WHITEHEAD AND "CATHOLICISM"

In his recently published autobiography *Memories and Meanings* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), Dr. W. R. Matthews, former Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, has written briefly about his friend Alfred North Whitehead. They were long associated in the University of London, while Whitehead was at the Imperial College of Science and Matthews was Dean of King's College in that university; their friendship continued and Matthews was the guest of the Whiteheads when he visited the United States to lecture at Harvard University, where his friend had gone to teach philosophy. In his notes about Whitehead, the sympathy and appreciation of Matthews is obvious. Brief as they are, they provide an interesting insight into some aspects of Whitehead's life and beliefs which hitherto have not received very much attention.

One day Whitehead said to him (the Dean tells us): "The older I get, the more certain I am that nearly all the things Catholics do are right, and nearly all the reasons they give are wrong." The Dean couples this remark with the comment that in his judgment "specimens of his [Whitehead's] conversation which are on record are defective"—presumably he is referring to Lucien Price's *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*. They are defective, he goes on to say, since "they do not convey the religious spirit of Whitehead's thinking." Furthermore, says Matthews, "sharply critical sayings on the apparent contradictions and confusions in Christian teaching are authentic and characteristic, but...he spoke from within the fellowship of the spiritually awakened. He was a worshipper."

These remarks of Dean Matthews seem to me of considerable interest. Not only did the Dean know Whitehead well; he also shows that he had considerable understanding of his friend's philosophical views, although he says of *Process and Reality* that it "is written in a most difficult idiom which the reader has to acquire before he can understand the work." That certainly is true enough. Unfortunately, however, Matthews thinks that there is some doubt as to whether "Whitehead's influence will be lasting"—in his old age, for he is now about ninety and has not been aware of the growing influence of Whitehead's "process thought" in recent years, not only in North America but in Great Britain and elsewhere. And it is precisely the fact of that growing influence which makes Matthews' earlier remarks so valuable; for, as I have said, these remarks bring clearly into focus an aspect of the man and his thought which has not received its proper attention from many Whitehead scholars.

My concern in this essay is with that aspect, more particularly as it has to do with "the things Catholics do" and "the reasons they give." When this is linked with what Matthews tells us about "the religious spirit of

Whitehead's teaching," as he says elsewhere in his comments, I believe we are compelled to reckon seriously both with that "religious spirit" and with the fact that Whitehead was sympathetic to what we might style the "Catholic side" of the broader Christian tradition, whatever may have been his disagreements with its theology and with the metaphysical assumptions upon which that theology rests.

I

I myself was first brought to realize this sympathy with "Catholic Christianity" (I put this in inverted commas because I mean here, not simply the Roman Catholic Church, but Anglo-Catholicism in the Church of England and the Anglican Communion) when I learned that during his days in the English Cambridge, where he lived and worked for some thirty years, Whitehead had attended worship with I do not know what regularity at what would be called a "high church" parish. He also attended services in the chapel of Trinity College, of which he was a fellow, and liked to be present from time to time at the afternoon service (even then celebrated for its music) at the chapel of my own college, King's. A former student of Whitehead's at Harvard informed me that after arrival in the American Cambridge, Whitehead took to attending worship at one of the "high church" parishes of the Episcopal Church in Boston, although later he discontinued this and went from time to time to the Memorial Church of the university.

One of my own students pointed out to me (what I had not noticed myself) that the only reference in *Process and Reality* to a specifically religious symbol has to do with incense (American ed., pp. 278–79). Whitehead recognized the dangers of such a symbol, yet said that "for many purposes, certain aesthetic experiences which are easy to produce make better symbols than do words, written or spoken." "Incense is a suitable symbol" for producing "certain religious emotions"; at the same time, there must be a real communication of the meaning to be conveyed, and the emotions produced must be sound and genuine. The specific instance of incense is probably of no great importance; what matters is Whitehead's *use* of that instance and his obvious appreciation of its place in Catholic worship. Another former student of Whitehead's at Harvard told me that Whitehead had once, in his hearing, defended "Catholic modes of worship" and had criticized what he styled the "literalistic" and "rationalistic" teaching often associated with it—not unlike his comment to Matthews, of course.

Price tells in the *Dialogues* of Whitehead's favorable comment on Mass in a German cathedral. Still a third former student reported to me that his teacher remarked on the aesthetic appeal of such worship, but ad-

mitted that he could not consider his philosophy reconcilable with "orthodox Christianity," although he still could think of himself as a Christian. I need not cite the many references to Christian faith and theology in *Adventures of Ideas*, *Religion in the Making*, and elsewhere. In all these it is apparent not only that Whitehead understood religion as a cultural phenomenon but also that he believed firmly in the "religious vision" and more particularly in the "brief Galilean vision" as important clues to the way things go in the creative advance.

This material, and much of the same sort which need not be detailed, has to be sorted out. What *was* Whitehead's religious position? How are we to understand it and him? Such questions lead us to a renewed study of the writings, especially if we are (like myself) in one way or another "disciples" of the "master." Until Prof. Victor Lowe publishes the biography upon which he has been working for many years, we shall not have all the data we might wish. Yet I believe that while we cannot now work out satisfactorily the story of Whitehead's religious ideas and development with the precision we desire, we can at least see how he began and we can have a pretty good idea of where he ended. In this connection, of course, we must be on guard against taking *au pied de la lettre* some of the comments reported by Mr. Price. That Whitehead in his last years found the Bible of little help to him may very well be true; doubtless it is, since Whitehead is stated to have said just that. But we need to remember that this, and other comments of which this is a single example, are essentially obiter dicta of a man in his eighties; they should not be used to undermine or deny his considered opinions expressed in his books and (as we know from Price's account) carefully worked out and carefully phrased. The obiter dicta are to be understood in the light of his considered views, not vice versa.

I believe we may think with some confidence that Whitehead held to the central Christian insights throughout his life (save perhaps for a short period, to which we shall refer in a moment, when he was "agnostic"); at the same time, we must grant that he was impatient with traditional formulae for expressing those insights and saddened, if not angered, by the perversion which in his judgment "alien ideas" imported from moralistic notions, substantialist metaphysics, and a rigid dogmatic stance, as well as from the imperial cult of the Roman and Byzantine empires, had brought about in the ongoing tradition of Christian thought.

II

First, as to how Whitehead *began*. His background was entirely Christian, not to say clerical. His father was a clergyman of the Church of England, vicar of St. Peter's in Ramsgate on the Isle of Thanet in Kent.

His brother became a clergyman and eventually was made a missionary bishop in India. As a child and during his early years Whitehead imbibed Christian teaching at home, attended services in his father's church, and knew dignitaries like Archbishop Tait, his father's close friend who was accustomed to drive frequently from Canterbury to visit the vicarage. Later, when at school in the ancient foundation of Sherborne in Dorset, he received religious instruction and was enormously impressed by the tradition of which that ancient school, which a few years ago celebrated its thousandth anniversary, was a living part. All this we know from his memoirs, included in *Essays in Science and Philosophy* and incorporated in his contribution to Schilpp's *Philosophy of Whitehead.*

Either as an undergraduate at Trinity College in Cambridge or shortly thereafter as a very junior fellow, he had a period of agnosticism, if Bertrand Russell's memory is to be trusted. But we have no further details of this, and Russell also tells us that at one point his friend and colleague was nearly converted to the Roman Catholic Church through reading the books of Cardinal Newman. We know, as I have said, that he attended services in his college chapel and at King's and that after his marriage he went to church—how frequently is uncertain—at Little St. Mary's, the "high church" parish whose building is next to Peterhouse in Trumpington Street, Cambridge. He read a great deal of theology, more particularly the writings of the Fathers or early Church theologians. He told Lucien Price that when he wished to make room in his library, he sold these books to a Cambridge bookseller, saying that he had read them through and saw no reason to keep them. From Russell we also learn that the death of his son, in military action in World War I, had a profound effect upon him; Russell thinks that this had much to do with Whitehead's philosophical and religious concern thereafter.

There can be little doubt, then, that throughout those years, with whatever doubts and despite the brief period of "agnosticism" to which Russell refers, Whitehead was essentially a Christian. His belief may not have been conventional; with much in the theological structure, familiar to him from childhood, he was evidently discontented. And much the same remains true during later years. Over and over again we find allusions to or discussions of religious and theological questions. In his books and in the *Dialogues* he could and did speak scathingly of "official" theology; he could and did denounce parts of the Bible, more particularly in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation, which seemed to him either subchristian or barbaric or unworthy of assent. He could even say that the Bible helped him much less in his old age than it had done when he was younger, although even then he described it as a great "saga." Yet at the same time he could speak sympathetically and warmly of the spirit

of worship, especially of "Catholic worship" on the continent of Europe. He contrasted such worship with the didactic and moralistic "Protestant" type that failed to emphasize the symbolic, with its "holiness of beauty" (as we might put it); he disliked the sort of worship which emphasized simply an intellectual attitude or was concerned with moralistic teaching. He mentioned his affection for the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England and its evocation of reverence and beauty; at the same moment, however, he criticized Anglicanism, the religion in which he had been brought up, because with all its advantages—the Prayer Book, the glory of its cathedrals and parish churches, and the like—it had "everything except religion." This is a hard saying, but those of us who are ourselves Anglicans can understand what he meant: the arid "establishment type" of Anglicanism is indeed more a cultural than a religious reality.

As he grew older, he continued to express his deep appreciation of genuine religious insight and faith but became ever more impatient with the conventional theological structure. He was equally critical of the liberalism which consisted mostly, as he said, of "vapid reasons" for continuing to "go to church in the old way." He felt that liberalism of this sort had tended to substitute ethical teaching for deep religious insight and was altogether too ready to give up the very notion of "dogma" (which evidently for him meant the ordered statement of the generalizations contained in religious vision) in its effort to accommodate itself to the passing fads of the moment. His reverence for Jesus was obvious; here was what he had called "the disclosure of the nature of God and his agency in the world." It troubled him that the doctrine of God had so often forgotten that disclosure, glimpsed by Plato and others and enacted in the man Jesus, and had substituted the model of an Oriental despot, or an abstract concept of being or substance, or a "ruthless moralist." His own central concern was with that "brief Galilean vision" where God is revealed, through an event of remarkable "importance," as loving and persuasive. It was for Christians, he said, to work out the doctrine which followed from this fact—here differing from Buddhism, which began with a doctrine or a metaphysic and then sought for facts to illustrate it. And in his very last words, if Price is to be trusted, he spoke of man as a "co-creator with God," which constituted man's dignity and obviously for Whitehead gave life its purpose, whatever might be said about individual survival of personal death.

III

With all this in mind—and it is here that Whitehead *ended*—we cannot question the accuracy of Dr. Matthews' judgment that his friend had a "religious spirit," that he spoke "from within the fellowship of the spiritu-

ally awakened," and that he was "a worshipper."

Alix Parmentier, the French philosopher who has written a massive study entitled *La philosophie de Whitehead et le Problème de Dieu*, is correct when she says that for him religion was essentially found in what she calls *adoration*, her translation of the word "worship" which Whitehead so frequently employed. She is also right in urging that for him love (*l'amour*) was central in his thought of God. Mlle. Parmentier is in error, however, when she says that "creativity" and "love" are in conflict in Whitehead's thought and that finally the former won the precedence. Her mistake arises from a failure to see that it was Whitehead's conviction that a world "in process," interrelated, and social in nature, has creativity as the characteristic of *all* entities or occasions, including God; while love is the nature or quality operative through the creative advance inviting and evoking the movement towards fulfilment or satisfaction of aim. Furthermore, in saying that Whitehead rejected a "personal" God, this French commentator does not observe that when he *speaks* of God, he suggests the chief characteristics of "personality" (conscious awareness, freedom, purpose, communication or relationship, etc.), although he is hesitant to use freely the *word* "personal"—doubtless because of its limiting and (shall we say) unhappily anthropomorphic suggestion, as well as its implication that impersonal structures are insignificant in the divine reality.

But worship (*adoration*) was for Whitehead the chief religious activity, coupled with a sense of "companionship" and what he calls "refreshment," and the "saving" of what has been accomplished in the world. But this required, for him, a "new reformation" in which there would be a reconception of Christian theology, more particularly to bring out both the character of God as love or persuasion and also the intimate relationship of God to a world which influences Him and has its affects upon Him. He regarded as the great apostasy in Christian thought the substitution of an "idolatrous conception" of God as absolute power, unmoved mover, "imperial Caesar," and harsh, unrelenting moralist. Anything which reflected that substitution was to be subjected to criticism; in theology or liturgy or behavior, the false conception worked devastatingly to alter the content of the "Galilean vision," or to render it meaningless and irrelevant. Thus he denounced a theology which in "paying metaphysical compliments" to God, was prepared to forget the tenderness, gentleness, patience, suffering, and love disclosed in that vision as the truth about the divine whom men worship. Love like this has about it the note of triumph or victory, even in its participation in anguish and the world's suffering.

A transactional view of the atonement, for example, was for him a

denial of the vision of Love as suffering with men, through communion with them saving what is salvable, and providing an insight into the way things go in the world, how men may live in fellowship, and the dignity of "co-creatorship" with God as their contribution is accepted and used by Him for further implementation of good. He rejected a view of worship which regarded it as an "endless serenading" of a God supposed to delight in having His creatures cringe in His presence and so abase themselves that their proper manhood is denied. For him, that was not genuine worship at all; it was more appropriate to the court of a tyrannical ruler than to the relationship of men to the God whose love enables them to think of Him as "Father." Nor did he have any use for the piety which regards creatures as puppets pulled about by an entirely omnipotent deity; such a notion seemed to him unworthy morally and a contradiction of the "vision" of God as persuasive, while it also denied the freedom which belongs to any and every entity to realize or actualize its aim in full responsibility.

What has been said to this point helps us to understand what Whitehead meant when he told Dr. Matthews that he thought that what Catholics do is, for the most part, right, while the reasons they give for doing it are "nearly all wrong."

Note that Whitehead commended what "Catholics *do*." We can see the meaning here, I think, without falling into the trap of setting what might be styled "denominational Catholics" against "denominational Protestants." Presumably, Whitehead would have been thinking of the way in which for Catholic Christianity *worship* is so central and all-important. With this he would have associated the rich symbolism, the appeal to the senses as well as to the mind and will, and the aesthetic quality in liturgical action such as he had so much appreciated in the German cathedral Mass about which he spoke to Price. These would have been related to the stress laid in his world view on the deep "feeling-tones" in human experience. Thus we can assume that what was in his mind was the sacramental sort of worship which would speak to the whole man, including human rationality and volition, but meeting needs (very deep in human experience) for imaginative response. This helps us to see why he was attracted to the beauty of the Prayer Book, the service in Germany, and (even) the value of incense as a religious symbol.

IV

In these ways, then, Whitehead was by way of saying to Matthews that this kind of worship or adoration was along the right lines. Such worship fits in with and is given sense by the total philosophical stance which he had adopted. Yet the reasons which were given for what Catholics "do"

were, he said, "nearly all wrong." By this, I take it, he was implicitly criticizing those theological formulations, and behind them the metaphysical assumptions, which seemed to him to be both alien to the Christian ethos and also in themselves open to the gravest suspicion, metaphysically and morally.

Prof. A. H. Johnson, one-time research student at Harvard under Whitehead, says in his *Whitehead's Philosophy of Civilization* (the chapter in that book which deals with his teacher's religious ideas seems to me the most adequate of all discussions I have read) that the view of God held by Whitehead was nothing other than a "generalizing" of what is to be seen in Jesus of Nazareth. The meaning here is that in Jesus God is seen as "Love in action"; God is there disclosed "in act" for what He is and in what He does. Insofar as "orthodoxy," of whatever variety, holds views which deny or reduce that affirmation derived from the Galilean disclosure, it is *wrong*; it does not make sense of the focal element in the Christian tradition, nor does it fit with the basic criterion entailed in that element. Love, and Love only, is the creative dynamic in terms of which every religious and theological statement must be evaluated. Any "reasons" given for worship, any theological formulations of the meaning of worship, must be consonant with that criterion or they will be "wrong."

Now to say what has so far been said indicates that the religious strain in Whitehead's thought, his theistic stress, is integral to his whole metaphysic, as it is vital to understanding his attitude to the significance of human life. It is necessary to say this at the present time, when the more general Whiteheadian scheme is being taken seriously by many philosophers who have been delivered from the sterile negations of a purely linguistic philosophy. There is a danger that the more general conceptuality will be accepted but that the religious element, based on the religious vision of Whitehead himself, will be regarded as merely incidental—a cultural accident, so to say, but not essential to the system as a whole. But without that religious element, and certainly without the theistic stress, Whitehead's metaphysic is misinterpreted and misunderstood. Theoretically it might be possible to construct a "process metaphysic," largely along Whitehead's lines, which would not require the concept of God; but then this would not be *Whitehead's* metaphysic but another one. Despite the argument in Donald Sherburne's recent essay in *The Christian Scholar*, for Whitehead himself God is *not* dispensable. God as "the fellow-sufferer who understands" is no mere addendum; He is inescapably part of the total picture. He is the reason for novelty in the creative advance, through His supplying of "initial aims"; He is the "chief exemplification" of the principles required to make sense of the world, not an extra feature stuck on as a pious addition but for no par-

ticular reason; He is the lure in all prehensions; He is the ultimate recipient of the achievements in creation as well as the chief (but rightly, for Whitehead and, I should say, for a sound theology, not the only) causative agency. To drop God from this metaphysic is to fail in respect for the integrity of that "vision of reality" which was all that Whitehead claimed his metaphysic to be; it is to substitute another vision for Whitehead's. And this God, integral to the metaphysic and (as we shall see) validated in religious experience, is nothing other than Love—I think Whitehead would have been willing to say, a Lover—disclosed in act in the event of Jesus Christ, just as It or He has been "divined in theory" in the thinking of Plato and others, including (as we might now add) the religious prophets and seers of many different cultures and faiths. What is more, God so conceived is supremely "available" for men in their religious requirements; He is both "the desire of all nations" and the fulfilment of that yearning.

I do not need to repeat here the answer made by Bernard Loomer many years ago to Stephen Ely's rejection of Whitehead's concept as *not* thus "available." But it may be useful to make several comments on related matters.

The first has to do with Whitehead's recognition, in *Religion in the Making*, that the history of religious advance is through the moralization and rationalization of an original sense of the sacred. Worship in an immoral or unmoral context is false; so also is worship which is irrational in that it fails to relate itself to a reasonable account of human experience and of the world. But this is not to suggest that worship itself, with its response to the sacred, is a passing phase in human history. Nor does it mean that religion is to be found exhaustively contained in moral imperatives and in the intelligibility of rational concepts. We have already spoken of adoration; von Hügel once said that adoration is the very heart of true religion, and Whitehead quite obviously agreed with him. The requirement in worship, for Whitehead, is that the sacred, now disclosed as "pure unbounded Love," shall be adored in such a fashion that moral goodness and intelligent (rational) thought are present as qualifications. The basic attitude of worship remains, however, as the response of the total human agent, body and mind and will and everything else that contributes to his wholeness, to that which discloses itself (or to him who reveals himself) as sheer goodness or excellence.

In the second place, Whitehead's well-known dictum about religion moving from God the void, through God the enemy, to God the companion, has its place in this context. While his intention was to speak historically—and there is much to confirm his analysis—we may take this as also understandable in an experiential or existential way. The vague

sense of the sacred which resembles a "void" can become to any man an "enemy" when he understands the sheer "rightness" which runs through things, as Whitehead himself pointed out on occasion. It is when this sacred is known as Love, such as the "Galilean vision" discloses, that the deep sense of companionship, along with the refreshment which for Whitehead was another essential element in religious experience, becomes central in the picture. But God as "companion" is not to be presumed upon nor toyed with; this is why Whitehead rejected the kinds of sentimentality which nineteenth-century liberalism had substituted for rigorous thought. There is all the difference in the world between genuine sentiment and responsive emotion, on the one hand, and sentimentality and emotionalism, on the other. For the latter Whitehead had no use.

Third, Whitehead carefully balanced personal religion and religion as a social phenomenon. His famous statement that "religion is what the individual does with his solitariness," coupled with his remark that one who is never solitary cannot be religious, cannot be taken as a denial of the social quality of religious experience. In the Whiteheadian view, this would be impossible in any case, since to be an actual entity *is* to be a social participant. It is indeed true that without "solitariness," by which surely he meant awareness of the integrity and responsibility of selfhood, there can be no profound religious response. Yet it is equally true that each man relates himself, and *should* do this on a high level of moral and rational self-awareness and self-criticism, to a community of faith, just as in other areas of his experience his selfhood can be given right expression only in terms of his social belonging and participation. As he himself says in *Religion in the Making*, the "topic of religion is individuality in community." What a man *does* with his "solitariness," when he is doing the right thing religiously speaking, is to bring that selfhood, in full awareness of his decision, with rational understanding and with moral zeal, to the cultural and social reality of religious observance and expression.

Whitehead spoke in the same book of the close relationship in primitive religions between "cult" and "myth." The former gives a setting for the latter, which develops as an explanation of what the "cult" signifies; the latter is not lost, however, once the explanation is given. What happens is a translation into a new understanding. Thus in Christian terms we might say that the liturgical act of worship, the Christian "cult," is given its specific meaning through the proclamation of the gospel which accompanies it—the statement of the Christian "myth," using the word in its modern theological sense. At the same time, the proclamation requires the liturgical act, the sacrament, to provide its appropriate context. Thus the requirement in the decisions of Vatican Council II that a homily is to be

given at Masses which have considerable congregations, like the Reformation desire (which unhappily the successors of the great Reformers were not able to enforce) for sermon and sacrament together as the chief Sunday service, has considerable validity. Here we have both "cult" and "myth"; and both of them have been moralized and rationalized, in Whitehead's sense of these words, while full participation by the laity indicates that what is going on is indeed a manifestation of "individuality in community."

V

We may conclude that Whitehead's meaning, in his remark to Matthews, was that what he called "Catholic" *doing*, which is to say worship, conforms to man's creaturely nature, in principle fits in with the basic Christian insight, and is a means to fulfilment of the human desire to give itself in responsive love. It is both expressive and impressive: expressive, since it manifests the reality of Christian faith and is appropriate to the worshipper; impressive, because it is a way in which human potentiality may be realized. With all its defects, the thing that Catholics *do* in their worship is the "right" thing. On the other hand, the theology which explicates this worship has often been disloyal, albeit unconsciously, to the reality in question; hence it is "wrong."

Several quite practical conclusions may be drawn. First, we are helped to see that in liturgical practice there must be stress on the sacramental, the symbolic, the sensuous; and we may be grateful that one of the main features of contemporary liturgical revival and revision, in all parts of Christendom, is a movement in this direction. Second, it becomes clear that theology requires a radical "Christianization," as we might phrase it, if it is to be faithful to its origins and serve its given task in the Christian tradition. Here too we may be grateful that one of the dominant aspects of modern theological work is precisely the awareness of Love as the criterion; and perhaps a process theologian may say that no contemporary group of Christian thinkers has been more insistent on this point than those who take the Whiteheadian conceptuality, however modified, as their vehicle for rethinking theology.

What is required of us is continuing emphasis on the sacramental setting of worship and a similar emphasis on such theological reconception as shall make God as cosmic Lover, and man as being created to become a creaturely lover in God's image, the focus of concern. Worship must be so ordered that the total human personality is involved; and here the use of light, color, music, movement, perhaps even the incense that Whitehead mentioned, will be of help. Everything that is said and done, however, must unmistakably declare that God *is* the cosmic Love and Lover, and

that in Christ He acted in love for man's becoming in fact that which potentially he is: the creaturely lover who dwells in love with his brethren. This on the one hand. And on the other, the theology which provides "reasons" must be centred in the "vision" of God as sheer Love, whatever radical rethinking of traditional doctrinal positions may be entailed.

In that which we do in worship, sentimentality should be avoided, but the need for healthy sentiment recognized; didacticism avoided, but the necessity of a reasonable faith understood; moralism avoided, but the moral imperatives of love grasped; emotionalism avoided, yet man's emotional nature seen; vulgar appeals to sensuous feelings avoided, but the truth that man *is* a sensuous creature accepted. When such worship is accompanied by a sound theology, finding its criterion in the "love of God which was in Christ Jesus our Lord," we are moving in the right direction. In both these ways we have to do with sheer Christian integrity. If I am correct in my interpretation of Whitehead's meaning, he was urging just such integrity.

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