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AN ANALYSIS AND THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF JOHN B. COBB'S

DOCTRINE OF GOD

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AN ANALYSIS AND THEOLOGICAL
EVALUATION OF JOHN B. COBB'S
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THESIS APPROVAL

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AN ANALYSIS AND THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF JOHN B. COBB'S
DOCTRINE OF GOD

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ABSTRACT

Process theology has become one of the most significant alternatives for contextual constructive theology in the 20th century. Process theology is a growing theological system that interprets Christian doctrines in the light of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. It is significant because process theology gives intellectually and emotionally satisfying reinterpretation of Christianity that is compatible with late 20th century ways of thinking. The main idea of process system is in emphasizing upon the process and the interrelationship of all entities that exist in reality. In contrast to the classical view of God, process thinkers envision the reconciliation between theology and science. Process theologians believe that a more logical and coherence picture of God can be found in process system. As the result, one can obtain an understanding of the compassion, empathy, relativity, and creativity from the living God.

One of the most prominent and important process scholars in North America is John B. Cobb. Cobb has shown his consistency by employing Whitehead's metaphysics and applying it into Christian theology. The reason of Cobb in using Whitehead's metaphysics as his theological framework is that Whitehead's process philosophy is excellent as philosophical system. Cobb is also confident that Whitehead's metaphysics is compatible with Christian faith. For Cobb, through process theology, Christian faith can open the dialogue in constructive manner to other world's religion and science.

In searching of the more adequate theological understanding based on Whitehead's thought, Cobb finds that some alteration is needed to make Whitehead's system more coherent and yet suitable to Christian faith. In his book titled *Christian*

Natural Theology, Cobb proposes some revisions on several issues he found incoherent in Whitehead's system, such as God as actual entity, God and time, God and creativity, God and space, and God and the eternal object. Cobb believes that his revision on Whitehead's doctrine of God can make process theology more coherent and no new difficulties arise.

However, Cobb's understanding of God has demonstrated some theological disagreements. There were many comments, critiques, or even challenges responding to Cobb's works. To his supporters, Cobb has contributed significant ideas to revitalize Christianity in today's living context. To his critics, Cobb's proposal is not a better solution. This research is an attempt to search the objective understanding of Cobb's doctrine of God, discussing several issues that arise as a result of his thinking, and some contributions he had given for Christian thought in the late of 20th century.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The doctrine of God has been a very important subject for theological studies. Even after two thousand years of Christian development, the doctrine has solicited a never ending debate. The debate is not only occurring in any nonessential issues, but involved in some of the fundamental questions about the nature and the reality of God. It deals with some questions regarding God's actuality, God's activity, God's nature and God's relationship with the world, especially with human being.¹

The classical view of God has played a dominant role in shaping a general understanding of God in Christianity over centuries.² God is the Lord Almighty. God is the Supreme Being, Sovereign, and Master of all things. God is the creator of the universe and the controller of everything. God is Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent, and Immutable. Everything that happens in the world is already determined by God.

On the one hand, the classical view of God has been the most comprehensive explanation of God's reality that Christianity has ever had. On the other, the classical view of God leaves many questions unanswered. Some of the most important questions are: How can God predestine some to be saved and others to perish? How could God bear to see a lot of horrible things that happened to the human beings without showing any sympathy and empathy? Did God purposely create evil and sins? Is God actually related to the world? Do human beings exist without a genuine freedom? Are human beings more or less functioning as if a programmed robot? These

¹ Although the Doctrine of God is fundamental for Christian Theology, in fact there were various understanding of God in Christianity. See Feinberg, John. S., ed. *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 31.

² Hill, Jonathan. *The History of Christian Thought* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 309.

questions have influenced the way of Christian practices such as prayer, worship, and evangelism over the centuries.

In fact, the classical view of God is less sufficient in facing the development of science and technology in the context of the world today. The concept of “substance” in Newtonian physic has been already replaced by the concept of “relativity” in Quantum mechanism physic. The development of today’s physics and science has succeeded to change our view on the reality of the world, such as our understanding of existential dimension, time and space. No doubt, the classical view of God needs an improvement, in order to keep the relevancies of Christian’s faith in today’s world.

Perhaps, one of the most influential alternatives for contextual theology in the 20th century is process theology.³ Process theology is a growing theological system that interprets Christian doctrines in the light of Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy. It is significant because process theology gives intellectually and emotionally satisfying reinterpretation of Christianity that is compatible with late 20th century ways of thinking. In process thought, all reality including God is processing into becoming. The main thought of process system emphasizes upon the interrelationship of all entities that exist in reality. In contrast to the classical view of God, process thinkers envision the reconciliation between theology and science. Process theologians believe that a more logical and coherence picture of God can be found in process system. As the result, one can obtain an understanding of the compassion, empathy, relativity, and creativity from the living God.

³ Grenz, Stanley, and Roger E. Olson. *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 130.

One of the most prominent and important process scholars in North America is John B. Cobb.⁴ Cobb has shown his consistency by employing Whitehead's metaphysics and applying it into Christian theology. His goal is to construct a contextual Christian's vision of reality for the postmodern world. The result is, according to Cobb, first, process system offers the explanation of the more biblical and living God. Second, this vision provides a more coherent theological system which is compatible with other disciplines of thought, such as modern science and other religions. Third, the answer for many unanswered questions left by the classical view of God, such as "the un-relational God," "the problem of evil," and "the nature of human freedom and responsibility" can more fully address.⁵

Statement of the Problem

Cobb has proved his contribution to Christianity by his effort in developing natural theology based on Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, particularly in the field of doctrine of God. The reason of Cobb in using Whitehead's metaphysics as his theological framework is that Whitehead's process philosophy is excellent as philosophical system. Cobb is also confident that Whitehead's metaphysics is compatible with Christian faith. For Cobb, through process theology, Christian faith can open the dialogue in constructive manner to other world's religion and science.

In searching of the more adequate theological understanding based on Whitehead's thought, Cobb finds that some alteration is needed to make Whitehead's system more coherent and yet suitable to Christian faith. In his book titled *Christian Natural Theology*, Cobb proposes some revisions on several issues he found

⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵ Cobb, John B. Jr. *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 63-75.

incoherent in Whitehead's system, such as God as actual entity, God and time, God and creativity, God and space, and God and the eternal object. Cobb believes that his revision on Whitehead's doctrine of God can make process theology more coherent and no new difficulties arise.

However, Cobb's understanding of God has demonstrated some theological disagreements. There were many comments, critiques, or even challenges responding to Cobb's works. To his supporters, Cobb has contributed significant ideas to revitalize Christianity in today's living context. To his critics, Cobb's proposal is not a better solution. Cobb thought to have some misinterpretation of Whitehead's concept of actual entity and God. There were also some critics concerning Cobb's alteration to regard God as a (special/unique) living person. At this point, Cobb appears to have fallen into incoherence that he found in Whitehead's system in which he has already rejected. Here, Cobb's claim that his alteration could make Whitehead's doctrine of God be more coherent is questioned. Therefore, there is a need to do a comprehensive analytical and theological assessment of John B. Cobb's doctrine of God. This research is an attempt to search the objective understanding of Cobb's doctrine of God, discussing several issues that arise as a result of his thinking, and some contributions he had given for Christian thought in the late of 20th century.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to do an analysis and theological evaluation of John Cobb's doctrine of God. The explanation is threefold:

1. To do an examination of John Cobb's theological background that contains his philosophical framework and methodology.

2. To understand how Cobb interprets and develops his understanding of God based on the philosophical framework of process thought.
3. To provide a theological evaluation of Cobb's doctrine of God. This evaluation will be done within both positive and negative aspects, such as John Cobb's contributions and also many theological disagreements regarded to Cobb's thought.

Significance of Research

The significance of this research can be described as:

1. The research will provide the brief and condensed information about Whiteheadian process philosophy, as well as John Cobb's view on the doctrine of God based on Whitehead's system.
2. This research will objectively investigate whether Cobb's revision of Whitehead's concept of God is successful or not, which makes the system become more coherent than Whitehead's. This research will also examine the reliability of Cobb's claim concerning the promise of process theology, such as the superiority of process metaphysics as a philosophical system, the compatibility of process philosophy with Christian faith, and the conformity of process theology to modern science and world's religions.
3. This research will also conclude the significance of John Cobb's works and his contributions for today's Christianity.

Limitation of Research

This research will be limited in several ways:

1. Theologically, this research is limited to the field of systematic theology, particularly to the doctrine of God.
2. This research is limited in the exploration of John Cobb's doctrine of God, including his theological foundation that relies on Alfred North Whitehead's process metaphysics, his understanding of the nature of God, and his interpretation of the relationship between God and the world.
3. When providing a theological evaluation, this research is limited to several theologians' positions in responding to Cobb's doctrine of God, such as James E. Caraway, John Feinberg, Fritz Guy, Robert Neville, and so on. Their theological views were chosen due to their capability and accountability related to this research area.

Definition of Terms

It is necessary to give a preliminary description of several terms which are very significant for the accomplishment of this research. Therefore, the definition of terms is provided, in order to reach the common understanding or meaning of the terms.

1. Doctrine of God

Doctrine of God is a system of the study of God and all that is relevant to God. It is the system that will provide the basic concept and understanding of the existence and the nature of God.

2. Classical view of God

Sometimes it is also term “Traditional view of God.” This term refers to the most general understanding of God in Christianity, grounded in the religion of Israel, emerging in the minds of the earliest church fathers, confirmed by the Nicene Creed and the post Nicene era, re-developed by the middle age scholars, and re-proclaimed at Reformation era until now. The classical view of God understands God as the Ultimate One, who created and established all things, bringing them into existence out of nothing. God is the controller, sustainer and sovereign over the universe. God is the author of all things.⁶

3. Process Philosophy/ Process Thought/ Process System

Process Philosophy is a system of philosophical thought that identifies the reality with change, development, and becoming. The origin of process thought could be traced back to the philosophy of ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus (ca. 540-475 BC). His famous statement was, “You cannot step twice into the same river.” He emphasized the principle of our reality as a process of “becoming.” According to his theory, all reality was involved in nonstop (never-ending) change and development. Heraclitus argued that “becoming” was the foundation of all metaphysical concept.⁷

In the early twentieth century, one of the most dominant predecessors of process philosophy was Alfred North Whitehead. Process Philosophy or “speculative philosophy” or “philosophy of organism,” according to Whitehead, is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every

⁶ Kennedy, Phillip. *A Modern Introduction to Theology: New Question for Old Beliefs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 18.

⁷ Grenz, *20th Century Theology*, 130.

element of our experience can be interpreted.⁸ For Whitehead, our reality is a process of becoming from every ongoing event. The starting point of process metaphysics or the basic unit of reality is termed “actual occasion.” It is our “now” or our present time. Since our “now” is continuous ongoing, there is a transition between every occasion. The transition is also known as “a process of becoming” in which makes up our reality.

4. Process Theology

Process theology is a type of theology fundamentally based on Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy. Process theology is notably developed by John B. Cobb Jr., David Ray Griffin, Schubert M. Ogden, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, etc. The basic concepts of process theology include: God is not a static perfect being but a dynamic always changing entity. Our reality is a reality of process and becoming. God is the actual principle of all process of becoming. God has a power of persuasion rather than coercion.⁹

5. Evangelical

Evangelicals are Christians who define themselves, their faith, and their lives according to the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth. For Evangelical, Scripture is the highest source of theology. It means that Evangelicals believe that human senses have limited capability to understand God. God reveals Himself to us through Scripture as written revelation and Jesus Christ as final revelation. Evangelicals believe that

⁸ Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition (New York: Free Press, 1978), 3.

⁹ Kurian, George Thomas, ed. *Nelson’s New Christian Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 629.

theology serves not only the purpose of knowing, but also application to life.

Therefore, evangelicals insist that theology must be relevant to their daily life.¹⁰

6. Actual Occasion/ Entity.

Actual Occasion or actual entity is the final real thing of which the world is made up. There is no going behind it to find anything more real.¹¹ It is a momentary happening event in which many events of the past actual world “becomes one” through a process of subjective unification.¹² Each actual occasion is a momentary event which is partially self-created and partially influenced by other actual occasions. All things can be explained by the concept of a process of actual occasion. Each entity is interrelated and varying in degree of complexity.

7. Prehension

This is the original concept in Whitehead philosophy which refers to a feeling or grasping of the physical and conceptual data of actual entities.¹³ Prehension is the experiential activity of an actual occasion by which characteristics of one occasion come to be present in another. By prehending, each actual entity is internally related. This means that an entity is not an isolated or independent being but is present in other actual entities as interrelated moments of an ongoing process. By means of prehension, a past occasion comes to be constitutively present in the contemporary occasion and contributes to its intrinsic character. All actualities apprehend and this is not necessarily a conscious activity.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹¹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 18.

¹² McDaniel, Jay, and Donna Bowman, ed. *Handbook of Process Theology* (Missouri: Chalice, 2006), 5.

¹³ Hosinski, Thomas E. *Stubborn Fact and Creative Advance: An Introduction to the Metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 1993), 59.

¹⁴ McDaniel, Jay, and Bowman, Donna, ed. *Handbook of Process Theology*, 7.

8. Creativity

Whitehead identifies creativity as “the ultimate.”¹⁵ It is that of which every actual entity is an instance. In Whitehead’s process philosophy, to be actual is to be an instance of creativity. Every actual entity has a measure of freedom which is expressed in an individual aim. The self-creative process by which an actual entity realizes its subjective aim includes unifying its many prehensions of the past and adding to them something new which is the entity’s own creative contribution to the cosmic process.¹⁶ When the actual entity has realized its subjective aim, it attains “satisfaction,” and thereafter ceases to exist as an experiencing subject, and becoming datum or its new becoming. Creativity should be thought of as an activity rather than substance.¹⁷

9. Eternal Objects

Eternal objects are pure possibilities for the specific determination of fact. Eternal objects are also forms of definiteness. Similar to actual occasion, eternal objects are both a particular and a universal, since it is just what it is in distinction from every other actual occasion and also a potential for participating in the constitution of any future actual occasion.¹⁸ Examples of eternal objects are colors, sounds, scents and geometric characters. Eternal objects do not have ideal existence apart from the actualities.

¹⁵ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 7.

¹⁶ McDaniel, Jay, and Bowman, Donna, ed. *Handbook of Process Theology*, 6.

¹⁷ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

Methodology

The methodology of this research is analytical descriptive. It means that the writing of research will be done in analytical and descriptive way. Therefore this research can be categorized as a qualitative research.¹⁹ Every proportion or statement of reasoning will be expressed in a proper logical argument.

The procedure of research will be done in several steps:

1. Study the literature of John Cobb's theological works, including his philosophical framework and methodology from the selected Cobb's primary references as well as secondary works.
2. Review and analyze Cobb's view regarding the nature and the reality of God and the relationship between God and the world.
3. Review and analyze the selected references that contain some of Evangelical theologians' positions responding to the process view of God, especially responding to Cobb's view of God.
4. Do an evaluation of Cobb's view of God, presenting his contribution and many theological disagreements related to his view.
5. Report the summary of research and propose a final conclusion.

Therefore, this thesis will contain:

¹⁹ The result of qualitative research includes descriptions, judgments, and evaluations. The method of qualitative research emphasizes on dependability, which is enhanced by the use of prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation, case analyses, auditing, etc. Analytical descriptive research is part of the qualitative research methodologies. The purpose of analytical descriptive research is to develop a purposeful, systematic intelligent and accurate description of some particular situation. For more details on qualitative research methods, see David R. Krathwohl. *Social and Behavioral Science Research: A New Framework for Conceptualizing, Implementing, and Evaluating Research Studies* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985), 178.

Chapter 1 explains the introduction, background, and the importance of this research.

Chapter 2 presents John B. Cobb's theological background, including his life and works, and his natural theology based on Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy.

Chapter 3 presents John B. Cobb's features on the doctrine of God, including his understanding of the nature, the existence, and the reality of God. It also describes his thought regarding the relationship between God and the world.

Chapter 4 contains the theological assessment of Cobb's doctrine of God. First, this chapter presents the survey of the critical thoughts of several theologians that have responded to Cobb's doctrine of God. Then, it will evaluate Cobb's thought with theological argument, especially epistemological argument.

Chapter 5 contains the summary of the research's findings. It also contains the final statement, the contribution of research, and conclusions.

Review of Literature

It is necessary to note several significant publications related to this research.

1. Caraway, James E., "A Preliminary Critique of John B. Cobb's Whiteheadian Doctrine of God," *Encounter*, 36/2. 1975.

In his works titled "A Preliminary Critique of John B. Cobb's Whiteheadian Doctrine of God," James E. Caraway presents several arguments regarding the problem of Cobb's interpretation on Whitehead's doctrine of God. According to Caraway, Cobb's criticism of Whitehead's dichotomizing God's primordial and consequent natures is unwarranted. Caraway argues that Whitehead explicitly

exemplifies the unity of the primordial and the consequent nature of God. Caraway also gives some critics related to Cobb's thesis to regard God as a living person, which Cobb believes is the simplest way to understand Whitehead's doctrine of God. Caraway questions whether regarding God as a living person is suitable to Whiteheadian system. Moreover, Caraway analyzes that Cobb's God, who is a person, is indeed a unique person, and so do Whitehead's God as an actual entity is a unique actual entity. In this way of thinking, Caraway concludes that if Whitehead's system is incoherent, then, Cobb's alternative is likewise incoherent.

2. Neville, Robert C., *Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Theology*. New York: Seabury Press, 1980.

One of the most promising features on Cobb's doctrine of God is its compatibility to open dialogue with world's religions. For Cobb, process philosophy has been a fruitful conceptual tool for building bridges between Asian and Western cultures. Neville in his work titled "Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Theology," gives several comments and challenges to Cobb's efforts in encountering Asia culture or specifically, the Buddhism. According to Neville, "The belief that something is appropriate for someone logically entails the belief that everyone concerned with the issue ought to believe the same. This is not to say that the same thing is appropriate for all people; but those who are concerned and knowledgeable ought to agree on what is appropriate for whom." Neville defends his thesis by asserting, "First, the thesis reflects the underlying claim that evidence for a belief has some objective status over against mere assertions regarding the belief...Second, although people may begin with different categorical perspectives, even different structures of existence defining those perspectives, there are objective issues of enriching life that reward or negate those perspectives...Third, this thesis regarding

the universality of a claim for appropriateness or truth derives from the Greek structure of existence, and therefore is parochial....”

3. Guy, Fritz, “Comments on A Recent Whiteheadian Doctrine of God.”

Andrews University Seminary Studies, 4. 1966.

In his works titled “Comments on A Recent Whiteheadian Doctrine of God,” Guy offers a brief summary of Whitehead’s idea of God, a short exposition of Cobb’s development and revision of Whitehead’s concept of God, and some critical comments on Cobb’s doctrine of God. Guy gives some critical comments regarding Cobb’s methodology and objectives in developing Christian natural theology. Guy argues that by utilizing Whitehead’s philosophy as a framework of Christian theology, Cobb’s doctrine of God sounds heretical. Guy is also questioning Cobb’s position on the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*. For Guy, by rejecting the doctrine of creation from nothing, Cobb has rejected one of the most fundamental doctrines in Christian faith. Consequently, the concept of holiness of God in process system is removed, and the concept of worship is considerably weakened.

Chapter 2

John Cobb's Theological Background

Each theologian is influenced by his/her own particular situation and context of living when expressing his/her theological thought. This fact is also true for John B. Cobb Jr. whose theological motivation and contributions are deeply connected to his life's experiences. Therefore, the brief survey of Cobb's life and works will be helpful to understand his theological background.

Life and Works

John B. Cobb, Jr. was born on February 9th, 1925, in Kobe, Japan. His parents were Methodist missionaries in Japan from 1919 to 1965. He lived mainly in Kobe and Hiroshima and grew up in a multi-ethnic Canadian academy in Kobe. There, he experienced his first cross-cultural point of view. At fifteen, he left Hiroshima and returned to his family roots in Georgia, USA, to finish high school and attended Emory College in Oxford, USA. During his living in Georgia, he experienced the anti-Japanese propaganda and some negative pictures of Japan from government and social publicity after the Pearl Harbor attack. He found that the same event could be presented in totally different perspectives according to the country in which he was living. He became more critical in encountering many dominant views in churches, media, and government.

In 1944 he joined the U.S Army and, because of his Japanese language ability, he served in the Japanese linguistic facility. During that time, he met with Jewish and Catholic intellectuals who helped him being aware of the narrow view of his Protestantism and widened his view by introducing him a more colorful world of religion from different perspectives. This experience led him to left government

service and entered the University of Chicago, where he chose an interdepartmental program for the purpose of encountering himself to all the objections to Christianity that produced by the modern world. At the time, he was struggling to reconstruct his own vision of reality in the context of modern science development.

A year later, he attended the Divinity School in the University of Chicago with the hope that he could find some affirmatives in religious study, so he could reconstruct a more compatible Christian faith with scientific and historical knowledge. In Divinity School, Cobb studied under Richard McKeon, Daniel Day Williams, and Charles Hartshorne. Richard McKeon introduced Cobb the thought of modern relativism, which claims that every system of thought has a capability to handling the rage of philosophical problems quite well only from a particular perspective. Charles Hartshorne, who has heavily influenced Cobb, introduced the thought of Alfred North Whitehead to Cobb. Through the teaching of Hartshorne, Cobb was successful in restoring his personal faith and enabled him again to take the idea of God seriously. After this experience, Whitehead's thought became the central theme of Cobb's work.

In 1952, Cobb received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago after finishing his dissertation titled "The Independence of Christian faith from Speculative Belief." He spent three years teaching at Young Harris College in north Georgia. At the same time, Cobb also served as part-timer pastor to six churches in the area and was establishing the seventh congregation as well. Ernest Cadman Colwell, the former president of the University of Chicago, brought Cobb to Emory University in Georgia to teach the new graduate institute for liberal arts. In 1958, also received an invitation by Colwell, Cobb moved to Claremont, California, and joined the faculty of Claremont School of Theology. There he remained serving as Ingraham Professor of Theology at the Claremont School of Theology and as Avery Professor of Religion at

Claremont Graduate University for over thirty years. In 1971, he established the Process Studies Journal with Lewis S. Ford, another distinguished process philosopher. In 1973, in partnership with his colleague David Ray Griffin, Cobb established the Center for Process Studies and has made Claremont the center of Whiteheadian process thought in this world. In 1990, Cobb retired from the Claremont School of Theology, but he still continued to make significant contributions to process theology, process philosophy, and interreligious studies. In 1998, he organized the International Process Network together with Herman Greene.²⁰

Cobb is known as one of the most important North American theologian of the twentieth century.²¹ Although he is often regarded as the preeminent scholar in the field of process philosophy and process theology, Cobb is also known for his interdisciplinary approach integrating insights from many different disciplines into significant dialogue. Cobb's works have been influential to a wide range of disciplines, such as theology, ecology, economics, biology, social ethics, and "Christian – East Asian" religious dialogue.

Cobb is the author of more than fifty books. Some of his most notable works in theology include *Living Options in Protestant Theology* (1962), *A Christian Natural Theology* (1965), *The Structure of Christian Existence* (1967), *God and the World* (1969), *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (1975), *Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition* (with David Ray Griffin, 1976), and *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (1987).

²⁰ The biographical information on Cobb in this research is collected from Livingston, James C. and Francis Schussler Fiorenza, Ed. *Modern Christian Thought*, Vol.2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), and Marty, Martin E. and Dean G. Peerman, Ed. *A Handbook of Christian Theologians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

²¹ Dorrien, Gary. "The Lure and Necessity of Process Theology," *Cross Currents* 58/2 (2008), 333.

Cobb's other significant works in integrating process thought and other disciplines are *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (1972), *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (with Charles Birch, 1982), *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (1982), *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (with Herman Daly, 1989), *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology, and Justice* (1992), and *Sustaining the Common Good: a Christian Perspective on the Global Economy* (1994).²²

The Basic Element of Process Philosophy

John Cobb has laid the foundation of his theology on the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.²³ So, it will be crucial to have a concise survey of Whitehead's process philosophy in order to understand Cobb's theological thoughts.

Process philosophy or "speculative philosophy" or "philosophy of organism" (as Whitehead named it), "is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted."²⁴ The method to achieve that goal is, "the utilization of specific notions, applying to a restricted group of facts, for the divination of generic notions which apply to all facts."²⁵ It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a

²² For more detailed bibliography about John B. Cobb Jr., See Griffin, David R. and Joseph C. Hough. "John B. Cobb, Jr.: A Theological Biography," *Theology and the University: Essays in Honor of John B. Cobb, Jr.* (Albany: Sunny Press, 1991).

²³ Alfred North Whitehead is one of the 20th century dominant predecessors of process philosophy. Whitehead was a British "outstanding" mathematician, logician, educator and philosopher. He accepted a professorship of philosophy at Harvard University, where there, he produced the most impressive metaphysical system of the 20th century. For more survey about the roots of process philosophy and theology see, Grenz, Stanley. And Roger E. Olson., *20th Century Theology: God & The World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 130, and Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 309-316.

²⁴ Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition (New York: Free Press, 1978), 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.²⁶

According to Whitehead, modern philosophy has fallen into an incoherent way of thinking which divides reality into a dualistic structure, such as substance-mental, abstract-concrete, subject-object, time-space, causal-effect, etc. This pattern of thinking can be traced back to the Platonic, Aristotelian and Neo Platonic metaphysics. Therefore, the “substance-quality” concept must be avoided. The static “form” description must be replaced by the description of dynamic process.²⁷ Organistic metaphysics, according to Whitehead, is that, “which the system seeks to preserve... the discovery that the process, or concrescence, of any one actual entity involves the other actual entities among its components. In this way the obvious solidarity of the world receives its explanation.”²⁸

According to Whitehead, metaphysics²⁹ has been usually understood to be composed of two areas of concerns. The first is ontology, which is the study of what constitutes being. Ontology attempts to identify the nature, the essential properties, and the relations of any things exists. The second is cosmology, which is the study of the fundamental relationship, interactions, and processes, and processes within the totality of being in the universe. Then, the goal of metaphysics should be to produce both ontology and cosmology consistently to each other, coherent and logical. Both ontology and cosmology should enable us to understand systematically each individual “being” and its relationship with all other “beings” in the universe. The metaphysical principles must consist of the most general and universal idea, because

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Whitehead’s full explanation regarding his view on metaphysics, see *Process and Reality*, 3-17.

it would explain what is common to everything that exists. On the other hand, it would also include the most concrete and specific data, because it attempts to understand the reality of actual fact and the fullness of the concrete actuality.³⁰

Whitehead recognized that this goal of metaphysics remains an ideal and can never be fully actualized.³¹ All philosophers can only do a reflection and test their hypothesis to come closer to the goal of metaphysics than the scheme of interpretation once they possessed. Philosophy is much like science, namely, there can be no final ultimate knowledge reached, and there is only progress in discovering the limitations of our understanding in the past. Whitehead was convinced that all discoveries in science or in philosophy have exhibited the same general method. For Whitehead, the method of knowing is a process that consists of three basic stages, such as particular observation, imaginative generalization, and renewed observation.³² In science, these stages are more usually be known as observation, hypothesis formation, and testing.³³ It is clear that Whitehead stands firmly on the empiricist position. It means that all knowledge has its origins in experience. That is to say, apart from experience there can be no knowledge.

The Ontological Principle: Actual Entities

Whitehead had shown his commitment to empiricism by what he called “the ontological principle.”³⁴ For him, “The ontological principle can be summarized as: no actual entity then no reason.”³⁵ This principle claims that no reason is acceptable unless it can be referred somehow to something actual. As Whitehead said, “there is

³⁰ For this summary of Whitehead’s central idea of metaphysics, I am indebted to Thomas E. Hosinski’s writing in *Stubborn Fact and Creative Advance: An Introduction to the Metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead* (lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 1993), 3.

³¹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ Hosinski, *Stubborn Fact and Creative Advance*, 12.

³⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 19-40.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

nothing which floats into the world from nowhere.”³⁶ He added, “Thus the search for a reason is always the search for an actual fact which is the vehicle for the reason.”³⁷

Therefore, according to Whitehead, actual facts or actual entities are a fundamental requirement in constructing a metaphysical interpretation of reality.

In Whitehead’s process philosophy, the basic unit of reality is the “actual occasion” or “actual entity.” “Actual entities – also termed actual occasions³⁸ – are the final real things of which the world is made up. One cannot find anything more real things going behind actual entities.”³⁹ Every actual entity is not static, but it is always in the process of changing and “becoming”; and that “becoming” is a creative advancement to become novelty.⁴⁰ While Whitehead usually explains actual entities as “drops of experience,”⁴¹ it is helpful to think of an actual entity as a “moment of experience.”⁴² A moment of experience is the actual present moment which we experienced. It is a single temporal and short lived moment. It is the moment that exists for a second “thick”⁴³ and instantly becoming our past and perishing meanwhile the new present moment happens. It can be said that human life consists of a series of moments of experience. The moment that can be recognized as a single moment of experience, but at the same time, the moment itself continues processing in an inseparable relation to other moment of experience.

The nature of actual entities is universal and related to one another.⁴⁴ It means that the present moment of experience is happening in everything which exists in the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁸ Whitehead used these two terms interchangeably.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18

⁴² Hosinski, *Stubborn Fact and Creative Advance*, 21.

⁴³ It is important not to think the term “second” here as duration of physical time, but it is more like the expression of short temporal moment.

⁴⁴ Hosinski, *Stubborn Fact and Creative Advance*, 21.

universe. For example, the present moment as experienced by all living human now is an actual entity and so is the present moment experienced by all other things, even in every tiny scale of things such as electron, proton and neutron. There is a level of complexity in each actual entity. Some actual entities are more complex than others. But, the formation of all actual entities is governed by the same principle, so that their basic structure of actuality is fundamentally the same.⁴⁵

Actual entity should not be confused with the concept of matter, since these two notions are not identical. Actual entity is not a static “substantial-being” that physically constructed by sub atomic particle.⁴⁶ In the contrary, actual entity is a dynamic moment experiencing a process of becoming. The “being” is constituted by its “becoming.”⁴⁷ Since every actual entity is constituted by its “becoming,” so every actual entity is a subject. Therefore, in order to emphasize the movement from each actual occasion to its new becoming, Whitehead terms the movement subject-superject,⁴⁸ instead of subject-object.

In Whitehead’s view, each actual entity is essentially bipolar, which contains mental and physical actualities.⁴⁹ Each actual entity contains the abstract or conceptual pole and the concrete or physical pole. Whitehead views on material things as “society” of actual occasion.⁵⁰ It means everything that one can feel, sense, and observe in this world is composed by complex numerous societies of actual occasion. In a sum, actual entity or actual occasion is the most basic, general and important thing in understanding process philosophy in which we can realize that we are now living in a world of becoming.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁴⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 28-29, and 78,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19, 45 108, and 239.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

The Process of Becoming

Whitehead convinces that our actual world is not constructed by unchanging substances with changing attributes. He asserts that the actual world is ultimately composed by a process of becoming.⁵¹ Even from our most basic method of observation of our reality as well as our direct perception of the contemporary world, we can know that we live in a process. Moreover, an actual entity is the result of process of becoming. As Whitehead says, “how an actual entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is; so that the two descriptions of an actual entity are not independent. The being is constituted by its becoming.”⁵² Therefore, the notion of “becoming” is more primary than “being,” in interpreting our reality.

The actual world is a “dynamic,” “creative” and “living” process that constantly develops as reaction of what had been happened in the past to what might be happen in the future.⁵³ It is “dynamic” because each actual entity is always open for its future possibility of becoming. It is “creative” because every actual entity is always creating its new becoming. It is “alive” in terms of its “living immediacy.”⁵⁴ This means that the process of each actual entity has an end. When the process of becoming ends in one actual entity, it is “dead” in the sense that it is no longer in the process of becoming, and it has “perished” into the past and is succeeded by a new moment of becoming, a new actual entity.

All past actual entities are the “stubborn facts” as Whitehead termed it,⁵⁵ which means that the past occasion had become the unchangeable or permanent fact. Then, when the moments of the past are no longer “alive” in becoming, they stay, in

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵³ Hosinski, *Stubborn Fact and Creative Advance*, 23.

⁵⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, xiii-xiv.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

what Whitehead's term, "objective immortality"⁵⁶ It is the fixed past situation that would influence the future moment of its actuality. Therefore, the process of becoming of a new actual entity begins by receiving the last condition of past actual entities, experiences it's new becoming in "creative advance,"⁵⁷ and when the process of this actual entity becoming ends, it accumulates those "stubborn fact" of the past to itself.

In each process of becoming of actual entity, there is an act of receiving of the past actual entity and an act of giving of new novelty. Whitehead terms these activities as "inheritance" or "inheriting."⁵⁸ It means that there is some inheritance passing from the past to the present. It implies that the new actuality cannot be something new which is totally different from its past actuality. Whitehead refers this limitation of becoming to the "objective datum."⁵⁹ There is another technical term that Whitehead uses to explain the acts of giving and receiving in the becoming of each actuality, namely, "Prehension"⁶⁰ or "feelings,"⁶¹ an activity of present actuality to grasp the objective datum presented to it.

Every prehension consists of three factors: (a) the "subject" which is prehending; (b) the "datum" which is the prehended; and (c) the "subjective form" which is how that subject prehends that datum.⁶² There are various forms of subjective form, such as emotions, valuations, purposes, aversions, consciousness, and so forth.⁶³ By prehension, the cause and effect are integrally connected and affect each other in the process of becoming. The notion of prehension explains the notion

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 29,60, and 81-82.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 223-224.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 24.

of interdependence. Causes are taken into their effects, for they actually become a part of what they are influencing. In another words, all things are organically connected. Prehension maintains a continuation of the past and present.

While there is a limitation to what each actual entity will become in the next actuality, there is also freedom for each actual entity to decide what it wants to be. There is a decision to make in the process of prehension, to accept or reject any possibilities offered by subjective forms. Once a decision had been made, an actual entity has determined and grasped its next actuality, and when it is accomplished, actual entity has reached its “satisfaction.”⁶⁴ It is a fulfillment from what is already given. Satisfaction marks a process of concrescence of actual entity which comes to an end and begins the next phase of its process.

Moreover, there are two kinds of process in Whitehead’s metaphysics, that is macroscopic process and microscopic process. The macroscopic process is the process of the whole actual entities. The microscopic process is the process of each actual entity. The former describes the becoming of the universe, and the latter explains the transition of each individual entity. In other words, while the former is the process of becoming of the “many,” the latter is the process of becoming of the “one.” This twofold manner of process is happening at once and become a dynamic “organism.” For this reason, Whitehead called his metaphysics as philosophy of “organism.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 219-221.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

Creativity

The process of becoming is driven by the activity of creating the new actual entity. Whitehead called this intrinsic character as “creativity.”⁶⁶ Creativity is a principle of novelty.⁶⁷ In process, each actual entity transforms itself to a new unique entity as there is nothing like it anywhere else or ever has been, or ever will be again. Process is a result of the fact that all actual entities are fundamentally creative. As Whitehead said,

“Creativity is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact. It is that ultimate principle by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively. It lies in the nature of things that the many enter into complex unity.”⁶⁸

Therefore, the role of creativity in Whitehead’s metaphysics is very important, necessary and “ultimate.”⁶⁹

According to Whitehead, each actual entity is a momentary event which is self-created and partially influenced by other actual occasions.⁷⁰ It can be said that each actual entity is self-caused. It is also true that the process of becoming is a process of self-creation. Ontologically, the process of self-creation recognizes no first cause. The process is just there and will endure forever. The principle of self-creation is also known as terms “*causa sui*.” It is a Latin word to describe something which is generated within itself and had no starting point as well as its final ending.

Creativity is the category which Whitehead attempts to explain the dynamism of all actual things. Through creativity, we can understand the process from possibility to actuality. Creativity represents the transition from one “perished” actual

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

entity to a novel concrescence. Creativity also displays the live interaction of all actual entities in cosmic process. For this reason, creativity is the “ultimate” in the process metaphysics. As Whitehead said, “In the philosophy of organism this ultimate is termed “creativity,” and God is its primordial, non-temporal accident.”⁷¹

Relativity

The other important philosophical element in Process philosophy is “relativity.” All actual entities are united in a lively dynamic relationship, interdependent, influenced by one another, and cannot be apart from one another. Whitehead expresses this principle as, “We must say that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity. The philosophy of organism is mainly devoted to the task of making clear the notion of ‘being present in another entity,’”⁷² Then, he added, “Every item of the universe, including all the other actual entities, is a constituent in the constitution of any one actual entity.”⁷³ Therefore, it is clear that in Process thought, all actual entities are essentially related to each other.

Actual entities are also related to each other in a sense of their grade of closeness in one and others. Whitehead called it the “societies” of actual entities. Then, the collection of many societies of actual entities is called “nexus.” As Whitehead said, “There are thus real individual facts of the togetherness of actual entities, which are real, individual, and particular, in the same sense in which actual entities and the prehensions are real, individual, and particular. Any such particular fact of togetherness among actual entities is called a nexus.”⁷⁴ Following this understanding, we can know that all entities are related, and entities in proximity

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

influence (impact) one another. One entity is influenced by others and vice versa. In this way of thinking, the reality is lively, vivid and creative. The notion of nexus reveals the doctrine of environment, that the universe as a reality of a whole is a sum of the characters and the connectedness of the various societies of actual entities.

The nature of the relationship of all actual entities in the entire world are interactive, continuously, and extending. Whitehead terms it, “extensive continuum.” As he states, “The physical world is bound together by a general type of relatedness which constitutes it into an extensive continuum.”⁷⁵ Again, he explains his view as, “We must first consider the perceptive mode in which there is clear, distinct consciousness of the ‘extensive’ relations of the world. These relations include the extensiveness of space and the extensiveness of time. Undoubtedly, this clarity, at least in regard to space, is obtained only in ordinary perception through the senses. This mode of perception here termed ‘presentational immediacy.’ In this ‘mode’ the contemporary world is consciously prehended as a continuum of extensive relations.”⁷⁶ Moreover, the concept of extensive continuum is not to be confused with the concept of time and space in a static view, believing that the duration of time and the dimension of space are all static. In Whitehead’s view, the process of becoming is not primarily caused by the existence of time and space. Time and space are not real things in themselves, but they expressed the most fundamental forms of relatedness between actual occasions. In other words, time and space are real because their reality is derived from the relationship between actual occasions.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

God in Whitehead's Metaphysics

There is an explanation for God and God's relation to the world in Whitehead's metaphysics. But, the term "God" which Whitehead used in his metaphysics is not influenced by any religious or traditional belief system.⁷⁷ Whitehead agrees with Spinoza that there is "One" ultimate reality actualizing itself in all entities that we can know or experience. But the "One" in Whitehead's view is not a static unchanged-substance that interacts with the changing world. Rather, it is an active ongoing-ness of things.⁷⁸ According to Whitehead, God is the everlasting actual entity who grounds the eternal objects in actuality and makes possible their implementation into the ordered process of becoming. It is true that each actual entity is self-created. But, the eternal object or the potentiality lacks of "causal efficacy" or power. God supplies each entity with its "initial aim" or purpose, serves as the principle of relevance, and actualizes it in actual entity. God, then, also serves as the principle of concretion."⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the "ultimate" principle in Whitehead's system is not God but "creativity."⁸⁰ The ultimacy of process metaphysics lies on the creativity in actualizing each new occasion continuously and simultaneously. But, creativity itself is pure, abstract and has no actuality.⁸¹ It is God, as the principle of concretion, who gives form to actuality. As Whitehead said, "He is that actual entity from which each temporal concrescence receives that initial aim from which its self-causation starts. That aim determines the initial gradations of relevance of eternal objects for

⁷⁷ The term God that Whitehead used here is intentionally secularized and rationalized to support his metaphysics. Whitehead insists that beyond the principle of empiricism, God cannot be known. Bertrand Russell, in the period of their collaboration, found Whitehead as an agnostic. See Victor Lowe, *Understanding Whitehead* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1966), 232.

⁷⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 6-7; 88.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 164; 244.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

conceptual feeling; and constitutes the autonomous subject in its primary phase of feelings with its initial conceptual valuations, and with its initial physical purposes.”⁸² Although God gives the limitation in the sense of giving the determination to the condition of the starting point of each actual entity, including giving its purposes, possibilities, and direction, but each actual entity has freedom to determine its new becoming. God transforms the mere creativity into a determinate freedom. God also serves as the “Sustainer,” which is to preserve each actual occasion as a vivid experience. With this point of view, God can be regarded as the creator of all actual entity and the actual entity itself.⁸³

Therefore, as Whitehead is convinced, God is not an exception to all metaphysical principles, but God is their chief exemplification.⁸⁴ This means that God is not an exception, independent, immutable, and impassable. Rather, as actual entity, God is regarded as dependent, changing, experience a temporality, and in process. But, how does God, on the one hand, serve as the causal efficacy and the principle of limitation, concretion, relevance, to actual entity and on the other hand, serve as the actualization of every actual entity? Whitehead explained that God, like other entities, is dipolar (bipolar).⁸⁵ It means God has a primordial nature (abstract/ conceptual/ mental pole) and a consequent nature (concrete/ physical pole).

God’s primordial nature is his conceptual structure of Deity. God is transcendent in his abstraction, permanent and unchanging. God is functional as orders, grades, and adjustments of the eternal objects and makes them applicable for actualization in the temporal world. Whitehead said, “Viewed as primordial, he is the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality. In this aspect,

⁸² *Ibid.*, 244.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

he is not before all creation, but with all creation.”⁸⁶ In his primordial or conceptual nature, God has a responsibility to envision the eternal objects, to maintain them as timeless conceptual possibilities. God’s own desire is to see the eternal possibilities become real and actual. This means God does not determine the realization of what will happen, but rather persuades (lures) each actual entity’s self-actualization toward a particular goal.

As the primordial nature, God is deficient to be real. At this side, God is free, complete, primordial, eternal, and unconscious.⁸⁷ Therefore, Whitehead asserts the other nature of God is God’s consequent nature, which is the physical pole of God. God’s consequent nature is concrete, changing, and impermanent. God as actual entity is physical prehension of all actualities of the evolving universe.⁸⁸ It means that God is affected by the concrete entities of the world. God is interactively receives the new data from the temporal entities, saves it, and those saved data become God’s wisdom accumulatively. In turn, God shares his wisdom to every actual entity as its objective goal. Whitehead said,

“God, as well as being primordial, is also consequent. He is the beginning and the end... Thus, by reason of the relativity of all things; there is a reaction of the world on God. The completion of God’s nature into a fullness of physical feeling is derived from the objectification of the world in God. He shares with every new creation its actual world; and the concrescent creature is objectified in God as a novel element in God’s objectification of that actual world.”⁸⁹

Therefore, in contrast to the primordial nature, God is always in the process of becoming. God is described as conscious, incomplete, conditioned, actual, and everlasting.⁹⁰ God and the world constitute a society of interdependent entities.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 343.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Whitehead expressed his famous antithesis to describe the relation between God and the world as:

“It is true to say that God is permanent and the world fluent, as the world is permanent and God is fluent. It is 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, in comparison with the world, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the world is actual eminently. It is true to say that the world is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the world. It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the world transcends God. It is true to say that God creates the world, as the world creates God.”⁹¹

In other words, the consequent nature of God is the world.⁹² God experiences the changing and developing world as well as the world experiencing God. God maintains the process of all things and experiences the everlasting process of becoming.

Moreover, In Whitehead’s metaphysics, God is not the only entity involved in creation. “Creative advance” requires the interdependent relation of God and the world. For Whitehead, God is better regarded as the “savior” of the world than as its creator.⁹³ While all finite entities perish and become “stubborn fact,” they do furnish God with new experience for prehension and integration into God’s consequent nature. Whatever God receives from actual entities never fades away. Hence, all perishing entities achieve a kind of “objective immortality” in God. In turn, God seeks to provide back into the world with what is worth saving, to afford entities a new ideal vision of the possibilities for creative advancement. Therefore, for Whitehead, the character of the relation of God and the world is persuasive, not coercive. Finite creatures are free to reject or receive God’s ideal envisagement and lure. Whitehead explained the love of God to the world as,

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 346

“The action of the fourth phase is the love of God for the world. It is the particular providence for particular occasions. What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven, and the reality in heaven passes back into the world. By reason of this reciprocal relation, the love in the world passes into the love in heaven, and floods back again into the world. In this sense, God is the great companion – the fellow sufferer who understands.”⁹⁴

At this point, the “love” relationship of God and the world can be established. The genuine love requires a free response, not coercion.

In sum, through Process system, Whitehead had proposed a radical view of God, from which we can derive a more logical and coherence concept of God, the harmonization of the idea of God and modern science, and a more consistent explanation of the dynamic and lively God – world relationship. God is transcendent and at the same time is immanent in the world. In God’s primordial nature, God acts by offering the world the vision that contains ideal things in which each entity can reach its maximum potentiality of becoming. Then, each entity takes the decision to determine its actualization. Here, each entity has a freedom and responsibly to determine its own future actuality. In God’s consequent nature, God is the ground of concrescence of the whole world. God is being prehended and being felt by the world, in turns, the world is being prehended and being felt by God. Here, the relationship of God and the world is true, dynamic, and vivid. Hence, God cannot be unaffected by the world. God loves the world as He loves His own body. God experiences suffering and joys as the world experience the suffering and joys. As Whitehead says in the final chapter of *Process and Reality*, God is “the great companion – the fellow sufferer who understands.”⁹⁵

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 532.

CHAPTER III

Theological Analysis of John B. Cobb's Doctrine of God

Cobb is convinced that Whitehead's process system is the best possible philosophical foundation for the development of a Christian natural theology, especially in understanding the nature of God in the modern world. As Cobb had said, "...I argued that there is a need for Christian natural theology and that the philosophy of Whitehead provides the best possibility for such a theology."⁹⁶ Cobb found that Whitehead's idea of God is prominent, because "God" has played one of the most important roles in metaphysics. As Cobb stated that, "Whitehead's philosophical reasons for affirming God and his attempt to show that God is not an exception to all categories appear to me philosophically responsible and even necessary."⁹⁷ According to Cobb, Whitehead's philosophy is excellent to make a revision and can be utilized as a framework for Christian theology, as it is substantially excellent as a philosophical system and its vision of reality is compatible with the modern Christian faith.⁹⁸ Cobb believes that the concept of God based on Whitehead's process thought is insofar coherent and complies to philosophy, science, and other world's religions. In sum, Cobb admits that his doctrine of God is very dependent on Whitehead's concept of God, and even more, Cobb has entered into a deep discussion with Whitehead as to how the doctrine of God might be better formulated.⁹⁹

In his book titled "Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition," Cobb explains that the term "God" in process theology has a different meaning to the term "God" in the popular Christian tradition. The "dipolar" concept of God which he

⁹⁶ Cobb, John B. Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 252.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

develops from Whitehead's thoughts is an objection to the one-sidedness views of God in the traditional theism. According to Cobb, there are at least five common connotations of the traditional theism that do not fit with the meaning of God in process theology. First, God is a cosmic moralist. Second, God is the Unchanging and passionless Absolute. Third, God is the controlling power. Fourth, God is the sanctioner of the status quo. Fifth, God is Male.¹⁰⁰ For Cobb, these five connotations are obviously derived from Greek philosophy. Cobb's believes that this way of thinking of God is historically influenced by Greek philosophers, so that God must be conceived as "primary," "absolute" and "unconditioned." Therefore, for Cobb, this kind of God is not suitable for biblical God.

Although Cobb's view of the doctrine of God is very dependent on Whitehead's process system, Cobb also does some analytical interpretation and evaluation of Whitehead's view of God. Cobb found that Whitehead was not successful in his attempt to show that God is not an exception to the categories of reality. Cobb found that there are many elements of incoherence in Whitehead's doctrine of God. As he noted, "Undoubtedly Whitehead's writings also include points of self-contradiction, but these are minor and easily remedied. The further criticism of a philosophy as incoherent has to do with its 'arbitrary disconnection of first principles.'¹⁰¹ Furthermore, he added, "To the extent that the four ultimate elements of his system (actual occasions, God, eternal objects, and creativity) are arbitrary disconnected, to that extent some measure of incoherence remains in Whitehead's own philosophy. It is my intention to show both that Whitehead moved far toward overcoming such incoherence and also that one can go, and therefore should go,

¹⁰⁰ Cobb, John B. Jr., *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 8-10.

¹⁰¹ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 177.

farther yet.”¹⁰² Therefore, Cobb challenged himself to have a better description in which God is related to actual occasions, eternal objects, and creativity. Cobb intends to show that God is not an exception to all metaphysical principles, but their chief exemplification, which can be more comprehensively explained. He aims to prove that his explanation of God could be more logical and coherent than Whitehead’s description.¹⁰³

God as Actual Entity

Cobb agrees with Whitehead that God should be viewed as actual entity. It means that actual entity involves both the primordial and the consequent nature. Whereas the primordial nature of God is an abstract form of God as actual entity, the consequent nature of God is his fully concrete reality as actual entity. God exists, not in terms of the “object of devotion” as the classical Christian view depicted. Cobb claims that in the Process view of reality, the kind of God as the object of devotion does not exist.¹⁰⁴ God exists as the reality exists. God is concrete by virtue of his consequent nature.

Further, Cobb points out that, “The reason Whitehead introduces concreteness with the consequent nature is that at this point he takes for granted the primordial nature and that the consequent nature as its complement, when he previously discussed the primordial nature, the consequent nature was not in view.”¹⁰⁵ Cobb found that Whitehead dealt too often with the consequent and primordial nature of God as if they were genuinely separable entities or as if God were merely an addition of these two natures. God’s primordial nature performs certain function and his

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁰⁴ Cobb, *Process Theology*, 42.

¹⁰⁵ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 178.

consequent nature others.¹⁰⁶ This systematic disjunction not only neglects the fundamental unity of God as an actual entity, but also involves a misunderstanding of the functions of the two natures in relation to the world. For Cobb, it is very difficult to imagine how the individual aim on each actual entity can be wholly timeless and yet become relevantly effective at particular moments of time. Therefore, according to Cobb, it is impossible to explain that the “eternally unchanging primordial nature of God” can provide different initial aims to every occasion.¹⁰⁷

Cobb would solve the problem above by suggesting that God’s subjective aim involved a various intensity of prehension depends on the satisfaction that occurs within each entity. At the same time, God also owns the actualization in such a way that it maximizes the possibility of that satisfaction. As Cobb stated,

“Certainly God’s aim is unchangingly directed to an ideal strength of beauty. In this unchanging form it must be indifferent to how this beauty is attained. But if God’s aim at beauty explains the limitation by which individual occasions achieve definiteness, then in its continual adaptation to changing circumstances it must involve proportional feelings of each of the becoming occasions as realizing some peculiar satisfaction. God subjective aim will then be so to actualize himself in each moment that the propositional feeling he entertains with respect to each new occasion will have maximum change of realization. Every occasion then prehends God’s prehension of this ideal for it, and to some degree the subjective form of its prehension conforms to that of God. That means that the temporal occasion shares God’s appetite for the realization of that possibility in that occasion. Thus, God’s ideal for the occasion becomes the occasion’s ideal for itself, the initial phase of its subjective aim.”¹⁰⁸

Then, the concrescence of each occasion is prehending God’s prehension. In turn, this concrescence forms part of the initial phase of the occasion’s own subjective aim. Therefore, the initial aim for the new occasion is included in its “initial data” and is not a distinct element as Whitehead describes it, but it comes from the totality of God’s nature as a whole and not only from the primordial nature only.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

To prove his view that God should not be understood by just emphasizing the primordial nature, Cobb then argues that God is not the only one that exclusively provides the initial aim for each actual occasion. Each actual occasion may also derive their initial aim from other preceding actual occasions. The initial aim other than God can also have propositional prehensions concerning the satisfactions of the new occasion, although the role of God remains decisive. He noted that,

“The analysis as a whole is not found in this form in his writings, and it deviates from the apparent implications of some of his statements in at least two ways. First, it rejects the association of God’s aim exclusively with the primordial nature, understood as God’s purely conceptual and unchanging envisagement of eternal objects; this rejection is required if we deny that God’s immutable aim alone adequately explains how God functions concretely for the determination of the events in the world. Second, it interprets the subjective aim of the actual occasion as arising more impartially out of hybrid feelings of aims entertained for the new occasion by its predecessors. In other words, it denies that the initial phase of the subjective aim need be derived exclusively from God.

In *Process and Reality*, much more sharply than in *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead treats the causal efficacy of the consequent nature of God for the world quite separately from that of the primordial nature. I believe that this is a mistake. If God is an actual entity, God will be prehended by each new occasion. We will assume that God’s aim for it, a propositional feeling for which the new occasion is the logical subject and some complex eternal object the predicate, will in every case be prehended and play a decisive role in the determination of the subjective aim of the occasion. But the occasion’s feeling of this propositional feeling in God need not exhaust the objectification of God in the new occasion.”¹⁰⁹

Therefore, one should not sharply divide the two natures of God by understanding the primordial pole exclusively as the conceptual-abstract nature and understanding the consequent nature exclusively as the concretion or actualization of actual occasion only. Moreover, Cobb added,

“Hence Whitehead was right to insist that in addition to deriving the initial aim from God, men alsoprehend God in some other way. But just as he was wrong to identify the derivation of the initial aim wholly with the primordial nature, so also he was wrong to identify the other prehensions of God solely with

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 183-184.

the consequent nature seem to attribute to it a synthesis of the physical prehensions with the conceptual ones.”¹¹⁰

It is clear here that Cobb insists that there can be no sharp distinction between the reception of the initial aim and other prehensions of God. According to Cobb, the role of God in a whole process of each actual occasion can be described as follow: Each actual occasion is initiated by a prehension of all entities in its past, including God. All of the becoming actual occasions, including God, have the specific aims for this new occasion to realize. The subjective aim of new occasion must be formed by the synthesis or adaptation of these aims. Additionally, all of the past entities, including God, will be objectified by other eternal objects. The eternal objects, then, are determined partly by the past entities and partly by the new subjective aim.¹¹¹

God and Time

As to God in relation to time, Cobb also found that Whitehead often focused on the primordial nature of God.¹¹² For Cobb, Whitehead usually emphasizes the non-temporality, primordially, and eternity of God. When Whitehead does discuss about the consequent nature of God, he introduces that there is a kind of process in God. God in his consequent nature is affected by what occurs in the world. The problem is, in Whitehead’s system, everything that in the process of becoming has its own temporality. For each actual occasion will soon perish and will be succeeded by its new becoming. On the one hand, Whitehead accepts that there is real becoming of God. But on the other hand, he refuses to say that God is temporal.¹¹³

Basically, Whitehead’s system recognizes two kinds of process regarding to time. First, it is a transition from one actual occasion to another. This kind of process

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

is also termed “physical time.” This physical time is not identical with the Newtonian scheme of time, nor with the Kantian scheme. In the doctrine of extensive continuum, Whitehead explains that each actual entity has temporal extension.¹¹⁴ This temporal extension is happening continuously and all at once. The second kind of process is the internal process of the becoming of each actual occasion. It is an abstraction from that process. It is the process of actual occasion, which begins with the initial phase, prehending, and ends at satisfaction (completion) of its new becoming. At this point, Cobb stated,

“However, one can analyze the process of becoming of the actual occasion, and indeed, Whitehead develops an extremely elaborate analysis. Each occasion begins with an initial phase constituted by its original data and its initial aims. It ends in its satisfaction through which it becomes a datum for further occasions. Between the indeterminateness with which it begins and determinateness with which it ends, each occasion passes through a succession of phases in which complex syntheses of data replace the mere data.

There is, clearly, some continuity between the physical time derived from transition from one occasion to another and the process internal to the becoming occasion. In terms of physical time the occasion must be said to become all at once, yet it is eminently clear that some phases of the becoming presuppose others; and Whitehead does not hesitate to use such temporal terms as earlier and later.”¹¹⁵

It is clear for Cobb, if God were an actual entity, then how could God does not experience the temporality like any other actual entities? The second problem is, if there is no temporality in God, it means that God is an eternal processing actual entity that had no completion or never reaches the phase of satisfaction.¹¹⁶ Then, God is a single actual entity processing forever.

Whitehead did try to solve this problem by introducing the threefold distinction of God with other actual entities. First, actual entities other than God are

¹¹⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 288-289.

¹¹⁵ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 186.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 188-189.

temporal. This means that actual entity will perish as soon as they have become actual, and this condition would not happen to God. Second, the primordial nature of God is eternal. This means that it is wholly unaffected by time or by process in any other sense. The primordial nature of God affects the world but is unaffected by it. For it, before and after are strictly irrelevant categories. Third, the consequent nature of God is everlasting. This means that it involves a creative advance.¹¹⁷ Similar to physical time, that the earlier elements are not lost as the new one is constantly added. As a result, God as in his primordial nature envisages all possibility eternally, and God as a whole is everlasting. At this point, Cobb concludes Whitehead's position that God is an actual entity in which the two natures (primordial and consequent nature) are involved in abstract parts.¹¹⁸

In this case, the question of God's efficacy in the world becomes acute. If there is no temporality in God, then, God did not experience the succession of occasion, and it means that God has no past occasion. And if God didn't experience past occasion, then God cannot affect and be objectified by the world. Although, Whitehead explicitly affirms that the role of God to the world is just such an influence, but, the case of the causal efficacy of God's consequent nature remains disputable. As Cobb noted,

“It may be objected that it is my development of Whitehead's thought in the preceding section that is in trouble here rather than Whitehead's usual formulations. If only the primordial nature of God were causally efficacious for the world, and if it were indifferent to time, then the problem would not arise. But if, as I hold, God can function as principle of limitation only by entertaining a specific aim for each becoming occasion, that aim must take account of the actual situation of the world. In that case, the problem does arise. Furthermore, since Whitehead unquestionably affirms the causal efficacy of the consequent nature of God, the problem also occurs for his explicit formulation. We must either reject this doctrine of the causal efficacy of the consequent nature and also affirm that an entirely static God can have particularity of efficacy for each occasion, or else we

¹¹⁷ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 345-347.

¹¹⁸ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 189.

must recognize that the phases in the concrescence of God are in important respects more analogous to temporal occasions than to phases in the becoming of a single occasion.”¹¹⁹

For Cobb, it is peculiar if God never completes and never knows satisfaction. In other words, it is unreasonable to think that God should eternally aim a goal that is in principle unreachable.

Cobb proposed a solution concerning Whitehead’s explanation of these problems. For Cobb, the easiest way to understand and answer these problems is to regard God as a living person.¹²⁰ Like human persons, a living person is a succession of moments of experience with a special continuity. God is an actual entity retrospectively and prospectively viewed as an infinite succession of divine occasions of experience.¹²¹ However, Cobb is aware that his view to regard God as a living person did not entirely solve the problem of God’s temporality and God’s satisfaction. As a living person, God lacks of complete self-identity through time and loses whatever they were in the past.¹²² In Whitehead’s principle, God must be self-identical and in him there must be no loss. Cobb argued that in God’s case, prehensions of all earlier entities would not be something other than his prehension of his own past, since they would all be included in his consequent nature.¹²³ With this point of view, the unity of all past entities is God’s completion. The loss in temporal world is the result of the very fragmentary way in which past occasions are regenerated to the present. Cobb added, in God’s case, no such loss occurs. God vividly and consciously remembers in every new occasion all the occasions of the

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 190.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

past.¹²⁴ God's experience grows by addition to the past, but losses nothing. For Cobb, the view of God as a living person can help us to more comprehensively understand God as actual entity. Cobb believes this thesis could make the doctrine of God more coherent and avoid new difficulties raised.¹²⁵

God and Creativity

In Whitehead's view, God plays an ultimate role in creation in term of that God is the creator of each temporal actual entity.¹²⁶ It is God that supplies the initial aim to each actual occasion and conditions for each process of becoming. But in several passages while Whitehead explains God in relation to creativity, Cobb found that it is creativity which plays the ultimate role in creation.¹²⁷ In this case, Cobb offers a clarification of the role of God in creativity, in order to reach the more decisive role of God in creativity than Whitehead himself had intended.¹²⁸ As Whitehead describes, the creative function of God consists of contributing the initial phase of the subjective aim to each new occasion.¹²⁹ In reality, the initial aim is the initiating principle in each processing occasion. The initial aim determines which occasions will constitute the past and provide the initial data for the new occasion. Then, God in effect selects causal factors in each occasion. As Cobb stated,

"In the first place, the initial aim determines the standpoint that the occasion will occupy its locus and extend in the extensive continuum. This, in turn, determines what occasions will be in its past, in its present, and its future. That means that the initial aim determines which occasion will constitute the past and therefore, the initial data of the new occasion.

In the second place, the initial data are not a part of the becoming occasion in the same sense as the initial aim. The initial data are the occasions in the past of the becoming occasion as they were in themselves in their own subjective

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹²⁶ Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition (New York: Free Press, 1978), 225.

¹²⁷ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 204.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 343.

immediacy. They are appropriated by the becoming occasion as it objectifies them. But how it objectifies them is determined by the initial aim.

For these reason we may properly think of the initial aim as the originating element in each new occasion. Since Whitehead regards God as the sole ground of the initial aim, he systematically attributes to God the all decisive role in the creation of each new occasion, although he draws back from so strong a formulation.”¹³⁰

With this point of view, Cobb concludes that God’s responsibility is not absolute and not effective as well.¹³¹ God is not enough decisive in a sense that, first, his role is limited even as the giver of situation. God’s work is ideal only for the situation in abstract sense. Second, the initial aim does not determine the outcome, although it profoundly influences it. Each occasion owns the freedom to decide the outcome elicited from the situation given to it. Third, God does not create the actual occasion. There is no *creation ex nihilo* in process metaphysics. Every actual occasion is its own creator (*causa sui*). God even does not create the eternal objects. Eternal objects exist as they are. Last, because there is no beginning of the world, there is no first cause of temporal creation out of nothing. In every moment, each occasion has in part determined its own form and is free to reject in part the new possibilities of ideal realization offered by God. Therefore, God is not the ultimate reason of the origin of everything.¹³²

At this point, Cobb pointed out the problem relating God as creator and creativity. There are several passages in Whitehead’s writings showing that the dominant role in creation is apparently assigned to creativity, and God is described as the accident or creature of creativity.¹³³ This view seems to suggest that even if God creates every individual occasion, God is himself created by creativity. For Cobb, this

¹³⁰ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 204-205.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 11, 135.

kind of view is a misunderstanding.¹³⁴ Cobb then argues that God cannot be the creation of creativity. According to the ontological principle of process metaphysics, only actual entities can have efficient or final causality for other actual entities.¹³⁵ God as an actual entity does have such efficacy for other entities, but creativity itself is not an actual entity. Therefore, creativity cannot function as an efficient cause of anything. Creativity is incapable to be the cause of any actual entity. If the term creator means an efficient final cause, then, creativity cannot be the creator, obviously not the creator of God.¹³⁶

Cobb added that, if creativity cannot be the function as the creator of anything, then, it is God who functions to give efficacy to creativity. Therefore creativity is neither abstract, nor actual or concrete.¹³⁷ In Cobb's observation, it is still far from clear from Whitehead's description to answer the question, why is there anything in this universe as "prime matter" as is in Aristotelian perspective?¹³⁸ For the idea of creativity is not followed by the explanation about the origin of first occasion and its following occasions to be actualized. As Cobb said,

"Whitehead, of course, was convinced that the process is everlasting. Creativity will always take new forms, but it will always continue to be unchangingly creative. My point is only that the notion of creativity in itself provides no grounds for this faith. Hence, as an answer to the question of why there is and continues to be anything at all, creativity cannot play in Whitehead's philosophy quite the role prime matter plays in Aristotle. In Whitehead every actual occasion is a novel addition to the universe, not only a new form of the same eternal stuff. Creativity is inescapably an aspect of every such entity, but it cannot be the answer to the question as to why that entity, or any entity, occurs. The question is why new processes of creativity keep occurring, and the answer to this cannot be simply because there was creativity in the preceding occasions and

¹³⁴ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 206.

¹³⁵ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 36-37.

¹³⁶ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 206.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

that there is creativity again in the new ones. If occasions ceased to occur, then there would be no creativity. Creativity can explain only ex post facto.”¹³⁹

Cobb would solve this problem by explaining that creativity in Whitehead’s philosophy as the material cause never serves as the role of “prime matter” found in Aristotelian thought. In the Whiteheadian context, things are to be happening (actual) by the decisions that are determined by actual entities.¹⁴⁰ As proposed by Cobb before, the decisive element in the initiation of each actual occasion depends on the initial aim that offered to it by God, and it is also God that functions as the actualization of every decision made by each actual occasion. As a result, God must be conceived as being the reason that entities occur at all as well as determining the limits within which they can achieve their own forms.¹⁴¹ For this reason, Cobb suggests, his explanation of God’s role in creation is more radical and fundamental than Whitehead’s own language usually suggests.¹⁴² Therefore, for Cobb, God is not subordinate to creativity but fundamentally an instance of creativity.¹⁴³ In this sense, God’s relation to creativity is just the same as to all actual occasions.

This clarification by Cobb is not intended to modify the essential in Whitehead’s metaphysics, but to be a closer adherence to his own definitions and principles in order to increase the coherence of the system as a whole.¹⁴⁴ Like Whitehead, Cobb refuses to claim God as either eminent reality or necessary existence. Cobb stressed that the role of God for the being as well as the form of actual entities.¹⁴⁵ Cobb affirms that God does exist and God’s aims are the maximum

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

strength of the beauty. God continues to exist everlastingly because he has power to do so.¹⁴⁶

In concluding his proposal to Whitehead's doctrine of creativity, Cobb once again emphasized his contention that the role of God is significantly decisive. Without God, each process of becoming of actual occasion, neither creativity nor the past, nor both together, could provide a future. Cobb summarizes that God always be the reason that each new occasion becomes. God, past occasions, and the new occasion are the conjoint reason for the becoming of each actual entity. The new becoming will always be the new embodiment of creativity.¹⁴⁷

God and Space

Cobb also proposed a revision of Whitehead's view of God in relation to the space. For Cobb, space, or space-time, is a real and important factor in the actual world.¹⁴⁸ Every actual occasion actualizes a spatiotemporal region that constitutes a standpoint. In Whitehead's term, space and time conjointly constitute the extensive continuum. Each occasion occupies some region within this extensive continuum. In short, each actual entity in the process of becoming is occupied by a spatiotemporal region. If God is actual entity, then God also occupies a spatiotemporal region. Cobb raises a question concerning God's standpoint and his physical present in this actual world, in order to treat God more coherent than what Whitehead already did.¹⁴⁹

Although Whitehead does not specifically have a discussion about this question, his system allows three possibilities to answer this question. First, God is local. It means that God occupies a particular region. It is ruled out by the fact that

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

God is related with equal immediacy to occasions everywhere in space.¹⁵⁰ Second, God is non-spatial. It means that God's mode of being is irrelevant to spatiotemporal region. It is based on Whitehead's thought of God primarily in terms of his primordial nature and its conceptual prehension by actual occasions apart from spatial relations.

As Cobb stated,

“Since God's functions as philosophically identified are related with equal immediacy to every occasion, any special location is impossible. The choice between the remaining is far more difficult. Since God's own being is independent of spatiality, it is clear that there is an important sense in which God transcends space.”¹⁵¹

But the idea of God as non-spatial creates an essential difference between God and other actual entities. For Cobb, this idea makes God as an exception and contradicted to Whitehead's God as chief exemplification.¹⁵² Since all actual entities have respective regional standpoints, then, Cobb intends to propose an explanation which can reduce the differences between God and other actual entities as much as possible.

For this reason, Cobb proposed the third option, namely God is Omni-spatial. Cobb suggests that God, similar to another entity, is spatial and regional. But, God's standpoint could not be in favor of one part of the universe over others, God must be all-inclusive. As Cobb stated,

“My own judgment is that the doctrine of God is always to be preferred which, other things being equal, interprets his relations with the world more, rather than less, like the way we interpret the relations of other entities. If we adopt this principle, there is prima facie support for the doctrine that God, like all actual occasions, has a standpoint. Since that standpoint could not be such as to favor one part of the universe against others, it must be all inclusive.”¹⁵³

It means that God occupies the entire continuum. But, Cobb realized that this idea cannot escape from serious philosophical objection, such as the possibility of actual

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 195.

standpoints can include the regions that comprise other actual standpoints. Cobb then draws an analogous explanation regarding to the relationship of human experience to the brain. Cobb explained,

“If we can think of the spatiotemporal regions of the occasion of the human person as including the spatiotemporal regions of numerous occasions in the brain, then we may think analogously of the region of God as including the regions comprising the standpoints of all the contemporary occasions in the world. If we follow the argument of the previous section, there would be some difference, for whereas the occasions of human experience have considerable temporal breadth in relation to the electronic occurrences in the brain, we have seen that the occasions of God’s experience must be extremely thin in their temporal extension. The regions of other occasions would be included, not in that of a single occasion of the divine experience, but in the regions of a succession of such experiences.”¹⁵⁴

With this analogy of human brain, Cobb believes that there is no real issue and self-contradiction occurred. Although Whitehead would deny the conception that God owns a regional standpoint, Cobb argues that God would be related to every occasion only if he were physically present. Cobb confidently affirms that it is more natural and more coherent to affirm that God is physically present.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, it seems more logical for Cobb to affirm that God is Omni-spatial.

God and Eternal Object

Cobb has also found another incoherent element in Whitehead’s explanation of God’s function in relating eternal objects to actual occasions. For Cobb, Whitehead seems to make a more radical differentiation between the way in which God prehends the eternal objects and the way actual occasions prehend them.¹⁵⁶ Cobb saw that Whitehead’s explanation of God in terms of eternal object has an unmediated relation while asserting all other entities have a mediated relation.¹⁵⁷ For Cobb, this could be a

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

danger and a final incoherent element in Whitehead's whole system. Again, Cobb suggests a solution based on Whitehead's formulation about God and eternal objects that can be found in Whitehead's writing "Religion in the Making." As Cobb stated,

"It may not be necessary, however, to understand Whitehead in this sense. What the ontological demands is that no agency be attributed to eternal objects in themselves. It does not forbid that they be classified as one of the categories of existence. Nor does it demand that their sheer existence be regarded as dependent upon God. Let us take our point of departure the formulation of the ontological principle to the effect that "every explanatory fact refers to the decision and to the efficacy of an actual thing." On the basis of this formulation I suggest that the relation between God and eternal objects can be restored to the situation we found in Religion in the making, namely, that it belongs to no totally different mode from that of other actual entities to the eternal objects."¹⁵⁸

The problems which need to be solved by Cobb are twofold; first, Cobb found that God's role is radically different from actual occasions in terms of the effectiveness of rendering eternal objects. Second, God envisions eternal objects in a way of conceptual prehensions, or in other words, Whitehead seems to emphasize God's primordial nature apart from God's consequent nature.¹⁵⁹

To solve the first problem, Cobb suggests that the subjective aim of an occasion derives initially not only from God but also from past occasions. Similar to God, this initial phase includes propositional prehensions of novelty and possibilities of actualization for its new occasion. In other words, the uniqueness of God is not radical. As Cobb explained,

"A much simpler theory, more coherent both in itself and with Whitehead's general position is as follows. According to this theory, there is just one hybrid prehension of God, the prehension that includes the feeling of God's aim for the new occasion. This aim includes not only the ideal for the occasion but alternative modes of self-actualization in their graded relevance to the ideal. It certainly includes God's conceptual feeling of eternal objects X and Y together with his feeling of relevance of Y to X. Hence no new hybrid prehension of God is required in subsequent phases. Although the new actual occasion may not actualize itself according to God's ideal aim for it, it will not include any

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

possibility not provided as having some relevance for it in the initial hybrid prehension of God.

This interpretation also allows us to see that the difference between God's function in providing novelty and that of past occasions, although great, need not be total. Some ordering of eternal objects is possible also in temporal occasions and in principle may have some effectiveness for future occasions. The difference, the vast difference, is that God envisages and orders all eternal objects, whereas temporal occasions can order only infinitesimal selection of eternal objects."¹⁶⁰

This argument leads to the second problem. According to the ontological principle, the eternal objects cannot be effective for actual occasions except by the decision of actual entity. It means that the conceptual feelings of an actual entity always derive from its physical and hybrid feelings. An eternal object is given for the new occasion with the mediation of some other actual occasions. But Cobb saw that, in this case, there is an exception of God. In God, all eternal objects are effective without the mediation of actual entity.¹⁶¹ There are two options of understanding responding to this problem. First, the ontological principle is simply inapplicable to the relation between eternal objects and God. Second, it is God's primordial decision which makes the effectiveness of eternal objects for God. Cobb holds the second position, he believes that the ontological principle allows the understanding that the decision of actual entity can be derived from conceptual prehensions and not depends on physical prehensions.¹⁶²

In fact, Cobb realizes that this position cannot escape from the problem such as the capability of each occasion to make decision apart from its physical prehension. The kind of decision by which eternal objects become relevant for God is categorically impossible for all other actual entities. Cobb insists to think that its

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

occurrence may well be connected with the highly reflective consciousness of human occasions. As Cobb said,

“Such a claim would supplement rather than contradict Whitehead’s analysis of novelty in actual occasions as arising from hybrid prehensions of God. He focuses on the emergence of novelty as it precedes and is presupposed by all conscious reflection and decision, whereas I am speaking of new possibilities introduced by highly reflective consciousness. However, I do not wish to press any claim beyond this: Whitehead should not preclude in principle the possibility that temporal occasion may have toward some eternal object the kind of relation God has toward all.”¹⁶³

By removing the role of eternal objects from the ontological principle of Whitehead’s thought, Cobb is confident to say that his speculation is more coherent and meets the principle found in “Religion in the Making,” such as “the forms belong no more to God than to any one occasion.”¹⁶⁴

God and the World

In his book titled “Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition,” Cobb summarizes his doctrine of God in the light of Whitehead’s process system, especially concerning to the reciprocal relationship between God and the world. Whitehead describes the relation of God and the world in his famous antithesis, such as, “What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven, and the reality in heaven passes back into the world.”¹⁶⁵ The principle of this relationship can be understood by briefly analyzing the process of becoming or concrescence of actual occasion. Each actual occasion begins with an initial phase constituted by its initial data (past experience) and initial aim. God’s role here is to offer particular potentialities for the new occasion through the initial aim. Any actual occasion precedes its new becoming, by considering many possibilities, from past experience and from God’s guidance

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 351.

through the initial aim, as an option to be chosen. It is free for any actual occasion to determine its new becoming. New creative possibilities offered by God may be rejected or may be accepted as well by any actual occasion. It ends with a decision, which is also termed “satisfaction,” through which it becomes a datum for future occasions.

Everything which happens in the world affects God, in the sense that God will offer the next initial aim to the next becoming of each actual occasion. God, then, is the final factor in the universe that makes a process becoming become possible. Cobb describes the necessity of God as follow,

“An example to illustrate the movement of Whitehead’s thought to God can be briefly indicated. He envisions a vast congeries of events coming into being momentarily and then lapsing into the past. Each new event must take account of the many events that make up the world given for it. It must do so in some definite way, for without definiteness there is no actuality. Since it has a past different from that of any event in its world, it must have a new form of definiteness. The past cannot impose such a form upon it, since the present can derive from the past only what the past contains. This form of definiteness can be derived only from the sphere of possibility. But the sphere of possibility is purely abstract, lacking all agency to provide selectively for the need of new events. There must be an agency that mediates between these abstract forms or pure possibilities and the actual world. This agency is best conceived as an envisagement of the abstract forms of definiteness such as to establish their graded relevance to every new situation in the actual world. In sum, God is that factor in the universe which establishes what-is-not as relevant to what-is, and lures the world toward new forms of realization.”¹⁶⁶

In his book titled “God and the world,” Cobb once again reaffirmed his understanding of God’s role and necessity:

“He entertains a purpose for the new occasion, differing from that entertained by the previous human experience. He seeks to lure the new occasions beyond the mere repetition of past purposes and past feelings or new combination among them. God is thus once the source of novelty and the lure to finer and richer actualizations embodying that novelty. Thus God is the One who calls us beyond all that we have become to what we might be.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Cobb, *Process Theology*, 44.

¹⁶⁷ Cobb, John B., *God and the World* (Philadelphia: John Knox, 1969), 82.

In short, God is necessary in the process system. In addition, God is “always” related to the world, in a “full-responses” relationship to it. God is the guider of the direction and offers purposes for every actual entity. On the other hand, each actual entity responds to God’s guidance with a decision either to obey God or disobey. In other words, whatever choices we make, God realizes it into actuality and makes it happen. This view has two logical implications on how God is related to the world, such as “God as Responsive Love” and “God’s Love as Persuasive.”

God as Responsive Love

When God actualized our decision into reality, whether we obey God or not, the first implication is that God loves us. Our decision does not change his treatment of us, in the sense that God never leaves us just because we do not choose the option which God offers. Whatever decision we make in every occasion, God makes it happen.

In this sense, God fully understands the world. God feels what the world feels. God knows what happened in the world at every moment. In Cobb’s word, God has a sympathetic feeling for the world. As Cobb stated,

“Sympathy means feeling the feeling of the other, hurting with the pains of the other, grieving with the grief, and rejoicing with the joys. The ‘others’ with whom we sympathize most immediately are the members of our own body.”¹⁶⁸

Moreover, Cobb added,

“Rather, the responsiveness includes a sympathetic feeling with the worldly beings, all of whom have feelings. Hence, it is not merely the content of God’s knowledge which is dependent, but God’s own emotional state. God enjoys our enjoyments, and suffers with our sufferings. This is the kind of responsiveness which is truly divine and belongs to the very nature of perfection.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Cobb, *Process Theology*, 44.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

This view is closely connected with Whitehead famous statement, “God is the great companion – the fellow sufferer who understands.”¹⁷⁰

God’s Love as Persuasive

The next implication is that God’s action is persuasive and not coercive.¹⁷¹ God seeks to persuade each occasion toward a possibility which would be best actualized. But God does not absolutely determine the new becoming of every occasion. God does not overrule the world by negating freedom. God is perfect in the sense of His divine creative responsiveness to the world.

Since the reality is partially self-created, future events are not yet determined. Therefore, even perfect knowledge cannot know the future, and God does not wholly control the world. Thus, God is related to the world in the sense of “persuasive” influence, and not coercive influence.¹⁷² In each occasion, God provides every actuality with “initial aim,” but this initial aim does not automatically become the subject’s own aim or subjective aim. Subjective aim is a product of its own decision. God persuades every actual occasion, giving it a direction to be a better occasion actualized. Again, God is not in coercive control to force the finite occasion in self-actualization. Consequently, God’s activity involves risks. Cobb sees this risk as a divine creative love which is adventurous.¹⁷³

This doctrine is in contrast to the classical Christian view of God that portrays God as “Almighty,” and the controlling “Power.” For Cobb, the interpretation of the Almighty God, attributed with perfection, immutability, impassibility, and omniscience, was derived from Greek philosophy, and the Bible itself is quite

¹⁷⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 351.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 57-61.

ambivalent about those divine attributes. Therefore, the Bible implies the role of God more as the divine providence than the all-determining power, and, for Cobb, that divine providence is God's persuasive love.

In sum, God relates to the world in a sense of allowing the independence and the integrity of both God and finite creatures. This affirmation also explains that God is fully present in the world but God is not the Creator of the world, which means separation from the world, and cannot be affected by the world. God loves the world and saves it with His vision of truth, beauty and goodness. God is the great companion of the world, a fellow sufferer who understands.



CHAPTER IV

Theological Evaluation of John B. Cobb's Doctrine of God

Cobb's efforts in presenting a revision of Whitehead's God without escaping from Whitehead's own basic principles are commendable. He attempts to demonstrate that God is not an exception to the categories of reality but their chief exemplification. However, many comments and critics have addressed to Cobb regarding his interpretations of Whitehead's philosophy. In general, Cobb has been successful to raise some significant questions by identifying the problem of incoherence in Whitehead's doctrine of God. On the other hand, he appears less successful in terms of formulating a better answer.

Cobb's doctrine of God will be assessed firstly by identifying Cobb's revision of Whitehead's doctrine of God, and then by pointing out some issues regarding Cobb's Christian theology, as well as his contributions to the development of Christian doctrine of God.

The Evaluation of Cobb's Revision of Whitehead's Doctrine of God

The Unity of Two Dichotomized Natures

Cobb is right in questioning Whitehead's dichotomized and mostly abstract God. Although Whitehead himself realized the danger of God could be considered as an instance of two dichotomized natures, many times he mentioned about the unity of God in actual entity. In fact, in *Process and Reality*, Whitehead mostly deals with the notion of God's Primordial nature as compared to the specific explanation of God's consequent nature, though appears only in the final chapter of *Process and Reality*.¹⁷⁴ Cobb has pointed out that the main problem of Whitehead's God as actual entity is the

¹⁷⁴ The specific explanation of God's consequent nature, see the final chapter of *Process and Reality* in Whitehead's, *Process and Reality*, 342-351.

unity of the primordial and consequent nature and the relation of these two natures to the world.¹⁷⁵ Cobb is aware that God could become an exception if only God exclusively provides the initial aim for each actual occasion. Therefore, Cobb would solve this problem by arguing that each actual occasion may also derive their initial aim from other preceding actual occasions. This means that every actual occasion must prehend a unity of conceptual and physical prehensions of its preceding actual occasion, and, moreover, a unity of God's primordial and consequent nature. Cobb terms this solution as a "hybrid prehensions of God."¹⁷⁶

The crucial question arises here, whether this unitary functioning of God implies a past-ness in God parallel to the past-ness of prehendend actual occasions. According to Whitehead's system, there was no actual entity can be prehendend while it was in the midst of becoming process. It must be entirely a concrete actuality to be prehendend. Since God's consequent nature is always in the process of becoming and it means that it is never a complete determinate thing. This is very problematic since Cobb argues that for actual entity to become, it must prehend God in both primordial and consequent natures of God. Then how can all entities prehend God's consequent nature that is a never complete process?¹⁷⁷

Yet, there is another dimension of the same problem raised regarding this issue. If it is true that no actual entity can be prehendend in its becoming process, then it is true also that no actual entity can experience the other while it is undergoing its process. In other words, no entities can exactly experience what God is feeling nor can God experience what all other entities are feeling and experiencing. In fact, one of the most process theology's critics about God of Classical theism is that God is

¹⁷⁵ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 178.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁷⁷ Feinberg, John S., *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Illinois: Crossway, 2001), 173.

separated from all other creatures, neither knows nor cares, or has no real experience what all creatures had experienced. However, the problem just raised above shows that process concept makes it impossible for God to enter into our subjective immediacy, so God really does not know what all other entities feel like. Nor does God suffer with us or rejoice as we do.¹⁷⁸ Thus, Cobb proposed a concept of “hybrid prehensions of God” to make Whitehead’s doctrine of God more coherent in process metaphysics.

God as a Living Person

Cobb also proposes another revision concerning the relation of time and the person-ness in God. Cobb sees the serious problem in Whitehead’s interpretation of God as actual entity. Whitehead constantly confirms that God, like all others, is an actual entity. But, Whitehead also asserts that in the distinction from all other entities God is non-temporal in regard to his primordial nature and everlasting in regard to his consequent nature.¹⁷⁹ This distinction could make God become an exception to all categories that Whitehead himself intends to avoid. Cobb contends that Whitehead has made a radical difference between God and other actual entities. Therefore, for Cobb, a consideration of God as a person would make the system more coherent.¹⁸⁰

Cobb argues that Whitehead's description of God as a mere internal process raises several problems. First, if the process ascribed to God as a mere internal process, then God cannot directly affect the world. Second, internal process alone cannot be the reason that God provides the initial aim for each occasion. Third, a mere internal process raises problems regarding God's satisfaction in actualization. If God

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁷⁹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 524.

¹⁸⁰ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 188.

is a single actual entity never to be completed, God can never know satisfaction.¹⁸¹ To solve these problems, Cobb suggests that God be considered as a person rather than an actual entity. As a person, God can remember all the past and anticipate the future. God is viewed as the total society or sequence of actual occasions. At any moment, God would be an actual entity, but as viewed retrospectively and prospectively God would be an infinite succession of divine occasions of experience. Cobb argues that viewing God as a living person could make the doctrine of God more coherent, and that no serious new difficulties are raised.¹⁸²

At this point, Cobb intends to solve the problem of the possibility of satisfaction on the part of God and the problem of God's ability toprehend other occasions. However, even if this proposal is granted, Cobb's alternative is actually facing other inescapable problems. In his explanation of God as a person, Cobb agrees with the Whiteheadian understanding of person. As he says, "A living person" is a succession of moments of experience with special continuity."¹⁸³ As long as one is speaking in terms of temporal person, this definition of person offers no significant problem. But, there is a question regarding the ground of the succession of the moments of experience, namely, the question of the unifying agency. There is no purely internal reason why the various moments of experience should constitute the "special continuity"¹⁸⁴ and why the ongoing process with some peculiar completeness sums up their predecessors.¹⁸⁵ However, in the Whiteheadian system, the answer of this question can be traced to the initial aim whose origin is grounded in God.¹⁸⁶ In fact, there is a serious problem if God is considered to be a person. The problem lies

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 188-189.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁸³ See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 531 and Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 188.

¹⁸⁴ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 188.

¹⁸⁵ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 531.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 108,224,244, 283.

in the completeness and the unity of God. If God is viewed as a person, then God will experience a route of successive occasions in which God was never in a state of complete in God's new becoming. As long as God is considered as an actual entity, then the question of unity is not raised. But if God is viewed as "a series of ontologically discrete units of actualization," then, the question of the ground of his unity cannot be answered within the system.¹⁸⁷

Moreover, Cobb also explains further that there are systematic reasons why Whitehead prefers speaking of God as an actual entity to a person. While a person's experience is lack of self-identity through time and losses what is it in the past, Whitehead wants to deny both of these limitations on God. Cobb argues that both "self-identity through time" and "no loss of what is past" can be maintained in God even if God is considered as a living person rather than an actual entity. Of course, such a person would be a special person indeed.¹⁸⁸ For being an ordinary, there was a time when he was not, and he faces a time when he will be no more. This condition is true to the temporal actual entities too. But God, considered by Whitehead as the non-temporal actual entity, is different insofar as he is "eternal" that there was never a time when he was not and "everlasting" which means there never will be a time when he will not be.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, in both ordinary actual entities and in ordinary persons, the passage of time entails loss. Yet, this is not so with God, who, according to Cobb, "vividly and consciously remembers in every new occasion and all the occasions of

¹⁸⁷ Cobb insists that regarding God as a living person is the best solution for many incoherencies found in Whitehead's metaphysics. However, the view of God as a living person stirs many comments and critics addressed to Cobb, see Caraway, James E. "A Preliminary Critique of John B. Cobb's Whiteheadian Doctrine of God." *Encounter* 36/2 (1975), 101-111; Guy, Fritz. "Comments on a Recent Whiteheadian Doctrine of God." *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 4 (1966), 107-134; also see Gilkey, Langdon. "Review of a Christian Natural Theology." *Theology Today* 22/4 (1966), 530-545.

¹⁸⁸ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 191.

¹⁸⁹ Christian, William A. *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 192-193.

the past.”¹⁹⁰ God’s experience grows by addition of the past, but loses nothing.¹⁹¹

There is no loss in God either through his facing of a time when he will be, or through his fragmentary re-enactment of the past in the present. Nevertheless, all other ordinary persons experience this loss.

In other words, in Cobb’s view, God as a living person is indeed a unique person; similar to Whitehead’s view, God as an actual entity is indeed a unique actual entity. For Cobb, Whitehead’s view of God as a non-temporal, everlasting actual entity is incoherent. Nevertheless, Cobb’s alternative proposal which calls for a non-temporal, everlasting person who experiences no loss through time is no more coherent than Whitehead’s either. In other words, even if Cobb could claim that there would be no serious new difficulties raised in his consideration of God as a living person, he could not claim that he has solved the difficulties raised in Whitehead’s explanation.¹⁹²

Whitehead himself seems to avoid intentionally in describing God as a living person. One must note that personality is not one of metaphysical categories in Whitehead’s process philosophy, and moreover, in Whitehead’s system human persons are interpreted as highly complex societies of actual occasions. God as an actual entity is obviously not a person in this systematic sense.¹⁹³ According to Whitehead, God as an actuality which enjoys everlasting existence with no loss of immediacy has a unity within an individual immediacy, rather than a unity characterized by a persistent pattern of definiteness with continuity between its individual immediacies. In an effort to avoid these ambiguities, Whitehead is reluctant to speak of God as a person even in a pre-systematic way. His reluctance stems from

¹⁹⁰ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 191.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Christian, *An Interpretation of Whitehead’s Metaphysics*, 300-301.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 409-410.

the fact that the traditional view of God as a person are related too easily with unreflective supernaturalism, a position which Whitehead wants to avoid.¹⁹⁴

James E. Caraway argues that while attempting to avoid the simple attribution of personality to God, Whitehead also wants to avoid the opposite extreme of conceiving God as mere infinity or as the impersonal order of the universe. Thus, Whitehead deliberately proposes his theory to avoid both these extremes.¹⁹⁵ For this reason, Whitehead sometimes uses personal images in reference to God,¹⁹⁶ although the purpose of using personal images is simply symbolic.

In his further explanations, Whitehead realizes that God, who is an actual entity, is a unique actual entity. Although God is a unique actual entity, one cannot universally apply this uniqueness to all other actual entities. Yet, Cobb seems to think that this somewhat sounds logically incoherent. However, Cobb's hypothesis of God as a unique person clearly makes him fall into the same incoherence found in Whitehead's system. In other words, Cobb's hypothesis is also incoherent as found in his criticism of Whitehead's doctrine of God. If there would be something coherent in Whitehead's system and Cobb's proposal, it would be something insofar as God does not negate the possibilities of supplanting or superseding the activities of other actual entities, but rather supplements and enhances the real individuality and influences upon actual occasions.¹⁹⁷

Additionally, Whitehead constantly emphasizes that the reality must be understood as an actual entity. He discovers that an adequate description of the reality requires the admission of a unique actual entity. God, who is to be the chief

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 410.

¹⁹⁵ Caraway, *A Preliminary Critique*, 106.

¹⁹⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 531, 525, 527, 532.

¹⁹⁷ Christian, *An Interpretation of Whitehead's Metaphysics*, 301, 336, 381.

exemplification of all categories, is not a principle invoked to save their collapse.¹⁹⁸

Cobb somehow accepts this idea as the only adequate way in which God is acceptable to the world. However, Cobb still insists that the Whiteheadian system could be more coherent only if God is considered to be a living person rather than an actual entity.

As to Cobb's assertion that God is a person, Cobb needs to explain how God as a person is related to all other actualities considered as essentially personal. That is to say, Whitehead's theory is that the ultimate should disclose the same general principles of reality which we dimly discern as stretching away into regions beyond our explicit powers of discernment.¹⁹⁹ Cobb contends that the ultimate should be considered as a person. However, his suggestions for alteration of the Whiteheadian system which consists in every instance of considerations of God as an actual entity in relation to other actual entities are merely to engage with a discussion utilizing the concept of God which he has already rejected. Here, once again it is evident that Cobb is inconsistent to solve the incoherence that he has found in Whitehead's system. As Caraway says,

“If Cobb consistent as he is willing to be, he should consider the problem on the basis of how God as a person relates to all other actualities. Consequently, the relationship which Cobb should describe is not the relationship between God, a person, and other actual entities, but rather between God as a person and other actualities who themselves are considered as individual persons.”²⁰⁰

God and Eternal Object

Another issue in Whitehead's system in which Cobb finds incoherent is God's relation to eternal objects. For Cobb, the problem is that God alone is responsible for the ordering of eternal objects. Whitehead sums up his whole philosophy by pointing

¹⁹⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 521.

¹⁹⁹ Whitehead, Alfred North. *Science and The Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 135.

²⁰⁰ Caraway, *A Preliminary Critique*, 106.

out that there are four creative phases in which the universe accomplishes the actuality. First, there is a phase of conceptual origination, which is deficient in actuality and it is a state of adjustment of valuation.²⁰¹ This phase explains God's role in his primordial nature. Second, there is a temporal phase of physical origination as an initiation to maintain the continuation of actualities. This phase is directed by God's subjective aims. Third, there is a phase of finalization of actuality, which is the many are as one everlastingly, without the qualification of any loss either of individual identity or of completeness of unity.²⁰² God functions as the ground of this phase. God is the principle of limitation and concretion, which directs the whole process by his lure of feeling. Fourth, the creative action completes itself. These phases can be accomplished by God's infinite patience and his tender care that nothing to be lost.²⁰³ It is noted that the role of God is decisive in each phase of this accomplishment. If the role of God is so significant in each phase of becoming process, then God becomes different and exceptional to all other ordinary entities. For Cobb, Whitehead's explanation regarding the decisive role of God in ordering eternal objects is incoherent to the ontological principle in process system.

According to Cobb, this incoherence can be solved only if the system admitting the possibility of temporal occasions for ordering eternal objects. Cobb proposes that while God orders all eternal objects, it is also possible for temporal occasions to order an infinitesimal selection of eternal objects.²⁰⁴ It is noted that Cobb alters the role of God with regard to his relation to eternal objects, just as he alters it with regard to his function as sole provider of the initial aim. Cobb rejects the idea that God alone is responsible for ordering eternal objects, just as he rejects the idea

²⁰¹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 532.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 525.

²⁰⁴ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 201.

that God as the only provider of the initial aim. He makes God more like other occasions by admitting that other actual entities contribute to the initial aim of a becoming entity and also have the ability of ordering eternal objects. In doing so, Cobb's alterations in both cases have caused limitations upon God which Whitehead himself tends to avoid.

In his attempt to show that God functions in a way not radically different from that of other actual entities, Cobb explains as follows: Firstly, God was not radically unique in terms that he was not the one that solely responsible for the provision of the initial aim. Secondly, Cobb rejected attribution of uniqueness to God insofar as God alone that has an unmediated relation to eternal objects while all other actual entities have a mediated relation.²⁰⁵ Cobb contends that God should not be unique in the sense that he alone envisaged directly the eternal objects and provided the initial aim. As Cobb noted,

"Whitehead should not preclude "in principle" the possibility that a temporal occasion may have toward some eternal objects the kind of relation God has toward all".²⁰⁶

It is important to note that the initial aim and eternal objects as pure possibilities are fundamental creativity in the process of becoming. Whitehead has found it necessary to attribute a role unique from all other actual entities to God in terms of both the initial aim and the envisagement of eternal objects. Cobb, as shown above, questions this attribution of uniqueness to God and proposes an alternative to make God function in a way not radically different from that of other actual entities. Cobb has made God's function in relation to the initial aim and eternal objects to be less radical. Yet, Cobb criticizes Whitehead for failing to have a radical doctrine of

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

creation, as he says, "The attribution to God of a more decisive role in creation than Whitehead himself intended".²⁰⁷

In his proposal to give God a more radical role in creation than Whitehead had done, the question here is, whether Cobb's reconstruction can be applied in Whitehead's system. It is also questioned whether Cobb's proposal can be accepted in the whole system. As noted previously, Cobb showed that Whitehead did have a doctrine of creation in terms that God did not create eternal objects, but initiate the ordering of eternal objects and providing initial aim to each occasion. Even though Cobb pointed out that God's role in creation was significant in Whitehead's thought, Whitehead somehow placed several restrictions upon God's creative role. These limitations may be summarized as follows: First, although God is the sole initiator of initial aim, this aim must always be given in consideration of the actual situation of the world. Secondly, although initial aim profoundly influences the outcome of an actual entity, it is not wholly determinative. Third, God does not create eternal objects. In other words, Whitehead has no doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo*.

Cobb concludes that Whitehead's concept of creativity is acceptable, even though it can only be pointed at and grasped intuitively.²⁰⁸ However, Cobb considers one most important question, whether Whitehead's principle of creativity can answer why there is anything at all. Cobb has found that Whitehead's explanation cannot answer it. Therefore, Cobb's revision focuses on the alteration of Whitehead's concept of creativity as to answer that question. Cobb contends that creativity cannot go even so far in the direction of an answer as did in prime matter.²⁰⁹ It is noted that Whitehead's ontological principle affirms that the only reason for occurrences is to be

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

given in terms of actual entities.²¹⁰ Cobb convinced that he had successfully given God a more radical role in creation than did by Whitehead himself. The results of Cobb's alteration may be summarized as follows: First, the only reason for occurrences is to be given in terms of the decisions of actual occasions. Second, the actual occasions occur and find their limitation by reasoning of God's establishment of their subjective aim. Third, creativity itself is not a being of an actual entity; therefore it cannot be the reason for their occurrence. Creativity itself provides no reason, while God is the reason for the being as well as the form of actual entities.²¹¹

At this point, Cobb believes he had done a more radical doctrine of creation than Whitehead's. The question raises here regarding how Cobb's doctrine is different from Whitehead's doctrine, or in what manner it can be more radical. One must consider that Cobb's radical doctrine of creation requires the integration of some elements in Whitehead's system in which Cobb himself has already rejected. This radical doctrine of creation includes affirmations that God is the provider of the subjective aim and the reason for the being as well as the form of actual entities. Previously, however, Cobb had wanted to attribute these functions in some respects generally to all actual entities other than God.

On the one hand, Cobb has been interested in making God function in a way precisely like that of all other actual entities. He has done this by making other actual entities function in their relation to creativity in a way not different from the way in which God functions. Hence, God is not to have a unique function as provider of initial aim and the one who envisages eternal objects. In this manner, Cobb argues, coherence is maintained in the system. But, on the other hand, Cobb contends that God must have a more decisive role in creation than that assigned by Whitehead's

²¹⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 28.

²¹¹ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 210-214.

system. There were two questions immediately arising. First, in order to maintain the coherence in the system, God functioning in creative role must be not radically different from other actual entities. Moreover, Cobb has argued for this similarity but suddenly wants to emphasize the difference. Second, if Cobb wants to maintain God for a more decisive role in creation than Whitehead's system allows, he then shouldn't reduce God's unique function to an establisher of the initial aim and to the one who is ordering eternal objects. In other words, Cobb, in the defense of his understanding of coherence has rejected the points in Whitehead's system in which God plays a decisive creative role. He appears to show that other actual entities can function in the provision of initial aim and the envisagement of eternal objects.

Perhaps, Cobb's idea that God could manage all the possibilities of becoming while other actual occasions deal with only an infinitesimal number can be comprehensible. However, a particular becoming actual entity does not require the actualization of an infinitesimal number of eternal objects in order for it to become. If actual entities other than God in a particular becoming entity's past can provide for that entity's initial aim, and if the entity in concrescence can envisage the number of eternal objects that require for its becoming, then the role of God is questioned here. In sum, instead of making God's role in creation more radical, Cobb has fallen into a situation in which the role of God has become less significant. In general, each entity could independently establish a process of becoming itself. In this point of view, Cobb's aim to make God's role in creation more radical seems to be unsuccessful.

The Issues Regarding John Cobb's Christian Theology

The reason for Cobb to use Whitehead's philosophy as a framework for Christian theology is that, for Cobb, it is most promising as philosophical system;²¹² it is compatible with that of Christian faith;²¹³ and it is also can conform Christian theology to other world's religions and science.²¹⁴ However, there were many comments, critiques, or even challenges concerning Cobb's claims about his natural theology.

Issues in Whitehead's philosophical system

No one would deny that Whitehead's work on "Process and Reality" is original and astonishing. But, it does not mean that there were no controversial issues in Whitehead's philosophy. Whitehead's claim that God is not an exception to all metaphysical categories but its chief of exemplifications has been seriously questioned. John Feinberg questions the true existence of God in reality. Feinberg argues that process theology offers a God who is nothing/ nonexistent at all. In the discussion of God's primordial nature, God's role are apprehending and ordering eternal ideas, but without "someone" who exists to do the ordering. In this sense, it is hard to see how the ideas get ordered. As Feinberg has stated,

"The ordering isn't an actual entity, and on this interpretation of the primordial nature there is no actual entity that does the ordering. But, then, on this notion, God's primordial nature is a nothing. Even in Whitehead's system, the notion is inadequate, for he claims that the only real things are actual entities, but since the ordering of the eternal ideas is not an actual entity itself, it must be unreal, and since Whitehead offers us no one who does the ordering, it is hard to see the primordial nature as anything other than an idea."²¹⁵

²¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 15-17.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* See also Cobb's preface to second edition in Cobb, John B. Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology*, second edition (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2007), xi-xiv.

²¹⁵ Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 172.

In terms of God's consequent nature, namely physically temporal world, Process thinkers claim that God as to his consequent nature interpenetrates and contains the world, but at the same time this nature is distinct from the world. The question now is, if God contains the world and at the same time distinct from it, where or what is the boundary? Regarding this problem, Feinberg said,

"We must remember that God's consequent nature is physical and is attached to the world, but we also told that that the world is physical and attached to God. Now the problem should become clear. Where does God's physicality end and the world's begin, and vice versa? If I must make that decision on the basis of empiricism, I have no way to know what aspect of any physical thing is the entity itself, and what part is part of God's consequent nature. But, then, is it not just an unprovable theory that God's consequent nature in its physicality is distinct from the world's physicality? The net result is that if God's consequent nature really is distinct from the world; there is no way of proving that, so for all we know, there really is no God after all distinct from physical world. On the other hand, if God really is there, the only thing verifiable present is the physical world; but then the view lapses into pantheism, where God and the world are identical."²¹⁶

In sum, Feinberg argues that God in Whitehead's system is just a concept but not a real thing. Even if we believe Whitehead's God exists, but nobody can prove it to make God distinct from the world, then God in Whitehead's system is just something as good as nothing.

Robert Neville also found another serious problem inside process system. Neville shows that according to Whitehead's system no actual entity can be prehended while in the process of generating a new occasion. It must be entirely concrete to be prehended, but genetic processes do not allow this. At a glance, this does not seem problematic. But as Neville explains, God's consequent nature shows that it is always in the process of becoming; it never completely concretes so as to be one determinate thing. But, if so, then how can God be prehended by any actual entity in its process of becoming? As Neville said,

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

“Against this suggestion, however, there are two objections. The first is allied with the argument concerning God’s knowledge of finite occasions. Just as there are no existent incomplete phases in finite occasions for God toprehend, so there are none toprehend God; rather, the occasion as an actual whole prehends God and the world, and this is to be analyzed into prehensions un-harmonized, which we call the satisfaction, with analytical components of logical progression toward harmony, which we call intermediate incomplete phases.

The second objection is that there are grave difficulties with the concept of God required for this suggestion. As remarked before, Whitehead equivocated on whether God’s concrescence is something forever in the process and never complete or something that has at least some completed and completely determinate decisions. It is clear that for occasions toprehend God, God would have to have some completed and objective presentations. Perhaps these divine valuations, allegedly relevant for each phase in the concrescence of an occasion, are themselves incomplete phases of the one everlasting divine concrescence, determinate disjunctively in relation to the different temporal occasions and phases of occasions, but indeterminate in their ultimate conjunction in the overall experience of God. An intriguing thought!”²¹⁷

This is a serious problem for Whitehead’s philosophical system. Hartshorne saw this problem and attempted to solve it by saying that God is a society of actual entities, but this does not solve the problem either. Since only those occasions in God that are past can be prehended, then God as the totality of all occasions still cannot be prehended. And, even if one grants that at least in part he can be prehended, he cannot be prehended in those parts of his being that are most subjectively immediate to himself, the parts that are becoming.²¹⁸

A further problem is that no one canprehend God in his subjective immediacy. But, the consequence of this fact is that God cannotprehend the world in its subjective immediacy. If it is true that no actual entity can be prehended while in its genetic process, then it is also true that no actual entity can experience others’ experiences when others are in the process. This means that actual entity has no way

²¹⁷ Neville, Robert C., *Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 18-19.

²¹⁸ Lewis, Ford, “The Divine Activity of the Future,” *Process Study* 11 (1981), 169-171. For more specific explanation of the difficulty that occurs from the view of God inability to know anything in its subjective immediacy as it is becoming, see Neville, Robert C., *Creativity and God* chapter 1.

of knowing what God is feeling and experiencing and vice versa. Meanwhile, one of the process theology's primary critique about classical theism's God that he is apart, alien, outside, and neither knows nor cares about everything that the world have experienced is also a critique to process theology itself. The problem just raised has shown that process theology makes it impossible for God to enter into our subjective immediacy. So, God really does not know what the world feels nor does God suffer or rejoice with the world. The only option for process theism is to adopt pantheism, so that as we suffer, it is God who suffers, but process theists strictly demand that God is distinct from the world while mutually interdependent. If so, the process God can no more suffer and rejoice with the world than the God of classical theism did.

For classical theists, God is transcendent in terms of God is the creator of the universe. Hence, there were qualitative distinction between God and the world. On the other hand, God at the same time is also immanent. It means that God is present in the world in the natural order, human nature, and history. The transcendence and immanence of God is best portrayed by the incarnation of God into a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. As written on the book of Hebrew 4:5, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." It is clear that in the classical-biblical view of God, God is present in the world but is distinct from the world. The Bible records a God who suffer as the world suffer and rejoice as the world rejoice. He is the king who cares.²¹⁹

Issues related to the compatibility of Whitehead philosophy with Christian faith.

In His book titled *Living Options in Protestant Theology*, Cobb summarizes his methodology of philosophical theology and suggests the way in which

²¹⁹ Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 61.

philosophical theology should be undertaken.²²⁰ He has noted the similarities as well as the differences between theology and philosophy. He also pointed out that philosophical theology overlaps both of these disciplines but not identical. He believed that natural theology should be the systematic explication of the presuppositions of Christian thought which are inevitably subject to critical evaluation from non-theological viewpoints. Cobb cites the theological methodology of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas as classical examples to construct his natural theology. It is the adaptation and development of an available cotemporary philosophy so that it can serve as a “Christian natural theology.” Cobb intends his work on Whitehead’s philosophy to meet a similar purpose. As he said,

“...have I intended to replace philosophical argument by dogmatic assertion or to distort Whitehead so as to tender him more amenable to Christian use. My attempt has been to make the philosophical doctrines conform to the philosophical norms...A Christian natural theology must not be a hybrid of philosophy and Christian convictions. It must be philosophically responsible throughout.”²²¹

Nevertheless, Fritz Guy gives some considerations regarding Cobb’s endeavor in developing a Christian theology by using Whitehead’s philosophical system. Guy realizes that Cobb apparently fails to recognize how different his standpoint is from that of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Cobb’s faithfulness to Whitehead’s philosophical principles is in sharp contrast to Augustine’s and Thomas Aquinas’ by which they alter the contemporary philosophical systems in order to make philosophy more applicable to Christian faith. As Guy has noted,

“Just as theological affirmations are never completely neutral ontologically, so the metaphysical systems are never completely neutral theologically. Therefore any philosophy not just as theological affirmations are never completely neutral ontologically, so metaphysical systems are never

²²⁰ Cobb, John B., *Living Options in Protestant Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press: 1962), 334-346.

²²¹ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 269.

completely neutral theologically. Therefore any philosophy not consciously constructed in terms of specifically Christian thought and no important philosophy has been originally constructed in this way-will probably carry implications that are hostile to Christian theology. So long as Cobb intends to write Christian theology he ought to recognize that the "community of faith" provides not only its context but also, in an important sense, the criteria for its validity-in the form of scripture or tradition or present experience or some combination of these. Where the implications of these criteria conflict with his philosophical conclusions, he has only two theologically sound options: he can either subordinate the philosophical interests to the theological, or he can learn to live with the tension between them. To ignore the necessity of rigorous criticism in the light of theological norms, as he has apparently done, is to create a natural theology that is not genuine theology at all, and may well go the way ultimately of Gnosticism and Deism. As it stands, his work might more appropriately be called *A Whiteheadian Philosophy of Religion*.”²²²

Hence, Guy questions whether or not Christian theology can accommodate a metaphysical rationalization of God. While the objective of philosophy is the endeavor to reasoning comprehensively why things exist and happen, at the same time, the Christian thought has always affirmed that incomprehensibility is a part of its basic understanding of deity. It is the nature of faith. In this case, Whitehead’s speculative philosophy tends to accept the idea of God in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground.²²³ For Guy, theology insists that God is transcendent not only in the Whiteheadian sense of the freedom of self-creativity but also in the sense of freedom from all other entities and principles encompassed by human thought.²²⁴

In the discussion of the possibility for natural reality to grasp the ultimate reality, and as a critique for naturalism, Robert Neville said,

“One of the things right about naturalism as an ideology is its rejection of authoritarianism and its insistence on experiential enquiry. One of the things often wrong with some naturalist positions is their insistence that only natural science constitutes valid inquiry. Another of the things right about naturalism is its rejection of literal supernaturalism as having explanatory or hermeneutical power. And yet, one of the things often wrong with some naturalist positions is tone-deafness with respect

²²² Guy, *Comments on a Recent Whiteheadian Doctrine of God*, 127-128.

²²³ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 529.

²²⁴ Guy, *Comments on a Recent Whiteheadian Doctrine of God*, 129.

to the symbolic power of super-naturalistic thinking, resulting in a religiously flat grasp of ultimate reality.”²²⁵

In light of Neville’s statements, it is not sufficient to grasp the reality of God (category of the ultimate) from the observation of our reality. Nature is not the only source for us to grasp and understand the ultimate reality. Whitehead himself also awares this problematic issue when he identifies God as the ground of rationality. Perhaps, Whitehead does not really mean the ultimate ground of reality, but only the ground of rationality. This issue has also affected most philosophers, thinking a God conditioned by the various metaphysical systems and cannot be anything else. However, in many cases, “God” seems to be an inappropriate word for philosophers, too often they describe God as the category of ultimacy. God in metaphysical system is better understood as a “cosmological system” that automatically performs God’s functions.

Yet, another issue regarding the compatibility of Whitehead’s philosophy with Christian faith is concerning the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. It is a Christian affirmation that God is the creator of the universe out of nothing. God is not only functioning as an accident of creativity ordering eternal objects which are not the actual entities by themselves, but also has a purpose for creation out of nothing according to His plan. God owns an unlimited power to warrant His ability and authority to create all things out of nothing to be happened. This understanding is contradictory to the process view which rejects the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In Whitehead’s system, God is not detached from the world. God doesn’t create and control the world by his ultimate power. Rather, God is a director and shares its actual world within the world. God is an interdependent partner of the world.

²²⁵ Neville, Robert C., “Naturalism: So Easily Wrong,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, 34/3 (2013), 199.

E. L. Mascall once noted that Whitehead had concentrated his thought so thoroughly upon the way in which things behave as never to inquire why they are.²²⁶ Mascall seems to be saying that the dipolar God of process thought dismisses some basic questions for process theologians, why does the actual world exist? Why were some potentialities actualized and not others? In short, Whitehead and other process thinkers develop a metaphysical system which leaves a most fundamental metaphysical questions unanswered, that is, why is there anything at all? Process thought seems to fail to provide any logical and coherent explanation.

As Mascall says,

“We still want to know why (existing finite things) are there at all. To say that they are units of Creativity explains nothing, unless we are also told why they are the particular units that they are, manifesting the particular kinds of Creativity that they do. The one thing that they are clearly not is self-explanatory, but this is the one fact that Whitehead never allows himself to think about. He postulates God as the ground of rationality, but never as the ground of being.”²²⁷

Concerning this issue, Cobb explains how God is involved in the process, and more, he affirms that God is the principle of process itself. Moreover, if the process of becoming is a transition of one actual occasion to its new actual occasion, and continually extends, then, consequently, all entities have their “earlier” and “later” moments. In the process view, God and the world are an interrelated pair, it follows that God could not have existed without the world. Then, the logical questions as entailed by this process’s doctrine of God arise: First, does God have His origin? Second, is there a reality existing before God? Third, how does the first process begin?

To answer these questions, Cobb argues with the principle of “*causa sui*.”²²⁸ It means that the actual occasion creates itself. Cobb argues as if we argue for the same

²²⁶ Nash, Ronald H. Ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 23.

²²⁷ Mascall, E. L., *He Who Is* (London: Longmans, 1962), 158.

²²⁸ Cobb, A *Christian Natural Theology*, second edition, 114.

question in classical theism. Then, the classical theistic answer is also *causa sui*, that God exists forever without beginning or end. Thus, if Cobb insisted that the doctrine *creatio ex nihilo* is not biblical, then, this statement is very problematic. On the one hand, Cobb argues that Whiteheadian philosophy is most promising and compatible to Christian thought. But, on the other hand, he rejects one of the most basic affirmations in Christian faith, that God has created the world out of nothing. The Bible clearly records the story of the origin of our reality in its simplest language in the book of Genesis chapter 1 & 2, and in the Gospel of John chapter 1.²²⁹ Therefore, Cobb's claim that Whiteheadian system is compatible to the Christian faith is truly questionable.

Issues related to the conformity of Whitehead philosophy to the World Religion and Science.

Cobb is highly praised for his efforts to offer a constructive Christian theology that could open dialogue among world religions and connect Christian theology with modern science with a positive attitude and manner.²³⁰ Regarding to other religions, particularly with religions in East Asia, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, the process's principles of God and Creativity seem to correspond with the concept of *Brahman* and *Ishvara* in Hinduism and with the concept of *Dharmakaya* and *Sambhogakaya* in Buddhism. With Cobb's efforts, the Christian community would no longer be an exclusive group that alienates itself from other religions of the world, but involved in a constructive dialogue with world religions. As to modern science,

²²⁹ The simplest interpretation of Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," is that before the moment in which the world or a universe existed. The declaration of verse 1 without any intimation of competing pre-existent matter suggests that the Genesis story is a purposeful affirmation that God is the only source of the universe. See. Haskell, Rob. "Process Theology: A Christian Option or a New Religion?" *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 36/4 (2012), 314-315.

²³⁰ Cobb is known as a Christian theologian that works in open dialogue with Buddhist religion, see, Ford, David F. *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997), 332.

process theology succeeds in connecting the reality and the activity of God with the principle of relativity, physics, biology, and the process of evolution. Again, Cobb's efforts are brilliant to remind Christians how to deal with nature and take on their responsibility to conserve the environment as a part of their physical existence. There is no doubt that Cobb's effort to introduce or to open constructive dialogue between Christianity, modern science, and world religions must be highly appreciated.

However, he realizes that to a certain degree of discussion, there are many "substantial" differences between Christian theology, modern science, and other religions.

These "substantial" differences are found when Cobb encountered with East Asian religion in dialogue. Particularly with Buddhism, Cobb pointed out that, the conception of God, defined by process theism, to a certain degree is incompatible with Buddhist perspective. The substantial difference lies at the question of ultimacy, namely, whereas Christians stress on the ultimate thing which has to do with increasing the knowledge and the experience of God, Buddhists stress on other ultimate things that have to do with the elimination of craving and with emptiness.²³¹ Therefore, the effectiveness of Cobb's doctrine of God is questioned while serving as a common ground for potential dialogue.²³²

Meanwhile, in terms of dialogue with modern science, Cobb realizes that Whitehead's theory of relativity does not fit Einstein's formulation of relativity, particularly in the general theory of relativity. Cobb wrote that,

"It is especially difficult because Whitehead found Einstein's formulation unintelligible and proposed one another. The version of his theory

²³¹ See Neville critiques of Cobb's thought about World Religion in: Neville, Robert C., *Creativity and God: A Challenge to Process Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 136.

²³² *Ibid.*

that he developed most fully has now apparently been shown to fail a crucial test.”²³³

He found that recently science researchers have developed a new understanding of time-space based on Einstein’s general relativity and gravitational principles. For that reason, Cobb realized that Whitehead’s scientific theory no longer fit with “mainstream” modern science.

The most significant gap between process metaphysics and current scientific discoveries is the issue of the beginning of the universe. The contemporary scientists have received a remarkable confirmation from scientific discoveries in astronomy and astrophysics that the universe is in fact expanding. Hubble’s discovery in 1929 had also confirmed that probably around fifteen billion years ago the entire universe was contracted down to a single mathematical point which marked the origin of the universe, and exploded thereafter. That initial explosion has come to be known as the “Big Bang.” In other words, scientists have confirmed that the entire universe has its own beginning.²³⁴ The Cambridge astronomer Fred Hoyle also points out, the Big Bang theory requires the creation of matter from nothing.²³⁵ At this point of view, the Big Bang theory of the universe somehow supports the Biblical view on the origin of the universe, that is, the universe was created out of nothing and began to exist.

In sum, Cobb insists to be faithful to Whitehead’s scientific theory. The reason of his conviction is that in Whitehead’s process metaphysics, Cobb has found there is a coherent explanation of God in the whole system. At least, Cobb argues that Christian theology can share a hypothetical character with science.²³⁶ But he also

²³³ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, second edition, 137.

²³⁴ Nash, *Process Theology*, 166-167.

²³⁵ Hoyle, Fred, *From Stonehenge to Modern Cosmology* (San Francisco: W.F. Freeman, 1972), 36.

²³⁶ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, second edition, 138.

admits that there is a gap between process theism and contemporary scientific discoveries on the origin and eternity of the universe.

The Changing Perspectives

After receiving many comments and critics, Cobb changed his mind and admitted that he had done some misinterpretations of Whitehead's doctrine of God. In 2007, Cobb published his second edition of "A Christian Natural Theology" in which some significant revisions, particularly on chapter 5 "A Whiteheadian Doctrine of God", took place. Cobb realized that in his earlier writings, he was strongly influenced by the thought of Charles Hartshorne. Cobb admitted that in his 1964 "A Christian Natural Theology," his alteration of Whitehead's understanding of God was "a too simple rational coherence."²³⁷ Cobb says in his revised edition,

"For Charles Hartshorne, in contrast, the topic of God was central. He became the leading philosopher of religion among interpreters of Whitehead, and he was my teacher at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. There are questions about God and the world to which my answer are, to this day, derived from him. This is reflected in my efforts to understand the relation of "God and space." In 1964, when I was first writing this book, I was trying to understand Whitehead in his own terms, and for the most part I think I succeeded. Nevertheless, in the chapter this one is replacing, Hartshorne's influence played a large role. This led to naming it "A Whiteheadian Doctrine of God, "indicating that I did not attribute most positions taken to Whitehead himself.

Hartshorne's metaphysics was highly rationalistic. Whitehead relied more on intuitions, and he was more aware of the inescapable ambiguity of language and of the speculative character of all thought. I have come to feel that my resolutions of problems to which I did not find clear answers in Whitehead's writings sacrificed some of his most profound intuitions for a too simple rational coherence.

...Rewriting this chapter provides me an opportunity not only to change what I have to say below about "God and Time" and "How God Saves" but also to explain important contributions of Whitehead's thinking about God that I had not appreciated when I wrote earlier."²³⁸

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

Through the second edition of his “A Christian Natural Theology”, Cobb begins to be a truly advocate of Whitehead’s thought. Cobb realizes that Whitehead’s idea of God is better than Hartshorne’s. Cobb went back to adopt Whitehead’s doctrine of God as actual entity, and regretted that he spent so much of his early career revising Whitehead’s positions. However, Cobb also admits that some of Whitehead’s formulations were still problematic. For him, Whiteheadian theologian should be highly tentative in discussing God’s relation to the world. Cobb says, “Whiteheadian theology is not for those who seek certainty.”²³⁹

The Contributions of John B. Cobb

Beside many critics and issues addressed to Cobb’s doctrine of God, John Cobb in fact contributes several constructive theologies to Christianity. First, he is remarkable in his efforts to integrate metaphysics and systematic theology. Most of Evangelical theologians in our times usually assume that it is impossible to harmonize a system of thought to interpret reality by integrating all disciplines. With this common assumption, there have been few systematic theologies developed by Evangelical theologians in recent decades. Even for those who disagree with the process thought, Cobb’s efforts in doing theology inspire all theologians, particularly in the Evangelical circle, to construct a system of metaphysics that is more contextual and more relevant to the existential situation of our current world.

Second, Cobb’s efforts to develop an understanding of God that still maintains the biblical teaching of God and opens positive dialogues to connect the Christian God with modern science and East Asian religions is highly praised.²⁴⁰ Cobb has

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁴⁰ Cobb is well known as a Christian theologian that works in open dialogue with Buddhist religion, see, Ford, David F. *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1997), 332.

successfully demonstrated that, there is an effort to get out of the religious boxes from Christian perspective and to get Christians involved in the world with its self-understanding. There is no doubt that Cobb's effort to introduce or to open dialogue between Christianity, modern science, and to other religions is a constructive theological accomplishment which deserves appreciation.

Third, Cobb has a deep conviction that all entities which exist in the world share an interconnected relation with all other entities including God. Cobb emphasizes that God is immanently related to the world. God does not exist independently outside of the world. Thus, Cobb argues that the entire world is in God, and God cares about what happened in the world as He cares about Himself. The process principle of relatedness in some way answers the modern person's question about the existence and reality of the God and the world.

Cobb's conviction about the interconnection of all entities has been applied to his practical engagement with others disciplines such as scientific, political, economic, and environmental issues for over a period of twenty-five years.²⁴¹ The range of his theological interests is remarkable wide and possibly incomparable among Christian theologians working in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Fourth, one of the strongest points derived from Cobb's doctrine of God is his critiques of the classical Christian view of God. The classical Christian view is usually focused on God's majesty, power, transcendence, omnipotence, and immutability, but forgets the main gospel message of love. It can be a reminder for Evangelical Christians that while God is transcendent, holy, and the ruler of the world, God is also a living compassionate comforter that guides us in His persuasive way with never ending love.

²⁴¹ Livngston, James C., *Modern Christian Thought*, 335.

Last, Cobb is true in his explanation that our knowledge and experience of God grows in a progressive-accumulative way. Cobb reminds us that we live in a time-bound and culture-bound reality. The context of human life changes and develops through a process. Consequently, we must always be aware of the re-evaluating, re-defining, and even synchronize our theology with the ongoing changing world. A healthy theological system requires a carefully comprehensive description of God, and at the same time, must be relevant and applicable to the people who are living in their particular cultural context.

All in all, in an endeavor to make Whitehead's system more coherent and applicable to Christian faith, John Cobb is successful by raising some problematic issues in Whitehead's doctrine of God. Cobb is right in pointing that one should not considered actual entity as an instance of two dichotomized natures. He is also convinced that Whitehead was doing a crucial problem for making God a single and everlasting actual entity. Nevertheless, Cobb is unsuccessful by providing a better answer. Even with his claim that God is better viewed as a living person. In fact, Cobb's theological hypothesis that God could be viewed as a unique person clearly makes him repeat the same incoherence found in Whitehead's system. Nevertheless, Cobb's theological work on the doctrine of God has reminded every theologian of this century to take the responsibility to revitalize Christian theology in the age of science and pluralism. In doing so, every Christian community can continue to be confident that the reality of God should always be relevant to our needs and contemporary social reality.

CHAPTER V

Summary

John B. Cobb has shown us the importance of the proper understanding of God which is contextual and relevant to our living. He is well appreciated for his critics for the “static” classical view of God and for his goal to revive Christian spirit in the modern world with its complexity and difficulties. Cobb employs Whitehead’s metaphysical philosophy as a framework for developing a Christian natural theology. For Cobb, the reason to develop Whitehead’s process philosophy is that Whitehead’s philosophy is excellent as a philosophical system. Second, it is compatible with that of the Christian faith. Third, it conforms Christian theology to other world religions and science. Through process theology, Cobb integrates Christian theology with many issues, such as science, world religions, economic, politic, environment and other global issues. His works are crucial and significant in a sense to revitalize Christian faith in the age of godless culture (West) and pluralism (East).

John B. Cobb has been also highly honored for his expertise in metaphysics and systematic theology. Meanwhile, many theologians of the 20th century think that it is pointless to have an endeavor to integrate all realities. In fact, there were a good few theologians making efforts to construct a systematic theology that can be open to religious dialogue and applicable to other disciplines. Cobb, then, is viewed as one of the few theologians who have been successful in integrating metaphysics and theology in order to revitalize Christian faith in the 20th century.

However, in developing Christian theology in the light of Whitehead’s metaphysics, Cobb learns that there is incoherence found in Whitehead’s system and some revisions are required. Cobb is right when questioning the incoherence found in Whitehead’s metaphysics, such as the dualistic primordial-consequent nature which

ultimately leads to too much emphasis of God's role in God's primordial nature, and the uniqueness of God as actual entity that makes God distinct of all other entities, and the like. Cobb's argues that God should be better understood by the unity of the primordial and consequent nature. Cobb also suggests that in order to reduce the distinction between God and all other entities, that each entity also has the capability to envisage the initial aim and ordering the eternal object (although only in infinitesimal number). At the end, Cobb suggests that God should be better understood as a living person, a best solution to describe a balanced (transcendence-immanence) understanding of God's relation to the world.

Although Cobb's alteration of Whitehead's metaphysics can be said brilliant and inspiring, there are many comments, critiques, or even challenges responding to Cobb's works. There are comments about Cobb's misinterpretation of Whitehead's explanation of actual entity and God. There are also some critics regarding Cobb alteration to view God as a living person. Cobb explains that although God is better to be viewed as a living person, but God's personality is fundamentally different from all others personalities. Consequently, God is viewed as a special (unique) person. Here, Cobb is utilizing Whitehead's method of thinking which he has already rejected. Additionally, Cobb's claims that his *Christian Natural Theology* conformed to science and world religions has received many challenges. Whitehead's metaphysics is substantially not compatible with the consensus of recent science. Meanwhile, process' God is also substantially different with the concept of the ultimate found in others world religions. Certainly, Cobb has specific arguments to answer all these critics. For Cobb, all these discussions are a matter of points of view.

There is no doubt that Cobb has made significant contributions to contemporary theological discussion. The most significant contribution is Cobb's

efforts to integrate process metaphysics and Christian theology. Cobb is well praised for his efforts to connect Christian God with modern science and other world's religions in a positive-constructive manner of dialogue. Cobb is also right in emphasizing that each actual entity which exists in reality is interconnected with each other. He insists that God is relating to the world with persuasive-creative love relationship. Finally, Cobb reminds us that our knowledge and experience grows and changes as time progresses.

Conclusions

In every context of living, a healthy Christian faith must maintain the balance of transcendence and immanence of God. Obviously, this is a very difficult task for the development of Christian theology today. The Bible as the basis of Christian revelation (source of knowing) has recorded the tension of transcendence-immanence of God. Once we over-emphasized one side, we were taken away from the God as presented in the Bible.

In this case, Cobb tries to make process theology more consistent with the teaching of the Bible than that of Classical theology. However, when he tries to reach this goal, Cobb appears to have a highly selective biblical hermeneutics, namely, he interprets several passages to support his process points of view. Surely, there are particular truths about process theism conformed to the Bible. But, when another Bible passages show conflict with process theism, it is conveniently ignored or casually discarded by Cobb. For example, serious questions can be asked concerning the basic doctrine of Christianity, such as *creation ex nihilo*, personal God, existence of evil, the Deity of Jesus Christ and His salvation act, bodily resurrection, life after death, and eternal life.

That is why many theologians in Classical theism circle consider process theologians cut the ties to the historic Christian faith and offers to the world a distinctly new religion. Of course, Cobb is right to point out the weakness of Classical theism and the irrelevancy of Christian faith within today's world context. But, we are forced to choose as if there is no third alternative theological system between these two. Personally, I am not interested in adopting process theology as the basis of my theological framework. I would rather think and rethink about the relevancy of the doctrine of God in Classical theism and search for the best application to build a healthy Christian spirituality in each context of our living world. I argue that believing the true and the living God that is dynamically related and illuminates the world in universal general revelation and particular special revelation is more consistent and coherent than any contemporary theological view.

As a last note, it is helpful to be reminded that while God is transcendent and holy, and as the Ruler of the world with His righteousness, power, and just, He also an immanent God that understands us, loves us, and persuades us to become a better being. God is the King with authority and power who cares and loves all of us. It is also helpful to be reminded that in our Christian practice, such as preaching, prayer, worship, and even theological teaching, we must be confident that God must be always relevant to the contemporary needs. This is our calling to always revitalize our understanding of God in the contemporary context and witness our Christian faith in this world, as well as to love God with all our heart, with all our understanding and with all our strength.

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