

## WHITHER PANENTHEISM?

by Gregory R. Peterson

*Abstract.* Panentheism has received widespread support among theologians involved in the religion-science dialogue, due in no small part to the success with which panentheism addresses a range of issues. Nevertheless, panentheism as a theological premise needs continued development and elucidation. Panentheism is often presented as a theoretical model of the God-world relationship, yet the supporting arguments rely on metaphors that are varied and open-ended. Analogy from the mind-body relationship leads to a “weak” panentheism that emphasizes the presence of God, while whole-part analogies suggest a “strong” panentheism that emphasizes some level of identity between God and the world. In turn, these analogies and metaphors bear nontrivial similarities to early Trinitarian and Christological debates in their treatment of God and world as distinct substances. This similarity suggests the importance of panentheistic approaches. Nevertheless, panentheists need to further clarify the relation of theory and metaphor in their work, as well as more precisely develop the central claim that God is in the world.

*Keywords:* Christology; metaphor; mind-body analogy; panentheism; theory.

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We are all panentheists now. At least, that is the impression one might get not only from many of the Christian theologians involved in the science-and-religion dialogue but also from many of the leading Christian theologians of our day. While Arthur Peacocke (1993) and Philip Clayton (1997) have both argued extensively for the doctrine of panentheism within the theology-and-science dialogue, their voices only accompany those of such prominent theologians as Sallie McFague (1993), Jürgen Moltmann (1985), and Leonardo Boff (1997). This level of consensus is all the more surprising when one considers the rather divided character of much of current

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theology. Even more impressive is that criticisms of panentheism have to date been relatively light. Within the science-theology dialogue, John Polkinghorne (1989; 1997) is among the few who have openly criticized panentheism, although he at the same time cautiously endorses some of its insights. Indeed, while many do not openly subscribe to panentheism or make arguments on its behalf, several of the concepts associated with panentheism, such as top-down causation and the world as God's body, have been adopted and expanded in a number of contexts.

These developments are certainly appropriate, inasmuch as they reveal panentheism's success in addressing a number of issues that have become of considerable importance for twenty-first century theology. At the same time, however, it is increasingly apparent that there are tensions among different interpretations of panentheism, tensions that are not insignificant. If panentheism is to develop coherently, these tensions need to be satisfactorily addressed. To wit, panentheists must begin to look more closely at the *en* that holds the position together and distinguishes it from its rivals.

#### WHY PANENTHEISM NOW?

Panentheism is not new. As a term, *panentheism* appears to have been coined more than two hundred years ago by K. F. C. Krauss. Theologian Ernst Troeltsch used the term to describe the relationship between God and world, and in doing so he was following a line of thought that was prominently advocated by, among others, G. W. F. Hegel (cf. Troeltsch [1925] 1991). As a concept, panentheism has deep roots. Yet, despite some prominent advocates, it has not truly flourished until relatively recently.

Part of the reason for this is the rise and continued popularity of process theology. Charles Hartshorne (1948) provided the first significant defense of panentheism within the context of process theology and was influential in making panentheism one of the cornerstones of modern process thought. Although process theology has broadened considerably in the intervening decades, panentheism remains an important component of the thought of process thinkers such as John Cobb, Schubert Ogden, and Jay McDaniel. In recent decades, panentheism has passed well beyond the bounds of process theology to be used by theologians employing a wide spectrum of methodologies, suggesting the vitality and importance of the concept.

The reasons for the upswell in panentheistic theologies are several. Panentheism, with its emphasis on the connection between God and world, strikes a chord with many feminist thinkers, who regard traditional models that emphasize God's distance and absolute power as being overtly patriarchal. Panentheism, by contrast, emphasizes God's connectedness and responsiveness to the world. The benign despot is replaced by the interactive community. Additionally, the idea that panentheism encourages us to

see the world as God's body is also suggestive for feminist theologians, who reject dominant forms of dualism that value the mind over and against the body, a perspective that has been historically disadvantageous to women.

Pantheism is also valued for its implications for environmental ethics. To say that God is in the world and, more strongly, that the world is God's body accords a much higher value to the world than other forms of theology that emphasize the distance between God and the world and that primarily regard the world as merely the theater in which the drama of human salvation is played. To say that God is in the world is to say that God is present among and concerned for all things. To speak of the world as God's body is to claim that, to the extent that we hurt and damage the world, we also hurt and damage God. Pantheism thus provides the basis for a strong environmental ethic, one that seems capable of countering the forces of exploitation and consumption that surround us.

While many pantheists are content to emphasize these particular benefits, it is also frequently argued that pantheism provides a model of God that is more compatible with modern science. Here the primary concern is with the question of God's action in the world. The modern sciences together present a picture of the world that seems seamless and beautiful in its nature and history. For many scientists and theologians alike, it seems inconceivable and inappropriate to conceive of God's action as an intrusive violation of the natural laws that were themselves set up by divine will. Indeed, the broad scope of natural and human history, spanning some 12 billion years or so, shows little sign of such heavy-handed intrusiveness. Pantheism, however, rejects a complete separation of God and world. God's action is frequently seen (once again) in analogy with the relation of mind and body. Just as the mind can control bodily actions without violating any physical law, so too can God act on the world in a way that is consistent with the laws of nature. God's action is conceived as a kind of top-down influence of the whole (God) on the part (the world). No violation of natural processes is implied. Rather, God's action is conceived in terms of a flow of information in a way that is compatible with natural causation.

As a coup de grâce, many current pantheists argue that not only is pantheism orthodox, but it is more orthodox than the classical theism that it prominently intends to replace. Philip Clayton (1997), for instance, argues that pantheism is the genuine position of the biblical tradition and that classical theism's emphasis on God's absoluteness and transcendence is a later aberration. As such, pantheism represents the golden mean between two heresies. On one hand, pantheism avoids the error of pantheism, which identifies God with the world. On the other hand, pantheism avoids the error of deism, which places God at such a distance from the world that God's action in the world becomes inconceivable. It is interesting to note that in much of their rhetoric pantheists

are careful to distinguish their position from pantheism, while at the same time they are loud in their opposition to classical theism. The perceived danger is for panentheism to appear too much like the heresy of pantheism that classical theists have so long opposed.

Given these characteristics, the contemporary appeal of panentheism is easy to see. Panentheism seems to address many of the challenges that face theology in the late modern and postmodern period, and it does so in a way that is true to the historical tradition. Panentheism seems to sacrifice little while it gains much. It does so, however, at a price. The price is ambiguity in the exact meaning of the term. What exactly does it mean for God to be "in" the world?

#### PANENTHEISM AS THEORY AND METAPHOR

Panentheism is increasingly portrayed as a theoretical account of the relationship of God and the world. As theory, panentheism claims to give a definitive account of the relationship between God and world that necessarily excludes competing alternatives. It stands to impact many other theological claims, from human nature to divine action.

Despite this expectation of its explanatory power, panentheism has produced a surprising number of theoretical models. As elucidated by Hartshorne (1948), panentheism served as a means for elaborating God's responsiveness to the world. Opposing the long-held claim that God, being perfect, is unchangeable and therefore cannot be (say) emotionally affected by human actions or capable of changing opinion, Hartshorne argued for a bipolar concept of God that permitted a distinction between God's absoluteness and God's relationality (relativity in Hartshorne's language). In Hartshorne's thinking, this necessitated a panentheistic stance, because a God completely separate from the world could not be conceived as relating to it. God is the world yet also more than the world. Yet, Hartshorne argued, the world is in a real sense independent and distinct from the essence of God. Thus, the distinction between God and world remained important.

More recent theoretical elaborations have been developed by Grace Jantzen (1984), Sallie McFague (1987; 1993), Arthur Peacocke (1993), and Philip Clayton (1997). Although these elaborations have much in common, there are important differences as well. McFague, in particular, emphasizes the metaphorical character of theological concepts, arguing that theological concepts always have an *is/is not* character to them. Theology provides models that are useful but always limited in character. For McFague, models are metaphors with staying power. When she speaks of the world as God's body, therefore, McFague expects the model to be taken with all the seriousness one might expect of a theoretical account, with the *is* character of the metaphor being emphasized over the *is not*.

This move from metaphor to theory is progressively clearer in the works of Peacocke and Clayton. For both thinkers, the doctrine of panentheism is tied closely to an account of divine action in the world. Consequently, both thinkers develop sophisticated accounts of emergent levels of being, supervenience, and top-down causation. Yet, for both, God is more than simply an emergent quality of the world as a whole. Furthermore, while the world is seen as being a part of the whole (God), the world is not simply identified with God.

This dual claim, that God is more than simply an emergent quality of the world and that the world is somehow more than simply a part of God, is the core of what may be called the panentheistic paradox. God both is and is not the world. God and the world are united, yet distinct. It is here that we plainly see the pregnant yet unclear implications of the simple *en* that connects the *pan* to *theism*, the *in* that connects God to world. Is speaking of the world in God (and God in the world) to speak merely of the copresence of God and world (what may be called “weak panentheism”), or is it to speak in a real sense of the identity of God and world, albeit in terms of part and whole (strong panentheism)? Is the world simply in God or of God? Does panentheism imply that the world *is* God?

On the last point, panentheists say no, but it is interesting that at this point nearly all panentheist accounts return to the categories of metaphor and analogy. The metaphors and analogies, in turn, are used to clarify the relevant aspect of panentheism in question. These metaphors and analogies are then seen to vindicate the panentheistic position, with the caveat that the obvious ways in which the analogy does not pertain to God are to be left out. It is here, however, that the character of the panentheist claim becomes imprecise and open to interpretation. This is not only because metaphors and analogies are necessarily open-ended but also because several metaphors and analogies are in fact used, each to a slightly different purpose. The result is often an evocative and suggestive account that nevertheless stops short of doing what the panentheist claims that it does: elucidate the panentheistic paradox.

*The Locative Metaphor.* It is noteworthy that panentheism implies in its very name what may be called a locative or spatial metaphor. That is, God and world are conceived as occupying different, spatial locations, with one being inside the other. Thus, the world is conceived to be *in* God, although the reverse is claimed as well. This locative metaphor is then elaborated in one of two ways. The first is in terms of whole and part. The world is said to be the part and God the whole. The nature of this whole-part relationship is not greatly clarified, beyond the assertion (especially by Clayton) that God should not be conceived in such a way as to be overly dependent or merely arising out of the part.

Frequently this relationship of whole and part is conceived vertically. Here the world is seen to be organized in terms of levels of complexity,

with less complex levels such as elementary particles being lower than more complex and therefore higher levels of biology and social structures. This vertical, hierarchical language is used explicitly to conceive of God's action, which is described as a top-down effect on the world. This top-down action of God does not violate natural laws, because it is understood in terms of the action of the organizational whole on the more localized part. Interestingly enough, Peacocke provides tables that demonstrate the spatial character of these metaphors (1993, 194, 217). In the second table, Peacocke arranges the hierarchy of organizational levels and disciplines, from atoms (lowest) to culture and its products (highest). In the first, Peacocke signifies the relationship of God and world by denoting the entirety of the page as God (noted as being infinite in character) and by placing in the center a circle, denoting the world as within God. Within the circle are human beings, in the world and also in God.

The value of the locative metaphor lies in its ease of visualization. Anyone can look at the chart and clearly see what appears to be the relevant point that is expressed: God is whole; world is part. The metaphor succeeds despite its own inappropriateness, for God and the world are not seen strictly as distinct spaces. At least, most modern theologians (including Peacocke and Clayton) do not conceive of a space beyond the edge of the cosmos where only God exists. Rather, the locative metaphor seeks to capture the logical nature of the relationship between God and world. Clayton does suggest, interestingly enough, that God can be thought of as "absolute space" in contrast to the finite (contingent) space of creation. Here Clayton takes the locative metaphor quite seriously.

Yet the metaphor hides some ambiguity. If the world is *in* God by analogy with spatial location, this implies that the world is in some sense divine. While pantheists affirm this, they do not affirm it unequivocally. Thus, Clayton (1997, 102–4) argues that pantheism provides a rich understanding of the doctrine of the image of God, for pantheism entails that God is indeed ontologically present within us, although we are also separate and distinct. When I sin, God does not sin as well. Yet it would seem that the locative metaphor would say otherwise. Whatever the part does, the whole would do as well. If the world is enveloped in God, the world and its occupants stand to lose their true distinctiveness. To the extent that the distinctiveness is retained, it is retained in some tension with the locative metaphor.

*The Mind-Body Analogy.* Despite the importance of the locative metaphor, much more attention has been cast on the analogy of mind and body. The mind-body analogy is given prominence by Jantzen and McFague and is extensively defended by Clayton as well. The widespread use of the mind-body analogy stems from its multifold appeal, affirming a modern holistic (as opposed to dualistic) account of human nature that emphasizes the personal nature of God, as well as addressing the issue of

divine action. Increasingly, this analogy is expressed by the somewhat awkward God:world::mind:body—God is to world as mind is to body. The success of this analogy hinges on an understanding of the relationship of mind to body that emphasizes the close relationship between mind and body and also rejects traditional dualist accounts. In what has perhaps become one of the chief cornerstones of philosophical anthropology in the science-theology dialogue, the categories of mind, soul, and person are seen to be emergent properties of human biology (Brown, Murphy, and Maloney 1998; Gregersen, Drees, and Görman 2000). In most of these accounts, the mind and sense of self emerges out of the processes of body and brain but supervenes on such processes as well. The mind therefore is not simply passive but plays a causal role.

On this model, God is therefore seen as the mind of the world, and the world is seen as the body of God. Just as the human mind is intricately tied to the processes of brain and body, so too is God intricately tied to the processes of the world. Just as the mind is capable of having a causal effect on the body without violating any natural laws, so too can God have a causal effect on the world while keeping physical laws intact.

Like the locative metaphor, the mind-body analogy is intuitively appealing. Moreover, the link it makes between human nature and divine nature is highly suggestive for the doctrine of the image of God. Yet its clarity depends on claims about supervenience and emergence that are unclear even when applied to human beings and less so when applied to God. It is notable, for instance, that many in the science-theology dialogue speak of supervenience in a way different from the way it is spoken of in the philosophical literature, from which the term is borrowed. There, supervenience does not imply a causally robust account of mind but rather suggests that the mind is a causal by-product (Kim 1993; Bielfeldt 2000). This point is indeed noted by Clayton, who differentiates between weak and strong supervenience (Clayton 1997, 247–57). Strong supervenience implies that some events can have a mental cause but not a physical cause. Such a claim, however, seems to make the term *supervenience* into yet another metaphor, because it no longer implies the kind of tight connection with the physical that has been previously presupposed.

When supervenience is applied to God, however, the problems only become greater. As Polkinghorne has pointed out, the cosmos as a whole does not have a structure even remotely similar to the human brain, providing a rather significant and relevant disanalogy (Polkinghorne 1989; 1996). If God is said to be an emergent feature of the universe, this would also imply that God is dependent on the universe in a very strong fashion. If taken to its logical conclusion, it would imply not that God creates the world but that the world creates God. Although I suspect that some panentheists might not be greatly troubled by this view (strict process theologians, for instance, deny the Christian doctrine of creation from nothing),

it certainly would not be a view held by all panentheists. Clayton notes a disanalogy precisely at this point, explicitly arguing that God is not dependent on the world in this fashion.

Perceiving God primarily under the category of mind, furthermore, presents its own problems. It is certainly true that for most of its history Christianity has taken very seriously the intentional, personal character of God. The God of the Bible is not only the God who acts but the God who loves and redeems. Additionally, modern neuroscience's integration of reason and emotion as well as mind and body (Damasio 1995) provides a fertile resource for theological metaphors. Yet to push the analogy too strongly risks excessive anthropomorphism. Presumably God does not have a brain the way we have a brain, and God's "thoughts" are not constrained as ours are by the quite particular character of our brain and body (see, e.g., Edelman 1993).

The mind-body analogy, it seems, confuses as much as it clarifies panentheism, dependent as it is on anthropologies that are still being worked out and that are the subject of some controversy. Moreover, the central panentheistic paradox is in many ways left untouched. In the God:world::mind:body analogy, God is analogous to the mind, the world to the body. In modern physicalist anthropology, the mind itself is bodily in character in the sense that it arises out of the operations of the brain (ignoring for the moment that the human brain functions properly only in a social context). By analogy, God (mind/brain) is in and part of the world (body). But the reverse is not true; the body is not in the brain. Furthermore, God (mind/brain) acts on the world (body), but the world (body) cannot be said to be in God (mind/brain). Of course, the brain is not a monad by itself but is connected to the body by the nervous and lymphatic systems. This would certainly provide an analogy of God's being in the world, but it is quite different from the locative metaphor. Whereas the mind-body analogy tends toward weak panentheism (God in the world), the locative metaphor tends toward strong panentheism (the world in God). Although the ultimate aim of both analogies is the same—to emphasize the presence of God in the world—their outcomes are significantly different.

*The Substance Metaphor.* While the metaphor of location and the analogy of mind to body are primary, it is worth noting that behind both lies yet another metaphor that is of more than passing interest: that of substance. That substance language should be present in the panentheistic literature seems, at first blush, surprising. Process theology has been particularly critical of the old substance metaphysics of Greek thought, a trend that is in many ways characteristic of modern theology in general. Certainly it is the case that modern proponents of panentheism do not in any overt way resort to traditional substance language in describing the God-world relationship. Invariably, however, panentheists treat God and world



as separate things or entities that are nevertheless related. Indeed, the choice of metaphors, whether in terms of location or in terms of mind and body, almost entails a kind of substantival relationship. This is certainly true of the locative metaphor, which emphasizes objects in spatial relations. To the extent that the mind-body analogy emphasizes the embodiment of the mind, it also has a significant substantival element.

To the extent that such substance language is present, it is also in many ways different from that of Greek metaphysics. Process theologians, while acknowledging the category of substance, tend to emphasize process and relationship, and many theologians (including those in the religion-science dialogue) are more prone to think of fields than of objects when speaking of God. Yet the analogy is striking, not least because the arguments put forth by panentheists and their critics parallel in nontrivial ways the issues behind the Trinitarian and Christological controversies that followed the accession of Constantine in the fourth century C.E. In both cases the primary issue was the relationship not of God and world but of God the Father and Christ. But because Christ became embodied in Jesus, the debate did indirectly involve an understanding of the God-world relationship as well. As modern panentheists struggle with the relationship of identity and non-identity implied by the claim that God is in the world, the early church struggled with the identity and nonidentity of Christ and God, splitting significantly over whether God and Christ were of same (*homoousias*) or similar (*homoiousias*) substances. Once solved in favor of the former, a further determination had to be made of how Jesus could be both God and human. The dispute ended (at least officially) with the Chalcedonian definition but achieved no real philosophical or theological synthesis.

In a real sense, panentheists carry on this unfinished task. Our understanding of both God and world has undergone some radical shifts, but the basic issue remains quite similar if not the same. In this light, it is unsurprising that Peacocke's elucidation of panentheism and divine action ends up significantly informing his understanding of Christology (Peacocke 1993, 290–311), which is true to a lesser extent of McFague (1993) as well. The relevance of Christology is also seen in the extent to which panentheism can be used to support sacramental thought, although to date this has only been touched upon in the theology-science literature (see, e.g., Peacocke 1979). To acknowledge this link to quite traditional issues and controversies in no way diminishes the importance and significance of the endeavors of panentheists but rather suggests the continued importance of the topic despite the intervening centuries and the advent of a scientifically minded age. It also suggests, however, that the complexities are greater than has generally been assumed and that, if panentheism is to remain vital, it must proceed with both wisdom and intelligence.

## WHITHER PANENTHEISM?

The problems entailed by panentheism have, at least for some, provided sufficient reason to seek alternative routes for understanding the God-world relation and for others a reason to eschew the problem altogether. Yet such a move may be premature. Panentheism has indeed proved fruitful for thinking about the God-world relationship and has done so in a way that has addressed some of the most important concerns of contemporary theology. At the same time, panentheism has resulted not in a single, clearly defined theory but rather in a range of possibilities enabled by a commitment to emphasizing the presence of God in the world. All panentheists argue for the presence of God in the world; the question remains as to what form that presence takes. While strong panentheism emphasizes some level of identity between God and world, weaker versions are satisfied with emphasizing the presence and action of God. In the process, panentheists have used metaphors that are powerful and suggestive but also imprecise.

Although this imprecision is frustrating, it is also revealing of the character of and tensions within the theological task itself. Frequently theology is understood as a theoretical endeavor, the systematic reasoning out of the symbols and claims of the faith. Within the theology-science dialogue particularly, this has been the primary mode of understanding theology. Ian Barbour (1997), Peacocke (1984), and Polkinghorne (1986), accordingly, have called for a critical realist philosophy that informs how we understand both scientific and theological claims. Nancey Murphy (1990), in particular, has gone further, arguing for a theological science that would propose, develop, and even test theological claims in the same fashion as the physical sciences. In these accounts, religious language is (with some caveats) largely understood to be essentially literal and transparent. The meanings of words are largely univocal, and therefore theological theories can be subject to philosophical analysis and debate.

While there is much to commend in a return to a theoretical theology, it is worth observing that much of traditional theological language is metaphorical and even poetic in character. Metaphors and poetry, in contrast to theories, do not so much describe as evoke. Words do not merely designate things; they are disclosive in and of themselves. Such disclosiveness, however, is a tricky thing. Poetry works for some and not others, and metaphors are prone to become flat and even oppressive when overused. The relationship between metaphor and theory is complex and not limited to theology. The sciences can and do use metaphors as well, and these are sometimes more powerful than the theories they inform.

Much of the current panentheistic literature very much walks on this complex border of metaphor and theory. Panentheism is often presented as a theory of the relationship of God and world, yet the relationship is explained primarily in terms of partial metaphors. The metaphors return

us to questions about theory. What is needed, perhaps, is not an abandonment of panentheism but the reconsideration of existing metaphors as well as the development of new ones. Panentheism captures one of the central intuitions of the great monotheist traditions, that God is present and active in the world. But, as the links to the debates of the fourth century show, the primary question for many is not whether God is in the world, but how.

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