

GREGERSEN'S VISION OF A THEONOMOUS UNIVERSE

by Langdon Gilkey

Abstract. In his article, "The Idea of Creation and the Theory of Autopoietic Processes," Niels H. Gregersen has proposed an important thesis: God supports and sustains autopoietic processes in nature. This contribution underscores what Paul Tillich called *theonomy*, a conception of the divine presence or action as one which undergirds, makes possible, and brings to perfection the creature's autonomy and creativity. The concept of theonomy is represented not only in contemporary Christian theology, but also in the work of Alfred North Whitehead and the Japanese Buddhist thinker, Tanabe Hajime. Gregersen shows that this concept extends not only to existential realities, but also to science and the processes of nature. There are connections, as well as differences, to be noted between Gregersen and Whitehead. This train of thought would be further enhanced if it included a discussion of the concept of God as the power to be—a connection that certainly is implied in Gregersen's argument.

Keywords: Tanabe Hajime; power to be; Providence; theonomy; Alfred North Whitehead.

Niels Gregersen's article is not only very welcome; it is also a most impressive work. I am personally in awe of theologians—and there are not many—who are as familiar with and knowledgeable about science as is Gregersen. He has presented us with an important, creative, and exciting thesis: God supports and sustains autopoietic processes in nature.¹ Autopoietic processes are self-creative and self-constitutive processes, processes in which both the elements and the system that unites them come together into being. There is here no separation of producer and produced; the process is thus *self*-constitutive. Nature represents a plurality of different kinds of such systems. One consequence is that they cannot be understood by only one mode of analysis—for example, of its elements, as in physics—and

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hence, reductionism is untenable. Moreover, fundamental categories—of “substance” and of “causality”—shift substantially as one moves from system to system. The author wishes to explore the possible relation (a “thought-model”) of divine action to such systems. Such an exploration, as he notes, is an aspect of the symbol of Providence and not of Creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*), for the process is here already in place, “in the game”—although the author clearly emphasizes the priority of the divine action in supporting, molding, and sustaining such systems.

This is a classic, elegant, exceptionally interesting, and important statement of what Tillich called *theonomy*. Theonomy refers to a conception of the divine presence—or action—as undergirding, making possible, and bringing to perfection the creature’s autonomy, self-creativity, and creativity of culture. In separation from its sacred ground, said Tillich, autonomy will slowly unravel and dissipate, losing itself in relativity, meaninglessness, and disarray. The sacred, experienced alone and so counter to autonomy, is *heteronomy*, the return of the holy to crush, control, and confine autonomy and so the diversity and freedom of culture. For Tillich, examples of heteronomy were the experiences of Protestant orthodoxy, later of fascism, and perhaps for us of a renascent fundamentalism. In theonomy, as in this article, divine and human creativity are not opposed but deeply intertwined; autonomy flourishes in relation to its divine ground, and in turn divine creativity is enriched by the diversity of history as well as tormented by history’s waywardness! (See Tillich 1951, 81–94; 1963, 157–61; 1948, 40–51; and Gilkey 1976, 40–43 and 60–66.)

As Gregersen notes (and I would agree), this conception of theonomy, so defined, represents something of a consensus in contemporary theology.² It has, of course, Augustinian roots, but its major expression was (to me) with Kierkegaard: the self constitutes itself or chooses itself, in relation to, or constituted by, eternity or God (Kierkegaard [1849] 1941, Part I, 1). Strangely, a slightly different interpretation of theonomy has been conceptualized with great power and coherence by Alfred North Whitehead. It maintains that the divine provides the general order and consistent relevance through which each particular individual entity constitutes itself, forms itself and its societies, and seeks its fulfillment or *telos*—a view that bears uncanny resemblance to Gregersen’s.

Finally, it is not inappropriate, I think, to mention that one of the most elegant expressions of this theme comes from the Kyoto School in Japan in Tanabe Hajime’s *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. Here self-power and Other Power are totally interdependent; self-power collapses without Other Power; Other Power is empty without self-power. Yet (surprise!) Other Power must be *Nothingness* in order so completely to realize itself in the diversity of self-power, a theme alluded to by Gregersen when he says that without radical self-relativization God could not enter into and share all the infinity of perspectives in the natural world. Gregersen adds that this kenotic

capacity to be “incarnate” in and so to share the inwardness, including its torments and sufferings, of all of creation is religiously more important than the foreknowledge of God of future contingencies.³

The theme of theonomy has been appearing everywhere in philosophy of religion and in theology in this century. Clearly, it represents a creative synthesis, in a number of forms, of classical transcendence with modern emphases: first, on autonomy, self-constitution, and hence both the reality and the meaningfulness of self-creation (freedom); second, on the significance of systems in the space-time continuum of social relations; and third, of the course—if also the turmoil—of history. What is particularly exciting here, although it can in principle be found in Whitehead, is that this emphasis on self-formation and spatiotemporal systems has now been so fruitfully and persuasively established in relation to the latest science and so in the processes of nature itself. Heretofore, most followers of this tradition, except again for Whitehead and Tillich, had distinguished history as the realm of existential self-creation rather sharply from nature. The latter, so it was thought, was the realm of causal determinism and so was appropriate for scientific and not hermeneutical understanding. Now a new generation of scientists has uncovered analogous processes at both the abiotic and the biotic levels, and a new school of philosophers of science has emphasized the hermeneutical character of scientific understanding.⁴

Gregersen has used the new analyses of autopoietic processes with the greatest intelligence and effect. Especially interesting is not only the uncovering of these autopoietic processes but also the necessity, the absolute significance, for such processes, of interconnection, “connectivity,” and even a “drive toward complexity.” Whitehead, for whom a relevant order and an inner *telos* toward value are, along with self-determination, the conditions of actuality, would be delighted. As a result, Gregersen’s conception of God as the “structuring cause” who reshapes possibility, configures the circumstances of events, yet depends on triggering or secondary causes, is very close to Whitehead’s notion. Gregersen, however, draws clear theological conclusions about the priority of God (with which I thoroughly agree). God is for him, apparently, the analogical *ground* of the structure of the metaphysical situation; God is not, as in Whitehead, a univocal *example* of that situation.

One final remark. As one influenced greatly by Tillich as well as by Whitehead, I have always felt—existentially, I may say—the importance of the category of being, the power to be. The power to be, as Tillich showed, is represented in the inner world by the courage that makes self-affirmation, and so self-constitution, possible. The power to be is, I take it, represented analogically in the objective world by energy, the dimension of power studied by mathematical physics, and finally (again analogically) by the energy within such autopoietic systems as Gregersen describes.

Whitehead did not like power; he conceived of it, apparently, as *power over* rather than as *power in*, the power to be, and so identified it not with God but with creativity. This has always seemed to me to be an existential, ultimately theoretical, and certainly theological mistake. I applaud, therefore, Gregersen's strong and persuasive emphasis on order—the order of systems, which makes self-creation possible, and on the creative role of God as the “structuring cause,” by limiting and ordering possibility, of such systems. But I suggest that this conception of the divine Logos be supplemented by a corresponding emphasis on the divine power of being, moving an ordered and a self-created finitude (now a vanishing actuality) forward in time into the new present, where each subsequent creaturely actuality is and self-becomes.

NOTES

1. Gregersen recognizes here that this thesis is a “hybrid” of scientific and theological elements. To me most modern theological statements also are hybrids of theological and philosophical (ontological and existential) statements about human beings or history. Few recently have been about natural processes, and that is what makes this piece so fascinating. I think that most biblical statements have the same hybrid form—always concerned with God and world, God and people, God and prophet. Possibly in Semitic forms of religion only *creatio ex nihilo* (a postbiblical formula) is “pure.” All creaturely references become possible only at the end of the sentence!

2. With understandable differences of language and categories, this conception of divine action as theonomous (that is, creative, supportive, and stimulative of creaturely freedom and creativity—rather than as opposed to or contrasting with human freedom) was shared by Tillich's colleague, Reinhold Niebuhr, and (as a result of both) by my own work. Note especially the analysis of historical passage as constituted by destiny and freedom, an inheritance from the past to be affirmed and constituted in the present by freedom. This ontological structure of finite passage requires the continuing and permanent presence of a self-limiting God—as the power of being mediating between the vanishing past and the present, as the ground of freedom or spontaneity in the present, and as the ordering of relevant possibility for future enactment. In *Reaping the Whirlwind*, pages 301–10, and *Nature, Reality and the Sacred*, chapter 13, the same point is made about nature. My only comment about Gregersen's remark on this “consensus of Continental and Anglo-Saxon theologians” is that without Walter Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, Tillich, and Philip Hefner, American theology would not be very worthy of notice—and I am not sure how the Scot John McQuarrie (nor this commentator) would have felt about that label! It is not quite the same as congratulating Gregersen for “being another fine Danish theologian,” but it is close!

3. Gregersen does not spell out, vis à vis foreknowledge, perhaps the most radical implication of his thesis of self-constitution—namely, that *if* the modality of temporal passage is taken seriously and *if* each creaturely system constitutes and forms itself, future systems and events can now only be *possible* and *not yet actual*, even for God. Hence, “future contingencies,” as Gregersen puts it, are as yet only possibilities and not yet actualities. God can and does know them as possibilities awaiting enaction, to use Whitehead's language, but God cannot know them yet as actualities. For this discussion, see *Reaping the Whirlwind*, pp. 167–69 and 242–53.

4. Note especially Harold Brown's *Perception, Theory and Commitment* for an excellent study of the “new philosophy of science.” See also the work of Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi.

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