The Philosophical Basis of Inter-religious Dialogue

The Philosophical Basis of Inter-religious Dialogue: The Process Perspective

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

MIROSŁAW PATALON

In the present epoch of tensions between civilizations, challenges being brought by globalization processes and the necessity of the coexistence of various cultures and traditions, the subject of inter-religious dialogue seems to be particularly significant. Can religions remain isolated islands? Are their claims of being the only source of theological truth justified? Or should it rather be understood as an effect of interaction between different points of view and common effort of looking for the answers to the questions about God and his relations to the world? What is the role of dialogue? Is it only a politically correct element or maybe something more essential – the basis of reasonable existence and development of religion? Should the direction traced by 20th century's partisans of ecumenical movements be widened in order to embrace also non Christian religions? What is the orthodoxy and where are its boundaries?

These are some topics discussed during the international conference that was held in Katowice, Poland in May 2008, organized by The Whitehead Metaphysical Society in Poland, Franciscan Seminary OFM in Katowice, The Pontifical Academy of Theology in Cracow, and the Institute of Philosophy at University of Silesia. The process philosophy creates a convenient and favorable atmosphere for this kind of considerations. The articles selected for this book represent different points of view of the discussed topic. At the conference we were honored to host scholars from Lithuania, Hungary, United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Japan, Bulgaria, USA, Germany, and Poland. We hope that the variety of approaches will be beneficial not only to the scientific discourse but also will influence the social relations in Poland. The book is addressed to all who deal with the inter-religious dialogue: both clergy and laymen as well as scholars and students interested in the subject.

In the first paper in the collection, *Whitehead on Religion. A Philosophical Basis for Inter-religious Dialogue?*, Santiago Sia considers the essence of religion in connection with culture, pointing out to the various definitions of religion. The author analyses this issue in light of the writings of Alfred North Whitehead whose broad understanding of

religion, not confined to the sphere of dogmas and rituals, is particularly helpful in today's reality of the secularized Western world. A confrontation with the most important, the most profound and the ultimate is only possible when one decides to challenge the existing tradition and cultural paradigms. Thus achieved solitariness, according to Whitehead, is the foundation of religious experience, though it need not manifest itself in a *stricte* religious activity. In addition, Sia shows how Whitehead goes beyond Cant's understanding of religion (seen, in the first place, as the source of morality) by relating it closely to metaphysics – conceived of not as an irrational image of the non-material world but as knowledge of the general and, at the same time, a determinant of everything that happens in the world.

In his paper *Between Ecstasy and Eschatology. Immanence, Transcendence, and the Metaphysics of Process*, Jonathan Weidenbaum deals with the issue of diverse religious experience among various confessional groups, isolating two main types thereof: mysticism and faith. The former aims at uniting a human being with the Absolute while the latter at submitting in everyday life to a god conceived of in personal terms. In the perspective of interreligious dialogue, the author – following John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin – considers a possible harmonization of both attitudes, which may become a significant step in achieving mutual understanding between the respective traditions. Does Whitehead's philosophy of organism enable harmonization of this kind by providing it with epistemological coherence? Do the rational and the irrational, the scholarly and the religious, the physical and the spiritual complement and stimulate one another within its confines? These are some of the basic questions posed by Weidenbaum.

In the article *Religious Experience in William James and Whitehead and the Question of Truth* Helmut Maaßen examines Jamesian concept of experience in relation to the epistemological assumptions of process philosophy. Louwrens W. Hessel in the article *Inter-religious Dialogue. By Whom, For What Purpose or: How To Overcome the Clash of Religions* argues that "there is no philosophical basis for inter-religious dialogue, but philosophy is indispensable for minimising derailments and for preventing stagnation". Accordingly Matthew Lopresti in his text *Inter-religious dialogue and Religious Pluralism. A Philosophical Critique of Pope Benedict XVI and the Fall of Religious Absolutism* deals with the incompatibility of different views of reality. He asks if it is "possible to hold an absolutist view of the truthfulness of one's own traditions and still engage in an open inter-religious dialogue with other religions?"

Hiromasa Mase in the paper *The Contrasted Opposites' in Nishida and Whitehead* juxtaposes the thought of the founder of the Buddhist Kyoto School with the views of Alfred North Whitehead regarding the relationship between transcendence and immanence. The meaning of the category of *emptiness* and *kenosis* is discussed in the context of the Christian-Buddhist dialogue. A similar purpose is pursued by Bogdan Ogrodnik, the author of *Buddhist 'Sunyata' and Christian 'Kenosis': An Attempt of Comparison on the Ground of Whitehead's Metaphysics*.

From a viewpoint of a Christian theologian, Romualdas Dulskis analyses selected doctrines of Daoism in his paper *The Purpose of Human Existence and the Meaning of Immortality in Daoism*, thus looking for stimulation for a deeper understanding of his own religion, particularly as regards salvation and immortality. Mariola Paruzel in her paper *The Truth Propagated by Mahatma Gandhi as a Base of Strong Dialogue Between Religions* deals with the problem of morality, considered as a very important platform of understanding between religions. In her view it is the quality of human life, rather than the set of accepted dogmas, that is a true determinant of dialogue. The author examines both the views and behaviour of Mahatma Gandhi, presenting specific suggestions regarding education in the spirit of mutual respect and development. That is because religion, with its open questions and hypotheses, is capable of dynamizing culture, as long as its adherents are willing to challenge the existing stereotypes and paradigms.

Petar Kanev in his paper *The Dialogue as a Precondition for the Freedom of Relief and as a Prerequisite for the Christian Enculturation. The Experience of the Bulgarian Orthodox Priests after 1989* presents a survey of an empirical study conducted among the clergy of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Bulgaria with respect to tolerance and openness to other religious traditions as well as research regarding the Christian-Muslim relations in Bulgaria. Likewise, Mirosław Patalon's *Discursive Construction of the Subject and Inter-religious Dialogue from the Perspective of Process Theology* presents a report from empirical research regarding openness to theological variance, conducted among religion teachers of various confessions in Gdańsk.

In *Confessions 2008*, Minoru Inada against the background of historical Christian creeds presents a specific view of religion from the perspective of contemporary scholarship, concluding that "the lamps are different, but the Light is the same." Przemysław Koberda and Urszula Stodolska-Koberda in their text *What New Insight Gives Us Wilber's Integral Philosophy/Psychology in Understanding the World?* present the basic thesis of Ken Wilber's thought trying to find it's application for the

dialogical co-existence in today's world. The last two papers in the collection, *On Mystic Experiences of Saint Hildegard of Bingen* by Magdalena Otlewska and *The Meaning of Heart in Christian and Indian Mystics in the Philosophy of Boris Vysheslavtsev* by Marta Kuty, focus on the significance of mysticism as inspiration for contemporary ecumenical dialogue.

WHITEHEAD ON RELIGION: A PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE?

SANTIAGO SIA

Introduction

Although inter-religious dialogue has been occurring for some time and in various forms, in our times it has been precipitated by a number of events, not all of which can be described in positive terms. Nonetheless, it is something that we should welcome as a step in the right direction and work towards making it more fruitful.[1] At the same time, conscious of the sensitivity and complexity of the situation, we need to engage in the dialogue in a spirit of mutual respect.

Inasmuch as the theme of this conference of the Whitehead Metaphysical Society in Poland is "The Philosophical Basis of Inter-religious Dialogue", I should like to focus on Whitehead's philosophical notion of religion. My aim is to discuss selected insights in his philosophy with a view to showing how they can provide some kind of philosophical basis and incentive for inter-religious dialogue. In developing the topic of this paper, I will first discuss A.N. Whitehead's notion of religion. Since a fundamental concern in the dialogue among religious believers is the competing claims to the truth of the beliefs of the different religions I will then examine his understanding of the origin and status of religious beliefs.

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[1] In his *Lights of the World: Buddha and Christ* (Dharmaram Publications, 1997), Ninian Smart shows how inter-religious dialogue between Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity is not only possible but also can bring about harmony to human civilization while preserving the distinctiveness of the religious traditions. As I see it, the purpose (or expected outcome) of such a dialogue—as I explained in response to Stanislaw Krajewski at the conference—can also simply be that engaging in dialogue is itself something beneficial for all parties concerned. As Martin Buber in his philosophy of dialogue shows, the reality of the "in-between" transforms both parties of the dialogue.

The Notion of Religion

Given the complexity of its meaning and use, the term "religion", requires some clarification first. It is not surprising that Wilfred Cantwell Smith would question the validity and the helpfulness of the concepts "religion" and "religions". Because the concept of religion in the West has evolved and because religion itself has been reified, he claims that these concepts are not only unnecessary but also much less serviceable and legitimate than they once seemed. [2]

A popular illustration of this complexity can be seen in discussions as to whether Buddhism should be regarded as a religion insofar—at least as generally understood—it does not believe in a transcendent god. Compounding that difficulty of classifying Buddhism as a religion is the fact that there are different kinds of Buddhism.[3] Again, as is well known, there has been some claim that Marxism, because of its demands on its followers, is a religion except in name. Additionally, the sophistication of the more established religions such as Christianity or Islam has led at times to the suspicion that native religions found in Africa or Asia are nothing more than superstitious beliefs—to the annoyance of those who regard them as genuine, if undeveloped, religions. More recently, we have been faced with the rise of what are labeled as "cults" rather than religions despite the fact that in some cases their present development appears to parallel the early stages in the growth of the more established religions.

The existence of many general interpretations of religion leads John Hick in his book, *An Interpretation of Religion*, to opt for dividing them into "naturalistic", i.e. religion as a purely human phenomenon, or "religious", i.e. confessional. In contrast to these two groups Hicks offers what he considers to be a theory of religion that is not confessional but one that acknowledges its plurality of forms. Focusing on belief in the transcendent, he bases his interpretation on "a family-resemblance understanding" of religion.[4] Likewise, the variety of competing definitions of religion and the difficulty of judging their correctness cause Peter Clarke and Peter Byrne to turn to the "family resemblance definition" of religion

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[2] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A Revolutionary Approach to the Great Religious Traditions* (London: SPCK, 1978), 121.

[3] In his *Pure Land Buddhism: Historical Development and Contemporary Manifestation* (Dharmaram Publications: 2004) Kenneth K. Tanaka gives a historical and theological account of Pure Land Buddhism, a form of Buddhism that is less known outside Asia compared to Zen or Tibetan forms.

[4] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

as a looser, more informal mode of definition. They believe that there can be no finality in the definition of religion because the phenomenon of religion keeps developing as illustrated by the New Religions, which have disclosed fresh insights into the relationship between religion and our present culture.[5] The "family-resemblance understanding or definition" of religion can be useful in stressing the commonality amidst the diversity of religions. At a time when inter-religious dialogue is particularly called for, such an understanding of religion can help set the appropriate context. It is also important in distilling what is essential in the different religions.

Whitehead's Understanding of Religion

Whitehead's account of religion is contained principally in his *Religion in the Making*. But this is complemented by shorter discussions in *Science in the Modern World, Adventures of Ideas* and other writings. Commenting on Whitehead's discussion of religion, John Cobb notes that Whitehead depended heavily on secondary sources with which he had limited familiarity. Nevertheless, he adds that Whitehead's discussion is valuable not only because it throws light on his philosophy but also because he develops his understanding of the relationship between philosophy and religion, a point that should be of particular interest to us at this conference.[6] Cobb also observes that Whitehead was not really preoccupied with religion, despite returning to this topic again and again. Whitehead's attention was more focused on what have become known as penultimate questions. But religion remains in the background, securing the importance of these questions; however, it is rarely itself at the centre of the stage.[7] Thus, it seems even more worthwhile to explore his conception of religion further.

A well-known definition of religion by Whitehead is "what the individual does with his own solitariness".[8] He states that the essence of religion is to be discovered, not in public dogmas, practices, or institutions, but in confrontation with "the awful ultimate fact, which is the

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[5] Peter B. Clarke & Peter Byrne, *Religion Defined and Explained* (Basingstoke: Macmillan/N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

[6] John Cobb, Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology: Based on the Thought of A.N. Whitehead* (London: Lutterworth Press 1966), 216.

[7] Cobb, *Christian Theology,* 223. Bogdan Ogrodnik had made a similar observation at the conference.

[8] Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cambridge University Press, 1926), 17; also, 47.

human being, consciously alone with itself, for its own sake."[9] This association of religion with solitariness will no doubt strike many as highly suspect and therefore unlikely to be of much help to us after all. Indeed in an article developing this definition of religion, Donald Crosby observes that Whitehead's description of religion has been frequently quoted and usually disparaged. However, he argues—and I agree with him—that it is seldom understood in anything like the way Whitehead intended.[10]

One of the misconceptions of Whitehead's definition of religion is that he is championing an individualistic interpretation of religion, which seems to contradict the teaching of many an established religion. Admittedly, Whitehead does place great importance on individuality insofar as he maintains that religious consciousness does not arise until one has risen above what he calls "communal religion", that is, beyond the stage in one's development that is informed by the myths, collective rituals, emotions and beliefs of one's society. As Whitehead puts it, "The moment of religious consciousness starts from self-valuation."[11] One becomes "religious" when one stands out as an individual, breaking out of the confines of the traditions and mores of inherited culture. One needs to loosen the strong grip of tradition upon oneself, thereby removing the sense of being at the mercy of arbitrary power.[12] Only then will that individual be confronted with the concerns which are of utmost importance and depth. Only then will he or she become aware of the inadequacy of social custom and authority to answer the most fundamental of questions and be forced to turn elsewhere. Stripped of one's sense of belongingness, experiencing solitariness, one begins to ask: "What, in the way of value, is the attainment of life?"[13] One discovers then one's uniqueness rather than one's society as the focus and source of freedom and value. For Whitehead religiosity, it would seem, really stems from the exercise of one's individuality, particularly as experienced in solitariness.

It is important, however, to contextualise what Whitehead says regarding solitariness. Although Whitehead does stress that religion is primarily individual, the solitariness that one experiences is due to the detachment

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[9] *Ibid.,* 16.
[10] Donald A. Crosby, "Religion and Solitariness," in: Lewis Ford & George Kline (eds.), *Explorations in Whitehead's Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 149.
[11] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 59.
[12] *Ibid.,* 39-40.
[13] *Ibid.,* 60.

from one's immediate surroundings. This in turn leads one to search for something permanent and intelligible to throw light on one's immediate environment.[14] Religion expresses, according to Whitehead, "the longing of the spirit that the facts of existence should find their justification in the nature of existence."[15] The detachment or disconnection from immediate surroundings is thus a prerequisite for "the emergence of a religious consciousness which is universal, as distinguished from tribal, or even social."[16] Whitehead in fact sees a close connection between solitariness and universality. Although the moment of religious consciousness starts from self-valuations, as we have noted already, "it broadens into the concept of the world as a realm of adjusted values, mutually intensifying or mutually destructive."[17] Whitehead denies that there is such a thing as absolute solitariness: "Each entity requires its environment. Thus man cannot seclude himself from society… But further, what is known in secret must be enjoyed in common, and must be verified in common."[18]

Elsewhere Whitehead describes religion as "the reaction of human nature to its search for God."[19] Whitehead does not believe human nature to have a separate function which could be regarded as a special religious sense. Nor does he hold that religious truth is something other than the highest form of knowledge, which had been first acquired with our ordinary senses and then developed by our intellectual operations. As he puts it succinctly, "religion starts from the generalisation of final truths first perceived as exemplified in particular instances."[20] What follows then is the amplification of these truths into a coherent system and the amplification of them to the interpretation of life. This interpretation serves as the criterion for the success of these truths. Although in this manner religious truths can be judged like any other truth, they are peculiar in that they explicitly deal with values. By this claim Whitehead means that religious truths make us conscious of what he calls the "permanent side of the universe which we can care for". In this way

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[14] *Ibid.,* 47.
[15] *Ibid.,* 85.
[16] *Ibid.,* 47.
[17] *Ibid.,* 59.
[18] *Ibid.*, 137-138. It should also be borne in mind that in Whitehead's metaphysics "relatedness" or "the social" is more fundamental and inclusive than individuality.
[19] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science in the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 1926), 266.
[20] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making,* 124.

religion enables us to discover meaning in our own existence against the background of the meaning of the wider scheme of things.[21]

Inasmuch as Whitehead's description of religion as "a human reaction" involves knowledge, it invites comparison with Plato's. Plato, it will be recalled, regarded religion as the culmination of the search for truth. Plato differentiated and distanced his conception of religion from the more anthropomorphic versions, which were prevalent in his time. In contrast, Whitehead, while regarding "communal religion" with its myths, practices and beliefs as merely a stage in the development of religious consciousness, nevertheless prefers to discuss religion in the context of what he refers to as "the great rational religions". For him these religions are "the outcome of religious consciousness which is universal, as distinguished from tribal, or even social".[22] Furthermore, Whitehead's definition needs to be qualified by what he says elsewhere; namely, that the immediate reaction of human nature to God is worship.[23] In this sense it is much closer—and further removed from Plato—to Charles Hartshorne's conception of religion as essentially worship by which Hartshorne means "devoted love for a being regarded as superlatively worthy of love". Hartshorne maintains that what distinguishes true religion from primitive ones is the worshipful attitude which it inspires.[24]

Whitehead sees an intimate link between life and religion.[25] In fact, Whitehead claims that "justification" is the basis of religion. By justification he means that one's character is developed according to one's faith. For him this is the preliminary inescapable truth. As he puts it, "Religion is force of belief cleansing the inward parts."[26] Consequently, he maintains that sincerity is the primary religious virtue. In terms reminiscent of Kant, Whitehead holds that even the doctrinal side of religion, i.e. the system of general truths, will transform one's character so long as these truths are sincerely held and vividly apprehended. Religion also

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[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.,* 47.

[23] Whitehead, *Science in the Modern World,* 192.

[24] See, among others, Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (La Salle, III: Open Court, 1967). I have discussed this point in some detail in *God in Process Thought: A Study in Charles Hartshorne's Concept of God* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985), 9-18.

[25] At the conference, Louwrens Hessel asked whether the link between religion and life in Whitehead's philosophy would include attention being given to poverty, discrimination, deprivation and so on. In response, I explained that in process thought, because of its connection with metaphysics (which is understood as a generalised interpretation of every experience), this means an affirmative answer.

[26] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, p. 15.

promotes the transformation of society through its moral energy.[27] On the other hand, unlike Kant, Whitehead also maintains that while religion is valuable for ordering one's life, conduct is merely an inevitable by-product. It is not the mainstay of religion. In fact, the overemphasis on rules of conduct can be detrimental to religion. What should emerge from religion is individual worth of character. But Whitehead warns us that worth is positive or negative, good or bad. Thus, in a rather startling observation, but perhaps a more realistic one, he points out that religion is by no means necessarily good and therefore that it may be evil.[28] Along similar lines Hartshorne, who describes human beings as fragments of reality, maintains that our reaction to that fragmentariness is what characterises our religion. Our religion is good if we accept our relative insignificance in the best possible way, poor or non-existent if we close our eyes to this situation. We could persuade ourselves into thinking that our limitation in space and time is only of slight importance; or we could consider ourselves the centre of the universe, with everything else revolving around us.[29]

Whitehead's conception of religion also clearly establishes its link with human thought not only because of his constant recourse to the word "rational" but also because of his distinction between religion and mere sociability. Religion, he says, emerges from ritual, emotion, belief, and rationalisation. But it is only when belief and rationalisation are well established that solitariness itself is discernible as of essential religious importance.[30] Without these, religion is in decay and returns to mere sociability.[31] Thus, religion as a human reaction is a conscious reaction. Furthermore, it is a conscious reaction to the world we find ourselves in. While religion appeals to the direct intuition of special occasions and emanates from what is special, it encompasses everything through conceptualisation.[32] This is accomplished with the help of human reason. Progress in religious truth, Whitehead tells us, is "mainly a progress in the framing of concepts, in discarding artificial abstractions or partial

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[27] *Ibid.*
[28] *Ibid.,* 17.
[29] Charles Hartshorne, "The Modern World and the Modern View of God," *Crane Review* 4.2 (Winter 1962), 73. See also his "Man's Fragmentariness," *Wesleyan Studies in Religion* 41.6 (1963-64), 17-28.
[30] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 18-19.
[31] *Ibid.* 23. Also, his *Adventures of Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 1942), 207.
[32] *Ibid.* 32.

metaphors, and in evolving notions which strike more deeply into the root of reality.'[33]

Religion and Metaphysics

For this reason, Whitehead shares the tendency, rooted in Western philosophical tradition but criticised in some quarters, to connect religion with metaphysics. It must be noted, however, that metaphysics for Whitehead is understood and developed differently from the dominant metaphysical schools of thought in the West. He describes metaphysics as "the science which seeks to discover the general ideas which are indispensably relevant to the analysis of everything that happens".[34] Whitehead argues that rational religion—and as we have already noted, rationality for Whitehead is an integral part of religion—must have recourse to metaphysics.

Metaphysics enables religion to scrutinise itself. Whitehead regards the dispassionate criticism by metaphysics of religious beliefs to be of utmost necessity. "Religion will not regain its old power," he points out, "until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of these principles requires continual development."[35] He strongly insists that the foundations of dogma must be laid in a rational metaphysics which criticises meanings, and endeavours to express the most general concepts adequate for the all-inclusive universe.[36] Moreover, for Whitehead the dogmas of religion are "clarifying modes of external expression", signaling the return of individuals from solitariness to society. Since there is no absolute solitariness, everything taking place in an environment, religious dogmas as modes of expression are thus important. The interaction between religion and metaphysics is regarded by Whitehead as one great factor in promoting the development in religion

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[33] *Ibid.* 131.

[34] *Ibid.* 84. See also, 88-89.

[35] Whitehead, *Science in the Modern World,* 189. Prof Richard Dawkins in his documentary "The Root of All Evil?" aired on Channel 4 (Britain) on January 9, 2006 maintains that religion and science are poles apart. Whitehead shows that this need not necessarily be the case nor must religion be equated with irrationality as Dawkins alleges. See also, "Religion, Science and Hartshorne's Metaphysics," in my *Religion, Reason and God: Essays in the Philosophies of Charles Hartshorne and A.N. Whitehead* (Peter Lang Publishers, 2004), 101-123.

[36] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, p. 83.

of an increasing accuracy of expression, disengaged from adventitious imagery.[37]

At the same time, however, metaphysics can benefit from its connection with religion by taking into account the evidence furnished by religion. While religion must reckon with metaphysics in formulating and developing its teachings, it makes its own contribution of immediate experience to that pool of knowledge.[38] In this way, metaphysical knowledge becomes truly all-inclusive. Thus, metaphysics and religion are not only related but also, and more importantly, mutually beneficial.

Whitehead offers yet another definition of religion, which incorporates what has been presented so far, particularly with reference to metaphysics, and adds another dimension:

> Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realised, something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest.[39]

John Cobb explains that religion for Whitehead is not a means to any end beyond itself, not even to the good of society. Instead religion is a vision of that whose possession, although unattainable, is the final good. Cobb adds that the reason for worshipping—we have already heard that the reaction to this vision is worship—is not to achieve some good, but because that which one dimly apprehends evokes worship.[40] In other words, religion is the attempt to see beyond the ephemeral; and what one sees, although not too clearly, inspires a worshipful attitude.

This vision that Whitehead mentions has an effect on one's life.[41] John Cobb makes the observation that Whitehead's own general mood in life was of quiet confidence in the worthwhileness of living. But this confidence was not derived from any assurance about history or about nature.[42] Indeed, Whitehead maintains that the worship of God, which is the

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[37] Whitehead, *Science in the Modern World*, p. 266. Whitehead adds that the interaction between religion and science also promotes religion's development.
[38] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making,* 79.
[39] Whitehead, *Science in the Modern World*, pp. 267-268.
[40] Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology,* pp. 217-217.
[41] M. Sivaramkrishna illustrates this point in the context of Hinduism in *Hindu View of Life: a Contemporary Perspective* (Dharmaram Publications, 2001).
[42] Cobb, *Christian Natural Theology*, 218.

outcome of this vision, is "not a rule of safety—it is an adventure of the spirit, a flight after the unattainable. The death of religion comes with the repression of the high hope of adventure."[43] He accepted that there is perpetual perishing, loss as well as gain, sorrow as well as joy. In rather poetic terms, he refers to human life "as a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience."[44] And yet, whatever may be its temporal outcome, what guarantees the worthwhileness of life for Whitehead, remarks Cobb, is the vision of God. When we respond positively to that vision, contributing our share to the world, then it is a vision that indeed can give meaning to life. "The vision of God was for Whitehead," as Cobb sums it up, "the basis for all reality of meaning and all depth of feeling."[45]

Religion and Human Experience

No doubt, Whitehead's conception of religion, culled from his basic insights, raises some important questions as we enquire into how it can serve as a philosophical basis for inter-religious dialogue: To what extent is this helpful in determining what could be classified a religion? Does it nullify the claim that special experiences are themselves religious? Is religion merely a human phenomenon? Does this mean that while solitariness is universal, religion itself is not so insofar as one may not reach, for whatever reason, that state of doing something about one's solitariness? How does this conception of religion relate to the major religions of the world? These are fundamental concerns which need to be addressed carefully.

Although Whitehead accepts that there are special occasions which can lead to religious consciousness, religion as far as he is concerned emerges from ordinary human experience.[46] We have noted that he refers to "the human search" or "the longing of the spirit" for something which transcends everything, but the search or the longing for it is deeply rooted in mundane matters, in everyday experience. This search or longing results in solitariness. Solitariness, however, is more than just the common experience of loneliness. Solitariness, as has been pointed out, is the sense

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[43] Whitehead, *Science in the Modern World,* 276.
[44] *Ibid.,* 275.
[45] Cobb, *Christian Natural Theology,* 223.
[46] According to Whitehead, "experience" is one of the most deceitful words in philosophy. He provides a brief analysis of it in his *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (Cambridge University Press, 1928), 19f. For a more extensive and technical discussion, see his *PR*, particularly Part III.

of separateness, the initial experience having been that of belongingness. It enables one to become aware of one's individuality, which is a further stage from one's previous pre-conscious experience of sociality and relatedness. Since religion is a response to solitariness, it means that solitariness itself is actually pre-religious, despite being a further stage in one's search for the transcendent. Strictly speaking then, religion is not to be equated with individuality. And unlike the sense of solitariness, religion itself is more than a stage. There has been an evolution in one's experience and not just a prolongation. In addition, there has been a development since there is an active element: religion after all is what one *does* with one's own solitariness. It is the response to one's search or longing. There is a purposeful consciousness in religion that is merely latent in solitariness but is developing as one becomes aware of one's individuality.

It is interesting that Whitehead should regard the human experience of longing and searching, which leads to solitariness, as the fundamental context in which religion can emerge. Some of the modern critics of religion had attacked it for preying, as it were, on such experiences. Freud, tracing religion back to the need for emotional comfort, especially relief from disasters, accidents, sickness, and other natural evils that surround us, accused religion of perpetuating human immaturity through its teachings and practices. He regarded religion as an infantile neurosis that ought to be cured before we can grow into mature, healthy adults. Once cured of such a sickness, human beings, he alleged, can achieve maturity as a race. It will then no longer be necessary to invent fanciful beings personalised by religion for us to be able to face this impersonal and at times brutal world of ours. Marx criticised religion for enslaving people through its preaching of acceptance of one's miserable lot in life and its championing the virtues of patience, humility and self-denial. Religion, he claimed, misleads us in not recognising the real causes of our alienation and suppresses our desire to improve the economic and political conditions of life. Both of these influential thinkers would hardly agree with Whitehead that true religion stems from the human experience of longing and searching. If anything, such an experience in their view is being misinterpreted and misled by religion.

But these experiences of life, as our pre-reflexive starting point, are part and parcel of human life itself. While agreeing with Freud that religion is based on emotional needs, Jung rightly criticised him for not taking into account that they are basic to human nature and that we cannot deny them without inducing neurosis. What is called for therefore is not the abandonment of religion as demanded by Freud. Rather, it is our response to those needs that is really in question. It will determine the kind

of religion that we have in mind, as Whitehead clearly states. Our response to human longing or yearning for something more does not have to be, and should not be, in the form severely criticised by Freud and Marx.

Unless religion embarks on its journey with our everyday experiences, including emotional ones, as the place of departure, it can easily become so abstract as to be rendered irrelevant. Worse, it makes nonsense of many religious practices and customs, which have arisen in response to specific life-situations. Religion—and one can notice in the various religions—cannot ignore deep-felt hunger or yearning for "something more" even if it is not always clear what that "something more" is or even if the expression of this desire is simplistic or unreflective. Whitehead correctly underscores this point whereas Plato neglects it. In the Western world Plato led the way in freeing religion from the particularistic, anthropomorphic expressions of it as exemplified by the Greek divinities. He insisted that true religion is concerned with fundamental and comprehensive questions rather than with emotional concerns. His own theory of religion was grounded in his desire to understand the universal attributes of reality, far removed from the transient, ever-changing environment which surrounded him. But by sharply establishing a line of demarcation between the established interpretation of religion in his day—understandably so, given its crudities—and his own one, Plato unfortunately cut off an important link with concrete life. He wanted to construct a theory of religion that had left behind the world of sense experience. While there were good reasons for dissociating genuine religion from the so-called religious practices and beliefs of his time, Plato's hard-line attitude resulted in a rather intellectualised, and even elitist, version of religion. Whitehead's conception of religion, on the other hand, rightly shows that it is in the midst of everyday life, experienced in various fashions and expressed in concrete ways, that we begin to ask questions which take us beyond the particular situation that we find ourselves in and lead us to what he refers to as "solitariness". And our reaction, also part of human living, to that solitariness shapes religious thought.[47]

Religion and Rational Thinking

Our further attempts to make sense of our experiences of and in life lead to something more general and more complex as we yield to the urge for something more. There is in human life what Whitehead calls "a noble

[47] In *From Suffering to God* (Basingstoke: Macmillan/N.Y. St. Martin's Press, 1994), we tried to illustrate how the experience of suffering leads to the question regarding what we can say about God.

discontent", which is "the gradual emergence into prominence of a sense of criticism, founded upon appreciations of beauty, and of intellectual distinction, and of duty."[48] Such a discontent distances us from particular experiences and inevitably prods us to seek conceptual expressions and rational support.[49] It is therefore inevitable that religion (or more accurately, what Whitehead calls rational religions) would be concerned with the intellectual dimension resulting in the formulation and adoption of beliefs, creeds and doctrines.[50]

Whitehead reminds us that "religion is concerned with our reactions of purpose and emotion due to our personal measure of intuition into the ultimate mystery of the universe," and that here we must "not postulate simplicity."[51] Rational thinking has a major contribution to religion. Situations in life have a way of pressing challenging questions on us, and

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[48] Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas,* 12.

[49] Whitehead outlines the process in this particularly helpful passage: "Our consciousness does not initiate our modes of functionings. We awake to find ourselves engaged in process, immersed in satisfactions and dissatisfactions, and actively modifying, either by intensification, or by attenuation, or by the introduction of novel purposes. This primary procedure which is presupposed in consciousness I will term Instinct. It is the mode of experience directly arising out of the urge of inheritance, individual and emotional. Also, after instinct and intellectual ferment have their work, there is a decision which determines the mode of coalescence of instinct with intelligence. I will term this factor Wisdom. It is the function of wisdom to act as a modifying agency on the intellectual ferment so as to produce a self-determined issue from the given conditions." *Ibid.*, 58. Whitehead sets this out for the purpose of understanding social institutions, but I have used it in this context because it also shows how he understands the process from experience to conceptualisation. He does add that this division must not be made too sharply.

[50] It had been pointed out to me during discussion that a certain understanding of the Koran would not accept this point. I acknowledge this. It seems to me, however, that Asghar Ali Engineer, an Islamic scholar, would actually agree with me. He argues that it is necessary to separate what is divine from what is the opinion of the medieval "ulana", claiming that even the most eminent Islamic thinker cannot escape various human factors which influence one's understanding of the divine. He makes the distinction between laws and values, for example, asserting that laws are merely temporal expressions of the values in the Qu'ran. Cf. *A Modern Approach to Islam* (Dharmaram Publications, 2003), 7. See also, Yoginder Sikand, "Asghar 'Ali Engineer's Quest for a Contextual Islamic Theology," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 15: 2 (2005), 211-231.

[51] *Ibid.*, 207. Whitehead maintains that history and common sense have testified that systematic formulations are potent engines of emphasis, of purification, and of stability. Without resorting to reason, Christianity would have sunk into superstition.

for the sake of intellectual credibility in religion, these questions cannot remain ignored. While religion is not, and should not be, a purely rational enterprise, it does involve careful, deliberate and logical thinking. Whitehead frequently uses the phrase "rational religion". On this point his reference to the obvious link between religion and metaphysics is especially notable. It is obvious not in the sense that the link is generally accepted since there are those who do not wish to associate religion with metaphysics or with any other kind of philosophical trappings and even argue that such an association is detrimental and dangerous. Rather, there is a clearly recognisable tradition which closely connects the two even if the kind of the connections is variously interpreted. As we have already seen, Whitehead, following in that tradition, accepts and defends that linkage. For him both religion and metaphysics are based on human experience and represent a common search for ultimacy. They help shape human thought and influence human life. Whitehead's understanding of the relationship between the two indicates that for him the formation of religious thought is inevitably connected to a metaphysical view of reality.[52]

One area where metaphysics features in religion—and of particular relevance to the conference theme—is in the development of religious doctrines.[53] We have seen that Whitehead maintains that progress in religious truth comes about "in the framing of concepts, in discarding artificial abstractions or partial metaphors, and in evolving notions which

[52] It is also grounded in his theory of knowledge. Whitehead rejects "mere knowledge". He claims that knowledge is always accompanied with accessories of emotion and purpose and that there are grades in the generality of ideas (Cf. his *Adventures of Ideas*, 5). All knowledge, according to him, is derived from, and verified by, intuitive observation. All knowledge is conscious discrimination of objects experienced (Cf. *Ibid.*, 227-228). He regards ideas as explanatory of modes of behaviour and of inrushes of emotion dominating our lives. Although ideas do modify practice, practice mainly precedes thought; and thought is mainly concerned with the justification or the modification of a pre-existing situation (Cf. *Ibid.,* 140; also, 127).

[53] There has been talk of course of the demise of metaphysics, particularly during the era of logical positivism. However, it is probably more accurate to speak of the decline of certain metaphysical ways of philosophising rather than of metaphysical thinking itself. It should be noted that Whitehead's notion of metaphysics and his metaphysical view of reality are quite distinctive. Cf. *Process and Reality.* Because of its emphasis on becoming (as well as relatedness and events), his metaphysical system has been referred to, among other descriptions, as process metaphysics although he himself referred to it as the philosophy of organism.

strike more deeply into the root of reality,"[54] all of which are achieved with the aid of metaphysics. But it is also useful to recall that for Whitehead religious truths are generalised truths, which originated in particular instances, expanded into a coherent system and *then applied to the interpretation of life.* The criterion for acceptance or rejection of these truths is their success in the interpretation of life.[55] Whitehead's well-known metaphor to describe speculative philosophy as the flight of the aeroplane is equally applicable to the discovery and formulation of religious truths: after taking off from life's experiences and being borne aloft by rational thinking, religion must touch down in life's fields again.

Religious doctrines, in Whitehead's view, represent a further stage in the process of making more explicit what one has held implicitly or has experienced. Ideally, they should express faithfully these pre-reflexive experiences. If they do, then one's appreciation of religion becomes richer and possibly more profound. But sometimes the process of conceptualisation does not do justice to the earlier stage; hence the need to rethink and re-interpret doctrines.[56] As Vincent Brümmer observes, "Changes in the circumstances and demands of life bring about changes in cultural and hence also in the conceptualisation forms that people find adequate, including the concomitant beliefs that they hold to be true. Because of changes in the demands of life, our conceptual forms cannot remain eternally adequate."[57] This is why the task of formulating religious doctrines is an on-going one. This is just as true for a particular religion as it is in inter-religious dialogue.[58] It is not surprising then that an urgent

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[54] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 131. Cf. my "Process Thought as Conceptual Framework," *Process Studies* 19, 4 (Winter 1990), 248-255. For a very useful discussion, based on Whitehead's thought, on the relationship between doctrinal beliefs and experience, see John B. Cobb Jr. & David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Belfast: Christian Journals Ltd., 1977), 30-40.

[55] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making,* 124.

[56] See Kuncherian Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology* (Bangalore: ATC Publications, 2005.).

[57] Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God*, 20.

[58] In reply to a question by Matthew Lopresti at the conference on this point, I explained that an important consideration in inter-religious dialogue is really an epistemological issue: how one understands and accepts the status of religious belief. In process philosophy, a distinction is made between absolute truths and our relative knowledge of such truths. Unlike relativism, process thought accepts that there are indeed absolute truths; but unlike absolutism, it rejects the absoluteness of our knowledge of such truths. Furthermore, the certainty with which one holds one's beliefs does not justify the absoluteness of those truths. In response, a

challenge today is to formulate religious doctrines which are not only based on concrete life but also, in an intellectual and systematised manner, express adequately the realities of life. What is called for therefore is the integration of religion with both human thought and life.[59] The following quotation from Whitehead is particularly appropriate here:

> Religion is an ultimate craving to infuse into the insistent particularity of emotion that non-temporal generality which primarily belongs to conceptual thought alone. In the higher organisms the difference of tempo between the mere emotions and the conceptual experiences produce a life-tedium, unless this supreme fusion has been effected. The two sides of the organism require a *reconciliation* in which emotional experiences illustrate a conceptual justification, and conceptual experiences find an emotional justification.[60]

Concluding Remarks

Despite some questions which will remain, Whitehead's conception of religion does, in my view, result in a clearer understanding of religion by showing how religion arises in the first place and how it also serves as the criterion for religious truths. At the same time it underlies the need to transcend our experiential starting point through rational thinking and to integrate the doctrinal expression with concrete human life. To what extent these considerations can form a basis and facilitate inter-religious dialogue remains to be seen.

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further question was posed regarding a situation when one does not accept such a theory of knowledge. It seems to me that Martin Buber's insights into the life of dialogue can be particularly helpful in creating what I would call "the cultural context" that should precede philosophical and religious conversations. I would, therefore, agree with Mariola Paruzel's comment at the conference that psychology has a positive role to play in inter-religious dialogue.

[59] G.C. Nayak attempts to understand religion from diverse perspectives in *Understanding Religious Phenomenon (*Dharmaram Publications, 1997). He shows how sincere faith commitments do not prevent adherents from embracing expansion and growth in their beliefs.

[60] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 16. Italics added.

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BETWEEN ECSTASY AND ESCHATOLOGY: IMMANENCE, TRANSCENDENCE, AND THE METAPHYSICS OF PROCESS

JONATHAN WEIDENBAUM

I. Introduction: The Problem of Religious Diversity

In *A Common Faith*, John Dewey argues that there is no such animal called "the religious experience." There is in fact a wide variety of experiences which have been labeled as religious. Between the "trances and semi-hysteria" brought on by fasting, the "mystical ecstasy" of Neo-Platonism, the visions of William Blake and the "mysticism of sudden unreasoning fear"- there is neither a common denominator nor an underlying unity.[1] One must speak instead of religious *experiences*, the existence of which Dewey in no way denies. "On the contrary," he states, "there is every reason to suppose that, in some degree of intensity, they occur so frequently that they may be regarded as normal manifestations that take place at certain rhythmic points in the movement of experience."[2] It is likewise for the object of these experiences. Dewey points out that a diversity of absolutes exists even within one religion: "The contemporary emphasis of some Protestant theologians upon the sense of inner personal communion with God, found in religious experience, is almost as far away from medieval Christianity as it is from Neoplatonism or Yoga."[3]

Few scholars of comparative religion or philosophically-minded theologians have a quarrel with Dewey's grasp of the world's many spiritual traditions. It is the consequences drawn out by him which presents a problem for the adherents of any particular denomination. Indeed, one of the major themes of this small but powerful critique of religion is the tendency of human beings to project the content of their

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[1] John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), pg. 35-6.
[2] Ibid, pg. 37.
[3] Ibid, pg. 36.

religious experiences out upon the cosmos, reifying them into objectively real forces or entities. Given the sheer diversity of gods, spirits, and principles held as sacred at different times and places, who is to claim that their particular object of ultimate concern -to borrow a phrase from Paul Tillich- is the ultimate reality? The biologist Richard Dawkins, perhaps the most scathing and unrelenting of the "new atheists", is fond of labeling all of us as non-believers. After all, Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike reject Zeus, Apollo, and Thor- among other popular deities of the past. That those who rejected the official gods of the Roman Empire were once branded as atheists adds more than a little historical weight to Dawkins' gleeful accusation.

Dewey's analysis if fine as far as it goes: There are many kinds of religious experience, and as many absolutes to correspond with each of these themes. But he overlooks the fact that not all have had the same impact upon the spiritual sensibilities of humankind, that a few have exceeded the others in enjoying a sustained influence upon centuries or even millennia of thought, belief, and expression. For it can be argued that there are invariants within the diversity; essential structures or modes of the spiritual life which have either persisted or continually resurfaced while others have vanished. Perhaps there is a reason why the mortification of the body or the invoking of hallucinations have either died away or remained only among those cultures largely marginalized from the world's major civilizations.

However, the problem of religious diversity does not go away if those few remaining invariants of the spiritual life remain at odds with one another. In fact, the problem increases. To affirm a wide plurality of religious worldviews is to leave room for the standards and methods of preference- an art more than congenial to an era of multiculturalism. But when two or more worldviews have endured the scrutiny of near-endless criticism and reflection, and yet are found to contrast with one another, then we are left with a formidable impasse. Standing before a number of perspectives, both possessing an equal measure of inner coherence and outer appeal, is akin to finding oneself at a fork in the road without a map.

Two such contrasting invariants of the religious life include the contemplative worldview- the goal of which is to nullify the ego and merge into or commune with an impersonal absolute (often called *mysticism*); and the more existential worldview- the goal of which is to further individuate the self and foster a living relationship to a transcendent and personal deity (often called *faith*). In our time, process theologies inspired by the groundbreaking work of Alfred North Whitehead have presented a schema through which these perspectives are

to be integrated into a single vision. In particular, it is the doctrine of the "two absolutes" elaborated by David Ray Griffin and John Cobb Jr. which is said to have harmonized these two forms of the religious life. The point of this essay is to evaluate just this claim.

My strategy is as follows: In section II, I discuss a fundamental divide between the contemplative and faith-centered versions of the religious experience, and employ the theologies of Advaita Vedanta and Johannes Climacus (a pseudonym of Søren Kierkegaard) as examples of each. I choose these philosophies for one reason: They are strong yet definitive representatives of the two perspectives. Thus, the possibility (or impossibility) of their inclusion is an ample test of the claim made by process theologians. In section III, I present an interpretation of the metaphysics of Whitehead along with his innovative notion of a dipolar God. In section IV I examine the doctrine of the two absolutes, and assess the extent to which it can incorporate *either* Advaita Vedanta or the theology of Johannes Climacus. Finally, I conclude by reviewing the implications all of this presents for a process philosophy of religion. If the pages which follow offer something to the woefully belated and much needed dialogue between religions, it would have fulfilled any larger purpose.

II. The Sages and the Pseudonym

Two Invariants

Sifting through the myriad theological positions entertained throughout history, particularly those which seek as their end the salvation or liberation of humankind, one comes across two predominant types. Of course, they do not exhaust the full story of religion. But that they are major strands running through the fabric of human spirituality is evident to anyone who cares to examine the world's great texts and traditions.

The first of these positions claims that we victims to a number of illusions- chief of which is our attachment to an individualized ego-identity. Overcome this separation, this perspective states, and one is reconciled with a supra-mundane reality, a primordial unity or a ground of being.

The second position claims that we are victims not to the illusion of a self but to self-satisfaction; or more accurately, a false sense of security. We are to redirect ourselves, according to this perspective, away from our pride and complacency, and towards an external and supernatural agent- one highly particularized and paradoxical to the understanding.