



On the Concept of God in Whitehead's Process Philosophy

RASTISLAV NEMEC

Faculty of Theology, University of Trnava
Department of Philosophy, Bratislava

The process philosophy and process theology terms are used in contemporary philosophical and theological science in connection with A. N. Whitehead († 1947), who is considered to be its founder. Whitehead's metaphysics primarily addressed the problem of whether, following the discovery of a special and general theory of relativity, it is possible to follow old, ancient concepts of metaphysics based on static conceptions, from Aristotle to modern times.

183

1. Basic Characteristics of Whitehead's Philosophy

Whitehead's metaphysics responds to inadequate answers of the new philosophy that has not been able to resolve the dilemma of an objective and subjective element of knowledge. His response was the philosophy of the organism¹, which means that body reactions at the microscopic level are projected into its higher, macroscopic spheres². For example, Whitehead's physics refused to teach about the "absolute position" of things and the "absolute time" which Newton assumes in his *Scholium*. So, by denying the "absolute position" we have to admit that there is an immense amount of given physical objects³ within any space-time area that are specified by the relationships of given coordinates for physical objects. The physical reality

¹ Cf. David Brown, *Continental Philosophy and Modern Theology: An Engagement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 49f.

² Cf. George L. Clark: *Problem of Two Bodies in Whitehead's Theory*. in *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*. Section Volume 64 (Edinburgh: Royal Society 1953), 49f.

³ Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 189.

is therefore composed in each area of the space-time by what the physical entities of the whole universe mean to this area.

Such change in interpretation of matter has to, according to Whitehead, result in a change of the paradigm in philosophy and metaphysics. According to Whitehead, each process of abstraction, generalization and creation of scientific concepts (time, space, movement, matter) must be based on a sense-concrete form of experience reflecting true reality. This basis of experience has an ontological status and represents, in fact, the only source of (also scientific) knowledge.

In his metaphysical proposal, Whitehead proposes to take over (precise) methodologies of natural sciences, whose assertions and actions are carefully revised. Sciences, in their research, develop only generalized characteristics that they reflect with respect to the individual fact and verify with additional working hypotheses. For Whitehead, they are exemplary because they do not lose the individuality they are devoted to⁴ from their perspective. Whitehead thus adopts the so-called “imaginative generalization”⁵ project, a process taken from the natural sciences, in which, starting with the general characteristics of certain known subjects or areas, these are provisionally universalized and postulated as hypothetical descriptions of all areas of a particular entity.

Processual philosophy, and later also processual theology, are based on an immediately observable reality and on assumptions related to it⁶. Reality and its interpretation, as evidenced by discoveries of the new physics, is changeable and unstable. It is constantly flowing, so interpretation of reality is only partial, fragmentary. We will never grasp reality as a whole in its entirety. The process in which it occurs will be the most fundamental feature of this philosophy⁷. Let's try to briefly introduce what this process is about.

⁴ Cf. id, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press 1953), 55: “The paradox (of the philosophy) is that we have mistaken our abstractions with concrete facts...”

⁵ Cf. id, *Adventures of Ideas*, 222; Whitehead also uses the “working hypothesis method” variation.

⁶ From this perspective, the question of God seems to be irrelevant. In addition to this, many processual philosophers do not agree with Whitehead when it comes to this characteristic of philosophy and consider his speculation about God to be exaggerated. Cf. Robert C. Mesle, *Process-relational Philosophy*. Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead (West Conshohocken: Templeton Foundation Press 2008), 83-84.

⁷ Cf. Rolf Lachmann, *Der Begriff der Metaphysik. Ethik und Identität: Der ethische Ansatz in der Prozessphilosophie A. N. Whiteheads und seine Bedeutung für die gegenwärtige Ethik* (Freiburg; München: Karl Alber, 1994), 42;

2. Differentiation of the Process

Whitehead defines the process as a basic property of reality. Everything is in the creative process, even the fact that things are in progress, is subject to change. There are unchanging principles and abstract forms, like Platonist ideas, which defy the process. But what's up-to-date, is in the process. Everything that is not in the process is an abstraction of the process, that is, an incomplete topicality. Abstraction is therefore always dependent on a particular reality, therefore it is something secondary, less substantial. Therefore, all generalizations seem less accurate and after a while, each systematization ceases to be valid.

At first sight, it may seem that such bases inhibit the possibility of some transcendence and theological dimension, but postulate the idea of a self-evolving and self-sustaining universe. However, Whitehead's basic philosophical ideas hide theological significance in their core, as we shall see. Even the very idea that everything that is current has the character of the process conceals the religious dimension of action, cyclicity and mythicity, as it is discussed, for example, by M. Eliade.

Whitehead's concept of the process is of a dual nature. It distinguishes between the temporary process, the so-called "transition" from one entity to the other. It deals with events that immediately disappear, before they become another entity. However, this process becomes determinant for following events. These events or processes stand for a change of one thing to another.

Besides this process, Whitehead distinguishes another type of process, the so-called constitutive. A real individual event is self-generated within itself by its own processes, course of events. These are processes that appear from the outside as if they were one big act, but we can recognize multiple processes by deeper observation. They create something like a unity that represents the identity of a given, specific thing, that is called concrescence⁸. Through this dual process, Whitehead suggests that everything in the world is linked both by a common space-time frame, and that there is dominance of some general "relatedness" of all things that ba-

cf. Francis Seaman, „Note on Whitehead and the Order of Nature”, *Process Studies* 5, nr 2 (1975): 129-133.

⁸ This double accentuation of the process, both as a transition and as a concrescence, opens many ways of understanding in the scope of religious experience. On one hand, the transition shows the importance of time (one event follows another). The past is composed of these events, presence is an event that is just happening and the future "does not exist", it will exist and will be completely different.

sically determines the reality of the world⁹. Without this inner relationship, the world could not be understood as an organism, as the number of entities forming a whole.

3. The Question of God in Whitehead's Philosophy

This is how we slowly come to the issue that is the subject of our study. In this context, the question that arises concerns the guarantee of such self-induced entities containing some finality; that is, the reason why these things are undergoing the process, as well as the question of purpose. If each entity develops in accordance with its own principle of conduct, is it possible that there arises a situation in which the whole reality would take a disparate course, at least in the sense of an unexpected development? According to Whitehead, it is not possible, at least at the macro system level. First of all, each kind of process is essentially positive, and at the microscopic level, it is difficult to find out if there is a certain process like catabasis. Secondly, the referee of this unified process is God, the actual entity *par excellence*, giving direction to this development of entities. He himself is the entity that, as the only one, is the "principle of concretion; the principle that initiates a definitive outcome from a situation that is otherwise marked by ambiguity..."¹⁰.

Whitehead, however, realizes that if he were to introduce the current entity into his metaphysical system, somehow extraordinary and different, he would compromise the coherence of this system. Even the principles would not be naturally metaphysical. He understands God, on the contrary, as the basis and pattern of all entities. Therefore, he claims the opposite: "God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse..."¹¹. On the contrary, Whitehead asserts that God is "an essential explanation"¹² of these principles. God must therefore

⁹ Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Cambridge: University Press 1929), 96: „The physical world is bound together by a general type of relatedness which constitutes it into an extensive continuum...“

¹⁰ Ibidem, 344-345.

¹¹ Ibidem, 345: "God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse..."

¹² Ibidem, 521. Here, Whitehead probably unwittingly agreed with Leibniz, who wrote in §43 of his *Monadology* the following: "It is farther true that in God there is not only the source of existences but also that of essences, in so far as they are real, that is to say, the source of what is real in the possible. For the understanding of God is the region of eternal truths or of the ideas

be perceived as one of many, as a “*primum inter pares*”. God can not be an exception in any other characteristic among other entities. Whitehead argues: “The description of the generic character of the current entity should contain God as well as the lowest actual event, although there is a specific difference between the nature of God and the event ...”¹³. He therefore states that if God is part of the metaphysical system, he constitutes a substantial coherence that such a system has to undergo¹⁴. We will discover later if he is able to consistently defend such an entity as exceptional or not. Whitehead asserts that only God is a current entity essential for the existence of current actual entities constituting the world. These entities can not exist without definiteness, therefore they are dependent on God as from the “principle of their own ending”. Thus, the actual entities are capable of acquiring existence, “to exist” only through the acquisition of a subjective purpose from God. This subjective goal helps them to complete their own process. This kind of characteristic remarkably resembles the Christian doctrine about God's creation of the world. However, according to Whitehead, God does not “create” the current events by his own activity, because each of them denotes a self-creation process. But if God is part of this metaphysical system and one of the actual entities at the same time, (1) he can not exist without other entities – he is “dependent” on them; (2) he is not the creator, only the referee of all entities; (3) he must be part of the process and develop himself.

4. The Relationship between Creation and God by Whitehead

Based on the analysis of Whitehead's texts, we can say that God must be dependent on other current entities if he has a relation to the world. Let us think about this matter below. Although God specifies this development of entities, it does not mean that he is the first cause of everything for Whitehead. God is only the referee, not the inception. God is not a good reason for him to explain why the world exists and why everything is in the state of action. We can not say why the world exists, because the reality is extremely complex and there is not one single answer to it. God and the world for Whitehead does not have, and thus we precede the problem we will discuss below, the characteristics of emanation in the Platonic sense, such discipline is rather in sharp contrast to some of Whitehead's statements. However,

on which they depend, and without Him there would be nothing real in the possibilities of things, and not only would there be nothing in existence, but nothing would ever be possible...”

¹³ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 110.

¹⁴ Cf. Ivor Leclerc, *Whitehead's Metaphysics: An Introductory Exposition* (Indiana University Press, 1975), 194.

based on Whitehead's claims, there is a differentiation between ordinary current entities and God as a current entity. Here Whitehead admits the difference between current entities and God: 1. in the realm of awareness (which is evolved in longer process only) in the degree of explicitness and clarity – only God has the ability of permanence, eternal changelessness; 2. in the realm of God's inclusiveness – because there always exist entities in the universe that do not perceive each other, but God perceives them all, and so only through God they have the opportunity to know about the others.

This clear distinction between God and the world is even more obscure by following Whitehead's words: "The nature of the world is what is first given by God, and the nature of God is what is first given by the world..."¹⁵. By using these words, he primarily deals with the question concerning the existence of the world, but not his relationship. The question about the relationship between the world and God he very mysteriously answers in the following quote: "It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent. It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many. (...) It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God. It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God"¹⁶.

Such words bear, it seems, a pantheistic sign. While dealing with them, many interpreters vary¹⁷. But, in case they were clearly pantheistic, it would mean that Whitehead could erase the relation that God has necessarily to the world, based on metaphysical identity (with reality). Provided that this is not the case, it means that Whitehead has meant the other nature of God. In my opinion, Whitehead uses the term God in a metaphysical sense as an instance that represents the very element of reality, that is, as its guarantee, as part of a metaphysical system without which such a system is unthinkable (Hartshorne). He does not use this term at all as the religious understanding of God does.

However, he problem remains that how can, in Whitehead's words, this timeless entity¹⁸ (given its eternal presence) perceive reality that is chrono-

¹⁵ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 493.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 348.

¹⁷ Michael Welker claims that Whitehead does not realize the extent of the term God and perceives it only metaphysically. Mascal, on the other hand, accuses Whitehead of pantheism: Eric Mascal, *Ten, który jest: Studium z teizmu tradycyjnego*, tłum. Jolanta W. Zielińska (Warszawa 1958), 283-301.

¹⁸ Cf. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 7.

logical and temporary¹⁹. According to Whitehead, it is the timelessness as the source of any order²⁰ that is the authorized referee of each God-related entity. The whole world exists only because of him as a source, only because of its incarnation of reality to God. Without this, it could not be determined by the boundaries that make the world evolve²¹. God limits reality by his own vision, giving it the source of development potential. It is not God of eminence, but immanence, so Whitehead can claim the identity of the world and God. God is a real fact of the very nature of reality. He is the centre of each entity as the source of its topicality. But Whitehead, in his theory, does not explain the origin of actual entities in relation to God. In Whitehead's work, there is also a paradoxical and even unexplainable relation of the "subjective goal", which is a purposeful cause that is "supplied" from within, but Whitehead claims that the actual entities "form themselves". Whitehead also paradoxically says that God determines the actual entity, and at the same time says that entities have "freedom (of development)"²². The relationship between these claims remains unanswered to Whitehead.

5. God in Process or Process in God

If it is true, as we have said, God is not an exception to metaphysical rules, and at the same time that the processual development is general²³ to Whitehead, then it is also true that Whitehead's God must undergo some processual development. In case God is a correct part of the metaphysical system, and he doesn't reject in any way the characteristics of other entities, he must necessarily be subjected to the process. While in its early writings Whitehead still perceives God as unchangeable and stable pillar of reality, he begins to use the notion of two natures of God in his later work. The first nature he calls "primordial" (original), and it is really unchangeable. God in it is "permanent", divinely perfect, and we could say "eternally remaining

¹⁹ The problem is not only the possibility of God's perception of reality but, moreover, how the subject can "undergo" a change while remaining identical; that is, consequences of the process in the sphere of identity.

²⁰ Cf. William Christian, *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1959), 271.

²¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cambridge: University Press, 1930), 104: "All order is aesthetic order; and the moral order is merely certain aspects of aesthetic order (...) And this aesthetic order is derived from the immanence of God".

²² Id, *Process and Reality*, 37.

²³ Cf. *ibidem*, 22: "... actual world is a process, and that the process is the becoming of actual entities...".

in himself". It is a concept of God presented by the tradition. God, being permanent, represents the initial source of development for the whole reality of current entities. This kind of naturalness represents an "unchanging" source of process in terms of the development of current entities²⁴.

The second nature Whitehead attributes to God will be the consequent or "consecutive" one. The basic characteristic of this nature is its consciousness and preferential perceptiveness of all entities. In their relationship, it is this perceptiveness that is also updated in the process of creative development and because of it, God remains relative. God, because of the "consecutive" nature, perceives the world and we perceive him. The question, however, is why Whitehead promotes the differentiation of these natures by attributing different roles and functions to both of them when such a distinction can cause confusion. Some authors²⁵ had begun to regard them as two distinct aspects of God, which resulted in the attribution of different perceptions and feelings to different natures of God. This interpretation seems to us to be inaccurate and one-sided. It rather seems to us that Whitehead wanted to support the active engagement of God in the world by which he creates a specific contact with the world, immanence, while the first may represent his permanence not related to time²⁶. Whitehead thus also harmonizes two common aspects of religion, namely its theoretical and practical level, its institutional and charismatic perspective, the level of personal experience, and the handed-down discipline. Whitehead therefore wants to say that if God has a direct relationship with a world where the change in the form of the process governs, it can not leave him without change as well. Even though God establishes the purpose of all things, and the thing continues to develop itself, this initiatory goal does not say how the creation will behave²⁷. And so, when he perceives and observes creation, it must also work vice versa.

²⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, 104.

²⁵ Cf. Victor Lowe, *Understanding Whitehead* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), 56; Allison Hartz Johnson, *Whitehead's Theory of Reality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), 58.

²⁶ Cf. John W. Lansing, "»Natures« of Whitehead's God", *Process Studies* 3, nr 3(1973), 148f. According to some authors, God is the unity of an abstract and concrete pole. Thus, the abstract is its objectivity, potentiality, versatility, and the specific one is its subjectivity, topicality and the sectionality, as opposing qualities. Cf. Kenneth Surin, „Process Theology“, w *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, redakcja David F. Ford, II (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989), 103-106.

²⁷ Cf. John Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology: Based on the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead* (London: Lutterworth, 1965), 203f.

Based on this description, we could highlight some of the weaknesses of Whitehead's philosophy of God. Whitehead himself in his work *Religion in the Making*²⁸ distinguishes between the position of science (which metaphysics is) and religion, between their spheres of competence, their different perspectives that should complement each other. If we applied these claims to his description of God, then the metaphysical description of this God should be identical with the religious one. However, it can be observed that Whitehead's metaphysical description lacks some aspects of God's Gospel. This is why it is possible to agree with the objection raised by Stephen Lee Ely long time ago: "Whitehead's God is not the God of religions"²⁹. On the other hand, it is necessary to understand that Whitehead's metaphysics argues in a different aspect. It seeks a metaphysical description of reality whose inevitable part is God. The consequence of this is the metaphysical description of the "highest being", which contains various contradictions³⁰. For example, we might think that if God is the foundation of the entire reality, then in a sense, we could interpret him as an active source of all evil with which creativity fills its sphere of action.

Moreover, the sketch of his metaphysics, inspired by the change of the interpretation of the physical subject, was supposed to point out to imperfections in the old conception and the outdated vision of the world by both metaphysics and religious studies. Whitehead writes the following: "Among medieval philosophers who were anxious to secure the religious significance of God, the habit of paying him metaphysical compliments spread. They understood him as the basis of a metaphysical situation with its initial activity. (...) There can not exist (according to this concept) any other alternative than to consider (God) as the source of all evil, as well as all good... (God) is also the supreme author of the game and he has to bear all its weaknesses as well as achievements"³¹.

²⁸ Cf. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 81.

²⁹ Stephen L. Ely, *The Religious Availability of Whitehead's God: A Critical Analysis* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1942), 56: "The only God that metaphysics can attain to has no religious value and presumably ought not to be called God, whereas the only Being who has a possible right to be called God can be reached only by religious and moral intuitions..."

³⁰ One of the deficiencies of this kind of God may be that it represents the function of the "glue" of reality – it is "God of the Gaps", as T. Machula calls him in his article. Cf. Tomáš Machula, „Bůh jako téma diskusí přírodovědců“ [“God as the Discussion Topic of Naturalists”], *Teologie & Společnost*, II, nr 6 (2004): 5.

³¹ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 257.

Based on the above mentioned statements, we can summarize Whitehead's description of the relationship between God and the world with the interpretation of P. Basile: "1. God is permanent in terms of its original nature, changeable in its subsequent nature. The world is also changeable in contrast with God and permanent, because it is objectively perceived by God in subsequent nature. 2. God is current, the world is constituted by several current events. God is multifarious because he absorbs much in himself, the world is one because it is united in God. 3. God transcends the world because it is actual in a different way (compared to him) and for the same reason, the world transcends God. 4. God creates the world, as he leads it concrescence, the world creates God by shaping his physical nature..."³². Based on this kind of interpretation, Whitehead's thoughts concerning the relationship between the world and God could be understood in a different way. An interesting contribution to the whole issue is also the interpretation of Whitehead's student and the chief initiator of "processual philosophy or theology", Charles Hartshorne.

Bibliography

Basile Pierfrancesco. *Leibniz. Whitehead and the Metaphysics of Causation*. Palgrave: Macmillan, 2009.

Brown David. *Continental Philosophy and Modern Theology: An Engagement*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

Cobb John Jr. *Process Theology : An Introductory Exposition*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976.

Christian William A. *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

Craighead Houston. „Non-Being and Hartshorne's Concept of God“. *Process Studies* 1, nr 1(1971): 9-24.

Ely L. Stephen. *The Religious Availability of Whitehead's God: A Critical Analysis*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1942.

³² Cf. Pierfrancesco Basile, *Leibniz, Whitehead and the Metaphysics of Causation* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2009), 142.

Johnson Allison Hartz. *Whitehead's Theory of Reality*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1952.

Lansing W. John. „»Natures« of Whitehead's God”. *Process Studies* 3, nr 3 (1973): 143-152.

Lowe Victor. *Understanding Whitehead*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962.

Machula Tomáš. „Bůh jako téma diskusí přírodovědců”[“God as the Discussion Topic of Naturalists”]. *Teologie & Společnost* II, nr 6(2004): 5-11.

Mascall Eric. *Ten, który jest: Studium z teizmu tradycyjnego*. Tłumaczenie Jolanta W. Zielińska. Warszawa 1958.

Miesle C. Robert. *Process-Relational Philosophy. An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*. Templeton Foundation Press, 2008

Rescher Nicholas. *Process Philosophy. A Survey of Basic Issues*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.

Seaman Francis. „Note on Whitehead and the Order of Nature”. *Process Studies* 5, nr 2(1975): 129-133.

Surin Kenneth. „Process Theology“. W *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, redakcja David F. Ford, II, 103-114. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

Voskuil D. Hartshorne. „God and Metaphysics: How the Cosmically Inclusive Personal Nexus and the World Interact“. *Process Studies* 28, nr 3-4(1999): 212-230.

Whitehead Alfred North. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919.

Whitehead Alfred North. *The Concept of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920.

Whitehead Alfred North. *Science and the Modern World*. New York: The Free Press, 1953.

Whitehead Alfred North. *Religion in the Making*. Cambridge: University Press, 1930.

Whitehead Alfred North. *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*. New York: The Free Press, 1978.

Whitehead Alfred North. *The Function of Reason*. Boston: Beacon, 1958.

Whitehead Alfred North. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: Free Press 1967.

Whitehead Alfred North. *Modes of Thought*. New York: The Free Press, 1969.

On the Concept of God in Whitehead's Process Philosophy

SUMMARY

The aim of this article is to present and outline Whitehead's processual philosophy in the sphere of its use within the concept of God. In the twentieth century, Alfred N. Whitehead outlined the most extensive concept of metaphysics, based on new origins, on knowledge of new physics and mathematics. He had also incorporated the question of God into this concept, which in turn led to a new stream of processual thinking in philosophy and theology. The aim of this article is to explore his theory of process in God and outline possibilities of its interpretation.

Keywords: Alfred N. Whitehead, processual philosophy, processual theology

O koncepcji Boga w filozofii procesu Alfreda N. Whiteheada

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie filozofii procesu Alfreda N. Whiteheada w jej zastosowaniu w odniesieniu do koncepcji Boga. W XX w. Whitehead nakreślił najbardziej szerokie pojęcia metafizyki oparte na nowych podstawach, na współczesnej wiedzy fizyki i metafizyki. W pojęcie to włączył także kwestię Boga, co w konsekwencji wymusiło nowy procesualny strumień myślenia filozoficznego i teologicznego. Celem artykułu jest zbadanie jego teorii procesu w mówieniu o Bogu oraz nakreślenie możliwości jego interpretacji.

Słowa kluczowe: Alfred N. Whitehead, filozofia procesu, teologia procesu

