

DISCUSSION REMARKS

by

Lonnie D. Kliever
Professor of Religious Studies
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, Texas USA

on

Gene Reeves's

PROCESS PHILOSOPHY AS A UNIFYING GLOBAL VISION

The Fourteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Houston, Texas November 28-December 1, 1985

© 1985, Paragon House Publishers

RESPONSE PAPER

"Process Philosophy as a Unifying Global Vision"
Gene Reeves

By

Lonnie D. Kliever
Professor of Religious Studies
Southern Methodist University

In this paper, Gene Reeves argues two interrelated theses. Process philosophy as a speculative metaphysics provides the rational grounds for the growth of a global culture (1) by establishing the possibility of a common human faith (2) without dismissing the importance of particular religious traditions. That Reeves argues these theses as proposals rather than as demonstrations is obvious. He does not show that the Westerner and the Easterner experience the quest for the sacred in essentially the same way, much less how Kashmir Saivites, Hasidic Jews or Shi'ite Muslims might actually use process philosophy to nourish their own faith and to bring them to the same altar. Nevertheless, this paper is useful for those who are interested in the possibility of a unifying global vision, both because of the example of a global philosophy which it offers and the criteria for a global philosophy which it suggests.

Reeves offers a useful "primer" in process philosophy (which for his purposes is limited to the thought of Alfred North Whitehead) for those who are unfamiliar with its central tenets. Reeves underlines Whitehead's own metaphysical modesty and concreteness by acknowledging that process philosophy is a limited perspective arising out of historical circumstances and philosophical assumptions rooted in Western cultures and languages -- at best, what Plato called "a likely story" (pp. 2-4). But its own central principles

embody a breadth of vision and flexibility that "makes process philosophy at least as potentially global as any philosophy can be" (p. 5).

Reeves supports this claim by reducing Whiteheadian metaphysics to four central principles. (1) Process philosophy is a philosophy of becoming (pp. 5-9). Unlike most of the classical philosophies and theologies East and West, this philosophy makes becoming the more basic category in the interplay between stabilities and changes, forms and dynamics, structures and energies. (2) Process philosophy is a philosophy of interdependence (pp. 9-11). This is a philosophy which seeks to redress the balance between independence and interdependence for both the human and the divine. (3) Process philosophy is a philosophy of depth (pp. 11-15). Process thought ties all intellectual visions, social institutions and action systems to the depths of immediate experience. Finally, process philosophy is a philosophy of God (pp. 16-18). The process vision grounds our common human faith in a sacral structure of love that encompasses all things and encourages all things in a creative and cosmic advance of joyful life.

While Reeves' summary analysis of Whiteheadian thought is provocative and helpful as an example of a unified and unifying global vision, the more interesting and useful contribution of this paper is the criteria it suggests for any such vision. Reeves does not address in any systematic way the standards of adequacy which should be applied to candidates for a global philosophy. But four such criteria can be gleaned from his 'nomination' of Whitehead's metaphysics for this task. (1) A global philosophy must allow for the emergence of historical change and religious novelty (p. 6). Reeves has the good sense to avoid directly tying this criterion to modern Western sensibilities. Rather, he derives this norm from the universal persistence of

human hope which yearns for the new and the different. (2) A global philosophy must account for the possibility of scientific determinism and moral accountability (p. 7). Once again, Reeves does not derive this criterion strictly from modern-day scientific understanding or ethical theory. Rather, this norm is rooted in that inescapable experience of human freedom which acknowledges both our conditionedness and creativity. (3) A global philosophy must provide the context for cross-cultural experiences and interfaith dialogue (p. 9). Reeves suggests a deeper justification for this criterion than the fact of political interdependence and religious pluralism. He roots this norm in the unexpungable longing for that human peace which brings an end to our conflict and separation. (4) Finally, a global philosophy must exemplify the scope of divine providence and human transformation (p. 17). Disavowing all secular soteriological and eschatological schemes, this norm reflects the universal quest for human liberation from the debilitating results of our folly and finitude itself.

That Reeves sees process philosophy meeting these four criteria for a global vision comes as no surprise. He shows how Whiteheadian metaphysics explicitly aims to overcome the absolutism that paralyzes hope, the fatalism that neutralizes freedom, the parochialism that destroys peace, the despair that conceals liberation. But whether process philosophy could help religious traditions other than modern Western monotheisms meet these criteria is not demonstrated in this paper. More important, whether any philosophical vision can nourish and unify the faiths of diverse traditions apart from a covert or overt process of cultural or religious assimilation is not argued at all. Therefore, the two interrelated theses proposed in this paper remain in serious tension if not outright contradiction. Why should we think any global

vision including process metaphysics can establish the possibility of a common human faith without dismissing the importance of particular religious traditions? Are not all programs in philosophia perennis, by the very descriptive and imaginative character of metaphysical reflection itself, destined to end up intellectualizing all faiths and universalizing none?