

TRINITY AND PROCESS: SOME COMMENTS IN REPLY

In the September 1970 issue of *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES*, Anthony J. Kelly of St. Mary's Seminary, Wendouree (Victoria), Australia, published a very interesting essay entitled "Trinity and Process," an attempt to stress the living, dynamic, and processive quality of the Godhead interpreted in Trinitarian fashion. In the opening section of his essay, the author gives a useful summary of process theology and addresses "three questions to process theologians" which, he says, must be answered "with some rigor"; they "expose some serious shortcomings in the process scheme of theology." It is the purpose of the present article to look at these questions and comment upon them; it is my judgment that they may be answered by the process theologian without difficulty and that, far from exposing "serious shortcomings," they indicate the validity of the process conceptuality.

The questions, with Kelly's discussion, will be found on pages 394-96 of Volume 31. I begin by quoting Kelly's own statement of his questions:

(1) If God is somehow contained within the process of the development of the universe, is not the process itself more fittingly called God than the "divine" reality which is subjected to it? Does it not have a prior reality, a more absolute measure, a more comprehensive scope than "God" who is contained in its law? Should we not, in short, adore the process rather than the Deity? (2) Further, what guarantee have we that God will actually survive the process? In His evolution, would He not be a possible casualty like any number of ourselves? If He is really exposed to the risk of existence, might He in the end be one of the unlucky ones? (3) Have not these theologians been misled by a very misleading term, the *relatio rationis*, in that they understand it as implying that a God of Pure Act is utterly static and related to creation in a literally extrinsic and unconcerned way? Have they given sufficient credit to the full richness of the concept of *Ipsam Esse Subsistens*, with its necessary implication of personal will, by which God freely chooses to commit Himself to us, so as to make Himself, from eternity, and in all that He is, *our God*?

In discussing these questions with another critic of process theology, I was told that what it came down to, in religious terms, was just this: Is the God portrayed in process thought sufficient or adequate to *save* men?

There are various ways in which one might comment on the three questions and the additional question which was said to sum up what the three were getting at, religiously speaking. One could look at each question in turn and then cite references from, say, Whitehead's writings which would show the sort of answer that might be given. One could sketch out, in reply, the general scheme of process thinking about the concept of God and His relation to the world. I have chosen to comment

in another way. What I shall do is to take each question and attempt to state what one process theologian (namely, myself with my own particular "slant" and my own way of understanding the affirmations of the conceptuality) can say about it. While this means a more personal approach, it may also (and for that very reason) be a more satisfactory method; after all, there is no completely unanimous "school" of process theologians; for each of us has a different background, religiously speaking, as well as different reasons for having accepted the general process perspective as satisfactory. Certainly, all of us accept certain emphases, but there is no process "orthodoxy" which is imposed upon us, as it were from outside and above. Indeed, to talk in that fashion would be to deny the process way of seeing things.

I

In his first question addressed to process theologians, Kelly asks whether "process" rather than "God" should not be taken as the "prior reality" by those who believe that "God is somehow *contained* within the process." I have stressed here the word "contained," since upon it depends the main point of Kelly's question.

As a matter of fact, process thinking would hardly wish to speak of God as "contained" within "the process of the development of the universe." The important truth would be quite different. What is asserted is that "process—that is to say, creative change or advance—is a characteristic of both the universe *and* God. Unquestionably, some statements of this point have been open to misinterpretation—as, for example, when Whitehead in an unguarded moment spoke of both God and the world as being in the "grip" of creativity. But an examination of Whitehead's discussion makes clear that this was nothing more than a vivid (and, as I have said, misleading) way of saying that creativity is present in, and the specifically defining quality of, *all* that happens. The world is a world in which we see a processive movement, as advance is made by its constituent occasions from potentiality to some degree and kind of actualization. But because God is no "exception" to this, or to most of the other principles required to describe how things go, but their "chief exemplification" (to employ here Whitehead's famous adage), we go on to say that God too is best spoken of in language which has to do with process. If God is in truth "the living God," not some static being who in the vulgar idiom "already has it made," then temporality is meaningful in Him and to Him, the movement forward towards goals which He seeks to realize is essential to His very nature and activity, and the actualization in concrete fact of potentialities which He has in view (in the "continuum of possibility" which is the whole infinite range of what Whitehead styled

the "ideal objects") is the point of His relationship with the world.

The processive or creative quality here serves, for process thinking, much the same ends which the generalized concept of "being" serves in classical theism, more particularly in the Scholastic theologians whom Kelly quotes in the course of his essay. In God, for such Scholastic thought, being is at its most complete, so that He may even be called Being Itself—His essence and His existence are identical, with the priority ascribed to His essence. In the creatures, this kind of thinking would say, being is limited, contingent, conditional; but it is none the less real. The creatures are indeed "becoming," whilst God "is." Yet what this *means* is that God possesses the fulness of being and the creatures possess, by derivation from that fulness, only a slight degree of being, such that their essence and their existence are *not* identical. In the "great chain of being," in Lovejoy's terms, the creatures are far down in the scale, whilst God is at the apex; but "being," of some degree and sort, is characteristic throughout, once we are above the zero limit of sheer negativity or "absence of being" which is the "nothingness" out of which (in a certain sense) God is said to create.

The comment which I should make, therefore, is that Kelly has failed here to understand the process mode of thinking; he has confused it with a kind of overemphasis on divine immanence, amounting almost to a pantheistic monism, and he has used an image ("contained within . . .") which is not only inaccurate but points away from rather than towards a basic assertion of process theology. In any event, if by God we mean that which by definition is worshipful because it is perfect in its goodness, excellence, wisdom, etc., we are then talking about that which is "comprehensive" and "absolute" (in the only viable sense of that word), with "a prior reality" because God is the indispensable prius (as chief causative agency who supplies initial aims, gives lures, works through prehensions felt by the creatures, and receives and employs all that is accomplished in the world) to anything and everything. He is not just an aspect of a total process, He is indeed Himself processive, but He is the "ultimate irrationality" which provides a means of understanding how there is a creaturely process going on in the way in which, through felt experience and observation, we see this one to go on.

II

What has just been said already provides a partial answer to the second of Kelly's questions. This second question, it will be recalled, asked whether we have any guarantee that God "will actually survive the process" or be a "casualty like any number of ourselves."

By identifying the description of God and the world (as characterized

by a processive quality) with the ongoing process of the creaturely world itself, Kelly fails here, as in the first question, to see that God's "evolution" (which might equally or more properly have been written *involvement*) is not a matter of His "existence" being threatened by the fate, whatever it may be, of *this* particular creation. Process theologians would insist, of course, that for God to be creative (or creator), in any meaningful sense of that word, he must have "a creation" in and on which He works creatively. There is no reason, however, to think that this entails the specific creation which we know and of which we are part: *this* world. Nor is there any reason to assume that the divine activity, in all its processive quality, within and through any and every conceivable world, is of the order that would make it possible for God to be a "casualty" when that world came (as it might) to its end.

On the other hand, a process thinker—at least this one now writing—is prepared to speak of the "risk" that God takes in His creative activity in the world. His very nature, His "root attribute," in such thinking is love; and His purpose is the sharing of love as widely and fully as possible. To say that *is* to speak of "taking risks"; for it is love's peculiar mark that it goes out of itself to others, putting itself at their disposal, desiring their response yet respecting their freedom sufficiently so that the response is not coerced, being vulnerable to others and to their decisions with the consequences which follow. Hence God *is* "exposed to the risk of existence"; but He is *not* exposed to the risk that He may become "nonexistent"; for in process thought God in His "primordial aspect" is necessarily existent, although in His concrete actuality as the divine reality related to the created world (His "consequent nature") He is inevitably contingent, to whatever degree we may wish to understand it, upon the response made to His initiative, His continuing lure or invitation, and His provision of possible satisfaction for the creatures with whom He has chosen to identify Himself in the closest possible manner.

There is no guarantee that *this* world will continue as we know it—Whitehead spoke of its running down physically, even if moving upward spiritually—and there is not any problem in the possibility that the particular style of creation known to us may not continue forever. On the other hand, some created order with some style peculiar to itself would be required if God were to be what for biblical and Christian faith He must always be, the creative principle and the chief causative agency as well as the final recipient of all good that is accomplished. And it may be worth nothing here that the idea, sometimes put forward, that in Himself (as triune Deity) God finds an abiding object of love and act, even without any creatures at all, is a meaningless idea, if love is taken with full seriousness and if act means going out in such loving concern. The idea

amounts to calling God a sort of mutual-love society, with no outlets or expressions beyond Himself; and for some of us that would suggest that He is not love at all but a highly subtle sort of selfishness and self-centredness.

III

When we come to the last of Kelly's questions, we have to do with the interpretation that, as he thinks, process theologians have given to the traditional view that God is *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, "self-subsistent Being," with the root attribute of aseity, and to be described as *Actus Purus*, "Pure Act" as he (not quite adequately) translates the Scholastic phrase.

It is indeed true that Scholastic theology endeavored to speak of God in a fashion which would make it possible to say that He is "personal will," that He "freely chooses to commit Himself to us," and that He has made Himself "from eternity, and in all that He is, our God"—to use Kelly's own words. The effort was to give "richness" to the concept of self-subsistent Being, so that the reality of the religious life—meeting with God, communion with Him, the experience of grace and salvation, etc., as well as the significance of prayer—could be grounded in the divine nature. But the fact is that this effort was not really successful; for in the great theologians of the tradition there seems always to be a sort of split or schism between their religious and their more metaphysical assertions.

In St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, there is a profound religious conviction which is expressed in, for example, his *Explicationes*, where he discusses the Apostles' Creed, etc., with the use of references to Scripture and occasionally to St. Augustine's teaching. Here, as in his sermons, hymns, and the *Corpus Christi* office, there is stress on God as indeed personal will, freely committing Himself to His creation, in loving relationship with His human children, faithful in His purpose but adapting Himself to the decisions of men so that He may invite them to respond to Him. But in the more metaphysical discussion in the two *Summae* and elsewhere, the Aristotelian emphasis comes strongly to the fore and St. Thomas spends enormous time and effort in attempting to reconcile the faith which trusts in a God closely relating Himself to creation with an unchangeable, impassible, and self-sufficient Deity for whom the creation seems to have no *real* point—and which is related to Him only logically.

It is indeed correct to say that the God of the "philosophers and savants" (to use Pascal's words) is not "utterly static"; but it seems to me clear enough that by definition that God is related to creation in what

may not improperly be called "a literally extrinsic" fashion, while this relationship can be described as "unconcerned" because it hardly makes the creation so much a matter of divine interest that the very heart of Deity is "pure unbounded love" going out ceaselessly to a world where He purposes to share His goodness. The description of such a God as "pure unbounded love" must come as an adjectival modification of the substantival aseity or self-containedness and self-sufficiency which is thought to be His *essential* selfhood.

Now I am prepared to accept the presence in Scholastic theology, and in the general traditional theism which it sums up, of a religiously significant element; in fact, I have often insisted upon this aspect of official teaching, as against those who (in my opinion) misrepresent that theology as being entirely and completely interested only in the *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. Yet I must note the neuter gender of that phrase; and I believe that the main stress in this type of theology has been precisely the one upon which most other process theologians have put their finger in critical comment. Furthermore, process theology, by making much of God's necessary existence in one pole of His reality, has provided for the truth contained in talk of God's transcendent supremacy and unsurpassable quality. But it has insisted that the priority in theology must be on God's *actual* nature as related to the creation; hence the placing of love in the position which in traditional theism has been given to aseity. Hence also the use of the conventional lists of attributes of God (in particular, the so-called metaphysical attributes) as primarily adverbial—they are statements about the way in which God as cosmic Lover acts in His world, by the wisdom of His love, the strength of His love, the universal presence of His love, etc.

An acquaintance said that the point of such critical questions as Kelly's is to ask whether the God of process theology is "strong to save"—we quoted this comment in beginning the present essay. The answer to the question just stated is really very simple; it is to ask the questioner "Why is He *not* 'strong to save'?" So far as I can see, every reason may be given for asserting that the concept of God in process thought provides for what religious experience and faith is saying when it speaks of the salvation or redemption of the world by the act of God. Obviously, theories of atonement which are phrased in transactional language or which have a legalistic character or which suppose that man is but a helpless object for divine action cannot be entertained by a theologian who stresses the divine love, the freedom of response in creation, the utter importance of human decision, etc. But the "love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," enacted and displayed in the full reality of a human life to the point of sacrificial death; the objectivity of that action as something historically accom-

plished; the evocation of response in commitment through faith and trust as men are grasped by the proclamation of that event as salvatory; the growth in sanctification as the love of God released in Christ is communicated through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit: all these are asserted in the writings of most process theologians, perhaps all of them.

I presume that what troubles some of the critics is their idea that God (so conceived) does not have adequate resources to meet the evil in the world and the wrongness (sin) in man. Yet is not the sheer reality of cosmic love, inexhaustible in its depths and all-encompassing in its outreach, sufficient to meet and overcome whatever is evil or wrong? The cosmic Lover will not triumph by being changed from love into coercion; but then anybody who thought that this was His way of victory must have failed utterly to understand what the gospel of God's love in action in Jesus Christ, to the point of death on Calvary yet through that death to the assurance of resurrection, really declares to us about the divine nature and the divine mode of activity in the creation.

More and more, some of us are convinced that a basic difficulty in Christian theology has been, and is, an inability to rest the case upon love. Somehow or other, it is felt, love must be backed up by force or there is no assurance of its triumphant quality. I think that we have here an instance of faithless fear. To be sure, the victory of love is not always apparent; certainly, that victory is not instantaneous; we cannot claim for it the kind of public validation which the man of the world likes to see. But the Christian act of faith *is* the commitment to that love, or rather to that Lover, incarnate in the human existence of Jesus. To be a Christian *is* to respond by total surrender to that love—or, because most of us are “frail children of dust,” to *want* to respond by such total surrender. And Christian theology, rightly understood, is the effort to work out the implications of such faith in response to the divine activity.

King's College, Cambridge University

NORMAN PITTINGER