Journal of Anglican Studies (2026), **24**, 333–347
doi:10.1017/S1740355325100867

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

RESEARCH ARTICLE

John V. Taylor and Process Theology

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(Received 14 September 2025; revised 14 September 2025; accepted 11 December 2025; first published online 26 March 2026)

Abstract

John V. Taylor was reluctant to acknowledge process theology flourishing in the 1960s; however, in reading a book by Norman Pittenger, *God in Process*, during a train ride, he had a 'light bulb' experience, triggering the writing of *The Go-Between God* in 1972. Though Taylor may not have studied the technicalities of the process philosophy of A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, he drew upon their characteristic understanding of God. By contrast with Classical Theism's contention that God is absolute in all respects, they vigorously argued that God is relative to the natural universe and revealed in and through its creative processes. Taylor was also influenced by the Australian biologist Charles Birch, a proponent of process theology. The shape of the train-ride religious experience, which Taylor unpacks in *The Go-Between God*, bears a remarkable family likeness to the kind of religious experience articulated at length by Whitehead in response to the atheism of Bertrand Russell and the logical positivism of A. J. Ayer, in his book *Modes of Thought*. This was published in 1938, the year of Taylor's admission to Holy Orders. It may be that Taylor was unwittingly much more of a process theologian than he himself was aware.

Keywords: Classical theism; God as absolute; neoclassical (di-polar) theism; process theology; the supremely relative

I was recently privileged to hear a presentation on the theology of the Holy Spirit in the thinking of John V. Taylor, who was for a time General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society prior to becoming Bishop of Winchester in 1974. This presentation was delivered at the Centre for Spirituality at St George's Cathedral in Perth, Western Australia, by Dr David Wood, Taylor's biographer.[1]

Given that John Taylor's work on the Holy Spirit is not so much an exercise in systematic theology as an invitation, with a clear missiological orientation, to pursue the possibility of an experiential acquaintance with the living presence of the Holy Spirit, this was a suitably appropriate topic for a gathering of seriously prayerful

[1]See David Wood, *Poet, Priest and Prophet*: *Bishop John V. Taylor* (London: Churches Together, 2002).

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people of faith at the Cathedral's Centre for Spirituality. Those who are acquainted with Taylor's work will find it perfectly understandable that David Wood's carefully researched account of Taylor's life naturally placed a primary focus on his groundbreaking work of 1972 entitled *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*[2] in which the dynamic possibilities of the human acquaintance with the Holy Spirit were carefully explored.

In the course of his presentation, David Wood provided an illuminating account of the specific circumstances of Taylor's life that led to the writing of *The Go-Between God.* This included a very significant account of a 'light bulb' moment late one afternoon when Taylor was travelling by train back (presumably to London) from Oxford, through the Berkshire countryside. Wood actually also refers to this experience on page 118 of his biography of Taylor, where he recounts what Taylor described as being captivated on an incredibly beautiful English evening when the sun was low and long shadows from the corn stooks, trees and hedges fell across the stubble fields. This triggered a thoughtful examination of what exactly it was that he was experiencing.

During the journey, Taylor had been reading a little paperback by Norman Pittenger entitled *God in Process,* which had been published in 1967. Though Taylor actually says he did not get very far into Pittenger's book and did not remember a great deal about it, he had kept the book because of the thoughts which he says 'suddenly came bursting out of me like a volcano' and which he scribbled on its two blank back pages.

Taylor confesses that the fundamental nature of this experience was not entirely new to him; indeed, he says it was very common to him and that he had in fact known it since childhood days. He describes it as an experience of being in communion, or some kind of communication, with a scene of beauty in the natural order, which appeared to attract a particular attention to itself and even, in a sense, to *command* attention; it was 'as though there was a kind of current between myself and what I was looking at'. Though this actual experience was not new to him, Taylor, however, confesses that for the first time in his life, he actually asked a crucial question about 'what creates this feeling of being addressed by what I am looking at?'.

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Though in a sense Taylor himself tends to minimize any dependence on what Pittenger had to say in *God in Process,* his interpretation of this experience in a specifically theistic way, and the fact that he had been reading what he himself notes was 'an application of process philosophy to the Christian Gospel', raises an interesting possibility. We may well ask whether Pittenger's book unwittingly played a more significant role than just the provision of some blank pages on which an account of a religious experience could be scribbled. Can it be that Pittenger's promotion of an 'application of process philosophy to the Christian Gospel' may have been more integral to the interpretation of Taylor's train-ride experience than Taylor himself may initially have been aware? For, even if Taylor may not have himself been cognizant of its importance, it is at least thinkable that Pittenger's book

[2]A new edition of *The Go-Between God* was published by SCM Press in 2004 with a fresh introduction by David Wood.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

played a role, not just in raising the specific existential question about the origin of the kind of experience that Taylor narrates, but at the same time in proposing an explicit answer to that question. Indeed, insofar as the scribbled notes in the back of Pittenger's book subsequently triggered the writing of Taylor's theology of encounter with the Holy Spirit in *The Go-Between God,* we may well ask whether this book of Taylor's is itself a specific instance of 'the application of process theology to the Christian Gospel'.

Certainly, the passing reference to Pittenger and David Woods's account of the religious experience recorded by Taylor on the back pages of *God in Process* at his presentation at the Centre for Spirituality at St George's Cathedral in Perth immediately excited my interest and attention. Until this time, I had never really associated the theology of the Holy Spirit articulated by John V. Taylor in *The Go-Between God* with process theology. As we shall see, however, a close examination of *The Go-Between God* itself reveals Taylor's heavy dependence on the philosophical underpinning of process theology in his fundamental approach to an understanding of the relation of God to the natural order of Creation and the divine presence *within* it. Indeed, there is a sense in which Taylor's spirituality of the concrete experience of the Holy Spirit and the human entry into the communion of the Holy Spirit arising from a feeling of being addressed in and through a specific kind of engagement with the natural order may be understood to be an outcome of the flowering of process theology which occurred on both sides of the Atlantic through the decade of the 1960s, immediately prior to the publication of *The Go-Between God.*

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At the time Pittenger published *God in Process* in 1967, he was recently retired, having had a long teaching career as Professor of Christian Apologetics at the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in New York. He was living alone in England in a small apartment in central Cambridge, though he enjoyed immediate access to a circle of academical friends and high table dining rights, along with the status of 'Senior Member' at King's College. This congenial arrangement for his retirement had apparently been organized for him by the then Dean of King's, his friend Alec Vidler.

However, though he was technically living in retirement, there is a real sense in which Pittenger was on a very intentional mission. He made no attempt to conceal the fact that he was thoroughly committed to the task of trying to promote a British interest in process theology, which up to that time had by-and-large been a localized North American phenomenon. This is despite the fact that all the most distinguished American proponents of this mid-twentieth-century revival of interest in it very self-consciously looked back to the British philosophy of A. N. Whitehead as their initial inspiration.

It is understandable that Whitehead had a particular impact in the United States, well away from the logical positivism then emerging in British philosophical circles with which he had no sympathy, for late in his career he took up the interdisciplinary post as University Professor at Harvard, a position he held for thirteen years prior to his retirement, after which he and his wife then remained in the United States. Indeed, by the 1960s Charles Hartshorne, whose teaching career spread right

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across the United States from Chicago to Atlanta and Texas, and who had become the undoubted flag-bearer of a crusading attempted revision of classical theism from a process perspective, had himself been assistant to Whitehead for a time during Whitehead's final full-time teaching years at Harvard.

Amongst the most notable of Hartshorne's like-minded disciples were his own research student John B. Cobb Jr, who went to a teaching position at the Centre for Process Studies at Claremont in California, and the United Methodist theologian Schubert Ogden of Perkins Divinity School in Dallas, Texas. Also, Ian G. Barbour, who, after being introduced to process thought by Daniel Day Williams and Gordon D. Kaufman in the early 1960s, prosecuted the fertile possibilities of the interdisciplinary engagement of process philosophy and the natural sciences with great enthusiasm at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota.

Norman Pittenger was undoubtedly the popularizer for this North American group of scholars. Originally a journalist with clear gifts of communication, he thought of himself as 'the Barbara Cartland of theology'. Certainly, he was never at a loss for words, whether as an entertaining conversationalist or as the author of a succession of books. It is not hard to believe that he is said to have actually published some ninety books during his lifetime. Some people unkindly, and somewhat unfairly, said that, though these books all had different titles, they were essentially all the same book![3] It has to be said in Pittenger's defence that, though a common theme of many of his small books flowed from his determination to promote an awareness of the importance of process theology and of its usefulness for the contemporary presentation of the Gospel, there were certainly some very notable exceptions. For example, his significant contribution to Christology, *The Word Incarnate* (1959), while certainly also written with an unmistakable process colouring, is a substantial piece of theological argument, even if with identifiable Nestorian resonances given Pittenger's preferential emphasis on Jesus' humanity as the starting point for a Christological assessment of his significance. And then there was his courageously pioneering contribution to the rethinking of Christian approaches to sexuality, very notably in *Time for Consent* (1970).[4] Even so, it may readily be admitted that most of his books were very readable small monographs with a crusading focus on one aspect or another of Christian theology from a process perspective.

Amongst the most important of his publications in his retirement years in Cambridge was *God in Process* (1967), which was to feature in John Taylor's train-ride experience, and this was followed a couple of years later by a brief biographical introduction to Alfred North Whitehead and his thought (1969), which included an introductory discussion of the key elements of Whitehead's evolutionary cosmology in *Process and Reality,* which Whitehead originally published in 1929.[5]

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[3]The Dean of King's College, Cambridge, David Edwards, is reported to have once asked Pittenger, 'What is it called this time?'.

[4]*Time for Consent: A Christian Approach to Homosexuality* (London: SCM Press, 1970).

[5]See A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) (Harper. Torchbook Edn., 1960), and W. Norman Pittenger, *Alfred North Whitehead* (London: Lutterworth, 1969).

As it happened, the year in which Pittenger published *God in Process* was my own first year as a research student in Cambridge. My wife Ann and I had arrived from Australia for the beginning of the 1966–67 academical year, with the precise intention that I would be doing a three-year research degree – believe it or not, in process theology, which had caught my interest in the course of studying the theory and method of history in the Honours School of History in the University of Melbourne.

Pittenger was an obvious resource person who very quickly became a very good friend to us. He regularly came on the bus to our Emmanuel College flat at 286 Hills Road, Cambridge, for an evening meal, sometimes arriving with a plastic shopping bag full of novels that he had been reading in association with his writing project on rethinking Christian sexuality. Some of these books bore quite lurid dust jackets; we were relieved that he had brought them on public transport under plain cover.

Our arrival in Cambridge in 1966 coincided with that of another research student named Peter Hamilton, who had been a chaplain at Marlborough College and had come to Cambridge also with the purpose of pursuing a research interest in process theology. Indeed, he had already been writing in this field in tandem with his secondary school teaching of religious education and, in fact, came with an already well-advanced draft manuscript. This was published by Hodder and Stoughton later in 1967 under the title of *The Living God and the Modern World*.

Though Pittenger was not a Fellow of King's College with teaching responsibilities, I notice in the preface to his little introduction to *Alfred North Whitehead* that he took a proprietary interest in promoting the elements of process theology amongst theological research students; the book is dedicated to '*my* research students and others at this University' (my italics). My own copy is inscribed 'With good wishes to Peter Carnley, Norman Pittenger'.

I have to confess, however, that in the course of my own three years of research at Cambridge, I came to acquire some reservations about the view of God that Hartshorne was at the time enthusiastically promoting as neoclassical theism and as an alleged viable alternative to classical theism. Indeed, insofar as the understanding of the nature of God is concerned, I came to entertain some serious concerns. For a start, Hartshorne's characterization of God struck me as a little too anthropomorphic, for while we humans were said to relate to a small part of the universe, God was said on analogy to relate to *all that is*. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the pitfall of anthropomorphism, given Hartshorne's uncritical appeal to the 'way of eminence' in the doing of theology: if humans are related to a small part of the world, God is said to be similarly related, but eminently. To my mind, the 'way of Eminence' called for some careful apophatic qualification. In the end, I finished by switching from theism to ecclesiology, though with a process perspective.[6] But this was not before I had, admittedly with the help of Pittenger's crusading encouragement, thoroughly absorbed the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and had carefully examined what Hartshorne, Cobb, Ogden, and others had been able to make of it.

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In *God in Process,* Pittenger outlined the fundamental differences between classical theism, with its focus on the *being* of God, and on God's *becoming* in relation to the

[6]"The Idea of Historical Memory in the Theology of John Knox'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

created order, which, contrary to classical theism, was said to make a real difference to God. The root attribute of God in classical theism is God's absolute ontological independence, or *aseity* (from *a se esse* = being from oneself). This entails not only that God is not dependent for his being on anything outside of himself but also, being absolute and unchanging in all respects, that God is not affected or changed by anything outside of himself. Hence, the doctrine of the impassibility of God in classical theism. This means that God does not suffer, but also that whatever happens in the created order can have no impact on God for good either, for God is already timelessly complete and perfect in himself. In other words, the perfection of God entails that God is changeless, being absolute in all respects and thus relative to nothing.

By contrast, in the thought of Whitehead, who insisted that the entire created order must be understood as evolving in time and as always being in the process of becoming, God is understood in a sense to evolve in tandem with it, at least in terms of his concrete experiences. In this way, God is understood not to be separate from and independent of the created order but to be intimately involved in, and affected by, the evolutionary process for which he is responsible. This means that God is in a sense dependent upon it, at least for his experience of it to be as it is. Whitehead therefore insisted that God must therefore be understood to have an absolute or primordial nature and a consequent or relative nature: if God is intimately involved in the evolutionary process so as to have an impact upon it, then in turn changes in the evolutionary process are real for God and have an impact upon him.

This means that, instead of being absolute in all respects as in classical theism, God is said to be absolute in some respects but relative in others. Abstract qualities of character, such as being all-knowing and all-loving, are absolute and unchanging. But these very qualities of character entail that God knows and loves all there is to know and love at any specific time and is thus relative to all there is to know and love, but this will change from time to time as what there is to know and love changes. Hartshorne systematically unpacked this by explaining it as *di polar* theism, though, instead of Whitehead's talk of God's 'primordial' and 'consequent' natures, Hartshorne speaks of them as 'absolute' and 'relative'. For example, in his primordial or absolute nature, God may be said to be all-knowing and all-loving, but Hartshorne argued that God must be relative insofar as in his actual experience of knowing and loving, he must change in relation to all there is to know and love at any one point of time in the evolutionary process. Because this is always changing and developing, God's experience of knowing and loving must consequently change and develop with it. It follows that God is absolute and hence unchanging in terms of his eternal qualities of character but relative in terms of the concrete content of the experiences entailed by these eternal qualities of character from moment to moment in time.

The end result is a view of a God who is intimately involved in and affected by what goes on in the created order and therefore, in this specific sense, relative to it. For Hartshorne, the defining characteristic of God is therefore not that God is Absolute in all respects, as in classical theism; rather, God is the Supremely Relative. This is why he contended that while we humans may be relative to and affected by what occurs in a small part of the created order, God is relative to *all* that is and must therefore in some way be affected by all that occurs. Moreover, because God's concrete experiences of knowing and loving change in accordance with what there is

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to know and love at any specific moment in time, God, as the Supremely Relative, becomes for Hartshorne 'the self-surpassing Surpasser of all'.

Hartshorne's term for this neoclassical theism is 'pan*en*theism' to ensure that it is clear that it is not that the created order is itself somehow divine. It is not to be mistaken for a form of pantheism; rather, God makes his presence felt as he is actively involved 'in and through' the created order.

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Norman Pittenger's vocational commitment to interpret this view of God to a wider audience in a less theologically technical way, and to draw out its implications, led him to point out that for Whitehead this God who has both a primordial and a consequent nature is actively involved in the evolutionary process insofar as he constantly directs its course, while not denying a certain element of freedom which confronts every actual occasion of creaturely existence. Instead of sporadically intruding into the natural order from outside, as it were, God's purpose is to make the best of all possible worlds by 'luring' the created order on to the next phase of its existence, at all levels acting persuasively rather than coercively to help it reach its next reiteration. This Whiteheadian concept of God as actively and intimately involved in the evolutionary processes as the 'lure' to greater and better things, and at the same time being relative to and affected by all that occurs, so as to be intimately engaged with the created order in such a way as always to move it towards his intended purpose, means that God is found within the created order instead of separate from it or outside of it.

As a consequence, for Pittenger, God is no remote deity, effectively absent from the created order except for occasional miraculous or extraordinary interventions, but is a God who is always actively involved in and through all of creation. As he says already on page 14 of *God in Process,* which John Taylor must surely have read on his train journey: 'The basic truth about God is that he is both the creative energy in all things, whose sovereign rule includes the whole of this world in its sweep, and also the living God who can and does enter into relationships with men *(sic)*'.[7]

In a sense, the incarnation of God in Christ is not an aberration; rather, the incarnation of Christ is the chief exemplification of a principle of the divine activity that is all-pervading. 'The Incarnation is not confined only to the historical person of Jesus Christ but is also the manner and mode of all of God's work in the world'.[8] Consequently, Pittenger explicitly says that the incarnation of God is *defined* in Christ but not *confined* there, given that it is the manner and mode of God's living activity that is found right through the whole of Creation.

Pittenger clearly believed that this is a much more credible view of the divine Reality than the static and unchanging 'Absolute' of classical theism. Indeed, he notes that, rather than speaking of the 'divine Reality', process theology gives a preferential place to the concept of 'the divine Activity'.[9]

[7] *God in Process,* p. *14.*
[8] *God in Process*, p. 19.
[9] *God in Process*, p. 17. As Pittenger says: 'He is in the world; or we might even say that the world is in him'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Given this understanding of the divine activity in and through the whole of creation, Pittenger naturally went on to insist that this God, who is intimately involved in and affected by what goes on in the world, is therefore known in revelatory disclosures in and through the natural order: '. . . God in the very conditions of the world is revealing himself as energizing and active within it . . . .'[10]

As Pittenger says on page 20 of *God in Process*:

> It is a matter of One Thing, the divine Reality himself, working in and through another thing, the world in which he is creatively at work and of which he is dynamic and sovereign ruler. In differing ways, in varying degrees of intensity, he is self-expressed. Something of him is shown in living matter . . . .It is all incarnation . . . .[11]

It seems clear that, if John Taylor only read as far as the first twenty pages of *God in Process* on his celebrated train journey through Berkshire, he would have encountered a view of a God who is intimately involved in living processes in and through all creation as 'the creative energy in all things', operating according to an 'incarnational' principle, so that from time to time in revelatory disclosures something of his presence is 'shown in living matter'.

On the other hand, if Taylor were able to sustain his interest in Pittenger's book up to page 40 during his train journey, he would have found that a transition is made from this incarnational focus on the Divine Word, or 'self-expressive activity of God' by whom 'all things are made', to a discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit.

In Chapter 3 of *God in Process,* Pittenger, having dwelt at length upon the self-expressive activity of God and the principle of its incarnation, turns particularly to the place of the Holy Spirit. 'While humanity's movement towards conformity with God's will and purpose for men (*sic*) as revealed in Christ is in *deepest* reality the operation of the Holy Spirit, we are quite right to speak of this also as 'our response'.[12] Thus, he says, 'Here in Jesus is both the focus of the divine Action, the Eternal Word in created things, and also the focus of the divine Response, the Holy Spirit who moves graciously in creation to bring it on to its proper end'.[13]

It is precisely at this point that John V. Taylor's description of his religious experience of the perception of the Holy Spirit as a 'go-between' actively involved in the created order shows a remarkable congruence with the God of process theology. Taylor acknowledges the difference between speaking 'of God existing in himself apart from the created universe and of God existing in and through all the facts'.[14]

Right at the beginning of his chapter on the Holy Spirit, Pittenger noted that 'the Holy Spirit is very frequently quite unrecognized because in fact he works "anonymously" among us in the world'.[15] Once again, we cannot fail to note the similarity of these words of Pittenger with Taylor's own expressed interest also in

[10]*God in Process*, p. 19.
[11]*God in Process*, p. 20.
[12]*God in Process*, p. 40.
[13]*God in Process,* pp. 42–43.
[14]*The Go-Between God*, p. 5.
[15]*God in Process*, p. 40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

God's 'working anonymously and on the inside; the beyond in the midst'.[16] Indeed, in relation to the experience of intense moments of interpersonal mutuality, Taylor affirms that 'In every such encounter there has been an anonymous third party who makes the introduction, acts as a go-between, makes two beings aware of each other, sets up a current of communication between them'.[17]

Furthermore, this notable aspect of interpersonal relationality is of a piece with the operation of God in and through the materiality of the whole natural world and the human response to it: 'What *causes* the gift of awareness that opens our eyes to one another' and 'makes us see as we have never seen before'[18] is the same go-between that is encountered in and through the evolutionary process of created nature.

As Taylor himself notes, it was once said by Martin Buber that the God of *I and Thou* is understood to be a God who 'acts and is known "through things temporal" yet remains transcendent'.[19] Further, Taylor says that 'Whatever else this means, it affirms quite clearly that, if we think of a Creator at all, we are to find him always on the inside of creation'.[20] In order to clinch this point, Taylor conjures up some words of the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins in his poem *God's Grandeur*: 'there lives the dearest freshness deep down things'.[21]

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To note the family likeness of Taylor's understanding of the perception of the presence of God from within the living processes of created nature and that of the professed process theologians of the 1960s is not necessarily to say that Taylor shared their first-hand acquaintance with the technicalities of the actual philosophical work of Whitehead and Hartshorne. It is more likely that the fundamental principles of process theology were acquired by Taylor at second-hand at that time, initially apparently from his reading of Pittenger's *God in Process*, even though he seems to have been reluctant to acknowledge this, but subsequently and very importantly also from other process thinkers upon whom he in fact openly acknowledges a direct dependence.

Amongst these, the most influential was undoubtedly the Australian biologist Charles Birch, whom Taylor cites at length in *The Go-Between God*. Indeed, when Taylor came to expound the nature of the experience which had been triggered by his evening train ride and to explain his understanding of it in more detail in *The Go-Between God,* he acknowledged the particular importance of the work of Charles Birch in a book entitled *Nature and God,* which Birch had published in 1965.[22]

Birch was a confirmed disciple of both Whitehead and Hartshorne, who clearly perceived the relevance of their view of God's relation to the natural world for his own discipline of biology. He himself acknowledges that his first professor of

[16]*The Go-Between God,* p. 5.
[17]*The Go-Between God*, p. 17.
[18]*The Go-Between God*, pp. 17–18
[19]*The Go-Between God,* p. 6. Quoting Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (London: T and T Clarke, 1966), p. 136.
[20]*The Go-Between God*, p. 28.
[21]Quoted by Taylor in *The Go-Between God*, p. 27.
[22]Charles Birch, *Nature and God*, (London: SCM Press, 1965). Curiously, this little book is published in the same format, with a very similar cover design to Pittenger's *God in Process*, which was also published by SCM Press two years later, in 1967.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

zoology, W. E. Agar, who had written a book on this subject,[23] advised him 'to read all I could of A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, which advice I gratefully took'.[24] In fact, Birch dedicated his own little book *Nature and God* to Charles Hartshorne.

Taylor in turn places Birch amongst scientists such as Teilhard de Chardin, Sewall Wright, Theodosius Dobhansky, Max Plank, and Alistair Hardy and then, significantly, associates him with 'Whitehead, Hocking and Hartshorne among the philosophers'.[25]

Though Birch rarely reveals any direct dependence on Hocking, he probably appreciated Hocking's interest in science and religion and his vigorous philosophical defence of theism. There is no doubt, however, that John Taylor fully appreciated the formative importance of Whitehead and Hartshorne in the thinking of Charles Birch, particularly in relation to Birch's scientific understanding as a biologist of the evolutionary processes of the natural world and, at the same time, as a Christian believer in his understanding of the action of God in the evolution of the created order. Even if Taylor had not himself delved far (if at all) into the technical philosophical theology of Whitehead and Hartshorne and may not have been acquainted with their thought at first-hand, he discloses that, certainly by the time he wrote *The Go-Between God* in 1972, he was well aware of the rudiments of their thought through his reading of Birch's *Nature and God.* Thus, in affirming his own convictions about the intimate relation of God's Spirit and the material creation, a family likeness with process theology is palpable:

> The Spirit of Life is ever at work in nature, in history and in human living, and wherever there is a flagging or corruption or self-destruction in God's handiwork, he is present to renew and energize and create again. Whenever faith in the Holy Spirit is strong, creation and redemption are seen as one continuous *process* (my italics).[26]

Indeed, Taylor reveals that he had acquired some unmistakably Whiteheadian language, though at second-hand from Charles Birch. For example, Taylor, in quoting Birch, adopts the characteristic Whiteheadian concept of God operating within the evolutionary process explicitly as 'lure', along with language with resonances that are typical of Whitehead's distinction between God's primordial and consequent natures. Quoting directly from Birch, he writes:

> In his primordial nature God is 'the absolute wealth of potentiality' of the universe. God confronts the world in his primordial nature which is the lure of unrealized potentiality. The world experiences God as the world is created.[27]

[23]W. E. Agar, *A Contribution to the Theory of the Living Organism* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1943).

[24]*Nature and God*, p. 67.

[25]*The Go-Between God*, p. 42. William Ernest Hocking (1873–1966) was an American idealist philosopher who taught at Harvard. He continued the work of his philosophical teacher, Josiah Royce in revising idealism so as to make it fit with empiricism, naturalism and a kind of pragmatism. His *Science and the Idea of God*, University of North Carolina Press, 1944 is commended by Birch (*God and Nature*, p. 124).

[26]*The Go-Between God*, p. 27.

[27]Charles Birch, *Nature and God*, p. 94. Quoted by Taylor in *The Go-Between God*, p. 31.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The fact that this unmistakably Whiteheadian language is found in a quotation from Birch, rather than directly from Whitehead himself, is significant insofar as it suggests that Taylor absorbed the basic elements of process theology at second-hand rather than as a result of a direct acquaintance with the philosophical work of Whitehead and Hartshorne themselves.

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However, it was not just that Taylor relied heavily on process theology's dipolar view of God as the Supremely Relative to furnish him with an understanding of the divine nature that seems to have informed his account of the religious experience of the apprehension of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, the fundamental structure of the religious *experience of the Spirit itself* that he makes so much of in *The Go-Between God* has about it an unmistakable Whiteheadian resonance.

It is highly significant that in his initial statement of what was to become the main argument of *The Go-Between God*, Taylor appealed, whether wittingly or unwittingly, to the notion of 'importance'. He noted that some things engage us and strike us somehow as 'important' by contrast with what is experienced as matter-of-fact. He says, 'The fact that something, or somebody, is *there* suddenly becomes *important* (my italics). Instead of simply being part of the landscape, part of existence, it presents itself, it becomes present, it commands attention'.[28] This is particularly so when humans become mutually aware of one another in a way that is quite different from the way in which they ordinarily relate to others. His point is that being mutually present to each other and relating to each other in a way that has a life-transforming significance allows them to elevate one as important to them in a way that others are not. Romeo and Juliet, for example, notice each other 'across a crowded room' and quickly find themselves in deep conversation with each other.

Although, in order to illustrate this, Taylor appeals to Martin Buber's celebrated *I and Thou*, the actual use of the concept of 'importance' in this context is much more characteristic of Whitehead. Indeed, though Taylor cites Buber in order to make his point, he is then quick to qualify his own words so as to emphasise a distinction between what he wishes to communicate and Buber's understanding of things. He notes that the kind of experience to which he wishes to draw attention is often spoken of theologically as 'the sense of the numinous'. He points out, however, that both Martin Buber in *I and Thou* and also Rudolph Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* speak of the sense of the numinous in terms of something that is awesome, almost frighteningly tremendous, and wondrously overwhelming.

By contrast, Taylor points out that the truly numinous experience is not just marked by primitive awe in the face of the unknown and overwhelming; rather, we rightly speak of the sense of the numinous. when something quite ordinary and much less intimidating nevertheless strikes us as 'important' and personally interesting and engaging. He firmly insists, therefore, that the precise meaning of the word 'numinous' comes from the Latin *nuo*, simply meaning 'to nod' or 'beckon'. When even very ordinary, quite unintimidating or less than awesome occurrences nevertheless somehow command our attention and we find ourselves taking an interest in them, then we are responding to a sense of the numinous. In other words,

[28] *The Go-Between God*, p. 8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whenever we become aware that the object of our experience has somehow initiated a response from us, it is as though what was first objective to us as subject has itself become a subject commanding our attention as *its* object: 'What we call the object of our response is really the subject and activator'.[29] Such experiences cannot be contrived; this is something that happens to us. It is in relation to these comparatively low-key very ordinary events that Taylor speaks of 'the involvement of the Spirit, or Breath, of God in the processes of creation'.[30]

It is important to note that Taylor is very concerned to underline the fact that these experiences in which the ordinary suddenly strikes us as extraordinary and as in some sense 'important' or significant are not to be thought to be rare; on the contrary, such experiences are frequent. Thus Taylor says, 'I want to emphasize the ordinariness and frequency of these experiences. In a manner of speaking we are falling in love at every turn of the road, with a fold in the hills, the mist over the lake, the stars tangled in the bare branches, the yellow chair in the sunlight, an old song at the peasant's fireside, a new thought flashing from the pages of a book, a lined face on a hospital pillow . . . .'.[31]

Now, this initial statement of Taylor's about the role of 'importance' in day-to-day experience might be accepted as perfectly innocuous and in itself of no great significance, but for the fact that A. N. Whitehead treated the notion of 'importance' as a dominant theme of an entire book entitled *Modes of Thought,* which he published in 1938.[32]

In this book Whitehead acknowledged the fundamental 'importance' not just of some experiences of nature, but of intimate loving relationships between persons. Whitehead was concerned to draw attention to the perception of something of significance somehow as being 'important' by contrast with the matter-of-fact in and through the apparent ordinariness of everyday experience. 'I am pleading', he said, 'that our whole experience is composed out of our relationships to the rest of things, and of the formation of new relationships constitutive of things to come. The present receives the past and builds the future. But there are grades of permanence and of compulsive stability'.[33] Somehow, what strikes us as 'important' has more than just passing momentary significance but signals something that emerges from the past and has a crucial bearing on the future. By contrast with the matter-of-fact and mundane, it carries a religious meaning, says Whitehead: 'In some sense or other, Importance is derived from the immanence of infinitude in the finite'.[34]

Indeed, Whitehead spoke of this kind of religious experience as a form of mysticism, which he defined as 'direct insight into depths yet unspoken'.[35] The role of philosophy (and we might today add of systematic theology also) is a matter of 'faith seeking understanding', as Anselm would have said. Its role 'is to rationalize

[29]*The Go-Between God,* pp. 11, 13.
[30]*The Go-Between God,* p. 25.
[31]*The Go-Between God,* p. 9.
[32]A. N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).
[33]*Modes of Thought*, p. 43.
[34]*Modes of Thought,* p. 28.
[35]*Modes of Thought,* p. 237. In *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1926), he had already emphasized the individual nature of the primary religious experience as against conceiving it as a community phenomenon.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mysticism, not by explaining it away, but by the introduction of novel verbal characterizations, rationally coordinated'.[36]

It can hardly be an accident that, as it turns out, Norman Pittenger refers to A.N. Whitehead's appeal to the concept of 'importance' in his discussion of the 'Self-Expressive Activity of God' at the beginning of the second chapter of *God in Process*. Before going on to expound something of the perceived 'importance' of the incarnation of the self-expressive activity of God not just in and through the entire created order but in supreme degree in the person of Jesus Christ, he noted that

> The concept of 'importance' is of fundamental significance in our human thinking . . . . Every interpretation of the meaning of human experience, every metaphysic, every understanding of the world in its totality, must of necessity start from some particular stance – or, better put, must find in some particular 'important' point a disclosure of the significance of the whole.[37]

If Taylor read even as far as this into Pittenger's book (up to page 21) on his train journey through the Berkshire countryside, he will have come across this reference to Whitehead's concept of 'importance'. On the other hand, it is also a very likely possibility that Taylor would already have read Pittenger's *The Word Incarnate,* which was published in 1959. Here, also Pittenger explicitly refers to Whitehead's discourse on the difference between the 'important' and the 'matter of fact' in *Modes of Thought*. The human phenomenon of assigning a specific 'importance' to what might otherwise have been passed over as a very ordinary humdrum experience is not only identified and discussed but explicitly acknowledged to be an insight for which Pittenger was dependent on Whitehead: 'A.N. Whithead's concept of "importance" seems to me to be of extraordinary value. Certain aspects of our experience strike us as having *unusual* significance. Through the force of their impact upon us, and through their fruitfulness for us in all our later life, they open up new depths of understanding, illuminate what we have already experienced, and prepare the way for what we may experience in the future'.[38]

On the other hand, it is at least thinkable that if Taylor's acquaintance with Whitehead's contrast between the 'important' and the 'matter-of-fact' was perhaps mediated to him by Pittenger in the course of his reading *God in Process*, we must also at least acknowledge the possibility that this in fact resonated, even if subconsciously, with a more direct acquaintance with Whitehead's actual thought in relation to the theme of 'importance' much earlier in Taylor's life. As it happens, 1938, the year of publication of Whitehead's *Modes of Thought,* was the year in which John Taylor was ordained Deacon at the age of twenty-four. This followed the years of his theological formation at Ridley College in Cambridge, which occurred at the same time that Taylor's own father was the principal of the college. Whether Taylor had actually read Whitehead's book at that time is not known. It has to be said, however, that there is a high likelihood that anybody remotely interested in

[36]*Modes of Thought*, p. 237.
[37]*God in Process*, p. 21.
[38]W. Norman Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate*, pp. 22–23.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theological issues at that particular time in British history would have had to go out of their way to avoid some kind of knowledge of it.

It was well known at the time that Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, having formerly collaborated in the writing of *Principia Mathematica*[39] earlier in their careers, had since parted company in relation to intellectual matters, not least matters relating to religion. Whitehead, who was a regular worshipper, had not only parted company with the aggressive atheism of Bertrand Russell. At the very same time, the British theological world was having to cope with the self-confident rise of logical positivism, very notably promoted by A. J. Ayer, with his contention that the meaning of a concept is necessarily linked to the method of its verification. Indeed, by 1938 A.J. Ayer had become a *bête noir* for religious believers in Britain through his promotion of logical positivism, particularly in his book *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936), in which he aggressively argued that the only valid basis for philosophy was the verification principle: unless logical or empirical verification is possible, statements like 'God exists' or 'charity is good' are not true or untrue but simply meaningless and may thus be excluded or ignored.

The fact that religious language in particular was declared to be unverifiable and, as such, literally nonsense meant that in 1938 the British theological world was hugely challenged. It could not avoid the necessity of having to contend with the very public and troublesome assertion that religious statements that could not be empirically verified by appeal to clear and distinct evidence could quite simply, therefore, simply be dismissed. Indeed, it was not until Wittgenstein in the 1950s that the logical positivist's slogan that the meaning of a concept depends on the method of its verification was finally itself dismissed, when it was in fact replaced by Wittgenstein's alternative dictum that 'meaning is use' – the contention being that meanings are conventionally agreed upon by linguistic communities. This dethroned the logical positivism of the previous generation.

Certainly, in the late 1930s and 1940s, however, the aggressively assertive logical positivism somewhat noisily prevailed. In this context, the alternative mind-set of A. N. Whitehead offered a kind of lifeline to religious believers. It was well known at the time that Whitehead was out of step with this emerging preoccupation of British empirical philosophy. In *Modes of Thought* Whitehead in fact lamented that the obsessive concentration on clear and distinct ideas amongst philosophers of his day (read notably A. J. Ayer) at the expense of what Whitehead himself spoke of as 'intimate vague experiences' was a kind of folly. He boldly declared that the 'matter-of-fact' is an abstraction that reduces the rich texture of human experience 'to purely formal relations which then masquerade as the final reality'.[40]

Whitehead was of the view that the emerging obsession of logical positivism amongst his contemporaries with their empirical concentration on clear and distinct sense impressions, not just as the basis of philosophical understanding but for defining the principle of verification as the arbiter of all meaningful discourse, needed to be put in its place. He pointed out that the agenda of logical positivism 'is

[39]A. N. Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia Mathematica*, 3 Vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910/1912/1913).

[40]*Modes of Thought*, p. 25.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867 Published online by Cambridge University Press

analogous to an endeavour to elucidate the sociology of modern civilization as wholly derivative from the traffic signals on the main roads. The motions of the cars are conditioned by these signals. But the signals are not the reasons for the traffic'.[41] In other words, traffic lights may give clear and distinct signals that regulate the flow of the traffic, but they have nothing to say about the origin or the destination of the traffic. All this was to neglect the underlying necessities of nature, a repudiation of 'our intimate vague experiences in favour of a mere play of distinct sensations'.[42]

In this context, when *Modes of Thought* appeared in 1938, Whitehead's pleas were widely read and indeed celebrated in the theological world, not least the world of British Anglicanism. Given the noisy philosophical hostility to religious thought at that time, it is highly unlikely that Taylor, his theology-teaching father, and his theological contemporaries at the beginning of their ordained ministry would not have known of it.

This means that it may well have been the case that when Taylor came across references in Pittenger's writing to Whitehead's views about the 'importance' of what commands attention in and through the matter-of-fact, it was not that he was stumbling upon something entirely new so much as becoming re-acquainted with something that lingered from the days of his theological formation and ordination – as something of which he had a residual remnant 'memory'. This is certainly a thinkable possibility.

In any event, there is clearly a 'family likeness' between Whitehead's account of the shape of this fundamental religious experience in which the importance of the Infinite is discerned in and through the finite processes of nature and that described by John Taylor in his account of his train journey from Oxford through the Berkshire countryside, especially as this is more systematically expounded in *The Go-Between God*. We can only conjecture about the precise way in which John Taylor may have come to be influenced by the process theology of the middle decades of the twentieth century, for the exact ways in which ideas of Whitehead and Harsthorne were mediated to him remain obscure. It cannot be denied, however, that the key elements of the enthusiastic promotion of 'process theology' by both Charles Birch and Norman Pittenger seem to have come together and surfaced in Taylor's own writing. What is perfectly clear in all of this is that *The Go-Between God* may justifiably be understood and categorized as an important expression of the phenomenon of twentieth century 'process theology'.

[41]*Modes of Thought*, pp. 43–44. See David Wood, *Poet, Priest and Prophet*, p. 118.
[42]*Modes of Thought*, p. 43.

Cite this article: Carnley, P. (2026). John V. Taylor and Process Theology. *Journal of Anglican Studies* **24**, 333–347. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355325100867

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