

**In Search of a Contemporary World View:
Contrasting Thomistic and Whiteheadian Approaches**
Editorial

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Comparing and Contrasting Aquinas and Whitehead: An Introductory Commentary

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In the early stages of preparation for the 10th International Whitehead Conference to be held at the Center for Process Studies in Claremont, California, on June 4-7, 2015, I received an email message from the chief organizer of the conference, John B. Cobb, Jr., inviting me to attend the conference and to organize a “track” at the conference that would bring together representatives of the philosophical world views represented by Thomas Aquinas and Alfred North Whitehead. The project for the group would be to compare and contrast the potential contribution of these two rival philosophical systems to the overall theme of the conference, namely, formulating a new ecologically oriented approach to reality that would “save planet earth” from the disastrous consequences of the reckless exploitation of nature’s resources by human beings at the present time. While flattered by this offer from a distinguished philosopher/theologian like Cobb, I was hesitant to say yes, given the difficulty of bringing together Thomists and Whiteheadians to discuss with an open mind the way in which their rival philosophical approaches to reality could complement one another rather than compete with one another in the analysis and solution of contemporary issues. But I eventually agreed to undertake the task and the papers published in this issue of Open Theology represent written revisions of most of the papers presented orally in our small group at the Whitehead Conference. A couple of the presenters chose not to submit their papers for publication. Likewise, one paper in this issue, that of the Japanese Whiteheadian scholar Tokiyuki Nobuhara, was delivered at another track. But, since the papers in his track were not scheduled for publication and his paper dealt with the possibility of an ecological world view shaped by the world views of Aquinas, Whitehead, and representatives of Japanese Buddhism, the decision was made to invite him to offer his paper for publication in Open Theology at this time.

As will be evident to readers of these essays, however, there is only limited reference to the current ecological crisis around the world today. This is in no small measure because in my invitation to the contributors I stressed the need to deal with the basic philosophical differences between the world views of Aquinas and Whitehead before addressing their application to more specific issues in creating an ecologically sensitive world culture. Likewise, several of the authors addressed more the deficiencies in the philosophical world view of either Aquinas or Whitehead rather than their potential value, either individually or collectively, for dealing with the current ecological crisis. Yet, even with these limitations in the scope of their inquiry, the essays in this volume are worth studying in the light of the theoretical issues which they de facto raise in dealing with the author of their choice. In what follows, I will offer a few comments on what I see as the major points in each of those essays that should be taken seriously.

Thomas Hosinski, for example, in his essay “Thomas Aquinas and Alfred North Whitehead on God’s Action in the World” notes that both of them envision God’s providential activity in the world of creation to be accomplished not directly through divine intervention into the normal workings of the natural order but indirectly through empowering creatures to act on one another under divine inspiration. For that purpose, Aquinas appeals to the necessary connection between the primary causality of God and the

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secondary causality of the creatures whereas Whitehead appeals to the notion of divine initial aims that influence the self-constituting decision of actual entities from moment to moment in virtue of the activity of creativity operative in both God and creatures. Hosinski, however, sees problems in retaining the classical notions of divine omnipotence and omniscience while at the same time affirming the interaction of divine primary and creaturely secondary causality in co-producing contingent inherently unpredictable events in the world of nature. Is the creature, for example, really free to make its own choice in the light of God's alleged foreknowledge of future events or is God's knowledge like that of the creature also limited to what has happened or is currently happening in this world? Whitehead avoids this speculative dilemma by stipulating that creativity as a principle of process that is independent of God's knowledge and decision guarantees the freedom of the creature to make its own contingent decision with reference to the present moment and the anticipated future. But then the ontological status of Divine Providence is problematic since God too is a "creature" of creativity with only limited power to influence the actions of creatures in determining both what happens here and now and what could happen in the future. Hosinski proposes a compromise position on the relationship between creativity and God that would in his mind make the world views of Whitehead and Aquinas more mutually compatible.

Robert Masson uses insights from contemporary cognitive linguistics to argue that Aquinas's use of analogy and metaphor in his language about God is "tectonic" in that it dramatically shifts the ground of our conventional fields of meaning so as to create space to conceptualize what otherwise would be beyond grasp and to make inferences possible that otherwise would be unthinkable. One moves, in other words, from preliminary sensory-motor concepts in common sense experience to highly abstract concepts in philosophy and theology via increasingly sophisticated neural correlations in the human brain. Aquinas was not explicitly aware of this cause-effect relation between enhanced neural activity in the brain and increasingly abstract networks of mental concepts, but in fact he first affirmed that God exists, then denied that God exists in the same way that creatures exist, namely, with a determinate essence or mode of existence, but instead transcendently as an entity whose essence is simply to exist. Via an imaginative leap, one moves in thought from concrete experience of determinate existence in creatures to a felt sense of existence as such. One thereby stretches the univocal meaning of the term to a non-empirical metaphorical meaning while claiming that this is not pure equivocation. The end-product of such a metaphorical "leap" is, however, a new insight into the infinity of God as opposed to the finitude of human life and thought. Masson concludes by asking whether Whitehead's concept of God transcends the cosmology which Whitehead sets forth in *Process and Reality* or simply exists as a component within it. This is in my view a legitimate question., But it is complicated by the fact that in Whitehead's view all philosophical systems, his own included, are ultimately metaphors or symbolic representations of physical reality that in its size and complexity is beyond full human comprehension (cf. below, Palmyre Oomen's essay "Language About God in Whitehead's Philosophy").

Tokiyuki Nobuhara's essay combines Buddhist and Christian understandings of Ultimate Reality, namely, Emptiness as an impersonal metaphysical ultimate and God as the personal religious ultimate. Emptiness is the "place" where God lives apart from the world of creation. God is, accordingly, not the "soul" of the world and the world is not the "body" of God as in the ecologically oriented theology of Sallie McFague. Rather, as in classical Christian theology, God transcends the world of creation even though emptiness as the ground of the divine being is also the ground of finite being in creation. God's loyalty to God's inner Self as continual self-emptying love should thus be imitated by human beings and the other creatures of this world in their self-emptying relations to one another, given their interdependent existence within the divine ground of being. Nobuhara gives a Buddhist focus to this unusual understanding of the God-world relationship with his reference to the "Original Vow" of Amida Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism: namely, to forego the Highest Enlightenment as long as sentient beings remain who have not found salvation through trust in Amida Buddha's own care for them. Nobuhara also gives a Christological focus to this ecological understanding of the God-world relationship with reference to Christ's trusting obedience to the will of the Father in the work of salvation and Christian imitation of the faith of Christ in their own pursuit of perfection, the creation and preservation of a truly Ecozoic civilization. Just as Jesus called his disciples "friends," so they must respond in friendship to Christ and the Father and to one another. Finally,

Nobuhara links Whitehead's reference to God in *Process and Reality* as the "Great Companion, the Fellow-Sufferer Who Understands" with the Christian experience of resurrection, namely, the experience of the love of God for oneself and the whole of creation in the Great Adventure with God in bringing the world of creation to its ultimate fulfillment within the divine ground of being. Nobuhara's essay is certainly not easy to follow, given its intricate argument for human loyalty to God and Emptiness, Christ and Amida Buddha, and human beings to one another and creation as a whole. But it does provide a rich philosophical/theological background for the task of creating an Ecozoic civilization at this point in human history.

Palmyre Oomen submitted two essays for this issue of *Open Theology*. The first essay is on the proper understanding of the notion of omnipotence in the philosophies of Aquinas and Whitehead. As such, the essay indirectly deals with the overall project of the Whitehead Conference, namely, how to fashion and then implement a new world view that effectively responds to the looming ecological crisis facing contemporary human beings. Oomen believes that Whitehead's understanding of divine power vis-à-vis creation is better than that offered by Aquinas. Yet they share the philosophical conviction that God is active in everything that happens in this world and that nothing happens apart from God's agency even though God's agency is totally different from that of human beings and other finite agents. To be specific, Aquinas believes that God is omnipotent in the sense that God can do everything that does not involve a logical contradiction. So like human beings and other finite agents God converts possibility into actuality but on a scale beyond what would be possible for any finite agent. In Whitehead's view, however, the agency of God is to convert present actuality into new possibilities for human beings and other finite agents to actualize. In a word, God "lures" or persuades human beings and other finite agents to choose the best among all the possibilities available to deal with a given situation. God cannot simply make something happen as an exercise of divine omnipotence that overrules whatever finite agents might want or be able to accomplish. Like Aquinas Whitehead believes that divine providence will eventually prevail even though it may take longer for God to bring about the best possible outcome than Aquinas would believe, given his understanding of divine omnipotence. In evaluating the likelihood of a potential ecological crisis, accordingly, Whitehead more than Aquinas is cautioning human beings that things could well get worse before they get better and that they should not count on divine intervention to bring about a miraculous change of fortune for themselves and the other creatures of this earth.

Oomen later sent me her second essay, arguing that it would be more compatible with the basic orientation of the other essays in the group. After reading the second paper, I responded that both papers were of such high quality that both should be included. Only later did it further occur to me that Oomen's second paper offers an interesting counter-position on the issue of metaphor and analogy in talking about God that was presented by Robert Masson. In effect, Oomen argued in her second essay that Aquinas (and Masson as his contemporary disciple) were working with the presupposition that the truth-value of an individual concept is found in its basic correspondence to an extra-mental reality, whereas Whitehead from the perspective of contemporary natural science presupposed that the truth-value of an individual metaphysical concept lies in its coherence with other concepts within a network of concepts intended to explain the phenomena of nature. Not the individual metaphysical concept but only the overall network of such explanatory concepts can and should be tested against the deliverances of common sense experience. Admittedly, within the network of explanatory concepts some concepts have the polar opposite meaning of other concepts but these rival concepts still derive their truth-value from the role that they conjointly play within the network as a whole.

An example of a polar opposite concept at work within a network of interrelated concepts can be seen in Whitehead's description of God as the single non-temporal actual entity within a finite world constituted by temporally successive actual entities in *Process and Reality*. The "concrecence" or growth of perfection within God as the one non-temporal actual entity is to move from the actuality of the world here and now to the envisagement of virtually infinite potentialities that God can offer to the world of finite actual entities by way of divine initial aims for the next moment in the cosmic process. The "concrecence" of an individual finite actual entity, on the contrary, is to move from potentiality, the options offered to it by God and past finite actual entities at every moment, to the actuality of its own self-constituting decision in the present

moment. Thus God needs finite actual entities to achieve actuality from moment to moment within the cosmic process, and finite actual entities need God to provide them with potentialities for their individual moment of self-actualization in the present. Yet Whitehead freely admits that his cosmology like every other philosophical scheme is simply an imperfect model or symbolic representation of the reality of the God-world relationship; it does not even metaphorically or analogically correspond to the truth about God and the God-world relationship in the way that Aquinas and Masson in terms of their understanding of metaphor and analogy in talking about God claim to be the case.

Marc Pugliese in his essay claims that the revision to Whitehead's notion of society that I have proposed for many years now, albeit in opposition to the views of most other Whiteheadians, is surprisingly consistent with the relatively new notion of non-locality or action at a distance that is currently under discussion among theoretical physicists. Moreover, if this correlation between concepts in philosophical cosmology and theoretical physics is at least plausible, it would be a major step forward in dealing with a complex issue for both disciplines. Pugliese is remarkably clear in setting forth his proposal; so in this brief commentary on his essay, I offer only some further reflections on how I myself view the issue as a quasi-independent third party at this point. To be specific, a Whiteheadian society is not simply a set of similarly constituted actual entities with a common pattern of existence and activity but a higher-order corporate reality that endures relatively unchanged over time as sets of constituent actual entities come and go. Given the prominence of field-theory in contemporary theoretical physics, it makes sense that this corporate reality of a Whiteheadian society should be conceived as an energy- field of activity constituted by the dynamic interrelationship of constituent actual entities with a governing structure that effectively channels or "constrains" the activity of its constituent actual entities in one direction rather than another. A cell, for example, has a membrane that seals off the interrelated activity of its constituent molecules from interference by outside sources in the environment. Likewise, the cell has an internal governing structure for its constituent molecules that keeps them in solidarity with one another from moment to moment. Finally, a cell thus constituted can further evolve in its internal organization as it links up with other cells to co-constitute some higher-order organism or socially organized physical reality. The same should be true of constituent actual entities and the societies to which they belong. In their individual self-organization, constituent actual entities are primarily shaped by their "prehension" or feeling-level grasp of the governing structure of the society/societies to which they belong by reason of inheriting it from predecessor actual entities. Furthermore, no matter how spatially distant they are from one another within their common field of activity, all constituent actual entities in their individual self-constitution simultaneously feel the causal influence of their common element of form or governing structure which sustains them as a higher-order corporate reality rather than simply as a contingent aggregate of similarly constituted individual actual entities.

Within theoretical physics, there is at present a major dispute whether subatomic particles that are spatially separated from one another by distances well beyond the speed of light can have any causal influence on one another in terms of their differing modes of operation. Einstein and other classically trained physicists argue that this is physically impossible, given that an infinite amount of energy would be required for information to be transmitted from one subatomic particle to another at a speed greater than the speed of light. Yet experiments performed by John Bell and other more empirically oriented physicists seem to vindicate the notion of non-locality or action at a distance between subatomic particles at such great distances from one another. My proposal that Pugliese develops in much greater detail than would ever be possible for me was that if the subatomic particles in question here were understood to be constituent actual entities of a Whiteheadian society/structured field of activity with spatial boundaries that extend beyond the speed of light, then these constituent actual entities could still influence one another's individual self-constitution through their common "prehension" of the governing structure of the society/field of activity to which they both belong and to which they both contribute the pattern of their own individual self-constitution here and now. The governing structure or common element of form for the society/field of activity, in other words, is not limited to a single point in the field but is simultaneously extended in every direction within the spatial boundaries of the field. No physical energy is needed for it to be omnipresent within the field. Whitehead in *Process and Reality* claimed that an actual entity is both

locally fixed and at the same time everywhere within the space-time continuum, given its influence on other actual entities throughout the world. The same psycho-physical character should also be true of the society/structured field of activity to which an actual entity belongs.

Finally Hans-Joachim Sander offers in his essay a detailed study of the various loci or places for the faithful transmission of divine revelation as given in Sacred Scripture to the faithful. That is, whereas within the classical Protestant tradition the faithful are led to find divine revelation in a literal reading of Scripture under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Roman Catholic Church likewise relies upon Church tradition as found in various sources/loci, especially the magisterium or teaching authority of the Church as exercised by the Pope, the bishops and approved theologians. Moreover, the philosophical system used in support of such authentic Church teaching should always be the same, namely Thomism as originally set forth by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae* and other works and then further refined over the centuries by various philosophers and theologians committed to the principles of Thomism as an unchanging philosophy of being (as opposed to becoming or ongoing evolution). The crowning achievement of this conjunction of Thomism and divine revelation as presented in Scripture and Tradition was the definition of Papal Infallibility at the end of the nineteenth century during the First Vatican Council.

Sanders, however, critically evaluates this doctrinal tradition extending from Thomas Aquinas to modern times. First of all, a distinction has to be made between loci, accredited sources of divine revelation and authentic doctrinal teaching, and principia, arguments in favor of a given interpretation of Scripture and Tradition as set forth in dogmatic theology, i.e., systematic explanations of Scripture and Tradition by various philosophers and theologians over the years. For, with appeal to dogmatic theology for the faithful transmission of Scripture and Tradition, the content of divine revelation and the doctrinal teaching of the Church is no longer timeless but historically grounded. Relativism in the form of rival systematic presentations of Scripture and Tradition has to be taken into account and decisions have to be made about which systematic understanding of Catholic doctrine is more relevant for adjusting to life in contemporary society. To the Pope and bishops assembled at the First Vatican Council, the doctrine of Papal Infallibility would seem to be the appropriate response to an intellectual relativism that could undermine the certitude traditionally associated with Church teaching. Yet, says Sander, close inspection of what is meant by Papal Infallibility once again introduces the problem of historical context and relativistic understandings of that historical context into what should be understood as the timeless doctrinal teaching of the Church.

For example, a proposition that a Pope declares to be infallible must be true, not simply because the Pope said so, but because the proposition is *de facto* true and can be used to resolve controversial issues in Church teaching. Papal infallibility, in other words, is itself dependent upon antecedent belief in the indefectibility of the Church as the divinely chosen institutional medium for the faithful transmission of the Gospel message. Furthermore, without such periodic definitions of the truth of the Gospel message by the Pope and bishops, then the message of the Gospel becomes totally relative to whatever a Christian believes to be true on the basis of one's private interpretation of Scripture. Hence, the infallibility of the Pope in speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals should be sustained. But the historical situatedness of a Papal pronouncement *ex cathedra* should still be kept in mind. The locus or source of Papal Infallibility is not to be found equivalently at a point outside of space and time totally unaffected by historical circumstances but at a point in space and time where the relevance of historical circumstances must also be taken into account in assessing the full truth of the infallible pronouncement. Sander confirms his argument here by comparing the two-dimensional geometry of Euclid with its presupposition of geometric points in an abstract sense apart from concrete conditions of space and time with Alfred North Whitehead's understanding of a geometric point as a "flat locus," a location in space and time as a consequence of many antecedent events (actual entities). The Pope speaking *ex cathedra* is a historically conditioned event; what the Pope says at that moment is subject to analysis and further interpretation.

With these introductory comments, readers of this issue of Open Theology should find the following essays quite intriguing. They each pursue a line of thought that can be traced to basic differences in the Whiteheadian and Thomistic world views. But these separate lines of thought are sufficiently diverse that nothing like a fully articulated compromise position in terms of world view seems to emerge. At the

same time, maybe it is a mistake even to seek a unified third position. For success in working out a new world view would almost inevitably give rise to the belief that there is only philosophical system that explains everything. It might be better to recognize that every thought-system is perspectival. That is, every philosophical system expresses some basic truth about the nature of reality, but none expresses the whole truth.