

## COMMENTS ON A RECENT WHITEHEADIAN DOCTRINE OF GOD

FRITZ GUY

La Sierra College, La Sierra, California

Alfred North Whitehead offered to the twentieth century a metaphysical system purporting to transcend the impasse of materialism and idealism, synthesize the quantum- and wave-theories of the transmission of energy, establish a non-empirical basis for all geometry, and account for human freedom, cosmic evolution, and Einsteinian physics. The sheer virtuosity of such a performance is staggering; and it is hardly surprising that Whitehead includes in his system an explanation for God and his relationship to the world.

Nor is it surprising, in a generation that is not entirely satisfied with classical, liberal, or neo-Reformation ideas of God,<sup>1</sup> that there should be a serious attempt to use Whitehead's thought as a philosophical framework for a modern Christian understanding of deity. To this task John B. Cobb, Jr. implicitly committed himself in 1962,<sup>2</sup> and *A Christian Natural Theology*<sup>3</sup> is the first major result of his constructive effort. The present article offers a brief, highly condensed summary of Whitehead's idea of God, a short exposition of Cobb's develop-

<sup>1</sup> This dissatisfaction is most clearly seen in the so-called "God is dead" emphasis of several younger American theologians—notably Paul Van Buren, Thomas J. J. Altizer, and William Hamilton—deriving from such sources as Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, and contemporary analytic philosophy. Hamilton has described this viewpoint in "The Death of God Theology," *The Christian Scholar*, XLVIII (1965), 27-48. Cf. statements by Van Buren, Altizer, and Hamilton in the series "How I Am Making Up My Mind," *CC*, LXXXII (1965), 428-30, 864-67, 1219-22.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. his *Living Options in Protestant Theology: A Survey of Methods* (Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 14-15, 315-16.

<sup>3</sup> *A Christian Natural Theology: Based on the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead* (Philadelphia, 1965).

ment and revision of this idea, and some critical comments on both method and result.

## I

For Whitehead, philosophy is the ultimate generalization of relationships, including all relationships of all entities that can in any sense be said to exist. This means that if there is the entity "God," it too must come within the domain of metaphysical rationalization. The following paragraphs are based <sup>4</sup> on Whitehead's explication of his idea of God in *Science and the Modern World* (originally published in 1925), <sup>5</sup> *Religion in the Making* (1926), <sup>6</sup> *Process and Reality* (1929), <sup>7</sup> and *Adventures of Ideas* (1933), <sup>8</sup> with supplementary reference to *Modes of Thought* (1938). <sup>9</sup>

The ultimate metaphysical principle in Whitehead's system is not God but "creativity" (PR 11); in the formal statement of the categorial scheme (PR 30-42) "God" does not appear at all, either specifically or by implication. Thus "God" is a

<sup>4</sup> Whitehead's own vocabulary has been used wherever possible, with the first occurrence of each technical term enclosed in quotation marks. More detailed introduction to Whitehead's idea of God may be found in Cobb's summary in *A Christian Natural Theology*, pp. 135-75; Ivor Leclercq, *Whitehead's Metaphysics: An Introductory Exposition* (London, 1958), pp. 195-208; and William A. Christian, *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics* (New Haven, 1959), pp. 283-413. The basic interpretative statement is Charles Hartshorne, "Whitehead's Idea of God," in *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, Ill., 1941), pp. 515-59.

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter cited as "SMW." Page references are to the New American Library (Mentor) edition (New York, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> Hereafter cited as "RM." Page references are to the World Publishing Co. (Meridian/Living Age) edition (Cleveland, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> Hereafter cited as "PR." Page references are to the Harper Torchbooks (The Academy Library) edition (New York, 1960), and are identical to the Macmillan edition (New York, 1929).

<sup>8</sup> Hereafter cited as "AI." Page references are to the New American Library (Mentor) edition (New York, 1955).

<sup>9</sup> Hereafter cited as "MT." Page references are to the Capricorn edition (New York, 1958), and are identical to the Macmillan edition (New York, 1938).

derivative notion,<sup>10</sup> a thoroughly comprehensible element (AI 171-72) in the philosophical explanation of the world as we know it.

By itself creativity is pure, abstract actuality, "without a character of its own" (PR 47). It is the function of God, as the "principle of concretion" (PR 374), to give form to actuality; that is, he<sup>11</sup> is the ultimate limitation of actualization in the sense that he determines "(i) the special logical relationships which all events conform to, (ii) the selection of relationships to which the events do conform, and (iii) the particularity which infects the course even within these general relationships of logic and causation" (SMW 160). In terms of directionality, the function of God is "to sustain the aim at vivid experience" (MT 128). But this is not determinism; rather, "the indetermination of mere creativity is transmuted into a determinate freedom" (RM 88). Yet it is precisely these limitations that establish the difference between good and evil (SMW 161).

God is at once both the primordial qualification of actuality and its non-derivative, unconditioned actualization (RM 99; PR 48, 522). Since there is in the universe "only one genus of actual entities" (PR 168), God is, like all other beings, a "creature" and part of the world (PR 102), "a factor in the universe" (RM 71). Among the characteristics which God shares with other actual entities are these: the basic function of decision amid potentiality (PR 68); "dipolarity," which is the combination of "mental" (though not always conscious) and "physical"

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Christian, "The Concept of God as a Derivative Notion," in *Process and Divinity: The Hartshorne Festschrift*, ed. William L. Reese and Eugene Freeman (La Salle, Ill., 1964), pp. 182-89.

<sup>11</sup> Whitehead regularly used the pronoun "he" in referring to God, but this was merely following convention and not an indication of "personality" in God (cf. RM 60-64) as in traditional Christian thought. Had Whitehead used a different proper noun to refer to God (such as "Eros," which occurs occasionally in AI), he would certainly have used "it" rather than "he" where such a pronoun was required. His reason for using "God" was that "the contemplation of our natures, as enjoining real feelings derived from the timeless source of all order, acquires that 'subjective form' of refreshment and companionship at which religions aim" (PR 47).

relationships with other entities (PR 54); a threefold nature, namely, "primordial," "consequent," and "superjective" (PR 134); transcendence over—that is, a certain freedom from the causal influence of—all other entities (PR 136, 339) in the sense of self-creation or self-causation (RM 99; PR 339); and a capacity to function as instruments of novelty for other entities (PR 529).

On the other hand, there is a certain uniqueness in God in terms of both nature and function. He alone is non-temporal (PR 73; RM 88) and transcends any finite cosmic epoch (PR 143; MT 128); he alone has no character "given" by the past (PR 134). He is further distinguished by the fact that he originates from the mental rather than the physical "pole" of his being (PR 54, 528); he is the ground of all mentality (PR 529) and the ultimate referent of truth (PR 19). He is characterized by the priority of permanence rather than flux in his nature, and unity rather than multiplicity (PR 529). To maintain an awareness of this singularity, Whitehead excludes God from the meaning of "actual occasions," a term which designates all other actual entities (PR 135).

God is related to the rest of the world through his primordial and consequent natures. The primordial nature is an abstraction, deficient in actuality (PR 50), but not therefore devoid of efficacy (PR 530). It is this aspect of God that functions as the principle of concretion (PR 374, 523); his primordial nature consists in conceptualizing and valuating all the "eternal objects" or categories of possibility in the universe (SMW 88, 99-100; PR 46, 70, 134, 382, 392) and then relating them to each "concretent" (this term functions as a present-participial form of "concrete") occasion as its "subjective aim," that is, its ideal of actualization in harmony with its actual situation in the world (RM 91, 146-48; PR 134, 248, 343). In other words, it is the primordial nature of God that makes pure potentiality into real potentiality for an actual entity (PR 69-73). And it is by means of his primordial nature that God is immanent in the world as the ground of the relationship between physical and

mental "prehensions" (PR 78), the contacts between actualities by means of which one appropriates (and thus is affected by) another as a component of its own essence. Thus God is the "supreme Eros" (AI 201), the "eternal urge of desire" (PR 522) that guides the ongoing advance of novelty at every stage so that it moves toward the realization of the ultimate perfection which is his own ultimate satisfaction as the fulfillment of his own subjective aim (PR 134; AI 251, 274-76). This fulfillment constitutes God's superjective nature.

In this way the primordial nature of God is the ground of both novelty and order. Without his conceptualization and organization of eternal objects as possibilities for actualization, there would be no progress toward the deeper reality, the intensification of experience that is the goal of the creative process; for eternal objects apart from God are without influence, and without his structuring of the totality of eternal objects, novelty itself would result in sheer chaos in the universe (RM 151-53; PR 46, 73, 75, 161, 164, 248, 377, 523; MT 128). While the efficacy of the primordial nature does not eliminate the creative freedom of actual occasions, its envisagement of relationships is so complete that it is "not added to, or disturbed by" any actualization of creativity (RM 147).

Complementing the primordial nature of God is his consequent nature, which is (or results from) his own physical prehension of the actualities of the evolving universe (PR 134, 527, 530). In contrast to the primordial nature, the consequent nature of God is described as conscious, incomplete, conditioned, actual, and everlasting (PR 524). Having "prehended" the self-creating entities of the world into its own developing wholeness, the consequent nature of God is in turn prehended by new occasions, of whose world it is always a part. Thus God again (in addition to the "objectification" of his primordial nature for conceptual prehension by concrescent occasions) becomes a constitutive factor in the world,<sup>12</sup> and perishing

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Daniel Day Williams, "How Does God Act? An Essay in Whitehead's Metaphysics," in *Process and Divinity*, pp. 178-80.

occasions are granted the fulfillment of their yearning for immortality (PR 533). Moreover, God's everlasting consequent nature may be related to the human "soul" in such a way that the latter "may be freed from its complete dependence on bodily organization" (AI 209), since the mental poles of occasions are not subject to measurable time and space (AI 247). Finally, here God may be understood in terms of a tender care that nothing of value be lost, as well as in terms of wisdom, patience, and love for the world (PR 525, 527, 532). But the "power" of God is not anything like intervention; it is the worship he inspires (SMW 172).

It is clearly the primordial rather than the consequent nature of God that fundamentally distinguishes him from the rest of the world and involves him in the creative process. Although God may be described as "Creator" because of his objectification for actual occasions as the ground for advance into novelty, this designation has unfortunate and misleading connotations of priority, ultimacy, volition, sovereignty, omnipotence, and personality (PR 343-44, 520). These elements of the Semitic concept of God (RM 66) have remained in Christian thought and are mischievous theologically as well as philosophically (AI 171-74); on one hand they make God the source of evil (SMW 161) and on the other they put him beyond metaphysical conceptualization (RM 68). It is better therefore to say not that God is *before* all creation but that he is *with* all creation (PR 521), and to say not that he creates the world but that he saves it (PR 526). God and the world require each other; they are mutually interdependent (PR 528; AI 173).<sup>13</sup>

Whitehead insists that he is not, like Descartes and Leibniz, introducing God into his system as an emergency measure to save the metaphysical principles from collapse (PR 78, 219, 289), because for him God is not an exception to these princi-

<sup>13</sup> Hartshorne, p. 521, offers this interpretative modification: "The world could . . . have been different from what it is, but some sort of world must have been 'there,' that is, must have been the content to the divine knower and the effect of the divine cause."

ples but rather their chief exemplification (PR 521). God is therefore intentionally secularized and rationalized (PR 515-16; AI 171-72). The rationalization is almost complete—but not quite: for *why* the relationships among the entities of the universe are what they are is a mystery of God's nature. No other reason can be given for them because that nature is the ground of rationality itself (SMW 160-61); they can only be discovered as they are. Finally, "the concept of 'God' is the way in which we understand this incredible fact—that what cannot be [namely, the correlation of opposites in actualization], yet is" (PR 531).

This then is Whitehead's God: a combination of creatureliness and primordality, dependence and transcendence, conceptualization and actualization, mentality and physicality, novelty and order, conditionedness and freedom, objectification and prehension, rationality and irrationality, abstraction and concrescence. It must be admitted that in some ways such a God seems more impressive as a Supreme Being than is the God of classical Christian theism.<sup>14</sup>

## II

Cobb emphasizes that his intention in *A Christian Natural Theology* is not to diverge from Whitehead's own basic viewpoint, approach, and objective; rather he is attempting to understand God's being and relationships entirely in terms of the principles that characterize Whitehead's system<sup>15</sup>—a goal which, according to Cobb, Whitehead himself failed to achieve. The program of revision involves five points.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hartshorne, p. 523.

<sup>15</sup> In the dedication of his book to Hartshorne, Cobb acknowledges the importance of the latter's influence. Cf. the evaluation Cobb gives in "'Perfection Exists': A Critique of Charles Hartshorne," *RL*, XXXII (1962-63), p. 302: "In my personal view Hartshorne's greatest achievement is not his brilliant revival of certain arguments for the existence of God but his development of a concept of God fully compatible with all that we know about the world, self-consistent within itself, and of profound religious significance."

(1) Cobb disagrees first with Whitehead's dichotomizing of God's nature,<sup>16</sup> observing that "too often he deals with the two natures as if they were genuinely separable. Further, he frequently writes as though God were simply the addition of these two natures. Thus God's primordial nature performs certain functions and his consequent nature others" (p. 178). This systematic disjunction not only neglects the fundamental unity of God as an actual entity, but also involves a misunderstanding of the functions of the two natures in relation to the world,<sup>17</sup> making it impossible to explain "how the eternally unchanging primordial nature of God can provide different initial aims to every occasion" (pp. 179-80).

Cobb would solve this problem by suggesting that God's own subjective aim at intensity of feeling involves (a) a propositional prehension concerning the satisfaction of each becoming occasion within its peculiar situation in the world, and (b) the actualization of himself in such a way that it maximizes the possibility of that satisfaction. The concrescent occasion then prehends this prehension, which in turn forms part of the initial phase of the occasion's own subjective aim. Thus the initial aim for the new occasion is included in its "initial data" and is not a distinct element as Whitehead describes it; and it comes from the totality of God's nature and not from the primordial nature only. Moreover, Cobb holds that the initial aim may derive in part from other (preceding) actual occasions which, like God, can have propositional prehensions concerning the satisfactions of the new occasion (although the role of God remains decisive). And Cobb also suggests that there are other prehensions of God quite similar to those involved in the provision of the initial aim. In short, the reception of the initial

<sup>16</sup> It is characteristic of Whitehead's thought that in PR the primordial nature of God is discussed in almost complete separation from the consequent nature; the former is almost wholly missing from the final chapter, "God and the World," and the latter appears hardly anywhere else.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, pp. 161-180, notes the need to emphasize the unity of God, but maintains a distinction in the functions of the two natures.



aim from God is not unlike an occasion's other prehensions of God or its prehensions of other entities.

(2) Another proposed revision concerns the relation of time and personness in God. Whitehead repeatedly refers to God as "an actual entity," but he also asserts that in distinction from all other entities God is non-temporal (that is, eternal) in regard to his primordial nature and everlasting (that is, cumulative of all elements of process without loss) in regard to his consequent nature. Cobb concludes that these latter assertions about God and time "compel us to assimilate God more closely to the conception of a living person than to that of *an* actual entity" (p. 188), so that he should be understood as "a succession of moments of experience with a special continuity" (p. 188; cf. pp. 71-79).

Now Whitehead recognizes two kinds of time: (a) time as transition between occasions, the time of the efficacy of causal sequence, or "physical time"; and (2) time within occasions, the non-divided time of internal process. If God is an actual entity, then his time is the latter kind and process in him is to be understood as the internal process of concrescence. But in that case the question of his efficacy in the world becomes acute; for efficacy is understood by Whitehead only in terms of succession; efficacy always means non-contemporaneity, and if God has no past he cannot be objectified for (that is, affect) the world. But Whitehead himself insists on the efficacy of God's consequent nature; and on the basis of the unity of God's nature (as Cobb argues) even the provision of the initial aim for each occasion involves efficacy. Furthermore, God's experience of his own satisfaction—an experience that comes at the completion of an entity—implies that as a continuing existent he is something other or at least more than *an* entity.<sup>18</sup>

So Cobb understands God as in important respects similar to what we know as personness. But this idea has its own problems, for in Whitehead's thought persons lack complete

<sup>18</sup> Hartshorne, pp. 544-50, moves in the same direction.

self-identity through time and experience loss of what is past. Cobb therefore suggests that God "vividly and consciously remembers in every new occasion all the occasions of the past" (p. 191); since all the occasions of the past are included in his own past, he thus maintains his identity and loses nothing of value in spite of the real pastness of his past. Finally, the idea of God as a living person requires that his conceptualization of the totality of eternal objects be conceived as a succession of acts, just as Whitehead understands a succession of occasions in the single "experience" of looking at a picture for, say, a minute. God is thus a personal succession of unimaginably rapid occasions.<sup>19</sup> Cobb maintains "that the chief reasons for insisting that God is *an* actual entity can be satisfied by the view that he is a living person, that this view makes the doctrine of God more coherent, and that no serious new difficulties are raised" (p. 192).

(3) Yet another problem is the relation of God to space. Although Whitehead does not attend specifically to this question, his system allows three possibilities: God may be local, or nonspatial, or omnispatial. Of these, the first is ruled out by the fact that God is related with equal immediacy to occasions everywhere in space. The second was probably the position tacitly assumed by Whitehead, thinking of God primarily in terms of his primordial nature and its conceptual prehension by actual occasions apart from spatial relations. In fact, his system admits the theoretical possibility that "physical experience may also be prehended apart from contiguity" (p. 194).

But the idea of God as nonspatial creates an essential difference between God and other actual entities, all of which have regional standpoints; and it is Cobb's aim to reduce such differences wherever possible. So he suggests that God

<sup>19</sup> These must be rapid enough to enable God to discriminate between non-synchronous electronic occasions. In contrast, human personal occasions succeed each other at a rate of approximately 10 per second, according to Cobb.

too is spatial, and since his standpoint "could not be such as to favor one part of the universe over others, it must be all-inclusive" (p. 195). The only problem is the question of the possibility of the inclusion of the region of one occasion within the region of another. Having already argued in favor of this possibility in regard to the relationship of human experience to the brain (pp. 82-91), Cobb easily draws an analogous conclusion here. At the same time he recognizes that there is no real issue here except metaphysical consistency. If God is nonspatial, he is equally related to all regions and occasions, and it is *as if* he were omnispatial; thus it seems more logical to affirm that he *is* omnispatial.

(4) Next Cobb turns to the uniqueness of God's function in relating eternal objects to actual occasions, and here he sees another element of incoherence: Whitehead seems to introduce God in order to explain the efficacy of eternal objects in the concrescence of actual occasions, without relating this function to the other elements of the system or explaining it in terms of the system. The resulting problem is two-fold: "First, it seems that God renders eternal objects effective for actual occasions in a way *radically* different from that in which temporal occasions make them effective for each other. Second, God seems to envisage eternal objects in a way for which the conceptual prehensions of actual occasions provide no analogy" (p. 198).

The first part of the problem is partially resolved by Cobb's previous idea that the subjective aim of an occasion derives initially not only from God but also from past occasions which, like God, include propositional prehensions of novelty—that is, possibilities of actualization—for the new occasion. In other words, the uniqueness of God is not radical; he "envisages and orders *all* eternal objects, whereas temporal occasions can order only an infinitesimal selection of eternal objects" (p. 201). This argument brings us to the second part of the problem, for it suggests that, in principle, actual occasions canprehend eternal objects directly and that, as

is the case in regard to God, "their own decisions can be explanatory of the conceptual prehensions not derived from physical prehensions" (p. 202).<sup>20</sup> Cobb does not insist that this in fact happens, only that it is not categorically impossible. And again there remains a vast difference in degree; the point is simply that "a temporal occasion may have toward some eternal object the kind of relationship God has toward all" (p. 203). If this does happen, Cobb thinks that its occurrence may well be connected with the highly reflective consciousness of human occasions.

Thus Cobb would replace the formulation in *Process and Reality* of a unique relationship of God to eternal objects with Whitehead's earlier but presumably more adequate statement that "the forms belong no more to God than to any one occasion" (RM 157).

(5) Finally, Cobb offers a clarification of the role of God in creation. For Whitehead, God's creative function consists of contributing the initial phase of the subjective aim of each new occasion, thereby determining which preceding occasions it willprehend and how they will be objectified for it. Thus God in effect selects the causal factors in each occasion. But his responsibility is not absolute, for it is qualified by (a) the givenness of the situation, (b) the freedom of each occasion to adjust its own aim,<sup>21</sup> (c) the presupposition of eternal objects which God does not create, and (d) the temporal and

<sup>20</sup> The two aspects of the problem seem more closely related than Cobb's separate discussion of them suggests. For the argument for the partial derivation of the subjective aim from preceding occasions presupposes the possibility in them of some genuine novelty not derived from God. Otherwise it is only a matter of the directness or indirectness of God's own provision of the subjective aim, a function that is not paralleled in any other actual entities; and if this is so, Cobb's whole point of increased coherence is lost.

<sup>21</sup> How this might occur—that is, on what basis and according to what criteria a concrescent occasion might adjust itself—Whitehead does not explain. Presumably this is the Whiteheadian approach to the mystery of self-determination, which he does not limit to personal occasions but extends to all actual entities. This is ultimately the source of evil (cf. *infra*, section V).

ontological equiprimordiality of the world (or conversely, the absence of any original *creatio ex nihilo*). Thus God is not, in Whitehead's thought, the ultimate reason why there is anything at all instead of nothing.

It is the function of God to give efficacy to creativity, which is itself not an actual entity and does not "exist," and therefore cannot function as the "creator" of anything. On the other hand, however, creativity is not merely one of the totality of eternal objects; for eternal objects express pure possibilities indeterminate to any one occasion, and creativity is necessary if there is to be any occasion at all. Therefore creativity is neither abstract in the usual sense, nor actual or concrete. But, Cobb observes, it is still far from clear why there is anything, for the idea of creativity itself does not explain why creativity continues to be actualized: "It seems just as possible that it will simply stop, that there will be then just nothing.... If occasions ceased to occur, then there would be no creativity. Creativity can explain only *ex post facto*" (p. 211). The conclusion is that God is not only the limitation of the form of existence but also the "reason" (whatever that is) why anything exists, so that "God's role in creation is more radical and fundamental than Whitehead's language usually suggests" (pp. 211-12). Once more this is not intended as a departure from the essential Whitehead, but a closer adherence to his own definitions and principles in order to increase the coherence of the system as a whole. Like Whitehead, Cobb refuses to claim for God "either eminent reality or necessary existence" (p. 213);<sup>22</sup> God is simply an infinite series of occasions, but since he exists he will continue to exist everlastingly because he aims to do so and has the power to do so.

In concluding his proposed clarification of Whitehead's doctrine of God, Cobb reiterates his contention that although the function of God is not radically different from that of

<sup>22</sup> This of course reflects a refusal to follow Hartshorne's revival of the ontological argument for the existence of God.

other actual entities, it is decisive. Without him, neither creativity nor the past nor both together could provide a future. "God always (and some temporal occasions sometimes) is the reason *that* each new occasion becomes. God, past occasions, and the new occasion are conjointly the reason for *what* it becomes. Whatever it becomes, it will always, necessarily, be a new embodiment of creativity" (p. 214).

### III

Cobb asks (p. 269) to be judged according to the soundness of his philosophy. In general he seems successful in raising significant questions by identifying important elements of incoherence in Whitehead's doctrine of God. But he seems somewhat less successful in providing answers in terms of acceptable alternative formulations.

Whitehead's dichotomized and mostly abstract God is clearly unsatisfactory. Although he insists that God is an actual entity, he generally ignores just those elements of his being (namely, his consequent nature) that are necessary for him to be *actual*. The fact that Whitehead finds it hardly necessary to mention the consequent nature of God at all until it appears as the subject of the final chapter of *Process and Reality* makes a certain feeling of incoherence inescapable.<sup>23</sup> Nor is the situation improved by Whitehead's reference to the peculiarly religious involvement of God's consequent nature (for example, the idea of God as love, patience, and companionship) at the end of an intentionally secularized system of metaphysics. If God is really to be understood as an actual entity, the system requires some such adjustment as Cobb offers. And his suggestions toward an understanding of the unity of God's nature and function are

<sup>23</sup> The greatest of several difficulties encountered by readers of PR lies in the fact that every argument seems to presuppose everything that follows it, so that the beginning is just as unintelligible without the end as the end is without the beginning. The notion of the consequent nature of God is a remarkable exemption from this circularity.

in harmony with the overall system, in which actual entities regularly function and are prehended as unities.

The crucial question which arises at this point is whether this unitary functioning of God implies a pastness in God parallel to the pastness of prehended actual occasions. In order to accommodate the fact that God influences the world (that is, is efficacious in the provision of the initial phase of the subjective aim of occasions by the objectification of his primordial nature, and in the influence of his consequent nature—or better, in Cobb's view, in both together), one must concur with Cobb's rejection of the view that God is *an* actual entity; and understanding God in some sort of analogy to "a living person" is an attractive suggestion, especially in the light of the Biblical picture of a "living God." But in the framework of Whiteheadian thought this idea is not as free of systematic difficulties as Cobb assumes.

What is a "person"? For Whitehead "an enduring personality" is "a route of occasions in which the successors with some completeness sum up their predecessors" (PR 531); Cobb applies this description to God, appropriately revising "some completeness" to "absolute completeness." But he neglects to seek for the *ground* of the route of occasions. In the temporal world, that ground is God, whose unitary primordial nature provides the initial aim for each occasion and thus furnishes order in successive occasions, in enduring objects, in living persons, and in the totality of the universe. As long as God is *an* actual entity there is no problem, for everything is held together by the unity of that one non-temporal, transepochal entity. If, however, God is not *an* entity but a series of ontologically discrete actualizations, the question of the ground of *his* unity becomes impossible to answer within the system.<sup>24</sup> Now Cobb is not unaware of this problem, but

<sup>24</sup> This weakness was first brought to my attention in conversation with Langdon Gilkey. Subsequent to the preparation of the present article, Gilkey has published an extensive review of *A Christian Natural Theology* in *ThT*, XXII (1965-66), 530-545, in which he takes

his proposed solution in terms of the completeness of God's prehension of his own past as well as all pastness of all occasions seems to fall short. For "'life' means novelty" (PR 159), and thus to say that God's total prehension of the past is the ground of his self-identity through time is of dubious meaning. And simply to affirm this self-identity and continuity is of course just the kind of arbitrariness that Cobb intends to avoid.

In view of the persuasiveness of Cobb's argument concerning the difference between the role of actual entities and role of God in Whitehead's system, not to mention the formidable set of distinctions indicated by Whitehead himself (cf. *supra*, p. 3), it would seem possible and perhaps more satisfactory to follow the master's lead in the direction opposite to that in which Cobb moves, and admit God as one of the categorial ultimates in the system, with no more need to assimilate him either to actual entities or to persons than there is to assimilate creativity to eternal objects. It is interesting that Cobb himself enumerates "the four ultimate elements" as "actual occasions, God, eternal objects, and creativity" (p. 177). He rightly objects to "arbitrary disconnection," but the disconnection here seems more essential than arbitrary. Of course the disconnection need not be absolute; there is no reason why these ultimate elements may not show some similarities to each other such as Cobb notes between creativity and eternal objects. Thus the important emphasis Cobb gives to the fundamental unity of God and his relationships to the world need not be lost.

On the other hand, if God is affirmed as a fourth ultimate rather than an entity within the category of actual entities, some of Cobb's arguments seem unnecessary or at least unimportant. In the first place, the incentive for maintaining the omnipatality of God is considerably weakened. Since creativity and eternal objects are nonspatial, there seems no

issue with Cobb on some of the problems mentioned here in sections III-V.



intrinsic reason to favor the notion of God's spatiality (and hence omnispatiality) just because of the spatiality of actual entities. As Cobb recognizes, the question makes no difference for the actualization of any occasion, and may therefore be argued on other grounds (if any) or left open. In the second place, if God is in a category separate from actual entities, there is no essential reason to argue for the capacity of actual occasions either to have propositional prehensions of novelty for subsequent occasions or toprehend eternal objects directly; God can hold this capacity uniquely. Of course, if Cobb is in fact correct in his affirmation of this capacity for all actual entities, his denial of the eminent reality and necessary being of God is readily understandable; but in that case it would be difficult to see on what ground he also affirms the "radical decisiveness" of God's role in creation.

A final reason for taking a path opposite from Cobb's assimilation of God to actual entities is the very cogency of his argument for giving God a more fundamental role in creation than does Whitehead. He demonstrates convincingly that pure creativity is even less adequate an explanation for the existence of actualities than was Aristotle's "prime matter," and that God "must be conceived as being the reason that entities occur at all as well as determining the limits within which they can achieve their own forms" (p. 211). But if God is in some sense the ground of being of actual entities (in precisely *what* sense, he does not spell out), it is surely creating confusion to understand God either as an actual entity or as a series of actual entities with a special continuity. Cobb's revision of Whitehead thus seems to be moving in two different directions. In contrast, a redefinition of God in the context of an ultimate quaternity of elements (Creativity, Creative Forms, Creator, and Creature, each presupposing the other three), while attributing to God a reality and necessity denied by both Whitehead and Cobb, would nevertheless avoid the problems that Cobb has encountered in his development of a Whiteheadian view of God.

But incorporating into Whiteheadian thought the idea of God as *sui generis* is perhaps impossible. At least it would raise for the Whiteheadians the same perplexing question that has harassed Christian theology for centuries and has been sharply reemphasized by the impact of analytic philosophy: on what basis is any language about God meaningful? If God cannot be understood in terms of the category of actual entities, can he be understood at all? Or must he remain essentially an unknown quantity? While Christian theology might be willing to live permanently with these questions, Whiteheadian metaphysics can hardly do so; for the whole thrust of its doctrine of God has been toward complete intelligibility. Therefore, although Whitehead's own view (God as *an* actual entity) is quite unacceptable, both Cobb's alternative (God as a "living person") and the one suggested here (God as categorially unique) seem to engender more difficulties for Whiteheadian thought than they resolve.

#### IV

Another and no less crucial problem in *A Christian Natural Theology* concerns methodology. Now there is a certain irony in suggesting that methodology is a problem for John Cobb; for he is acutely aware, and has done much to make others aware, of the place of method in the understanding and evaluation of theological systems. His *Living Options in Protestant Theology* is aptly subtitled "A Survey of Methods," and he has concluded the presentation of his own philosophical theology with a 32-page explanation of the way in which the theological task in general and philosophical theology in particular should be undertaken. And he has said the right things. He has noted the similarities as well as the differences between theology and philosophy, and he has pointed out that philosophical theology overlaps both of these disciplines while being identical with neither. Therefore "natural theology" is not the old and hopeless endeavor to ground Christian thought on neutral, universally acknowledged rational

principles; it is rather the systematic explication of the presuppositions of Christian thought—presuppositions which are inevitably subject to critical evaluation from non-theological viewpoints, that is, in the context of more general reflection. Cobb establishes the necessity of this kind of enterprise by showing that if it is not taken seriously the result is not *no* natural theology but an unconscious, uncriticized—and therefore probably poor and possibly alien—natural theology, with the consequence that the whole theological structure is weakened. He cites Augustine and Thomas Aquinas as classical examples of natural theology in its most practical form: the adaptation and development of an available philosophy so that it can serve as a “Christian natural theology.” Cobb intends his own work on Whitehead to be a similar endeavor.

He explains why he has chosen Whitehead’s philosophy to revise and use as a framework for Christian theology: (a) it is intrinsically excellent as a philosophical system; (b) its vision of reality is compatible with that of the Christian faith; and (c) it corresponds with his own fundamental vision of reality. Now about (a) there is no argument, and about (c) Cobb himself is the only competent judge. But it seems strange that (b) is so quickly assumed—and on the curiously inadequate basis that Whitehead’s own environment was culturally influenced by Christianity (in a way the environment of Aristotle or even Plotinus was not). Since the compatibility of Whitehead’s philosophy and Christian faith is widely disputed, it would seem that Cobb should endeavor to demonstrate its reality.<sup>25</sup>

Cobb’s inattention to this problem is reflected also in his neglect of an essential difference between the theological enterprise of Augustine and Thomas (as he himself describes it)

<sup>25</sup> A short step in this direction is taken by Norman Pittenger, “A Contemporary Trend in North American Theology: Process-Thought and Christian Faith,” *RL*, XXXIV (1964-65), 502-03. But this necessarily brief statement is hardly convincing.

and his own endeavor. For them the objective was to adapt philosophical categories for the elucidation of a Christian theological perspective; for him the objective is quite different (p. 269):

At no point... have I intended to replace philosophical argument by dogmatic assertion or to distort Whitehead so as to render him more amenable to Christian use. My attempt has been to make the philosophical doctrines conform to the philosophical norms.... A Christian natural theology must not be a hybrid of philosophy and Christian convictions. It must be philosophically responsible throughout.

It is remarkable that Cobb apparently fails to recognize how different his stance is from that of Augustine and Thomas; his allegiance to Whitehead's philosophical principles is in sharp contrast to their willingness to "distort" the philosophical systems they adopted in order to make them "more amenable to Christian use."

I am not here contending that Cobb's enterprise is wrong-headed; the point is that to label it "Christian natural theology" and to imply a parallel to the work of Augustine and Thomas is an unfortunate source of confusion if his principal interest is philosophical—and this seems certainly the case. Nor is the confusion eliminated by reference to his singularly broad definition of theology as "any coherent statement about matters of ultimate concern that recognizes that the perspective by which it is governed is received from a community of faith" (p. 252). This definition merely re-introduces the question of the immediate identification of Whiteheadian philosophy, which is clearly "the perspective by which [Cobb's "Christian natural theology"] is governed," as the perspective which can be reasonably understood to be "received from a [Christian] community of faith."

If Cobb is in fact writing "Christian natural theology," his work is subject to *two* sets of critical criteria; this is the price that is always required of those who would carry on an interdisciplinary project. To the extent that natural theology is philosophical, he is correct to observe that it must be judged

*qua* philosophical, and not hopefully received just because of its Christian convictions. But to the extent that natural theology is theological and Christian, there ought to be an equal openness to criticism in these terms. Yet this latter element is missing; why? Perhaps because of an epistemological assumption that quite naturally accompanies Whiteheadian philosophy: the susceptibility of all truth, including theological truth, to metaphysical rationalization. In other words, there is here an undiscussed question of theological authority which, so long as it remains undiscussed, is just as subversive of sound theology as is the undiscussed ontological assumptions against which Cobb properly warns.

It is instructive to recall that whenever philosophical categories have become, intentionally or by default, authoritative in a system of Christian theology (as in Gnosticism and Deism), the system has become heretical. This is the historical part of the reason why some theologians have been so skeptical of any kind of philosophical theology that they have (unfortunately) denied its usefulness altogether.

Just as theological affirmations are never completely neutral ontologically, so metaphysical systems are never completely neutral theologically. Therefore any philosophy not consciously constructed in terms of specifically Christian thought—and no important philosophy has been originally constructed in this way—will probably carry implications that are hostile to Christian theology. So long as Cobb intends to write Christian theology he ought to recognize that the “community of faith” provides not only its context but also, in an important sense, the criteria for its validity—in the form of scripture or tradition or present experience or some combination of these. Where the implications of these criteria conflict with his philosophical conclusions, he has only two theologically sound options: he can either subordinate the philosophical interests to the theological, or he can learn to live with the tension between them. To ignore the necessity of rigorous criticism in the light of theological norms, as he

has apparently done, is to create a "natural theology" that is not genuine theology at all, and may well go the way—ultimately—of Gnosticism and Deism. As it stands, his work might more appropriately be called *A Whiteheadian Philosophy of Religion*.<sup>26</sup>

## V

Although it has just been suggested that Cobb's presentation is incomplete as it stands, it may be assumed that a fuller discussion in the future will tend to clarify rather than modify the conception of God he has expressed. The following paragraphs are therefore intended as a brief discussion of this conception when considered from the context of Christian theology.<sup>27</sup> That is to say, I am here attempting to indicate the kind of questions that Cobb needs to examine very thoroughly if his doctrine of God is to be received (in spite of the methodological impediments) as theologically acceptable.<sup>28</sup>

(1) A basic question is whether or not Christian theology can accommodate a metaphysical rationalization of God.

<sup>26</sup> It is possible that the two issues raised in this section—the assumption of the fundamental compatibility of Whiteheadian philosophy and Christian theology, and the neglect of theological norms as valid criteria for philosophical theology—were intentionally excluded from the initial presentation of *A Christian Natural Theology*. Thus the present complaint may be merely a reflection of unwarranted irritation over (a) a misjudgment of the book's objective, resulting from a literalistic reading of its title and an accompanying failure to take the subtitle seriously enough, and/or (b) the fact that Cobb did not write the book that this reader wanted and expected him to write. But he does imply (p. 252) that he has now said what he believes needs to be said on the subject, and that his future writing is likely to move to other areas, such as Christology and soteriology (p. 12).

<sup>27</sup> "Christian theology" may be defined, for the purposes of this discussion, as the central understanding of God, man, and the world shared generally by classical, Reformation, and (to a lesser extent) contemporary Christian thought.

<sup>28</sup> Christian, *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics*, pp. 382-413, shows an awareness of the importance of this task, although he himself does not really attempt it.

Here the divergence seems radical in both meanings of the word—degree and depth. For Christian thought has always maintained, even in its most rationalistic forms, a final incomprehensibility as part of its basic understanding of deity. There is, to be sure, much less conflict between Whiteheadian thought and popular piety, which has always tended to forget that it knows God only by means of symbols, and that the symbols are necessarily anthropomorphic. And it is also to be noted that neither the Whiteheadian God nor the popular Christian God is *wholly* open to human understanding: the reasons why things are what they are, and happen as they do, are veiled in the mystery of the divine nature. Nevertheless the general “feeling” about God is that he is rational and regular.

But theology is not so easily satisfied as is popular piety, especially in regard to the assumption of regularity (which is the ground of rationality)—the assumption that all things are what they are because that is what they must be. Thus theology denies what piety tends to accept, namely, the idea of “God . . . in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground” (PR 529). Theology insists that God’s aseity (or, as Whitehead liked to put it, the fact that God is *causa sui*) means that he is transcendent not only in the Whiteheadian sense of the freedom of self-creativity but also in the sense of freedom from all other entities and principles—rational, metaphysical, or whatever—encompassed by human thought. Whitehead himself points in this direction when he identifies God as the ground of rationality; yet he does not really mean ultimate ground, but only proximate ground.

This problem has afflicted most philosophers’ Gods, who are what the various metaphysical systems let them be and cannot be anything else. But in such cases “God” seems an inappropriate word, for what the philosophers too often describe seems more like a cosmic functionary, obediently performing his duties. The idea of a “rationalized God” is simply a more sophisticated formulation of the self-contra-

dictory notion of a "conditioned God." The question is whether a meaningful concept of God requires—or, on the other hand, allows—his nature and function to be conditioned by the rational categories of a fully consistent ontology.<sup>29</sup> Again, it is not the point of this article to show that the Whiteheadian assumption ought not to be made; the point is that the question of a "rationalized God" involves a fundamental vision of reality, and that here Whiteheadian metaphysics and Christian theology do not seem compatible. The latter insists that ontology is an expression of God's nature and/or being; the former insists that God is an instance of metaphysical principles. The question is: is God within the system or outside it? Can philosophy include God or only point to him?

(2) Besides the formal question of the relation of God to the philosophical system, there is also the material question of the relation of God to cosmic process itself, that is, the relation of God to the world by means of creation. Cobb takes two important steps toward the theological affirmation of God

<sup>29</sup> It may be objected that this whole argument is based on a confusion of the order of being with the order of knowing, and that neither Whitehead nor Cobb nor any other metaphysician is really "imprisoning God within a metaphysical system" as is here implied, but that each is describing ultimate reality on the basis of the evidence he encounters. In other words, just as the statement, "I see a green patch; therefore there is grass beneath my window," does not mean that the patch of green I see is the ontological cause of the grass, but only the ground of my knowing that the grass is there, so also the statement, "I see an orderly world; therefore God functions within a metaphysical order," does not mean that what I see (and subsequently formulate logically into a metaphysical system) is the cause of ultimate reality but only the ground of my knowing what ultimate reality is like. But both statements presuppose (a) the comprehensibility of that to which the evidence points (for example, grass *qua* grass is knowable), and (b) an ontological correspondence between the evidence itself and that reality to which it points (grass is in fact green). In the case of the grass, these presuppositions may be verified to the point of practical certainty; in the case of ultimate reality, they remain fundamental assumptions upon which the Whiteheadian and other philosophical concepts of God rest.



as Creator. First, by emphasizing the unity of the primordial and consequent natures of God he makes possible an understanding of causal efficacy in a way that Whitehead did not clearly establish: God's role in creation becomes "actual" or "concrete." Secondly, Cobb makes God the reason for the existence of anything as well as the primary factor in its particular form. But he is still far from affirming God as a Creator who creates *ex nihilo*, for not only do creativity and eternal objects (which are not actual entities) remain equiprimordial with God, but so does the world. To use a clumsy metaphor: God pushes the button that lets creativity flow into actual entities, and at the same time regulates the amperage, voltage, and alternation of the current; but he is not the source of the current. God is an element in the process, indeed its supreme element; but he is not its ground.

The subordination of God to process brings other, derivative difficulties. In the first place, it effectively removes God from the definition of evil, and so empties that concept of theological meaning. As a corollary to the argument that if God is "the foundation of the metaphysical system with its ultimate activity" he must be the source of evil, Whitehead says that "it stands in His very nature to divide the Good from the Evil" (SMW 161). Although Whitehead does not elaborate his meaning, it can have no connection with any kind of divine "will," for God is not to be understood in terms of volition. Presumably the idea is that the initial aim which God supplies to every occasion is the Good, since it derives from God's subjective aim for his own satisfaction and is thus a part of the creative advance that is the goal of eternal process. A creative decision in each concrescent occasion can adjust this initial aim in the light of (a) aims inherited from other occasions and (b) its own immediate prehension of eternal objects (these two are Cobb's suggestions), as well as (c) its own "subjective form" or "effective feeling"; but this hardly corresponds to the Christian idea of radical disobedience, rebellion, or sin. In the Whiteheadian system

evil is incoherence, a conflict of cross-purposes; and in the nature of things it "promotes its own elimination" (RM 94). It is not by oversight that Cobb omits the idea of evil from his chapter on the nature of religion; there is no real connection between the two ideas.<sup>30</sup>

In the second place, if God is only part of creative process and not its ultimate ground, the concept of worship is considerably weakened. Even if Cobb is right in saying that "one does not worship in order to achieve some good. One worships because that which he dimly apprehends evokes worship" (pp. 216-17), the question remains whether a finite God—who is "in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground" (PR 529) and who is as ontologically dependent on the world as the world is dependent on him—does in fact evoke worship in the Christian sense. If he is not really Creator he can hardly be Saviour, except in the sense of stimulating an awareness of meaning in a function analogous to that of a great philosopher or prophet or poet, whose insight lights up some aspect of reality for others. If that is all that exists to be worshipped, it is difficult to see how the act of worship can retain any essential meaning for a Christian.

Whether a doctrine of God that (a) limits his function and being to a prescribed place in a metaphysical construction, (b) expands the category of ultimacy to include the world of actual entities as well as God, (c) divorces God from the concept of evil, and (d) eliminates the primary ground for worship, can serve as an expression of Christian belief is a question that Cobb and his fellow Whiteheadians ought not to evade.

<sup>30</sup> The underlying optimism about the upward direction of the eternal process seems axiomatic with Cobb as well as with Whitehead, and provides a significant point of contact between them and Teilhard de Chardin. Cf. Cobb, "Christian Natural Theology and Christian Existence," *CC*, LXXXII (1965), 266.

## VI

The predominantly negative tone of the second half of this article tends to obscure the possibility that Whiteheadian thought may yet furnish (or point to) ways of thinking useful to a formulation of a theologically valid and intellectually meaningful doctrine of God.

Certainly the idea of primordial and consequent natures, especially as revised and unified by Cobb, is a suggestive way of understanding the relationship of God's transcendence, absoluteness, and eternity on the one hand and his relatedness and responsiveness to history on the other. It seems to make less difficult—though of course not more true—the simultaneous affirmations that God is ontologically unconditioned and that what he experiences is in a certain sense dependent on human response, so that how human beings use their creaturely freedom does make a difference *to him*. However much the idea of the love of God is interpreted as disinterested *agape*, it must retain the idea that the world *matters* to God, and this must mean that he is in some way experientially conditioned by it. And the "two natures" concept also facilitates the affirmation of a real pastness in God, an affirmation that is closely related to the possibility of directionality and meaning in time. That is, for God as well as for man, Creation, Incarnation, and Redemption must be an order of events; at least it is impossible to conceive of them as significant without such an order.

Another possible contribution is the indirect suggestion of Creativity, Creative Agency, and Creative Forms as aspects of the creative process. These three elements can be assimilated to the idea of a transcendent, sovereign God; whether they form some sort of analogy to the Trinity is another (and interesting) question. In any case, their combination may offer a useful way of understanding the function of God in relation to the world.

Finally, the idea of "initial aim" may point to a way of

understanding providence and/or the operation of the Holy Spirit. It is interesting that even though Calvin was unattracted to this kind of speculation, his doctrine of particular providence may be explicated metaphysically in such a way that it too involves God as selecting the causal factors operative in each occasion. At the same time, aspects of Whiteheadian thought may make it possible to maintain—in contrast to Calvin—human freedom and moral responsibility.<sup>31</sup> This philosophical correlation of God's universal efficacy and man's self-determination may well be a theologically important development.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Cobb, "The Philosophical Grounds of Moral Responsibility: A Comment on Matson and Niebuhr," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LVI (1959), 619-21.