

CHRISTIANITY AND PROCESS THOUGHT

Christianity and Process Thought



Spirituality for a Changing World

Joseph A. Bracken, S. J.

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*To the memory of Jim Hoff, S.J.
who mercilessly teased me about process theology
but who now knows better (one way or another),
this book is affectionately dedicated.*

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Foreword

FOR CENTURIES Christian spirituality was built on the assumption that perfection means changelessness. Not only God but also the heavens were thought to be essentially immutable. Only on Earth, where imperfection is so obvious, did things move, and their movement was the emblem of their imperfection. Although the heavens as a whole swept in wide circles around the Earth, it was unthinkable that the blemish of novelty could ever show up in the celestial spheres. Perfection meant permanence, the absence of change and becoming. As the unfading lights from above shone down on the world, they invited people to lift up their hearts to the immutable divine goodness transparent in them.

It is important to realize how intricately religious awareness has been woven into this cosmology of fixity. To a great extent it still is. We have not yet fully worked our way through the spiritual trauma that set in when Copernicus, Brahe, Kepler, Galileo—and later Einstein and Hubble—exposed the super-lunary world as itself mobile and unfinished. It has not made spirituality less challenging that Charles Darwin placed the realm of life in a continuous stream of becoming and that present-day microphysics thrusts us even more decisively into a world in which movement rather than fixity is the dominant feature. But in such a fluid world what happens to our irrepressible longing for perfection?

The idea that perfection means absolute immutability still

lives on. Who can deny that the religious sensibilities of most people in the world remain most at home in a prescientific understanding of the universe? Theology has moved only slowly and often reluctantly away from the ancient cosmological assumptions in which it came to birth. And even where notional awareness has conceded the correctness of an evolutionary worldview, Christian spirituality still remains emotionally fastened to the pillar of permanence stamped into our consciousness long before the coming of modern science.

People of all times and places, of course, need something toward which to direct their aspirations for perfection, and this is true no less today than ever. But it is hardly a credit to contemporary theology that the spiritual instincts of most people, including many of the scientifically educated, still seem so out of sync with our new understanding of nature. Joseph Bracken, however, is one of a relative minority of contemporary theologians who have taken with full seriousness the task of aligning spiritual longing and religious thought with what we now know to be true about the natural world. He has spent much of his distinguished academic career working out a sophisticated conceptual framework that can bring together science and Christian doctrine coherently.

Professor Bracken began to realize quite early, however, that such a synthesis cannot be accomplished as long as the conceptual tools available to theological reflection are limited to those provided by ancient and medieval thinkers, resourceful as these may otherwise be. What contemporary theology needs, since it still cannot get by without the help of philosophy, is a system of concepts that takes science, religion, and all other modes of experience into full account. Happily the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead provides at least much of the apparatus to build such a system.

Developing his theology in the context of Whiteheadian process thought, the author of this timely book has been able to link science and its disclosure of a world-in-motion with the aspiration to perfection that has always been central to human spiritual existence. Substituting process for permanence, emphasizing the fact of subjectivity instead of the monotony of materialist mechanism, and acknowledging the primacy of dynamic relationality in place of fixed substantiality, he is able to show that spiritual longing is not taken away but only enlivened.

Along with the Bible and Christian tradition, Whitehead's philosophy—which Bracken is not loath to criticize when necessary—provides the basis here for a Christian spirituality that can face head-on the world revealed by science without diminishing the importance and indispensability of religious faith. The unique contribution of the following pages is to make the spiritual implications of this grand synthesis available to many levels of readership in a clear and accessible manner.

John F. Haught
Georgetown University

Acknowledgments

SEVERAL PEOPLE assisted me in converting Whitehead's insights and the technical terms of his philosophy into more readable commonsense language. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the help of Sr. Nancy Vollman, O.S.U (a well-known spiritual director in the Cincinnati archdiocese), Rev. Terry Smith (former pastor at St. Columban Parish in Loveland, Ohio, where I work on weekends), and Rev. Gene Carmichael, S.J. (fellow Jesuit community member at Xavier University in Cincinnati). All three kept prodding me to write in a more conversational (as opposed to a formal academic) style. Likewise, I am grateful for the initial encouragement of Dr. Billy Grassie of the Metanexus Institute in Philadelphia and Dr. Tom Oord of Northwest Nazarene University in Nampa, Idaho, to publish my manuscript with the Templeton Foundation Press. Finally, I am grateful to Laura Barrett and her staff at the Press for facilitating its rapid publication.

Introduction

FOR MANY YEARS I have used the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead for my teaching and writing in both philosophy and theology. Whitehead was a distinguished mathematician and theoretical physicist who taught at Trinity College, Cambridge University, in England, and then at University College, London, in the early twentieth century before taking a newly created position at Harvard University in the United States in 1924. At Harvard he focused his attention on philosophy—above all, on cosmology or the principles underlying change or evolution in the world of nature. Until his death in 1947, Whitehead published many works in philosophy, including *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929), the revised version of his celebrated Gifford Lectures in Scotland in 1927–1928. His highly original approach to reality unquestionably took many people by surprise. Professional philosophers in England and the United States were by and large somewhat slow to follow his lead, but many theologians saw in Whitehead’s philosophy the basis for a new understanding of the God-world relationship.

Speaking for myself, I can testify that his process-oriented approach to reality immediately fired my imagination to think through all over again my basic Christian beliefs about God and our relationship to God, both as individuals and as a worshipping community. Furthermore, in my preaching on Sundays in various parishes I found myself instinctively resorting

to key ideas out of Whitehead's philosophy, albeit in somewhat simplified form, so as to illuminate Scripture passages of the day. To my pleasant surprise, I often received highly favorable comments from parishioners. But, in point of fact, I should not have been surprised, for Whitehead's thought is in many ways better attuned to the conventional understanding of Holy Scripture than the philosophy and theology of Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican monk whose thought has been the benchmark for Roman Catholic thought since the thirteenth century. Where Aquinas emphasized God's transcendent reality as Creator of heaven and earth, Whitehead proposes that God is necessarily involved in an ongoing, ever-changing relationship with creatures. Just as pictured on the pages of sacred Scripture, Whitehead's God responds with feelings of joy or sadness to what is happening in the world. God thus shares in our world in a way that is logically impossible for the somewhat distant, unchanging God of traditional Thomistic philosophy and theology.

Yet, given this obvious attractiveness of Whitehead's thought for the interpretation of sacred Scripture and the explanation of basic Christian beliefs, it has been for me somewhat disappointing to note over the years the relatively cool reception given to process-oriented philosophy and theology by fellow Christians, most notably by Roman Catholic colleagues in philosophy and theology. In some measure, this is surely due to the preeminence of Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, and Urs von Balthasar in Roman Catholic systematic theology. The richness of their thought has sustained most Roman Catholic theologians for the past half-century. Likewise, one can point to the technical character of Whitehead's basic concepts—hence, the difficulty in coming to terms with a totally new approach to reality—as reason enough for Roman Catholics as

well as many mainstream Protestant theologians to postpone or simply put off reading works in process theology even though the process image of God as being in ongoing communication with the world of creation is otherwise so attractive.

A deeper reason for this unresponsiveness to the project of process theology, however, in my judgment lies elsewhere. Process theology is unhappily linked in the minds of many Roman Catholics and mainstream Protestants with a tendency to eliminate or explain away some of their most cherished Christian beliefs, even as it offers new insight into still other beliefs, as noted above. For example, doctrines such as *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), with its emphasis on God's free self-gift in the act of creation, and classical eschatology (the doctrine of the "four last things": death, judgment, heaven, and hell) with its promise of eternal life not only for human beings but for all of material creation, have been either set aside or significantly underplayed by the disciples of Whitehead in their sustained focus on life here and now in a rapidly changing world. Too little effort, as I see it, has been expended in somehow adjusting Whitehead's philosophical categories to accommodate those same traditional Christian beliefs. The deeper issue, therefore, for many Roman Catholics and mainstream Protestants seems to be whether one ultimately puts one's faith in Whitehead's metaphysical scheme or in the established belief system of one's church.

Ideally, the two should enrich one another. Just as Aquinas reconceived the philosophy of Aristotle so as to accommodate basic Christian beliefs about God and the world and in the process came up with some new philosophical insights into the nature of reality, so Whitehead's process-relational metaphysics should both enrich traditional Christian theology and be enriched by it. Yet this convergence of viewpoints is still not

finished. I myself have worked for many years at such a revision of Whitehead's metaphysics so as to accommodate the basic Christian beliefs mentioned above. Over time I have developed a new understanding of the God-world relationship in which all creatures come forth from the triune God and return to God as members of an all-embracing cosmic community. Strong emphasis is thus laid on the freedom of the three divine persons to create and the corresponding freedom of creatures to respond to what Whitehead calls divine "initial aims." Out of this prolonged comparison of Whitehead's metaphysics and basic Christian beliefs, moreover, has come the conviction on my part that initial inconsistencies in point of view between Whitehead's philosophy and basic Christian beliefs can over time be harmonized, to the ultimate advantage of both faith and reason.

Yet friends have also reminded me that I cannot present these new insights into the creative link between Whitehead's philosophy and classical Christian theology in the formal language of process-relational metaphysics and expect most of them to follow my line of thought. Accommodation must be somehow made to their more conventional understanding of reality until the Whiteheadian scheme of things begins to sink in. The real challenge, of course, is not thereby to lose the originality of Whitehead's metaphysical vision even as one tries to explain it in more commonsense language. Here I will certainly do my best, but I ask the reader to be patient if initially some of Whitehead's basic concepts seem rather strange, even bizarre. From my own experience I can say that, if one perseveres in the effort at comprehension, the deeper logic of this approach to reality will gradually become clear. This in turn sparks the imagination, and one finds oneself unexpectedly hooked on Whitehead. He was undoubtedly one of the most

original thinkers of the twentieth century, someone well worth the extra effort to read and understand.

Before concluding, I wish to add one more introductory remark. Since the doctrine of the Trinity figures prominently in my approach to the God-world relationship, I face a modest dilemma in deciding upon appropriate names or titles for the divine persons. The traditional names of “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” have been rightly called into question by Elizabeth Johnson and other Christian feminists, for these names or titles implicitly carry forward and promote a form of patriarchy within Christianity that many contemporary men and women with good reason repudiate.¹ But they still are the names most widely used by Christians both in public worship and in academic discourse, albeit with some uneasiness since there is as yet no commonly agreed-upon new set of names or titles. Paradoxically, however, if one consciously uses Whitehead’s new categories and modes of thought for thinking about the God-world relationship, the dilemma about the use of the divine names seems to disappear. For example, as a Whiteheadian, I find myself normally thinking in nonsexist terms about the three divine persons. Each divine person is to be understood not as male or female but simply as a subject of experience with an infinite or totally unlimited field of activity proper to its own form of existence. There are no sexist overtones here since, as we will see below, subjects of experience, or what Whitehead calls “actual occasions,” are likewise the building blocks or ultimate constituents of everything that exists, even of inanimate things (atoms, molecules, etc.). Hence, a Whiteheadian actual occasion or subject of experience is by definition sexually neutral. One simply does not ask whether it is male or female since it could be either or neither in any given case.

In any event, as a practical measure here and now in writing this book, I put the traditional divine names in quotation marks the first time that they are used in any given chapter so as to indicate their nonliteral, purely metaphorical usage. After that, simply as a matter of convenience I use Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the conventional terms for the three divine persons without further qualification. At the same time, I try to speak of the divine persons in the plural and refer to them as “they” wherever possible. In this way I generally avoid use of the pronoun “he” or “his” with reference to the divine persons.

CHRISTIANITY AND PROCESS THOUGHT

*“In Whom We Live and Move and Have
Our Being” (Acts 17:28)*

IF SOMEONE WERE TO ASK “Where is God?” how would you respond? Would you raise your finger in the air and point to the sky, saying “Up there!” After all, didn’t Jesus ascend into heaven in front of his astonished disciples (Acts 1:9)? Or would you turn the finger on yourself, point to your heart, and say, “In here!” For, didn’t Jesus also say: “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him” (John 14:23)? Or perhaps as a third alternative, one might say, “God is everywhere.” But there is risk in all three answers. If God is limited to being either in heaven above or in the human heart here below, then how can God truly be God, Creator of heaven and earth and ruler of all things in this world? But, on the contrary, if God is everywhere, then equivalently God is nowhere. God does not exist. “God” is just the name for a childish fantasy carried over uncritically into adulthood.

These questions remind us of how important it is to have a model or symbolic representation of how God and the world relate to one another. Every such model, of course, is in one way or another deficient since we cannot shrink down to human proportions what infinitely exceeds our power to comprehend. But without some implicit model of the God-world

relationship at work in our minds and hearts, the reality of God tends to disappear or be ignored as we focus simply on the world in front of us. Furthermore, as I explain below, the choice of a model is not purely arbitrary. There are practical consequences for us in virtue of the model we consciously or unconsciously choose to work with.

Perhaps the best traditional model for the God-world relationship was provided by the great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas. Answering the question whether God is present in the world, Aquinas replies that God is present in every creature so as to keep it in existence.¹ Since God is Pure Being, the creature only exists in virtue of God's ongoing creative activity in its regard. But, Aquinas adds, while God is everywhere, God does not take up any space. Rather, God spiritually coexists with physical bodies as the invisible cause of their existence and activity.² God is thus everywhere in creation as the cause of the existence and activity of creatures, in virtue of God's knowledge and love of creatures, and through God's all-encompassing power.³

This is a marvelously concise description of God's relation to the world of creation, and it has certainly stood the test of time for most Christians. But it still has its limitations. While God is evidently present and active in the world, the world as the ongoing effect of God's creative activity still exists apart from or outside of God as its Creator or transcendent First Cause. Yet St. Paul says, in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Perhaps Paul was carried away by his own rhetoric on this occasion when talking to philosophers in the Agora at Athens. But there still seems to be a logical problem in saying at one and the same time that God is infinite, without limitations, and that creation exists apart from God or outside of God. If creation is somehow outside of God, is God still truly infinite, without any limitations?

Still another deficiency of Aquinas’s model for the God-world relationship has to do with our relation to God as God’s creatures. If all that we are and have is simply the effect of God’s ongoing creative activity in our regard, are we in any way free to be ourselves, to act independently of God and God’s will for us at this moment? Most of us believe that the three divine persons empower us to make our own decisions; they do not overpower us by a unilateral exercise of divine power. But, if that is indeed the case, how is that compatible with Aquinas’s approach in which everything exists only because God makes it happen? How can we be genuinely free to make our own decisions and still be totally dependent on God for our very being from moment to moment?

Partly for these reasons, some contemporary theologians have tested out other models for the God-world relationship. One of these theologians is Sallie McFague in her book *Models of God*.⁴ She endorses the model of God as the “Soul” of the universe and the universe as the “body” of God. She is careful to say, of course, that this model of the God-world relationship is not to be taken literally.⁵ Models of the God-world relationship should be taken seriously but certainly not literally.⁶ But even so, is her model any better or even as good as that of Aquinas? Thinking of God as the “Soul” of the universe and the world as the “body” of God seems to jeopardize the independence of God from the world and the independence of the world from God. If soul and body are inseparable within human beings, what does that say about our relation to God and God’s relation to us? Her theory, in other words, borders on pantheism, the identification of God with the world and vice versa, something condemned by the church.

McFague is aware of this danger. But what she likes about the model is the way in which it presents God as knowing the world directly and immediately, just as we know our own

bodies directly and immediately: “God relates sympathetically to the world, just as we relate sympathetically to our bodies.”⁷ We cannot ignore what goes on in our bodies; God cannot ignore what happens in the world, above all, when pain and suffering are involved. Thus, as she sees it, God does not overcome evil in the world by divine decree. Rather, God suffers with creatures in their pain and suffering. With loving concern God assists them to work through the pain and suffering and achieve something worthwhile in the end.⁸

Yet the limitations of her model still remain. God seems to be much too dependent on creation within this model. McFague suggests that if this world were blown up or otherwise destroyed, then God would establish a relation with still another world.⁹ But, at least for most Christians, this still raises the question of God’s freedom to create or not to create. If God can’t be without some world, even if not necessarily our world, does God create out of love, a desire to share the divine life with creatures, or out of necessity simply to be God? McFague has a clever response: “We are not submerged parts of the body of God but relate to God as to another Thou.”¹⁰ Likewise we encounter the physical world around us “as the body of God where God is present to us always in all times and in all places.”¹¹ Thus thinking of God, the world, and one another in terms of ongoing I-Thou relationships, we are encouraged to take more responsibility for the world in which we live, a world that is endangered by the possibility of nuclear war and ecological disaster.¹²

I could not agree with McFague more on this point, but I also believe that her soul/body metaphor for the God-world relationship lacks credibility, at least in the way she presents it. For example, McFague is surely correct in saying that we human beings should have an interpersonal relationship with

God our Creator. Likewise, we should strive for better interpersonal relationship with the people we meet every day. But what about the world of Nature? Isn't it pure sentimentality to refer to plants and animals as Thou? Maybe we can have such an interpersonal relationship with our household pet, but surely not with most other animals and still less with trees, bushes, and other forms of plant life. So many of these animals and plants we routinely kill or harvest in order to feed ourselves. Finally, since most of the world is made up of inanimate things, atoms and molecules in intricate combination, isn't it ridiculous to think of the entire world as somehow alive?

So, as it stands, McFague's model for the God-world relationship seems somewhat strained and artificial. But, as we see in the next chapter, Alfred North Whitehead believes that "the final real things of which the world is made up" are subjects of experience somewhat akin to ourselves from moment to moment.¹³ That is, everything that exists is either itself a subject of experience or what Whitehead calls a "society" of such subjects of experience. Not just human beings and other higher-order animals with self-awareness, therefore, but all forms of animal and plant life, even inanimate things, are thus internally composed of mini-subjects of experience (equivalently, spiritual "atoms") with a given pattern of interrelated existence and activity. The individual subjects of experience keep changing, coming into and going out of existence very rapidly, but the societies that they constitute remain the same. Each of us, for example, feels that we are the same person as a moment ago even though subtle changes have taken place within our minds and bodies in just that small time interval. Similarly, within the animals, plants, and even inanimate things of this world, subtle changes are taking place at every moment even as outwardly they all seem to remain much the same.

What emerges out of this Whiteheadian approach to reality is a third model for the God-world relationship that seems to have all the advantages of the model proposed by McFague and very few, if any, of its disadvantages. This third model is based on the notion of a cosmic community in which everything that exists is both itself and partner with everything else to make up a common living space, a community in which to live together. Especially if we think of God not as one person in dialogue with creatures but as three persons who are already in their own divine life even apart from creation a community, the idea of the God-world relationship as a cosmic community makes a lot of sense.¹⁴ In creating us, the three divine persons thus invite us into their living space, their divine communitarian life, insofar as we finite creatures can share in it. Heaven, in other words, is all around us even though in this life we do not fully realize where we are. Limited as we are by the concerns of life in the body here and now under the conditions of space and time, we lose the bigger picture of what is really going on.

In a later chapter of this book, I explain how at the moment of death we will indeed see the bigger picture. But for now I simply clarify how this model is better than the other two for explaining the God-world relationship. Aquinas's model was good for making clear how God is present to every creature as its First Cause or Creator, but he could not do justice to Saint Paul's claim that in God we live and move and have our being. Sallie McFague, using the metaphor of the soul/body relationship, indicated how God is at work in the world in the same way that the soul is in touch with the body. But her metaphor seemed to draw God and the world into too close a relationship with a consequent loss of independence for both God and ourselves. The attractiveness of this third model is that it allows the three divine persons and all of us creatures to be ourselves

as separate subjects of experience and yet by our interaction with one another to co-create a common space, a cosmic community to which each and every creature contributes and upon which each and every creature at the same time depends. For the common space or community collapses unless everyone works to sustain it.

This does not mean, of course, that the three divine persons depend upon us creatures for their own existence as in Sallie McFague’s model. For they have their own communitarian life even apart from creation. But it does mean that, if the divine persons choose to create a cosmic community, then they need our cooperation in order to sustain that common space between us and themselves. Communities only come into being when subjects of experience dynamically interact and co-create a common space that is gradually shaped and structured by their ongoing interaction. Equivalently they co-create a common field of activity for their ongoing exchange of information and affective response to one another. What you say and do affects me, and what I say and do affects you. Together we bring into being what Martin Buber in his celebrated book *I and Thou* called “the Between,” an intangible but very real link between us that lasts as long as we remain in contact with one another on an interpersonal basis.¹⁵ Sometimes we can sense that common space between us while in conversation with others. But, sensed or not, it is always there as the implicit basis for our ongoing relationship.

If then, as Whitehead urges, the world is made up of momentary subjects of experience gathered into “societies,” or what I call structured fields of activity, for their ongoing interaction, then the world of creation is made up of an enormous network of hierarchically ordered and overlapping fields of activity for all these created subjects of experience. Just as our

own bodies have different levels of activity from the subatomic to the body as a whole, so there are different levels of social organization within the universe (atomic, molecular, organic, supraorganic or environmental, solar systems, galaxies, clusters of galaxies, etc.). Likewise, one and the same subject of experience can participate in more than one society or form of social organization at the same time. Members of a family, for example, create their own special field of activity simply as a family, but they also participate in other communities or other fields of activity by reason of work, political affiliation, or simple friendship. The world for each of us as individuals is a complicated set of overlapping and hierarchically ordered fields of activity that we share with many other individuals, both friends and mere acquaintances.

Furthermore, this entire network of interrelated fields of activity constituting our world is contained within the field of activity proper to the three divine persons. The three divine persons thus set the pattern or provide the structure for what goes on in the world. The New Testament, after all, tells us that we are one with Christ in Christ's relationship to the "Father," all in the power of the "Holy Spirit" (Eph. 1:7-10; Col. 1:15-20). In terms of my own model, that would mean that we human beings and all other created subjects of experience are aligned with the "Son" in the Son's relation to the Father through the mediating power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Like the Son, we too receive from the Father through the activity of the Holy Spirit divine grace at every moment, which both empowers us to be ourselves and lures us in a direction proposed by the Father. Unlike the Son, we all too frequently misuse the divine empowerment and follow our own self-centered inclinations. But the rhythm of life and love among the divine persons still gives a deeper order and purpose

to all the myriad decisions made by ourselves and all other created subjects of experience at any given moment of the cosmic process. The world is deeply trinitarian in its overall makeup even though we human beings seldom, if ever, think in those terms.

At the beginning of this chapter, I referred to the importance of different models of the God-world relationship, their significance for the way in which we live our daily lives. What then is the cash value in thinking of the three divine persons, ourselves, and the world of Nature as partners in a cosmic community? In brief, it allows us to see that we do not exist simply for ourselves and our own interests but for the sake of something bigger than ourselves, what Scripture calls the kingdom of God. There is, after all, a basic human instinct first to look out for our own short-range interests and only afterwards to think of the long-term interests of the community (communities) to which we belong. We may label this tendency “original sin” and thus trace it back to the Fall of Adam and Eve in Paradise, or we may attribute it to various conditioning factors in our personal, family, or community history. But in any case it is an all-pervasive tendency in human life. We need a vision of how life can and should be different.

We should find our true self-fulfillment in contributing to a community or cause bigger than ourselves as individuals. This is not to say, of course, that we always have to sacrifice our own interests totally to the interests of the group to which we belong. Quite the contrary, the community exists to serve the needs of all of us, taken collectively. But there will be instances when we will be asked to sacrifice personal interest for what is clearly a higher good representing the future well-being or even continued existence of the group(s) to which we belong. At these moments it is important that we do so willingly rather

than under duress because it corresponds more closely to what we recognize as the divine will, the way in which the three divine persons exist among themselves as a divine community and the way in which they seem to have ordered the world of creation in their own image and likeness as a cosmic community destined for ever-deeper communion with themselves.

In Mark's Gospel, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, ask Jesus for privileged places at his right and left hand in the future kingdom. When the other disciples learn of this trick, they are indignant. In reply to them all, Jesus says:

You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

It requires strong personal conviction regularly to exercise power in terms of empowerment or service of others rather than in terms of control and domination. Such strong conviction, however, normally arises only out of a spirituality or enduring vision of the way things are or at least ought to be. Belief in the Trinity as a communion of divine persons selflessly dedicated to the service of one another and of all their creatures can be the cornerstone of such a communitarian spirituality in which all are united in the service of a common goal and a common set of values.

Our understanding of the God-world relationship, accordingly, is not simply a speculative issue to be thought about occasionally and then set aside for more pragmatic concerns.

Rather, it subtly influences at every moment our attitude to ourselves, other human beings and indeed all of God’s creatures even as it also shapes and organizes our felt relationship to God. Thus, if we truly believe that in God we live and move and have our being and that as a result we share with the divine persons in a deeply communitarian way of life together with all of God’s creatures, we may be more readily inclined to make the periodic sacrifice of personal self-interest so as to pursue the higher good of sustained life in community. In the end, it is simply a matter of seeing the bigger picture, realizing what life is ultimately all about.