Chapter 4

Whitehead’s Philosophy of Religion

I

The reader will see from our first and second chapters that the important theistic element in Whitehead’s world view can scarcely be understood without keeping the main outlines of the whole in mind. If this is done, it will be useful to know where his chief discussions of religion and the concept of God appear. In chronological order, we have:

Science and the Modern World (1925), Chapters xi (God) and xii (Religion and Science). Whitehead’s concept of God in this book is not the complete concept which appears in the later ones. The partial concept is founded on general experience only, not on religious experience. Only the “primordial nature” of God, under the name of “the Principle of Concretion,” is explained. The distinction of God’s primordial from his “consequent” nature is introduced in Process and Reality, but the corresponding ideas can be discerned in Religion in the Making. It would be a gross error to dismiss
Whitehead's concept of God on the ground that a Principle of Concretion is not an object of worship.

Religion in the Making (four lectures) (1926).

Process and Reality (1929): In Part I, Chapter I, Section vi; in Part II, Chapter III, Section x, and the last two pages of Section i, also Chapter IX, Section viii; in Part III, Chapter III, Section i; and Part V.

Adventures of Ideas (1933): In Part I (Sociological), especially Chapter II, Sections iv, v, vii, and viii; Chapter III, Sections i, iii, and iv; Chapter V, Section vii; Chapter X (The New Reformation); and Chapter XX (Peace).

Modes of Thought (1938): Lectures V and VI.

"Immortality" (1941). 1

These are indispensable; but the indices to Science and the Modern World, Process and Reality, Adventures of Ideas, and Modes of Thought, though poor, must also be consulted—not forgetting such terms as "Harmony" and "Eros."

This list I set down with some confidence; but the topic of the present chapter is one which I write about with the greatest diffidence. I have mulled it over at intervals for many years, and I think I understand a good deal in it; but my reaction to the whole is not settled. Some explanations of Whitehead's meaning and comments on it, which I hope will be useful to others, are set down here. Reference to other writers will be omitted, in view of my vast ignorance of theologies and of philosophies of religion.

II

Whitehead presented a concept of God, and theses concerning God's relation to the world, which he stated as definitely as he could. He also emphasized religion's need for

1 Printed in LLP-W, ESP, and IS.
this intellectual element. He most emphatically held that
religion is something to live by; but he equally opposed the
reduction of it to an emotion or an attitude. The following
passage is a good example:

The witness of history and of common sense tells us that
systematic formulations are potent engines of emphasis, of puri-
fication, and of stability. Christianity would long ago have sunk
into a noxious superstition, apart from the Levantine and
European intellectual movement, sustained from the very be-
inning until now. . . .

Thus the attack of the liberal clergy and laymen, during the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, upon systematic theology
was entirely misconceived.—AI x, ii.

Here Whitehead is applying to a particular instance his usual
high—perhaps unduly high—estimate of the beneficial agency
of general ideas. He is not simply defending traditional
dogmatic theology against the liberals. So far as they objected
to the notion of dogmatic finality, they were entirely right.
Whitehead considered that notion wicked in every department
of human thought. Theology, like metaphysics, is dead when
it ceases to be a continuing business. The absence of certainty
does not mean, as many people might fear, that the whole
subject is unimportant. It means that possession of the exact
verbal formulation is not to be claimed. Precision is always
hard to achieve when we are dealing with matters of the
highest importance: the figures which correctly state the density
of iron are far easier to discover than the words which will
accurately state the destiny of man.

To people engaged in the continuing effort to refine and
restate theological principles, Whitehead’s support is the more
welcome because it comes from a man who was not at all naïve
about the relations between thought, emotion, and language.
He made a point of insisting that being true or false was only
one of the functions of propositions: ‘‘. . . a Christian medi-
tating on the sayings in the Gospels . . . is not judging ’true
or false'; he is eliciting their value as elements in feeling" (PR II ix i). And, because of our tendency toward unwarranted dogmatism, Whitehead suggested "that the development of systematic theology should be accompanied by a critical understanding of the relation of linguistic expression to our deepest and most persistent intuitions" (AI x ii). He wrote accompanied by; any idea of replacing the theological effort to understand the nature of things by a study of theological language must be, for Whitehead, a mistake. Such a study can be no more than an auxiliary investigation.

Whitehead’s concern over theological expression was not a concern that it might be devoid of what is usually called “cognitive” meaning; it was a concern over ambiguities of meaning, and over unwitting reliances upon unformulated metaphysical preconceptions. These two are connected: “... it is impossible to fix the sense of fundamental terms except by reference to some definite metaphysical way of conceiving the most penetrating description of the universe” (RM II iv). Of course this does not mean that there can be no theology without a completed metaphysics. It does mean that terms which we think are fixed, will not stay fixed; that there never has been an exact, complete system of metaphysics; that dogmas are only bits of truth. But dogmas are important: to illustrate their value, Whitehead compares it to that of the Greeks’ precise formulation of general mathematical truths which the Egyptians had acted upon for centuries (RM iv i). He finds the real roots of religion, however, in religious experience and history. “Religions commit suicide when they find their inspirations in their dogmas. The inspiration of religion lies in the history of religion” (RM iv iii). —But it is quite impossible for me to convey, except by massive quotation, the remarkable union of penetrating criticism and wise appreciation which characterizes Whitehead’s concise statements of the significance of religious experience, truth apprehended but unformulated, dogmatic expression, the history of religion, and metaphysics. Each of these is illuminated in more than one Section of Religion in the Making, the most concentrated
discussion of their relationships being in Sections i-iii of Chapter iv.²

Whitehead understands religious beliefs in the light of "the two levels of ideas which are required for successful civilization, namely, particularized ideas of low generality, and philosophic ideas of high generality" (AI Pref.). Their interplay is a central theme in Adventures of Ideas. He was not alone, of course, in lamenting with horror the bitter quarrels over particularized ideas, the blood cruelly shed because of creedal differences. But he saw that the production of a proper excitement and sense of importance, without hatred, was the great difficulty in the checkered history of religion. In an unpublished address to the Augustinian Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts on March 30, 1939, I heard him explain what strikes all his readers, namely, his excessive dislike of St. Paul, on the ground that, although St. Paul was perhaps not himself a hater, he had the way of going at religious things that leads to the development of hatred. (I think he was often unfair to Paul; but this question will inevitably be settled more by temperament than by reason.) Generally speaking, "The Anti-Christ is the fusion of religious feeling with hatred." Because this has been too frequent, he could write, "Religion is the last refuge of human savagery."³ His reminder that religion, though of the highest importance, is not necessarily good, is

² I must quote at least this from Sect. ii:

"In particular, the view that there are a few fundamental dogmas is arbitrary. Every true dogma which formulates with some adequacy the facts of a complex religious experience is fundamental for the individual in question and he disregards it at his peril. For formulation increases vividness of apprehension, and the peril is the loss of an aid in the difficult task of spiritual ascent.

"But every individual suffers from invincible ignorance; and a dogma which fails to evoke any response in immediate apprehension stifles the religious life. There is no mechanical rule and no escape from the necessity of complete sincerity either way.

"Thus religion is primarily individual, and the dogmas of religion are clarifying modes of external expression. The intolerant use of religious dogmas has practically destroyed their utility for a great, if not the greater part, of the civilized world."³

³ RM 1 v; also i.
one which, now and in the foreseeable future, human beings need constantly to bear in mind.

To return to the two levels, general and particular. In the address of 1939 Whitehead likened religious utterances to poetry: they are particular statements with universal connotations. But literal accuracy belongs to prose, not to poetry; it is the mathematician who rightly dotes on the accuracy of his symbols. For all his recommendation that theologians strive for as much accuracy as possible, Whitehead felt that they should prize Love more than accuracy.

III

I have now to notice that Whitehead does not in fact often speak of theology. The one notable exception is the chapter called "The New Reformation," in Adventures of Ideas, which reads as if it were written as an address to a group of Protestant theologians. His real topic, in that and all his other discussions in this general area, is religion as a whole and its relation to philosophy. R. Das, in The Philosophy of Whitehead, saw Whitehead as emerging with religious feeling on the one hand, and philosophic ideas on the other, no place being left for theology. I note that in Religion in the Making theology, under the name, "rational religion," is an important topic to which Whitehead gives positive treatment. But it is a part of metaphysics: "The doctrines of rational religion aim at being that metaphysics which can be derived from the supernormal experience of mankind in its moments of finest insight" (t, v). If this metaphysics is disjoined from general metaphysics the outcome is an extreme example of the incoherence of first principles; if it presumes to dictate the general metaphysics, it attempts the impossible business of determining what are actually its own presuppositions—presuppositions con-

* London, 1938.*
cerning the many and the one, finitude and infinitude, process and form, and so on. Das's interpretation of Whitehead, though put in extreme terms, was essentially correct. It can be supported by many quotations. For example: "Religion should connect the rational generality of philosophy with the emotions and purposes springing out of existence in a particular society, in a particular epoch, and conditioned by particular antecedents." That is how "it is directed to the end of stretching individual interest beyond its self-defeating particularity." Among Whitehead's several semidefinite descriptions of religion, it is important to notice this one:

Religion is an ultimate craving to infuse into the insistent particularity of emotion that non-temporal generality which primarily belongs to conceptual thought alone.—PR I i vi.

Whitehead continues with an explanation which for the moment lets us down:

In the higher organisms the differences of tempo between the mere emotions and the conceptual experiences produce a lifetime, unless this supreme fusion has been effected. The two sides of the organism require a reconciliation in which emotional experiences illustrate a conceptual justification, and conceptual experiences find an emotional illustration.

However,

This demand for an intellectual justification of brute experience has also been the motive power in the advance of European science.

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5 PR I i vi; italics added.
6 It may be doubted that Whitehead anywhere offered a general definition of religion. True, the opening section of Religion in the Making is entitled, "Religion Defined," but the definition offered is of "a religion, on its doctrinal side." Whitehead wrote many statements of the form, "Religion is . . ."; they supplement each other. The most well-known one, no doubt, is "Religion is what the individual does with his solitariness." A better candidate for a general definition is this: "Religion is the art and the theory of the internal life of man, so far as it depends on the man himself and on what is permanent in the nature of things" (RM i i).
He then points out "a grave divergence between science and religion in respect to the phases of individual experience with which they are concerned." It comes to this: "Religion is centered upon the harmony of rational thought with the sensitive reaction to the percepta from which experience originates," that is, with the value-enjoyment in our reaction to the given world; while science "is concerned with the harmony of rational thought with the percepta themselves." 7 We shall return to the concentration of religion upon value-experience. Let us consider here the idea which may be disturbing—the idea that religion is a kind of craving. Is this a retreat from Whitehead's oft-expressed claim that religion is a kind of apprehension of truth?

His position is best seen by considering the way in which his philosophical theology offers a justification for two cravings which seek to be somehow jointly satisfied. One is, that the future which is bound to follow upon the present shall bring novelty, freshness. The other is the craving for permanence: "... the culminating fact of conscious, rational life refuses to conceive itself as a transient enjoyment, transiently useful" (PR V 1 iv). Whitehead's solution was summarized in the final section of our second chapter. We recall that one aspect of God, his "primordial nature," is an unchanging unity of conceptual feeling which embraces all eternal objects in its vision, and thereby serves the temporal world as its instrument of novelty; that the temporal world of finite occasions is itself the instrument of novelty for God, in that its process "passes into the formation of other actualities, bound together in an order [God's 'consequent nature'] in which novelty does not mean loss"; and that the passage of this—of the satisfaction of the divine process—into the temporal world 8 completes the

7 Cf. Whitehead in 1917, explaining the "scientific validity" of Occam's razor: "... every use of hypothetical entities diminishes the claim of scientific reasoning to be the necessary outcome of a harmony between thought and sense-presentation" ("The Anatomy of Some Scientific Ideas," AE p. 218).

8 God as thus immanent in the world, Whitehead calls his "superjective nature."
process by which the universe perpetually "accomplishes its actuality." *Process and Reality* concludes with these words:

Throughout the perishing occasions in the life of each temporal Creature, the inward source of distaste or of refreshment, the judge arising out of the very nature of things, redeemer or goddess of mischief, is the transformation of Itself, everlasting in the Being of God. In this way, the insistent craving is justified—the insistent craving that zest for existence be refreshed by the ever-present, unfading importance of our immediate actions, which perish and yet live for evermore.

What Whitehead offers here is no bland assurance in the face of our mortality; his tone is suggested by the phrases, "tragic Beauty," and "the sense of Peace," which he uses in the last paragraph of *Adventures of Ideas*. (In Section iii of Chapter xx he called Peace "primarily a trust in the efficacy of Beauty.") Plainly, Whitehead is not injecting any of the traditional theologies into his world view. He is offering something which, if true, is of the utmost value. Its truth, as he so wisely (and more than once) says, is nothing that can be demonstrated by logical argument. Neither, to be sure, is the truth of a formulated metaphysical system so demonstrable. But in all four of his books which deal with this subject he indicated a distinction between "a metaphysics which founds itself upon general experience" and further metaphysical notions whose source is religious experience. General experience includes—indeed, first of all is—an enjoyment of value here-now, and acknowledgment of value-existence elsewhere in the temporal world. The broad contribution of religious experience to metaphysics, according to White-

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9 I regret to note one apparent exception, the passage in which Whitehead offers this argument for the consequent nature of God: "there can be no determinate truth, correlating impartially the partial experiences of many actual entities, apart from one actual entity to which it can be referred" (PR I iv). Not even Whitehead could produce a valid version of the argument from the "existence" of truth to the existence of God!

10 *RM* iv iv. See SMW xi, first paragraph; PR V iv; AI xx x.
head, is a widespread direct apprehension of a character of
righness and a unity of value in the universe. There is also
the possibility of supplementing this with more definite con-
tent drawn from exceptional intuitions, provided they are
trustworthy.

Whitehead wisely insists that the verbal formulation of any
religious intuition is always imperfect and fallible. If it
expresses something more than strong emotion, it must be
capable of integration with the (also imperfect) formulations
of the nature of existence which are suggested by the general
texture of general experience. Assuming that this is possible,
the philosophic use of an exceptional intuition rests upon this
argument (stated by Whitehead in setting forth the culmina-
tion of his philosophical theology): 11

It must be remembered that the present level of average waking
human experience was at one time exceptional among the
ancestors of mankind. We are justified therefore in appealing
to those modes of experience which in our direct judgment
stand above the average level.

No special intuitive experience, I take it, is justified for all
time; any one may be superseded by finer intuitions. The
many intuitions of an omnipotent perfection, reported in re-
ligious literature, have been superseded in Whitehead’s eyes;
and they fail to pass the test of being formulatable in a meta-
physical system which is self-consistent and consistent with
general facts of experience.

Whether widespread or special, religious intuitions vividly
arise only because “religion is the longing of the spirit that
the facts of existence should find their justification in the
nature of existence. ‘My soul thirsteth for God,’ writes the
Psalmist” (RM III i). One reason for prizing Whitehead’s
philosophical theology is that his language often reflects per-
fectly the peculiar character of those religious cognitions which

11 AI loc. cit. The argument applies also to the corresponding exposition
in Process and Reality (loc. cit.)
have metaphysical meaning. For example: "the higher intellectual feelings are haunted by the vague insistence of another order, where there is no unrest, no travel, no shipwreck: 'There shall be no more sea.'" It would be vain to object that the phrasing is ambiguous, to ask whether it refers to an intuition or a craving. The language is accurate as it stands.

This mutual involvement of craving and insight inevitably makes the value of religious evidence for metaphysics problematic for those who have had no personal experience of insight. The occurrence of just such experience demands explanation, but does not determine the soundest mode of explanation. We know too little about ourselves to eliminate the possibility that no religious experience, frequent or infrequent, reveals anything about the universe.

But the metaphysics which Whitehead drew from general experience and speculatively formulated as the philosophy of organism was already theistic. Unless it is willing to hand over religious experience to the philosophy and sciences of man, a "properly general metaphysics" must be more than merely consistent with additions drawn from religion. Whitehead gave the undeniable reason for this: "nothing, within any limited type of experience, can give intelligence to shape our ideas of any entity at the base of all actual things, unless the general character of things requires that there be such an entity" (SMW p. 243).

To summarize Whitehead's exposition of this requirement: The world consists of individual temporal occasions, becoming and perishing. Each arises from a situation which includes an antecedent world of occasions, a creativity with infinite freedom, and a realm of forms with infinite possibilities. These Whitehead, with his generalizing mind, discerns in the universe. A new concrescence must in its process achieve a perfectly determinate novel issue of the underlying energy of

\[12 \] PR V 1 iv; my italics. Note also "the notion of redemption through suffering, which haunts the world" (PR V II vii).

\[13 \] There is a brief explanation of such speculation as a method of analyzing the world in Chap. 12, Sect. I, below.
creativity; it must come to stand in perfectly definite positive or negative relations to every entity (of every type) in its universe. Otherwise the finite process would achieve neither a complete individuality, nor a definite shape of value. If there is to be such an outcome, the creativity must bring to the new concrescence not only the deposition of the past, but a gradation of relevance among the countless possibilities of value presented by the realm of realized and unrealized forms. The actual entity that is needed to order the possibilities is called the primordial nature of God. We have here a definite argument from a speculative analysis of the world to the necessary existence of an ordering entity.\(^{14}\)

We remember another feature of Whitehead’s exposition of the general nature of things. His view of the world-process is dominated by a profound and wholly ingenuous temporalism.

All relatedness has its foundation in the relatedness of actualities; and such relatedness is wholly concerned with the appropriation of the dead by the living—that is to say, with ‘objective immortality’ whereby what is divested of its own living immediacy becomes a real component in other living immediacies of becoming.—PR Pref.

\(^{14}\) Cf. SMW xi; RM iii iv, and last paragraph of vii; PR I iii i. To what we said at the end of Sect. II, Chap. 2, above, we should add Whitehead’s argument (in *Process and Reality* it is from his “ontological principle”) that the necessity for all temporal occasions to conform to mathematical and logical relationships can only be understood as the immanence in the world of an aspect of God’s primordial nature; his vision includes that eternal logical order as well as an aesthetic ordering of value-potentialities (cf. SMW end of i). I cannot agree with Prof. Christian’s argument, in Chap. 14 of his *An Interpretation of Whitehead’s Metaphysics* (New Haven, 1959), that after *Science and the Modern World* Whitehead dropped the idea that there is some fixed order among eternal objects (though the grading of value-potentialities appears to be, as Prof. Christian argues, new for every new occasion). Examination of this matter would require a detailed discussion of texts, for which this is not the place.

Other respects in which Christian’s careful study of the structure of Whitehead’s metaphysics is challenging, or enlightening, or both enlightening and challenging, are indicated in my review of his book: *Philosophical Review*, 70 (1961), 114-116.
Philosophers have taken too easily the notion of perishing. . . .
Almost all of *Process and Reality* can be read as an attempt to analyse perishing on the same level as Aristotle’s analysis of becoming.—ESP p. 117; IS pp. 217 f.

Throughout the elaboration of his general metaphysics, Whitehead makes us feel the sole value and the creativity of immediate life, and the poignancy of the fact that time is a “perpetual perishing.” And that is the way things are. But it is hard for most of us to read this account without experiencing a strong emotional need for a concluding conception of “another order.”

If a thinker produces a theistic metaphysics which, among other things, justifies an insistent religious craving, this result does not discredit the metaphysics. There is after all a type of experience to be explained in this case, “the zest of self-forgetful transcendence belonging to Civilization at its height” (AI xx xi). Whitehead offered an explanation in his concept of God, particularly of God’s consequent nature and its immanence in the World. More: the general success of the system as a whole in explaining other things is a strong argument for the theistic concept, if the theistic concept is so integral a part of the system that without it we could not apply the system to anything. And that is the case with the philosophy of organism. If you start to use its fundamental categories—creativity, actual entities, and eternal objects—in the manner prescribed by Whitehead’s categorial scheme, you cannot avoid introducing an actual entity which from eternity to eternity holds the entire multiplicity of eternal objects in its conceptual experience. And once you have this primordial nature of God, the completeness of the system in its own terms necessitates some doctrine of God’s consequent nature. I think that the marvelous coherence of Whitehead’s completed metaphysics constitutes the strongest argument for the theistic element in it—provided this general characterization of the universe has any considerable success as an interpretation of mundane experience, which to my mind it does.
There is one more thing that I want to say about Whitehead's appeal to religious intuitions. He writes of Peace as "the intuition of permanence" amid the passing of beauty, heroism, and daring (AI xx iv). Theologians would doubtless be better pleased if Whitehead had written, "the intuition that so-and-so is the case." Sometimes he does write in that way—but not dogmatically. I think that the frequency with which he uses the vaguer form of expression—"intuition of permanence"—is significant. The phrase presents a continuing challenge to our conceptual powers. The intuition of permanence will not be denied, but it does not formulate itself in propositions. We must do that; and every formulation may be questioned, and should be questioned. When Newton's statement of the laws of motion was found wanting, more than that set of propositions was overthrown for Whitehead. His way of thinking in all fields was affected.

IV

In our efforts to understand what Whitehead means by God, there are three points which we must constantly keep in mind. They by no means exhaust his concept of God, which is quite complex; I single them out because, for thinkers in the Western religious tradition, they are the points from which any slipping away will let us drift from Whitehead's ideas toward more familiar ones. Hence a bit of repetition here does no harm.

The first point is that the only proper concern of religion is with the value-aspect of our lives and of the universe. Quotations to show Whitehead's insistence on this could be multiplied indefinitely. Thus: "... religion is wholly wrapped up in the contemplation of moral and aesthetic values" (SMW p. 258). "The peculiar character of religious truth is that it deals explicitly with values" (RM 4 iv i). "Deity... is that factor in the universe whereby there is importance, value,
and ideal beyond the actual”; and, “There are experiences of ideals—of ideals entertained, of ideals aimed at, of ideals achieved, of ideals defaced. This is the experience of the Deity of the universe” (MT v 9).

The second point is that value is always individual, and intrinsic to every actual entity. The first positive use of the term value in Whitehead’s philosophical writings was in Science and the Modern World. The way in which it was introduced is revelatory. “‘Value’ is the word I use for the intrinsic reality of an event” (SMW p. 131).

“An event” here means the prehensive unity which is called an actual occasion in Process and Reality. In lectures at Harvard, Whitehead persistently rejected the tendency of monistic idealists to make the one Absolute realize all value, while a temporal creature is only one item for the Absolute. His comment on Bradley’s view that Wolf-eating-Lamb is a qualification of the Absolute was, “Hang it all! The wolf was enjoying himself and the lamb was in torture.” Our sense that value-experience belongs intrinsically to finite individuals is overwhelming. God’s realization of value occurs by his absorption of the finite value-achievements in the world.

The third point is that Whitehead always conceives of God according to the philosophic method which he applies to everything short of all reality—as “an aspect of the Universe.” The phrases vary: In our last paragraph but one, “factor in the universe” and “the Deity of the universe” appeared. Elsewhere this factor is described as “that ultimate unity of direction in the Universe, upon which all order depends” (MT iii 3). This way of speaking of God is maintained in Whitehead’s last utterance on the subject, the Ingersoll Lecture on

15 In his last discussion of Value, the Ingersoll Lecture on Immortality, Whitehead introduces the word in what at first appears to be a contrary way. Attention to just what he says about value-possibilities and value-realizations shows that there is no doctrinal contradiction. His constant position is that the finite occasions and the infinitude of God’s experience require each other, if there is to be any value-realization. “Those theologians do religion a bad service, who emphasize infinitude at the expense of the finite transitions within history” (MT iv 7).
Immortality. It becomes natural to ask, then, whether Whitehead's thought is an example—a somewhat unusual one—of the kind of theism called "naturalistic." (It should be obvious, from the way he writes about man in relation to the universe, that there is no possibility of reading his philosophical theology as "humanistic"). The summary reply to this question is to point out that Whitehead always conceives of God as a being, an actual entity; we may not say, "aspect," and stop. He transcends the world as much as he is immanent in the world. However, there is one fact, often mentioned by Whitehead, which limits our thought about God transcendent. It is, that the only Kingdom of Heaven which anyone is acquainted with is the kingdom that is with us today, a kingdom "in the world and yet not of the world" (RM III iii). The account of God's consequent nature is an interpretation,\(^{16}\) an explanation of the source of the quality of immortality which haunts our own experience of transient actualities. God may be, as Whitehead says, a being whose consequent nature is conscious; what we experience is what Whitehead calls his superjective nature. We may recall\(^{17}\) the feature which distinguishes Whitehead's theory of perception of the external world from other realistic ones; in his theory there are two levels of intuitive perception: causal perception (vague, haunting, insistent) and presentational perception (clear, definite, limited) which are joined by symbolic reference. Only a similarly complex account will do justice to our perception of the creative advance of existence. We have a clear perception of the finality with which a finite occasion is superseded; and in our religious moments, at least, we are haunted by a sense of the immortality of the passing fact. No one-level all-of-a-kind perception, no vestibule-of-eternity idea of the temporal world can do justice to the religious consciousness, least of all for any consciousness of a redeeming God.

I think that Whitehead in his philosophical theology never gave up, nor wished to give up, that insight into the supreme

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\(^{16}\) Cf. the end of Chap. i in PR V.

\(^{17}\) See Chap. 2, Sect. III, above.
importance of present fact, which he expressed before he wrote even his philosophy of natural science. He concluded his fine address, “The Aims of Education,” delivered in January, 1916, by saying that our educational ideal must conceive of education as religious, that is, inculcating duty and reverence. “And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity” (AE p. 23). I doubt that Whitehead ever turned longingly away from this world. To him every escapist metaphysics was self-condemned.

It is both amusing and scandalous that he was himself accused of such a view. Thanks to D. H. Lawrence, there is one passage in Religion in the Making that has very likely been read more than any other in the book. In Chapter XVI of Lady Chatterley’s Lover Clifford, who has been “reading one of the latest scientific-religious books” (author not named), reads the final four sentences to his wife, who has just returned from a tryst with Mellors; she responds with contempt. In those final sentences Whitehead was presenting the idea of an indefinite succession of cosmic epochs; of new orders of nature, unimaginable but equally with ours dependent upon the divine wisdom. Lawrence read this as predicting a nonphysical order of nature; in terms of Whitehead’s system, this is a complete mistake, since the physical and the mental are universal features of every actual entity, including God. By seeing in Whitehead only another despiser of the body, Lawrence completely mistook Whitehead’s attitude toward this world.

V

Some of the hearers of Whitehead’s Ingersoll Lecture asked each other, as they left the Harvard Memorial Church, “Does he believe in immortality, or doesn’t he?” The old notions die hard. If I may risk putting Whitehead’s position in a
nutshell, it is this: we are already immortal. But we must not suppose that this is merely a fancy way of saying that a man lives after his death in the books he has written or the houses he has built. What is meant concerning the future is the difficult notion, beyond our imaginations to conceive, that a quality, derived from the man’s life and purified in the harmony of God’s experience, contributes good to the world for evermore. More precisely, every occasion in the life of every temporal creature has this immortality in God and thence in the temporal world. Whitehead himself wrote, “This immortality of the World of Action, derived from its transformation in God’s nature is beyond our imagination to conceive” (“Immortality” xvii). I should add that any conception which was not at least extremely difficult for us to imagine, could not be of much value either as metaphysics, or in its religious character. A little further statement, in the terms of Whitehead’s metaphysics—more, that is, than Whitehead himself wrote—has been attempted by many close students of this part of his work, with conflicting results; whether God’s experience of a temporal occasion abstracts from some aspects of that occasion, how similar God in his consequent nature is to a “society” in Whitehead’s theory of actual occasions, and other such questions, have been argued. I rather doubt that definite answers can be derived from the system. What I find most significant in these discussions is the variation in distance which the interpreters keep between Whitehead’s metaphysics and traditional theologies.

We should also note that some critics of Whitehead find the primordial nature of God an impossible notion, because the collection of all the eternal objects, including all value-possibilities, is an infinitude incapable of being well-ordered. Whitehead himself spoke of this fecundity of possibilities as “beyond imagination” (ESP p. 118; IS p. 219). It seems to me inevitable that we should be unable at present to conceive the unity and order of this totality, in any sense of order that would be acceptable to our best mathematical minds. I do not see that this is any more fatal than the difficulty we have in
conceiving any other aspect of God. We may still read Whitehead as offering a *general* idea of God, big enough to accord with the scale on which he wrote his theory of actual occasions.

In Whitehead's metaphysics, "The limitation of God is his goodness" (RM iv iv). That which in itself is unlimited, he termed Creativity. The fact has been misleading, but can be enlightening. The mistake is thinking that Whitehead erected creativity into a kind of God beyond God. Creativity is the ultimate, inexplicable stuff of the universe—not an entity. Whitehead called it "the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact" (PR I 11 ii). Some readers may find Charles Hartshorne's suggestion helpful: creativity is the ultimate analogical concept for a philosophy of process, as "being" is in Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy. Its nonentitative character should not tempt us (at the opposite extreme) to suppose that it is peripheral to Whitehead's categorial scheme. It and his two other ultimate terms, "many" and "one," are, as he says (PR I 11 ii), presupposed by all his other categories.

In this handling of creativity in relation to actual entities, Whitehead noted,

the philosophy of organism seems to approximate more to some strains of Indian, or Chinese, thought, than to western Asiatic, or European, thought. One side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact ultimate.—PR I 1 iii.

This is one of the few passages in which Whitehead says something about the partial affinity of his metaphysics of process to Buddhism.—But I must leave this subject to those who know Buddhistic thought.

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19 If this is forgotten, Prof. Christian's remark that "creativity" is not a term in Whitehead's categorial scheme will have misleading consequences (William A. Christian, "Some Uses of Reason," in *The Relevance of Whitehead*, ed. Ivor Leclerc [London and New York, 1961], p. 80 n.).
20 My friend William Ernest Hocking suggests that there are some
Whitehead's own emphasis in theology comes out best in one of his comparative remarks about the great religions of mankind. "I hazard the prophecy that that religion will conquer which can render clear to popular understanding some eternal greatness incarnate in the passage of temporal fact" (AI iii iv).

In 1925 Whitehead said that apart from the religious vision, "human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience" (SMW xii, last page); and in 1941, that apart from the "immortality of the World of Action, derived from its transformation in God's nature . . . every activity is merely a passing whiff of insignificance" ("Immortality," xvii). These are strong expressions. Whitehead also held that it is possible to exaggerate the importance of religion. He had this to say about the fundamental idea of Importance (roughly, another name for Value):

Importance is a generic notion which has been obscured by the overwhelming prominence of a few of its innumerable species. The terms "morality," "logic," "religion," "art," have each of them been claimed as exhausting the whole meaning of importance. Each of them denotes a subordinate species. But the genus stretches beyond any finite group of species. There are perspectives of the universe to which morality is irrelevant, to which logic is irrelevant, to which religion is irrelevant, to which art is irrelevant. . . . The generic aim of process is the attainment of importance, in that species and to that extent which in that instance is possible.—MT 1 6.

analyses between Whitehead's metaphysics and the Buddhist rejection of Advaita Vedantism.

The passage is from his last book; from our survey of the development of his philosophy in Part II we shall see, if it is not already evident, that the passage expresses a kind of wide outlook that was second nature to him. It is a just view concerning Importance, and it is not at all to be read as watering down his conception of a religion as, on its doctrinal side, “a system of general truths which have the effect of transforming character when they are sincerely held and vividly apprehended” (RM i i).

In the same paragraph of Modes of Thought Whitehead refers to “the final unity of purpose in the world” as including religious, moral, logical, aesthetic, etc., aspects. Thus the concept of God in his philosophy is much more than a religious concept. It does have entirely to do with values; God’s function in the world is described, to a first approximation, as being “to sustain the aim at vivid experience” (MT v 5).

But in Whitehead’s system, we remember, there are no valueless actualities, and a subjective aim is of the essence of the individual existence of every actual occasion, human or subhuman. In his cosmology, his concept of God enters systematically into an understanding of the order and processes of nature. The significance of the concept is not limited to the religious feelings of mankind. In fact Whitehead, advancing the idea that the immanence of God’s primordial nature in the world provides a possibility for a supplementary, non-statistical, ground for judgments of probability, pointed out that such judgments are in no sense religious, and urged a “secularization of the concept of God’s functions in the world” (PR III ix viii). The challenge to religious people is to contemplate these secular functions of Whitehead’s God without jumping to the conclusion, as some have, that the concept is not available for religious purposes. Such thinking is too compartmentalized, or too exclusively concerned with man.

Of more concern to us in this chapter is correct identification of the source of those religious functions which Whitehead attributes to God. Here the danger is that we might forget or scornfully repudiate what he plainly said.
Religion insists that the world is a mutually adjusted disposition of things, issuing in value for its own sake.—RM iv iii.

The metaphysical doctrine, here expounded, finds the foundations of the world in the aesthetic experience, rather than—as with Kant—in the cognitive and conceptive experience. All order is therefore aesthetic order, and the moral order is merely certain aspects of aesthetic order. The actual world is the outcome of the aesthetic order, and the aesthetic order is derived from the immanence of God.—RM iii v.

Although “morality” and “art” name comparable species of importance for human beings, we are here reminded that Whitehead has a generalized concept of the aesthetic which really is metaphysical; it applies to every bit of existence and to ideals in the universe. If any actual religion ever is “morality tinged with emotion,” which I suppose Whitehead doubted, it falls far short of his notion of the religious ideal. Unlike most systematic philosophers, he never wrote an essay or a chapter on ethical theory; in fact he disliked the subject. He was more concerned with tragedy, the disclosure of ideals, and the union of these two. One implication of his work is that instead of separating ethics and aesthetics we should bring them together in such notions as “harmony,” “feeling,” “adventure,” and, of course, “value.” But these terms are first aesthetic terms; they are moral terms in a derivative sense. In some passages Whitehead touches on right and wrong, which were important notions to him as to other men. (I never expect to see a human being whose life exhibits a more complete and perfect discipline than his did. Russell’s “Portrait” of Whitehead emphasizes this.) He speaks of “the beauty of right conduct,” which is one kind of beauty. The notion that human conduct can be understood, or appreciated, or guided with any largeness of spirit, by taking the right as a more fundamental concept than the concept of value, is indefensibly narrow. The ideas to be got from Whitehead’s

21 “The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty” (AI xviii i).
writings are, rather, such as these: that the touchstone of good is the intuition of beauty, harmony; that nothing good is lost; that the difference between good and bad is largely the difference between diversities which contrast with each other and diversities in conflict. The notion that a civilized religion can either support or be supported by a deontological ethics is fantastic. Only a large-minded teleological ethics, using concepts which are in effect aesthetic, can suggest to religion ideas of charity and mercy which are neither sentimental nor false.

As for sin, I don’t think Whitehead discusses it anywhere. It would be a great mistake to suppose that he held a rosy view of human nature; he simply had no occasion for a theological concept of sin, since he did not conceive God as omnipotent or issuing decrees. Whitehead saw these conceptions as originally modeled upon the kings of the earth, who wielded arbitrary absolute power over their subjects; and the concept of “a Divine Despot and a slavish Universe” is still with us (AI III i; MT III 3). (Psychologies—or phenomenologies—of religious experience which purport to give a modern foundation for the idea of original sin, he would likewise have criticized for magnifying our slavish tendencies and devotion to power.) In recommending the idea of “the divine persuasion” instead, he thought of this as suggested by Plato and revealed in act by Christ (AI x iv).

The universal immanence of God’s primordial nature is not a simple doctrine, for the eternal forms include forms of evil as well as forms of good; but the unity of the realm of

22 Notice the language Whitehead uses when he indicates his own concept of morality: “Morality consists in the control of process so as to maximize importance. It is the aim at greatness of experience in the various dimensions belonging to it. . . . Morality is always the aim at that union of harmony, intensity, and vividness which involves the perfection of importance for that occasion” (MT i 7).

23 I have found Maud Bodkin’s article, “Physical Agencies and the Divine Persuasion” (Philosophy, 20 [July, 1945], 148-161), a good statement of the distinctive value of this concept for religious minds in our time. The article includes brief comparisons of Whitehead with Buber and Santayana.
forms is the unity of God's vision, and the gradation among forms which he effects suggests for each temporal actuality the best that is possible on that occasion. A theistic metaphysics which frames its explanations in terms of divine will, rather than the logical and aesthetic harmony which God brings to the creativity of the universe, abandons the ideal of rational explanation in metaphysics. It would be more appropriate in an earlier stage of religious evolution. Here is the contrast that Whitehead would have us keep in mind:

In a communal religion you study the will of God in order that He may preserve you; in a purified religion, rationalized under the influence of the world-concept, you study his goodness in order to be like him.—RM 1 vi.

In concluding this chapter I am aware that pointing out various emphases, familiar in the philosophy of religion but partial and inadequate in Whitehead's large view, may have had the effect of lessening the chances that his thought will be appreciated. His own addresses on religion evoked some of this reaction; evoked, for example, the exclamation that it is the particular creed on which one sect differs from another that is all-important. Rushing to the defense of our loyalties, we do not like to allow that Whitehead may have reached more truth by going farther. But we can try.

Whitehead's philosophy of religion is something that will bear thinking about for a good long time.