

- A Response to My Critics, from the Symposium on Clayton's Panentheism, *Dialog* 38 (Summer 1999).

The Panentheistic Turn in Christian Theology: Dialog #2

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I have defined panentheism as the view that the world is within God, though God is at the same time more than the world. Some of my critics find the panentheist model helpful; others worry that it will lead theology astray.

One misunderstanding should be cleared up before all else: space functions metaphorically when referring to God; hence panentheism is not just a theology about the relative *location* of God and world. Instead, it seeks to stress that the infinite God is ontologically *as close to finite things as can possibly be thought without dissolving the distinction of Creator and created altogether*. Christian panentheism does not change the biblical statements about God; it changes the philosophical framework that has too long dominated Christian attempts to conceive the relationship of God and world.

Let me attempt to respond to my critics by carrying the positive project a few steps further, leaving it to the reader to discern which new arguments respond to which criticisms. (Any omissions on my part will certainly be pointed out to me quickly by my critics.)

I am encouraged, first, by the extent of the agreement. Thus a number of us view systematic theology in a similar manner: we agree that a hermeneutical lens—here, a systematic theological or metaphysical framework—is always employed when one does Christian theology, and we agree on many of the desiderata for evaluating such a framework. It is consistent with Vanhoozer's methodology, for example, that panentheism could turn out to be not a competitor to Christian theology but a better conceptual restatement of its content than many of the alternatives.

On certain other issues the disagreement is very serious. The two most fundamental concern the adequacy of substance metaphysics and the impassability of God. Before any real debate over panentheism is possible one must decide whether (as Vanhoozer puts it) "the newer relational ontology is superior to the older substantial ontology." On my view it is crucial that God can "suffer change by something other than himself," and hence that God has the property of being susceptible to causation. Like many relational theologians today, I break fundamentally with the Aristotelian notion of God as unmoved mover cited by Vanhoozer, which I find to be a sub-biblical notion. Until we agree on these prior and more fundamental questions, there is little point in

debating over the finer points of panentheism.

Finally, there are points where my critics and I could reach agreement. For one, I agree that the lines of influence *should* move in two directions. Science tells theology what is known about the natural world, correcting against overly literal readings of the Bible. For its part, theology corrects science *not on science's rightful terrain* but when scientific results are turned inappropriately into metaphysics (as in physicalism or determinism) or when people appeal to science to prove that all knowledge must be scientific knowledge (as in positivism). Still, not all scientific work presupposes a metaphysic that is hostile or damaging to theology. I also agree that God's involvement with the world must be understood as action and not as involuntary response. The point of using the metaphor of autonomic functioning is to emphasize the regularity and naturalness of the involvement. Panentheism attributes *all* the regularity in the functioning of the natural world to conscious divine intention, providing a thoroughly theological reading of physical regularities, yet one that's fully consistent with natural law. And yet it acknowledges that focal divine agency, while equally conscious and equally intentional, represents a far more difficult pill to swallow today—partly because science has come to realize the overwhelming lawlikeness of the physical universe, and partly because, if God *can* change the course of events, one must ask why God *does not* do so to reduce suffering. Panentheism should interest the reader because it accepts the limits on divine intervention in the world that are suggested by natural law and the problem of evil while still preserving a place for divine action. Its model of mind and body is particularly helpful for suggesting both ubiquitous influence and deliberately chosen, pattern-breaking outcomes.

Is the theology of divine action in crisis?

In Christian theology, I have argued, God's closeness to creation is to be maximized with regard to presence, likeness, dependence, personhood, and being. But how is this relation any different from the classical notion of God? In classical philosophical theism (CPT) God is *also* close to his [sic] creation—omnipresent, maximally caring, maximally good. Why then add the “within” metaphor; why not stick with “separate-but-present-too”?

None of the opposing positions, I have argued, takes seriously enough the crisis facing the theology of divine action today. It doesn't take much reading in the theology of the last 40 years (or 20th-century theology, or theology since Schleiermacher) to realize that very grave problems are raised by assertions of God's action in the world. The philosophical framework that undergirded such language and made it plausible in earlier ages is in shambles. Substance metaphysics is no longer common sense; it now lacks the currency it had for Origen, Thomas Aquinas, and Descartes.² The metaphysical commitments of Thomistic theology, for example, “do not seem to allow for the possibility that one entity can exist in another entity and yet retain its own separate ontological identity.”³ Moreover, substance metaphysics was wedded to a notion of power that

raises insurmountable problems for theodicy: if God has this sort of power and regularly intervenes in the world in this way, working miracles for the encouragement of believers, then God is responsible for unspeakable evils.⁴ Earlier centuries could also accept an ontology of perfection: to be is to be good; thus all things have some intrinsic degree of perfection; all strive by their nature toward higher levels of perfection; and the whole hierarchy points upward toward the telos that sustains it: the *ens perfectissimum* (most perfect being) in which all else, insofar as it exists, participates. But over the last centuries this ontology was replaced first with a pervasive physicalism—a world of “bodies in motion” (Hobbes)—and more recently with the discovery of embedded hierarchies of order and natural structures. And in any case, the “metaphysics of perfection” was not a biblical doctrine; it was a product of the metaphysics and natural philosophy of the Middle Ages, and contemporary science and thought has rightly left it behind.

These changes require some shifts in theological thinking. In particular, they raise stronger challenges for conceiving divine action than did theology’s intellectual world in earlier centuries. A philosophical theology that is genuinely responsive to these changes needs to begin with a less sharp separation of God and world if it is to preserve a genuine place for divine action. We can no longer imagine God first creating a world outside Godself and then moving into it to act upon it. The heuristic key is to minimize the separation—even to the point of worrying how there could possibly be room both for divine being *and* for a world of finite things.

This is what is deeply right about Moltmann’s return to the Jewish mystical idea of *zimzum*, the self-emptying of God. On this view the world is created in the womb of God—yes, another metaphor—because there is no place outside the infinite God for a creation to occur. In the end Moltmann shows a failure of nerve, however, finally expelling the world out of God. But how is one to conceive the independent existence of the finite outside the womb of ontological sustenance that alone can keep it alive? The point about being a finite in relation to an infinite is that there can never be the expulsion outward; there is no *tertium quid* between finite and infinite. Our Enlightenment colleagues have held that the birth took place long ago and that modern men and women have since grown into enlightened independence. But given the impossibility of finite objects as separate substances, Christian philosophical theologians may be better advised to explore metaphors such as the enfolding womb of God than to imagine the world ticking along in law-like fashion in some unidentified space outside of God.

Personalist metaphors and beyond

How then *should* one represent the relative autonomy of human existence without falling into externalist metaphors that obscure the relation of ontological dependence that is basic to Christian theism? Biblical theology begins with the relations of human persons to a divine person or persons. The theology of personhood is a great advance over the framework of human substances created by

the divine substance—and over a Trinity of Son and Spirit who are *consubstantialem Patri*. Personhood is the highest form of external relatedness we can conceive. It evokes many of the most fundamental insights of Christian theology: we are agents, free, with a moral and rational nature, essentially social in being, related out of the core of our humanness to a God who is in no way *less* than us in any of these respects.

But what personalist theologies do not convey is that God must be *more than* personal. This acknowledgment is not new; Patristic theology already knew that God was not a person but a Godhead consisting of the three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. Theologians insisted that, though the divine persons were *like personae*—a Latin notion far from equivalent to the 20th century idea of persons—person language falls short of truly describing the divine being. This point was driven home to modern philosophical theology by Fichte, who showed in 1799 that an infinite person is a contradiction in terms, and by Tillich’s well-known argument that God is not person but the Ground of personhood.⁵ Most recently, increased knowledge of the hierarchical structure of the natural world—sufficient complexity of structure at one level leading to the emergence of genuinely new properties at the next higher level⁶—has given us further reason to conceive God as *trans*-personal. Whatever “emerges” out of and above the level of human persons must be *meta*-personal. (Note that “emerges” here refers initially only to the order of discovery; at least some aspect of divine reality must have preceded and been responsible for creation in the first place.)

Modern theology has not yet achieved consensus on a conceptual framework adequate for expressing the God-world relationship beyond the category of personhood, which most acknowledge is not fully adequate. If we are committed to doing “theology from below,” this failure matters. Theology from below entails searching for the most adequate parallels and concepts to make sense of Christian assertions. What *are* the best available options? In particular, isn’t it appropriate to take the highest level of emergence known to us and to use it as the model for a theological reality of which we can form only a limited concept? The highest level known to us is the emergence of mind or mental properties from the most complicated biological structure known to us, the human body and brain. So the relationship suggests itself: the body is to mind as the body/mind combination—that is, human persons—are to the divine. We are analogous to the body of God, God is analogous to the mind which indwells the body, though God is also more than the natural world that is united with Godself. Call it the Panentheistic Analogy (PA).⁷

Now, the strengths of the PA for handling the problem of divine action in light of modern science are obvious. In one sense, all actions of the body are actions of the “self” of that body, while in another sense, the finger or leg or heart performs its “own” actions. And just as “I,” the mental part of me, can perform certain actions that break past patterns (in contrast to other things I do that are highly patterned or habitual), so also one can ascribe to God focal or transformative actions as well as the regularities of causality that produce a lawlike universe. The power of this analogy lies in the fact that mental causation, as every human agent knows it, is more than physical

causation and yet still a part of the natural world. Apparently, no natural law is broken when you form the (mental) intention to raise your hand and then you cause that particular physical object in the world, your hand, to rise. The PA therefore offers the possibility of conceiving divine actions that express divine intentions and agency without breaking natural law.

Theologies of change and emergence

Now Owen Thomas has pointed out a number of disanalogies, and I happily acknowledge that they, and others also, exist. Like Wittgenstein's ladder, the analogy should be used only as long as it helps us to ascend and then should be discarded. Still, despite the disanalogies panentheism effectively expresses two vital theological truths that must be retained even when we reach the limit of mind/body talk: first, God is everything that we are as persons (hence not an impersonal force such as karma) *and yet immeasurably more* than a finite person; and second, there is no place to locate a finite world outside an infinite God. Neither a theology of substances nor a personalist theology is able to do justice to both of these insights at the same time. In my view the combination of emergence and panentheism is the most promising framework currently available to philosophical theologians, insofar as it meets the two criteria just listed, is consistent with (indeed, springs from) the conclusions of modern science, and allows for divine action in the world without breaking natural law.

I have shown in *God and Contemporary Science* how emergence is consistent with the pre-existence of God (or at least an aspect of God) to the world. Elsewhere I have spelled out the philosophical underpinnings of this view in some detail⁸ and can only sketch it here. I advocate a dipolar doctrine of God in which the eternal nature of God preceded the world and the consequent (personal, responsive) side of God has emerged in the course of universal history. This assertion reflects my debt to Charles Hartshorne, who followed Whitehead⁹ in distinguishing between the primordial and the consequent nature of God, and to Schelling¹⁰, who identified the Ground and the Consequent in God. Hartshorne's work on both the doctrine of God and panentheism remains groundbreaking today, although I agree with Joseph Bracken that corrections are needed to give enduring persons and societies a stronger ontological status. For these thinkers, the moment of creation inaugurates a bi-directional relationship of mutual influence between God and world and is a free act of God rather than a necessary entailment of God's nature. (Freedom entails that God be personal in nature prior to creation, which requires that God consist of multiple centers of agency; a trinitarian theology seems to be the most successful way to meet this requirement.¹¹) Creation makes a world, but it also constitutes God; being related to this world, God acquires new qualities—not qualities that change the divine essence, but ones of which the divine life *ad extra* is composed.

The body metaphor and divine agency

Various reservations have been raised about the body metaphor. Rather than fighting over less important details, let's focus on what's fundamental to this position. My first goal has been to conceive the world in a way that is compatible both with modern science and with divine agency. Clearly, the astounding success of the physical sciences has left less place for divine agency, at least in the physical world. If the modern separation of God and world is allowed to stand, divine action becomes inconceivable. A number of the attempts to solve this problem—say, by appealing to “double agency” (Austin Farrer), or asserting of some kind of “primary causality” underlying all scientific causes, or viewing history-as-a-whole as the one act of God (Maurice Wiles)—are not recognizably different from no divine action at all. Miracles defined and recognized through the eyes of faith alone ignore rather than confront the challenge posed by scientific success (and may be incompatible with it), and the quest for a “causal joint” where divine interventions could occur has so far proved elusive. How then should one think God in relation to creation? Suppose we start, as I have done, from the side of monism, reducing the difference between God and world to its minimal essential features? As Sponheim sees, this is a *direction* of thought, a recommendation to begin theologizing at a different place.

The body metaphor must therefore be parsed in terms of agency. Before all else it says: God doesn't create a machine that operates on its own, metaphysically separate from God. Physical events are themselves expressions of divine action, though it's an agency characterized by extreme regularity and lawlikeness. Agents, divine or otherwise, who wish to do something in the physical world must do it by means of bodies. Since God's agency can't be limited to one particular body, as ours is, it must stand in relation to the entire universe as we stand in relation to our bodies. Wherever there is regularity, it reflects God's nature and choice. It turns out to be a feature of this regularity that physical law produces a chain of increasing complexity that we call life, that independent centers of agency gradually emerge, and that at very complex levels these agents evidence freedom, self-consciousness and rational thought. In this sense persons arise out of and within God's autonomous agency. Note that, whereas finite agents can control only some but not all of their body's behavior (e.g., we can't control our blood vessels or intestines), God could in principle control *any* part of the physical world to which God is related. Finite agents cannot attend to every part of their bodies, and they sometimes experience their body's recalcitrance or resistance to their wishes, but these are limitations unknown to God.

The overwhelming impression of the physical world is its lawlike order. Why would God, if able, not intervene to break this order, say to reduce suffering? A number of reasons suggest themselves. For one, place must be left for finite agents to exercise agency, to form intentions and act through their own bodies. This can occur only through divine self-limitation. Second, to be able to act, or to gain knowledge of the world, agents need a context of regularity. A physical

world in which God is manifested through natural law provides that sort of context. By contrast, a world in which the murderer's bullet turned into a flower the moment before impact would be one in which rational agency would be impossible. Finally, natural science is only possible on the assumption that the causal histories of events can (at least in principle) be traced and studied. If physics cannot explain cell reproduction, biology can; if biology cannot explain human action, psychology can (and if psychology cannot explain the experience of divine revelation, perhaps theology can). In each case the complexity of the lower level leads one to expect the emergence of higher-order phenomena and explanatory principles. But this ordered emergence is very different from using "God did it" as the explanation for a physical anomaly. If any physical anomaly could be the result of direct divine intervention, natural science would be impossible.

One last comment: note that one can assert the Panentheistic Analogy—God has a similar kind of relation to the world as we have to our bodies—without asserting that the world *is* God's body.¹² Panentheism's success turns in the first place not on an identity relation, and not on a spatial concept of inside versus outside, but on its ability to give a more adequate account of divine agency than its competitors. We exist as embodied subjects, and our only understanding of agency presupposes embodiment. It is not essential to God to be an embodied subject; God's agency over the world is not essentially limited as is our control over our bodies (I still can't hit the tennis serve that I can visualize). Still, in being genuinely related to creation, God exercises a type of agency analogous to our own. All (regular, lawlike) occurrences in the physical world are conscious divine acts and are revelatory of the divine nature; none are just results of a natural order ticking along outside of or apart from God. For God *all* activity involves agency; God has pervasive conscious awareness—or better: an awareness that is higher than consciousness.

Conclusion

I have argued that there are two types or categories of divine action. Neither conflicts with scientific method or results, and together they are sufficient to preserve the agency of God presupposed in Christian theology. Every physical event is an act of God; thus the world's regularity reflects a (contingent) divine choice and expresses God's character. But God also exercises a "downward" causation or lure on mental states, just as our mental states can exercise downward causation on the brain as a whole and, through it, on our bodies and the world.

Does panentheism stumble fatally over a preposition ("in"), as Owen Thomas thinks? Is it either trivial, asserting what Christian theology has always held, or just blatantly wrong? It does not seem that the critical salvos have proved fatal to this theology. The mystical traditions, for example—not to mention many forms of "perennial philosophy"—provide precedents for my use of "in," although my own primary model has been the concept of *en Christo* used repeatedly by St. Paul.

What about evil? Well, is the problem any worse for panentheism than for the doctrine of the omnipresence of God? There are however two differences of emphasis. First, Christian theology has often started with God's presence to redeemed persons (and/or redeemed creation), speaking of the divine presence to the rest of the world only in a secondary or derivative sense. Panentheism does not begin soteriologically with God's special presence to some but with the universal presence to all, moving from thence toward the theories of special presence. The same direction of movement is reflected in panentheistic doctrines of divine action (we first conceive God as active in *all* things and derivatively as exercising focal agency, similar to what the tradition calls miracles) and revelation (the general revelation of the divine nature in the world precedes and provides the context for understanding special revelations). Second, panentheism provides, I believe, the right focus in the face of evil: instead of *pulling away* from those things that do not now manifest the nature of God, comfortably excising them from the divine like a virus or cancer, panentheism suggests the picture of transforming and healing them, as a healthy body might heal itself from an injury.

The church's calling is to embody the love of God in and for the world. The mission statement of my home church reads, "Submitting ourselves to the claims of Jesus Christ, together we seek to honor him, *embody his presence* and proclaim his gospel with authenticity and humility." Shall we embody the divine presence without allowing God to *become embodied*; do we really need to insist upon this asymmetry? As McFague writes, "The world is the bodily presence, a sacrament of the invisible God."¹³ Undoubtedly, the connotations of embodiment theologies are fruitful for Christian life and practice: for understanding sacraments (the divine as "visible and palpably present") and the suffering of God, for comprehending the risk and the costs to God in loving the world, and for encouraging an environmentally conscious Christian lifestyle, the "greening of theology."¹⁴

Above all I have sought to emphasize the conceptual structure that panentheism seeks to express and embody. Each of the metaphors I've used brings us only so far: the *spatial* metaphor of the world as within God, the mind-body metaphor for the relation of God to world, the womb metaphor. But I suggest that they bring constructive Christian thought further than any other metaphors available to us. Or, more precisely: they pick up nicely where the personalist metaphor is forced to leave off and bring theology just those steps further that it needs to take today.

Endnotes

1. I am grateful to all four critics for their probing papers that helped me clarify many features of my panentheistic theology. In preparing this response extensive conversations with Steven Knapp were particularly helpful; many of the ideas and some of the formulations that follow stem from these conversations.

2. See Clayton, *Infinite and Perfect? The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming 1999, chapter 2.

3. Joseph Bracken, "The Issue of Panentheism in the Dialogue with the Non-believer," *Studies in Religion* 21 (1992): 207-18, quote p. 209.

4. See Tyron Inbody, *The Transforming God: An Interpretation of Suffering and Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), esp. chapter 7 and W. Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

5. I have developed these ideas more fully in *Infinite and Perfect?*, chaps. 8 and 9 respectively.

6. See Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine, and Human*, enlarged ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

7 I use "mind" as shorthand for the totality of mental properties, and not in the dualist sense of a thing, a different kind of substance that is somehow linked to the body.

8. Cf. the work cited in note 1 and the successor volume, *Immanent and Transcendent? The Problem of God since Feuerbach* (forthcoming).

9. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Enlarged Ed. (New York: Free Press, 1978), e.g. p. 345.

10. See Schelling's *Essay on Freedom*, discussed in *Infinite and Perfect?*, chap. 9.

11. See my "Pluralism, Idealism, Romanticism: Untapped Resources for a Trinity in Process" in Joseph Bracken, S.J., and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, eds., *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 1997). Bracken's trinitarian philosophical theology strikes me as one of the most promising recent efforts; in the original *Dialog* article I cited *Society and Spirit* and *The Divine Matrix*.

12. See Grace Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

13. See Sallie McFague, "The World as God's Body," *The Christian Century* (July 20-27, 1998): 671-72; see also her *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). The following quote is from the same source.

14. See Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).