

THE VARIETY OF PANENTHEISMS

by Edgar A. Towne

In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World. Edited by Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2004. 344 pages.

Abstract. In this article I review the efforts of eighteen scientists and theologians, recorded in this book, to describe the relation of God to the universe during a conference sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation at Windsor Castle in 2001. Theologians from several branches of Christian faith articulate their understanding of panentheism, revealing a considerable diversity. I deal with each author in relation to six issues: the way God acts, how God's intimate relation to the world is to be described, the relation of God to spacetime, whether God is dependent upon the world, what type of language is used, and the problem of dipolar panentheism. I identify significant differences between these authors, suggest where fruitful dialogue is possible, and distinguish between intelligibility and plausibility in comparing dipolar panentheism with other types.

Keywords: analogy; body of God; cosmology; dipolar panentheism; divine agency; evil and God; God; God-world relation; Charles Hartshorne; John Templeton Foundation; metaphor; metaphysics; naturalism; panentheism; pansyntheism; process-relational thought; relativity physics; science; spacetime; theism; theology; Trinity; Alfred North Whitehead.

In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being is a big book full of big ideas to match its effort to envision God in relation to the universe described in its microcosmic and macrocosmic dimensions by the sciences of physics, cosmology, and evolutionary biology. It consists of the efforts of eighteen scientists and theologians to articulate their visions of the relation

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of the universe to “God” as each understands the meaning of this term. I have been challenged by how difficult it is to appreciate each essay for the uniqueness of its author’s viewpoint and to judge the cogency of its argument in relation to others in this book. It is helpful, as Mary Ann Meyers assures us in her Foreword, that these authors are willing to treat “the mystery of the divine agency . . . [as] a quest that must remain forever open-ended and subject to revision” (p. ix).

This book includes essays by persons who participated in a symposium sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation within the walls of Windsor Castle 6–8 December 2001. The volume is organized so as to focus the diversity among the essays as much as possible upon the notion of panentheism, broadly defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* as “The belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in Him, but (as against Pantheism) that His Being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe” (Cross and Livingstone 1985, 1027). However, in his Introduction physical biochemist and theologian Arthur Peacocke notes that this definition has its critics (pp. xviii–xix). Bearing out Peacocke’s observation, Niels Henrik Gregersen, a research professor in science and theology at the University of Aarhus in Denmark, distinguishes “strict (dipolar) panentheism” from “qualified (Christian) panentheism” (p. 23), which are not compatible. This is a crucial distinction, and he quite rightly counsels that “anyone who wants to describe himself or herself as a panentheist should from the outset make clear what kind of panentheism he or she is endorsing” (p. 34). David Griffin, until recently professor of philosophy of religion and theology at the Claremont School of Theology and the Claremont Graduate University, in a direct challenge to Gregersen, offers dipolar panentheism as a new “revelation,” defining and defending it in his characteristically careful way. Yet when he says of it “God is essentially the soul of the universe. Although God is distinct from the universe, God’s relation to it belongs to the divine essence” (p. 42) he seems to mitigate the significance of the distinction Gregersen makes. Philip Clayton, professor of theology at the Claremont School of Theology and professor of philosophy and religion at the Claremont Graduate University, seeks to see a “recognizable school of thought” among panentheists but must remain content in his concluding essay to gather up the diversity in terms of “family resemblances” (p. 249). Michael Brierley, domestic chaplain and research assistant to the Anglican bishop of Oxford, who did not participate in the Windsor Castle symposium, thoroughly documents the variety of panentheisms in his comprehensive, lengthy, and remarkably judicious, historical essay.

Generally, it may be said that this book demonstrates that theology now concedes that there are many theisms, traditional or classical theism being neither normative nor the only type worthy of attention. It also demonstrates that panentheism is a contested type of theism among these authors.

There are diverse connotations of the term, and the meaning it carries in these authors' essays shows a certain idiosyncrasy deriving from the combination of allegiances—to empirical science, to historical theology, and to their own experience—they have as panentheism of one type or another seems plausible or implausible to them. Generally it also may be said that among most of the theologians panentheism is qualified by respect for Christian doctrine; metaphysics is pursued within a symbolics, not an empirics—a fact noticed by Clayton (pp. 74–75).

The book is organized in four parts, the last of which comprises Clayton's essay cited above. Part 1 consists of panentheistic interpretations of the God-world relationship (Gregersen, Griffin, Christopher C. Knight, Keith Ward, Clayton). Part 2 consists of scientific perspectives on the God-world relation (Paul Davies, Russell Stannard, Robert L. Herrmann, Harold J. Morowitz, Peacocke). Part 3 consists of theological perspectives on the God-world relation, divided into Eastern Orthodox (Kallistos Ware, Alexei V. Nesteruk, Andrew Louth) and Western Christian (Denis Edwards, Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., Ruth Page, Celia E. Deane-Drummond). The book also contains a section that identifies the contributors in considerable detail, extensive endnotes, an index, and a section that summarizes each essay.

In what follows I identify several issues that inform and contribute to the diversity of panentheisms documented in this book and try to do justice to the uniqueness of each essay by relating them to these issues. In such a way, of course, I am imposing my own order upon this diversity and making my case just as each essay in its own integrity has done in greater or lesser degree.

The intent and tone of this collection is constructive, and in that spirit I identify six issues with which the book is concerned throughout and which are systematically related. (1) The issue of the divine agency, the way in which God acts in creating and sustaining the world, has already been mentioned. (2) The issue posed by the focus on panentheism is that of how the intimacy of the relationship between God and the universe and to human persons and other sentient creatures is to be described, what language is to be employed. (3) More generally, there is the issue of the relation of God to time and space. (4) More specifically, there is the issue of the dependence relationship of God and the universe, whether a mutual dependence or a one-way type. (5) There is the issue of the type of language we use and believe appropriate to describe the intimate relation of God to us and to our world, the way this language functions. (6) There is the issue of the way in which dipolar theism, that of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, is to be described. I discuss these issues briefly to show the book's promise for the dialogue it seeks to promote.

1. *The way God acts.* Peacocke speaks as a scientist and theologian when he says that cosmic and natural processes “constitute a seamless web of interconnectedness and display emergence.” “The processes are not themselves

God, but the *action* of God as creator” (p. 144). Davies, professor of natural philosophy in the Australian Centre for Astrobiology at Macquarie University, distinguishes interventionist, non-interventionist, and uniform types of divine action. Advocating a modified uniformitarian view, he proposes that “God ‘initially’ selects the laws, and the laws then take care of the universe, both its coming into being at the big bang and its subsequent creative evolution, without the need for direct supernatural intervention” (p. 104). Nature has a co-creative role with God.

Davies sees panentheism as a compatible perspective, but a theological interpretation is “by no means obligatory” (p. 108). Griffin from a theological viewpoint also speaks in a uniformitarian way when he says “God never acts in some events in a way that is formally different from the way God acts in other events”; God can be said to act “variably,” so that some events can be considered acts of God in a special sense revelatory of the divine character (p. 45). Scientist and theologian Christopher Knight, senior research associate at St. Edmund’s College, Cambridge, similarly focuses on non-interventionist types of divine causation as he advocates a pan-sacramental naturalism “in which both the natural world . . . and our religious experience within that world may be understood naturalistically,” such that “any particular revelation of God will take place only in what I call an appropriate *psycho-cultural niche*” (p. 56). He points out helpfully that these naturalistic models of divine action rest on the belief that “the creation is far more subtle and complex than our present scientific understanding indicates” (p. 54) and that differences on the panentheism issue can “legitimately arise from any particular view about the causal joint of divine action” (p. 50).

Peacocke says that science describes both diachronically and synchronically “a spontaneous creativity” in nature (p. 142) and agrees with Hermann, a retired biochemist and onetime executive director of the American Scientific Affiliation, that the “seamless whole” of creation and the evolutionary process leads to increasing complexity and to human self-consciousness and awareness of God (pp. 121–22). Hermann is attracted to panentheism, but to show the fruitfulness of the panentheist analogy he awaits further research into the neurobiology of consciousness (pp. 128–30). In contrast, Ruth Page, onetime principal of New College of the University of Edinburgh, is critical of the anthropocentrism and exaltation of complexity in these authors and their association of divine agency with natural processes, considering the extinction of innumerable species. Proposing “pansyntheism,” everything with or in relation to God, not in God, Page says that God “created possibility as the possibility of possibilities” (p. 228), all natural and historical possibilities and actualities, including the laws of nature, being the responsibility of the creatures. “God is not a cause, therefore not a cause of order, therefore not a guarantee of any inherent orderliness in the world” (Page 1996, 20).

2. *What language best describes the intimate God-world relation?* Page prefers the language of “withness” instead of “withinness,” presence, relationship, because she is concerned not to imply that God is responsible in any way for evil, sensitive as she is to the ambiguity of all historical and natural processes (Page 1985). However, the dialectics in Griffin’s dipolar panentheism permit him to say, “there is evil only in God’s experience, not in God’s intentions. There is no moral evil in God” (p. 46). He might better have said God never acts as an agent immorally; but if God’s agency makes evil inevitable—by creating the laws of nature and the freedom of human agency—this may not answer Page’s critique. Page’s concerns are shared by Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, who examines the “en” of panentheism in terms of the world-as-the-body-of-God metaphor, discussing Ramanuja, Hegel, and Whitehead. He has “grave reservations about saying that the conflict and suffering and evil in the world are actually parts of the divine being” (p. 71).

Edwards, senior lecturer in systematic theology in the School of Theology at Flinders University in Australia, says that an interrelated world evolves within the relational life of the Trinity “as the free expression of the fecundity of this dynamic divine life” (p. 200). Similarly, Bracken, emeritus professor of theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, says of the divine persons of the Trinity that they “co-constitute an all-inclusive divine field of activity which simultaneously serves as the ‘matrix’ or womb of creation” (p. 212). With a Whiteheadian conceptuality he avers that “both the good and evil in the world are the result of decisions made by actual occasions or momentary subjects of experience in their process of self-constitution” (p. 220). Edwards preserves the divine moral integrity by employing the Thomistic distinction between primary and secondary causality (pp. 201, 209).

3. *God’s relation to time and space.* Despite what I say in the first sentence of this review, there is relatively little attention given in this book to relativity physics and cosmology. It is premised by the scientists that the way their disciplines describe the world is the way the world works. The “lawful continuity and regularity” of nature, Peacocke says, makes it “imperative to consider more coherent and plausible ways of relating God to natural events” (p. xx). Enter panentheism. Yet, he respects a “dualism” that makes “the distinction between the ultimate ontology of God and that of everything else” (p. xxi). To make this distinction, I think, is to endorse Davies’s view that science has no need methodologically of any theological reference. Davies discusses panentheism as an option for theists “who wish to mesh the worldview I have presented” with theirs. In fact, I think dipolar theism of Hartshorne’s type can agree and embrace his view that “no real (finite) physical system is in fact physically closed” (p. 98; see Davies 2003, 84). Clayton reviews the present state of relativity

physics briefly (p. 85) in a discussion of emergence and attention to physical and biological systems considered as wholes. Stannard, emeritus professor of physics at Open University, offers a useful discussion of commonsense ideas of time, of Einstein's special relativity, and of the relativity of simultaneity in support of a block universe. Ingeniously, he represents four-dimensional spacetime by reference to the hand (space) in relation to the thumb (time); "All of time is there in the thumb" (p. 113). Of course the hand is all there because we are looking at it. He thinks this lends plausibility to panentheism; I think he is right, but not with the dualism he presupposes: our body, our hands, and our consciousness are really related ontically. Peacocke's dualism subverts the plausibility of the pantheistic analogy.

4. *God and universe: mutually dependent?* Considering his distinctions between soteriological, expressivist, and dipolar pantheisms, the latter being incompatible with the former two, it is curious that Gregersen makes the existence of "a real two-way interaction between God and world" (p. 20) the indispensable and generic element of panentheism, which he says here is "more or less shared by all versions of panentheism." The biblical witness clearly requires this generic quality; but the theological tradition continues to resist it, requiring Gregersen to fudge the issue above. This fudging makes it possible for Eastern Orthodox theologians to participate, and I think fruitfully, in the dialogue. So Ware can say that "the penetration of the world by the uncreated energies does not enrich God, as he is in himself, but it certainly enriches the creation in its relation to the creator" (p. 167). Nesteruk, senior lecturer in mathematics at the University of Portsmouth, interprets panentheism in terms of the nature-hypostasis distinction. "The reciprocity of the Divine and the created is ultimately initiated and held by the person of the Logos of God. [This is] one-sided and entirely determined by the Logos himself" (p. 176). Similarly, Louth, professor of patristic and Byzantine studies at the University of Durham, discussing panentheism in terms of the divine logoi and energies, says, "there is no sense in which God may be said to be affected by the cosmos itself" (p. 184). Like Edwards and Bracken, Nesteruk and Louth locate the divine interaction with the universe within the divine Trinity. Gregersen rightly sees dipolar theism as an incompatible metaphysical option, which relates God and world in such a way there is real ontological identity, to whose view other pantheisms appear to be equivocal.

5. *The way pantheistic language functions.* Clayton rightly observes the dialectical quality of dipolar panentheism: "not unity or difference, but unity-in-difference. The world is neither indistinguishable from God nor (fully) ontologically separate from God" (82). He discusses the metaphorical character of "in" and the analogical character of the mind-body relation. Gregory Palamas (ca. 1296–1359) and Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662) are shown to be masterful dialecticians as presented by the

Eastern Orthodox theologians in this book. Paradox and antinomy are not feared by these theologians. “The recognition of this profound gulf between God and creation,” Louth says, “has a paradoxical effect: on the one hand it stresses the utter transcendence of God, but on the other hand it means that *within the created order* nothing is nearer or further away from God by virtue of the constitution of its being” (p. 191). Dipolar theism may dialogue fruitfully with Eastern Orthodoxy, and Louth poses the salient question “Why bother? Why attempt to rethink such ancient modes of thought?” (p. 195)

6. *The contested character of dipolar panentheism.* It should be borne in mind that within the orbit of process-relational thought dipolar panentheism utilizes the thought of Hartshorne and Whitehead, who are philosophers being interpreted by theologians in significantly different ways (Ford 2000), though Hartshorne’s views tend to be assimilated to Whitehead’s (Towne 2001b). Hartshorne’s dipolar panentheism builds metaphysics on the basis of empirical input from the sciences; he has no stake in the outcome of debates among scientists (Towne 2001a). His constructive intent makes him intolerant of equivocation, respectful of precision for the sake of plausibility. I have defined panentheism thus: “God *contains* the world as the concrete states of the world-now enjoy or have that personal order which can be nothing other than divine. The sequence of the world-states are [sic] the divine states, and *being in this sequence* is to be in God. This sequence . . . is a ‘coincidence of opposites’” (Towne 1997, 250). This sequence is everlasting, and its literal predication supports the plausibility of the metaphor “body of God” and the mind-body analogy. The dialectical God-world relation should be understood with a cybernetic epistemology, suggested in this volume by Morowitz (pp. 133–35) in terms of emergence and by Deane-Drummond, who rightly desires to retain “an adequate apophatic sense . . . together with an ontological interpretation” (p. 240). I have sought to show how this might look in Towne 1999 and 2003.

Metaphors and analogies lend intelligibility to panentheism. But intelligibility does not confer plausibility. That requires a specifiable ontological relation between God (Trinity) and spacetime. So far as I can see, only Hartshorne’s dipolar panentheism unequivocally provides this requirement.

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