

BACK TO BERGSON: THE CONTINUING IMPORTANCE OF BERGSON FOR PROCESS PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: Henri Bergson has been seen as one of the forerunners of both process philosophy and theology. Whitehead has noted Bergson's influence directly on the formation of his ideas. In recent times there has been a revival in both Whitehead and Bergson studies around the world. As process philosophers and theologians engage with the burgeoning interest in Whitehead, Bergson must remain central to both philosophical and theological engagements. Three key areas are discussed which demonstrate the benefits of going "back to Bergson" and how this will supplement and enliven Whitehead studies. Bergson's philosophy is inherently suited to describing the nature of process, while Whitehead's metaphysics and concepts often make this difficult to understand. This general benefit of returning to Bergson's philosophy is demonstrated specifically in examining Whitehead's extensive continuum. Bergson's image of "two trains" is offered as an image to help us grasp both the nature and importance of Whitehead's continuum. Lastly, by going back to Bergson in the area of religion, we find a more mystic-emotive approach to supplement Whitehead's overly rationalistic conception of religion.

KEYWORDS: Bergson; Process philosophy; Process theology

Process philosophy and theology are currently undergoing a renaissance period. This is demonstrated by the renewed interest in the work of Alfred North Whitehead, who many regard as the main influence for both process philosophy and theology.¹ Whitehead's work is now generally finding a far greater audience in both philosophical and theological circles than has been the case for some

¹ Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: a Basic Introduction* (Danvers: Chalice, 1993), 6.
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time. This renewed interest in his work can be seen in recent French Philosophy in particular.²

Didier Debaise argues that the current revival in Whitehead studies is the result of the speculative and cosmological questions he was asking now having become central to current concerns. Process philosophy has always had a strong influence on the North American context. This stems particularly from Whitehead's time at Harvard University. The philosopher Charles Hartshorne further championed Whitehead's work at Duke University in the latter half of the twentieth century. Theologically, process theology found fertile ground in the work of John Cobb at Claremont School of Theology. Today process theology is championed by theologians such as Catherine Keller, Monica Coleman, and Daniel Dombrowski, amongst others. There have also been strong engagements with process thinking in certain parts of Asia, particularly China³ and in Europe.⁴ This engagement can be further seen in the formation of various academic associations in the last few years both in the United Kingdom⁵ and mainland Europe, dealing specifically with Whitehead's work.⁶

This newfound interest in process thought is paralleled and perhaps influenced by, a revival in the work of Henri Bergson.⁷ Bergson himself is seen as a forerunner of process thinking and a direct influence of Whitehead in particular.

Bergson's continued importance can be argued for by demonstrating that the questions he was wrestling with remain central to our current intellectual and

² There are numerous texts that one could cite to illustrate this engagement, and what follows is simply a small sample. Didier Debaise, *Nature as Event* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2017), Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers, *Speculative Empiricism: Revisiting Whitehead* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017). Keith Robinson, ed., *Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson – Rhizomatic Connections* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009). Fabrice Bothereau, *Des compositions de l'expérience Whitehead, l'hylémorphisme et le phénomène* (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2015)

³ Jay McDaniel, "The Greening of China: The Constructive Postmodern Movement in Contemporary China," *Worldviews 12* (2008); Fubin Yang, "The Influence of Whitehead's Thought on the Chinese Academy," *Process Studies 39* (Fall/Winter 2010): 342-9

⁴ Helmut Maaßen, *European Studies in Process Thought, Book Series* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2003-)

⁵ The Association for Process Thought in the United Kingdom (APT).

⁶ The European Society for Process Thought.

⁷ Brian Macallan, "Novelty in Twentieth-Century French and Process Philosophy" *Process Studies 48*, no.2 (2019):279-295.

cultural reality. In a philosophical climate that can tend to push towards hyper-specialization, Bergson's philosophy is wide in scope, yet integrated by his central concept of duration and its implication for freedom. Bergson offers us unique insights into the nature and importance of metaphysics, philosophy of mind, biology, along with reflections in religion and morality. Ansell-Pearson has argued that the recent resurgence in Bergson studies is related to its wideness in scope, and that:

All of Bergson's major concerns closely correspond to today's practice in philosophy, and there is nothing that is peculiarly 'continental' about his interests that range from an inquiry into the nature of freedom and time to the consideration of questions about life and evolution.⁸

Bergson, in all his work in the above areas, sought to challenge conceptions of life that were deterministic, materialistic, and that sought to foreclose genuine novelty and freedom. Ellie During has argued that the importance of Bergson goes beyond a simple adherence to his ideas, but one that attempts to rethink Bergson's doctrine of *durée*, becoming and genuine novelty. During believes this will provide new directions and insights, and a philosophy for our own times.⁹ Going "back to Bergson" in the key areas of metaphysics, biology, mind, and morality allows us to highlight his continued importance for both process philosophy and theology. The current task is to offer three examples of how this can be done. They involve demonstrating that Whitehead's work can be strengthened and supplemented with returning to Bergson. This is a result of the accessibility of Bergson's metaphysics, Bergson's description of process in supplementing Whitehead's extensive continuum, and finally Bergson's understanding of Religion.

Bergson's philosophy and its relationship to process philosophy, as already mentioned, are well known. Robinson has noted that both Whitehead and Bergson read, enjoyed, and commented on each other's work, and that "Whitehead explicitly links his own key ideas to Bergson, connecting, for

⁸ Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson: Thinking Beyond the Human Condition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 2-3.

⁹ Ellie During, 2018. *We Bergsonians*, The Kyoto Manifesto.

example, the very idea of ‘process’ with what he called Bergsonian ‘time’.¹⁰ This time is articulated by Bergson as crucial to his philosophy of evolution, and should be understood as in essence, a “flow”.¹¹ This flow is part of the fundamental reality of the universe for as Bergson argues:

Metaphysics will then become experience itself; and duration will be revealed as it really is, unceasing creation, the uninterrupted surge of novelty.¹²

Bergson, although being one of the world’s most well-known philosophers in the early part of the twentieth century, eventually went into a precipitous decline. French philosophy itself has since had an ambivalent relationship with Bergson. During has made the case that Bergson can be seen as the forgotten and despised father of French philosophy, an easy scapegoat and obtrusive mentor. During notes that Bergson was much maligned for what was deemed a mystical approach to philosophy.¹³ It is said that Deleuze was laughed at by his colleagues for choosing to write on Bergson.¹⁴ A recent monograph to emerge dealing with Bergson’s work is by Mark Sinclair entitled *Bergson*.¹⁵ Sinclair in his final chapter, discussing the legacy of Bergson, links his influence directly to Whitehead:

Bergson’s influence lives on. It lives on, for example, in the process philosophy that, in drawing on Alfred North Whitehead’s development of Bergson’s ideas, is significant in many fields of philosophy and that is still inspiring critique of dominant paradigms in the philosophy of biology.¹⁶

The importance of Bergson for process philosophy, that Sinclair highlights, is one to which I would like to now turn. With this background of the renewed interest in both Bergson and Whitehead, I will attempt to describe at least three key areas in which going “back to Bergson” could potentially aid in the development of process thought today. As mentioned, this is in the question of Metaphysics, the extensive continuum and the challenge of religion.

¹⁰ Keith Robinson, “Introduction: Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson – Rhizomatic Connections” in *Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson – Rhizomatic Connections*, ed. Keith Robinson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 2-3

¹¹ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: an Introduction to Metaphysics* (,2007)

¹² Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 7.

¹³ During, *A History of Problems* , 4.

¹⁴ Daniel Smith, “Giles Deleuze” In Alan Schrift, ed, *Poststructuralism and Critical Theory’s Second Generation* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 92.

¹⁵ Mark Sinclair, *Bergson* (London: Routledge, 2020)

¹⁶ Sinclair, *Bergson*, 271.

We know that Whitehead himself felt that much of what he was trying to do was an attempt to make a case for some of Bergson's central concerns, though without falling into what he felt many perceived to be an irrationalism in Bergson.¹⁷ These comments by Whitehead are unfortunate and have clouded much of how future process thinkers have chosen to understand Bergson. Despite Whitehead's comment about Bergson, he still embraced key aspects of Bergson's metaphysics, specifically concerning the conflating time with spatial categories. Despite this, Whitehead will in an important passage in *Process and Reality*, move to reject Bergson's assertion (or what he believes Bergson's position is) that the intellect is faulty in inherently spatializing reality:

On the whole, the history of philosophy supports Bergson's charge that the human intellect 'spatializes the universe'; that is to say, that it tends to ignore the fluency and to analyze the world in terms of static categories. Indeed Bergson went further and conceived this tendency as an inherent necessity of the intellect. I do not believe this accusation; but I do hold that 'spatialization' is the shortest route to a clear-cut philosophy expressed in reasonably familiar language.¹⁸

Auxier has mounted a defense of Bergson while acknowledging that challenging Whitehead's reading of Bergson is hard after decades of Whitehead's reading having shaped how process thought has interpreted him. As Auxier notes:

while Whitehead and Bergson share a suspicion about the over-intellectualization of reality, Whitehead thinks Bergson is committed to some sort of necessity about this "built-in" to the nature of the human intellect. Whitehead later made his view about this even clearer, and it suggests a criticism that Bergson has been burdened with ever since he wrote *Creative Evolution* that the intellect necessarily distorts reality by spatializing it -- precisely the criticism Gunter and Hausman have now laid to rest. This is not exactly what Whitehead said above, but it is what he means.¹⁹

Auxier argues that Bergson has been misunderstood, but the charge of irrationalism has stuck.

Whitehead's work is notorious for being inaccessible and is often difficult even for those who have become familiar with his work. This is due to the novel words

¹⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: MacMillan, 1979), xii

¹⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 209.

¹⁹ Randall Auxier, "Influence as Confluence: Bergson and Whitehead" *Process Studies* 28, no. 3/4, (1999): 301-338.

that Whitehead developed in an attempt to describe reality differently, and to distinguish himself from previous descriptions of that reality. It is also related to his very mode of exposition.²⁰

When it comes to process theology and its attempt to present Whitehead's thought in an accessible manner, it runs into these familiar difficulties.²¹ The very reality that Whitehead attempts to describe, as being one of process and flow, is in some way hamstrung by the vocabulary he uses and the way he engages with his material. Process thought would do well to return to Bergson's work as one way to recapture the essential point in process thinking, that all of reality is not substance-based, but rather in flow and in process.

The contrast in reading Bergson to Whitehead is striking, as reading Bergson feels like a poetic experience, where one is carried away in the flow and duration of what he describes. Even hearing Bergson's voice (of which there is only one recording) enables one to get a sense of process and flow that is central to process thinking in general. Bergson somehow enables us to get caught up in our immediate experience. It is unsurprising that Michael Foley's new book on Bergson was done in collaboration with the school of life, and has been such a success.²² It is because Bergson's thinking and writing are accessible and can touch our immediate experience in a way that Whitehead cannot.

The appeal of Bergson is illustrated by the French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. In a recent biography of Sartre, Gary Cox noted that Sartre in the 1920s was heavily influenced by Bergson's *Time and Free Will* and became hooked on Bergson.²³ He found in Bergson a perfect description of his consciousness and the way he experienced it. Sartre stated that Bergson offered him a connection between consciousness and time. Indeed, according to Cox, Bergson inspired Sartre to become a philosopher.

De Beauvoir, like Sartre, was significantly influenced by Bergson.²⁴ Margaret

²⁰ Donald Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality* (Chicago: Chicago University of Press)

²¹ Bruce Epperly, *Process Theology: a Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 2-3.

²² Michael Foley, *Life Lessons from Bergson* (London: MacMillan, 2013)

²³ Gary Cox, *Existentialism and Excess: the Life and Times of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 22-23

²⁴ Margaret Simons, "Beauvoir and Bergson: A Question of Influence" in *Beauvoir and Western Thought from Plato to Butler*, Shannon Mussett and William Wilkerson, eds. (New York: Suny Press, 2012), 153-170. See also, Margaret A. Simons, Bergson's Influence on Beauvoir's Philosophical Methodology, in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed., Claudia Card (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Simons has demonstrated this convincingly following the discovery of De Beauvoir's private diaries, one of which was only published in 2008. Before her diaries came to light, our perception of how De Beauvoir thought about Bergson was influenced only by her memoirs. In her memoirs, De Beauvoir made passing reference to Bergson as someone whose voice failed to move her, and one who was too abstract. Her diaries, however, reveal her as someone who entered into a rapturous experience when reading Bergson, one where she felt she was touching reality and encountering life.²⁵ Simons believes Bergson's influence to be at the root of De Beauvoir's philosophy. She argues that both Bergson and De Beauvoir believed in a methodological turn to immediate experience, which discloses our freedom. By reengaging with Bergson's work, process thought can reimagine its core doctrine of process and change in the same way that De Beauvoir and Sartre did, as "encountering life" as "touching reality" and connecting "consciousness with time". As a specific example demonstrating the accessibility of Bergson's philosophy, I would like to discuss Whitehead's understanding of the extensive continuum, and how Bergson can supplement and bring Whitehead's metaphysics to life.

The extensive continuum in Whitehead is discussed in chapter two of *Process and Reality*. The extensive continuum is a concept used to describe the nature of reality as it moves through time. Whitehead describes all of reality as being in a process of concrescence. The word "concrescence", which is Whitehead's creation, describes how all actual entities (everything that composes the universe) takes into account the past while moving into the future. Each actual entity prehends (Whitehead's word for an actual entity taking in the what has gone before) the past, engages with eternal objects and then offers itself to the future.

Both Whitehead and Bergson believed that we have tended to spatialize reality, resulting in a substance-based metaphysics. This substance-based, spatialised reality, does not afford us the opportunity to reflect on how all of reality moves through time together, and further how all of reality is related. The extensive continuum is Whitehead's attempt to describe just this. Whitehead describes this reality as follows:

The second metaphysical assumption is that the real potentialities to

²⁵ Simons, *Bergson's Influence*, 155.

all standpoints are coordinated as diverse determinations of one extensive continuum. The extensive continuum is one relational complex in which all potential objectifications find their niche. It underlies the whole world, past, present, and future...An extensive continuum is a complex of entities united by the various allied relationships of whole to part, and of overlapping so as to possess common parts, and of contact, and of other relationships derived from these primary relationships. The notion of a 'continuum' involves both the property of indefinite divisibility and the property of unbounded extension. There are always entities beyond entities, because nonentity is no boundary. This extensive continuum expresses the solidarity of all possible standpoints throughout the whole process of the world. ²⁶

As already mentioned, Whitehead's extensive continuum is composed of actual entities. These actual entities are related to each other on a continuum, which is defined by extensive relationships.²⁷ Whitehead argues that each actual entity is in a process of concrescence. When actual entities come together to form a plant or a human being, they are then referred to as "societies of actual occasions", coming together in a "nexus".

There is of course great merit in Whitehead's descriptions of actual entities in the process of concrescence, related to each other within the extensive continuum. The difficulty lies in the complex terminology Whitehead uses to describe this, making it difficult to understand the concepts themselves, let alone how actual entities are related to one another. The very word concrescence, which attempts to describe the process of actual entities as movement, tends to imply something solid and finished – concrete! The fact that we are already conditioned to think spatially then further confounds. The result is that it becomes very hard to imagine the relations within Whitehead's extensive continuum. This is where returning to Bergson's examples, and the images he offers, enables us to *feel* and *imagine* what this extensive continuum would be like.

²⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 66.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 67

In chapter five of *The Creative Mind*²⁸ Bergson gives us an image that can help one visualize Whitehead's extensive continuum. In a chapter entitled "The Perception of Change" Bergson will describe, through a variety of images, the process of reality in duration. These images are given by Bergson to help us transcend spatialised understandings of reality. Like Whitehead, Bergson affirms that reality is one of change, novelty, and process. Bergson will attempt to move beyond the implication of a spatialised reality, one in which we often consider ourselves (and other things) to be immobile.²⁹ Bergson will argue that immobility is an illusion and that movement "is reality itself". The image of two trains is then offered to illustrate the way that movement is part of reality itself. In the illustration, two trains are imagined as moving on parallel tracks, at the same speed, and in the same direction:

each of the two trains is then immovable to the travellers seated in the other. But a situation of this kind which, after all, is exceptional, seems to us to be the regular and normal situation, because it is what permits us to act upon things and also permits things to act upon us: the travellers in the two trains can hold out their hands to one another through the door and talk to one another only if they are "immobile," that is to say, if they are going in the same direction at the same speed. "Immobility" being the prerequisite for our action, we set it up as a reality, we make of it an absolute, and we see in movement something which is superimposed.³⁰

In terms of Whitehead's extensive continuum, you could now imagine each actual entity as being on parallel tracks within this continuum. The benefit of this image and what it offers is threefold. Firstly, it enables us to see how the various actual entities within Whitehead's continuum are related to one another. Secondly, the image enables us to *feel* the movement, while at the same time allowing us to understand the illusion of immobility. Lastly, it provides an example that we can relate to, rather than getting bogged down in Whitehead's terminology of concrescence within the extensive continuum. Bergson's insight

²⁸ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: an Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Dover, 2007)

²⁹ Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 119.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119-220.

provides a *clearer* and more *approachable* image of the reality of movement and its inter-relatedness. By going back to Bergson and supplementing Whitehead's extensive continuum with Bergson's "train image", Whitehead's description can be strengthened, while still enabling us to appreciate the intricacies and details of Whitehead's understanding of process within the extensive continuum.

Our previous discussion focused on one area of Whitehead's metaphysics. We will now examine why returning to Bergson can further aid us in supplementing Whitehead's understanding of religion. John Cobb has recently tried to argue that God is a central part of Whitehead's metaphysics and that to take God out of the system invalidates the metaphysics itself.³¹ This is because much of the recent interest in Whitehead has come from a un-avowedly non-theistic perspective.

Whitehead's impact in religious discussions has been significant, partly because of the influence of Charles Hartshorne, but largely due to the impact of John Cobb. Cobb argues that Whitehead's metaphysics enables a good grounding for inter-religious dialogue³², while Dombrowski has offered an interpretation of Whitehead and religion that traces the move from force to persuasion and mechanism to organism.³³ The application of Whitehead's thinking regarding religion has been fruitful and will continue to be into the 21st century.

Whitehead's *Process and Reality* has tended to focus almost exclusively on questions of metaphysics from which later Whitehead scholars developed their application of its ideas concerning religion. As already noted, the book itself and its terminology, are particularly difficult. Whitehead did, however, write a text solely dedicated to the question of religion. In *Religion in the Making*³⁴ Whitehead's conception of religion, in a similar way to Bergson, sought to take evolution into account. The four evolutionary movements of religion involve a move from ritual, belief, emotion to rationalization.³⁵ The earlier forms are more "primitive" and

³¹ Cobb, John B. "Whitehead, God, and a Contemporary Rift Among Whiteheadians." *Process Studies* 45, no. 2 (2016): 132-42.

³² John Cobb, ed. *Religions in the Making: Whitehead and the Wisdom Traditions of the World* (Oregon: Cascade, 2012).

³³ Daniel Dombrowski, *Whitehead's Religious Thought: from Mechanism to organism, from force to persuasion* (New York: SUNY, 2017)

³⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Fordham, 1996)

³⁵ Whitehead, *Religion*, 19.

therefore of less religious import according to Whitehead. These ritual forms can be found even in animals. Even the later developments in rationality that Whitehead discusses, does not mean that humans have no vestiges of their animal past. Bergson will take a similar position about the instinctive functions that humanity still maintains. Clearly, rationalization becomes the end or highest point in religious development for Whitehead, and hence of more importance. What does this rationalist religion look like? In *Religion and the Making God* becomes the non-temporal actual entity, the supreme God of rationalized religion.³⁶ Wood has argued that Whitehead's conception of God is one that develops from his earlier work *Science and the Modern World* through to his magnum opus *Process and Reality*.³⁷ Towards the end of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead constructs his conception of God as di-polar with both a primordial and a consequent nature. I do not intend to engage directly with Whitehead's metaphysics and its implication for religion, or to discuss his understanding of the religious development of religion, for which some have raised significant concerns.³⁸ I would also not want to suggest that his metaphysics has not been, and nor will be, relevant to religious thought in general. What I would like to argue though, is that Bergson's conception of religion has something unique to offer us in today's context. Like Whitehead, he offers an evolutionary account of religion. Unlike Whitehead though, his vision culminates not so much in rationality but rather in Spirit. It offers a more mystic-emotive account rather than the overly rationalistic conception of Whitehead. With the growth of Religion worldwide and particularly Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, Bergson's work is more accessible. His idea of "open and closed religion" offers modes of engagement for those from non-religious backgrounds that seek to take into account our changing religious landscape. If Whitehead studies is branching off into theistic and non-theistic directions, Bergson's account of religion might enable convergence between divergent process traditions. What then is this current religious landscape, and what can Bergson offer us in taking this into

³⁶ Ibid., 90

³⁷ Forest Wood, *Whiteheadian Thought as a Basis for a Philosophy of Religion* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986)

³⁸ Clare Palmer, "Religion in the Making? Animality, Savagery, and Civilization in the Work of A.N.Whitehead" *Society & Animals* 8, no. 3 (2000).

account?

Bergson's book *The Two Sources of Religion and Morality* was dismissed from the beginning. This is no longer the case, however, as two recent texts by Sinclair³⁹ and Ansell-Pearson⁴⁰ have demonstrated by choosing to give extensive attention to this work by Bergson. *Two Sources* is a book that is often neglected in accounts of Bergson's overall work. Deleuze's book on Bergson does not even mention it. Those who had criticized Bergson for irrationalism, or simply being a mystic, believed they were now vindicated with the *Two Sources*. Guerlac challenges this by affirming that its key insights emerge from a scientific base.⁴¹ Leonard Lawlor has been so bold as to say that the *Two Sources* might just be Bergson's greatest work.⁴²

There have been many reasons for the lack of reception of this book in both Whitehead and Bergson studies. Much of the last century was committed to the idea that those professing Christian faith would decline. With the rise of the "secular city" as Harvey Cox described it, there would be a decline in all forms of faith and religion.⁴³ It would be true to say that in many parts of the Western world this has proven to be the case and will continue to be. One of Harvey Cox's later works, however, entitled *The Pentecostals are Coming* challenged the previous view he held. Cox captured the reality of that moment, but has also been born out by the rise of Religion more generally in the world.⁴⁴

Pew Research has shown that the world's non-religious members are due to decline substantially from 18 to 13%, while the growth areas in religion will be dominated by the Christian and Muslim faiths.⁴⁵ The research indicates that between 2015 and 2060, the world's population is expected to increase by 32%,

³⁹ Mark Sinclair, *Bergson* (London: Routledge, 2020)

⁴⁰ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Bergsonism: Thinking Beyond the Human Condition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018)

⁴¹ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (New York: Cornell, 2006), 9.

⁴² Leonard Lawlor, "Forward: Hope for this Volume, sympathy" *Beyond Bergson: Examining Race and Colonialism through the Writings of Henri Bergson* Eds. Andrea Pitts and Mark Westmoreland (New York: SUNY, 2019), vii.

⁴³ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)

⁴⁴ Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise Of Pentecostal Spirituality And The Reshaping Of Religion In The 21st Century* (Cambridge: De Capo, 1995)

⁴⁵ Hackett, Conrad, Marcin Stonawski, and David McClendon. 2017. *The Changing Global Religious Landscape*. Washington: Pew Research Center

to 9.6 billion. Over that same period, the number of Muslims – the major religious group with the youngest population and the highest fertility – is projected to increase by 70%. The number of Christians is expected to rise by 34%, slightly faster than the global population overall yet far more slowly than Muslims.

There is significant growth in the Christian religion in South America, Africa and parts of Asia. By 2050 Africa will account for a staggering 42% of the world's Christians.⁴⁶ Although Pentecostalism is one of the fastest-growing denominations, there is increased growth in Anglicanism and Catholic branches of the faith too.⁴⁷ It is against the backdrop of this changing religious landscape that we should examine Whitehead and Bergson's understanding of Religion, and specifically why Whitehead's view needs to be supplemented with Bergson.

Bergson will examine society through the concepts of closed and open. Closed societies are those that are static, while open societies are amenable to change:

For Bergson, closed societies and static religions aim only at social cohesion. The static, moral values one finds within closed societies, while presented as universal, have the sole function of making individuals conform to that particular society.⁴⁸

Bergson traces two sources, or modes of morality, that need to be examined before morality can be rationally considered. Closed morality is one where habit and sociality are primary, while open morality is one in which love for humanity takes precedent.⁴⁹ Similarly, Bergson will then contrast open and closed religion by exploring the idea of the “mystical hero”. Jankélévitch believes Bergson's view of an open religion allows religion to be subject to change and therefore always moving forward. Jankélévitch argues that Bergson's philosophy by definition implies this, in that duration and the emergence of the new are beyond metaphysics and evolution, implying an open religion, whereby morality is

⁴⁶ Hackett, *Religious Landscape*, 12.

⁴⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The coming of global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 90-92.

⁴⁸ Lawlor, *Forward*, x.

⁴⁹ Sinclair, *Bergson*, 28.

dynamic in its openness to the future.⁵⁰

Bergson's account of religion is one in which he believes that religion is an initial reaction of nature against the result of the evolution of intelligence.⁵¹ In this, we can already see a reversal in Whitehead's understanding of religion where rationality is the endpoint of evolution. Bergson argues that religion is a response to a vital need for structuring human experience for both the individual and society.⁵² Bergson cautions about pushing "intellection" to far in our quest to overcome our animal instinct and that this leads to a mechanizing tendency.⁵³ Bergson calls for a mystical approach that gets one in touch with the creative potential of duration. This allows one to get beyond the static approach to religion that is so natural to humankind due to our animal instincts.⁵⁴ The mystical approach that Bergson proposes is not inward but one that is turned towards action, and towards universal love.⁵⁵ It is this active-love borne by a mystical approach that enables religion to be dynamic and not return to its static form.

Bergson's approach to religion is, therefore, one that while not rejecting rationality, does not give it the same high value that Whitehead does. It rather sees rationality as a potentially dangerous outcome and traces this to an early evolutionary origin. In a religious landscape that is changing significantly, Bergson's emotive-mystic approach provides potential points of engagement that are not overly reliant on Whitehead's rationalistic account of religion, culminating in a specific metaphysical approach.

The dynamic approach is further one that would seek to reject rising forms of fundamentalism that remain essentially a static form of religion. His theology is ambivalent though, in leaving a question mark open as to the existence of God, and whether God might be identified with duration itself.⁵⁶ This could provide a further entry point for Whitehead scholars who are non-theistic in their

⁵⁰ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2015), 159

⁵¹ Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 122.

⁵² Sinclair, *Bergson*, 242.

⁵³ Ansell-Pearson, *Bergsonism*, 130.

⁵⁴ Bergson, *Two Sources*, 311.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁶ Sinclair, *Bergson*, 244.

approach, while still wanting to engage in interreligious dialogue and discussion. Going back to Bergson affords us all these potential benefits in what will likely be a very religious century

CONCLUSION

Process philosophy and theology have always engaged substantially with Bergson and continue to do so.⁵⁷ The recent revival in both Bergson and Whitehead studies will further aid this process. The scope of Bergson's understanding of duration, and its implications for metaphysics, evolution, philosophy of mind and religion, will allow multiple points for dialogue. James has noted that French philosophy today, and in the twentieth century, is part of a "trajectory of thought which can be traced from Bergson".⁵⁸ Process philosophers also trace some of their origins back to Bergson.

Three areas have been offered as an attempt to justify a return to Bergson for both process philosophy and theology. The first was in making the argument that Bergson's philosophy is far more approachable than Whitehead and that Bergson's philosophical style illustrates the nature of process in ways that Whitehead's difficult terminology does not allow. Secondly, by supplementing Whitehead's understanding of the extensive continuum with that of Bergson's image of the "two trains" allows Whitehead's conception of reality as actual occasions moving within an extensive continuum easier to grasp. Both Whitehead's terminology and his explication of the continuum, further fail to adequately illustrate the inter-related nature of actual occasions and their inherent movement. Bergson further offers us the ability to move beyond the illusion of mobility, for which Whitehead's description of the extensive continuum does not address sufficiently.

The third area where a return to Bergson can supplement Whitehead studies is in the area of religion. As we have noted, Whitehead's understanding of religion is bogged down for the same reasons as his discussion of the extensive continuum is. His account of the development of religion moves from more primitive forms to an overly rationalized religion. It is further burdened by his terminology and

⁵⁷ Nicholas Rescher, *The Promise of Process Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 4.

⁵⁸ James, *The New French Philosophy*, 6.

his metaphysical account of God. Bergson offers a fresh approach, while still taking an evolutionary perspective.

Three offerings of how going "back to Bergson" can give us the ability to supplement Whitehead's metaphysical account have been provided. This gives an opportunity to bring together divergent trends in work on Whitehead, while at the same time generating potential convergent points for those involved in the current revival in both Bergson and Whitehead studies.

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