

On the Lively Afterlife of Process Philosophies of Religion

by Roland Faber

If process philosophy of religion is declared dead, in Whitehead's terms it only becomes immortal (cf. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 45). And as in Heidegger, for Whitehead death is the "place" of experience. Moreover, the experience of "death" (even in its "eternal" form of being God-forsaken) is the place for experience to become religious, in the first place (cf. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 20).

There is not one "process philosophy of religion." As Whitehead's philosophy is pluralistic in itself, its (religious) interrogations are manifold from the outset. Besides process philosophies of religion—e.g., Charles Hartshorne and David Griffin—we find other Whiteheadian philosophies of religion—e.g., Bernard Loomer and Henry Wieman—which are even older than the first ones, both of which, however, have taken up Whitehead's philosophy of religion as presented first in his *Religion in the Making* (1926). In turn, Whitehead's philosophy of religion neither is identical with either stream of thought (and others influenced by Whitehead, for that matter) nor exhausted by them.

While I don't see any evidence that all of their "immortality" is threatened (in becoming useless or outworn)—we might think of the innovative approach to religious pluralism of the first one, generated by a multitude of "ultimates" with its immediate consequences for a current interreligious discourse, or the far from exhausted (or even really encountered) concept of radical ambiguity of Life and God of the second one with all its consequences for religious experience, community formation, the problem of evil and the concept of God—I will further be concerned only with the "new life after death" of Whitehead's philosophical investigations into religion.

It is one of the privileges of philosophy that its conceptual spheres are never dead or alive once and for all or only in their time of creation but, as the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze ponders at the end of his career, they are always capable of intersecting, reappearing, informing new ignitions of creative thought (cf. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 135-6). This is all the more

true for Whitehead if we—with Deleuze—"deterritorialize" (cf. Deleuze/Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 291-2) his thought out of the restricted zone of framing within American philosophy (of religion) and by regaining the breadth of a wider field in which his thought, in fact (although mostly undetected by the omniscient "blind eye" of established frameworks), newly became "problematic," i.e., became recognized as philosophically confronting us with real "problems."

For a beginning, Whitehead's concept of God—far from being hijacked by theology (thereby allegedly being disqualified as "real" philosophy)—may be one of only two "surviving," serious philosophical conceptualizations of the Divine today (omitting phenomenology, which may speak for itself), the other one being Levinas' "Other than Other" because both philosophers situate themselves in the context of difference instead of identity and of multiplicity instead of the tyranny of the "One." Since Nietzsche's "death of God"—no serious philosophy (of religion) can avoid to meditate on this philosophical event!—as a precondition of philosophical reflection as such, not only of (the phenomenon and conceptualization of) "religion," with its overturning of Being by becoming, no philosophy of religion can naively account for "God" anymore in a way that would not be an expression of this very same event. And while Levinas' "God" (although facing the same poisoning presumption as Whitehead's: that it is basically nothing but disguised theology) was never dismissed by Jacques Derrida (far from it!), Whitehead's "God" became even endorsed by Deleuze—who otherwise only knows of "pure immanence" (cf. Deleuze/Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 49) not allowing for any concept of the Divine—as "desist[ing] from being a Being who compares worlds and chooses the richest compossible" by "becom[ing] Process that at once affirms impossibilities and passes through them" (Deleuze, *The Fold*, 81).

On another level, that of a theory of religion and religious experience (in its philosophical relevance), Whitehead's theory of religion may be one of only two

philosophies (omitting certain strains of pragmatism, e.g., Charles S. Peirce and William James) to take religious experience seriously, the other one being George Bataille, one of the "originators" of the philosophy of difference of which Derrida and Deleuze are only the latest expressions. Instead of the many theories of religions that, in the aftermath of Nietzsche, Marx, Critical Theory and—above all—the two World Wars and the Holocaust, renounced "religion" as a soothing opium or pre-ordained medium of methods of control of the State (of things)—one might think, e.g., of Freud and Durkheim—for both Bataille's *Theory of Religion* (posthumous, 1973) and Whitehead's *Religion in the Making* religion is an excess of energy of the otherwise repetitive performance of nature, a medium of para-causal turmoil of energy overflowing into rituals, initiating culture, furthering intensity of feeling, creating myths and even initiating the search for reason. And for both—besides always remaining a dirty pond of regress into conservatism, foundationalism, fundamentalism, hatred, war, and violence—religion always renews itself as the secret source of a profound superfluidity that, for catalysed societies, snatches the "ever unknown" out of any pre-ordained necessities, thereby depriving (religious) experience of the fate of "original order"—be it that of physical law or of Divine destiny.

If there is an evolutionary impact of religion—as the majority of evolutionary biologists believe today (despite their scepticism regarding its particular life-forms)—the death of a philosophy of religion would only be an expression of a constant movement beyond established expressions of Life into an unwritten future (cf. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 174). For Whitehead's philosophy of religion, however, I expect its alleged death to only indicate its "non-being" (= becoming) between the states of caterpillar and butterfly. I would not mourn the death of the first one but cherish the emergence of the second because the immortality of its past is its transformation into the flight of its undiscovered future. ☘