

**Marc A. Pugliese and John Becker
(eds.): *Process Thought and Roman
Catholicism: Challenges and Promises***

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The nineteenth century witnessed a growing dissatisfaction with the received philosophical and theological tradition on the divine nature as omnipotent, omniscient, unchanging, and all-loving. Foremost among them was Georg Hegel (1770–1831), whose dialectic of the spirit envisaged God as a dialectic of the finite and infinite, in a process of self-realisation. However, the person considered the father of modern process thought is Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), a mathematician who, like his mathematical collaborator, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), turned increasingly to philosophical questions. Dissatisfied with what was viewed as a traditional “static” substance-based metaphysics, Whitehead sought to build up a metaphysical system wherein process, relationship, and event become central categories for all being, including the divine being. His favoured title for this metaphysical system was “philosophy of organism” but eventually the term “process philosophy” became more popular for his system.

Process thought has not received a significant uptake among Catholic theologians, which is the focus of this book. Apart from Thomists and perhaps Lonerganians (such as myself), most Catholic theologians have preferred more personalistic or hermeneutical philosophical approaches to the various metaphysical systems on offer. Whitehead’s philosophy has however found advocates largely among liberal Protestant philosophers/theologians such as Charles Hartshorne, John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, and among those interested in the relationship between science and religion, such as Ian Barbour, Philip Clayton, and Arthur Peacocke. Cobb and Griffin, in particular, did much to make Whitehead’s stance more accessible in their book, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*

(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976). Whitehead sought to develop a metaphysical system that would replace the generally Thomistic language of substance, accident, causation, and existence, with a more “dynamic” set of categories such as event, relationship, and process. This approach led to a very different conception of divine being—one which existed in mutual relationship with the world—such that “It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God.” It is difficult to reconcile such a statement with traditional Christian beliefs such as creation *ex nihilo* (from nothing).

This present collection of essays provides various levels of engagement with and extensions of Whitehead’s approach, touching on a variety of theological questions of interest. Many of the essays provide convenient introductions to aspects of Whitehead’s thought and terminology, which is notoriously complex and not always consistent. This helps readers navigate their way, piecing together insights into the totality of the system.

The book has a longish introduction by John Cobb Jr., on his own encounter with process thought and notes of appreciation of and engagement with each of the contributions to the volume. While not as tightly written as the major essays, it provides a more personal account and response to the other authors. Cobb was an early adopter of process thought and continues to be a strong defender.

The first two substantive essays, by David Burrell and J. J. Mueller, reproduce articles that have appeared in *Theological Studies*, which raise significant objections to Whitehead’s project. Burrell’s piece is a standard reference point for many Catholic theologians seeking a critique of process thought. Its appearance in *Theological Studies* generated some significant response from Joseph Bracken and Elizabeth Johnson. Burrell argues that process thought was built on a straw opponent labelled “classical theism” which bore little resemblance to the achievements of Aquinas. Mueller explains why process thought has found so little pick up among Catholic theologians, while finding a home among some liberal Protestants.

Ilia Delio, a Franciscan nun, suggests links between the thought of medieval Franciscan thinker Duns Scotus and that of Whitehead. Scotus has a mixed reputation and there are a number of scholars seeming to rehabilitate it. For the general reader with little knowledge of Scotus' thought, this is likely to be of little interest. While there are some points of contact between Scotus and Whitehead, some of the connections seemed a bit forced. The context of both thinkers was very different, and there is no evidence that Whitehead was aware of Scotus' work.

Daniel Dombrowski examines the contribution of Charles Hartshorne, who did more than anyone to bring Whitehead's ideas to a larger audience, and Hartshorne's relation to Catholic thought. This chapter introduces the term "dipolar" in relation to God, not to be confused with the contemporary psychological meaning of the term. A process account posits a primeval nature of God to which many of the classical divine attributes, suitably reinterpreted, can be located and a consequent nature which is constantly changed by creation itself. Such a conception of God views God as changing as creation changes, in a relationship of mutual dependence. This is argued as a superior position to the more traditional "monopolar" notion of an unchanging timeless God. Dombrowski also discusses how process thought handles the problem of evil, a major issue in any metaphysical account of God.

Maria-Teresa Teixeira likewise identifies similarities and tensions between Whitehead's thought and key Catholic positions. Here we encounter Whitehead's focus on creativity and freedom which extends to all "actual entities." Teixeira is not afraid to raise the spectre of heresy in noting the divergences of Whitehead's position on creation from traditional Christian teaching but still strives to harmonise his position with that teaching where she can. Among all the contributions, she identifies Whitehead's position on "objective immortality" as opposed to continued personal subjective immortality as posing a major break with traditional belief.

Joseph Bracken, perhaps the more prominent Catholic thinker to have engaged with Whitehead, suggests a more "systems-oriented" metaphysics to balance permanence and change, drawing on lesser

utilised elements in Whitehead's thought. Bracken proposes a model of "system" to provide a bottom-up account of causality as an expansion of Whitehead's account as a way to overcome identified weaknesses both in Whitehead and more traditional approaches. He calls this approach a "systems-oriented panentheism." Bracken includes speculation on the Trinity as part of this, which, while better than the abortive attempt of Cobb and Griffin, still falls short of traditional beliefs on the Trinity. It is more a philosophical construct than a theological faith seeking understanding.

Thomas Hosinski proposes a process interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* that would bring it closer to more traditional Christian belief on the issue of creation. The virtue of this contribution is that it directly addresses a key issue, the absence of any sense of *creation ex nihilo* in Whitehead's understanding of the God-world relationship, with flow-on issues such as the problem of evil, divine governance, and providence. Hosinski's analysis makes it clear that Whitehead's God has a temporal existence, as evident in his discussion of God's "foreknowledge," leading to claims that the classical account of God "predetermines" reality, placing God "in control." All these assertions are in fact a misunderstanding of the more classical account, but they highlight the fact that such misunderstandings are, in fact, common and present real difficulties for many believers. Hosinski seeks to restore some sense of *creation ex nihilo* in Whitehead's system, which may convince those wedded to it.

Palmyre Oomen considers ways in which process thought might assist in understanding the Incarnation through the notion of co-inherence. Similar to Bracken's attempt to present a process account of the Trinity, Oomen seeks to present a process-oriented account of the Incarnation through a consideration of Platonic influence on the early Church Fathers. The chapter comes up against some of Whitehead's own limited understanding of Christian belief, for example, that the belief in the Holy Spirit is a doctrine of divine immanence in the world. Given his philosophical approach, Whitehead tends to read the doctrine of the Trinity along the lines of the philosophical problem of

transcendence-immanence, rather than a scripturally based account of divine missions. Oomen suggests the notion of mutual indwelling or co-inherence (*perichoresis*) as a way of describing the process account of the God–world relationship.

The following four essays have a tighter, more limited, focus in particular issues in Catholic theology. Thomas Schärfl suggests the use of a process metaphysics for understanding sacramentality and the Eucharist. Again, Whitehead's noting of divine immanence plays a key role. Given Whitehead's rejection of the metaphysic of substance, Schärfl proposes various alternative ways in which the eucharistic present can be explained. John Becker, one of the editors, engages with the topic of religious pluralism from a process perspective. Here, a number of process-oriented authors, most notably Cobb, but also Griffin and Bracken, have made contributions and Becker provides an account of some of these. Marc Pugliese, the other editor, enters into the debate about the possibility of intrinsically evil acts, comparing the position of Aquinas and Whitehead. This is of interest to Catholic moral theologians where the category of intrinsic evil has found its way into Catholic papal teaching. A final essay by Leo Lefebure brings process thought into dialogue with ecological issues, including Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Here, Whitehead's more "organic" approach is said to be more congenial to ecological concerns. There is a brief afterword by well-known Catholic theologian, Thomas Rausch, offering some autobiographical notes on his own encounter with process ideas.

One issue I felt was not seriously engaged with is the repeated assertion that God is temporal—an inevitable consequence of Whitehead's understanding of the God-world relationship. Such a claim appears to violate Einstein's account of the relativity of time. If God's existence is in some sense "temporal" we are entitled to ask, "Which time frame does God's time correspond with?" Whitehead was aware of this difficulty and attempted to address it by reinterpreting Einstein's theories of both special and general relativity. His interpretation of special relativity was mathematically the same as Einstein's, but more phenomenologically oriented, drawing on our "experience" of temporal

duration and simultaneity. He specifically attempted to restore some notion of simultaneity which Einstein's theory rules out. However, his work of a theory of gravitation differed significantly from that of Einstein's general relativity and makes different predictions. The equations of Whitehead's account of gravity are linear while Einstein's are distinctly non-linear. Given the continued success of general relativity to stand up to empirical verification, Whitehead's attempt here has not been successful. This remains an unaddressed issue in this book.

This book is a good place to start for anyone interested in a serious engagement with process thought. A number of the authors spell out basic aspects of the process vision, helping to unpack the dense and difficult ideas found in Whitehead's writings. The editors have done well to begin with two relatively critical pieces, so as not to turn the work into a one-sided affair.

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