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Aquinas and Process Theology

Benedict M. Ashley, O.P.

The powerful influence of Teilhard de Chardin on recent Catholic theology is matched by the similar influence of Whitehead and Hartshorne on Protestant theology. Both tendencies are rooted in the process philosophy of Bergson. It was no accident that the redoubtable Thomist Jacques Maritain battled early and late against this process philosophy and its theological influence. To Maritain it seemed that Thomism and Bergsonianism in both their epistemology and ontology were radically opposed systems.

Whatever the merits of this polemic, my concern and method in this paper are very different. Dialogic ecumenism has provided us with a non-polemical method of confronting one system of thought with another. In a time of philosophical and theological pluralism little is gained by emphasizing the radical opposition of systems. Instead the adherents of one system must attempt to listen to the problems raised in another system. Then they must seek to discover a solution to these problems in terms of the principles of their own tradition. However (and this is the crucial point), they must avoid the kind of *reductive* solutions which so easily result from a rigid application of the principles of one system to the problems of another. Instead the dialogic method, without encouraging facile conversions from one system to another, requires us to be open to a *transformation* of the way in which we understand our own principles as a result of our attempt to expand them to cover new problems.

By this method apparently contradictory systems often tend to converge. Consequently I hope in this paper to view the problems raised by contemporary process theology in the light of Thomistic principles in a non-reductive manner, with a view to a deeper understanding of these same principles, as well as a closer approach to the minds of others.

Norman Pittenger's little book *Christian Thought and Process Philosophy* provides a clear statement of the problems that especially concern such process theologians as Hartshorne, Daniel Day Williams, Schubert Ogden, John Cobb and Eulalio Baltasar. They are two: (1) God as person; (2) God as related to the world.

They argue that classical theology derived its ontology from the Greeks for whom substance was primary and process was secondary—an "accident" of substance. Consequently, such a theology tended to conceive God as a supreme substance whose perfection excluded all process. God thus became the Unmoved Mover, a static Absolute who was a person only in an abstract sense, since authentic personality signifies above all dynamic life, growth, relatedness, and a capacity for suffering.

Because of this static conception of God as substance, classical theology also tended to conceive God as isolated and non-relative, absent from the world. A standard reference is found in many works on process theology to the scandalous saying of Aquinas that "the world is related to God, but God is not related to the world." Such a statement is thought to exclude that *mutuality* which seems basic to all genuine inter-personal relations. How can a God who is not related to us feel compassion for us?

Process theologians, therefore, seek to present a picture of an authentically personal God who profoundly cares for the things and persons he has made. They are willing to pay the price of admitting that God is limited, mutable, in some respects ignorant and powerless, if this will make possible a new view of God as really the friend of man present at his side. They believe that it is this view, and not the Greek notion of an Unmoved Mover, which is revealed in the Christian Scriptures. In this they are surely right.

At first sight it would seem that even a tyro Thomist could solve these metaphysical dilemmas. But further reflection shows us these questions are in fact quite embarrassing for the Thomist. Since for Aquinas philosophy and theology are "sciences" and as an Aristotelian he accepts the dictum "science is of the universal," for him history is not susceptible to scientific analysis except by a reduction to universal principles. For us, however, personality and personal relations seem irreducibly existential, historical, unique, and subjective. It seems, therefore, that these questions about the personality of God and his relation to man in the precise sense that concerns the process theologians cannot even be raised by a Thomist without a reductive distortion, a transformation into questions of a different type.

Thus we need to ask ourselves a question of our own: In the thought of Aquinas are there untapped resources by which we might deal with such contemporary questions in a non-reductive manner?

Let us consider first of all the notion of "process" itself. For process theologians it not only means "change," but it also implies a progressive or teleological advance from one level of activity to a higher, still more active level. The basic analogues of this notion are threefold: (1) the process of biological evolution culminating in man; (2) the creative process by which an artist produces a work, or an inventor discovers a new device, or the scientist a new theory; (3) inter-personal growth as an increasingly profound involvement of one human person with another, or with a community. In each of these instances it seems as if the notion of "substance" is a barrier to understanding reality.

Yet if we look again at Aquinas' view of substance we are struck by its flexibility. It is true that for him substance is primary reality. It is true also that for him all created substances are in a degree static and passive. They cannot come into being by themselves, and even when they exist they continue to depend on outside agents

to get them moving and keep them acting. Even living things are only self-moving in the sense that one part moves another, but the total organism must receive its energy from outside. This is another way of saying that for Aquinas all created substances are in many ways *potential*. They are by nature only potential to existence, and they exist in a state of potentiality to acting and being acted upon. Even the highest spiritual creatures exist in potentiality to knowing and loving.

However, for Aquinas this passivity of creatures is a matter of degree. In his ontological scale it is precisely the lowest kind of substances which have the type of substantiality which is rejected by process theology as anti-personal and static. As we go up the ontological ladder we find that substances become more and more dynamic, active, alive, progressive. Their "substance" more and more expresses itself in teleological process, so that we can say the reality of a living substance, especially that of animals, is much more to be found in what it is doing than what it merely "is" in the sense of passive substantial existence. Process in such substances is no mere "accident" but rather their "proper operations," their "full actuality."

In man and purely spiritual creatures substantiality ceases to be inert, passive corporality and becomes pure self-activity. Aquinas conceives the angels as existing in the pure processes of thought and love, transparent to all of reality, perpetually dynamic and energetic. Thus if the world of Aquinas is too static, it is because medieval science supposed bodies more inert than we know they are, now that we have explored the atom. We see matter as much more dynamic than Aquinas did. On the other hand our conception of thought as completely dependent on a fixed brain-structure would have seemed to him excessively static. Parapsychology might profit from his more dynamic conception of thought.

Aquinas conceives God as Pure Existence free of every trace of potentiality. Aquinas denies that God is in the category of substance, precisely because the first Being transcends the division of being into substance and accidents. God can rightly be called pure Process Itself.

It may be objected that it is not only reductive, but even dishonest to translate Aquinas' Pure Act as "Pure Process." If indeed the term "process" always implies a transition from lower levels of activity to higher, so that God must be thought of as in transition in order to be in process, then clearly Aquinas meant something different by "act" than is meant by "process." Nevertheless, we must observe that the concept of *transition* from lower to higher activity implies that there remains in process an element of inertia, or anti-process, a resistance to progress. It is this "burden of the past" which prevents process from "free-flight." This anti-process factor is precisely substantiality understood as potentiality.

Thus, paradoxically, process theologians do not differ from Aquinas because they insist on the dynamic or processive while he insists on the static or substantial character of God. On the contrary process theology burdens God with a past, with a "primordial nature," with a polarity between the substantial and processive.

Aquinas on the other hand admits this polarity in creatures, but insists that God is the dynamic pole, pure Process Itself, free of the burden of substantiality, potentiality, and transition. God is the Present without the burden of the past, the Future as it is already Now, the goal of all historical process.

The term "change" also can be applied analogically to God, although with more difficulty than the terms "act" or "process." Aquinas insists that we cannot apply any term taken from human experience to God without careful attention to the rules of analogy. These rules require that all terms applied to God must be first freed of all negative implications. It was for this reason that Aquinas and the medievals refused to apply the term "change" (*mutatio*) to God and tried to demonstrate that God is immutable, the Unmoved Mover.

But the term "change" has different connotations for us today than it had for Greeks and Medievals. For them it usually implied loss, destruction, corruption, dysfunction of whatever was well formed and functional. Today, as a result of the scientific revolution, "change" commonly has positive connotations. We think of it generally as "change for the better," as progress, dynamism, life, growth, discovery, creation. Today we diminish God if we call him "immutable." This makes him inert, inactive, hopelessly conservative. In current language we glorify God if we call Him "Change Itself," "the ever-active." Do not the Scriptures speak of the Divine Wisdom as "the most mobile of all mobile things?"

In the same way, in speaking of God as a person, we must be sure to retain in our concept all those positive elements connoted today by the term "personality." In our contemporary thinking what is ultimate about the human person is the uniqueness of the individual. In a man or woman this uniqueness is some combination of hair and eye-color, expression, even a scar or a mole here or there, along without a thousand other little details that go to make up this particular personality. Many who read Aquinas today take away the impression that for him God may be a person but only by a kind of abstract or generalized personhood which lacks any unique individuality.

Yet by the rules of analogy God must be conceived not only as a person in the abstract, but as Personality Itself. His uniqueness is not the result of a mere combination of common characteristics, but is so profound that in every way God is more unlike any of his creatures than he is like. Whatever we cherish in the uniqueness of those we really know and love is somehow a revelation of the uniqueness of God as personal. Unfortunately we are still influenced by the Platonic tendency to make the Ideal something as blandly generalized as a piece of neo-classical sculpture. Aquinas' insistence that the very notion of person implies uniqueness, must be used to develop a more concrete view of God, a God who enters history not as a force but as a vivid character in a drama, with his own language and his own (shall I say) eccentricities!

I now turn to the second problem raised by the process theologians, that of the

inter-relatedness of God and creatures. Charles Hartshorne, one of the most systematic thinkers of this school, has labored at length in his *The Divine Relativity* to show how different is his *panentheism* from that of Aquinas whose transcendent God is not related to the world. It has been pointed out before, but it needs to be said again, that Hartshorne has misread Aquinas on this point because the term "relation" is used in so many different ways in medieval and modern philosophy.

Aquinas only meant that while the creature is dependent on God, God is independent of the creature, just as the knower is dependent on the known, but the known is not dependent on the knower. But he did not mean that God has no relation to the world in the sense we mean today when we speak of "inter-personal relations."

In this sense of "relation" for Aquinas God is more related to the world than it is to Him, because God knows and loves the world which he created more than it knows or loves him as its creator. The world tends to be opaque to God. It knows him dimly and loves him largely for its own benefit. It "relates" to Him inadequately as an image or a vestige, but God relates to the world totally, giving himself to it to the limit of its capacity. The world insofar as it is defective or evil tends to withdraw into isolation from God. God has not withdrawn from the world, but draws ever closer to it by his continued acts of grace and mercy, which are greater than even the work of creation.

The real differences, therefore, in the conception of God's relation to the world as between Aquinas and Hartshorne is not in the fact of mutuality, but in Aquinas' affirmation of God's *independence*. It is here perhaps that process theology raises its most acute questions. Can we really say that God loves the world personally, if God is utterly independent in his own life of what happens in the world? Must we not also grant to creatures a certain independence of God, if they are to be really free?

Must we not say that God awaits the free decision of creatures to know what they will choose? When man chooses to do evil, or when he chooses to do good does this not modify the experience of God himself? Does God not experience our suffering and share our joy? No one who has read the sublime last page of Whitehead's *Process and Reality* can deny that at this point the God of Whitehead appears more like a real Father, than does the God of Aquinas, independent of his utterly dependent children.

I think that we must honestly admit that process philosophy seems on this point to show a greater sense of the compassionate God of the Scriptures than did the medieval scholastics. Certainly Thomists, if they are not to look unChristian, must cease to present God as "above the battle," the cool observer of the human agony.

However, we have not yet exhausted the resources of Thomistic thought. Let us consider the notion of "compassion." When a sensitive and wise person suffers or

rejoices with one whom he loves, he truly shares his pain or joy. He may in fact actually experience that pain or joy more acutely than the one with whom he sympathizes. Often a parent suffers over a child who cannot know the full tragedy of his own illness, or rejoices in the growth of a child who does not yet fully know the beauty of his own growing-up.

It thus appears that compassion is not primarily passive, but is an active sympathy, which is all the more profound if it is not itself obscured by the traumatization which the patient undergoes. The essence of compassion is not to be found in pain and suffering as these are trauma, but rather in the heightened awareness of the reality of physical or moral evil. If we seek for an analogy we can find it in the psychotherapist who profoundly appreciates the conflicts undergone by his client, yet remains somehow "uninvolved" not out of indifference, nor merely for the purpose of objective observation for the sake of research, but precisely because he knows that this makes him more helpful to the patient. The healing process depends in fact on this *independence* of the therapist: an independence which is not unfeeling, but rather the most profound kind of sympathy.

This is the kind of healing compassion that we should attribute to God. God remains independent of the world, not because He does not care, but because He cares so much. Only by remaining "uninvolved" in physical and moral evil in their destructive action, can God remain free to heal us and restore us. We ourselves experience something of this when we remember some great suffering of our own which has both scarred us and helped us to grow. What is positive in this memory is not merely the good results, it is also the suffering and the wounds themselves, but they are now transformed and viewed by us as no longer enslaving us. It is in some such way that God knows the reality of suffering to its depths, more profoundly than we do, yet remains completely uninjured by it. Because He is wholly healthy, he can heal us. This holds also for God's share in our human joys. He really shares them, but he is not limited or enslaved by them, as we tend to be.

The God of Aquinas, understood in this way, is in fact closer to man than is the God of Whitehead or Hartshorne. In their systems God and creatures are able to maintain a certain independence of each other, without which their inter-relatedness would result in monism, by the fact that God and creatures as actual entities each achieve their individuality in a moment of satisfaction in which they are for that moment un-related to any other actual entity in the here and now. For Whitehead, strangely, God knows and loves an actual entity only after it has perished and thus achieved its objective immortality not in itself, but in the consequent nature of God. This I find cold comfort.

For Aquinas, on the other hand, the uniqueness of God and of creatures is maintained precisely by God's independence and transcendence of the creature. Since God needs nothing of us, and wills only that we should achieve our fulfillment by our own free acts, he can come very close to us while not "dominating" us. He

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can enter spiritually into our very hearts and minds not to destroy our freedom but to free us. His presence is neither possessive nor oppressive because it is like the presence of a truly unselfish friend which permits us to be ourselves.

I will admit that this use of the analogical method does not by any means quiet our distrust of God in His superiority. The difficulty in believing in a compassionate God does not arise so much from our perceptions and experiences of true friendship as from our perceptions and experiences of betrayal. How can we personally believe that God is really concerned about us, when we find ourselves as human persons too little concerned with one another? I think that is why above and beyond all philosophy, the Incarnation was needed, not to show that the transcendent God is compassionate, but to show us that even God, made man, can be compassionate in the midst of his human sufferings.

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