

The Many Faces of Panentheism

with Harald Atmanspacher and Hartmut von Sass, “The Many Faces of Panentheism: An Editorial Introduction”; Philip Clayton, “How Radically Can God Be Reconceived before Ceasing to Be God? The Four Faces of Panentheism”; Willem B. Drees, “Panentheism and Natural Science: A Good Match?”; Jan-Olav Henriksen, “The Experience of God and the World: Christianity’s Reasons for Considering Panentheism a Viable Option”; Roderick Main, “Panentheism and the Undoing of Disenchantment”; and Michael Silberstein, “Panentheism, Neutral Monism, and Advaita Vedanta.”

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD AND THE WORLD: CHRISTIANITY’S REASONS FOR CONSIDERING PANENTHEISM A VIABLE OPTION

by *Jan-Olav Henriksen*

Abstract. What reasons and resources can Christian theology find for developing a panentheist position that is also able to engage with contemporary science? By taking its point of departure in basic human experiences, Christian theology can, even in a Trinitarian fashion, be developed as a way to understand God’s presence in the world as a presence where the actual occurrences point towards God’s own work. This point is especially related to the experience of love. Furthermore, God’s presence can be understood as sacramental in the Augustinian sense. Moreover, the contributions of the Danish philosopher of religion Knud E. Løgstrup on God’s presence and transcendence, as well as Niels Henrik Gregersen’s elaborations on deep incarnation. Prove to offer important reasons for considering panentheism a viable option for the articulation of Christian theology.

Keywords: emergence; Niels Henrik Gregersen; Knud E. Løgstrup; love; panentheism; sacrament; semiotics

SACRAMENTAL PANENTHEISM AND DIFFERENT REALMS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

It is indeed a challenge to contribute something new to the discussion about the panentheist position. However, there are two angles to explore that I think are still important and may be breaking some theological ground: first, to try to see how some basic human experiences are related

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to panentheist concerns, and second, to see how elements in Christian Trinitarian reflection, especially as related to Christology, may also be of relevance for the articulation of a panentheist position. Both these approaches are related to how God and the world interact—and they do so in ways that are captured by a sacramental understanding of the world. The position I will argue for takes its point of departure in two distinct experiences that are both pre-scientific and pre-theological: the experience of love and the experience of the existing world as conditioned by a power to be that transcends the actual entities of the world. In this transcending character, that is rooted in the experience of the “immanent,” we can distinguish a sacramental quality.

Therefore, we need to say something about what a sacramental view of the world entails. First and foremost, a sacramental understanding of the world means that God mediates Godself by the world. In classical theology, this is articulated as the way in which God gives Godself in, with, and under the created, meaning in, with, and under something that is distinguishable from Godself, but still intrinsically related to God, and conditioned by God.

This way of thinking makes God’s sacramental mediation of Godself dependent on the created world. In this way, dependence goes both ways: the world as a sacramental reality is dependent on God as creator and as the one who brings forth the promise of the world’s fulfillment and consummation in the creative and loving community with God. But God is, on the other hand, dependent on the created world in order to mediate this promise, and God is also dependent on the world’s response to God’s communication of the call to community. This response would not be possible unless there was already issued a graceful calling to such community. Against this backdrop, it is possible to say with Niels Gregersen, in his definition of “Qualified Christian Panentheism,” that “it is by divine grace that the world is codetermining God, so that temporal events may influence God and creatures share the life of God; all that is redeemed participates in divine life” (Gregersen 2004, 23).

One significant contribution from a sacramental approach is that, by understanding the world as a gift and a promise, one does not have to accept the world as it presently is as the final articulation of the reality of God. Therefore, not all that happens needs to take on a qualified sacramental character. Accordingly, the sacramental approach developed here does not identify panentheism with a pan-sacramental approach. Unlike pantheism, which identifies God and the world, panentheism maintains a difference between God and the world that does not require us to take the present state of affairs to be one in which the reality of God is fully displayed. The notion of promise captures the still outstanding, the still becoming, the still future reality of God towards which the world is called, and it enables a vision that captures basic conditions for human life orientation

and for visions about (necessary) transformations. To see the world as a sacrament in which God mediates the reality of Godself enables a *dynamic* approach to the world, where one is guided by the contents of the promise as well as by the knowledge about what is at present. This is fundamental for understanding the relation between religion and science, which I will return to shortly.

I take the semiotic character of the world to be the very basic condition for seeing the world as a sacrament. This is not the place to enter more deeply into the discussion about this character; it suffices to state here that semiotic processes are internal to all that characterizes life. Such processes constitute, connect, transform, and engage signs in order to exchange information within and between different living beings at all levels of reality (cf. Robinson 2010). This semiotic character also means that life mainly consists of such processes and that humans need to interpret the experiences they have as signs of something, in order to be able to *orient* themselves.

So, sacraments should be seen as signs that provide points of orientation. Orientation is about more than registering what is the case. It has to do with what we do and how we relate to that which is, and what use we make of what we know, or think we know, about the world. This approach allows us to see religions primarily as specific types of human practices that orient us in ways that are mediated through different types of *signs*: story-telling, symbols, rituals, reflection, and communicative co-operation. Religions thereby contribute significance that transcends the immediately given of the everyday, but without leaving the everyday behind. To become religious is to learn how to process and act on the signs that open up the world to more than what is immediately at hand, as, for example, in a promise. It is to relate to and to interpret the present in light of that which transcends the immediate.

Thus, God's sacramental and graceful presence in the world, where God mediates Godself through nature, through the social and cultural world, through our inner lives, and through mystical experiences are all mediated. That there is a close connection between mysticism and pantheism is acknowledged by Michael Brierley, who points to how mysticism not only is a way of ordering human experience, but also that "mysticism testifies to the pantheistic character of the deepest human religious experience" (cf. Brierley 2004, 13). God is never directly experienced. On the other hand, this means that God can—but does not necessarily—mediate Godself in all realms of human experience. This is a point I will return to later. Here, it is only necessary to state that this understanding of God's internal mediation of Godself make it insufficient to speak about God's presence in the world as *pansyntheism*, a position argued by Ruth Page, who stresses, and rightly so, the relational character of all reality, but she sees it as more apt to speak of *God with everything* (Page, 2004, 222ff.). As will be clear in my

discussion of Knud E. Løgstrup below, I do not think that position captures sufficiently the immanent character of God's reality in the world. Page's concern with God *in evil* as a problem I think can be met by speaking about God as offering a call and a promise to creation that does not rule out that this calling and promise is also shaping, transforming, and orienting those who heed the call and the promise.

The reasons contemporary Christian theology has for considering panentheism a viable option can, therefore, be articulated as related to theological concerns on several different levels. Both on the level of creation and redemption, panentheism articulates the close, intimate and reciprocal relationship between God and the world, in which the two are dependent on each other in order to realize themselves fully, once God has created the world. It is the close, intimate and reciprocal relationship between God and the world that I take to be the most important element in panentheism. But this relationship can be developed on different levels in theology and in relation to different realms of human experience.

As humans, we partake in different realms of experience. Science has taught us to distinguish these from each other, and we do so due to the differentiations of the different sciences. We speak about the physical world, the social and cultural world, the inner world of humans. All these realms of experience are researched by the sciences. Theology would say that God as a creator is the condition for all of these realms, and panentheism will say more: that God is present, and working in and through all these realms, and that it is by partaking in these realms that humans also participate in the life of God as it manifests itself in human experience.

Accordingly, I argue that a panentheist position is based on specific features of human experience, and is not only a position formulated in order to articulate a theoretical solution to the problem about the relationship between God and the world. These features allow for a theological interpretation, but this interpretation is not necessary in a strict philosophical sense.

A SACRAMENTAL PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION AND SCIENCE

The sacramental approach I develop here can be seen as suggesting that the relation between science and religion may be seen as parallel to the relation between sign and reality in sacramental theology. What science tells us about the world can be seen as analogous to what we can investigate, have sensations of, and know extensively with regard to the conditions, contents, and material of the sacramental elements. However, when the world is employed as a sacramental sign, it is understood as pointing beyond itself, and doing so in a way that transcends the actual elements, but without leaving them as *mere* signs without a quality in themselves. This point is made in order to take up the insight that what we know about

the part cannot account for the content of the whole, and that the whole in turn also may determine how we relate to the part. This is important also for underscoring the relational character that determines every part of being and beings (cf. Clayton 2004a, 87ff.) As becomes clear here, the sacramental position argued is *realist*, and presupposes an understanding of God's real presence that is most extensively developed in the Lutheran strand of the Reformed tradition.

Contemporary religions need to be informed by the results of science. Both science and religion are *pragmatic* in character, and religions offer hermeneutical (and not explanatory) practices of orientation and transformation that cannot ignore scientific knowledge, but nevertheless also imply more than science in the strict sense offers. Whereas science aims at providing solutions to specific problems, the perceptions of such problems are conditioned by specific contexts of experience and background beliefs that often may be characterized as pre-scientific. Some of these background beliefs may be religious, not necessarily in terms of assumptions about gods or supernatural realities, but in terms of what matters more than something else, and why. Such conviction comes to the fore in how religions are expressed in specific practices. These practices and their theoretical legitimation (in theology) should be considered in their concrete actuality and context before entering into discussions about the relationship between religions and science. Generically speaking, these practices serve three main functions: they orient human life, they aim at transforming it, and they generate reflections that explain, justify, and legitimize the former. The last of these is what we usually call doctrine (or theology). However, a possible and fruitful relationship between science and religion needs to take all these practices into account.

Against this backdrop, there can be a deep and profound relation between religions and science. Science in all realms of human life establishes the necessary conditions and resources of knowledge that humans need in order to live in the world. In the contemporary world there can be no human life without some kind of science, that is, some kind of methodologically secured knowledge that can, if necessary, be repeated, criticized, and thus, expanded—all in order to be secured. Moreover, all religions, including religions that build on notions about divine revelation, presuppose common or everyday knowledge as well as the knowledge that sciences contribute to establish. It is *on the basis of interaction with knowledge as accessible in and through science and other ways of ordinary knowing that religion can contribute to human practices of orientation and transformation*. Such practices do so by interpreting the present and the real as signs that point towards a larger or more encompassing reality.

Science relates to all realms of human experience (including some research on mystical experiences), but cannot by itself circumscribe these realms. There is no full overlap between scientific knowledge and reality.

Science expands our knowledge about reality only because reality is more than science so far or hitherto has been able to investigate. Good science relates to the openness of the world and does not infer conclusions that go beyond what is warranted by observation, theoretical understanding, and the interpretation of the conditions for both. As science does not need to presuppose God in order to be good science, methodological reductionism is a necessary element in all scientific inquiry, as is religious agnosticism.

Religions that relate to the world as a sacramental reality are pragmatic in character, that is, they aim at orienting and transforming human life. In order to achieve this, religions must build on common and accessible knowledge about what is the case in the world. This knowledge is under constant development and revision, and in the contemporary world much of it (but far from all of it) is stewarded by science. The *functions* of religion cannot be seen in isolation from this reservoir of knowledge, but religions offer specific ways to relate to this knowledge. For instance, human experience and science can both tell us something about how people long for love and what love does, but the decision to live your life from and directed toward love requires another motivation. Likewise, science can tell us what is and how it is, but not why it is. That requires a specific decision, and it is this decision that orients humans in the world.

Human experience, made thematic and investigated by sciences, opens up to an interpretation that is in consonance with science, in the way sketched above. Thus, panentheism is not a scientific position, but one that is in accordance with the open character of science.

REALMS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND A PANENTHEIST APPROACH

A deep and thoroughgoing understanding of reality as *relational* is among the most important backgrounds for a panentheist approach. As our reality is deeply relational in character, nothing cannot exist without something else (a point in classical metaphysics), and it also does not exist without being in relation. This relational character comes to the fore, or is manifested, in all realms of human life and experience. In the physical realm, we know that no element in nature is there unless there are specific conditions present and to which it stands in relation, that are behind and beyond the concrete experience we have of it. This point also relates to and includes the body, where every part serves the whole and every element has its function only in relation to the others. In the social and cultural realm of human experience, the competences to be there, thrive, flourish, and develop are conditioned by our relations to other humans and their relation to us. And the inner, personal realm of our being (what we may call our self or our "soul") is profoundly shaped by, and dependent on, our relations with others. Hence, even our concrete experience of specific features of our existence always points to relations that exist beyond the actual content of

our experiences. We exist within a wider relational context than the one we can ourselves control, determine, and condition. To experience this fact is to experience that human life is conditioned by relations. In a specific way, these features of human life may manifest themselves in different forms of mystical experiences, as well.

Under the present circumstances, to think that the social and cultural realm (usually the realm considered most relevant for religion) has emerged from conditions in the physical realm may be part of a relevant interpretation, as with the psychological realm. However, I would argue that all realms of human experience (physical, sociocultural, psychological, and mystical) mutually condition each other, given how we experience the world and these realms as related to each other in the concrete life experience. Physicalist reductionism is not (or may not be) sufficient to explain our concrete experiences in all these realms. Such reductionism also seems to ignore the basic back-and-forth influence across different realms of human experience (cf. the ideas about emergence and downward causation in Clayton, 2004b, especially 60–62, as well as from a scientific point of view in Chibbaro, Rondoni, and Vulpiani 2014).

What do these considerations entail for a panentheist position? First and foremost, I would argue that it means that we need to see the relationship between God and the world as manifesting itself in all realms of human experience. Because all these realms are constituted as relational and thereby pointing beyond themselves, we could claim that the openness implied in this relational character (for which I have not argued so far) means that all that exists in a creative space that allows for a multitude of dimensions in human life to display themselves creatively. This “space” or “field” (cf. Pannenberg and Gregersen 2008) is God as the infinite ground of (finite) being (cf. Clayton 2000). Nothing that exists as independent of this field or “outside” of it. That does not mean that what manifests itself within this field *is the field*.

A panentheist position conceived thus is a challenge to science in the following way. It challenges the sciences to maintain their openness towards what is and to acknowledge the open field that conditions all that is. There is an argument that can support this challenge in the phenomenological “metaphysics” of the Danish philosopher of religion, Knud E. Løgstrup.

ELEMENTS IN A PANENTHEIST THEOLOGY (1): GOD’S POWER

Because the main concern of a panentheist position on the level of creation is to articulate the perpetual and continuous presence of God in the world, or the presence of the world in God, one has to ask at what level one should take the point of departure for this concern. In his metaphysics, Løgstrup defines God at “the power to be *in* all that exists.” This is an ontological statement that points to God as the condition for what is (ontologically),

but it can also be seen as a *transcendental* statement that implies that God is the condition for our experience of the world as we now know it. We can consider this point a little more in detail, because it has some implications with regard to how we understand the relation between science and religion also.

In his metaphysics (which he occasionally also calls a phenomenological philosophy of religion), Løgstrup argues that our experience of the power to be emerges out of our experience of the familiarity of the existing world. We are familiar with the fact that something exists. This familiarity, however, also means that we know that all that is disappears and is annihilated after a while. The experience of the perishable character of the world, in turn, gives rise to the thought that all that exists does not possess its own power to be. In Løgstrup's thinking, this is developed as a phenomenological, and not a cosmological, argument (Løgstrup 1978, 96).

We are unable to *experience* the power to be in all that exists, says Løgstrup, because this power is not in itself an experience, but a condition for experience. Løgstrup can therefore also say that this power is transcendent, but transcendent not in the sense of being beyond and "outside" the realm of existence, but rather because it is closer to us than we are to ourselves (it is not "other-worldly" but "this-worldly." He writes (in my translation):

We can experience ourselves in our mental and embodied condition, because we can distance ourselves from ourselves in an external perception of our body and in a retrospection of what has happened to our mind. However, the power to be in all we are and all we do is something from which we cannot distance ourselves in a similar manner. No matter how close we are to ourselves, the power to be is even closer to us, and we cannot relate to it as an experience. This is so even though we do not ourselves possess this power. (Løgstrup 1978, 96).

Løgstrup here holds that human experience is conditioned by a certain distance with regard to its content. However, as human beings we are unable "to look behind our own backs" or to relate to something in creation from beyond creation. All we can do is to investigate something from a scientific point of view with regard to *how* it is; we cannot establish a position that can tell us *why* it is what it is. The ultimate horizon of meaning or significance escapes us.

This power to be in all that exists has a twofold character, according to Løgstrup. On the one hand, it is present in our experience, but hidden. It is so present that without this power everything would disappear. But it is also so hidden or absent that it cannot be observed. The power that allows existing beings to exist is, in the Jewish-Christian interpretation of reality, simultaneously beyond and within this world (Løgstrup 1978, 97), or both transcendent and immanent. This allows Løgstrup to develop a

specific notion of transcendence. If this power is God's power, it means that God's transcendence does not consist in God's distance from the world, but that this transcendence is always present and manifest within the world as that which allows it to be, while at the same time it cannot be identified fully with the existing beings, because this creating power is also something that is beyond the present state of beings.

I will argue that Løgstrup helps us develop in more detail how God can be thought as being in, with, and under the features of this world, as already suggested. However, it has to be admitted that much of what he writes in this regard seem to be articulating God's immanence in the world—a point that is also articulated in theistic positions, and which does not need to imply any form of panentheism. So why is Løgstrup fitting for the panentheist approach? The main reason is that the way he develops his ideas about God as the power to be in all that is implies that he sees God as an *internal* condition of the world. God is not merely a transcendent power that sets everything in motion and separates Godself from creation, as in deism or theism. For Løgstrup, the idea about the indwelling of God in creation is based on the experience of the power to be. Thus, he maintains the classical Christian position that God is ever present in, with, and under God's creation. If we employ the distinction between external and internal conditions, this may also help us to develop in what way Løgstrup's reasoning may be further qualified as open to a panentheist position.

Furthermore, Løgstrup argues that, contrary to common assumptions, the idea that this power to be is beyond this world and simultaneously within this world is not a contradiction in terms. Instead, these features mutually condition each other: "As within this world, the power is omnipresent. As omnipresent, the power is hidden, and as hidden, it is beyond the world." Therefore, if we weaken the idea about the power as something transcendent or beyond the world, we weaken the idea about the divine power's omnipresent this-worldliness also (Løgstrup 1978, 97). Or to put it another way: these two features in the divine power contribute to the strengthening of each other.

As indicated above, one could, from another point of view, characterize Løgstrup's mode of reasoning as transcendental: what he says about this power points to the conditions for the possibility of our concrete experience of the world. It is so because the idea about this power to be seems to presuppose a kind of transcendental deduction that leads to the conclusion that *there are transcendental features involved in all human experience that cannot simply be taken as "facts" along with other "facts of the world."*

A main conclusion to the reflections so far is that *if we ignore this transcendental dimension which is implied in the human experience of the world, we are downplaying the specifically human mode of being in the world as a multidimensional existence.* Our experience of this power presupposes that we can experience the world as more than what is in front of us. It

is this ability to see the world as pointing toward something more that constitutes the source of religion, and the reasons why humans find it necessary to talk about God in their relation to the world.

The outcome of these considerations by Løgstrup is that our experiences of the world testify to something that we cannot experience in itself, but only in, with, and under the experience of something else. Accordingly, I would argue that Løgstrup's account of God as the power to be is open to a sacramental version of panentheism. If one should develop his position even further, it would also be possible to say that, in the experience of something as existing, there is a promise about endurance for some time that points towards God's trustworthiness and reliability when it comes to maintaining existence. This is a point that he does not himself develop, however.

Another "metaphysician" that seems to move in the same direction as Løgstrup is David Bentley Hart (Hart 2013). He points to how *infinity* is an important element when it comes to determining God. God is beyond finite comprehension, and therefore experiences of God, even more than experiences of the world, are in need of revision and supplementation, offering different perspectives. Hence, "much of the language used of him is negative in form and has been reached only by a logical process of abstraction from those qualities of finite reality that make it insufficient to account for its own existence" (Hart 2013, 30). Furthermore, "God is not merely one, in the way that a finite object might be merely singular or unique, but is oneness as such, the one act of being and unity by which any finite thing exists and by which all things exist together. He is one in the sense that being itself is one, the infinite is one, the source of everything is one." This makes it possible to say that, from a semiotic perspective, God is the source of quality, otherness, and mediation (cf. Hart 2013, 31), features that come to the fore or are expressed only in relation to specific existing beings. But God cannot, like the vulgar atheists seem to think, in any way be likened with anything in this world, or of things that we imagine as part of this world, like fairies and gods. Writes Hart:

Beliefs regarding God concern the source and ground and end of all reality, the unity and existence of every particular thing and of the totality of all things, the ground of the possibility of anything at all. Fairies and gods, if they exist, occupy something of the same conceptual space as organic cells, photons, and the force of gravity, and so the sciences might perhaps have something to say about them, if a proper medium for investigating them could be found. (Hart 2013, 33)

Accordingly, it is not possible to suggest that belief in God is unscientific, or that it is beyond what can count as rational. Exactly the fact that God, as related to the world, must be seen as its transcendental condition and as the source and origin of our capacities to grasp it in its

multitude of different manifestations, suggests that science cannot explain God, whereas the notion of God may somehow help us to understand why there is something like science, because the world has its origin in a source that is not mere matter, but also *ratio*, reason, a drive towards order and beauty. God is thus to be identified as the condition for the possibility of the world, and in this way *God's function as a transcendental condition for human experience is different from the other transcendental conditions in a more Kantian sense, as neither the world nor our experience of it are necessary.*

Whereas the existence of fairies and so on is a matter of empirical existence, of finite beings, the existence of God is not an empirical question in a similar sense. Empirical science deals with the finite (including the totality of the finite world as we can comprehend and relate to it) whereas theology, which discusses the question of God, deals with the *infinite* in a way that is qualitatively different from that of science.

Summing up: as the infinite power to be in all that is, God makes the world possible, and God is, accordingly, also the transcendental condition for our experience of the world. God makes it possible for us to experience this world in its quality, relation, and otherness, while continuously maintaining the differences between the elements in relation in such a way that the world can exhibit complexity, variation, and a plurality of interrelated forms.

ELEMENTS IN A PANENTHEIST THEOLOGY (2): GOD'S LOVE

In Christian theology, the basic character of God is love. Love displays itself in goodness, and care. A viable claim about the love, goodness, and care that God displays in the world needs a reference to an experiential dimension. If not, talk about God as love remains empty. In human life, love, care, and goodness mostly take on an embodied character, and this is the fundamental reason why these can appear in human experience. From a theological point of view, this means that humans and God are so closely related in these experiences that humans are actually participating in the reality of God when they partake in events that allow loving phenomena to come to the fore. God works in human love and is experienced in goodness. This captures the essence of the Christian panentheist position. As God is not the world, and love is not God, the world nevertheless is in God and manifests God in instances of love, care, goodness, and creativity. Love is the theme that relates God and the world most distinctively.

I argue that one of the conditions for concrete human experience is love. Love determines us, conditions us, both in its concrete and positive forms, and in its absence and our desire for it. Love is behind many of our quests for fulfillment, relationship, and flourishing. Our relation to love, both the positive and the negative, determine how we experience and relate to the world.

The promise of Christian faith is eternal life as participation in God, as God is love. We experience some of the content of what God is, and what this promise might imply when we experience love. God is nevertheless always more than what our experiences contain; God is *semper major*. The share we have in the eternity of God we have by love and grace, a grace that is also present in the natural conditions we live on, and from, and of which we all partake in the presence of God. These natural conditions are something that God uses in God's sacramental presence in the world. We are the hands, the feet, and the bodies through, and by which, God can manifest God's love concretely in this world. Love is something that arises out of relations between beings, but it is not something that we can decide should be there—we can only be open to it, or not. Thus, to be open to God is to be open to love, and vice versa.

The main reason for approaching the theme of God and love from the pantheist position is therefore that the human experience of love is always embodied. This basic feature of the experience of love means that God's love must necessarily be mediated by a body or bodies. However, when speaking of God's love as embodied through human love we must take care not to conflate the two fully. As Werner Jeanrond writes, "any identification between human forms of love and divine love, however well intended, are in danger of not respecting and not loving God as God and the human being as human being" (Jeanrond 2010, 243). So although human love is fundamentally conditioned by a loving and creative God, it also belongs to a human subject that relates to others. Love on the side of both humans and God is accordingly best affirmed, enhanced, and consummated in a network of loving relationships where these differences are intertwined but not dissolved. The main example for understanding this close relationship experientially is in God's incarnation as Jesus of Nazareth—a point I will return to shortly.

There is in the experience of love also a tacit *promise* about eternity (cf. Marion 2007, 100): We do not love within temporal limits, and say, "I will love you for some time now." "I love you" is a statement without temporal restrictions, a point we can see illustrated in the fact that love is something we can have for others even after their death. Even a love that ends for specific reasons once held the promise of continuity and endurance, and its disappearance establishes an experience of loss. This loss is due to the promise that love holds. When I am loved, the presence of this love in my experience is something I hope for and count on that will last, and the assumption that this will be the case is included in the promise that is present in love. This promise in turn shapes and influences my experiences of myself, the other, and the world. Thus, love also has a sacramental character, not only in being relational and manifesting the presence of the other (God) in me, but in its promise about being present in the future and becoming even more fulfilled. The future element of love in the relation

between God and the world is also pointed out by Gregersen when he writes:

In this temporal world, however, we are not yet there. Only that which is born out of love is attuned to the love that God eternally is, and only that which is attuned to divine love can dwell in God. While the prologue of John spoke of the world as participating in the life and light of the Logos, elements of the world are here said to be present in God in the qualitative mode of an indwelling. (Gregersen 2004, 27)

For Christian theology, the *incarnation* reveals God's intimate relationship to God's creation as a concrete expression of our deepest human desires: love and community. Human longing for love and community reflect how deeply we are embedded in the process whereby God realizes Godself in the very same features. However, one can also say that the incarnation is an expression of how God uses God's creation to express who and what God is as love in full measure. The fact that God becomes human in order to realize God's intentions in the world points to how God makes Godself dependent on creation as the means for expressing Godself fully. The main point here is not God's power, but God's *vulnerability*. Thus, the incarnation is not only the key to understanding nature from a theological point of view, but also a key to understanding the ways of God in the world, and why God is affected by what goes on in the world. God works, in, with, and under the processes of nature, including evolution, not by intervening in ways that are opposite to nature's potential. This point is recognized even in Kevin Vanhoozer's critical discussion of panentheism, where he writes: "Panentheists consider the classical theist response—that God intervenes in the world as a substance outside it—to be a dead end. If God were external to the world, his actions in the world would necessarily be interventions and hence unintelligible in terms of this-worldly explanations, assuming that the world is a closed causal nexus" (Vanhoozer 2010, 134). Gregersen sheds light on this idea in his proposal for deep incarnation, which I will draw on in the following.

ELEMENTS IN A PANENTHEIST THEOLOGY (3): DEEP INCARNATION

So far, I have discussed the interaction and mediating sacramental presence of God in the creation and in love as part of the conditions of this world. As Christopher Southgate rightly points out, this can—up to a point—be described as God's immanence in the world (Southgate 2015, 207). However, when we speak about incarnation, he writes that we speak about "the astonishing, gracious, humble gift of the Son's taking flesh for the salvation of all" (Southgate 2015, 207). Incarnation means, accordingly, that the power and love of God as immanent and manifest in all of creation is *materially present in a specific way in Jesus of Nazareth*. In the present

section, I will, as does Southgate, look into how the notion of incarnation has been extended beyond thinking about God as present in human flesh. Gregersen has developed the notion of *deep incarnation* in order to articulate how the eternal Logos not only takes on human flesh but takes on nature more generally. Southgate summarizes his position thus: “Jesus of Nazareth was not just a man but a human animal, an evolved human animal. More than that, he was the victim of the evolutionary process, both in the sense of dying without issue . . . but also in the sense of dying at the hands of the cruelty and violence in defense of self-interest that is utterly unsurprising in evolved animals” (Southgate 2015, 208).

Gregersen himself uses the concept of *deep incarnation* in order to argue that

It is not sufficient to say that God—as a nude God without material connections—is pervasively present in the world of creation. God conjoins *with* and *for* the material world at large *as* a concretely embodied divine-human person who is experiencing perplexity and anguish from within. Deep incarnation thus urges us to reflect upon what kind of God we presume to be present in and for all creatures. (Gregersen 2016, 255)

Thereby, he relates the language of deep incarnation quite closely to the language that pantheists usually employ. Of special interest here is that he also expands the language of “in, with, and under” with another preposition, namely, “for”: God is *for* us—therefore, God relates and engages with the world in a way that makes it impossible to conceive of God as unaffected by what takes place in the world. I argue that Trinitarian thinking is aimed at exactly that: to state that God relates to the world in such a way that what happens in the world (as God’s creation), with God in the world (as the world’s power to be and possibility for expressing itself as love) and as deeply incarnated in the word (as *taking the world up in Godself*)—all these features cannot leave God *unaffected* by the world. The reciprocal relationship between God and the world, therefore, has to be thought as something that expresses itself at different levels.

Gregersen holds that God as the incarnated *Logos* actually is “*sharing* the conditions of materiality to such an extent that the world is continuously embodied in Jesus the Christ (the *Logos ensarkos*).” Therefore, the earthly character of Jesus can properly be said to reveal the eternal character or identity of God (Gregersen 2016, 255). Or, to put it in other words, it is as this human that Jesus is God, when and if God is a human (cf. Henriksen 2009, 333).

Furthermore, Gregersen sees deep incarnation as a notion that suggests “that God does not only enter material existence but also brings it back into a divine embrace.” Of specific interest to us, as we are looking for elements that are of relevance to a Trinitarian pantheism, is the concomitant claim that “there is no material world in which the embodied Christ is not actively

present.” Here, he builds on the ancient thought about the assumption, which he develops as a reciprocal relationship—a *twofold assumption*: the assumption of the flesh by the divine word as well as an assumption of the flesh into divine life (Gregersen 2016, 256). Furthermore, Gregersen refers to the Athanasian Creed, which speaks about *adsumptio humanitatis in Deo* (§ 33). However, his position expands this assumption to creation in general (cf. Gregersen 2013, 455–68). The incarnate Christ thus “exemplifies God’s own willingness to enter the material and imperfect realm of creation, including aspects of suffering and anxiety.” The incarnation understood thus implies that God meets the world of creatures where they actually are—in states of complexity and perplexity, disarray and impurity. To assume the flesh of the whole of creation means more for Gregersen than “just tolerating the material world. It also means God’s embracing and incorporating the cosmic aspects of the world in order to renew God’s own world of creation from the inside out” (2016, 255).

Gregersen also points to how. In the Franciscan tradition, we already can find the view that the incarnation of the divine Logos was a result of an eternal predestination to come to the world of creation (2016, 259). Thus, the Trinitarian God is from “the outset” determined to unite Godself fully with creation, a point Gregersen formulates as incarnation being a “genuine or ‘perfect’ union is only possible if Christ embraces the entire mishmash of created existence, and not only its ideal forms.” Therefore, “Divine perfection does here not mean staying aloof in simplicity but entering into the complex realities of creation in order to bring the manifold world back to God” (2016, 259). Thus, restoration is only possible if the God of the heights goes deep into the full gamut of human existence in order for God to be known by people living in the world of flesh.

The mediated or sacramental presence of God in the incarnation is, therefore, contributing to the concrete conditions on which human can experience the power and the love of God through Christ. This is possible in different realms of human existence. Gregersen writes:

The natural realm of flesh also becomes the social realm of powerlessness and humiliation. Birth and cross, deep incarnation and deep suffering, belong together. Similarly, the story of the incarnation is one that reaches into the body of Jesus no less than into his soul. (Gregersen 2016, 252)

The fact that Christ can experience the world in all realms, and that we can experience God through Christ as one who takes an active part in all these realms, means that incarnation is about more than humanity. God, as incarnated in Christ, can be a human only because the whole of evolution has made it possible, and Christ is possible as incarnated only because God has worked in, with, and through evolution. Interestingly, Gregersen can develop this by pointing to Bonaventure’s Christology, where “the bond between Christ and cosmos is rooted both in his cosmic

exemplarism and in his understanding of the humanity of Christ as a fulfilled microcosm.” Christ is “encapsulating the material realm of creation as well as the noetic orders of reality in his body and soul.” Deep incarnation thus has a cosmic scope: Christ is “the chief exemplification God’s active embrace of the material configurations of the universe, from sand and rocks to living, sentient and cognitive life-forms” (Gregersen 2016, 253). Hence, Gregersen can claim that “Christ the Wisdom is operative in the whole nexus of creation” (Gregersen 2016, 254).

Gregersen asks if these considerations have any traction in today’s worldview, and he answers in the affirmative. A physical perspective implies that “we are all made out of the same stuff as the stars.” Furthermore, “we no longer speak of matter and the material as something dead to be vivified by an additional world-soul. Rather Matter-Energy forms a unity endowed with Information as its structuring principle” (2016, 253). And evolutionary genetics have taught us how we belong to an ecological community and are embedded in ecological networks as ceaselessly active niche-constructors, “and with a deep history behind us and in us which we share with our forebears” (2016, 253).

As a conclusion then, Gregersen can summarize what his notion of deep incarnation means in the following statement:

“Deep incarnation” is the view that God’s own Logos (Wisdom or Word) was made flesh in Jesus the Christ in such a comprehensive manner that God, by assuming the particular life-story of Jesus the Jew from Nazareth, also conjoined the material conditions of creaturely existence (“all flesh”), shared and ennobled the fate of all biological life-forms (“grass” and “lilies”), and experienced the pains of sensitive creatures (“sparrows” and “foxes”) from within. Deep incarnation thus presupposes a radical embodiment that reaches into the roots (*radices*) of material and biological existence as well as into the darker sides of creation: the *tenebra creationis*. Incarnation is thus about a radical divine self-embodiment that reaches into in the whole system of the material world (Mass/Energy/Information), including biological life forms from growth to decay, from cooperation to competition. (2016, 255)

I argue that Gregersen’s notion of deep incarnation makes it impossible to understand the world in a manner where God remains unaffected by what happens there. It means, first, that God is active in the world in order to create, and thus also creates the specific conditions for incarnation as well, because they are part of the evolutionary process. But second, his position also means that if we take seriously the deeply reciprocal relationship between the divine persons, and therefore also between God and Christ as an example of the relationship between God and the world, then God cannot be unaffected. Christ is a sign and a reality, and as such, he is manifesting a real promise about the possible future of the world. This sign is displayed in vulnerable power, but also in love.

Summing up, we can say that the notion of deep incarnation provides a means for articulating the integral relationship between creation and redemption, between God and the world, and between the present and the promised state of the world. In Christ, the fulfillment of the world is manifest as a promise about the future fulfilled relationship that God has with the world, and which is anticipated in faith, hope and love in the present. Thus, incarnational panentheism is not only a statement about present affairs, but from a soteriological point of view also a promise.

Here, we may in conclusion also point to the relationship between the creation-based and the sacramental element in a Trinitarian panentheism. The need for maintaining the soteriological dimension is, as Gregersen argues, that the world's being "in God" is not taken as a given, but as a gift. It is only by the redeeming grace of God that the world can dwell in God; not everything shares automatically in divine life. Wickedness and sin, for example, have no place in the reign of God. Thus in a classic Christian perspective the world's being "in God" does not so much state a general matter of fact, but is predicated only about those aspects of created reality that have become godlike, while they still remain a created reality. Only in the eschatological consummation of creation shall God finally be "all in all" (I Corinthians 15:28) (Gregersen 2004, 21).

CONCLUSION: PANENTHEISM AS VISION

I have suggested that panentheism can be seen as a vision that emerges out of, and is closely related to, historical experience, and out of experiential elements such as semiosis, the power to be, love, and the historical event of incarnation. The latter, historical incarnation, testifies to the promise inherent in all of creation, and the loving power that can be detected as working in, with, and under creation. Thus, panentheism articulates main concerns in classical Christian theology, and does so in ways that manifest the close relationship between God and the world in a far more interactive way than does theism.

This does not mean that all ambiguity with regard to the experience of the world is dissolved. To the contrary. As long as the world stands, there is a choice as to which vision of it we should engage, and thus realize. This is a choice about in what ways the world should be interpreted as a sign (used pragmatically), and as a sign of what (pointing towards content). As long as the world remains ambiguous, the faith in God as a loving creator remains a vision for the world, a vision that also implies a calling to articulate faith, hope, and love as basic and the best conditions for humanity and for creation in general. When Christians worship the triune God, they give themselves over to, rest in, and glorify this God by manifesting the glory of God as the creating and redeeming power that brings the world forth

from chaos, delivers it from evil, and who in the future will consummate everything in love.

NOTES

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