

GOD'S WILL OR GOD'S DESIRES FOR US: A CHANGE IN WORLDVIEW?

JOSEPH A. BRACKEN, S.J.

Taking up the mystery of divine providence, the author suggests that the terms "God's will" and "God's desires" correspond to different understandings of the God-world and God-human relationship. In the former, the focus seems to be on the fulfilment of the unchanging divine plan for creation; in the latter, attention is directed to the strictly contingent decisions of creatures and God's flexibility in somehow ordering them to a higher purpose and goal. Divine providence is active in both cases but in quite different ways.

WITHIN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM reference to the will of God for human beings and presumably for creation as a whole is quite common. But how specific is God's will in particular cases? Is it simply to do good and avoid evil, or is it to take one course of action rather than another? Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises* (widely used as a retreat manual for over 400 years) seems to favor the second alternative. As he notes in the "Annotations" at the beginning of the *Exercises*, a spiritual exercise is "every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies, and, after it is rid, to seek and find the Divine Will as to the management of one's life for the salvation of the soul."¹ Certainly the rules for making an "election" at the end of the Second Week of the *Exercises* seem to focus on a choice of a way of life or the reform of an already chosen way of life so as better to fulfill God's will for oneself now and in the future.²

Yet in the Summer 2008 issue of *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* entitled "Something That Happened to Me at Manresa," Charles Jackson

JOSEPH A. BRACKEN, S.J., received his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. Now professor emeritus of theology at Xavier University, Cincinnati, he specializes in trinitarian theology, process theology, and religion and science. He has recently published: *Christianity and Process Thought: Spirituality for a Changing World* (2006); *God: Three Who Are One* (2008); and *Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Intersubjectivity: A New Paradigm for Religion and Science* (2009). In progress is a collection of essays on the interrelation of chance and purpose within a theistic worldview from an evolutionary perspective.

¹ David L. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978) 4.

² *Ibid.* 102–15.

first notes that Ignatius, in virtue of his spiritual experiences at Manresa, “was ultimately able to put aside *his* desires and allow *God’s* desires to become the dominant factor in his life.”³ He then adds: “It is clear that Ignatius spoke not of God’s *desires* but of God’s *will* and of the need to find God’s *will* and to do God’s *will*.”⁴ But in Jackson’s mind, “the expression ‘God’s will’ carries emotional baggage that grates on modern-day sensitivities. It seems to describe an uncaring intention based solely on intellectual grounds that, in some manner or other, include a penalty for a failure to comply with it. It seems, in fact, to describe the state of mind, not of a loving Person, but rather of a machine.”⁵ In the next issue of *Studies* William Barry, in “Letter to the Editor,” warmly approved Jackson’s conversion of God’s *will* into God’s *desires*, writing: “I have not seen this anywhere else, and believe that it hits upon something profound about God that Ignatius intuited at Manresa, and especially at the Cardoner. . . . Charlie Jackson has hit a home run with this one.”⁶

In what follows, I explore this issue further. I contend that, if the difference between the expressions “God’s will” and “God’s desires” is not purely linguistic, simply a matter of convention, but reflects instead a somewhat different understanding of the God-world relationship than presumably Ignatius himself normally took for granted, then this change of terminology should be thought through and critically evaluated for its eventual consequences for Christian belief and practice.⁷ What comes to mind, for example, is Martin Buber’s celebrated distinction between I-Thou and I-It relationships in human life.⁸ Subjects in I-Thou relationships normally express their desires to each other and thereby leave room for each other to respond freely and creatively to the other’s urging. A subject in what Buber calls an “I-It” relationship, on the contrary, habitually takes a more impersonal approach to human relations. A person

³ Charles J. Jackson, S.J., “‘Something That Happened to Me at Manresa’: The Mystical Origin of the Ignatian Charism,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 38.2 (Summer 2006) 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ William J. Barry, S.J., “Letter to the Editor,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 38.3 (Autumn 2006) 41.

⁷ See *The Decrees of General Congregation 35*, Decree 4, “Obedience in the Life of the Society of Jesus” nos. 9–29 (Jesuit Conference: Washington, 2008). These paragraphs clearly refer to the classical understanding of God’s will in the *Spiritual Exercises* and other writings of Ignatius; at the same time these paragraphs evidence a new awareness of the contemporary context for the exercise of the vow of obedience by Jesuits, something that seems to demand much more sustained dialogue between subject and superior than was customary in the past before the superior made a decision.

⁸ See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner’s, 1970) 54.

in authority, for example, gives a command and expects the other person(s) to comply or face a penalty for disobedience. The personal feelings of the other person(s) in the matter are clearly secondary to what needs to be accomplished through the command of the person in authority.

Does the expression “the will of God” as opposed to “the desires of God” thus reflect more of an I-It than an I-Thou relationship between God and a human being? Not necessarily, although here too distinctions are in order. In his treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity in *Summa theologiae* 1, qq. 27–43, for example, Thomas Aquinas was, in my judgment, implicitly thinking in terms of I-Thou relations between the divine Persons. That is, by conceiving the divine Persons as subsistent relations vis-à-vis one another,⁹ Aquinas was equivalently elevating relationality above substance as the first category of being within the Godhead.¹⁰ But in the later questions of *Summa theologiae*, part 1, dealing with God’s creation of the world, Aquinas seems to be working more within an I-It world, if only because the four causes of Aristotle (material, formal, efficient, and final) tend to govern his overall approach to the God-world relationship. Presumably, then, like many Christians to this day, Aquinas was unconsciously living in an I-It world and an I-Thou world at the same time. In his prayer life and at other times when he was more aware of his own power of free choice, Aquinas presumably thought of his relation to God in more interpersonal terms. But when he reflected philosophically on the God-world relationship as a whole, he inadvertently slipped into the I-It world of Aristotelian cause-effect relationships.

In any event, the following pages will sketch an alternate view of the God-world relationship to that conventionally set forth in Thomistic philosophy and theology. My alternate view will, accordingly, lay heavier stress on God’s desires than on God’s specific will for human beings and for the cosmic process as a whole. Otherwise stated, I will characterize God’s will as more persuasive than coercive. My intention, however, will not be to convince the reader that a process-oriented philosophy such as Alfred North Whitehead’s is inherently superior to various contemporary versions of Scholastic philosophy and theology. Rather, I wish simply to provoke reflection on the inevitable limitations of any philosophical conceptuality to probe the mystery of what we mean by God and God’s relation to ourselves on a daily basis. For that same reason, I will content myself in this article merely with laying out in some detail my own understanding of the God-world relationship from a basically Whiteheadian, process-oriented perspective; I will not engage in extended commentary

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) 1, q. 29, a. 4 resp.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Joseph A. Bracken, “Subsistent Relation: Mediating Concept for a New Synthesis?” *Journal of Religion* 64 (1984) 188–204.

on the supposed deficiencies of the standard Thomistic approach to the same issue.¹¹

WHITEHEAD'S VISION

I begin with an overview of Whitehead's metaphysics followed by my own critique of it so as to bring his thought more into line with traditional Christian belief in the God-world relationship. The basic premise in Whitehead's metaphysical vision is that events, not things, constitute the world around us. Some events are momentary, others are protracted. But the protracted events are in turn made up of momentary events in rapid succession. A parade through the downtown area of one of our cities on Memorial Day, for example, is a protracted event; it takes a certain amount of time to happen. But for that same reason it is made up of momentary events in rapid succession. Each band member in the parade has to play an instrument and march in step with others from moment to moment. Each such moment in the lives of the band members is an event in its own right even as it contributes to the bigger event of the parade as a whole. Similarly for the spectators: the parade does not happen all at once. Band members pass before the spectators until the parade has moved out of sight and the spectators go home. A parade, then, is by definition something transient or time-bound. It has no enduring existence except as a memory in the minds of the participants and spectators, and even in that case it is remembered as an event, something that happened and then ended.

Perhaps because he was a mathematician and theoretical physicist before he seriously turned to the study of philosophy, Whitehead accepted the modern scientific notion of physical reality as matter in motion. But

¹¹ Long-time readers of *Theological Studies* may remember a series of articles that appeared in the early 1980s on the value and significance of process theology: David B. Burrell, C.S.C., "Does Process Theology Rest on a Mistake?" 43 (1982) 125–35; Bernard J. Lee, S.M., "The Two Process Theologies," 45 (1984) 307–319; Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., "The Two Process Theologies: A Reappraisal," 46 (1985) 115–128. Rereading those essays as background for the present article, I was reminded of the old maxim: "*Plus se change, plus ce reste la meme chose.*" In a May 2009 address to the College Theology Society, David Burrell reiterated his contention that process theology in all its multiple forms is fatally flawed. Bernard Lee no longer writes on topics dealing with process theology but, given his down-to-earth approach to reality, probably still favors a more empirical, experiential approach to Whitehead's metaphysics. Finally, while I have grown in appreciation of the priority of subjective feeling over logical argument in human discourse and behavior, I still admire most of all Whitehead's daring speculative proposal that the ultimate units of physical reality are not inert mini-things (atoms) but momentary self-constituting subjects of experience (actual entities). As I will suggest below, the practical implications of such a proposal for further work in both the sciences and the humanities are truly enormous.

unlike his predecessors he did not think of matter as in this way composed of mini-things, material atoms that are subject to external forces like gravity and electromagnetism but that eventually coalesce into larger units called molecules, the building blocks of the persons and things of common sense-experience. Rather, for him reality is characterized by a series of mini-events that contribute to larger events. Moreover, as an ongoing series of mini-events with a certain order or pattern of succession, reality is dynamically interconnected. No event is self-explanatory but instead is necessarily affected by previous events and has an effect on subsequent events within the overall sequence of events or ongoing process. The contrast between things and events in Whitehead's thought is thus important for understanding his approach to reality. As he notes in an early philosophical work, *Science and the Modern World*, things have "simple location," a single fixed place in space and time.¹² But events overlap and reinforce one another, somewhat like waves radiating out from stones thrown at random into a still pond. So something other than mini-things (atoms and molecules with a fixed location in space and time) must be the ultimate constituents of physical reality. His solution, controversial even to the present day among natural scientists and empirically minded philosophers, was that "the final real things of which this world is made up" are "actual entities," momentary subjects of experience which are heavily influenced by other such subjects of experience in their environment but in the end are self-constituting realities, making themselves to be what they are in virtue of an immanent "decision."¹³ Each such actual entity is thus a mini-event that is part of a larger event, namely, the "society" or series of events of which it is a momentary member.¹⁴

Whitehead's inspiration for this counter-intuitive approach to physical reality partly came from careful study of his own conscious experience. As he himself admits, he was heavily influenced here by a remark William James made many years ago: "Either your experience is of no content, of no change, or it is of a perceptible amount of content or change. Your acquaintance with reality grows literally by buds or drops of perception."¹⁵ So, according to James, consciousness is not continuous but discontinuous, a series of distinct moments of experience rapidly succeeding one another, each with its own identity. Whitehead agreed with James

¹² See Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967) 48–49.

¹³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978) 18

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 34–35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 68. Reference is to William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, chap. 10.

on this point and then went on to claim that, since the only physical reality to which we have direct access or “insider information,” is our own consciousness, it is entirely possible that every other physical reality is somehow similarly constituted. Consciousness, to be sure, is a special kind of physical reality. It has no spatial parameters but only a temporal sequence of moments of experience. Other physical entities like our bodies exist in space as well as in time. But, argued Whitehead, our bodies and other material realities could likewise be internally constituted from moment to moment by an ongoing series of psychic energy-events, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience, with an objective pattern of self-organization in space and time that we have learned to recognize as individual persons or things.

Our minds, after all, have to simplify the sense data pouring in upon us from all directions at every moment, if only to survive in a sometimes threatening environment. What counts in the end is the ability to respond quickly and effectively to what presents itself to us as either an opportunity or a threat. Hence, the principle of natural selection presumably has been at work over the centuries to simplify our powers of perception so as to allow us to deal with people and things as if they were solid, enduring realities rather than complicated networks of interrelated energy-events that possess a “common element of form” or recognizable pattern of self-organization.¹⁶ In point of fact, however, people and things are the moment by moment result of natural processes taking place below the level of normal perception and self-awareness. I do not normally attend, for example, to my lungs breathing, my heart beating, the circulation of the blood in my veins and arteries; and yet, if any of these processes are interrupted even for a short time, I will be dead.

Still another source of inspiration for Whitehead came from his reflection on how our customary use of language subconsciously shapes the way we look at reality.¹⁷ We in the Western world, perhaps in implicit reliance on Aristotle with his emphasis on “substance” as the first category of being,¹⁸ tend to privilege nouns over verbs, subjects over the activities in which they engage. After all, *agere sequitur esse*. An entity has to exist before it can act. This is a timeless truth but, for that same reason, lacking in historical perspective. From a historical perspective, the opposite seems to be true. *Esse sequitur agere*. We are what we are today as a result of past decisions channeling our activity in one direction rather than another. In that same context, Aquinas’s description of God in the *Summa theologiae* as *Ipsium Esse Subsistens*, the unlimited actuality of the activity of

¹⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 157–60.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1028a.

existing,¹⁹ is intriguing. Is God as thus understood primarily a noun or a verb, the Supreme Being or the ontological Ground of Being as a subsistent activity? Clearly God must somehow be both. But, depending on which is unconsciously prioritized, the God-world relationship is pictured differently. That is, the world of creation is seen as either relatively fixed in its basic hierarchical organization under God or as in ongoing process under divine guidance toward a further stage of existence and activity.

In any case, in terms of Whitehead's metaphysical vision, reality is radically intersubjective. Everything that exists is either an individual subject of experience constituting itself out of its relations with still other subjects of experience or an intricate network ("society") of such momentary subjects of experience with an analogous pattern of self-organization. Whether right or wrong, Whitehead's proposal was and still is truly revolutionary in its implications for the understanding of physical reality. On the one hand, his metaphysical scheme seems to be in line with the latest discoveries in theoretical physics, namely, that the flow of energy within nature is not continuous but discontinuous, occurring in discrete units or "quantum jumps."²⁰ On the other hand, from a strictly philosophical perspective his scheme overcomes the dichotomy between matter and spirit that has bedeviled the Western philosophical tradition from the time of René Descartes with his celebrated distinction between mind and body.²¹ That is, somewhat akin to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's claim in *The Phenomenon of Man* that physical reality has a "within" as well as a "without,"²² an actual occasion for Whitehead is initially an immaterial subject of experience engaged in making itself to be what it is and then what he calls a "superject," a material reality with a perceptible pattern of self-organization.²³ An atom, for example, is not an enduring mini-thing as most people, including natural scientists, presume, but a "society" or ongoing series of atomic events occupying successive locations in space-time.²⁴ Each such atomic event transmits to its successors in the "society" its specific energy-content and its distinctive pattern of self-organization so as to give the appearance of a continuously existing reality in scientific experiments.

There is, of course, no way empirically to verify Whitehead's hypothesis, and this gives many scientists reason enough to dismiss it as useless specu-

¹⁹ Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 3, art. 4 resp.

²⁰ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* 129–37.

²¹ See James Collins, *A History of Modern European Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1954) 178.

²² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 53–66.

²³ Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 27–28.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 80; see also Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* 34–35.

lation. Yet the notion of momentary self-constituting subjects of reality at the base of physical reality is certainly one way to explain indeterminacy at the level of subatomic particles within physical reality.²⁵ Furthermore, for philosophers and theologians, Whitehead's hypothesis opens up a new and strikingly different understanding of the God-world relationship with clear implications for spirituality. If God deals with human beings and other creatures intersubjectively (as one subject of experience to another), how does this affect what we conventionally mean by divine providence and human freedom? How are we to understand God's will and our response to it?

MY CRITIQUE OF WHITEHEAD'S THEORY

For some time, it has been clear to me that Whitehead solved the problem of how spirit and matter can coexist within everything that exists. He specified what Teilhard de Chardin proposed in purely metaphorical language as the "within" and the "without" of things. Likewise, Whitehead offers a plausible philosophical explanation for evolution in the natural sciences, how things can change dramatically in form and function over time, something that is much more difficult to explain in terms of classical metaphysics with its doctrine of substance and accident. But did he overplay his hand with such a strong focus on constant becoming within nature and thereby lose the ability to explain what classical metaphysics properly emphasized, namely, the existence of permanence and continuity even in the midst of ongoing change? For example, in his analysis of human consciousness did Whitehead focus on the ego to the neglect of the self? That is, did he so emphasize the succession of distinct moments within human consciousness that he was no longer able to explain the experience of enduring self-identity, namely, that I am the same person I was five min-

²⁵ This is not to claim that the Whiteheadian proposal of actual entities as the final real things of which the world is made up is the generally preferred way to solve the problem of indeterminacy at the quantum level. Many natural scientists, for example, prefer to think that alleged indeterminacy within natural processes is based on either current ignorance of the true laws of nature or on inevitable limitations in human observation of and experimentation with quantum phenomena (see Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997] 170–73). Others, such as Robert Russell, director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, Calif., urge that, while genuine indeterminacy exists at the quantum level, God, not the actual entity or self-constituting subject of experience as in Whitehead's scheme, determines what was previously indeterminate (see here Robert John Russell, "Quantum Physics and the Theology of Non-Interventionist Objective Divine Action," *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* [New York: Oxford University, 2008] 579–95).

utes ago even though I have had a series of new experiences in that same time-period?

My conclusion for many years now has been that Whitehead did not think through carefully enough how to guarantee permanence and continuity of form or structure within his metaphysical worldview. He simply presumed that individual actual entities or momentary self-constituting subjects of experience are mini-events that are parts of bigger events in space and time that he called societies, aggregates of actual entities with an analogous self-constitution or “common element of form.”²⁶ But aggregates by definition are not wholes different from their parts; they have no reality apart from their constituents and last only as long as those same parts. Thus Whiteheadian “societies” would seem to come and go with the same rapidity as their constituent actual entities; they would not represent the much-needed principle of continuity of form or structure in a constantly changing world. Yet, if Whitehead considered these societies of actual entities as substances, he would have found himself back in an Aristotelian worldview dominated by things rather than by events.

My own solution to this dilemma for Whitehead and his followers has been to claim that Whiteheadian societies should be understood as intentional fields of activity existing between actual entities as interrelated self-constituting subjects of experience. This idea was partly inspired by Whitehead’s own comments in his master work *Process and Reality* about societies as law-like “environments” for their constituent actual entities from moment to moment.²⁷ But it was also influenced by Martin Buber’s reference to the “Between” in his celebrated book *I and Thou*.²⁸ Buber, to be sure, simply claimed that when two people engage in a genuinely I-Thou relation, something common exists between them as long as the encounter lasts. From these two quite different sources, I drew the conclusion that continuity of form or structure in a changing world is constituted not by substances or enduring things but by fields as the enduring context or environment for interrelated energy-events (momentary self-constituting subjects of experience in dynamic interrelation). Thus a world populated by enduring things or substances such as Aristotle and Aquinas envisioned should be replaced by an event-oriented world, provided that all these mini-events can be brought into a cohesive unity in terms of an environment or field of activity that retains its basic structure as individual events within the field come and go.

Accordingly, each “society” of actual entities is to be understood as an ongoing field of activity structured by its constituent actual entities. Each

²⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 34–35.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 90–91.

²⁸ See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* 71–72.

new actual entity (or each new set of actual entities for “societies” that are extended in both space and time) emerges out of a field of activity already structured by predecessor actual entities. The current actual entity (or set of actual entities) makes its own self-constituting decision with respect to the structure or pattern it has inherited. The current actual entity cannot, of course, totally deviate from that already existing structure or pattern; it can modify it slightly by its own decision, but it cannot reject it completely if it is to be the latest actual entity or set of actual entities in the society. This interplay between the new actual entity and its already structured environment nicely accounts for how a Whiteheadian society of actual entities maintains a strong sense of self-identity: the way, for example, that a human being feels that he or she is basically the same person from one moment to the next. The pattern of one’s life remains the same even though one has new and different experiences with the passage of time.

But this is only half the story in a world constituted by intersubjectivity. The other half is to make clear how not only individual actual entities but also Whiteheadian societies as such relate to one another so as to create a common intersubjective world. That is, as Buber saw in his understanding of I-Thou relations in opposition to I-It relations, two subjects of experience can by their encounter with each other cocreate a common world, the world of the Between.

How is this common world, the world of the Between, to be understood in terms of my revised Whiteheadian scheme? My argument is that a Whiteheadian society not only has its own distinctive field of activity, but that it can coinhabit or co-possess with other Whiteheadian societies a common field of activity. That is, the actual entities in each of these coexisting societies find themselves being influenced in their self-constitution not only by the pattern or structure of the field proper to themselves as members of a single society, but also by the structure or pattern of the fields of activity proper to the actual entities constitutive of the other societies as well. They feel, in other words, the effect of the self-constituting decisions not only of the predecessor actual entities in their own society, but also of the self-constituting decisions of antecedent actual entities in the other societies to which they are here and now linked. For example, when you and I enter into an ongoing I-Thou relation, we begin to have a strong impact on each other’s thinking and behavior. We get inside each other in a way that would be impossible between two Aristotelian substances, linked for the most part by various cause and effect relationships.

APPLICATION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

All this may seem heavily speculative and thus impractical for ordinary life. But, carefully thought through in terms of its consequences, this new

intersubjective approach to reality makes possible a dramatically different understanding of the traditional God-world relationship. In Acts 17:28, for example, Paul, speaking to the Athenians, refers to God as him “in whom we live and move and have our being.” Within Thomistic metaphysics Paul’s assertion is difficult to explain. Aquinas makes clear in the *Summa theologiae* that God is indeed present in the world through his knowledge, love, and power.²⁹ But this is not quite the same as saying that the world as such exists in God. After all, it would seem that only a mental representation of the world exists in God; that within the divine consciousness the world exists as an object of divine knowledge and love. The world as a material reality cannot literally exist in God as a strictly immaterial being. Yet within an intersubjective understanding of the God-world relationship, specifically within the revised version of Whitehead’s metaphysics that I have sketched above, God and the creatures of this world can be said to share a common space or field of activity and thereby mutually indwell one another. Their relations to one another are no longer external, based on the logic of cause and effect, but internal, based on the dynamic of intersubjectivity whereby they directly influence one another’s ongoing self-constitution.

For that matter, the ongoing relations of the three divine Persons to one another within the divine life are the best example of this new intersubjective approach to reality. For, within this intersubjective frame of reference, each of the divine Persons is an ongoing subject of experience with a distinct self-identity, what Whitehead would call a personally ordered society of actual entities. Likewise, each of the divine Persons thereby presides over an intentional field of activity proper to itself as this rather than that divine Person.³⁰ But, since these three fields of activity are in principle unlimited, their individual fields of activity merge into one all-comprehensive common field of activity that is structured by their dynamic relations to one another as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³¹ Insofar as each divine Person thus contributes to the ongoing structure or pattern of their common field of activity, they each enter into the ongoing self-constitution of

²⁹ Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 8, art. 3 resp.

³⁰ Here one might inquire whether personhood within this scheme is to be attributed to the field or to the momentary subject of experience within the field. The answer, of course, is that personhood is to be identified with both the momentary subject of experience and with the field out of which it here and now emerges. They cannot be separated. Insofar as personhood implies continuity of existence or self-identity, it is identified with the enduring structured field of activity; but insofar as personhood implies responsiveness to an environment here and now, it must also be a momentary self-constituting subject of experience.

³¹ I use the traditional masculine names for the Persons of the Trinity here simply for the sake of convenience without further implications as to the alleged gender of God.

the other two persons. In effect, they are one God in virtue of this common field of activity whereby they invariably act toward both one another and all their creatures in a totally unified way.

In his own exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas maintained that the divine Persons are subsistent relations, defined in their individual existence through their ongoing dynamic relations to one another.³² This seems remarkably akin to what I just stated above. But, whereas Aquinas limited the term “subsistent relation” to the divine Persons in their ongoing relations to one another, I can apply the term “subsistent relation” likewise to finite subjects of experience in their relations to one another and in their relations to the divine Persons. Every subject of experience, whether finite or infinite, is a “subsistent relation,” constituted in its own self-identity by the way in which it integrates its complex relations to other subjects of experience. Nothing, therefore, solely exists in and for itself; everything is interrelated with everything else. What exists in the end, then, are not simply individual entities, as Aristotle and Aquinas presupposed, but socially organized realities, “societies” of individual entities, interrelated subjects of experience sharing a common field of activity and, through their dynamic interrelation from moment to moment, constituting a higher-order, specifically social, reality.

This same line of thought also explains the traditional Christian belief that the world of creation is made in the image and likeness of God. The world is to be understood as a megasociety composed of innumerable subsocieties of interrelated subjects of experience, each such society with its own field of activity and yet each somehow contributing to the field of activity proper to the world as a common space within which to exist. If this be the case, then, to return to Paul’s statement in Acts 17:21, the world as a whole and each of us as its constituent parts or members can be said to “live and move and have our being” within God. The field of activity proper to the world as a megasociety of subsocieties of subjects of experience is, in other words, contained within the field of activity proper to the divine Persons in their relations to one another. This came about, of course, through a free decision on the part of the divine Persons to share their divine life with created subjects of experience. But we human beings and all other creatures of this world thereby participate in the divine field of activity and share a common life with the divine Persons. Furthermore, as I will explain below, our decisions affect the divine Persons in their ongoing self-constitution, and their decisions affect us in our moment-by-moment decisions.

³² Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 29, art. 4 resp.

GOD'S WILL OR GOD'S DESIRES FOR US?

At this point I can return to the question I raised at the beginning of this article, whether in our relations with God we should think in terms of obeying God's will or fulfilling God's desires for us. "Obeying God's will" suggests to me the worldview of classical metaphysics in which God is the Ultimate First Cause and the Ultimate Final Cause of all else that exists. There are, to be sure, multiple secondary causes at work in creation, but these finite agencies are in the end subordinate to the will of God, the transcendent agency, in the gradual unfolding of salvation history and the cosmic process as a whole.³³ "Fulfilling God's desires," on the contrary, suggests to me the intersubjective world view sketched above in which the three divine Persons and all their creatures make up a cosmic community of dynamically interrelated subjects of experience who are cocreating a common world, in biblical language the kingdom of God. Within this worldview the divine agency is more persuasive than coercive. Creatures make most of the decisions about what is to happen in this world. God's role is threefold: first, to empower creatures to make self-constituting decisions from moment to moment; second, to order these innumerable finite decisions into a coherent whole or "universe" from moment to moment; finally, to advise creatures (above all, human beings) about what would be a better choice in the next moment of their individual and corporate history.

In all likelihood, most Christians operate out of both worldviews in their daily lives without thinking much about it. When their focus is on the workings of Divine Providence in their own lives and in the world at large, Christians take comfort in the belief that the will of God will eventually prevail, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. When their focus, however, is on free will, their God-given power to manage their own lives, they feel a much stronger sense of personal responsibility for what will happen next. In this case, they pray for divine guidance but realize that it has to be in the end their own decision. Is there a way to rethink the God-world relationship so that one can have full confidence both in the workings of divine providence and in one's own personal freedom?

Following Whitehead, I argue that God deals with actual entities, momentary finite subjects of experience, at different levels of existence and activity within nature, through persuasion, not coercion. That is, God offers to each "concreting" or self-constituting actual entity what Whitehead calls an "initial aim."³⁴ This initial aim gives to the concreting actual entity a prospective orientation as to its own "subjective aim," what it

³³ See below, n. 35.

³⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 244.

consciously or unconsciously is moving toward in virtue of its own process of self-constitution. I would further argue that this initial aim from God empowers the developing actual entity to make such a self-constituting decision. In this way, Whitehead's notion of an initial aim comes very close to what classical Christian theology has called actual grace, namely, a gift from God intended to enlighten the mind and motivate the will of rational creatures like ourselves to do good and avoid evil.³⁵

The key point, however, is that the finite actual entity is "free" to accept without qualification the divine initial aim, to reject it outright, or, perhaps in most cases, to modify it in line with other influences on it, stemming from the past of the "society" to which it belongs and from the external environment out of which it is here and now emerging. Just the reverse, therefore, of Thomas à Kempis's celebrated dictum, "Man proposes; God disposes,"³⁶ this radically intersubjective approach to the God-world (God-human) relationship equivalently claims: "God proposes; man disposes." God, accordingly, is clearly not omnipotent in the classical sense of unilaterally making some *thing* happen. But God is still powerful insofar as God can be and presumably is in many cases persuasive with respect to the

³⁵ See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 22, art. 4 resp. and the commentary on this article by Joseph P. Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: "Merit" in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1995) 154–55: "When God achieves the divine will through necessary causes, the effect is necessary, for it pertains to necessary causes that their effects follow necessarily. When God achieves the divine will through contingent causes, the effect follows infallibly but not with necessity; it does occur as God plans but it occurs contingently, in keeping with the nature of the secondary cause. . . . Through reason and will, the human person is able to discover and contemplate various courses of action to attain the fulfillment of his being. God respects this freedom and leaves human contingency intact. Nevertheless, while the human person retains dominion over his acts, his activity falls under the divine providence employed by God for the achievement of God's plan." The key difference between this understanding of divine providence and human freedom and my own neo-Whiteheadian understanding of God's grace (the divine initial aim) and human free choice (the subjective aim of the individual here and now) is that in the Thomistic account the human free choice is somehow aligned with the antecedent will of God for the good order of the universe as a finite reflection of the infinite goodness of God. In my theory, on the contrary, God's ongoing will for the good order of the universe follows upon the human being's choice of a subjective aim here and now. In both cases, divine providence over creation is a reality, but the emphasis is different. In the one case, the focus is on the achievement of the *divine will* in terms of a comprehensive plan for the workings of the universe; in the other, the focus is on creaturely spontaneity from moment to moment with God always finding a way to do "damage control" as needed so as to bring the fallible decision of the creature into line with *God's desires* for creation as a whole and the human race in particular.

³⁶ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* 1.19, trans. Richard Challoner (Rockford, Ill.: Tan, 1989) 46.

self-constituting decision of an independently existing finite *subject of experience*.

As we all know from our personal experience in dealing with other human beings, this is no mean accomplishment. Usually much patience and forbearance is required to win over by degrees another human being to one's own way of thinking and behaving. Furthermore, if God's activity in our lives is persuasive, not coercive, this equivalently absolves God from any culpability for what goes wrong in our world. Creatures, finite self-constituting subjects of experience, and not God, are ultimately responsible for the existence of evil: both moral evil (sin) on the part of human beings and natural evil insofar as both human and nonhuman subjects of experience unconsciously and without culpability on their part reduce the world in which they exist to a state of near chaos by their self-constituting decisions contrary to what God initially proposed for them. Thus, given this intersubjective approach to the God-world relationship, there is no longer need for theodicy, a theoretical justification for God's ways of dealing with creatures, since creatures, and not God, regularly make the decisions on what *de facto* happens in this world from moment to moment.

But is God then reduced to being merely a passive spectator of the cosmic process, offering initial aims or "lures" for action to finite actual entities but helpless to ensure that these aims are accepted and implemented by those same actual entities? At the end of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead proposes that God "prehends," grasps intuitively, everything that happens from moment to moment in the world of finite subjects of experience and incorporates all these different self-constituting decisions of actual entities into the divine "consequent nature," God's own moment-by-moment experience of the cosmic process. In this way, God "saves the world as it passes into the immediacy of his own life."³⁷ This is Whitehead's way of saying that the cosmic process has meaning and value beyond the present moment. Everything that happens is preserved for all eternity within the memory of God.

I have indicated elsewhere how not just human beings but all the creatures of this world can coexist with the three divine Persons within the divine life for all eternity, albeit in a transformed state.³⁸ Important for my purposes is Whitehead's proposal that God's chief activity with respect to the world of creation is not to make things happen but to order over and over again the contingent decisions of finite actual entities so as to constitute from moment to moment a universe. That is, in virtue of God's

³⁷ Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 346.

³⁸ See, e.g., Joseph A. Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought: Spirituality for a Changing World* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Templeton, 2006) 103–15; and Bracken, *God: Three Who Are One* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2008) 109–22.

“prehension” of the world as an ordered totality at every moment, God is able to provide over and over again initial aims for new generations of finite subjects of experience. For its part, the world as a reality distinct from God depends upon those same divine initial aims to ward off complete chaos as a result of all the conflicting decisions of finite actual entities at any given moment. So this is how divine providence can be said to be actively at work in the world without jeopardy to the spontaneous activity of nonhuman creatures and the personal freedom of human beings. That is, God does not maintain order within the world of creation by making things happen one way rather than another in terms of divine efficient causality. God maintains order by continually reconfiguring the pattern of finite events within the world of creation in terms of divine final causality. Thus, while creatures, finite subjects of experience, have the final say in terms of what *de facto* happens within the world of creation, God has the final say in terms of what it all means both for the present and for the future.

Finally, whereas in Whitehead’s own approach to the God-world relationship, God does not know the future as actual but only as more or less possible,³⁹ I argue in line with classical metaphysics that God does know the future as an actuality. But I contend that the future of the world of creation is not thereby a finished reality within the timelessness of eternity as in classical metaphysics. Rather the past, present, and future of the world of creation are present to the divine Persons as interrelated dimensions of an ongoing cosmic process. New events, as they happen in the present, continually add to the content of the past and reconfigure what is still possible in terms of the future even for the divine Persons. Thus the three divine Persons see each and every concreting actual entity in its “presentiality” or moment of dynamic self-constitution within the cosmic process and transmit to it just for that moment an initial aim or “lure” to assist it in its self-constitution.⁴⁰ In this way divine providence and human freedom are reconciled with each other. The events that thus occur within

³⁹ “God and the world are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjoined multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into concrecent unity, with its diversities in contrast (Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 348).” God is, according to Whitehead’s thinking, not transcendent of the cosmic process but immanent within it. Hence, God cannot know the future of the process as actual but only as more or less possible.

⁴⁰ See Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 14, art. 13 resp., where he claims that God from eternity sees “future contingents” in their “presentiality.” But, whereas Aquinas sees these entities as already fixed actualities, I see them simply as passing moments in an ongoing cosmic process. Hence, even though the divine Persons know the outcome both of the cosmic process as a whole and of the destiny of each entity in that process, they still offer “initial aims” to each actual entity as it comes into existence since they are present to the actual entity in its “presentiality,” while it is still in the process of self-constitution.

the cosmic process are due to the spontaneous self-constituting decisions of finite subjects of experience with or without the benefit of divine guidance. But the order that is nevertheless maintained within the world from moment to moment is due to the providential activity of the divine Persons in ordering and reordering over and over again these same events into an ever-growing intelligible whole from the perspective of their concomitant knowledge of the cosmic process as a completed whole.⁴¹

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, let me remind the reader once again that I am only using Whitehead's metaphysics (or, better, my revision of his metaphysical scheme) in this article as an example of what I mean by an explicitly intersubjective approach to the God-world relationship as opposed to a more conventional view grounded in Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics with its emphasis on specific cause-effect relationships. Endorsement either of Whitehead's or my own neo-Whiteheadian approach to the God-world relationship, however, is not necessary for the success of my main argument that the worldview implicit within the classical understanding of obedience to the will of God is significantly different from the notion of God's desires for creatures who retain their own power of self-constitution with or without active assistance from God. At the same time, no one should presume to know the mind of God (see Rom 11:33–35). Hence, the real import of this article is not to settle in theory whether God's will for us from moment to moment is quite specific or instead open to further specification by us on the assumption that God will somehow order whatever we decide into the broader context of our personal lives and salvation history as a whole. No, the real import of my article is to raise the question of which model of the God-human relationship better serves our spiritual needs from day to day. On the one hand, a person who is serenely confident that he or she is executing the will of God for him- or herself at any given moment has a decided psychological advantage over another person who is struggling with a decision, while praying for divine guidance, trying to read "the signs of the times," and conferring with other people about what to do. On the other hand, if the first individual's self-assurance turns out to be a big mistake, then the consequences for both the individual and other people could be quite painful, even disastrous. Clearly either alternative carries risk, but which one carries the greater risk?

⁴¹ I have argued this hypothesis at greater length in an already published article: "Space and Time from a Neo-Whiteheadian Perspective," *Zygon* 42 (2007) 41–47; and as a chapter in Bracken, *Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Intersubjectivity: A New Paradigm for Religion and Science*, foreword William R. Stoeger (Conshohocken, Pa.: Templeton, 2009).