

How, exactly, if at all, does "process philosophy" provide a new resource for the christological reflection of Christian theology?

Clearly, any answer to this question must reckon with the fact that the term "process philosophy" may be legitimately used to refer to a number of philosophical positions. If Whitehead's is a "process philosophy," so also is Dewey's, even though no one, presumably, would wish to deny that there are a number of important differences between them. Recognizing this, I see no way around specifying more exactly what I shall here take "process philosophy" to refer to--namely, the kind of philosophical position classically formulated by Whitehead and more fully elaborated and developed, especially as regards questions of method, by Charles Hartshorne.

My conviction is that Whiteheadian philosophy in this sense does indeed provide a new resource for christological reflection--and that not merely in one respect but in two: not merely in the material respect that it takes "becoming" rather than "being" as the inclusive philosophical category or transcendental, but also in the formal respect that it conceives philosophy itself as precisely integral self-understanding at the level of full reflection.

I take it that the first or material respect is understood sufficiently well by now to obviate the need for extended comment. If, as is widely recognized, the understanding of existence--of man, the world, and God--necessarily implied by the normative witness to Jesus as the Christ in Holy Scripture is in a broad sense "historical," it can be appropriately as well as understandably explicated solely in terms on which becoming, not being, is the inclusive reality. Insofar, then, as Whiteheadian philosophy provides just such terms, it undoubtedly provides a new resource for christology, as well as, naturally, for theological reflection generally--new, namely, in relation to the terms of the older philosophies of being by which classical christology and theology have largely been determined. Of course, Whiteheadian philosophy is not the only philosophy that thinks and speaks of existence in broadly "historical" terms. But, assuming as I do, that the Christian witness to Jesus as the Christ implies an understanding not only of man and the world but also of God, one can only regard the integral metaphysics of Whiteheadian philosophy as a distinctive new resource--distinctive, namely, in comparison with the other semi-, non-, or even anti-metaphysical philosophies of process, for which becoming rather than being is somehow taken to be the inclusive reality.

If I am correct, however, the second or formal respect in which Whiteheadian philosophy provides a new resource for christology is no less important, even if it is by no means as well understood. Despite what I take to be countless clear indications to the contrary by Whitehead himself, his philosophy is still widely regarded as a speculative generalization of certain insights of modern science and hence as on logically the same footing as science itself. Thus the important fact is overlooked that Whiteheadian philosophy is not really science at all but one expression--in my opinion, the clearest and most consistent expression--of "the subjective turn" of modern philosophical reflection.

Not the least important contribution of Hartshorne, in working out the methodology of Whiteheadian philosophy, is to have clearly focused its essential logical difference from science or from any speculative generalization thereof. Whereas the proper question of science is the ontic question, "What are the facts?" the question proper to philosophy is the ontological question, "What is it to be a fact?" And, whereas science seeks to answer its question by critically reflecting on our external sensory experience of the world, philosophy seeks to answer its question by fully reflecting on our internal nonsensory experience of our experiencing itself. Thus Hartshorne can say, thereby expressing Whitehead's meaning as well as his own, that the philosophical questions of God and the world, as well as of man, are precisely questions of self-understanding. Accordingly, philosophy centrally consists in metaphysics, understood as the explicit or thematic conceptualization of the understanding of existence as such, which is present implicitly or nonthematically in all our experience and understanding.

A philosophy so conceived must be particularly significant for christological reflection if, as at least some have argued, the question of christology, finally, is precisely the existential question of the ultimate meaning of human existence. For, if the christological question is the existential question, and if philosophy is properly the integral understanding of existence at the level of full reflection, then philosophy is evidently the conceptualization of the necessary conditions of the possibility of christological reflection. In other words, philosophy and christology alike have to do with man's existential question--the former by explicating the necessary conditions of even asking it, the latter by explicating the specific answer given to it in the Christian witness of faith.

Admittedly, the assumption that the christological question, finally, simply is the existential question is open to objections that cannot be gone into here. But, if these objections, as I believe, can be effectively met and overcome, then Whiteheadian philosophy formally as well as materially provides a new resource for christological reflection. In the one respect as much as in the other, the shrewd statement long since made by Colin Wilson is to the point: "Whitehead has created his own kind of existentialism, and . . . it is fuller and more adequate than that of any Continental thinker."¹

An important corollary of this conclusion needs to be underscored. If the question to which all christological assertions finally answer is man's existential question of the ultimate meaning of his own existence, the object of christological reflection is not the person of Jesus in his being-in-himself but, rather, the event of Jesus in its meaning-for-us. Thus what should matter to a "Whiteheadian christology" is just what should matter to any christology--namely, not simply Jesus himself, his qualities, his mode of being, his relation to God, etc., but the significance Jesus has for us because the word that he speaks and is as he encounters us through the Christian witness decisively

¹Colin Wilson, Religion and the Rebel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), p. 317.

answers our question about the ultimate meaning of our own existence. Put differently, what Whiteheadian philosophical terms should be used to explicate, so far as they are appropriate for doing so, is not a past event that occurred between Jesus and God but the present event that occurs between us and God through our encounter with the Christian witness to Jesus as the Christ.

This implies, of course, a very different kind of christology from those that have usually been developed, including the revisionary christologies of modern times and even certain "process christologies" that have more recently been projected. But I am myself convinced that the apostolic witness itself demands just such a very different christology. So far as the New Testament witnesses are concerned, Jesus is the Christ not because he actualized the possibility of faith and, unlike us, actualized it perfectly, but because he re-presents the possibility of faith and, for us, re-presents it decisively.

To what extent Whiteheadian philosophical terms are appropriate for explicating this distinction and thus for developing the kind of "a priori christology" that the a posteriori christologies of the New Testament call for is no doubt questionable. But, if my own experience is any indication, not a little can be learned about the crucial christological importance of the concept of "re-presentation" from reflection on Whitehead's pregnant statements that "speech is human nature itself" and that "expression is the one fundamental sacrament."²

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²Alfred North Whitehead, Modes of Thought (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1938), p. 52; and Religion in the Making (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1926), p. 131.