

JOHN B. COBB, JR. *A Christian Natural Theology*. Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1965. Pp. 288. \$6.50.

Can the existence and, if so, the nature of God be known independent of specific religious experiences? The answer "yes" and attempts to vindicate it are known traditionally as "natural theology." They are extremely rare on the contemporary scene. For the Barthians the project is a futile withdrawal from the faith-state, for the humanists a throwback to defunct scholastic assumptions or fraudulent Protestant value-theory. For the fundamentalists it is dangerous intellectualizing; for the existentialists it is the idolatric identification of religion with finitude. Typically, the informed layman finds it suspect either because it seems loosely unscientific or because it does not touch on "matters of the heart."

Alfred North Whitehead, partly because he pre-dated most of these outlooks, was not fettered by them. Seeking models by which to account for reality in all its fulness and variety he was perhaps the last of the "grand style" metaphysicians, more fascinating because he was an acknowledged master mathematician, formal logician, and philosopher of science. Whitehead is the starting point for the natural theology of the book under review—but the result is a composite of Whitehead and the author. John B. Cobb, Jr. offers a summary-supplement to Whitehead as an alternative to contemporary trends. It amounts to a religious redefinition of secular experience.

Mormons may be startled to find views they have espoused on grounds of reason and revelation defended on grounds of reason alone. Once one ceases to be awed at Whitehead's terminology he may still be mystified at the method. By whatever procedure Whitehead bridges three chasms as if they didn't exist. First, the language gap. Both the relations and attributes of God can be stated in literal language. Second, the dualism of being and becoming. Whitehead (as well as his disciple, Hartshorne) balances traditional static with dynamic terms, holding, if anything, that the static terms (absolute, unchanging, infinite, etc.) are in need of denial or qualification. The conclusion of his book *Process and Reality* is that even in and for God, Process *is* reality. Third, the God-man cleavage—God is not "utterly other" and man is not utterly corrupt. Whitehead is unafraid of praising man as "co-creator" whose "grandeur and dignity" are a reflection of God. In other words, for

Whitehead, the "infinite qualitative distinction" between the Divine and the human is not infinite, not qualitative, and not a distinction. (Neither, by the way, are the usual distinctions between men and animals.)

Beginning with pure possibilities (eternal objects) the cosmos as a society of occasions (substantial activity) and a telos or thrust (creativity) Whitehead is constrained to introduce an envisaging "principle of limitation." This can only account for the ordering rule if it is an "actual entity." It becomes in Whitehead's later thought (or, at least in Cobb's) a living being. Further, on Whitehead's principles, God, to be susceptible to the "occasions of experience," which open to Him a rich synthesis of this and all other worlds, must have "physical feelings." It is therefore Whiteheadian to speak of God as having an aim (primordial in Him as in man) toward intensity of feeling, whose ultimate appetition is toward "the strength of beauty." Hence God is described as having consciousness, purpose, vision, knowledge, wisdom, love. Thus God, for whom man is not an inappropriate model, is personal, "the mirror who discloses to every creature its own greatness" (*Religion in the Making*, pp. 154-55).

Whitehead goes further. God, being involved in the actual processes of the universe, is a "lure" to man. There is temporal successiveness in the divine nature. Unlike man, God knows no "perishing" of experience. There is living immediacy in God of all His and all our experiences. Unlike man he preserves in memory all values in complete conscious form. There is spatiality in God at least in the sense that He "has a standpoint" and thus, contra orthodoxy, may be somewhere. Unlike man his touch with everywhere is direct and non-inferential. He is numerically one, hence "union" with Him is literally impossible. His freedom is not unlimited (whatever that concept might mean), and His will is often thwarted by other "occasions." In sum "God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands." All this is the more interesting because Whitehead sternly rejects the view that religious experience provides a basis for affirming that God is personal (*Religion in the Making*, pp. 62-66).

Cobb argues in favor of this di-polar approach to God that "an abstraction can't *do* anything." He means, of course, that a mere abstraction cannot account for the harmony of actual entities. But Cobb clearly sees the religious point too. *Belief* that

God is an abstraction *does* do much. It stifles and suffocates the religious life. In witness whereof we need only observe that dominant writers today who defend the ultimacy of God while denying personal attributes portray religion as a matter of alienation, monotony, meaninglessness, loneliness, and "fear and trembling." Whitehead, in exact contrast, affirming the personal intimacy of God portrays religion as worship, adventure, meaning, companionship and peace (which is not, by the way, mere cessation of activity, but "the harmony of harmonies which calms destructive turbulence and completes civilization." Apparently *constructive* turbulence is everlasting).

What may prove stimulating to Mormons are ideas enmeshed or implied in these: Emphasis on beauty, not just truth, as the religious quest; each occasion is novel and the universe is everlastingly unfolding in infinite variety, even the inanimate. Whitehead's view of process is a matrix for resolving such theological anxieties as how there can be development and response in a perfected entity, how freedom and novelty may emerge in a universe of interrelated causation, how there may be worth in the midst of anguish. It also gives a remarkable rationale, which Whitehead avoids, for continual revelation. In fact, since Cobb's Whiteheadian theology turns out to have a distinctive Mormon flavor, Mormons may conclude that Whitehead is more Christian than Christendom and that Mormonism is more Christian than both.

Whitehead is one of the least-read and rarely-cited philosophers in the American climate and maybe has the fewest serious followers. For Mormons it is at least interesting that such views commended themselves to one of the most religious of thoughtful men in the Twentieth Century.

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