

## A PERSONAL APPRECIATION

by John B. Cobb, Jr.

*Abstract.* My primary relation to Barbour's work is that of indebtedness and appreciation. He has reassured me that despite the vast changes in physics, the Whiteheadian perspective that has been so important to me as a Christian believer provides a valid way of understanding the physical world. If there is a difference between us, it is my greater emphasis on perspective and on the challenge of the Whiteheadian perspective to the ones that now dominate the sciences.

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I appreciate greatly this chance to share in honoring Ian Barbour. But it has not been easy to see just what I could contribute in responding to Part 3 of *Religion in an Age of Science* (Barbour 1990). My usual academic style is to identify some point on which I disagree or, failing that, some point on which I can propose further developments. But in this case that would be quite artificial. Barbour's conclusions are ones that I deeply appreciate and find supporting of my own prejudices and judgments.

A second response would be to undertake to expound or clarify what I suppose some readers might find difficult to follow or understand. But I perceive Barbour as himself doing the expounding and clarifying of ideas that I share with him. My explanations of his philosophical and theological views would be likely to be more difficult to follow than his own lucid, and sometimes moving, formulations.

Since I find myself with so little to offer along these lines, I have decided to speak in a very personal vein to explain why Barbour's work, beginning with *Issues in Science and Religion* (1966) and

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culminating with his Gifford Lectures, has been so very important for me. In that context I also can indicate some differences between us about which he may choose to comment.

I grew up as a pious boy in a pious home. I was thoroughly convinced of the truth of the Christian faith. Part of that conviction was that Christian faith encompassed all truth. That was so evident to me that it would not have occurred to me to mention it.

That never meant for me that I could learn all truth from the Bible. I assumed there were other avenues to truth, such as history and science. What I read of those I understood in the light of Christian faith, but I also understood the Christian faith in the light of what I learned from them.

My first encounter with evolution, so far as I remember, was when I read Van Loon's world history in early adolescence. I immediately became an evolutionist. The doctrine seemed plausible, and I gathered that it had the support of the best scientists. I discovered that not all my playmates (or their parents) found this convincing or readily reconcilable with their Christian faith. But to me there was no question.

Of course, my understanding both of evolution and of faith was extremely elementary and simplistic. I am not claiming any intellectual accomplishment. I am simply indicating that for me as a boy the idea that science and history could be in tension with faith, that one might need to hold them somehow separate, was incomprehensible. My studies since then have made it somewhat more comprehensible that others would make such moves, but this solution to the problems of the modern world has never been an option for me. I can be a believer only if that belief includes the continuity and mutual penetration of all aspects of what I think. There is for me only one reality, about which we can learn in various ways, one that has great complexity, to be sure. I can use the word *God* only if I can believe that this word refers to some aspect of that one reality about which I know something also through science and historical scholarship.

This deep assumption, one that I cannot escape, led me into trouble when, at Chicago, I studied modern thought more deeply. That study broke apart what for me had to be united. And that meant that I could no longer speak of God at all. To use that term to name a product of human mind would be, for me, blasphemy. If I could not locate God in that total matrix of reality with which I interacted, then I knew of nothing to be called by that name. To affirm some reality disconnected with what I knew through experience and thought, through something called "faith," was simply not an option for me.

It was in the context of that distress that I encountered Hartshorne and, through him, Whitehead. That encounter initiated a long process of recovery and healing. It enabled me gradually to live in a world in which the actual, approached in so many ways, contained deity within it. Of course, the God I came to know in this way was not the same as the one who had become unreal for me. Yet, in another way, it was. It was much the same aspect of the totality now known differently, because the actuality as a whole was known differently.

Having had one worldview shattered, I did not find it easy to trust another. Whitehead appealed to me not only because he offered a highly nuanced vision of the whole, but also because he emphasized its provisional character. That made it easier to trust him. My teacher, Daniel Day Williams, taught me perspectivalism, but, more deeply, my own experience did so. I knew what it was to perceive the world piously and what it was to perceive it atheistically. I saw that Whitehead's way of perceiving it was different from both. I knew that I could not simply choose my perspective. But I also knew that a perspective is not unaffected by thought. Thought had played a large role in shattering my earlier, pious one. Thought also could raise doubts about the atheistic one. But thought could not enable me simply to choose to cease to be an atheist.

The new perspective had to become mine actually. That was not a leap of faith, but it also was not a response to argument. I could provisionally view the world as made up of interrelated events instead of objects, but in the next moment I would fall back into seeing it in terms of objects. Yet, as I found the idea that it is made up of events intellectually plausible, I continued the experiment. Similarly, I could provisionally experience myself as constituted only of events with no underlying self or I. But this, too, was not an easy perspective to adopt. I could not by an act of will really understand myself in that way, regardless of what words I might use in explaining my opinions.

Since God as understood by Whitehead can be a factor in reality only when that reality, including oneself, is understood as this matrix of interpenetrating experiential happenings, one cannot include this God in one's perspective unless it is reshaped in this way. One could, of course, argue that this is a plausible theory, and that if it is correct, there is a place for God within it, but that is a quite different matter. Believing in God, as I understand belief, is not the same as holding that God's reality is a plausible hypothesis. It involves having a perspective in which there is a factor in reality that is creative and calls one to goodness, something one can trust and worship.

Part of the appeal of the Whiteheadian perspective to me was that

it offered a rich wholeness that the atheistic perspective denied me. Was it then just wishful thinking that it seemed so plausible? It had very little support in the dominant community of intellectuals. I could think of reasons for that lack of support that were not damaging to it. But again, who was I to suppose that the great majority of the leading thinkers of the time lived and thought out of less adequate perspectives?

One part of the issue was science. Implicitly or explicitly, the dominant schools of thought of that time claimed that science supported a position very different from Whitehead's. He was generally viewed as out-of-date, asking inappropriate or even meaningless questions, and undertaking a hopeless and fruitless enterprise. Studying him, from the dominant point of view, could only be a distraction from the proper work of the mind.

If I had not been at Chicago I might well have abandoned the study. I needed support, and at Chicago I found it. Attraction to Whitehead was not viewed there as an aberration. The Divinity School cultivated a certain arrogance about its ability to continue lines of inquiry that were not followed elsewhere. Although I did not have the ego-strength to do it on my own, it was not so hard to share in the work of a group that knew itself to be eccentric.

I continued to take most of my courses with persons who were not Whiteheadians, especially Richard McKeon. My fear of following the way of wishful thinking drove me in that direction. I needed a more comprehensive view of the options and the history that provided them. I suspected that there might be better philosophical reasons for rejecting Whitehead than I had yet discovered. My study with McKeon intensified my sense of the perspectival character of all thought, but it did not show me a better perspective than his.

An important part of Whitehead's persuasiveness was my sense that although I could not understand twentieth-century science myself, I could through him have a way of understanding the whole that fitted with it. But already in the late forties there was a gap between the science with which Whitehead had worked and the cutting edge of physics, especially quantum theory. Perhaps Whitehead's perspective was formed by scientific views that were now superseded. Perhaps developments in physics are such that any philosophy correlated with it will be obsolete almost immediately. Perhaps my own deep need to have a vision that was in principle inclusive was in fact as impossible to meet as most of the intellectuals of the day asserted.

I wished that I could simply ask a competent physicist whether this was the case. But I knew no physicists who would readily understand the question or who would find it of sufficient interest to work

patiently with me. And I knew that I would never know enough physics to make the judgment for myself.

Of course, I will never *know* the answer to this question. Interpretations of the quantum world by physicists vary greatly, and the effort to connect that world with relativity theory is still a difficult frontier. But my anxiety has been alleviated.

No one has helped more in that process than Ian Barbour. In 1966 he published a standard work in science and religion in which he presented the state of scientific understanding in very readable, highly intelligible terms. In that book he also made extensive use of Whitehead in correlating scientific knowledge with religion. Of course, there are many difficult and obscure issues in the interpretation of the implications of physics which that introductory text did not touch. But it assured me that one who, unlike myself, *did* understand what was happening in physics found that Whitehead's speculations had not been fundamentally outdated by new developments. Twenty-three years later, now that I am much more deeply settled into a Whiteheadian perspective, *Religion in an Age of Science* renews that assurance. I hope that this account of my personal journey will enable you to understand that my expression of indebtedness and gratitude is not casual.

I hope also that you will now be able to understand what I perceive to be differences between us. Barbour has seen the difference himself. He fears that I allow my philosophy to play too large a role in shaping my theology. Process thought functions for him, not as his basic perspective, but as a way of dealing with certain problems. He studies the scientific literature and Christian theology. He finds in process thought a way of dealing responsibly with both. For me, on the other hand, process is the perspective in terms of which I view both science and theology.

The difference is not sharp. Barbour knows that his account of science is already informed by his own nonscientific beliefs. He disagrees with other scientists in their interpretations of the data. In part, his interpretation is informed by his Christian faith; in part also, I think, by the influence of process thought. Similarly, his interpretation of Christian theology is influenced both by his scientific knowledge and by process thought.

I am certainly not criticizing him for this. From my point of view, this is just the way it should be. We cannot present a neutral picture of what we learn from science or of Christian teaching. There are no neutral pictures of anything, and at these high levels of generalization and interpretation, perspective plays a large role indeed. In his case, I am convinced, its role is to illumine and clarify rather than to distort.

Nevertheless, as Barbour describes what he sets out to do, there is no thematic attention to issues of perspective and mutual influence. He states that the goal of the chapter on “human nature” is “to compare what biology and the biblical tradition have to say about human nature.” If I were writing a similar chapter I would say that I was trying to integrate the implications of biology and the biblical tradition when both are viewed in a process perspective. The content of what I would write would be remarkably similar.

Does this mean, as Barbour sometimes fears and other theologians have complained more vigorously, that my primary commitment is to Whitehead rather than to Jesus Christ? From my point of view that question makes assumptions that I do not share. It is obvious to me that what drew me to Whitehead was Jesus Christ. Whitehead has enabled me to renew my faith in Jesus Christ. But of course I am not enabled to believe in Jesus Christ as he appears in other perspectives. Hence, when I explain who Jesus Christ is, I do so from my Whiteheadian perspective. I believe this perspective illuminates and clarifies, and if I did not believe that, I would grow dissatisfied with the perspective. But as long as that *is* my perspective, I have no choice but to understand Jesus Christ in it. I do not understand my perspectival approach to be in contrast with someone else’s neutral or objective one. I think that by being fully open about the perspective I am as objective as one can be.

Given the fact that the perspective is Whiteheadian, my faith in Christ affects the way I see everything else as well. *My* Whiteheadian approach is also Christian. Because I believe that Jesus Christ played a role in shaping Whitehead’s perspective, I think all Whiteheadians are somewhat Christianized, but of course I do not say that to Jewish and Buddhist colleagues, or at least only when the time seems right. But in my case, what brought me to Whitehead, what sustained me through the labors of entering into his perspective, what determines the way I employ that perspective, the issues I find important, and the way I pursue them, that is all faith in Jesus Christ. It is because of my faith in Jesus Christ that I sometimes write books on issues that seem important to me that are directed to a general audience and do not speak of Christ. To me, now, prioritizing between my perspective and my faith is not possible.

Just as I say unabashedly that I interpret the present state of biological knowledge about human nature as a Whiteheadian Christian or a Christian Whiteheadian, so also I affirm that as the proper procedure with respect to physics. This is a great challenge! It requires an approach that Barbour does not take and of which he may not approve. Although I detect some influence of both his Christian

faith and process thought in his interpretation of the present state of physics, he does not challenge the formulations of these disciplines on the grounds of either.

The problem as I see it is that certain metaphysical assumptions are built into the categories employed by mainstream physicists, and these differ from Whitehead's. The advance of physics using these categories has been brilliant, so that questioning them at this juncture seems foolish. Nevertheless, I believe that both internal to physics and in its impact on popular consciousness these categories have had negative consequences.

The simplest place to point is to the old problem of waves and particles. Approaching the quantum world with substantialist assumptions, these were the only available categories. They have generated many puzzles and paradoxes. What would happen if one approached the quantum world as a field of Whiteheadian interpenetrating events in which there were neither particles nor waves? Could one intelligibly explain both the particlelike and wavelike characteristics of this world?

Obviously, this is not a task I can undertake. At best it is an extremely difficult one. The major effort in this direction has been that of David Bohm. He came close, at least, to showing that the data can be interpreted in this way. To me, this is very important. To most physicists it is not, since his theories generated no new hypotheses to be tested. Again, perspective is all-important. From a Whiteheadian perspective, intelligibility and coherence with other knowledge are important. From the dominant perspective among physicists, they are not. Barbour seems to share their view, or at least not to oppose it.

As you can see, I have had to work hard to identify a point of difference, and perhaps disagreement, between us. It is a topic on which I would appreciate Barbour's reflections. I think that the sciences across the board are negatively affected by substantialist assumptions built into their language and methods. I have worked on this problem with Whiteheadian colleagues in biology and in economics. I would like to see work done in many other fields. I am curious whether Barbour shares this interest.

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