

CHRISTIAN LOVE AND WHITEHEAD'S POETIC GOD

MARIAN GEORGE PANAIT

Constantin Rădulescu-Motru Institute of Philosophy and Psychology,
Romanian Academy

Abstract: Whitehead uses the term *God* along two lines of thought: to make a typology of religion – i.e., a typology of how divinity is understood in each type of religion (*Religion in the Making*) – and to formulate his own philosophy in terms of metaphysics (*Process and Reality*). I propose a comparison between the concept of Christian Love and the meaning, in each of these two contexts, of the term *God*. In this way I want to investigate whether God, as he appears in Whitehead's philosophy, maintains a relationship with the way divinity appears in Christianity, particularly when it is defined as Christian Love.

Keywords: Christian Love, poetic God, creativity, primordial nature of God, consequent nature of God

1. PRELIMINARIES

The text of this analysis is organized into four sections. The first is devoted to clarifications necessary for a correct understanding of the positions expressed in the following three: in the first of these, Christian love is discussed, in the second Whitehead's conception of God, and in the last the two conclusions of the analysis.

As the title indicates, the first purpose of this text is to establish a comparison between Christian love and Whitehead's poetic God. The text has a second purpose, namely, to show what is the solution adopted by Whitehead to one of the important problems that arises for a philosopher in a cultural environment strongly imbued with religion, in particular, that of Christianity. The proposed comparison is a way to discover Whitehead's solution to this problem; at the same time, the comparison makes sense considering the background of this problem.

This problem is that of the relationship between philosophy and religion/theology. Historically, it has presented itself as one belonging to a theoretical level, namely that of the theoretical relationship between philosophy and theology; the latter being a rational discourse – comparable to philosophy in this respect – but limited in its claims by dogmas. A recent form of this relation can be found in the dispute between Émile Bréhier – who rejected the possibility of a Christian philosophy – and Étienne Gilson, who argued for the existence of a

Christian philosophy¹; the relationship between philosophy and theology at the level of theoretical claims, influences, etc. is well studied. The issue I am referring to has received much less attention²; the problem is that an author is a philosopher by all the characteristics of his creation, but at the same time he is immersed in the cultural environment of a religion and can have religious commitments. This situation can generate tensions between the philosophical and religious commitments of a philosopher (the reverse is also true, that is, for a theologian); these tensions are most clearly seen in the case of a principle when philosophical claims about it – an author's metaphysics – may conflict with religion's description of that principle.

Broadly speaking, three types of solutions are proposed to solve these tensions. The first solution is that illustrated exemplarily by neopositivists, who argue that the 'propositions of metaphysics are completely meaningless'³: metaphysics is merely an expression of life, as is religion or theology. Therefore, the problem I have formulated is, for them, a false one and should not be asked; for the neopositivist, the meaning of life is the preservation of the spirit of youth⁴. This type of solution was already present *in nuce* in Comte, who considers the theological and metaphysical phases of humanity's evolution obsolete.

The second type of solution is also based on a distinction at the level of human faculties or at the level of their use; but in this case, the results of various faculties or uses are equally accepted. Exemplary of this kind of solution to the problem of metaphysical and religious description of the principle is Kant's philosophy, where 'the existence of God – who is to theoretical reason "a hypothesis" – is to practical reason a pure "rational faith".'⁵

The third type of solution is to interpret the Christian principle – the personal divinity – in terms of one's own philosophy, even specifying that it is the Christian divinity. Exemplary in this sense is the philosophy of Hegel for whom Universal Spirit is another term for God⁶: nature, spirit and self-awareness are moments of divinity, of God as Trinity⁷. The problem also arises for theologians; as the way they treat it is not the subject of this study, I will give only one example: that of Thomas Aquinas, who formulates the well-known *quinque viae* considering that they argue for the existence of the Christian God; in reality, the arguments refer to

¹ Cf. Henry Donneaud, "Étienne Gilson et Maurice Blondel dans le débat sur la philosophie chrétienne," in *Revue Thomiste*, 1999, 99, pp. 497–516, p. 498; in other forms, the dispute goes back to Tertullian and Julian the Apostate.

² Usually in the form of studies on the position on religion of one or another of the philosophers.

³ Rudolf Carnap, "Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache," in *Erkenntnis*, vol 2:1, 1931, pp. 219–241, p. 238.

⁴ cf. Moritz Schlick, "Vom Sinn des Lebens," in Moritz Schlick, *Wiener Zeit*, Wien, Springer, 2008, p. 125.

⁵ Rudolf Eisler, *Kant – Lexikon*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1984, p. 221.

⁶ Cf. Glenn Alexander Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary*, New York, Continuum, 2010, p. 50.

⁷ Cf. Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1999, p. 114.

the existence of the Aristotelian principle⁸. This outline of the types of solution is useful to determine the nature of Whitehead's solution to the problem raised before.

My interest in this study was inspired by reading *Jesus' Abba*, a work belonging to one of the most important interpreters of Whitehead's work and, at the same time, one of the most important representatives of process theology, John Cobb. In his book, Cobb states that the term *Abba* is used by Jesus to show that our relationship with God is that 'of the father to the infant...one of tenderness and unconditional love.'⁹ Heavily influenced by Whitehead's philosophy, Cobb himself establishes relationships between Whitehead's thinking and Christian love. Cobb's claims are not exaggerated insofar as the leading scholars of Jesus' understanding of God agree with Cobb: 'whenever you cry *abba*...God assures you that you can be absolutely certain that you really are His children.'¹⁰ These considerations support the achievement of the aims of this study.

Two of the methodological rules I generally follow also apply to this study. The first rule is to assume that the problems of philosophy are difficult, and authors offer solutions to them over a long period of time. This conjunction generates complexity, even changes of opinion and sometimes lack of coherence. The interpretation of an author's philosophy is possible precisely because very rarely is a philosophical text univocal. The second rule is that the interpreter also encounters difficulties; therefore, he should not aim for perfection, but only for better understanding of the text. In accord with this rule, Cobb points out that Whitehead's philosophy should be approached after knowing the contributions of the two generations of scholars who separate us from him.¹¹

2. CHRISTIAN LOVE

The *New Testament* was written in *koiné*; the Greek language – in its various ancient layers – has numerous terms to express love with its various nuances; of these only four appear in the *New Testament*: *storge*, which refers to feelings in the family; *eros* that refers to passionate feelings; *philia* which denotes sympathy, the goodwill relationship between people; and *agape*, translated into Latin as *caritas*, which has come to be the most important Christian term for love¹².

Each of these terms has a prodigious cultural presence in the ancient Greek world; for example, *philia* is not only the term around which, through composition, Plato builds one of the most beautiful dialogues of his youth, *Lysis*; it is primarily

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q.2, a.3 in Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, *Opera Omnia*, Roma, Typographia Polyglotta, MDCCCLXXXVIII, tomus quartus, p. 31-32.

⁹ John Cobb, *Jesus' Abba*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2015, p. 5.

¹⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1967, p. 65.

¹¹ cf. John B. Cobb Jr., *A Glossary with Alphabetical Index to Technical Terms in Process and Reality*, Claremont, P and F Press, 2008, p.10.

¹² Ceslas Spicq, *Note di lessicografia neotestamentaria*, Brescia, Paidea, 1988, vol. I, p. 51-55.

the term that designates in Aristotle the essential relationship between citizens for the proper functioning of the city. Here I am only interested in the use of the term *agape*, or *caritas* as it has been re-signified in Christianity.

A fundamental reason why the transition from the Greco-Roman world to the Christian world was possible was that the worldview of the two centered on *aretai*, virtues; virtues, thought of as force, as power not only of man, but of every entity in the Greek world, and of every creature in the Christian world. Not only do Greek philosophers or Christian theologians believe that metaphysical principle, or God, endowed the world with *aretai* by making order possible, but ordinary people also shared this position¹³. The Christian religion borrowed the language from Hellenism, whereas Christian theologians borrowed from the latter many conceptual structures; under these conditions, the positive characteristics of Creation are considered *aretai*. On this basis, Ambrose of Milan – the bishop who brought Augustine to Catholicism – was able to order and name the most important Greco-Roman and Christian virtues, respectively: the former he called *cardinal virtues* and the latter *theological virtues*. The cardinal virtues are temperance, courage, wisdom and justice; and the theological virtues are faith, hope, and love; the latter are the most important, love, *agape*, being the highest of them¹⁴.

Among the many occurrences of the term *agape* in the *New Testament* I select those that are essential and group them so that one can notice the references of the term to God, to man and to the relationship between them. We are told, before any arrangement of dogmas, that ‘whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love.’¹⁵ Before being all-powerful, all-knowing, etc., God is love and must be understood as such. Symmetrically, man is also characterized by love when Paul states: ‘if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.’¹⁶ The conditioning of any ontology by love is clearly expressed; in addition, the priority of love over faith is affirmed. By placing love as defining God and man, we can understand why theologians motivate Creation through love. The creative character of love is fundamental. It can be considered that love conditions not only the relationship between man and God, but even what they are. From the position in which it is placed, love precedes every dogma and conceptual framework of theology (as well as any conceptual framework, *tout court*).

Love transcends any ontological difference, even an abyss. This Christian understanding of love has no parallel in Greek thought, where love functions within the boundaries drawn not only by ontology, but even by education, age, or social status. It is useful for the correct understanding of this distinction between Christian love and that of the Greeks to invoke the example given by Plato with the

¹³ Cf. A.W.H. Adkils, *Moral Values and Political Behavior in Ancient Greece*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1972, p. 135.

¹⁴ Cf. John Ferguson, *Moral Values in the Ancient World*, London, Methuen and Co., 1958 p. 24.

¹⁵ 1 *John* 4:8; I quote Michael D. Coogan (ed.), *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

¹⁶ 1 *Corinthians* 13:2.

love between the alike, between Lysis and Menexenes, which excludes the different, Hippothales¹⁷. It is Christian love that makes it possible for Paul to say: 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'¹⁸ Jesus Christ is God and God is love; we are all one – and with us the whole of Creation – in love. Love erases ontological differences, opens to immanence and mutual belonging; through love, God is in us and in every created thing, as we are in God. This mutual belonging of the creator God and the world is possible only in love; without love I would be void and God just a concept.

Jesus tells us all this when, asked by a disciple, he teaches us to pray by saying 'Our Father'¹⁹; the Son himself tells us that we too are children of God through love, just as He is Father of all His children, also due to love. The Jewish culture in which Jesus lived and preached was rigorist, governed by strict rules; no wonder, therefore, that His disciples ask Him what are the most important commandments He gives them. Jesus responds thus: '... "You shall love the Lord, your God..." (... "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".'²⁰ Kant interprets the commandment of love according to his own philosophical position, namely as addressing reason because you cannot command inclination. The interpretation is inappropriate because there is no effort to understand what Jesus is saying; Jesus' words are made to serve Kant's philosophy. These commandments must be interpreted from the perspective of love, namely as requirements that are in one respect stronger than any commandment because Christian love transcends everything, and, in another respect, more lenient than any commandment because Christian love forgives everything.

Looking conceptually, Christianity has the same problem that Platonic philosophies have: on the one hand, by its condition, the Principle must be separated from the world; on the other hand, also by its condition, the Principle must ground, that is, must have a relationship with the world. This *aporia* generated the multiplication of the 'intermediate' levels in Neoplatonism; however, this multiplication is not a solution because 'intermediaries' have characteristics specific to the Principle, thus they cannot overcome the separation from the world without despecifying the Principle (this evolution is anticipated by the condition of mathematical objects in Plato). Christian theology has faced the same problem: God, the sacred, as His name indicates, is in a different condition from the creature, but at the same time He is a central term in religion, which establishes by definition a connection between God and the world. The religious approach to this difficulty is dogmatic in nature, it constrains us to assume *aporia* as a teaching of faith. The conceptual approach to this difficulty is the treatment by analogy. Love as God's nature and as a process of creation that transcends any ontological (or other) difference is the solution that Jesus Himself proposes to show how each of us can understand the communion with God and with others. It was this proposal that won Whitehead's sympathy.

¹⁷ Cf. Platon, *Lysis*, 207 c; I quote Platon, *Lysis*, București, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1969, whereas Constantin Noica's commentary illustrates my interpretation.

¹⁸ *Galatians* 4:28.

¹⁹ *Matthew* 6:9-13, *Luca* 11:2-4.

²⁰ *Matthew* 22:37-39.

3. WHITEHEAD'S GOD

The term *God* is an important one in *Process and Reality*; it is used by Whitehead as a term in his philosophical construction, not in a religious sense; the philosopher clearly states that 'apart from any reference to existing religions (...) we must investigate dispassionately what the metaphysical principles, here developed, require (...) as to the nature of God'.²¹ However, this term has a religious semantic charge; it is precisely this fact that makes it relevant to study how Whitehead uses it. The philosopher is aware of this reality and, prior to the metaphysical use of the term in *Process and Reality*, establishes a taxonomy of religions and, accordingly, shows their conceptions of divinity. For Whitehead there are three types of religion: the Eastern Asiatic one, the Semitic one, and the Pantheistic one; correspondingly, the concept of God names: an impersonal force, a person, and a personal entity, but one that includes the world as its phase²². Whitehead shows most attention and sympathy for Christianity in which he appreciates the understanding of God as Father, the definition of Him as love, and the importance given to immanence, to the fact that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us, just as God can be revealed in a piece of wood that we split²³.

It must be noted that we are in the presence of two separate lines of reasoning; the first is that of the philosopher's characterization of the types of religion, with an insistence on the Christian one; the second is that of his own philosophical conception in which, according to Whitehead's own claim, the term *God* is used as a metaphysical, not religious term. In this paragraph I describe Whitehead's metaphysical use of the term *God*. This is the main metaphysical theme of the philosopher in *Process and Reality*. The aims of my study, however, refer to: 1) a comparison between Christian love, i.e., the Christian God, as described previously, and God as described by Whitehead himself in *Religion in the Making* and in *Process and Reality*, and 2) the place in Whitehead's philosophy of the Christian God.

Whitehead considers his own philosophy as one of organism, of the organic link between the processes he describes. In order for these processes to exist and be described, it is necessary to introduce two terms that explain the actuality of the world and its order. These two terms are *creativity* and *God*. The realities referred to by these terms are the two sides of reality as an organism. In keeping with his processual view of reality, Whitehead states: 'in the philosophy of organism this ultimate is termed "creativity" and God is its primordial, non-temporal accident.'²⁴ The two terms are necessary in Whitehead's philosophy; they are two sides of the same reality: 'one side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact

²¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (PR), New York, The Free Press, 1978, p. 343.

²² Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1927, p. 56-57.

²³ Cf. *Ibidem*, p.59-62.

²⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, PR, p. 7.

ultimate.²⁵ It is creativity that generates, in a processual form, any reality, the fluent reality, while God sets limits, defines processes by making them facts. This is why God is also called *the principle of limitation*. Reality as an organism develops through this collaboration of creativity and God; neither one can be missing. For this reason, describing God returns to describing reality as fact, and describing creativity returns to describing reality as a process. The two descriptions cannot be separated because they suppose each other. As this study focuses on God as a principle of limitation in Whitehead, it describes God in more detail and what this organicity is – reality as fact – but also describes creativity – reality as a process – especially the aspects relevant to its relationship with God.

After rejecting the religious concept of God, Whitehead reaffirms: ‘in the first place God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles...He is their chief exemplification.’²⁶ As an accident of creativity, God finds Himself in process, a process conducted primarily between His two natures, the primordial one and the consequent one. God’s primordial nature is a conceptual nature; it consists of possibilities that describe and determine actual occasions. These possibilities are eternal objects in the sense of eternal mathematical objects. God’s primordial nature is not actual, it has a character of potentiality. It is God’s primordial nature that sets the initial aims for each of the actual occasions²⁷. The primordial nature of God is practically a condition of possibility for the world, whereas the consequent nature of God ‘is His conceptual valuation of the entire realm of possibility with its eternal objects, its gradations of relevance and its logical coherence.’²⁸ God cannot be merely conceptual; being merely conceptual would mean that He had no self-awareness. God’s primordial nature tends toward His consequent nature; thus, God actualizes Himself and becomes self-aware. God is immanent in the world by opening His nature to the future. For Whitehead, God is dipolar; God’s consequent nature originates from the temporal world, representing the actual world realized in God. The world, the consequent nature of God, is the physical development of its conceptual nature, development that makes possible God’s self-awareness. As consequent nature, God establishes the solidarity and the order of actual occasions in the world; they act through a combination of initial goals, purposes of past realities and purposes of their own. The consequent nature is a physical experience that fulfills the conceptual nature of divinity²⁹. It is God’s primordial nature that unifies the universe, the multiple actual occasions of consequent nature. Through this actualization of God, ‘He saves the world...[with] the judgment of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved.’³⁰ God actualizes himself through the multitude of actual occasions, which

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 343.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 31-32.

²⁸ Daniel D. Williams, “Deity, Monarchy and Metaphysics: Whitehead’s Critique of the Theological Tradition,” in Ivor Leclerc (ed.), *The Relevance of Whitehead*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1961, p. 366.

²⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, PM, p. 345.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 346.

in Him acquire objective immortality; thus, the consequent nature of God is everlasting.³¹ God is not omnipotent and creator in the religious sense, ‘he is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty and goodness.’³²

The universe, as we have shown, is also described by Whitehead through the processes of creativity, through its phases, which fulfill the actuality of the universe. The first phase is that of ‘conceptual origination, deficient in actuality’³³; the second is ‘temporal phase of physical origination with its multiplicity ... full actuality ... [and] deficiency in the solidarity of individuals.’³⁴; the third phase is that ‘of perfected actuality, in which the many are one everlastingly ... immediacy is reconciled with objective immortality’³⁵ and the individual identity and unity of the whole are preserved. The fourth phase is when the fulfilled actuality of divinity passes into the temporal world, and this includes divinity as its own experience; this two-way movement brings the kingdom of heaven within us: ‘the fourth phase is a love of God of the world ... the love in the world passes into the love of heaven and floods back again into the world.’³⁶ As seen, love is the description for the higher phase of creativity; based on the reality of love that establishes the relationship between God and the world, Whitehead states: ‘God is the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands.’³⁷

4. CONCLUSIONS

We have the data to propose solutions to the two problems we have considered: the comparison between Christian love and Whitehead’s poetic God, i.e., the status of God in Whitehead’s philosophy. To answer these two problems, we must bear in mind that Whitehead treats God in both aspects, as a term of religion and as a term of philosophy. In the previous sections, these aspects are specified, so they do not need to be repeated here. Here I only draw conclusions based on the descriptions in the previous ones.

If we draw a comparison between Christian love and the God of religion – particularly that of the Christian religion – as Whitehead understands Him, we can argue that the closeness is very great: the importance shown to the name *Father* for God, love as the establishment of an immanent relationship between God and the world, the fact that the Kingdom of God is within us, that He is present everywhere in the Creation and so on. This closeness is enough to argue that Whitehead is strongly influenced in his understanding of religion by this Christian stance on love.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 349.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 346.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 350.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 350.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 350-351.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 351.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 351.

But what interests us is not this, but the extent to which the Christian God, understood as love, has – or does not have – influence on how Whitehead conceives his philosophy. The philosopher explicitly criticizes the Christian concept of God, especially its monarchical aspects, and rejects the claim of omnipotence that theologians attribute to Him. Furthermore, also explicitly, Whitehead asserts that the term *God* as he uses it in his philosophy has a purely philosophical, metaphysical meaning. And, indeed, Whitehead constructs a philosophical theory in which he personally capitalizes on various philosophical influences: Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, etc. On this basis it can be argued that the religious term *God* is not present in Whitehead's philosophy, nor does it influence it. Which comes back to saying that by comparing Christian love with Whitehead's poetic God we have established that there is no close relationship, and that the philosopher chooses to be a metaphysician whose philosophical construction has nothing to do with the Christian God. In addition to the three types of solutions proposed in the first section to the problem of the relationship between religion and metaphysics, Whitehead proposes a fourth: the philosopher makes a metaphysics and delimits himself from religion. This conclusion is possible, all the more so since Whitehead's proposed construction can be described without using the term *God*; for example, *creativity* and *principle of limitation* can be used as the last terms describing the process and fact; the *potential principle* and *actual principle* can be used for the two natures of God, and so on.

But Whitehead does not make this choice, he chooses to use a term, *God*, which has a great religious semantic load. If the philosopher were to limit himself to this choice, the conclusion just mentioned would still be possible on the basis of the argument that Whitehead allows himself such a choice because he made it clear that he was doing metaphysics with the term *God*, not religion. But to this choice are added – as we see from the previous sections – numerous characteristics that bring his ideas closer to Christianity: the importance of love, suffering, ensuring immortality and personal identity beyond the temporal world, etc. It is true, omnipotence, the original act of creation, etc. are lacking, and are replaced by the metaphor of God as poet.

It should be noted that Whitehead might not have used the term *God*, even if he had introduced ideas specific to Christianity into his philosophy. But he does do so; indeed, he chooses to use in conjunction both the term *God* and ideas particularly close to Christian ones. This is the result of the comparison between Christian love and Whitehead's poetic God. All that can be said without speculation is that Whitehead programmatically uses the term *God* as a metaphysical term; the philosopher explicitly delimits himself from religion and makes metaphysics. As I said, this is a fourth possible solution to the problem of the relationship between metaphysics and religion. But we must accept that the proposed metaphysics presents not only different characteristics from religion (rejection of omnipotence, etc.), but also very close ones (importance of love, etc.). From this point of view, Whitehead's position on the question of the relationship

between metaphysics and religion, from the perspective of the metaphysical principle, is a solution of the type for which Hegel is exemplary.

This indecision is supported by the texts; it must not be paralyzing but provoke further research; such indecision shows how deep and important the studied problem is for the creators of philosophy themselves.

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