

The Christianization of Whitehead:

Justice in Process Theology

By

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In the following remarks, I will be addressing the issues of justice in Whitehead's thought and some of its offshoots. In a certain sense, this is a personal matter. Many of us are attracted to process thought because it solves something rather profound for us – the question of the God-world relation, or a matter of spirituality, or an effective answer to a postmodern question. For me, it was the problem of evil.

When it comes to issues of justice, however, whether one is concerned with them theoretically, or, more likely, because one starts to do peace and justice work, and one starts to look to process thought, there is a surprising paucity of work on the subject. I came across this phenomenon while in the course of doing my dissertation on providence, which I'll refer to more later.(rework) As an example, in the thematic bibliography of process thought at the Center for Process Studies that all of us who do work in process thought are indebted to, there is a category dealing with Process Thought and Justice, but it only has 31 entries, and several are on topic such as jurisprudence. This compares to the God-world relation, with over eight pages of entries, or creation, with X amount. The interest, from the side of process theologians, has just not been there in specifically dealing with Justice as such.

The question, of course, is *why* this is so. I think the reason is that in the formative documents of process thought, that is, in the writings of Whitehead, questions of justice, social or otherwise, are just not addressed. With regards to the questions of society, *Adventures of Ideas* has the five ideal aims that constitutes the "Aim at Civilization": Truth, Beauty, Art, Adventure, and Peace – Justice isn't in there. In much the same way, in *Process and Reality* the aims for society are Harmony and Intensity, and Flux and Permanence. There are several reasons for this. The first is

that, historically speaking, in the circles in which Whitehead moved, there was not the interest in dealing with social questions – more with questions of scientific and historical fact. Not that people were not involved in such questions, but in late 19th and early 20th century England, there was much discussion of the relation between science and religion, and questions of the Biblical material got more interest. Questions of social progress didn't come up as much. (revisit) Another reason is philosophical. Whitehead's orientation is towards persuasion, not coercion, and there is a coercive aspect, an absolute demand, in many questions and discussions of justice (this cannot be!). And, finally, there is a reticence on Whitehead's part to add fuel to "morality" and the moralists, as he considered them the "best rallyers of stupidity against change" and justice and morality are often related. He preferred a "genial orthodoxy" rather than any kind of strict orthopraxy, which is the kind of commitment that justice demands. As is often remarked, there is much of the vicar's son in Whitehead's style and tone. And, I would argue, in his substance as well.

I am not as familiar with Hartshorne work on the subject, perhaps there are others who can instruct me in his discussions of the work.

We now turn to a couple of examples of later work in process theology that deals with themes of justice in order to illustrate the point that resources for dealing with justice in Whitehead's work are lacking. In the first place, there is John Cobb and Herman Daly's widely acclaimed work *For the Common Good*, that specifically deals with issues of justice in the sphere of economics. However, when they come to dealing with their own motivations for the work, they say that the resources of process thought are not enough, and they specifically call on the prophetic heritage of their own Christian traditions. Schubert Ogden, in his attempt at a liberation theology (the most systematic attempt to date from the perspective of a process theologian) is correctly taken to task by Claremont's own Anselm Min for his failure to get the key point – the option for the poor, the conversion to the other, the radical, almost undeniable call toward action that is justice, and for trying to start with the metaphysical underpinnings and move from the top down, rather than having his theology be "a reflection on praxis that in some sense always proceeds it." (Gutierrez). (break into 2 sentences). In another of John Cobb's cooperative ventures, *The Liberation of Life* with Charles Birch, the authors turn from Whitehead's account as a metaphysically satisfying one to the

work of John Rawls and his notions of the “good society” with equal opportunity and the sharing of one another’s fate, as well as Aldo Leopold and Albert Schweitzer, as resources for the ethics they feel are called for. And, last but not least, there is Jay McDaniel, whose appropriation of the worldview of process thought, with its sensitivity and attempt at taking all effects into account, perhaps comes closest to developing a justice-oriented ethic from the resources of process thought. Even McDaniel, however, with his sensibility of sensitivity that demands consideration of other life, especially animals, draws on resources of Swimme and Berry, ecofeminist thought, Buddhism and other resources, rather than from process thought specifically, as he discusses questions of justice. All of the preceding writers feel the need to move outside of process thought, especially Whitehead, in order to marshal their resources in a way that allows them to address issues of justice effectively. And, once again, the point that such resources are not there is brought forcefully home.

However, Whitehead was not dogmatic about his own work – at the end of *Religion in the Making* he points out that we are in a continual search for better modes of expression, better metaphors to express the essential truth of our experience. Remember, Truth is Appearance conforming itself to Reality – in language, better, truer expression of experience. So, with some trepidation, I propose the following revision/addition to the final chapter of the *Adventures of Ideas*, on the ideal aims for civilization – finding a place for Justice among them, putting it on the same footing as Truth, Beauty, and Art, as a necessary component of Peace, as they are of Adventure.¹

A civilized society not only exhibits the qualities of Truth, Beauty, Art, Adventure, and Peace, it will also exhibit the quality of Justice if it is to be worthy of the name. In one sense, a Whiteheadian vision could subsume the ideal of justice as an exemplification of the ideal of Truth, with the apparent disjunction between appearance and reality being the driving force behind the urge for justice. The disjunction in question would be between the the apparent necessity of an unjust action under the laws of a society and the reality of the unnecessary suffering entailed, for no particular good reason.² Thus it could serve as a goad to further adventure — the attempt to fashion a better, more just society in order to better tell the truth. There is much to be said for such a formulation. Among other advantages, it illustrates how, perhaps, injustice serves as a spur to better attempt “impossible” or “unthinkable” projects, like the aforementioned dissolution of slave societies.

Such a formulation of justice as a subset of truth is, however, unsatisfying in a larger sense. To make justice serve truth, or beauty, or adventure ignores the radical call to change that is part of the experience of injustice. It undermines the felt necessity of action. It is almost a “gnostic” sort of solution to the problem of suffering: we understand its function, and that understanding somewhat mutes the force of the empathetic feeling of “suffering-with.” Also to right an injustice for the ultimate purpose of bringing about greater intensity of feeling seems to cheapen the suffering itself. Justice demands action in and of itself, and speak of it as being a part of truth or beauty could take away from the urgency of the felt injustice, and therefore the will to act for its righting.

Whitehead himself seemed to note this danger in emphasizing the ideal aims without some sort of a larger frame of reference. He pointed out that the ideal aims of beauty, truth, etc., cannot be pursued for themselves alone, or they run the risk of becoming “ruthless, hard, and cruel...and thus lacking in some essential quality of civilization.”³ Whitehead maintained that the sense of Peace was necessary to temper and give context and meaning to the other ideal aims. Thus, following Whitehead’s intuition, I would propose that the reason for the necessity of Justice as an ideal aim in a Whiteheadian scheme is not because it is an incomplete telling of the truth, but that injustice is a violation of Peace and thus a civilized society cannot stand without Justice.

Close attention to the nature of radical unnecessary human suffering that itself constitutes injustice is important to see why this is so. There are at least two different responses to human suffering: a blunting and numbing of human feeling, and a resolve to work against it regardless of the consequences. The first can be illustrated by certain examples from Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, as Jewish people are radically oppressed by the Nazis on the way to the concentration camps, they lose their feeling for and with the human beings who suffer with them, culminating in the man who beats his father to death for a few mouthfuls of bread.⁴ Sustaining any sense of a “harmony of harmonies” in such a situation seems impossible. There may be exceptional cases that can manage it,⁵ but on a broader cultural level, it would be hard to call the society that allowed such things “civilized.”

The second response, that of an identification with the sufferers and a resolve to end such suffering, can in one sense be thought of as part of the further goad to adventure in that it is a discord. However, massive injustice, by virtue of its interruptive character,⁶ moves us outside of our explana-

tory schemes and forces us to the praxis of suffering. Interruptive means, in this case, the end of a vision of Peace, of the Harmony of Harmonies. To use a Whiteheadian type of example, it is the “It cannot be borne!” of grief and rage that accompanies great loss or tragedy. An analogy with the experience of overwhelming pain in the human body and the effect on the human mind can illustrate this point further: In the same way that a hammer-blow on the finger blots out other experience because of the immediacy and intensity of the pain, the feeling of the suffering of oneself or others in radical injustice also blots out other considerations, making Peace, Adventure, Art impossible until something has been done.

A fine example of the destruction of peace through injustice, and the compulsion for action that it entails, can be found in an essay by Montana/Oregon writer David James Duncan, “Beauty/Violence/Grief/Frenzy/Love: On the Contemplative Versus the Active Life.”⁷ Duncan outlines his own transformation from award-winning novelist to environmental activist at the age of forty, writing opinion pieces and satire to try to save some of the remaining wilderness in the Pacific Northwest:

I became a nonfiction writer ...not out of a sense of calling, but out of a sense of betrayal, out of rage over natural systems violated, out of grief for a loved world raped, and out of a craving for justice.⁸

Duncan writes about the end of the contemplative life that sustained his novel-writing, as corporate and government interests systematically destroyed the ecosystem where he lived. He illustrates Whitehead’s emphasis on the ideal aims as states of individual, rather than the social or political, emphasis, while at the same time pointing out that such individual aims also have social and political contexts and outcomes that in turn affect the individual in question. His topic, in this context of destruction is “the grief and frenzy that daily invade every sincere human’s attempts to simply pursue a vocation that expresses gratitude and respect for life.”⁹

In the essay, Duncan holds an imaginary dialogue between Thomas Merton, the great American contemplative, and activist Montana writer Rick Bass. He points out Merton’s warning against the “pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist ... easily succumbs: activism and overwork” that “neutralizes his [sic] work for peace,” even “destroy[ing] his [sic] inner capacity for peace...[and] the fruitfulness of his [sic] own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom that

makes work fruitful.”¹⁰ Whitehead himself could have written such a warning of not attending to the Harmony of Harmonies, the Peace that is at the heart of the world. He would have approved of this attitude that would keep the priorities in their proper places, by virtue of referencing everything to the aim of Peace.

Bass, however, replies to the above quote, in a hand-written note in the margin:

Yes. but NO
Can't do it! Not yet.
Not now

Then Duncan imagines the two men going on a walk together in the woods, first in the wooded hills of Kentucky where Merton made his contemplative home at Gethsemane Monastery, and then in the deforested mountains of northwestern Montana where Bass makes his. If they should encounter the same kind of destruction being visited on the northwestern forests, Duncan claims that

[t]here is little doubt in my mind that this kind of alteration, inflicted upon the forests of Gethsemane, would induce in the nature-adoring Trappist the very state his contemplative self abhors: *the frenzy of the activist*. When your heart's home is being annihilated, your peace and serenity are in deep shit and that's all there is to it.¹¹

If the very conditions of life and beauty and love are being systematically destroyed for nothing more than money in some wealthy person's pocket, Peace, in Whitehead's sense of a trust in the efficacy of beauty, is an early casualty.

It is interesting that Whitehead chose Peace as an ideal aim, complementary and in some senses opposed to Adventure. In common parlance the opposite of Peace is not Adventure, but War. Injustices on large scales, with their repression and savage acts, undermine the sociological conditions necessary to contemplate and dialogue on philosophical and religious topics.¹² In large populations, injustices often lead to armed resistance, which easily escalates into war. The point at issue here is not to enter into the large and varied literature on the possible (and possibility of) justifications for war but to point out that insofar as injustice is a contributing factor in leading to large-scale armed conflict, it undermines both the conditions for and the expression of Peace.

Of course, one could argue that Whitehead was not talking about the actual state of Peace as a sociological and political condition, but as an ideal aim toward which individuals and societies are called.¹³ This is, of course, true, but the exemplification counts as we consider the ideal aims and their effect in the world. Injustice runs counter to Peace as a felt reality of the character of the

universe, in that it destroys both the ability to feel as such and the pursuit of art, adventure, and peace. It is also counter to the exemplification of the ideal aim in societies, in that it undermines the conditions for the possibility of peace on the large scale. In both senses, Justice is a necessary component of True Peace in the world.¹⁴

With this small excursus finished, I would like to re-emphasize the main point that while several important thinkers in the process tradition have made important statements on justice, especially in questions related to ethics, there remains the difficult point that the most important resource for process thought, the writings of Whitehead, gives short shrift to the subject. This related to the question of process theology, which can be seen as a fruitful encounter between Christian (and some post-Christian) faith and process philosophy. The relation is often viewed (especially by its critics) as that of bringing faith into line with the dictums of process philosophy. It is, and has been, the case, however, that the the relationship runs both ways, and process theologians have been modifying Whitehead's emphases, if not his actual words, throughout their interactions. If Whitehead were alive, he might (or might not) be convinced by the argument above to modify his work in a future offering. More likely, however, he might see the creative syntheses of the various process theologians as continuations and correctives of his own work, and all of us engaged in the ongoing processes of working out the divine aims for the world.

¹ The following selection is from my doctoral dissertation entitled "The Purposes of God: Providence as Process-Historical Liberation," The Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, 2002.

² Whitehead seems to be pointing in this direction in his discussion of the question of slavery in the second chapter of *Adventures of Ideas*.

³ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 284.

⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960).

⁵ See Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Simon & Schuster [Pocket Books], 1959 [1985]). Saints are ideal examples, not expressions of cultures.

⁶ This is following the analysis of Rebecca Chopp in her *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), anticipating its discussion in the chapter on Peter Hodgson.

⁷ David James Duncan, in *My Story as told by Water: confessions, Druidic rants, reflections, bird-watchings, fish-stalkings, visions, songs and prayers refractng light, from living rivers, in the age of the industrial dark* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 2001): 167-179.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 172.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹² It destroys both the “leisure and libraries” that philosophers need for their work, according to Richard Rorty — see Wm. Dean’s analysis in “Pragatism’s Pallid Piety.”

¹³ See, for example, the discussion in *Adventures of Ideas*, 274.

¹⁴ Here ends the selection from my dissertation.