GOD AND THE WORLD:

COMPOUND INDIVIDUAL OR COSMIC COMMUNITY?

In his celebrated essay “The Compound Individual,” Charles Hartshorne first reviews various ways in which philosophers have tried to account for the reality of individual entities and then concludes in agreement with Whitehead that besides utterly simple entities without component parts there must be compound individuals, individual entities which have subordinate individual entities as their component parts; otherwise one cannot explain the unity and individuality of living organisms such as human beings (Hartshorne, 191-220). He then argues that God is “the compound individual who at all times has embraced or will embrace the fullness of all other individuals as existing at those times” (Hartshorne, 118). As such, God is the “soul” or organizing principle of the universe, itself understood as an individual existent with multiple parts. The resulting model of the God-world relationship whereby the universe is the “body” of God and God is the “soul” of the universe is widely used in philosophical and theological circles to justify the notion of panentheism, the belief that the world exists in God but is nevertheless distinct from God in its own existence and activity.
Yet there are some notable disadvantages to this model of the God-world relationship which I will mention before setting forth what I consider to be a more satisfactory understanding of the God-world relationship. From a philosophical perspective, for example, one can argue that the soul-body metaphor for the God-world relationship is implicitly logocentric. For, as Hartshorne notes in “The Compound Individual,” God is “the only eternal individual” (Hartshorne, 118). God, to be sure, exists in ongoing interdependence with the world (Whitehead, 348). But it is never the same world from moment to moment. God is thus the transcendent individual entity who gives unity and order to the many entities of this world (God’s “body”). Hence, the charge of logocentrism is still valid even though God never exists apart from some world.

From a Christian theological perspective, moreover, there are still other limitations to this metaphor for the God-world relationship. Anna Case-Winters in her book God’s Power argues: “What we have in the mind-body relation is an organic unity that lets go of the social relation. . . . This analogy also violates the principle of dual transcendence, which argues for passive as well as active power in God (Case-Winters, 165). She herself prefers the analogy of the pregnant woman and the child in her womb.
The two are, in a sense, interdependent and the well-being of the one depends upon the well-being of the other” (223). At the same time, Case-Winters concedes that the mother-foetus analogy is limited since the child in the womb eventually becomes fully independent of the mother for its own existence and activity whereas the world never achieves such independence from God (222).

Likewise, Sallie McFague, sees still another limitation in the soul-body metaphor for the God-world relationship: “For the saving love of God to be present to human beings it would have to be so in a way different from how it is present to other aspects of the body of the world – in a way in keeping with the peculiar kind of creatures that we are, namely, creatures with a special kind of freedom, able to participate self-consciously (as well as be influenced unconsciously) in the evolutionary process” (McFague, 76).

My own model for the God-world relationship is that of a cosmic community with the three divine persons of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as the primordial members. A bona fide Trinitarian understanding of God within a Whiteheadian context is, of course, logically impossible, unless one somehow reinterprets what is meant by a “society.” For many years now, I have urged that a Whiteheadian society even on purely philosophical grounds should
be not only more than but also other than its constituent actual occasions if it is to be understood as a functioning ontological totality and not just an aggregate of actual occasions with analogous patterns of self-constitution (Bracken SS, 39-56). Hartshorne’s efforts to deal with this issue in “The Compound Individual” were in my judgment only partially successful because he was forced to distinguish between compound and composite individuals with the latter being described as “individuals only in a slight degree” (Hartshorne, 215). Thus for Hartshorne composite individuals such as atoms and molecules are equivalently aggregates of actual occasions with no internal principle of unity and organization. Yet DNA and RNA molecules as carriers of information for the formation and proliferation of cells likewise must possess an internal unity and organization beyond that of a simple aggregate of atoms.

A much simpler and more inclusive way to guarantee the ontological integrity of Whiteheadian societies is to stipulate that they are enduring structured fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions. The structure is, to be sure, initially determined by one set of constituent actual occasions but the “common element of form” survives from one set of actual occasions to another as a result of being already present in the structure
of the field out of which the new actual occasions are arising. Likewise, by their dynamic interrelation a given set of actual occasions can alter the structure of the field for prehension by their successors. But the structure should survive basically unchanged so as to serve as the principle of continuity and, in the case of organisms, as the principle of self-identity for the society. Finally, this is not to deny the existence and activity of a “soul” or regnant subsociety of actual occasions within organisms, but only to stipulate that the agency which the regnant subsociety exercises has to be coordinated with the agencies of all the other actual occasions within the rest of the body so as to constitute the collective agency of the organism as a whole (Bracken SS, 46-48).

If, then, Whiteheadian societies are objective ontological totalities in their own right by reason of being enduring structured fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions, then the model of the God-world relationship as a cosmic community is easy to construct. The three divine persons of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity are one God rather than three gods in close collaboration because they share a single structured field of activity. Within that divine field of activity or divine matrix the physical universe subsists as a vast network of inter-
locking and hierarchically ordered fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions (Bracken OIM, 146-51). Each of these fields with its constituent actual occasions has its own ontological integrity, its own “common element of form,” with respect to fields below and above it. The fields below it with their characteristic patterns of operation constitute the necessary infrastructure for its operation and the fields above it constitute its superstructure, the way in which it functions as a part within an even larger totality. Cells, for example, only come into existence and survive as a superordinate field of activity for interrelated molecules, even as each molecule is a superordinate field of activity for a given set of atoms. Yet the field of activity proper to the cell is integrated into the broader field of activity proper to a plant or animal organism.

To sum up, then, the God-world relationship can be seen as a cosmic community of actual occasions (subjects of experience) organized into interlocking and hierarchically ordered fields of activity from the subatomic to the divine levels of existence and operation. If we compare this model with the soul-body metaphor for the God-world relationship, then it seems to possess a distinct advantage over the latter. For, like the soul-body model, this approach allows for a panentheistic understanding of the God-
world relationship. The physical universe exists within God but is distinct from God in its own existence and activity. The three divine persons, like the unipersonal God of the other model, are affected but not controlled by events taking place in the physical universe. They give order and direction to the creative process through divine initial aims to concrescing actual occasions at every level of existence and activity within the physical universe. Yet, better than in the soul-body metaphor for the God-world relationship, this communitarian model provides for the ontological integrity of the physical universe as distinct from God. For, a community of interrelated subjects of experience is obviously a looser social unity than the unity of body and soul within an individual organism. Finally, this communitarian model of the God-world relationship seems to allow for a repristination of the classical Christian doctrine of creatio ex nihilo. The basic objection to this doctrine from a process-oriented perspective, after all, has always been that it presupposes a unilateral exercise of power on the part of God in dealing with creatures. But this communitarian approach implies that the real motive for creation was God’s desire to share the divine life with creatures; hence, creation should be understood as an exercise of self-giving love rather than of unilateral power on the part of the divine persons. But to discuss this last point further would demand more
time than is permitted to me in this presentation.

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REFERENCES


