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## **Religion in the Making? Animality, Savagery, and Civilization in the Work of A. N. Whitehead**

### ABSTRACT

Constructions of the animal and animality are often pivotal to religious discourses. Such constructions create the possibility of identifying and valuing what is “human” as opposed to the “animal” and also of distinguishing human beliefs and behaviors that can be characterized (and often disparaged) as being animal from those that are “truly human.” Some discourses also employ the concept of savagery as a bridge between the human and the animal, where the form of humanity but not its ideal beliefs and practices can be displayed. This paper explores the work of the influential scientist, philosopher, and theologian A. N. Whitehead in this context. His ideas of what constitutes “the animal,” the “primitive” and the “civilized” are laid out explicitly in his now little-used history of religions text, *Religion in the Making*. This paper explores these ideas in this history and then considers how the same ideas permeate his currently more popular philosophical and theological writing *Process and Reality*. Drawing on some work in post-colonial theory, the paper offers a critique of this understanding of animality, savagery, and civilization and suggests that using Whitehead to underpin modern theological work requires considerable caution.

A. N. Whitehead is often regarded as one of the most significant philosophers and metaphysicians of the early twentieth century. His work led to the development of a school of philosophical and theological

thought often called “process” philosophy or theology because of its emphasis on the primacy of process and change. Most recently, some of those working broadly within process philosophy and theology or influenced by such process approaches have applied some aspects of Whitehead’s work to environmental and animal issues (Birch & Cobb, 1981; Griffin 1996; Page, 1996; McFague, 1997). The openness of Whitehead’s metaphysical system to the development of concepts of interconnectedness, ecological change, and intrinsic value in the nonhuman world has proved particularly attractive. These ideas may well be helpful in thinking through questions about human relations with nonhumans. However, in this paper, I want to set these ideas in the problematic context of other, broader aspects of Whitehead’s project, first as outlined in his *Religion in the Making* and then as exemplified in his metaphysics.

### **Religion in the Making**

*Religion in the Making*, based on Whitehead’s 1926 Lowell Lectures, was published only three years before his metaphysical magnum opus, *Process and Reality*. The introduction to *Religion in the Making* links this work closely with his earlier and perhaps most widely read text, *Science in the Modern World*. In terms of both time and content, all three texts are closely related, and the products of Whitehead’s mature thinking (he was in his 60s and 70s when his significant metaphysical works were published). Whitehead certainly intended *Religion in the Making* to deal with some weighty topics:

... to give a concise analysis of the various factors in human nature which go to form a religion, to exhibit the inevitable transformation of religion with the transformation of knowledge, and more especially to direct attention to the foundation of religion on our apprehension of those permanent elements by reason of which there is stable order in the world, permanent elements apart from which there could be no changing world. (1926: Preface)

Thus, we would expect to find in this text something about how Whitehead understands both religion and human nature. I will argue that *Religion in the Making* lays out an understanding of animality, savagery, and civilization that underpins not only Whitehead’s construction of religion but also his entire metaphysical system.<sup>2</sup>

## *Whitehead's Construction of Religion*

As one would expect from a philosophical theology known for its emphasis on process, Whitehead makes it clear that religion is constantly undergoing change. Indeed, as was characteristic of work in comparative religion since its inception in the nineteenth century, Whitehead adopts an evolutionary framework to describe the development of religion.<sup>3</sup> This evolutionary framework is, broadly speaking, progressive (although the possibility of recidivism, as I shall suggest later, is ever-present). "The emergence of religious consciousness" has, according to this view, followed an upward trajectory.

In tracing this "ascent of man," Whitehead maintains that religion has passed through four "stages" that "emerged gradually into human life." These four stages are: ritual, emotion, belief, and rationalization. This ordering not only corresponds to their order of emergence but also, Whitehead says, to their "religious importance" (1926, p. 19). Ritual, the first stage of religion, is of least importance; rationalization, the most recent stage of religion, is of greatest religious significance. It is along this ordered, developmental spectrum of religion that Whitehead constructs animality, savagery, and civilization.

Whitehead (1926) begins at ritual, the lowest, or to use his term, most "primitive" end of the spectrum. Ritual is a kind of organized behavior, the "habitual performance of definite actions that have no direct relevance to the preservation of the physical organisms of the actors" (p. 20). Any organized behavior that is not directly about survival falls into this category; it is "produced by superfluous energy" and is the repeat of actions "for their own sakes" reproducing the "joy of exercise and the emotion of success."<sup>4</sup> (p. 21). This ritual behavior, Whitehead argues, goes "back beyond the dawn of history," and "it can be discerned in the animals."<sup>5</sup> Non-human animals - he provides the example of rooks and starlings wheeling in the sky - can thus participate in the most primitive phase of religion.<sup>6</sup> Not everything they do is about survival; they are capable of rising beyond this, and they are capable of feeling primitive emotions generated by ritualistic behaviors.

Animality thus marks out the most primitive end of the religious spectrum. This "primitivity" operates at different levels. First, animality is of the *past* - that is to say, it is what preceded humanity temporarily in terms of evolutionary emergence, that out of which humans have ascended. In this sense, much of Whitehead's discussion is talking about the development of religion

out of animality as a temporal journey across the millennia. Second, he is also aware that animals (the circling rooks and starlings, for instance) *co-exist* with present humans. In this sense, they also are contemporary representations of primitivity. Third, Whitehead (1926) suggests that *within humans* there is animality; animality not only is a past era and a contemporary external presence but also something on which humanity is built and to which humans can regress. In as much as a human practices rituals without the development of ritualistic emotions and beliefs, he or she is expressing animality rather than humanity.

Savagery marks the next, higher stage of the spectrum, the place where, human beings began to develop ritual to stimulate religious emotion, to the point where rituals are performed because of the emotions they generate. These emotional rituals, Whitehead argues, are collective activities which act as "one of the binding forces on savage tribes" (p. 23). They allow humans to rise beyond "the task of supplying animal necessities" and eventually to raise intellectual questions. However, primitive races, Whitehead tells us, are not capable of thinking abstractly (p. 23); their rationality is no more than "incipient." Thus, they create myths, which are "vivid fancies" which help to explain rituals and ritualistic emotions. Such myths will generally explain what can "be got out of" ritual and emotion (p. 26) because "there can be very little disinterested worship amongst primitive folk."

The presence of mythology, then, distinguishes the savage from the animal. Animals, Whitehead comments, are "destitute of a mythology." In attempting some kind of religious *explanation* - that is, the slow movement from emotion towards reason - savage or primitive humans elevate themselves above animals. However, as with animality, this human primitivity operates at three levels. Savagery is a past state out of which civilized human beings have evolved. But equally, savagery is the present condition of tribal religion. And savagery is also present within even civilized individuals: We have a "primitive side" - that part of us which has not fathomed the universe and which lacks "coherent rationalism." Thus, even for "civilized" human beings there is always a threat of a "lapse into barbarism" and the possibility of "degradation."

Further along, Whitehead's spectrum of religious development is what Whitehead calls "semi," the beginning of truly religious thoughts and beliefs.

In the "early stages," such concepts may be "crude and horrible," but they do at least have "the supreme virtue of being concepts of objects beyond immediate sense and perception" (p. 27). These concepts become more sophisticated as religion develops, but remain largely "uncriticised," and "the masses of semi-civilised humanity" have halted at this stage of religious evolution, "without impulse towards higher things" (p. 28). However, some humans have moved onto those higher things: religion as rationalization. Rational religion, Whitehead maintains, has over the past 6000 years extended itself over "all the civilized races of Asia and Europe." (Six thousand years, he tells us, is "reasonable with regard to all the evidence" and also "corresponds to the chronology of the Bible"). The two "most perfect" examples of such rational religion are the organized and coherent religions of Christianity and Buddhism. Such rational religion is characterized both by its solitariness and by its universality.<sup>7</sup> The solitary individual becomes the supreme "religious unit," rather than the community or the tribe; the religious thoughts of this solitary individual move in universal generalizations rather than relating solely to tribal interests. The civilized religions of Christianity and Buddhism have a disengaged, rational and ethical "world consciousness"; they have "clarity of idea, generality of thought, moral respectability, survival power, and width of extension over all the world" (p. 44).

### *Religion in the Making: A White Mythology?*

This account of the historical development of religion in many respects resembles what Robert Young (1990) describes as a "white mythology." Young's description of white mythologies is detailed and complex; but four central characterizing principles can be identified in his work. First, he argues that white mythology tells history as ultimately a story of progress and self-realization. Second, it sees European history as world history.<sup>8</sup> Third, it presents European white man as the representative of humanity, whose experiences and qualities can be generalized to those of all humans - but also, in direct relation to and in tension with this, Europe's "others" (that is, non-Europeans) are constructed as primitive, uncivilized, irrational and so on. Fourthly, white mythology operates to subject and assimilate Europe's "others" into what Young calls an "economy of inclusion" (1990, p. 4).

In both obvious and less obvious ways, Whitehead's narrative of the development of religion presents a variation of this idea of white mythology.

Whitehead does, obviously, see religious history as a story of progress and self-realization. The arrow of “civilization” points ever onwards and upwards. As the term “progress” suggests, this process is value-laden: civilization is better than savagery; rationality is better than ritual and emotion. Furthermore, the civilized are at a higher stage of moral development than the uncivilized; rather than understanding religion as a “way of getting something,” the civilized see religion as charging the universe, and other people, with value (p. 59). Certainly, Whitehead expresses fear of a “relapse into barbarism,” the possibility of reversal of progress.<sup>9</sup> But this does not undermine the underlying progressive nature of his historical narrative.

Second, Whitehead’s account interprets Euro-American history as world history. His teleology follows, as it were, the arrowhead of history: Once the arrowhead has moved on, that which remains is no longer part of the developmental process. “Primitive” peoples are now invisible to history, outside the evolutionary sequence. Whitehead’s interpretation suggests that the religions of tribal peoples should be regarded as a “survival” - a living fossil that has failed to evolve. Tribal religion had a role in the past, as a stepping stone to civilization. As Whitehead tellingly comments: “Their work was done” (p. 39). History thus shrinks to the arrowhead of progress - with the rational religions. And although the rational religions include the Buddhism of the “civilized” peoples of Asia, Buddhism is acceptable only inasmuch as it passes Whitehead’s Eurocentric criterion of conformity with a particular interpretation of rationality.

This leads directly to Young’s third principle: the identification of European white man as the representative of humanity bearing its essential qualities and the related construction of Europe’s “others” as, in various ways, lacking these “civilized” qualities. Bhabha (Moore-Gilbert, 1997) captures this tension well:

One element of colonial discourse, then, envisages the colonised subject’s potential for reformation and gradual approximation to the coloniser through the redeeming experience of benevolent colonial guidance; while another contradicts this with a conception of the ontological difference (and inferiority) of the colonised subject. (p. 120)

This colonial discourse and the tensions within it are manifest throughout *Religion in the Making*. Whitehead identifies European religion as bearing the essential qualities of true religion and reaching religion's "final satisfaction," while those individuals who practice it are the most civilized individuals, exemplifying what humans at their best can become. These civilized individuals show the primary religious virtue of sincerity: Their religious experience is "solitary" and "inward" because "the great religious conceptions that haunt the imagination of civilized mankind are scenes of solitariness" (p. 19). Presumably since these are the primary religious values, if "the others" are to reach "religious satisfaction," they must follow the example of the civilized man and, by becoming incorporated into rational religion can also become visible to history.<sup>10</sup>

But Whitehead's construction of this civilized "man of religion" is also inextricably bound to his related construction of its "other" - the barbarous, primitive, tribal man. It is only over against this primitive man that the boundaries of civilization can be drawn, and Whitehead makes the division and non-continuity between the divided classes very clear. Whitehead also highlights their tribal nature - constructed as a kind of clannish self-interestedness - which he sharply distinguishes from the solitary and personally disinterested nature of civilized and rational religion. Thus Whitehead's history of religions demonstrates both the idea of civilized man as a kind of role model for the uncivilized and, simultaneously, the need to define the civilized over and against the primitive, and hence to need the primitive to remain uncivilized.<sup>11</sup> As Charles Long (1986, 91) argues, "'the primitives' operate as a negative structure of concreteness that allows civilization to define itself as a structure superior to this ill-defined and inferior 'other'" (p. 91).

### *A Mythology of Animality?*

But Whitehead's text does not only suggest a myth of primitivity. It also suggests a parallel myth of animality. Whitehead is not very explicit about this myth of animality, but it haunts the text of *Religion in the Making*. As has already been suggested, animals have three locations in this text (a) as the pre-history of humanity, (b) as a present, external reality, and (c) as an inner part of the human self. It is significant that animals constitute pre-history, not history; animality for Whitehead has never been part of history; animal

rituals are “beyond the dawn of history” (p. 20). History commences with the emergence of humanity; animals never were part of history’s progressive arrow.

This three-fold presence of the animal is, however, telescoped by Whitehead into what we might call an “essence of animality” shared by the animals of prehistory, presently existing animals and the animality of human beings. This essence of animality is characterized by behaviors aimed at survival, ritual practices, and very primitive emotions (mostly produced by the pleasures and pains of the physical body) without any kind of rational or conceptual framework. Indeed the lack of any kind of rationality or sophisticated emotion is fundamental to Whitehead’s construction of the animal essence. This animal essence offers itself as a comparison against which the religious sophistication of humans can be measured. Directed emotions, mythology, religious beliefs, and ultimately rationality all provide “value added” to the animal.

As with savagery, animality creates tension in Whitehead’s text. Animality is both “other” - out there, beyond the human, before the dawn of time and distinct from the human and, simultaneously, incorporated into the human, forming the threatening “animal self” that could rise up and engulf the civilized. Thus, animality is both outside civilization and a constant internal threat to it. One of the dangers of savagery is its greater proximity to animality, the rituals of “primitive” peoples being associated with the behavior of animals - an association common in colonial discourses (Fanon, 1963; Chideste, 1996). But the animal self threatens all humans, however civilized, and Whitehead represents human degradation as becoming animal. “A hog is not an evil beast, but when a man is degraded to the level of a hog, with the accompanying atrophy of finer elements, he is no more evil than a hog” (p. 97). Humans incorporate and transcend the animal: Thus, a completely degraded human being may appropriately be described as being on a level with an animal. Animality, like savagery, operates as a “negative structure of concreteness” out of which civilization stands and against reversion to which it must struggle.

### *Religion in the Making as a Discourse of Power*

Of course, Whitehead’s discourse about the history of religion was not produced in a vacuum. Born in 1861, he grew up in Britain during a time of

British colonial expansion and consolidation. There, non-Europeans were frequently treated both as invisible (in that their lands were often viewed as empty lands) and, equally, as forces of irrational and primitive resistance that needed to be controlled and suppressed.

Although concern for animal welfare grew in some sectors of British society in this period, animals (other than domestic pets) were treated as invisible (in terms of the development and urbanization of their habitats) or, often violently, used as instruments to human ends.<sup>12</sup> Whitehead's narrative cannot be divorced from these violent colonial power structures. His history is, as Spivak (1996, p. 163) argues of colonial discourse in general, part of a process of "epistemic violence." To use Foucault's (1980) terms, Whitehead's texts form part of a complex of power/knowledge where knowledge (of non-human animals as irrational and non-European peoples as primitive, emotional, and fanciful) is generated by power relations and legitimates power relations that "... cannot themselves be established, consolidated, or implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse" (p. 93). Of course, Whitehead was never out in the colonies shooting the natives, and he frequently advocated the use of "persuasion" over "force" (although the effects of "persuasion" in attempts at assimilation may themselves be devastating - as witnessed by the "stolen generation" in Australia).<sup>13</sup> However, it is hard to avoid reflecting on the irony - so sharply drawn out by Fanon (1961) - that it was in the name of the supposedly rational, universal and disinterested values espoused by intellectuals like Whitehead that the "native" was "arrested, beaten and starved" and obviously "inferior" animals were treated with often-fatal violence (p. 45).

## **Whitehead's Metaphysics**

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Whitehead's mythology in *Religion in the Making* is implicitly ethnocentric, imperialistic, and anthropocentric. But why should this be regarded as problematic now? Whitehead's work in history of religions, it might be argued, can be discarded as a product of what we now think of as an imperialist and anthropocentric culture, not to be sharply differentiated from the similar views of others working in comparative religion at that time. The problem arises, I would argue, because, unlike many of his contemporaries in history of religion, there is currently a revival

of positive interest in Whitehead's metaphysics as a way of exploring a range of current philosophical and theological questions, including philosophical and theological understandings of non-human animals. If, as I will argue, this imperialist and anthropocentric mythology is manifest in Whitehead's metaphysics too, this would suggest, at the very least, that his work should be treated with caution as a source of ideas for exploring these issues.

It may seem strange to contend that Whitehead's metaphysics is ethnocentric and anthropocentric, given that his work is so frequently judged to be the reverse. In particular, it is well known that Whitehead attacks a Cartesian separation of mind and body, maintaining that *both* mentality and spatial extension may be found throughout the universe. Thus, it is often argued, his metaphysics closes the gaps between humans and non-humans that exist in other philosophical approaches, suggesting that non-human animals are not different from humans *in substance*.<sup>14</sup>

The account of animality in *Religion in the Making* does not contradict this perception. The presence of animality within humanity indicates that the difference is not one of *substance*. Non-human animals, savages, and the civilized are all what Whitehead describes as "societies of actual occasions" - composed from fleeting moments of experience bound together in different ways. Rather, the differences that separate animality, savagery, and civilization concern their expression of particular capacities and the evaluation of these capacities.

One way of explaining this more clearly is to look at the beginning of *Process and Reality*. The second sentence of this book reads: "Speculative philosophy is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted" (Whitehead, 1978, p. 1). This sentence, unpacked a little, reveals a good deal about Whitehead's project. He emphasizes, for example, the significance of coherence and "general ideas." As *Religion in the Making* makes clear, the capacity for coherence and generalization is the prerogative of civilization - specifically, as Whitehead (1938) maintains in *Science and the Modern World* (p. 24) of "the European mind" (unlike the Asian mind in which, he says, such general ideas have had little effect). Therefore, this program of speculative philosophy is to be pursued by rational Europeans rather than Asians

(or, of course, fanciful savages). Further, this process of generalization, Whitehead says, is derived from “our experience.” But who is the “us” whose experience is being interpreted here? Does he mean all experiencing beings (including non-human animals)? All human beings (excluding non-human animals)? Or does he mean Euro-Americans (whom he explicitly defines as “us” in *Religion in the Making*)?

Whichever of these possibilities he has in mind is problematic. If he means all experience, including non-human experience, what essential, universal qualities can he identify? Has “experience” as a concept an essential element divorced from particular instantiations? If so, how has Whitehead discovered such “consistent and persistent elements of experience” (p. 5)? If, however, he has in mind particular groups, such as all humans, or all Euro-Americans, even if one could identify essential aspects of their experiences, how could such limited frames of experience produce universally generalizable principles? The experiences of those outside these groups would surely affect any such generalizations about experience.

All that can be derived from Whitehead’s own account is that he operates by generalization from his *own* experience (p. 5). But such a generalization is already dependent on the (unargued) premise that there is something generalizable about experience and that, further, he is in a position to distinguish this generalizable element from what is particular to him. If this premise is not conceded, then Whitehead’s generalized description of experience throughout the Universe means little more than that he is modeling the entire universe on himself.

As Abu-Lughod (1991) argues, “Generalisation can no longer be regarded as neutral description.” For writers such as the ascerbic Fanon, this attempt to generalize from self to universe is just another reflection of the “narcissistic dialogue” of “the colonist bourgeoisie” who maintain that “essential qualities remain eternal in spite of all the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West that is” (Fanon, 1963, p. 46).

Whitehead’s metaphysics, like his history of religions, seems to take his own experience as the ultimate model for all, human and non-human. This experience is universal experience, just as western history is world history.

Further, if we look more closely at what Whitehead (1978) understands by experience we find that although all experiences have certain common forms, some experiences are “more important” than others (p. 18). All experiences have what Whitehead calls a “physical” and a “mental” pole. Where the physical pole predominates, the experience is likely to be “trivial or low-grade” (1978, p. 102). Where there is a strong mental pole, and conceptuality or rationality is involved, the experience is likely to be “high-grade.” Where a higher-grade experience is possible but a lower-grade experience is chosen, there is degradation. All experiences, according to Whitehead, are felt by God; but higher-grade experiences, which achieve greater “harmonious intensity” are of more value to God because they provide God with greater satisfaction. It is the manifestation of a rational capacity that makes experiences most valuable.

This higher value placed upon rational, conceptual experiences and lower value on non-rational experiences meshes with Whitehead’s account of animality and savagery in *Religion in the Making*. The conceptual experiences of those associated with the great “rational” religions are, on this account, of more value than the experiences of those primitive peoples who move in a world of ritual and emotion. Both are of more value than animal experiences, which are non-rational. In Whitehead’s metaphysics, as well as his history of religions, we find the condemnation of degradation, of choosing the lower experience over the higher experience - that is, the physical experience over the more conceptual experience.

Higher experiences are defined against “the other” - lower experiences - as rational religion is defined over against the other - savage or animal religion. So in Whitehead’s metaphysics, as in his history of religions, we find a European white man as the representative of humanity, identifying the essential qualities of experience and manifesting them in their most valuable form. We also find the related construction of the “others” - both human and animal - in various ways lacking these “civilized” qualities and generating less value. And, fundamentally, the divine underpins this whole metaphysics of experience and value. It is God who feels the experiences in the world and God who ultimately derives value from them. Thus, Whitehead can claim divine legitimating for his perspective: It is God who judges the respective value of animality, savagery, and civilization.

## Recent Uses of Whitehead's Metaphysics

As I suggested at the beginning of this paper, Whitehead's thought has recently enjoyed something of a revival, particularly in philosophical and theological writing about animals and the environment. This sometimes takes the form of direct discussion and advocacy of his work (Armstrong-Buck, 1986; Griffin, 1994). In other cases, there is an indirect infusion of Whiteheadian process thinking into new theological constructions (Macaque, 1997; Page, 1996). It is the former, more explicit uses of Whitehead in which I am interested here, since they raise particular questions about modern representations of his ideas.

The first, and perhaps most fundamental question, concerns whether Whitehead's ideas of animality, savagery, and civilization, as outlined in *Religion in the Making* and as developed in his metaphysics, are morally problematic. Of course, answers depend on which moral perspectives one adopts. In broad terms, however, there would, I think, be widespread agreement that while Whitehead's views on savagery expressed the perceptions of many white Europeans of his era, these views are no longer morally acceptable. That this is the case seems to be reflected in recent Whiteheadian work where there is no advocacy of his views on savagery or - it should be noted - no condemnation of it either. Most recent texts - even while extensively quoting metaphysical passages from *Religion in the Making* - politely ignore this aspect of Whitehead's work (Griffin, 1994; Palmer, 1998).

In equally broad terms, we might expect that Whitehead's views on animality as non-rational, primitively emotional, less valuable experience would less generally be thought of as morally problematic. This also seems to be reflected in recent Whiteheadian writing about animals and the environment, where Whitehead's ideas about animality are advocated (Cobb & Birch, 1982; Griffin, 1994). These accounts present interesting versions of Whitehead's thought. They broadly accept Whitehead's value spectrum of increasing value significance through animality up into humanity and are comfortable with terms such as "lower-grade" and "higher-grade" experience. But these Whiteheadian value-spectra omit the category of savagery; humans are not graded (explicitly, at least) on this hierarchy of importance.

These more recent Whiteheadian accounts also employ his category of *experience* as the locus of value. However, the apparent emphasis is slightly shifted

from Whitehead's account: The value of experience relates primarily to suffering/pleasures and self-realization (Griffin, 1994) whereas Whitehead suggests *rationality* is the locus of the most valuable experiences. This distinction, however, should not be over-emphasized. Birch and Cobb (1981) maintain that the capacity for complex conceptual/rational thoughts enhances ability to feel pain and pleasure and hence adds value to those experiences. As I have argued elsewhere (Palmer, 1998), such an account suggests that some kinds of humans (such as the new-born or those with mental disabilities) generate less value than other humans. Perhaps these are the equivalent of "new savages" who fall between animality and the fully human in these revised versions of Whiteheadian hierarchy.

Of course, a variety of responses to such modern accounts of Whitehead's thought are possible. Some turn on the complex question of how one relates to texts advocating or accepting political views that one finds morally repugnant but which in other senses (metaphysically, for instance) provide perspectives that seem interesting or even compelling. Similar questions have, of course, been raised about other twentieth century philosophers, Heidegger in particular. Is there something problematic about re-presenting ideas from such a context in a sanitized or revised way? Are the ideas inextricably related to their historical context? Could one find similar metaphysical systems emerging from very different political contexts? Perhaps attempting to find any general answer to such questions is itself problematic; one can only consider individual texts, their historical circumstances, and the ways in which such texts are re-presented.

This returns us, then, to considering the modernized versions of Whitehead's ideas about animality (although these are by no means unitary). I want, in conclusion, to suggest that they do raise difficulties, and that these difficulties are inherited from the ways in which Whitehead constructs animality and moves on to value animals. Primarily, I think, these difficulties stem from the view, proposed by Whitehead and adopted by those now writing about Whitehead and animals, that humans incorporate and transcend the animal. Of course, this does have the effect of emphasizing the origin of humans within evolution, and is suggestive (for instance) of shared genetic material. But it is an evolutionary story that has built into it something like Young's "arrow" of progress, where in Griffin's words (1994, p. 204), God is "coaxing

along" a universe of "increasingly complex species of life" which are capable of "contributing more value . . . to God." Whitehead's view is restated: the animal is more primitive in emergence, in present existence, and within human selves, and capable of producing less value in itself than complex and conceptual human beings (and, in addition, that less complex and conceptual human beings also generate less value than fully human beings).

But why view the relation between humans and non-humans in this way? Why see animals as essentially primitive, truncated humans, lacking (to different degrees) the value-adding qualities of humans? As argued by writers such as Midgley and Plumwood, animals instead might be regarded as just *different* to humans - and different from one another - with their own qualities and capacities, many of which humans do not possess or which some humans possess to a greater degree than others. Just as we might now draw up short at Whitehead's dismissal of the myths of indigenous peoples as "vivid fancies" aimed at "getting something"; so perhaps it is appropriate to hesitate over recent Whiteheadian descriptions of the experiences of most animals as "low-grade" in comparison with human "high-grade" experience. In this sense, it seems to me, even modern versions of Whitehead's metaphysics remain closely linked to his assumptions of colonial superiority.

## **Conclusion**

I recognize that these thoughts about Whiteheadian constructions of animality and the value of animals are controversial. I have not been intending in this paper to argue that there is nothing of value in Whitehead's process thought or that ideas derived from his thinking have been without value for the development of ecological and feminist approaches to theology and philosophy. Indeed, some parts of his metaphysics - his emphasis on process and change, on internal relations, on panexperientialism - have been positively suggestive to the work of a number of modern thinkers. Rather, I suggest that, as with other great philosophers and theologians linked with violent political systems, today we view Whitehead's work with caution and critical awareness and recognize the political difficulties with his texts. Finally, I have been arguing specifically that Whitehead's construction of animality, savagery, and civilization, even when modified in modern contexts, is a problematic way of considering human/non-human relationships.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Correspondence should be sent to Clare Palmer, Department of Religious Studies, University of Stirling, Stirling, Scotland FK9 4LA. I would like to thank Andrew Brennan, Sue Hamilton, Michael Levine, and Francis O’Gorman for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, and Erica Fudge and Paul Waldau for their comments on this version.
- <sup>2</sup> I am not intending to argue either that Whitehead’s history of religions or his metaphysics logically preceded or influenced the other; but that both formed part of Whitehead’s worldview during the mid-late 1920s.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Carpenter (1926), who argues that the study of religion is founded on evolution and ‘the general movement of human things from the cruder and less complex to the more refined and developed’; and discussion of this trend in comparative religion in, for instance, Fabian (1990:351).
- <sup>4</sup> This, it must immediately be admitted, is a very strange definition; not least because ordinarily one would not argue that a practice could not be a ritual because it concerned survival.
- <sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Whitehead thus dates history from the evolutionary emergence of humans - the period before this is *prehistoric* time.
- <sup>6</sup> This is not a new idea; it appears in Greek, Roman and ancient Indian writing, and has resurfaced in the work of Jane Goodall, who speculates in various places about proto-religious activities of chimpanzees. My thanks to Paul Waldau for making this point.
- <sup>7</sup> Here, Whitehead is presumably influenced by William James.
- <sup>8</sup> As Young argues, Hegel, for instance, declared that ‘Africa has no history’; while Marx (p. 2) thought that the British colonization of India was good because it brought India into the evolutionary narrative of Western history.
- <sup>9</sup> Both Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* and Forster in *Passage to India* convey the ambivalence of terror and desire associated with the return of the civilised to the primitive - or ‘going native.’
- <sup>10</sup> Indeed, as Whitehead comments, the great “rational religion” of Christianity is itself the result of an incorporation: “We - in Europe and America are the heirs of the religious movements depicted in that collection of books (the Bible)” (p. 31).
- <sup>11</sup> It was reflection on this ambivalence in colonial discourse which led to Bhabha’s (1994:88) thought about the anglicized Indian who is “almost the same - but not quite” and “almost the same - but not white” - where the colonizer to defines himself against the remaining difference.
- <sup>12</sup> Possible footnote to Chien-Hui Li.

- <sup>13</sup> See the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report (HREOC) report (1997) *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*.
- <sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Birch and Cobb, 1981; Griffin, 1994.

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