

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, A. N. WHITEHEAD
AND A METAPHYSICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Almost forty years ago, Ian Barbour wrote an article entitled “Teilhard’s Process Metaphysics” which was originally published in The Journal of Religion and then republished in an anthology on process theology edited by Ewert Cousins.¹ With his customary thoroughness, Barbour compared and contrasted the metaphysical schemes of Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead in seven major areas: reality as temporal process, the “within,” freedom and determinism, continuing creation, God and time, the problem of evil, and the future of the world. Without going into detail on each of these themes, I wish in this brief essay to focus on one key difference in the way that Teilhard and Whitehead view the cosmic process and then indicate how these differences might be unexpectedly complementary in the creation of a third position, namely, a metaphysics of intersubjectivity which, as I see it, neither Teilhard nor Whitehead fully achieved.

The key difference in their approach to reality, as Barbour points out,² is that, while Teilhard focuses on the unity of the cosmic process as a whole and its teleological orientation to the Cosmic Christ, Whitehead emphasizes instead the diversity and multiplicity of “actual occasions” as “the final real things of which the world is made up.”³ Furthermore, even though Whitehead concedes that “the growth of a complex structured society [of actual occasions] exemplifies the general purpose pervading nature,”⁴ he anticipates “no integrated cosmic convergence and no final consummation of history” even apart from the Cosmic Christ.⁵ For Whitehead, unlike Teilhard, cosmic process does not mean progress toward a goal predetermined by a Creator God. For him, “God and the World are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjointed multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into concrescent unity, with its diversities in contrast.”⁶ The cosmic process is thus infinite, without beginning or

end. God and the World are forever in dialectical relationship.

One can certainly attribute this difference in metaphysical vision between Teilhard and Whitehead to their contrasting personal background and previous training. Teilhard was a Jesuit priest anxious to reconcile his Christian faith and seminary training with the theory of evolution arising out of his studies in paleontology. He was not a professional philosopher of science like Whitehead who was consciously trying to break free of the materialistic determinism characteristic of much of early modern natural science.⁷ Whitehead's primary objective was to set up a metaphysical scheme in which novelty and spontaneity would be as much an ongoing feature of physical reality as order and predictability. Hence, how the cosmic process began and where it might end some day were not questions pertinent to his task. What was important was to expose the fallacy in the implicit metaphysics of early modern science whereby reality is composed of inert bits of matter "simply located" in space and time and thus with purely external relations to one another.⁸ Instead, as noted above, he stipulated that "the final real things of which the world is made up" are actual occasions or momentary self-constituting subjects of experience with varying degrees of spontaneity depending upon the relative complexity of their self-organization. In this way he implicitly agreed with Teilhard in the latter's insistence that material things have a "within" as well as a "without," a principle of spontaneity as well as a principle of order.⁹ but for quite different reasons. That is, both were opposed to the dualism between spirit and matter in the early modern period, but Teilhard for largely theological reasons and Whitehead for strictly philosophical reasons.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that it might be possible to reconcile these two different process-oriented visions of reality in terms of a third position, namely, a metaphysics of intersubjectivity which neither Teilhard nor Whitehead fully realized in his own work. Intersubjectivity, after all, basically implies a balance between multiplicity and unity, between multiple subjects of experience and the higher-order level of existence and activity which

they achieve by their dynamic interaction. On the one hand, in saying that “the final real things of which this world is made up” are actual occasions or momentary self-constituting subjects of experience Whitehead provides the necessary plurality of subjects of experience needed for a metaphysics of intersubjectivity. But, as I shall indicate below, he is vague on the ontological status of “societies” as the objective result of all this intersubjective activity. Teilhard, on the other hand, was clearly thinking in intersubjective terms with his notion of the noosphere or collective consciousness of humankind.¹⁰ But he too is vague with respect to the details of his scheme, specifically, how the law of “complexification” works at the inanimate level or even at the pre-human animate level of Nature.¹¹ Is the “within” of things to be identified with subjectivity, as in Whitehead’s scheme, or simply to be accounted for in terms of a distinction between “radial” and “tangential” energy, both of which terms are themselves more suggestive than scientifically descriptive?

Admittedly, intersubjectivity as a theme of scientific investigation is still in its infancy. What seems clear from a historical perspective is that with Descartes’ celebrated “cogito; ergo, sum”¹² there was a notable paradigm shift in philosophical reflection from a focus on classical metaphysics and the objective order of things (as in Medieval philosophy and theology) to a new focus on epistemology and subjective experience. In due time this “turn to the subject” led to transcendental subjectivity as worked out by Immanuel Kant and the German Idealists. But at the start of the twentieth century Edmund Husserl in his Cartesian Meditations was still struggling with the reality of the (human) Other as truly Other, that is, as not simply a component in one’s own self-consciousness.¹³ Martin Heidegger with his notion of Mitsein (being-with) and Emmanuel Levinas with his stipulation of the ontological priority of the Other to the Self both contributed significantly to the theme of intersubjectivity without setting forth an appropriate paradigm for its conceptual analysis.¹⁴ As I see it, only Martin Buber first with his distinction between I-Thou relations and I-It relations and then with his elusive notion of the “Between” as the intentional space generated in moments of genuine interpersonal exchange

provided the entry-point for thinking through the notion of intersubjectivity as simultaneously involving both subjectivity and objectivity.¹⁵ That is, two or more subjects of experience by their interaction create something other than themselves, not simply Buber's somewhat illusive *Between* but a longer-lasting social context (an environment or a community) with a definite structure or lawlike character. Such a social context, once constituted, heavily conditions the subsequent behavior of those same subjects of experience and their successors, even as they by their continuing interaction sustain it as a commonly shared reality.

If this preliminary analysis of the notion of intersubjectivity be true or at least plausible, then a combination of the theological insights of Teilhard and the philosophical categories of Whitehead could result in a new understanding of the God-world relationship as a cosmic community of subjects of experience (divine and creaturely) in dynamic interrelationship. That is, from Teilhard one could draw the insight that God is tripersonal rather than unipersonal, hence that God is not an individual subject of experience in ongoing dialectical relationship with created subjects of experience (as in Whitehead's own scheme) but rather a community of divine subjects of experience who make a "space" within their own divine intersubjective field of activity for the emergence of created subjects of experience. Hence, instead of the dualism between God and the world which still exists in Whitehead's scheme,¹⁶ one has in hand a panentheistic understanding of the God-world relationship. The world of creation exists within God but is still distinct from God in terms of its own creaturely existence and activity.¹⁷

Then, instead of talking in general terms about the "within" of things, we can say with Whitehead that "the final real things of which the world is made up" are actual occasions or momentary self-constituting subjects of experience. Likewise, we can propose that Teilhard's process of gradual complexification within cosmic evolution is not simply to be attributed to a growth in "radial energy" with its counterpart in new forms of "tangential energy." Rather, with Whitehead we claim that growth in complexity is to be explained in terms of progressive growth in the structure and organization of "societies" of actual occasions with a "common element of

form” or analogous self-constitution.¹⁸ At the same time, however, to validate Teilhard’s claim that the human community and perhaps all of material creation as well is summed up in the cosmic Christ, we rethink Whitehead’s notion of society. It is more than an association of actual occasions with a “common element of form” or closely analogous self-constitution.¹⁹ Rather, a Whiteheadian society is a structured field of activity for its constituent actual occasions. So understood, it nicely serves as the “Between” or the common space for the dynamic interrelation of actual occasions (momentary subjects of experience) from moment to moment.

Whitehead himself, to be sure, did not conceive the God-world relationship or, for that matter, the relations of created actual occasions with one another in terms of intersubjectivity. For him intersubjectivity was logically impossible since concreting actual occasions only “prehend” (on a feeling-level grasp) their predecessors, not their contemporaries. But the predecessors have already lost their subjectivity in becoming “superjects,” objective data for their successors. Thus even God cannot prehend created actual occasions except as “superjects,” entities lacking in subjectivity. In Process and Reality, to be sure, Whitehead referred to societies as “environments” in “layers of social order” limiting the self-constitution of any given set of actual occasions here and now.²⁰ But he failed to exploit this insight to explain intersubjectivity. For, understood as matching fields of activity for their constituent actual occasions, two Whiteheadian societies can overlap so as to create a common field of activity populated by both sets of concreting actual occasions. Thus, while the concreting actual occasions do not directly prehend one another, they prehend the structure of their common field of activity and thereby experience the reality of their ongoing intersubjective relations. You and I, for example, are in Whiteheadian terms very complex structured societies of actual occasions; and yet we enjoy intersubjective relations with one another through sharing a Between or common field of activity in successive moments of consciousness.

Turning back now to Teilhard’s vision of the Cosmic Christ as the goal of cosmic

evolution, we see how with the aid of this revised notion of a Whiteheadian society we steer clear of pantheism, the absorption of all created reality into the reality of the risen Lord, and affirm instead panentheism, the incorporation of creation as a complex set of created fields of activity into the field of activity proper to Christ and ultimately into the field of activity proper to all three divine persons in their ongoing interrelation. The advantage of the notion of “field” as opposed to the classical understanding of “substance,” therefore, is that fields can be layered into one another without losing their individual identity as different fields of activity. Individual substances, on the contrary, inevitably lie outside one another unless one of them is actively assimilated into the other as in the consumption of food by human beings and other animals. Hence, Teilhard’s vision of the Cosmic Christ as goal of the evolutionary process makes excellent sense within a field-oriented approach to Whiteheadian societies.

Furthermore, not just human beings but all of physical reality can be thus incorporated into the Cosmic Christ as members of his Mystical Body. Whereas Teilhard in The Phenomenon of Man seems to think that at the end of the world only human beings will survive after the noosphere has detached itself from its material matrix,²¹ within this neo-Whiteheadian scheme everything survives, albeit in a transformed state, within the Cosmic Christ as an all-embracing divine-creaturely field of activity. But, to elaborate further upon this latter point, is impossible within the time-frame of this talk. I refer interested parties to some recent publications, notably Christianity and Process Thought: Spirituality for a Changing World, recently published by the Templeton Foundation Press.

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ENDNOTES

1. Ian G. Barbour, "Teilhard's Process Metaphysics," The Journal of Religion 49 (1969), 136-59; Process Theology: Basic Writings, ed. Ewert Cousins (New York; Newman/Paulist Press, 1971), pp. 323-50.

In this essay, page references will be to Process Theology.

2. Ibid., p. 323, 327.

3. Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality; An Essay in Cosmology, Corrected Edition, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), p. 18.

4. Ibid., p. 100.

5. Barbour, "Teilhard's Process Metaphysics," p. 348.

6. Whitehead, Process and Reality, p. 348.

7. Cf. his early philosophical work Science and the Modern World (New York: Free Press, 1967), pp. 1-74.

8. Ibid., pp. 57-58.

9. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 53-66.

10. Ibid., pp. 180-84.

11. Ibid., pp. 48-49; 142-52.

12. Rene Descartes, Meditations concerning First Philosophy, II: in Rene Descartes: Discourse on Method and Meditations, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), p. 82.

13. See Edmund Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), pp. 89-151.

14. See Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 153-63; Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 39-40.

15. See Martin Buber, I and Thou, 2nd ed., trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner's, 1958), esp. pp. 3-9, 63.

16. See Whitehead, Process and Reality, p. 348: "God and the World are the contrasted opposites etc." Even though it is a dualism within an overarching cosmic process, Whitehead's God-world relationship is still a dualism between quite separate realities.

17. See, e.g., Bracken, The Divine Matrix: Creativity as Link between East and West (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), pp. 52-69; The One in the Many: A Contemporary Reconstruction of the God-World Relationship (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 109-30.

18. See, e.g., Whitehead, Process and Reality, pp. 89-109, where he sketches "The Order of Nature" within his system of metaphysics.

19. Ibid., p. 34.

20. Ibid., p. 90.

21. Teilhard de Chardin, The Phenomenon of Man, pp. 285-90.