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Process Thought From an Evangelical Perspective: An Appreciation and Critique

By Stephen T. Franklin

I first encountered Whitehead's philosophy as an undergraduate in a hybrid course entitled "Process and Analytic Philosophy." The eight required texts included Whitehead's *Process and Reality*. The professor, whose interest at the time lay neither in process nor analytic philosophy but in existentialism, gave us no preparation for this encounter. I vividly remember my bewilderment as I began. It is only a slight exaggeration to say I was unable to understand a single sentence in the first 50 or 60 pages, although the words individually seemed simple enough and the grammar not particularly complex. I never finished the book.

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I have since learned that without a knowledgeable guide, first encounters with *Process and Reality*, and indeed with Process thought in general, often produce similar reactions. There are some good reasons for this. Alfred North Whitehead produced a metaphysical vision of extraordinary originality, and to express his insights he created a vocabulary in which he sometimes invented new words but, more often, redefined old words to fit his needs. This can make entry into his world quite daunting.

Yet once one gets a feel for the vision as a whole and learns a little of the basic vocabulary, Whitehead's philosophy is not particularly difficult. Excluding the strictly mathematical and logical sections, I think *Process and Reality* is easier to read than Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

After struggling for 2,000 years with Aristotle's metaphysical scheme, Christian theologians have come to a solid understanding of its advantages and disadvantages. Whitehead's philosophy is much younger and less well-known. Some Christian theologians have struggled with it, but they have not often been Evangelical. Indeed, both Evangelical and non-Evangelical thinkers alike have tended

In the past, both Evangelical theologians and Process scholars have often misunderstood the perspectives and concerns of the other camp. **Stephen Franklin** introduces Process thought to Evangelicals, showing how Process thought addresses central Evangelical concerns. He also considers the limitations of Process thought from an Evangelical point of view. Lastly he explains to Process scholars why Evangelicals have a serious stake in the analysis of human experience, whether or not explicitly religious, and thus why Evangelicals have a natural basis for using the categories of Process thought. Mr. Franklin is Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Tokyo Christian University.

to see Process thought and Evangelical theology as mutually exclusive alternatives. This is unfortunate because Whitehead's philosophy emerges out of and speaks to issues that many reflective Evangelicals have confronted in the twentieth century.

We Evangelicals, at least those of us who are American, have grown up in a culture not only focused on modern science, industry, and technology but also descended from the Enlightenment with its emphasis on personal autonomy and social liberation. We may not always approve of the culture in which we find ourselves, but we cannot escape it. Its issues become our issues—its problems, our problems. *Process and Reality* critiques precisely these issues and problems. Whitehead's affirmations nearly always illuminate, while, quite unexpectedly, his criticisms often parallel those proffered by Evangelicals.

Thus I begin this paper in something of a dilemma. While Process thought emerges out of some very down-to-earth concerns, outsiders often perceive process thinkers as engaged in highly technical and even esoteric exchanges among themselves. My first task, therefore, is to present Process thought so as to highlight its connections to contemporary Evangelical life. To this end, I will begin autobiographically. This is not to say my intellectual life is particularly important or interesting. While every personal history has its unique elements, mine is quite ordinary. But that is precisely the point. By showing where Whitehead spoke to central issues in my own intellectual journey, and where he did not, perhaps I can cast light on the potential significance of Process thought for other Evangelicals. And perhaps I can remind those outside the Evangelical tradition that the central issues for Evangelicals mostly overlap the central issues all Christians must face. To do this, I sketch some of the main motifs of Whitehead's Process thought, with an eye towards their implications for the issues raised in my "representative" autobiography. Lastly I highlight the Evangelical distinctives where Process thought has typically been seen, not as an aide to, but in conflict with Evangelicalism.

A Christian Child in a World of Science

Being the son, grandson, and greatgrandson of Protestant pastors guaranteed that I would confront the demands of the Christian faith. I know my greatgrandfather only through stories and the devotional books he wrote for his congregations. My grandfather, a chaplain in World War I, served as a pastor and, for twenty-five years, as an administrator in our denomination. While he represented a conservative anti-evolutionary Protestantism, he also worked hard to prevent the premillennialists and dispensationalists from establishing their theological distinctives as the denominational norm. I was born while my father served as a Marine Corps officer in WWII. Later he studied for the ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary. The seminary assigned us a faculty house close to Einstein's. I can clearly remember one of his relatives who lived with him passing out her sugar cookies to us neighborhood children.

In the mid 1950's, my family moved to the Panama Canal Zone, an American oasis in Latin America, where my father pastored a Union Church. Somewhat

removed from developments "back home," the Canal Zone in the late 1950's reflected the generic Protestant consensus of the United States in the 40's and early 50's. My America was a Protestant country.

The Canal Zone may have been the only place in the world where the law required the head of government to be a licensed engineer. Every Canal Zone governor was a high ranking officer in the United States Army Corps of Engineers. This environment shaped the schools which strongly emphasized science and mathematics. The Canal Zone stood surrounded by the poverty and ignorance of the Panama, which was as Roman Catholic as we were Protestant.

Just as the sun outshone the stars, so in my world, it lay in the very nature of things that America should shine brightest among the nations. This pre-eminence had two sources in my mind: the Protestant faith and natural science. While still in high school, I decided to study philosophy in college for one reason: the relation of science and religion was by no means obvious to me. And yet these two together forged the very heart of the strength of the America I knew. Rather my concern centered on two issues. First, American's strength and financial future, and even my personal health, obviously required the best in science and technology. Yet science itself seemed wholly indifferent to any values, whether political or religious. If, as I was taught and believed, Jesus Christ determines what is good and evil, what is right and wrong, then how could a religiously indifferent science be good? Second, why did the methods of coming to truth seem so different in school and in church, that is, in science and religion. Did science really provide the model for knowledge; and if so, how can we know that God exists?

Religion, Science, and Immanuel Kant

Like most Protestant liberal arts colleges in the 1960's, my undergraduate college taught philosophy as the history of western ideas and thought. This "classical" approach left me with three basic conclusions.¹

First, the fundamental questions concerning the nature of science and religion, and their interconnections, had been set forth by Immanuel Kant. According to Kant we human beings construct our knowledge, our world, and even ourselves. This act of construction, however, separates us from the real world as it is in itself, "out-there." That is, since the world we experience is the world we ourselves have shaped, it follows that we can never know the world as it exists in itself apart from our shaping activity. In Kant's own vocabulary, the phenomenal world in which we live day-by-day emerges from the interaction of the *a-priori* categories of the mind with the noumenal world which lies forever beyond our conceptual grasp.²

¹One of my philosophy professors, now retired, read an earlier version of this paper. He urged me to note that these were my own conclusions and not those of the department.

²Of course we might dismiss Kant with the quip that "That's not how our language works." The problem is, however, that Kant put his finger on an issue that dominates not just philosophy but modern Western (and increasingly Oriental) culture as a whole. For more

Kant's position has enormous implications for both the nature of science and the truth of religion. It means that scientific knowledge—its cognitive content—extends only to the phenomenal world. The world scientists uncover is nothing other than the world they as human beings have shaped. The world as such lies beyond the reach of the scientific method. This of course is a very modest reading of the epistemological claims of the scientific enterprise.³

Kant's position, while unacceptable to many working scientists, does not cut to the heart of the scientific enterprise. Most consumers (and funders) of scientific research, and even perhaps some scientists, do not greatly care whether science delivers the world itself into our hands or just the world as it appears to us. Kant's philosophy does, however, pierce to the marrow of classical Christianity. The Christian faith is empty apart from God. And the word "God," at least in orthodox theology, means nothing if it does not connect us to what is the case, to what lies beyond and stands prior to our human existence and power, and to what exists in the noumenal world. Of course the human experience of "God" is humanly shaped, at least in part; but orthodox theology demands that there be "more to the story."

Kant presented Christian theology with a fundamental dilemma. Either theologians could keep the cognitive content of their doctrines at the cost of sacrificing any reference to God as such; or they could keep the connection with God as such, at the cost of sacrificing their cognitive content. Kant himself chose the second horn of this dilemma. He held that the Christian religion connects us with the noumenal world by giving us the "practical" presuppositions of ethics and human action. That is, as we act, we do so as ethical beings, and our actions implicitly presuppose a real "right and wrong" whose roots lie deeper than our own human creativity. And this "practical" relation is all we need. In Kant's own vocabulary, our doctrines about "God" do not provide us with theoretical knowledge.

On my reading, Kant gave voice to the direction in which Western culture, quite apart from the discipline of philosophy, was headed. And the larger culture

than two centuries, Westerners have lived in a culture of interpretation. The rise of historical, sociological, psychological, and economic modes of thought have all tended to the same conclusion as Kant's: we do not deal with reality as such but only with the world as shaped by our historical situation, our sociological status, our gender, our psychological needs, and our economic interests. And, as mentioned in the main text, even language itself is not a privileged route of access to the world, but simply one more way of organizing that world, one that varies enormously from time to time and place to place.

³Today scientists routinely acknowledge the influence of the scientist/observer upon their observations. This is related to Kant's point. There may even be a historical link between the scientific claim and Kant's philosophy, though I have yet to see this substantiated. Kant's philosophy, however, leads to a more radical conclusion. For Kant there is a fundamental bifurcation between the world in itself and the world we perceive. This is more than the mere claim that the observer influences some aspects of the observation. Rather, Kant is claiming that the observer's *a-priori* categories shape all aspects of the observed phenomena, thus denying the observer any knowledge of the true character of the observed items apart from and prior to the observer's structuring of those items. According to the Kantian interpretation, scientists do not deal with the real (i.e., the noumenal) world.

has continued to move in this direction ever since. Of course, this theme has spawned endless variations. And, whereas Kant saw the categories of the mind as invariant and absolute, later scholars catalogued the ever-moving kaleidoscope of culture, language, class, and biology. In a sense, even postmodernism does no more than yet again reincarnate Kantian philosophy, this time with an overwhelming sense of our human power to shape our own world but without Kant's conviction that, if not doctrine, then at least human ethics and practical action could place us into deep connection with God and the noumenal world.

This historical approach to philosophy could also be applied to science, and this left me with a second basic conclusion. The history of modern science can be seen as a sustained, multi-generational effort to drop the category of purpose from our understanding of the world, that is, to eliminate Aristotle's so-called "final cause." It puzzled me how Evangelicals can strain at the gnat of evolution, even when restated in theistic terms, while swallowing whole the camel of a mechanistic understanding of biology, economics, and above all psychology. Yet we live in a world drenched in felt purpose. Our experience of telos in nature is at least as primitive as our experience of its measurable attributes of mass, shape, and velocity. My earlier puzzlement about science, which ignored the standards of truth to be found in Jesus Christ, widened into a broader confusion about how science could say anything about the world we really live in, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, Christian or non-Christian, or religious or non-religious.

My college years overlapped Vatican II, which rendered my earlier experiences of Catholicism somewhat obsolete to say the least. I also gained a highly appreciated acquaintance with Thomas Aquinas. The Roman Catholics claim Thomas as "their own,"⁴ and this helped to reshape my estimation of Roman Catholicism. While my professors tended towards Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, I found myself gravitating towards Aquinas. Even while remaining squarely in the reformation heritage of sola gratia, sola fide, and sola scriptura, I could not ignore Aquinas' analysis, particularly his doctrine of "esse" as interpreted by E. Gilson. This became the third conviction. While the Bible surely provides the fundamental norms for all doctrinal claims, nonetheless, Christian theology requires some scheme, which traditionally meant metaphysics, to provide a vocabulary in which to articulate the implications of the Christian faith for the larger culture.

Whitehead and American Christianity

The move from undergraduate to graduate education merely meant traveling across Chicago, from North Park College on Chicago's north side to the University of Chicago on the south. While life at the University proved exciting and challenging in most ways, the one place where I had expected the transition to be difficult,

⁴Thomas was not a Roman Catholic in the modern sense, since he lived before the break-up of Latin Christianity in the Reformation and the council of Trent and, thus, before the appearance of the Protestant and Roman Catholic communions as we understand them today. Thomas belongs to the common heritage of Western, Latin Christianity.

it was not. It was merely disappointing. I began my graduate education in the philosophy department, where I had been looking forward to a vigorous debate on the God Question. I found almost complete indifference. To be sure, the department offered classes on Aristotle, Thomas, and Scotus, where the theistic option at least gained a hearing. But sadly, such classes were mainly taught by “holdovers” from an earlier era who retained no political clout within the department. The majority of my professors, those who held the keys to doctoral success, had no such interest. I moved on to the Divinity School, where at least the question was taken seriously.⁵

The Divinity School provided a new category, philosophical theology, which perfectly defined my interests. Like so many other young Evangelical Christians, my deepest commitments were to the Gospel. Therefore it was not enough for me to be a philosopher who happened to focus on religion. Rather, I was a theologian, and a Christian theologian at that. And yet precisely as a theologian wishing to

⁵In the philosophy department, I encountered the extraordinary belief, held in practice if not in theory, that the history of philosophy began with the later Bertrand Russell. But the only way I could make sense of “Analytic Philosophy” as taught in the philosophy department was to see its links with the problems Kant had raised. It seemed to me then, as it still does now, that I was dealing with philosophers who had, to put it in vastly oversimplified terms, replaced Kant’s a-priori categories of the mind with ordinary language. While I could find many professors willing to examine counterfactuals or analyze the difference between “could have” and “should have,” I could find none interested in examining the historical and logical presuppositions of the method itself. To me, the philosophers seem strangely indifferent to philosophy.

Just as my initial reactions to Roman Catholicism changed over time, so have my perceptions of Analytic Philosophy. Some years after I had left the philosophy department, Stephen Toulmin and Alan Janik published *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (1973) which concretely documented the deep roots of Wittgenstein’s thought in neo-Kantian philosophy as it flourished in turn-of-the-century Vienna. This not only confirmed my intuitions, but more importantly it evidenced an increasing interest among Analytic Philosophers in the history of philosophy. Of course, even thirty years ago, some Roman Catholic analytic philosophers—Elizabeth Anscombe comes easily to mind—demonstrated a serious interest in Aquinas. The intervening decades have seen an increasing number of Analytic Philosophers pursuing the history of philosophy quite vigorously. And today the analysis of Christian theological concepts has become positively *de rigueur* in some analytic circles. But thirty years ago, this all lay in the distant future.

While all schools of philosophy certainly engage in the clarification of concepts, and while such clarification is often highly useful, nonetheless I have three critical observations concerning an exclusive reliance on linguistic analysis. First, as the Marxists have correctly observed, if we merely analyze the current structure of our language (or world view) and accept the results as somehow normative, we necessarily end up affirming the current social arrangements as well as the associated forms of science and knowledge. While the Marxists are wrong to assume these social arrangements are necessarily unjust or outmoded, they are right when they argue we should subject them to the test of justice. I would add that we must be free to move beyond our old ways of speaking about the world and to explore alternatives. Second, if done mono-culturally with the assumption that such an analysis gives us a normative (or even just the-best-we-can-get) understanding of our world, it unfairly and uncritically devalues the cultures of those who speak a language, such as Japanese, unrelated to the Indo-European family. Third, if we consider linguistic analysis to be a form of transcendental deduction, as I would, then the problems mentioned in the main text concerning Kantian philosophy are simply recapitulated “in a new key” in Analytic Philosophy.

express the Gospel in my own mixed world of religion, science, and national crisis (the Vietnam War had begun), I needed to use the tools of culture, which meant, above all else, philosophy and language, but which included, at least in principle, history, literary theory, and the natural and social sciences. During this time, I again met *Process and Reality*, a good number of years after the first unfortunate encounter. This time the book made sense, largely due to Langdon Gilkey's skillful lectures.

Whitehead's central premise is actually quite simple: one event can include another event. For example, my trip from Chicago to Tokyo can include a stopover in Los Angeles. Just as a thought experiment, let us try to view our world, not in the traditional way as composed of substances, but in a radically different way, as composed of events. To say that the world is constituted by events certainly violates our normal way of talking about the world and about events. Whitehead had to stretch and rework the notion of an "event." For example, he argued that the present event includes its past events, whereas it does not directly include its contemporary or future events. Again, he argued that most basic events are very brief. His reworking of the notion of an event is extensive and radical.

Before rejecting Whitehead's vision as simply offbeat, notice what he achieved with this simple reconceptualization of an "event." The premise is that the new event includes the past events within its own identity. This means there is no absolute or unbridgeable gap between the new event and the old events, between the "out-there" and the "in-here," between (in the human case) the self and the other, between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds. In short, Whitehead provided a powerful answer, the first I had even encountered, to Kant.⁶

⁶Whitehead's notion of one event including another also sheds light on a medieval debate about knowledge. Many Medievals argued that knowledge required the object known to be present in the knower. It was understood that this was a special kind of presence "in the mode of knowledge." The scholars of that age offered a variety of explanations for this, typically suggesting that the "form" (in a basically Aristotelian sense) somehow passed, via the senses, from the object "out-there" into the mind or soul "in-here." Process thought agrees with this medieval principle, though not necessarily with their explanation of it. In fact, Whitehead can be interpreted as generalizing from that epistemological principle into the realm of ontology. Each subject (each new event) is related to the larger world only because there is some sense in which that outside world is present in the subject. That is, the medieval epistemological principle would be a specific case of the ontological principle.

What hindered the Medievals from moving from the epistemological to the ontological interpretation of this principle was a substantialist view of reality. As Aristotle remarked, one substance cannot be predicated (that is, be present in) another. Whitehead's ontology of events directly contradicts this dictum.

At the same time, however, the scholastics sometimes held an alternative view of a "substance" as a dynamic center of activity that held together a variety of forms over a period of time. While still far from Whitehead's position, it does offer some striking parallels and perhaps some opportunities for constructive interaction with Process thought. In any case, the existence of this half-forgotten Medieval alternative clearly indicates the extent to which a far more mechanical view of substance has dominated Western thought from Descartes onward, where it was this mechanical view of substance (derived from, or at least supported by, the successes of the early modern sciences such as physics and astronomy) that Whitehead was most directly concerned to refute.

This simple device of imagining the world as constituted by events highlights the alternative metaphors that implicitly dominate Kant's thinking. While, as Heidegger observed long ago, Kant assigns a certain priority to time over space within his categories of the mind, nonetheless, Kant's analysis as a whole rests on the implicit normativity of spatial metaphors. The categories of the mind "in-here" interact with a world "out-there" to produce the phenomena as they appear to me. If we use the word "substance" somewhat loosely and intuitively, I think we can say that Kant presupposes that both the mind "in-here" and the world "out-there" are substances or a multiplicity of substances. Since one substance cannot be present in another, it follows that the world "out-there," or the substances "out-there," cannot be present to me "in-here."

The heart of classical Christianity, and thus Evangelical Christianity, dies without the conviction that in Jesus Christ, in the proclamation of the Word, and in the Christian life (including for some the sacraments), we truly have to do with God. This of course is precisely what Kant brought into question. So any challenge to the Kantian bifurcation of noumena and phenomena deserves a closer look from Evangelicals, and not just Evangelicals but from all those Christians who consider their doctrines to be, among other things, claims about "what is the case."

Experience, Power, and the Evangelical Life

American Evangelicals speak the language of experience. We meet Jesus. For us, being "born again" refers to an experience. In the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions, one hears of a "second blessing," "speaking in tongues," and "deeper life"—all of which are experiential. Church members often quote the proverb, "It is better to know God than to know about God"—which if meant seriously, and not as an excuse for avoiding the hard work of carefully thinking through the faith, is beyond reproach. Even the Reformed heritage, probably the least experientially based of the Protestant traditions, can boast of Jonathan Edwards, whose revivalistic theology found its philosophical articulation in the empiricist categories of John Locke.

Whitehead's process philosophy also appeals to experience—to experience of all sorts, even experience drunken and hallucinatory. The categories of an adequate metaphysics must not only apply to the experience of people at their "sharpest," say when reading a meter in a physics lab, but also to every other sort of experience, say our intuitions into our child's fears or when waking up from a long drug-induced sleep. In this context, Whitehead shifts roles. It is Whitehead who sticks quite close to our common modes of speaking in which we experience and feel all sorts of things, whereas it is the empiricist philosophers who seem preoccupied with a very limited range of experience—namely, a conscious subject's sense experiences, preferably those that are, in Descartes' phrase, "clear and distinct," a phrase that echoes in Locke, Hume, the positivists, and not a few "ordinary" language philosophers.

According to Whitehead's process ontology, there is an endless flow of new events. The events are born with a certain "openness" about how they will develop, but eventually they become fixed. Here also, Whitehead stuck close to our normal modes of thinking. For example, I am writing this during the earliest primaries in the 1996 presidential race. This is a kind of event. When it starts, the outcome is open. But by the time you read this, the election will have taken place, and the outcome will be closed. Only one person will have been elected.

Whitehead differs from our common language, however, in describing this flow of events as a flow of experiences. Each "basic" event is "an occasion of experience" which "feels" its past events, where these feelings *are* the inclusion of the past events in the new one.

In reworking the word "experience," Whitehead strips it of any necessary connection with sense perception. The details are complex, but Whitehead's main point is easy to grasp. Experience at its most basic is not something we have; it is something we are, the being or "esse" of all reality. In certain cases, such as simple animals, this foundational experience develops into sensation. In a still narrower range of cases, say the more advanced animals, sensate experience acquires consciousness. And in an extremely narrow range of cases—apparently limited to human beings, and even then, only at certain times—this grows into self-conscious experience. This, of course, is consistent with Evangelicalism. Whatever else the "experience" of being born again may be, it cannot be directly seen, heard, touched, tasted, or smelled. "Meeting Jesus" is not a photo op. And "being filled with the Holy Spirit," even if accompanied by colorful outbursts, cannot in principle be shown on *Candid Camera*.

Evangelicals need no permission from metaphysicians before having and cherishing such experiences. Yet, it can be dangerous to disconnect those experiences from the rest of one's life. If "meeting Jesus" has no connection with my other experiences, it can be plausibly dismissed as a subjective projection of my "inner" feelings upon the "outside" world. If my experience of "knowing Jesus" is an isolated religious miracle, divorced from everyday life, it will soon lead to "The Death of God" in practice, whether or not it is acknowledged as such.

This brings us to a quite significant implication of Whitehead's philosophy for Evangelicals. One can appeal to Process thought to show that religious experiences, such as meeting Jesus, fit into a much larger class of pre-sensory experiences. These pre-sensory experiences connect us with the noumenal world and, thus, are more foundational than sensory experiences. It follows that since Evangelical religion lives in this realm of pre-sensory experience, it gives us a more basic and elemental contact with the world than does science, which is primarily oriented to our enormously important but relatively superficial sense experiences.

In Whitehead's philosophy, the flow of events in which one event can include another is not only experiential, but it is also power. Whitehead is not saying that we have experiences of something called power. Long ago, David Hume recognized that we cannot experience power, if we are thinking of such an experience as a relation between a subject "in-here" called a mind and an object "out-there" called

power. More specifically, if we reduce experience to sensation, and if try to find a sense-datum of this thing called power, we will fail. Rather according to Whitehead, the experiential flow of events *is* power. That is, power, as another name for the fundamental experiential flow of events, is the being of the world.

Let me summarize the implications of this aspect of Whitehead's philosophy for Evangelical theology. Process thought offers us both a description and an explanation, very powerful ones in my mind, not only of how it is possible to talk about God but also how it is possible to actually experience God as a noumenal reality. Evangelical religion leads inevitably, it seems to me, to the conclusion that our basic experience is pre-sensory. Whitehead adds that such basic experience is pre-conscious. This means God enters into our existence at the level of the basic flow of events, at the level of power, at the level in which the reality "out-there" is a part of the reality "in-here." That is, on Whitehead's ontology, meeting Jesus and being baptized in the Holy Spirit refer to experiences in which God and the noumenal world have truly entered into our hearts, into our very identities. And so, from a Process point of view, experiences such as being born again and tasting the grace of God are consonant with those fundamental experiences which constitute the being of the world, whereas our sense-experiences, into which God and the Holy Spirit and Jesus do not normally seem to enter, are relatively superficial in comparison. Whitehead can also remind us Evangelicals of the fact that we live out of the grace of God at the pre-conscious level as well as the conscious. Thus it is plausible to claim that we live in constant communion with God not only when we are awake but when we sleep as well, and not only when we worship in church but when we teach a mathematics class as well.

The Reintroduction of Teleological Explanations

This flow of events, in which the past world "out-there" is present in the new event, is dynamic and goal-oriented. Some scholars, who have grown in number since Kant, may try to convince us that we "project" values and purposes upon a "neutral" world. But nobody lives on that basis. Yet precisely this inherently implausible separation of value from reality has become widely accepted. The question is why. The answer is that our culture earlier accepted the mistaken notion that the outside world on which we allegedly "project" our values is radically separated from our own identity. Once we admit, however, that the past world is present in and constitutive of the new event—which in the human case means that the "other" is present in and constitutive of the "self"—it follows that our sense of purpose, by which we guide our decision-making, must necessarily be rooted in that outside world. That is, in an ontology of events, the outside world is present in each decision-making, purposing, value-creating subject. In short, values, goals, and decisions, far from being only subjective, are in fact truly present in what I have called the basic flow of events. Our value-soaked experience, thus, emerges out of a value-soaked world.

Evangelicals and other Christians live in a world of value. The Bible says that the mountains rejoice, the trees clap their hands, and the sun, moon, and stars praise God their creator. These are obviously metaphors and analogies. But why do we so often think of them as *only* metaphors, as *only* images we impose on nature. Do not I, precisely as a Christian, live in a value-laden world in which "nature sings and 'round me rings the music of the spheres"? For Whitehead, this may not be "my Father's world," but is a world of value. And in that sense, the process vision comports well with the Evangelical faith.

Let us grant we live in a world of pre-sensory and pre-conscious experience and power, in which we find our deepest identities. This still leaves us with a need of an explanation for the relation between the world of religion, values, and goals and the world of technology in which we also live. An answer will emerge to this question as we recognize that science is a very partial perspective. We must therefore explore this notion of a "partial perspective."

According to Whitehead each event, at least those we can call basic, undergoes its own internal development. At this point, at least, Whitehead has remained close to our ordinary understanding of an event. Previously I used the presidential election as an illustration of an event. To be sure, for Whitehead, an election is not a basic event, but a connected plethora of events, and in that sense quite abstract. Yet, as it develops, various stages are completed and add their definiteness to the event as a whole. By the end of the election, everything has been accomplished: speeches made, positions taken and abandoned, votes cast, ballots counted, concession speeches made, and victory won. At the end, one candidate has been elected president. This event gradually grows more concrete. We can describe it as a "concrecence."

It will be recalled that a basic event, what Whitehead calls an actual entity or an occasion of experience, begins with the inclusion of its past events. The new event is, in a sense, the world coming together and redefining itself. At their crudest and least sophisticated, events do little else than repeat their past worlds. But some events are more creative in their reactions to their worlds, and they develop sophisticated modes of interacting with the world, forms that we call sensations, consciousness, and even self-awareness.

To understand Whitehead's vision, few points are more important than the following four claims. First, sensation, consciousness, and self-consciousness all emerge out of something far more primitive—our involvement in the world. Second, this primitive involvement in the world is an infinitely complex set of relationships, where even one relationship intertwines us with our environment and, thus, where the entire set of relations guarantees an infinitely rich interweaving with our environment. This is the pre-conscious world of power, relatedness, and purpose. All reality, according to Whitehead, shares in this primitive mode of existence. Third, precisely because this primitive mode of existence is infinitely complex, finite creatures must simplify it before they can deal with it creatively. Sensation, consciousness, and self-consciousness, thus, are nothing other than simplified, and so specialized, ways of interacting with the world. In the human case, these

modes of specialization also include language and culture. With the introduction of language and culture, this process becomes further specialized into natural science, government, social status, economic interests, political life, and much more. These specialized modes of life are all simplifications of the rich and complex relationships out of which each basic event begins its process of concrescence. Thus the sophisticated ways of interacting with the world are actually simplifications of a infinitely more complex background. Fourth, such simplifications always take place from a particular perspective, namely, the perspective of the new event. The notion of "simplification" requires the notion of a "location" or "perspective" from which it takes place. In short: no perspective, no simplification; and no simplification, no creative interaction with our infinitely complex world.

Process thought thus not only accounts for but insists upon the perspectival nature of our knowledge and, indeed, upon the perspectival nature of the worlds we create for ourselves. To this extent, Kant and the following generations of scholars were absolutely correct. But Whitehead goes on to differ from Kant and the majority of scholars at two points. First, all these perspectives are simplifications and specializations of our richer, more basic existence. They are abstractions. Second, because they emerge out of the basic flow of events, out of the presence of the world in each new event, it follows that these perspectives do not totally isolate us from the world. Yes, there is a distinction between the noumenal world of things in themselves and the phenomenal world which we create, but both the noumenal and phenomenal worlds are compresent within us and constitute a part of our very identity.

In a sense, Whitehead is a critical realist concerning our sensations, knowledge, and language. Because it simplifies the rich data out of which it emerges, no sensation, idea, or sentence perfectly mirrors reality. But nonetheless this is not an ordinary form of critical realism because the reality out of which these simplifications emerged—our infinitely complex, primitive "being in the world"—remains present to and within each event. We live simultaneously at the level of our basic involvement with the world and at the simplified, and so abstract, levels of sensation, consciousness, self-consciousness, language, and culture.

We can now explore somewhat more deeply the significance of Whitehead's "perspectival critical realism" for the relation of religion to science. Science is an abstraction. In this it is like any other human enterprise. But the simplification inherent in the scientific method is more careful, intentional, and precise than that of most other human activities. It pays attention only to our clean and tidy sense experience and not the rich but messy fullness of existence out of which we live. It prefers measurement. And it systematically eliminates purpose. The results of science are *not* wrong. But the results of the scientific enterprise, however fruitful for certain purposes from surgery to nuclear warfare, are far more *partial* and *abstract* than most other human endeavors. The inability of science to find purpose in the world tells us much about science but little about the world. The lack of purpose in science tells us only that it is possible to overlook the value-soaked texture of our existence and yet still produce certain extraordinarily useful abstractions. One

might say that the scientist purposefully overlooks the presence of purpose in the very marrow of his existence and, thus, in the world he studies.

Religion which deals with God and our existence at the most basic level is far more concrete than science. Of course, religious knowledge and theology are abstract, just as any other human enterprise. But religious existence is precisely that mode of being human in which we struggle to touch God, to feel the flow of purpose, and live in relation to the power of that primitive existence out of which all else, including science, emerges. In this sense, then, religious life is the critic of abstractions, including the scientific ones. Neither theology nor philosophy nor religious existence can mandate either methods or conclusions to the specialists in the abstractions we know as physics, astronomy, biology, economics, etc. But religious life can put these abstractions into their place as abstractions and can refuse, in the name of the complexity and richness of our concrete existence in which God meets us, to see all of life as reducible to their limited abstractions. This is a momentous conclusion for Evangelicals, and not just for Evangelicals.

Propositional Revelation

Since Evangelicals, by intention at least, stand in the classical Christian heritage, their concerns overlap those of other conservative Christians. If there is one distinctive that sets Evangelicals apart, however, it is their stress on the Bible as God's written revelation. For the last hundred years, propositional revelation has been out of favor in nearly all Protestant circles beyond the most conservative. Whitehead, however, invites us to rethink this issue.

On this point, we must become slightly technical. Whitehead radically stretches the meaning of a "proposition." His understanding of a proposition grows out of his larger vision, which differs greatly from the implicit world view dominant in our culture. Since traditional philosophers developed their understandings of a proposition in terms of that dominant world view, it follows that Whitehead's notion of a proposition will be quite unconventional. To think with Whitehead, we must be willing to alter our well-worn, comfortable habits of thought.

Traditionally, we distinguish between things and ideas. Real things are objectively "out-there," whereas ideas are subjectively "in-here." Propositions are part of the world of ideas, of the subjective reality "in-here." Thus we have a mental reality "in-here" called a proposition that somehow describes or refers to some reality that is "out-there." This notion of a proposition often crops up, quite spontaneously so far as I can tell, in the essays of my students. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, under the article "Proposition," provides a list of distinguished philosophers who held some variation of this view.

To grasp Whitehead's position, we must remember that both the subject entertaining a proposition and the entities to which the proposition refers are events, where one event can be present within another. But such a view amounts to a challenge to the traditional vision of a proposition according to which (1) a purely

mental reality in-here (2) refers to, means, or intends (3) some objective reality out-there. Since both the mental and the physical, both the subjective and the objective, and both the new subject and the past events are compresent within the new event, it follows that for Whitehead all elements in a proposition (its sense, its reference, the "act" of intending, etc.) are compresent within that new actual entity.⁷

A Whiteheadian proposition includes within itself not only the ideas (the meaning, sense, or predicate) but also the objective realities (the objects referred to). Such a proposition, therefore, is a hybrid reality that links a set of ideas with some particular concrete objects. This is far from our ordinary understanding of a proposition, but it flows with naturally and even necessarily from the foundations of Whitehead's vision.

We now come to the counter-intuitive "big leap" in our discussion. According to Whitehead, propositions are to be found, not just in books and speech, but throughout all reality. A full explanation of Whitehead's position would take us far beyond the boundaries of this short essay. But the nub of the issue is this: Whitehead argues that the gap between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, between the "in-here" and the "out-there" cannot be overcome in the human case if it is not also overcome in all reality. Since a proposition precisely is a relation that integrates the world "in-here" with the world "out-there," it is to be found not just in human minds but throughout all reality.⁸

Thus if God is to work in the world, as Christians have always claimed, then God must work in and through the propositional structures that extend throughout all reality. The propositional structure of a book, such as the Bible, is a specific case of this larger propositional structure. There is nothing in principle to separate God's action in and through the propositional structures in history from God's speech in and through propositional structures of a book. Thus one of Evangelical theology's most fundamental tenants finds unexpected support and explanation in Whitehead's philosophy.

⁷I have been discussing the "canonical" proposition of Whiteheadian metaphysics, in which a proposition is a particular type of relation between the new actual entity and certain of its past entities. This discussion would have to be nuanced considerably to take into account propositions about the new entity itself, about contemporary and future entities, about other propositions, about God, etc.

⁸Let me restate the issue in Whitehead's technical vocabulary. I have lumped together physical purposes (as a kind of proto-proposition) with regular propositions. Every actual entity creates its own new physical purposes and thus has a propositional structure in a broad sense. In addition, every actual entity must entertain its own initial subjective aim which is a proposition even in the most stringent (Whiteheadian) definition. This initial subjective aim is a gift from God. Thus while all actual entities must *entertain* a proposition, it does *not* follow that every entity is capable of *creating* its own new proposition. But it does follow that some part of every actual entity may be described as propositional in the most precise sense of "proposition" in Whitehead's philosophy. Thus all reality shares in a propositional structure both broadly-speaking (because all actual entities create physical purposes) and narrowly speaking (because all actual entities entertain at least one proposition), even though only some actual entities are capable of creating their own new propositions.

God the Creator

In the relation between Evangelicalism and Process thought, not all is sweetness and light. There are at least three areas of significant tension.⁹ In the first area, other traditional Christians would share our hesitations. The concerns expressed in the last two areas, however, might be more narrowly Evangelical. The first has to do with the doctrine of God the creator.

For many years Whitehead was an atheist precisely because he could not imagine a doctrine of God apart from the doctrine of creation, and he could not find a way of harmonizing a doctrine of creation with genuine and radical creaturely freedom. Eventually he discovered that his own philosophical vision required the affirmation of a factor which could only be called God. This divine factor had many roles: the ultimate repository of all possibilities, the maintainer of both freedom and continuing order in the world, the provider of certain values towards which each event might aim, and many others. What is totally missing is any affirmation of God as the creator of the very existence of the world.¹⁰ Whitehead's God is more a necessary factor in the world—albeit with many of God's traditional roles—than the transcendent creator of the world.

Whitehead puts the issue in terms of "creativity." In addition to its everyday meaning in which an artist is creative, Whitehead uses "creativity" to refer to the functioning and existence of each basic event. In this sense, "creativity" resembles Thomas' "esse." According to Whitehead, creativity, along with the one and the many, accounts for a world in which the "many" events fuse into "one" new event. This fusion eventually reaches a conclusion, thus adding "one" more completed event to the "many" events already in the world. Whitehead has given us a vision of a world in dynamic change, genuine novelty, and radical freedom, but we still don't have a God who creates this pullulating world. Rather Whitehead considers God to be a factor in the flux, a creature rather than the transcendent creator.

It should be noted that Whitehead's vision does *not* eliminate all senses in which God might be called the Creator of the world. John Cobb has suggested that God's role as shaper of the universe is so pervasive that we can legitimately call God the creator.¹¹ We must be grateful to Cobb for his careful elaboration of these roles for God, which the Evangelical can also affirm. But this is not enough for Evangelicals. God remains a *de facto* demiurge.

Again, Whitehead, Cobb, and a host of Process theologians have shown how God is the source of teleology, where this teleology is deeply rooted in our universe and present in our primitive, pre-conscious, noumenal experience. Values exist prior to our "normal" sensory, conscious, and specialized modes of

⁹Obviously, there are far more than three such issues. But these are the central ones in my mind.

¹⁰This is hardly a new or a rare criticism of Whitehead's view of God. For example, soon after Whitehead's full vision began to emerge, E. L. Mascall in his book, *He Who Is* (London: Longmans, 1943, ch. 11), made much the same observation. It has been repeated many times.

¹¹For example, in his book, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965) and in many other articles and books since.

experience, and far before the emergence of economic, cultural, or scientific modes of human culture. Evangelicals can affirm these insights without hesitation. Asking an Evangelical to affirm the reality of God's purposes in the world is like asking a fish to swim. The question, however, remains. Is this enough? Evangelicals say no.

We need a Process view of deity that affirms God's creation *ex nihilo*. I think this is possible. I noted that Whitehead's original atheism stemmed from two convictions: 1. A doctrine of God entails a doctrine of creation, and 2. A doctrine of creation cannot be harmonized with genuine creaturely freedom. Whitehead moved to a theistic position when he realized his emerging metaphysical system required a factor with certain roles traditionally associated with divinity but did not (he thought) require creation *ex nihilo*. In short, he re-examined his first premise.

It would also be possible, however, to re-examine Whitehead's second premise. That is, we might wish to question whether a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* necessarily undermines human freedom. This is the only route open to Evangelicals. To do this, we would have to develop, within the bounds of a Process orientation, a way of combining a radical, ontologically based freedom of each new entity with an affirmation of God as the source of that new entity's existence or, to use Whitehead's language, of its creativity. I have suggested such a revision in an article entitled "God and Creativity." Whether it really works, other scholars will have to decide.¹²

The Historical-Factual and Existential-Universal

In my article, "The Unique Christ as the Hope and Judgment of the World,"¹³ I explore the underlying logic of Evangelical theology. That is, I try to uncover the foundational principles which govern how Evangelicals think about their religion

¹²The "bondage of the will," of course, remains one of the classic defining points for Reformation Protestantism, as compared with the later Arminian and the later revivalistic forms of Protestantism. I am convinced, however, that for Luther and perhaps even for Calvin, the real issue is *not* human freedom as such. The real issue is salvation by grace alone and the priority of God throughout creation. In the *Institutes*, for example, Calvin deals with predestination, not under the rubric of creation. Rather he discusses predestination under the doctrine of Christology, meaning that we are predestined "in Christ" by God's grace so that salvation is God's gift alone.

Let us imagine a revision of Whitehead's doctrine of God that is compatible with a doctrine of salvation by grace alone and that, in addition, emphasizes the priority of God's action throughout all creation. And let's imagine that this revision also affirms human freedom in the most radical sense. Such a revision may well comport not just with the Arminian heritage but even more profoundly with the traditional Reformation emphases as well. I have tried to create precisely such a revision in Whitehead's doctrine of God. In the article mentioned in the main text, I not only affirm the strongest possible freedom, but I also try to do so in a way that heads us back towards the affirmation of creation *ex nihilo* and, thus, towards the magisterial Reformation's radical affirmation of the absolute priority of God and of salvation by grace alone.

¹³*Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 (January 1993): 29-53.

and indeed how they (ideally) live out the Christian life. What's really Evangelical about Evangelicalism?

In answer to this question, I would argue that each major doctrine has two foci. Consider the Incarnation. The Incarnation refers first to the historical event about 2,000 years ago when God took on human nature in Jesus Christ through the Virgin Mary. This is the historical-factual side of the doctrine. This does not refer to the birth of Jesus insofar as modern historical scholarship can reconstruct that event. That is, it is far more than an event in the life of the "historical Jesus" so dear to liberal theology. Rather it refers to an action at a specific place and time which, in a very real sense, must be called God's action. While many factors entered into that event, God's agency takes priority to such an extent that it can be called God's action.

The historical and factual side of Christianity, however, does not exhaust the meaning of the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Incarnation also structures the lives of Christians. The Incarnation gives sanctity to our physical existence, including our eating, drinking, and sexual life. It also helps to explain (according to some) what takes place in the Lord's Supper. The Incarnation can even illumine human experience far beyond the borders of Christianity. In Shinto, for example, we find the divine concretely located in a mirror or rock in some shrine, which in a sense, can be called an incarnational understanding of the presence of the divine. There are a number of names for this side of Christian doctrine, of which the "mythic" seems to be the current favorite. Many Christians have emphasized the mythic nature of Christian doctrines, from the gnostics, through the allegorical tradition of Alexandria, to Schleiermacher, to Bultmann.

This side of Christian doctrine can be called "existential" because it deeply shapes the very existence of the Christian who believes that doctrine. It can also be called "universal" because the truth of this dimension of a doctrine can be verified, in principle, by any believer at any place and time. The term "existential-universal" may be a bit more awkward than "mythic," but it seems to me more precise and far less tendentious.

Process theology, as a part of the liberal heritage of American Christianity, has strongly emphasized the existential-universal side of Christian doctrine. Evangelicals, however, would ask whether Process thought can *also* account for the historical-factual side of Christian doctrine?

An easy but inadequate answer would be to note that according to Whitehead, all human existence—in fact, all existence—is in process and, so, drenched in history. This answer is inadequate not only because it fails to specify how some events are truly God's normative acts in a way that other events are not, but also because Evangelicals see a danger lurking in this use of the word "history." Process theologians have typically worked with a quite restricted understanding of the historicity of God's specific actions—that is, Process thinkers have traditionally accepted the historicity of such events as the Exodus, Incarnation, and Resurrection only to the extent that these events can be reconstructed by the normal methods of contemporary historical science. But this does not get us to the historical-factual side

of Christian doctrines as understood by Evangelicals. While one side of doctrine of the Incarnation can appropriately be called mythic in the technical sense of that word, nonetheless, according to Evangelicals, it is not merely a myth. It is also an unrepeatable divine action, at a particular place and at a particular time.

Evangelical theology holds that the historical-factual side of any doctrine, such as the Incarnation, is normative for our understanding of its existential-universal side. Let me illustrate. People have had a wide variety of experiences of the presence of God within the physical dimensions of their lives. This is the incarnational motif, the existential-universal meaning of the doctrine. These experiences, however, are not all consistent. We Evangelicals hold that to the extent that these experiences disagree with the historical-factual Incarnation in Christ, they must be rejected. To the extent that these experiences directly agree with the historical-factual Incarnation in Christ, they must be accepted. To the extent that they neither agree nor disagree, we are invited to explore further. But always the norm is what God did at a certain time and place in Jesus Christ.

Can Process thought move beyond a generic affirmation of the historicity and particularity of all events? Can Process thought move beyond an affirmation of God's generic involvement in every event to an affirmation of God's unique involvement in certain events—where these particular events become the norm for all other understandings of God? From an evangelical perspective, a central desideratum for Process thought would be to develop ways of speaking about God's special, unrepeatable, and normative action in some events, supremely the Resurrection of Jesus Christ understood as a real event in space and time, in a way that is not true of others.

The Unique and Normative Christ

We have finally arrived at the point where we move beyond metaphysics and philosophical theology to basic religious conviction. Is Christ, not at the mythic or existential-universal level but at the level of his historical and factual uniqueness, the sole source of all salvation and the norm by which to evaluate all religious claims?

It is mostly liberal Christians who, up to this point, have employed the categories of Process thought. While both liberals and Evangelicals are Christians, and while both share many points in common, on this issue they almost always part ways. In fact this is one of those issues that may be said to mark the boundary between liberal and Evangelical Christianity.

In the issue of "one way" in Jesus Christ, Evangelicals close ranks with conservative Roman Catholics, the fundamentalists, as well as with mainstream Christians in every age. Let us lay aside the important but secondary issues of how widely the salvation offered in Jesus Christ is available, of the extent to which salvation requires conscious awareness of the name of Jesus, and of whether or not other religions may have helpful insights that supplement and enrich the Christian

heritage of theological reflection and religious life. For Evangelicals, the bottom line is this: full and complete salvation comes from Jesus and from nowhere else.

Process Thinkers have not been comfortable with the claim that Jesus is the “one way”—not even when such claims recognize the significant enrichment that may come from the other religions as well as from non-religious traditions. The question is this: does this dis-ease come from Process thought *per se* or does it come from the religious commitments of the theologians who have thus far made use of Whitehead’s conceptual structure?

I believe that Process thought as such is, at least potentially, neutral concerning the “one way” of traditional Christianity. Process thought certainly does not require the exclusiveness and normativity of the Cross and Resurrection as the source of salvation. The question, however, is whether Process thought can provide a vocabulary in which this normativity, if accepted on religious grounds, can be expressed and with which the relation of the uniqueness of Christ to other aspects of life can be explored. This, however, is my hope. It has yet to be demonstrated. But on the fulfillment of this hope hangs the possibility of Evangelicals’ continued employment of the modes of Process thought to help them express the Gospel and to explore its implications for life in our contemporary world.