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The Deeds of God in the View of Process Theism

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Abstract: Process theology based on the philosophy of Alfred N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne views the world as a process of becoming composed of moments (actual entities), which occur by way of self-actualizing out of the data available for such an occasion. This presupposes a kind of subjectivity in these entities, as well as their being motivated for such self-actualization which would be a creative contribution to the fact that reality is a "world," rather than chaos. This brings us to the hypothesis of "a God" luring the actual entities to following an aim that is optimal for both themselves and the world in its entirety. Actual entities occur at many levels of complexity. At the human level their data include values. This scheme is believed to be essentially consistent not only with the Biblical view of divine activity and its modern interpretations, but also with the traditional doctrinal layout of the content of the Biblical witness.

Keywords: process; world; God; divine activity; Biblical witness

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It used to be only theologians and philosophers who engaged in thinking about God's acting in the world. A survey of one such debate is offered in the collection *God's Activity in the World*.[1] At the end of the last century and the beginning of this century the theme came to be deliberated in a more extended discussion, one which also included natural scientists. It was primarily these scholars, in particular those who happened also to be theologians (such as Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacock, John Polkinghorne, etc.), who brought a new input into this topic. Of especial importance were a series of five research conferences devoted to the question of divine acting in various natural scientific contexts which took place under the auspices of both the Vatican agency Specola Vaticana and the Center of Theology and Natural Sciences (CTNS) in Berkeley. The papers which were read at these occasions (divided into thematic segments and including both general and special issues) make up the content of anthologies published between the

1 Owen C. Thomas (ed.), *God's Activity in the World* AAR Studies in Religion 31 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983). Cf. also Owen Thomas, "Recent Thought on Divine Agency," in: Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (eds.), *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 35–50.

years 1993 and 2001. Jürgen Moltmann was among those who contributed to one of these collections. The main topics included quantum cosmology and the laws of nature, chaos and complexity, evolutionary and molecular biology, the science of the nerve system and the human person, and quantum mechanics. It was primarily the scholars dealing with the theory of chaos and quantum theory who were interested in searching for an interpretation of divine acting that would make sense in the contemporary scientific discourse. Robert J. Russell, then the director of the CTNS, provided a typology of contemporary alternatives in an introductory essay in the collection *Chaos and Complexity* published in 1995.[2]

The Deeds of God in Process Thought

In this article I will, however, limit myself to the issue of divine acting within the framework of a philosophical-theological debate, namely the one that took place among the representatives of what is called "process thought," and the early attempts at using process concepts in the hermeneutics of the biblical message. According to Owen C. Thomas, the editor of the collection *God's Activity in the World*, it was only process philosophy that provided a coherent alternative to the neo-Thomist concepts of God's dealing in or with the world. Among the scientists who were also philosophers or theologians, the American physicist Ian Barbour and the Australian biologist Charles Birch are among those who might be thought of as process thinkers.

Now, what is "process thought"? Process thought (and the same applies also to process philosophy and theology) is, to put it very briefly, a view of reality based on the latter philosophy of the (originally British) thinker Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and the philosophy of his younger American colleague Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000). Whitehead's *magnum opus*,

2 Robert Russell, Nancey Murphy and Arthur Peacocke (eds.), *Chaos and Complexity* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory; Berkeley: Centre for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1995), 9–13. See also Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (London: SCM, 1990), chap. 9; Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming – Natural, Divine and Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Thomas F. Tracy (ed.), *The God Who Acts* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Thomas F. Tracy, "Theologies of Divine Action," in: Philip Clayton and Zachary Simpson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 596–611.

Process and Reality, published in 1927,[3] was a comprehensive discussion of the principles upon which our universe is founded. It should be obvious from this that Whitehead's basic philosophical query did not issue from the Heideggerian wonder – "why is there anything at all?" – but rather from the wonder at "why what *is*, is the way it is?" How is it possible that things are the way they are, so that we can have a relatively common experience of them? His comprehensive philosophical vision ensuing from this query was thus an attempt to find an answer to this wonder through a thorough genetic and morphological analysis of all experience (starting with the human one) and present the outcome in a consistent and coherent set (or sets) of essential principles (which he called "categories").

We cannot go into any detail here but only summarize the essentials. The basic concepts resulting from Whitehead's analysis were *process* and *relativity*. Everything "that is" happens to be in *transition*, in a process of *becoming*, and everything acquires its identity through its relations to everything else, primarily to its own environment and its own history. In the final version of Whitehead's vision, inspired largely by atomic theories, the world is a process composed of moments of becoming (called "actual entities"), which occur via self-actualizing out of the data available for them. This process, however, presupposes a kind of "subjectivity" in all these entities, as well as their motivation for such an actualization, which would entail a creative contribution to the whole, namely to the fact that the universe is *cosmos* (the term for "jewel" in Greek), rather than *chaos*. This brings us (as it brought Whitehead) to the hypothesis of "a God," i.e., a directing element that is attracting all the actual entities to follow an aim that is optimal both for them and for the world in its entirety. It is a form of "final causation" where the actual cause (the data) cannot be presently active in bringing about the effect because it precedes it in time. There must be "a God" who is contemporary to everything actual and who participates in the becoming of each entity by providing it with subjectivity and purpose. This God happens to be (as Whitehead later realized and admitted) identical with the traditional ultimate source and object of our *religious* intuitions.

The actual entities occur at various levels of unity and complexity and usually form a kind of "society," the smallest of those being "a cell." The data

3 Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* [1929], Corr. Edition, David Giffin and Derek Sherburne (eds.) (New York: Free Press, 1978).

of their formation are varied and at the human level they include values. The options of each becoming entity are ontologically and historically limited but each entity has a certain degree of freedom to evaluate the offered options and make a choice. In other words, what is objectively optimal for such an entity, in order that it would also enrich the whole, does not have to become its own aim. At some levels of subjectivity, the subjective aim can indeed become the very opposite of what is proposed for this entity by God.

What is essential in the scheme is that the divine influence does not exceed a kind of "persuasion"; it does not involve any coercion beyond the laws of nature that make the whole process possible. God at every moment evaluates and harmonizes within Godself the decisions of the world in order to be able to react to it both sensitively and creatively. While this process involves some changes all the time God's identity does not change, and neither does God's ultimate aim for the world. Only the ways through which God accomplishes this aim are constantly changing.

The process view of the world (the universe) as a whole and process theism, namely the view of God, whose relation to the world is not only conceivable but also necessary, as well as the nonviolent nature of God's dealings with what is happening in the world stimulated the appearance of process *theology*. The concept of divine activity in the world (of the relationship with the world and of the interaction with it) in the interpretation of process *philosophy* is now clear. However, process theologians believe it is essentially consistent not only with the biblical view of divine activity and its modern interpretations, ranging from neo-orthodoxy to existentialism, but also with the traditional doctrinal layout of the content of the biblical witness.

As for Whitehead himself, he arrived at his concept of God as something that was missing in his coherent philosophical scheme of the universe as we experience it. Though he originally studied theology he did not find the predominant theological views helpful. Yet he saw the historical realization of the idea of divine persuasion in the Christian witness to the historical appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. In the concluding chapter of his *Process and Reality* Whitehead laments: "The brief Galilean vision of humility, flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly… But the deeper idolatry, of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial ruler, was retained. The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar."[4]

4 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 342.

Whitehead knew that it belongs to the core of Christianity to appeal to Jesus Christ as the revelation of the very substance of God. For him it meant to view God as our "great companion," indeed "the fellow-sufferer" of the suffering creation "who understands."[5] Although he believed that this state of affairs is recognizable even without this revelation, Jesus was for him a unique phenomenon, a turning point of all history. Some Whiteheadian process thinkers saw in Jesus primarily a message of love in its nonviolent power, a kind of "focal point," or a "classical instance" of the God-human being relationship, which can illuminate all other divine work, but not an exclusive revelation. According to Charles Hartshorne, Jesus embodied the conviction that it is nobler to endure suffering than to escape from it. In this he became the symbol of God's own life. This, to be sure, corresponds in principle to the view and conviction of the Christian pacifists, the "peacemakers,"[6] though neither Whitehead, nor Hartshorne thought of themselves as pacifists. Hartshorne was also convinced that the process theological alternative ("neoclassical theism" as he called it) is decisively closer to the biblical tradition of the "living God" than the theism of "classical" (Greek) metaphysics. All process thinkers shared in principle this conviction, but they differed in their theological evaluation of the correspondence between process thought and biblical witness, and in the way they demonstrated it.

The Process Concepts of the Deeds of God and Christology

Schubert Ogden's work in the 1960s was described as one of the first attempts at a fruitful discourse between process theology and biblical theology. It included a criticism of Rudolf Bultmann's theology from the perspective of process theism. Ogden, who was one of the main interpreters (and translators) of Bultmann's work for the American public, tried in the first place to demonstrate, using the example of Bultmann, the impossibility of any rigorous distinction between philosophy and theology. According to Ogden, Bultmann contradicts such a distinction when he wants to propose the constitutive significance of the New Testament message about Jesus Christ for an authentic human existence. His thesis that without a relation to the biblical message of God's decisive acting in Christ, any existential interpretation of

5 Ibid., 351.
6 Cf. Matt. 5:9.

the human situation remains a mere abstraction, is, in Ogden's view, inconsistent with the radical de-historicization presupposed by the program of demythologization. He writes: "On Bultmann's own showing the proclamation of God's decisive eschatological act in Christ is indistinguishable from the original demand to understand one's self as a genuinely historical being and is therefore deprived of any independent validity."[7] Any distinction between a possibility "in principle" and possibility "in fact" is a logical contradiction, for to say that a human being has a possibility that cannot be carried out means to deny it to him or her.

Ogden presented his "constructive alternative" to Bultmann's Christology in his study *Christ without Myth*, published in 1961. The demand of demythologization, he insisted, is justified by the subordination of Christology to the universal aspect of theology. The peculiarly Christian economy of salvation has a definitively subordinate role in the ultimate outworking of God's purposes. Like the other New Testament witnesses, Paul takes for granted that God and God alone is the final source of authentic human life. Therefore, "unless the theocentric basis and sanction of Christocentrism is explicitly acknowledged, emphasis on Jesus can be a snare and a delusion and a mere travesty of authentic apostolic faith."[8] In summoning all humans "to live in radical dependence on God's grace, and so in freedom from the past and openness to the future, the event of Jesus Christ is but the re-presentation in the form of a single human life of man's original possibility of existence *coram deo*."[9]

But how to speak about God's self-presentation in history and not fall into mythological categories? In what sense is the event of Jesus an event of God? Ogden finds an answer to this question in distinguishing between mythology and analogy with the help of the "dipolar theism" of Charles Hartshorne. Dipolar theism, as conceived by Hartshorne, distinguishes between God's general and special relationship to the world. "The same God, who is the subject of an existential encounter in the Word which Jesus both is and proclaims, can become, on the basis of analogy, the object of our thought."[10] Because of this analogy one can speak of God's revelation in the

7 Schubert M. Ogden, "Bultmann's Project of Demythologizing and the Problem of Theology and Philosophy," *The Journal of Religion* 37:3 (1957), 156–73, at 165.
8 Schubert Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (New York: Harper, 1961), 143.
9 Ibid., 160.
10 Ibid., 147.

world. Ogden discusses this idea primarily in his study "What Sense Does It Make to Say, 'God Acts in History'?"[11] He relies here on Hartshorne's deliberation that God's dynamic relationship to the world could be compared to the way the human self is related to all the components of his/her body. All these partial relations or reactions are contingent expressions of what itself is not contingent.

"*That* God is, in some actual state or other, or in relation to some actual world, is dependent on nothing whatever and is in the strictest sense necessary. The only thing that is contingent (and that only in part) is *what* God is, what actual state of the literally infinite number of states possible for him is in fact actualized."[12] Just as in human public acting the self that already exists is somehow revealed, so also in history can that which transcends the particularities of history be partly revealed. The observance that some of our deeds can express who we really are more than some others is analogically true about God. While God is somehow active in everything, some of God's creative activity can really be a manifestation of *who* God is.

"Whatever or insofar as particular religious symbols appropriately re-present God's action as Creator and Redeemer," Ogden argues, "they actually are or become his act in a sense strictly analogous to the sense in which some of our own symbolic actions are our acts in a way others are not."[13] It is in this sense that the possibility of authentic human existence was not *constituted* in Christ, but radically *re-presented*.

At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the search for adequate hermeneutical methods for interpreting the biblical message in its broadest scope influenced much of the American theological debate. One of the topics was dealing with those parts of the biblical witness that indicate divine influence in what is happening in the world. This issue was formulated with pregnancy by the American theologian Langdon Gilkey in his study "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language."[14] Gilkey was dealing primarily with the talk of some Old Testament theologians of "God's mighty acts" depicted in the Old Testament narratives. These scholars

11 Schubert Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1966), 164–87.

12 Ibid., 176.

13 Ibid., 181.

14 Langdon B. Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *The Journal of Religion* 41:3 (1961), 194–205.

were talking about "the response of faith" to "divine activity," but a closer look proved that this activity was meant as something that did not interfere in the spatio-temporal causality in a way that would contradict the continuity of our current experience, and thus, in Gilkey's view, as something for which there was ontologically "no place." The concept of analogy cannot, he believed, overcome this ontological deficit, and neither can the Bultmannian reduction of God's activity to "one act" actualized in "interpretation." How has this "one act," supposedly arousing the response of faith, actually occurred, when objectively, as a matter of fact, nothing has happened? How can one then talk about "mighty acts" as the basis of God's self-revelation?

What, according to Gilkey, must replace this "emptied" analogy is a theological ontology which would give the analogical categories of "divine acts" or "divine self-manifestation in acts" an intelligible and credible sense, which would, that is to say, specify how God is related to ordinary events, and how then God could be related to special events. Understanding of the former is a prerequisite for a parallel inquiry into the latter.

> "Unless we have some conception of how God acts in ordinary events, we can hardly know what our analogical words mean when we say: He acts uniquely in this event or that this event is a special divine deed. God's special activity is logically connected with his providential activity in general historical experience, and so understanding of the one assumes a concurrent inquiry into the other."[15]

Without an ontological basis all and any analogical discourse of God's acting in history appear to be only a theological abstraction.

The process theologian David Griffin attempted to respond to this challenge by defending the rationality of revelation.[16] In his *Process Christology*[17] Griffin shows that in the framework of a Whiteheadian cosmological ontology we can conceive the "coherent vision of reality" with which we are confronted in the biblical witness and still make a distinction between the general and particular (or "special") divine activity, as Gilkey demands. The theory of "actual occasions" presupposes God's participation in the causality of all being, for the self-creative "experience" of each occasion (for which Whitehead uses the term "prehension," a derivative of "comprehension") includes God. Because each occasion enjoys some freedom of choice there is no interruption of the *causal nexus*. God acts in the world without interrupting

15 Ibid., 204f.
16 David R. Griffin, "Is Revelation Coherent?," *Theology Today* 28:3 (1971), 278–94.
17 David R. Griffin, *A Process Christology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973).

the cause-effect link presupposed in the process of becoming of each entity or event. This is the ontological basis for conceiving divine activity in both the primary (general) and the secondary (special) sense.

> "God's acts in the primary sense are his self-constitution, in which he responds sympathetically to the past state of the world and at the same time lays the foundation for the next state of its creative advance by providing ideal aims for all its agents. And since every finite act of becoming in influenced by God's aim for it to some extent, every world event can be called an act of God in the secondary sense."[18]

The same ontological basis provides for conceiving God's special activity. An occasion has the status of a special act whenever the circumstances allow that it becomes a manifestation of God's character and purpose and the self-actualization of that occasion becomes a realization of the intended manifestation because the subjective aim is fully congruent with the ideal aim that God had in mind for the given occasion.

This understanding of God's "special act" was the very foundation of Griffin's Christology that was also meant as a counterpoint to the Christology of Schubert Ogden.[19] "The decisive divine act" does not differ from other acts by being most typically *re-presentative* for God but by being what God wanted it to be, by being the occasion of God's self-manifestation. "The decisiveness of the act is partially a function of God's activity, which is in one sense different here than in other places, for the particular ideal aim given here is such as to give particularly apt expression to his being."[20]

This is how God acted decisively in Jesus Christ.

> "In actualizing God's *particular* aim *for him*, Jesus expressed God's *general* aim for his entire creation […]. The aims given to Jesus and actualized by him during his active ministry were such that the basic vision of reality contained in his message of work and deed was the supreme expression of God's eternal character and purpose."[21]

Griffin also contributed to the debate about biblical theology and hermeneutics in his study "Relativism, Divine Causation, and Biblical Theology,"[22]

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18 Griffin, "Is Revelation Coherent?," 289.

19 David R. Griffin, "Schubert Ogden's Christology and the Possibility of Process Philosophy," *The Christian Scholar* 50:3 (1967), 290–303. Reprint in: Delwin Brown, Ralph James and Gene Reeves (eds.), *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 347–61.

20 Griffin, "Schubert Ogden's Christology," 358.

21 Griffin, *A Process Theology*, 218, 220.

22 David R. Griffin, "Relativism, Divine Causation, and Biblical Theology," *Encounter* 36:4 (1975), 342–60.

where he responded to the positions for which the refusal of the supernatural alternative presupposes a one-sided (Bultmannian) emphasis on the subjective (receptive) side of revelation. Some events have, according to Griffin, the character of divine acting in themselves, that is, regardless of whether they would be accepted as such or not, and therefore they deserve (and it is appropriate for them) to be so accepted. This, says Griffin, is not to deny the activity of the Holy Spirit in this regard. In other words, the revelation has both the objective and the subjective components. Whitehead's metaphysics removes, in Griffin's view, the necessity of a rigorous distinction between divine and other causality and thus makes it possible "that biblical theology could be understood as the discipline that attempts to carry out the task that the biblical historian who is a (process) theist could in principle attempt, i.e., of reconstructing the development of the biblical tradition employing 'divine influence' as one of the categories."[23]

Some process thinkers rejected this approach as a kind of Whiteheadian scholasticism. The process philosopher Lewis Ford is critical toward any attempts at an ontological conception and expression of Jesus' historical uniqueness. He believes it is impossible to connect ontology with any specific intention that God would have with Jesus. In Whitehead's scheme of reality all intentions are subject to contingency. All are dependent on historically given possibilities. Jesus' uniqueness is neither metaphysical, nor is it revealed; it is *historical*. Jesus is unique by becoming Christ, the Messiah. It was a possibility for which history provided a semantic framework. Jesus revealed God's uniqueness as a "power of the future." By "drawing all people to himself" (John 12:32) Jesus became the vehicle of divine activity, because in this way he enables God to make a new evolutionary step, the emergence of reality which is "more" than humanness. Through his life, his death and his resurrection he became the mediator of a transformation that is involving all creation. Here history meets its "meaning": Jesus is a Logos expressing in a contingent way the divine overall intention with humanity. He became a Word calling to a form of humanness in which all fragmentation is overcome and the church, of which the Resurrected is "the head," becomes an invitation to participation in a historically contingent form of this transformation.[24]

23 Griffin, "Relativism," 356.

24 Lewis S. Ford, *The Lure of God: A Biblical Background for Process Theism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 127.

The Nature of the Deeds of God

Schubert Ogden discovered in process theism an adequate hermeneutical instrument for dealing with the biblical mythical language in interpreting the Christian message; David Griffin believed he discovered in the same philosophy the ontological basis for conceiving the objective side of the revelation. The philosopher and biblical scholar Lewis Ford contended that the basis of the uniqueness of divine acting is historical rather than ontological. However, all of them were convinced that, in Whitehead's theory of events (of "actual occasions"), God takes part in the causal nexus and we can thus rightfully speak about God's acting. This acting is not uniform; it differs from entity to entity and from one situation to another and thus makes it possible to interpret even the Christology of the biblical witness. Yet, in principle the part God takes is always the same: in its nature it is the "persuasion" or "luring" of the becoming subject to what is objectively (in God's view) optimal for its meaningful and enriching existence, for its self-creation in the direction of the initial aim provided for it by the providence of the Creator.

Around this principle there evolved a broad discussion initiated by the critics of process theism in general and specifically of "process theodicy." These critics believed that process theism collapses the problem of evil because Whitehead's God is limited in his control of what is happening in the world and cannot thus guarantee a final "triumph of good." I will not go into this in detail here, as I have recently published an article about it in this journal.[25] So, I will only mention some of the responses in defence of process theism which appeared in the context of the debate about the relationship between process theism and biblical theism.

I already mentioned Whitehead's comment on the "brief Galilean vision" vis-a-vis the development of much of traditional Christian theism. The traditional concept of divine omnipotence, says Whitehead, is a kind of "idolatry." Any direct influence, whether limited or unlimited, conflicts with the concept of divine perfection and must be excluded. The same concerns the concept of divine coercion. "We may define coercion," says Ford, "generally as any restriction upon the range of real possibilities which would otherwise

25 Petr Macek, "God and Evil in Process Theism," *Communio Viatorum* 66:2 (2024), 94–106.

be available."[26] In his article "Divine Persuasion and the Triumph of Good,"[27] he is more specific:

> Coercive power directly influences the outcome, since the process must conform to its control. Persuasive power operates more indirectly, for it is effective in determining the outcome only to the extent that the process appropriates and reaffirms for itself the aims envisioned in the persuasion […]. Pure coercive power transforms creation *ex nihilo* into *creatio ex deo*, with the world possessing no more independent actuality than an idea in the divine mind would have. To the extent that God exercises such power, creaturely freedom is restricted, the reality of the world is diminished, and the divine experience is impoverished.[28]

Just as there is, on the one side, non-chaotic existence unthinkable without God, so, on the other side, without a certain measure of independence no existence outside God is possible.

Ford admits that a final guarantee of the "triumph of good" is missing in process theism, yet he believes it is not a real deficiency, because this triumph may remain an object of our trust, justified by the present reality which is in principle constantly a form of overcoming "the triumph of evil" in the form of a total destruction of existence. David Griffin comes to a similar conclusion. Process theism is a defence of our general experience. Creation was, so to say, a risk since there is no absolute defence against evil, but because its alternative is only non-existence, it was a risk that was worth taking. The risks that creation is facing are thus risks that the Creator himself had to accept and is constrained to deal with. We can even say with Whitehead that creation was (and still is) a divine "adventure." But it was not anything like "throwing a die," a metaphor that Einstein deplored. This liberates God from rebukes or reprimands which God would have to face – in a symbolic sense – if his role was that of a mere onlooker, waiting to see how things end up. His being a "fellow-sufferer" makes him rather the only source of hope and the addressee of invocation, which puts him in a position which God has traditionally held.

As much as the process theologians are convinced that "dipolar theism" can deal adequately with the biblical witness in its manifold diversity, the

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26 Ford, *The Lure of God*, 17f.

27 Lewis S. Ford, "Divine Persuasion and the Triumph of Good," *The Christian Scholar* 50:3 (1967), 235–50. Reprint in Brown, James and Reeves (eds.), *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, 287–304.

28 Ford, "Divine Persuasion and the Triumph of Good," 288, 289.

best informed do not hesitate to admit that many biblical images are not easily reconciled with process theism. As Lewis Ford puts it:

> The Bible is not a doctrine of divine reality but a witness of God's dealings with the world. In the case of the Old Testament, it is primarily with Israel, and the context of interpretation is not a cosmology, but the *Covenant.* No concrete witness should be then viewed as a systematic description of the nature of divine dealing or acting. Israel bore witness to that action of God directly impinging upon the situation at hand, letting the total cumulative context make the necessary adjustments and modifications … By his covenant with Israel all of God's actions could be accepted and understood as expressions of his long-ranged struggle and personal confrontation with his people and nor as mere displays of raw, naked force.[29]

Still, much of the biblical testimony can be interpreted and, in this way, illuminated and appraised in a more universal, even cosmic context, as the one represented by process theism. Divine acting via 'persuasion' is in a sense witnessed in the biblical account of creation. It can be interpreted as responsive activity, as a kind of a dialogue, where the creation responds to the Creator's calling it to a higher complexity. God directs this "calling" but does not have the power to determine it. There is an element of spontaneity, which finally matures in the form and experience of freedom. By the connection of inherited matter and new form, the self-creative activity on the part of creation makes up for emergence of new structures.

The concept of divine persuasion illuminates even our understanding of God's creative Word, as a "structuring principle" safeguarding that the world is cosmos rather than chaos. Thus, the Logos in the gospel of John and the divine calling (or challenge) to creative decisions are principally the same. The specific "divine history," the appearance of Israel, is thus in continuity with the history (or creation) of everything and God's Covenant with Israel can be viewed as a symbol as well as a model of creative reciprocity. God's providence consists in God's readiness to improvise in his reaction to new situations. So, the history of the world is open to contingency, but divine intention remains in play and the development of the world can be viewed as its "intensification." The biblical witness in its entirety confirms the consistency of God's work. The inconsistency of some particular portraits which can be prescribed to the lack of interest of the biblical witnesses in the logic of their testimony cannot disprove this overall impression.

29 Ford, *The Lure of God*, 16.

Ford's hesitation to give all biblical testimony a place in process thinking led to disagreement among some biblical scholars, who were themselves process thinkers, but my record of their exchange is dated. In principle it was (and is, if it still continues) a dispute about the measure of correspondence or congruency of the biblical witness and Whitehead's concept of divine creativity and God's relation to the world. The debate among process scholars concerned the biblical testimony of divine wrath, the issue of miracles, the relationship to the environment (the subhuman nature), the phenomenon and the work of the Holy Spirit, among other themes.[30]

As much as Ford excluded some biblical testimony from a systematic process reflection, his process-philosophical recapitulation of biblical witness was, as I have tried to show, by no means too modest. He sees in biblical witness a contingent history of God's dealing with the world and therefore he believes process categories are a fitting instrument for interpretation of this witness and for appropriating it for our own history. Process theism need not dissolve biblical particularities like the "passage to the promised land," or the "expectation of the Messiah" into symbolic manifestation of universal truth, since it can proclaim a God vitally interested in precisely these particularities whose activity is shaped by their peculiar character. These aims do not lose their particularity in being broadened to embrace all humankind, since from the divine perspective the human being is only one particular form of creation.[31]

The biblical narrative gives the necessary conditions of divine activity expressed in Whitehead's metaphysical theism concrete historical outlines.

30 Cf. J. Gerald Janzen, "Modes of Power and Divine Relativity," *Encounter* 36:4 (1975), 379–406; "Metaphor and Reality in Hosea 11," *Semeia* 24 (1982), 7–44; Lewis S. Ford, "God as King: Benevolent Despot or Constitutional Monarch?," *Christian Scholar's Review* 1 (1971), 318–22; "The Divine Curse Understood in Terms of Persuasion," *Semeia*, 24 (1982), 81–87, George W. Coats, "The King's Loyal Opposition: Obedience and Authority in Exodus 32–34," in: George Coats and Burke Long (eds.), *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 91–109; "The Way of Obedience: Traditio-Historical and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Balaam Story," *Semeia* 24 (1982), 53–79; David J. Lull, *The Spirit in Galatia: Paul's Interpretation of PNEUMA as Divine Power*, SLB Dissertation Series 49, (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980); Theodor J. Weeden, "The Synoptic Tradition: A New Angle of Vision," unpublished study, presented at AAR-SLB, Washington, 1974; Stan Rummel, "The History of Israel: What Place for the Subhuman?," unpublished study, presented to SBL Israelite History Section, 1975.

31 Ford, *The Lure of God*, 27.

But it is exactly this concrete history which concerns us all and gives our experience a decisive sense.

> The biblical drama is the biography of God, whereby the integrity of his values is gradually made manifest in the vicissitudes of the concrete situations of Israel, Jesus, and the church. These values in all of their complex richness cannot be simply given at the outset; they must be temporally emergent as a layer upon layer is added to the account of God's dealings with humans. The concrete character of each such situation needs to be explored.[32]

I want to give the last word to the luminary of process theology, John Cobb who died at the end of 2024, a few weeks before his hundredth birthday. John Cobb will be remembered as one of the most prominent representatives of process philosophy and theology, reflecting and applying the work of Alfred North Whitehead. With his wide interest and knowledge, his readiness to participate in transdisciplinary dialogue and primarily with his effort to make Christian theology open to the new findings of the sciences he influenced not only theology and philosophy, but also ecology, economy, biology, and social ethics. Even with this broad openness he saw in Jesus a unique embodiment of God and therefore the decisive authority.

In the Christological part of his *Theological Reminiscences*[33] Cobb says that "the most needed understanding of who we are, where we stand, and what is needed comes from viewing the whole from the center," which is God's acting in Jesus.[34] The highest authority cannot be what is culturally acceptable. Authentic Christianity must be countercultural; it must look at reality from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Its centre cannot be a teaching that is focused on what is true at all times and places but what calls us to action. Although we may find bits of such calling elsewhere, "its sustained recognition and development is provided by the prophetic tradition of Israel."[35] However, such a calling must be even more inclusive. The prophets did not celebrate Israel's superiority over the rest of the world but remained ethnocentric. They went a long way to overcoming the "we/they" opposition, but they were not able fully to transcend it. Jesus was the first who achieved this goal. His ministry and teaching became inclusive. "His teaching that we should love our enemies and his call for the forgiveness of

32 Ibid., 127.
33 John B. Cobb, jr, *Theological Reminiscences* (Claremont: Process Century Press, 2014).
34 Ibid., 279.
35 Ibid., 280.

those who crucified him went beyond standard prophetic teaching." After his resurrection his disciples still hesitated but the apostle Paul recognized that gospel was equally for Jews and the rest of humanity. "The communities he established were inclusive." Thus, Jesus can be viewed both "as the fulfillment of the prophetic tradition and as the one through whom it entered into the wider stream of human history."[36]

"The ability to love your enemies goes beyond rational beliefs."[37] To follow Jesus, even though only partially, is to centre our life and understanding of what is going on on the One with whom Jesus lived so intimately. This is why we can and should think and speak of God's being and active creativity in Jesus. This is how Whitehead viewed God's causality: as "indwelling." Thus, by saying that while God participates in the constitution of every individual thing and that each entity in its way "incarnates" God, God's presence in Jesus is even stronger, Cobb is combining the view of both Griffin and Ford. Jesus actualized the possibilities God provided for him more fully than anyone else. His responsiveness to God's call was extraordinary but at the same time exemplary and inspiring and became a turning point in human history.

This is what makes Jesus decisive for us. God called Jesus to liberate the prophetic message from the residuum of ethnocentrism, to deepen and enrich it, and make it universally available. Through him a new kind of personal human existence came into being. In this way Jesus also created the possibility for a new kind of human community. Some elements of what emerged in those days exist in some form or another even today. This is what Jesus and the early church called the Holy Spirit. In his case the "initial aim" was transformed into the "subjective aim" that actually determined his decisions. For us who follow Jesus, the God who calls us to do so remains the deciding centre of our "selves." The difference between us and Jesus is that in him God's presence was fully synthesized with who he wanted to be. In this way he could speak for God in a way we cannot.

While nothing created is perfect, a lot may be successfully challenged and inspired. "The role of Jesus in the contemporary world can," according to Cobb, "benefit greatly from an understanding of the reality and the limits of inspiration." While even Jesus was a man of his time like us "the extent to which he was able to transcend and transform everything around him is

36 Ibid., 280f.
37 Ibid., 282.

astounding."[38] Similarly astounding and impressive is the extent to which he lived his own "vision of reality" and was ready to pay the full price for doing so. He was inspired in such a way that the claim that "the Spirit was enfleshed in his life" is not exaggerated. Cobb believes that "in this straightforward sense" Jesus "incarnated God"[39] and could become – through his words and deeds – the divine authority for us.

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38 Ibid., 287.
39 Ibid.