:

‘God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God’ (verse [20](#)).

But are there not other indications as well in the New Testament? Does it not speak of a witness of God to all people? Does Paul not say to the people in Lystra that God ‘did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness’ ([Acts 14:17](#))? What do these words ‘not leaving himself without witness’ mean? Do they only refer to a ‘general’ revelation of God which is not salvific? Here we [p. 374](#) are back to the question: what is the nature of God’s self-revelation to humanity as a whole and what is the relationship of this general self-revelation to his special revelation to Israel and in Jesus Christ?

In the final part of this paper we will try to answer this basic question. We agree with Lesslie Newbigin that the answer can be found only when we start with God and not with the religious experiences of man. This is the great mistake of the ‘comparative religion’ approach that is followed by many present-day theologians. It starts with man and his religious experiences. On this ground W. Cantwell Smith calls the other religions ‘*great movements of the human spirit, each with great historical legacies of, of course, cultural moment, and of scientific, theological, and sociological, and political, and artistic; but also ... of great spiritual depth, and many would now add, salvific force*’.⁹² This approach is sociological rather than theological. A truly theological approach starts with God himself and his self-revelation. And since we know God as the Triune God, our approach to this problem should also be Trinitarian.⁹³

God the Father, the overflowing fountain of goodness.

We borrow this term, ‘the overflowing fountain of goodness’, from article 1 of the Belgic Confession. Although the description of God in this article is rather formal and abstract, the last phrase beautifully indicates the deepest nature of God. It is another way of saying what the apostle John wrote: ‘God is love’ ([1 John. 4:8, 16](#)). God is self-communicating love, both in himself and towards his creation. At this point, too, Bishop Newbigin begins the exposition of his own view. ‘We must begin with the great reality made known to us in Jesus Christ, that God—the creator and sustainer of all that exists—is in his own triune being an ocean of infinite love overflowing to all his work in all creation and to all human beings’.⁹⁴ We see this in Jesus’ own attitude to people. Eagerly he awaits signs of faith, not only among his fellow-Jews but also among men and women outside the house of Israel. We see it in his outstretched arms on the cross, embracing the whole world. In him and his actions we see ‘the most fundamental of all realities, namely, a grace and mercy and loving-kindness which reaches out to every creature’. Therefore, Newbigin feels unable to restrict the words ‘not leaving without witness’ to general revelation [p. 375](#) and common grace only. Says he: ‘I believe that no person of whatever kind of creed, is without some witness of God’s grace in heart and conscience and reason.’

I believe that this is a correct starting point. When the Bible speaks of God it always speaks of the Father of Jesus Christ. God in the Bible does not exist as a God-in-the-abstract, a God who can be seen apart from Jesus Christ and his own eternal plan of salvation through the incarnation, death and resurrection of his own eternal Son. The God who is revealed to us in the Bible is from the very beginning God-in-Christ. Paul writes to the Ephesians that God chose them in Christ ‘before the foundation of the cosmos’ ([Eph.](#)

⁹² *Art. cit.*, 361.

⁹³ Cf. J. Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 355.

⁹⁴ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

[1:4](#)). In his high-priestly prayer to his heavenly Father Jesus himself speaks of 'thy love for me before the foundation of the world' ([John 17:24](#)). When God reveals himself he is always the God-in-Christ, also in his so-called general revelation. This does not mean that this general self-revelation is a clear revelation of Christ himself. It is no more than a '*clair-obscur*' of God, of his divine power and goodness. Or to borrow an image that Barth uses in the last volume of his *Church Dogmatics*: the lights kindled by the general revelation are the small lights that at the most 'reflect' the great light that has been kindled in Christ.⁹⁵ 'The prophecy of Jesus Christ [says Barth] is the one truth and the one light. But as this light rises and shines, it is reflected in the being and existence of the cosmos which is not created accidentally, but with a view to this action and therefore to this revelation' (153). Undoubtedly, even this reflection is in many ways distorted, for it is constantly mixed with human interpretations. Even worse, it is constantly suppressed and replaced by artificial lights of our own devising. For this reason the religions can never be seen as equally valid ways of salvation. Verkuyl rightly points out that our approach to and appreciation of the religions should always be of a 'tri-polar' nature. There is God and his self-revelation giving man a 'transcendental experience of reality'. But there is also the 'sphere of human reacting, repressing, projecting, searching, groping, questing and fleeing'. And, thirdly, there is the dimension of the 'powers' that collectively influence us for good or ill.⁹⁶ This tri-polar relationship also explains the ambiguity of all human religiosity. There is too much of human 'suppression' of the truth ([Rom. 1:18](#)) and too much of oppression by the 'powers' in them. And yet we should not exclude the possibility that the light of God's grace shines into these dark corners too. The experience of the missionary p. 376 in the prison of Pretoria is exemplary for the experience of many other missionaries: God was already at work before we came with the light of the gospel. Our God *is* an overflowing fountain of goodness and salvation!

Jesus Christ, the Mediator of all revelation and grace

For a proper approach to and understanding of the religions of this world we also have to take into account the confession of the Christian church that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. He, the eternal Son of the Father, became incarnate as the man Jesus of Nazareth. he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him and gave him the name 'Kurios', the name above every name ([Phil. 2:6-9](#)). He, therefore, is the mediator of God's special self-revelation in grace and mercy. He is the one Mediator between God and men ([1 Tim. 2:55](#)).

But this is not all that is to be said about him. Looking back through the prism of his resurrection and exaltation the apostles began to realize that from all eternity he was the medium of God's self-giving love. The Mediator of revelation and reconciliation, that is of recreation, is also the Mediator of creation. So the apostle Paul confesses: 'For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' ([1 Cor. 8:6](#)). A similar line of thought is found in [Col. 1](#), where Paul calls Jesus not only the 'first-born from the dead' (verse [18](#)), but also 'the first-born of all creation', in and through whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together ([15-17](#)). The writer to the Hebrews affirms the same truth when he says that God created the world through him and that he upholds the world by his word of power ([Heb. 1:1-3](#)). The early church was deeply convinced that in Jesus they had to do with the eternal Son of God, who with the Father

⁹⁵ *Op. cit.*, IV, 3, First half, 164.

⁹⁶ *Op. cit.*, 356.

was involved in the creation of this world and who from the very beginning was the mediator of all God's self-communication. Newbigin rightly says: 'Jesus is the personal presence of that creative word by which all that exists was made and is sustained in being.'⁹⁷ This does not in any way derogate from that stupendous historical fact which we call the incarnation. He was not incarnate from all eternity. The *Christus incarnatus* is a fact of history that happened once upon a time. but this *Christus incarnatus* was from all eternity the *Christus incarnandus*. As p. 377 such he was and is God's self-revelation from creation to consummation. It is only through the Son that the Father makes himself known. Therefore our conclusion, also with regard to the religions, can only be that whatever truth is present there is due to this very same Lord Jesus Christ, who 'reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of God's nature' ([Heb. 1:3](#)).

All this has nothing to do with the idea of the so-called cosmic Christ who 'is present in all developments of history, in all the social revolutionary moments, and in all human religious ideas and quests'. Verkuyl rightly points out that this idea is 'merely a caricature of a genuine Christology for a theology of religions'.⁹⁸ It completely ignores the fact that it was highly religious men who put Jesus to death on the cross! The cross therefore is the divine judgement upon all human religiosity ([1 Cor. 1](#) and [2](#)). At the same time this same cross (and the following resurrection) is the concentration point of all previous and following divine self-revelation. It is such a cosmic event that 'its importance extends to human beings of every religious stripe', and it is therefore the task of every theologian of religions to 'keep looking for evidences of this Christ who is ceaselessly active; [such a theologian] will be alert for signs of the messianic kingdom in the religious life of mankind both inside and outside the church' (359).

The Holy Spirit as 'Christ active in the world'

God's Spirit, who is at work in the world, is the Spirit of Christ, both of the *Christus incarnandus* and the *Christus incarnatus*. This is the deep truth of the '*filioque*'. The Spirit from all eternity proceeds from Father and Son. The Spirit is God active in this world, but since God can never be seen apart from Christ, we can also say that he is Christ active in this world. When Christ was exalted to the right hand of the Father, he sent the Spirit in a new manner, as the One who was to bring sinners to Christ and thus to make them participants in the benefits of Christ's reconciling work. 'He awakens in man that deeply hidden awareness of guilt. He convinces man of sin, even where previously no consciousness of sin was present.'⁹⁹ He opens the heart for the grace that God has provided in Christ. He creates faith that embraces this grace as its greatest treasure.

He is at work, however, not only in the sphere of special revelation, but also in that of the so-called general revelation. There too he is the p. 378 Spirit of the *Christus incarnandus* or the *Christus incarnatus*. From the very beginning of creation he was active ([Gen. 1:2](#)) and he continues to work in history. All understanding of God's self-revelation is due to his activity. All that is true and good in whatever religion is due to his enlightenment. Again, this does not make the other religions ways of salvation next to the way of Christ, but it does mean that at times there may be some understanding of the true light. J. H. Bavinck, who is straightforward in his refusal to accept the religions as ways to God, nevertheless also says: 'No one can say what is going on in the heart of the individual, no one can imagine what the endless patience and goodness of God may work out in such

⁹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *op. cit.*, 180.

⁹⁸ *Op. cit.*, 358.

⁹⁹ J. H. Bavinck, *op. cit.*, 229.

a heart.¹⁰⁰ Verkuyl is more outspoken when he says that he agrees with Max Warren, when the latter says that ‘the Holy Spirit is latently active in so many ways among those people who live within the context of other religious traditions’. Verkuyl even asks the question: ‘Is it really possible for any one of us to believe that human beings can be found somewhere who have *not* been touched by the hand of Jesus Christ who goes out to them in reconciliation?’¹⁰¹ I am not sure whether we have the right to be so expansive, but I do know that if it is possible that people of other faiths may be saved, they most certainly will not be saved by their own religiosity, by their own religious experiences and rites¹⁰², but only because the Spirit of Christ was active in their lives; because by the work of the Spirit the secret of Christ became manifest to and in them, too.

Consequences

This trinitarian approach as outlined by me has some important practical consequences. I largely follow Newbigin here.¹⁰³ (1) We [p. 379](#) shall expect, look for and welcome all the signs of God’s grace at work in the lives of those who do not know Jesus as Lord. (2) We shall be eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects that are in line with the Christian’s understanding of God’s purpose in history. This purpose has been revealed in Jesus Christ and he is the sole criterion by which we must evaluate all such projects. (3) In this context of shared commitment to the business of this world, there is also place for true dialogue. Undoubtedly we will reach a point where our ways have to part. But there will also arise opportunities where both parties cannot but witness to what motivates them at the deepest level. Here the dialogue becomes witness. (4) The essential contribution of the Christian to the dialogue will simply be the telling of the story; the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible. (5) Newbigin adds that it is not the task of the Christian to try to convert the others, for this is the work of the Spirit of God. Here I disagree with him, because I regard this to be false dilemma. The apostles always called those outside the circle of light of the gospel to conversion. That does not mean that we should do it always in a very explicit way, showing the others how wrong they are. In our clay and age the call to conversion will usually take place in an implicit way. But even so, it must take place. Conversion is a ‘must’, for our true situation is, as Paul says, that ‘all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin’ ([Rom. 3:9](#)), and for all of them there is only one way of salvation: justification by faith in Jesus Christ, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption ([1 Cor. 1:30](#)).

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¹⁰⁰ *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof*, 206.

¹⁰¹ *Op. cit.*, 359.

¹⁰² It is striking that the advocates of the other religions as ways of salvation usually refer to the many good and pious people they find among the adherents of these religions. In doing so, they actually introduce the principle of meritorious good works, which is quite foreign to the Bible. In his book *The Open Secret* (1978, 196) Lesslie Newbigin rightly says: ‘It is the “men of good will”, the “sincere” followers of other religions, the “observers of the law” who are informed in advance that their seats in heaven are securely booked. This is the exact opposite of the teaching of New Testament. Here the emphasis is always on surprise. It is the sinners who will be welcomed and those who were confident that their place was secure who will find themselves outside.’ It is also in direct opposition to the doctrine of the justification of the ungodly.

¹⁰³ *Op. cit.*, 180ff.