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Panentheism in the context of the theology and science dialogue

Abstract: The term "panentheism" (literally, everything in God) mediates between pantheism of the sort espoused by Spinoza and classical theism (God as transcendent Creator of the world). In this essay, in dialogue with the contemporary Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen I review various historical positions re panentheism before concluding with a summary statement of my own understanding of the God-world relationship. The ancient Greek Orthodox tradition, for example, can be retrieved to set forth what might be called soteriological panentheism whereby the communitarian life of the three divine persons of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is freely offered to all creatures at the end of the world. The German Idealists Krause, Hegel and Schelling focused instead on the progressive self-manifestation of God in the world of creation in and through a dialectical process governed by Divine Mind or Will. In the mid-20th century Charles Hartshorne, the disciple of Alfred North Whitehead, presented what he called dipolar panentheism: God as the "soul" of the world and the world as the "body of God." The Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin located the goal of cosmic evolution in the Pauline vision of the Cosmic Christ who thereby "personalizes" the whole of creation. Most current understandings of panentheism are derived from one or another of these earlier efforts at understanding how the world can be both in God and yet distinct from God. I myself use the notion of hierarchically ordered systems employed in the life-sciences to make clear how the higher-order system proper to the communitarian life of the three divine persons both conditions and is conditioned by the lower-order systems proper to the world of creation.

Keywords: Panentheism, Niels Henrik Gregersen, Greek Orthodox Tradition, German Idealism, Process Philosophy and Theology, The Cosmic Christ, Systems Theory.

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The term "panentheism" was coined by the German Idealist philosopher of the early 19th century, Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, in an attempt to mediate between pantheism of the sort espoused by Spinoza (*deus sive natura*) and classical theism (God as Infinite Being who first freely creates a finite world apart from God-self and then by special divine intervention redeems it so as to unite it with God-itself in the *eschaton,* the end of the finite world). As Michael Brierley comments:

> At every stage of its entry into modern theology, panentheism has represented a middle path between two extremes, and so it has explicitly become one of the three essential types of the most fundamental of doctrines, the doctrine of God. Classical theism, pantheism, and panentheism are recognized as the basic patterns through which the doctrine of God can be analyzed (Brierley 2004, 3).

Perhaps more precisely, panentheism represents the modern attempt to offer a coherent explanation of the term Infinite Being as applied to the God of Biblical revelation. To quote Philip Clayton in his magisterial work *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*:

> Philosophical theologians have long struggled to show how an entity can be at the same time an individual being and Being-itself. On the one hand, a ground of being lacks the attributes for being personal, for example, being in relationship to something outside itself (there is nothing outside itself!). On the other [hand], *a* being is per se finite, since only in contrast to something else is it *this* being. Yet the notion of God is supposed to encompass both of these concepts; God is supposed to be *the infinite being* (Clayton 2000, 478).

In the following essay, I will review positions *pro* and *con* of a number of prominent contemporary Christian philosophers of science and Christian theologians re the notion of panentheism before concluding with a summary statement of my own understanding of panentheism via a systems-oriented approach to reality.

As my guide for this overview of positions re panentheism. I will use the typology of Niels Henrik Gregersen in an article entitled "Three Varieties of Panentheism" (Gregersen 2004, 19-35). By way of introductory remarks, he indicates why he took such a pluralistic approach to the notion of panentheism. In his view, "the concept of panentheism is not stable in itself. The little word 'in' is the hinge of it all. There may be as many panentheisms as there are ways of qualifying the world's being 'in God'" (19). Yet they all "share the intuition of a living two-way relation between God and world, within the inclusive reality of God" (20). The three varieties of panentheism are in their more or less historical order of appearance within the history of Christianity: soteriological panentheism (in the Greek Orthodox tradition as interpreted by Greek Orthodox theologians like John Zizioulas), expressivist panentheism (in the context of the German Idealists Hegel and the late Schelling), and the dipolar panentheism inspired by Alfred North Whitehead and his disciple Charles Hartshorne. I will first review Gregersen's comments re each of these approaches and then note the points where we agree and disagree.

With reference to soteriological panentheism, Gregersen initially notes that the God-world relationship developed by Thomas Aquinas and other medieval philosopher/theologians cannot be classified as panentheistic, i.e., involving a two-way relation between God and the world. For, relying on the philosophy of Aristotle, they presupposed that "substance" is the first category of being and that "relation" is an "accident" or contingent qualification of whatever is regarded as a substance in its essential reality (25). With respect to the God-world relationship, this means that God has a real relation to the world, but the world has only a conceptual relation to God. The world of creation, in other words, is affected by God as its First Cause or Creator. But God is not affected in God's own being by what happens in the world (25; see also Aquinas 1951: ST, I, Q. 9, a. 1). I only note that within Aquinas's scheme God is nevertheless present to the world: namely, as first cause of everything finite that exists, through God's intellectual knowledge and love of all finite things, and through God's power to make things happen in creation (Aquinas 1951: I, Q. 8, art. 3 resp.). Furthermore, unlike a material reality, God does not take up space, i.e., exclude other entities from a given spatial location, by being present in a certain place (Aquinas 1951: I, Q. 8, a. 2 resp.). But Gregersen is certainly correct in claiming that the God-world relationship within the philosophy of Aquinas is not panentheistic in the normal sense. God is in the world but the world is not in God. As Pure Spirit, God is immutable. Hence, even though the "perfections" of material things can be found in God as the First Cause of their existence in these things, they are present in God in a more prefect immaterial way that is compatible with divine immutability (Aquinas 1951: ST, I, Q. 4, a. 2).

Yet, says Gregersen, within the Greek Orthodox tradition "the life of God is a *community* constituted by the interdependence of the divine persons. God exists as God only in the eternal mutual relations of self-donation and interpenetration (*perichoresis*) between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Gregersen 2004, 25). Within this context, human beings who have been redeemed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and thus purified of their sinful tendencies shall in the *eschaton* share in the divine communitarian life (27). Even now, the world is "in God"; nothing can exist apart from the network of relations shaped and sustained by the divine persons which also serves as the divine milieu for all communication taking place within the world (Gregersen 2004, 26). This vision of all creation existing within the divine milieu is quite akin to my own eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God. But in contrast to the Greek Orthodox tradition (and possibly Gregersen as well) for me relationality is ontologically prior to individual personhood. That is, by nature we human beings cannot exist apart from one another, but we acknowledge that deep need for one another only in terms of a privileged few. As Martin Buber comments in *I and Thou*, "I require a You to become I; becoming I, I say You" (Buber 1970, 62). Likewise, with his notion of the divine persons as subsistent relations (Aquinas 1951: ST I, Q. 29, art. 4), Aquinas implies that the divine persons need one another simply to be themselves as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But is this true for the Greek Orthodox tradition, given the traditional priority of the Father to the Son and the Spirit?

Zizioulas, for example, claims that the Trinity is the communion of three divine persons only in virtue of the ecstatic activity of the First Person of the Trinity, the Father as source of all that exists. In *Being and Otherness,* for example, he says:

> The one God and the triune God are thus conceived simultaneously, thanks not to an impersonal relationality or 'Triunity' but to a *hypostasis* [person] which is both particular and relational. The Father's otherness and particularity does not subject or negate but, on the contrary, affirms the particularity of the other 'others,' being as he is their free and loving originator from whom 'flows both the equality and the being of equals" (Zizioulas 2006, 137).

Otherness and communion, to be sure, are intrinsically interrelated: "The Person is otherness in communion and communion in otherness" (Zizioulas 2006, 9). That is, the identity of a person exists only in virtue of communion or relationality: "If we isolate the 'I' from the 'thou' we lose not only its otherness but also its very being; it simply cannot be without the other" (9). But, as noted above, within the divine communitarian life the Father is the cause of the existence and activity of the other two divine persons. So, while the Father needs the Son and the Spirit to be Father, just as they need him to be themselves, their equality with one another still has its origin in the 'ecstatic' self-transcending personhood of the Father. In the theology of Aquinas God as First Cause is beyond the categories of substance and accident. For Zizioulas, the Father as Cause of everything that exists is an individual entity that is different from, irreducibly "other" than every other entity, including the other two divine persons: "Even when we look for accounts for (i.e. causes) divine being, we are confronted with otherness, that is, with a particular person, the Father" (11). Without doubt, the notion of ecstatic personhood is more dynamic in its connotation than the notion of "substance" as something self-existing. It lends itself to the notions of communion and relationality much better than "substance". But the notion of substance is easier to apply to the analysis of the inanimate things of this world than the notion of person which seems to privilege human beings over all the other living and non-living entities of this world. So on balance Greek Orthodox theology, at least as further interpreted by Zizioulas, does not seem to offer a much better resource for the understanding of the contemporary notion of panentheism than the theology of Aquinas. That is, in both cases individual entities are ultimately responsible for the existence of communion or relationality among themselves. The constituent parts constitute the whole, not vice-versa. At least in some versions of process theology, as I will argue below, the reverse is true. Given that (actual) entities in a process-oriented context by definition come and go quickly, relations as stable patterns of existence and activity among such entities are what endure so as to constitute the world as a cosmic community.

Gregersen then discusses the second type of panentheism, what he calls Expressivist Panentheism in the work of the author of the term "panentheism," Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781-1832) who took his inspiration from the German Idealists, Fichte and Schelling. Whereas Aquinas in the Western tradition and the Cappadocian Fathers in the Eastern tradition were preoccupied in different ways with the objective unity of God as First Cause of everything that exists, Krause instead focused on the subjective unity of God as Divine Will, God's overflowing love for creatures: "Love is the living form of the inner organic unification of all life in God. Love is the eternal will of God to be lovingly present in all beings and to take back the life of all his members into Himself as their whole life" (Gregersen 2004, 28). Conceiving God in terms of Love or the Divine Will contrasts sharply with the traditional Thomistic understanding of God as in the first place Mind, not Will: "A central feature of Thomism is its emphasis on intellect – on the primacy of intellect in God and man, and generally on the rational structure of the created universe. Duns [Scotus], on the contrary, assigned primacy to will, in both God and man" (Jones 1969, 311). That is, within the Thomistic scheme human free will generally follows the last practical judgment of the intellect (Copleston 1962, 101). But, within Scotus's understanding of human psychology, the will "has no cause other than itself. Like God's will, ours is completely free to choose – whatever it will" (Jones 1969, 312). Thus the will in both God and human beings moves itself; it is not moved by the intellect to its proper choice. Similarly, Aquinas's Franciscan contemporary Bonaventure emphasized the overflowing Goodness of God the Father which accounts both for a plurality of persons within the divine life and the existence of creation (Bracken 2008, 22). With the focus on will rather than intellect in both God and human beings, of course, one has moved

from the realm of objectivity governed by rational cause-effect relations to the realm of subjectivity in which spontaneity and free choice are key factors.

Thus "Krause's panentheism shares the goal of romanticism and idealism, viz., to overcome the split between humanity and nature and to move beyond the alternatives of a supernatural theism (as epitomized by Leibniz) and the idea of pantheism (as formulated by Spinoza)" (Gregersen 2004, 28). I concur with Gregersen in that judgment. I likewise agree that Hegel in his own way advanced Krause's insight into divine subjectivity to set forth his own dialectical understanding of the God-world relationship: "The overarching model of God is here one of a self-conscious subjectivity who creates the otherness of creation in order to bring it back into divine life. Hegel is here an heir of the Western version of Trinitarian theology that gives priority to the unity of God, here in the form of the self-manifesting subjectivity of the Father" (30). God is one, but the unity of God is not that of transcendent First Cause in a world constituted by finite cause-effect relationships in ordered relation to that First Cause, but the unity of a transcendent subjectivity, Absolute Spirit as the Identity of Subjectivity and Objectivity.

But, in line with Schelling's critique of Hegel, beginning with Schelling's lectures on the history of philosophy at the University of Munich in 1827, I would argue that Hegel's understanding of divine (and human) subjectivity is still far too rational with little or no place for Will in the form of non-rational feeling and desire. For Schelling in the so-called "middle" and "late" periods of his philosophical career, however, Will in the form of desire (*Sehnsucht*) replaced Mind or pure rationality in his understanding of the God-world relationship. For example, in his *Freiheitsschrift* published in 1809 Schelling dealt with first the possibility and then the reality of human evil or sin, Schelling used the mystical philosophy of Jacob Böhme to stipulate that the Ground of Being both in God and in creation is not Mind but feeling-oriented non-rational Will (Bracken 1972, 43-56). So the dialectic in Schelling is not between logical contradictories as in the philosophy of Hegel but between competing wills, the will of the ground (non-rational desire) and the rational will which in God are perfectly harmonized but in human beings are in ongoing conflict. Then, in his "late philosophy" Schelling contrasted the "negative philosophy" of Hegel and his own *System des Transcendentalen Idealism* of his early period with his new "positive philosophy." The negative philosophy is purely conceptual with logical determinism as a result; the positive philosophy is empirically grounded in the *de facto* free choice (*Urtat*) of the divine subjectivity to reveal Godself in and through the process of creation (Bracken 1972, 102-120). Schelling then is much more in line with Krause's strong emphasis on God as divine Love that is governed by feeling instead of transcendent Mind that is governed by reason as with Hegel.

Even more important for this historical overview of the doctrine of panentheism in the West is Schelling's emphasis in the *Freiheitsschrift* that God's self-revelation in and through the cosmic process is primarily aimed at the creation of human beings as likewise free in their dealings with God even at the cost of bringing evil into the world as an indirect consequence (Bracken 1972, 39-40). One could question, of course, whether the freedom of God to create and the freedom of human beings to respond freely to God both in the *Freiheitsschrift* and later in the positive philosophy of Schelling's late period are grounded in a necessity of nature, a dialectical process whereby both God and human beings achieve personhood (Bracken 1972, 57-61). But even so Schelling makes clear that intersubjectivity, not just subjectivity, is key to understanding the true God-world relationship. What is not free cannot be in God fully, namely as person to person, but only exists tangentially in God as likewise impersonal or pre-personal, namely, as the Ground of Being (Bracken 1972, 38). In Hegel's philosophy, on the contrary, there is the end only one subjectivity, Absolute Spirit. All finite subjectivities are instrumental to the full self-manifestation of God as the Identity of Subjectivity and Objectivity. This is not to discount the many valuable insights to be found in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, notably in Hegel's analysis of the master-slave dialectic at the beginning of Book Two on self-consciousness. But the movement of thought in *The Phenomenology* is toward the conceptual realization of Absolute Spirit as the complete identity of subjectivity and objectivity. This concept can only be empirically identified with God or the reader of Hegel's philosophy who accepts it as true. In itself, as Schelling pointed out with his contrast between negative and positive philosophy, it is a closed conceptual system without empirical reference, a triumph of speculative logic but nothing more.

Gregersen's analysis and critique of dipolar or Whiteheadian panentheism is in my judgment basically correct. It is important to note, however, that Whitehead himself would not have immediately thought of himself as a panentheist although his philosophical cosmology is dipolar. As he says in Part V of *Process and Reality*, "God and the world are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjoined multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into concrescent unity, with its diversities in contrast" (Whitehead 1978, 348). So for Whitehead the dipolarity is not within God but between God and the world, and the unity of existence and activity within the notion of dipolarity is to be found not in God but in Creativity as the principle of the cosmic process or simply in the cosmic process itself as a systematic whole. Hartshorne presumably derived his notion of panentheism from Whitehead's claim that God has two natures: the primordial nature, namely, "the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality" (Whitehead 1978, 343); and the consequent nature, namely, "the weaving of God's physical feelings [through prehension of the world of finite actual entities from moment to moment] upon his primordial concepts" (345). In other words, within God there is a timeless intuition of a world of "eternal objects", abstract patterns of existence and activity for finite actual entities in their dynamic interrelation, and a "prehension" or empirical perception of all the events in the cosmic process from moment to moment. Thus within God there is an ongoing unification of potentiality and actuality so that God can be the ongoing principle of unity within a world otherwise characterized by pure diversity.

For Hartshorne the primordial nature of God represents God as transcendent of the empirical world; the consequent nature represents God as immanent within the world (Gregersen 2004, 31; Hartshorne & Reese 1953, 506). On this basis, Hartshorne claims that he has vindicated the notion of panentheism as the only viable option between classical dualism in which God is completely transcendent of the world and pantheism in which God is identified with the world or the world is identified with God. In my judgment, however, Hartshorne is mistaken in this claim. Within his cosmological scheme, only God exists as an enduring reality. The empirical world changes in its components and their interrelated patterns of existence and activity from moment to moment; it achieves enduring reality or "objective immortality" not as a finite entity in its own right, but only in God. Reductively, then, Hartshorne is a pantheist. What Hartshorne calls "God" could just as easily be the world as a self-standing corporate system of parts or members, an ongoing cosmic process. Whitehead was more honest in saying that Creativity as the principle of the cosmic process rather than God is Ultimate Reality (Whitehead 1978, 7; 21). God, like every finite actual entity is a "creature" of Creativity (88), an indispensable component of the cosmic process as its principle of unity in dialectical opposition to the ever-changing world of finite actual entities as the principle of diversity for the cosmic process. Yet in the end only the cosmic process which is without beginning or end is Ultimate Reality for Whitehead. Hartshorne presumably saw the awkwardness of Whitehead's understanding of the God-world relationship for acceptance by Christians and other theists. So he used the metaphor of God as the soul of the world and the world as the body of God (e.g., Hartshorne 1936, 218-20). But if God is "the only eternal individual" (218), that is, if the world as the body of God keeps changing and only God has an enduring self-identity, then what results is pantheism, not panentheism in the strict sense (finite entities exist both as themselves and as in God).

Most of the problems that Gregersen lists with respect to Whiteheadian dipolar panentheism seem to be traceable to this ontological priority of the cosmic process to its parts or members. There is, for example, no doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in the metaphysics of Whitehead and Hartshorne since the cosmic process as Ultimate Reality by definition has no beginning or end (Gregersen 2004, 31). Likewise, according to Whitehead, God is no more transcendent of the World than the Word is transcendent of God since both God and the World, as noted above, are dialectical opposites within the cosmic process (Whitehead 1978, 348; Gregersen 2004, 33). In my own work on a process-oriented panentheism as Gregersen acknowledges (Gregersen 2004, 33n. 5), God transcends the World in that the World originates from within the divine Ground of Being, the structured field of activity proper to the three divine persons in their ongoing relationship with one another apart from the world of creation. Here is where my prior research and writing on Schelling's notion of the Ground of Being for both God and creation (cf. above) was very helpful. If one is to think of the God-world relationship in terms of panentheism (creatures within God but still distinct from God in their ongoing existence and activity), it makes much more sense

to claim that God and creatures share a common Ground of Being which is in the first place the vital source for the ongoing existence and activity of God apart from the World. Especially if God is triune, an ongoing unity of existence and activity for three distinct but dynamically interrelated divine persons, the thought of creation as coming into existence and being sustained by the same vital source as that for the three divine persons, albeit only through their antecedent free decision to share their life with creatures, seems to be a very reasonable hypothesis. One thereby avoids the speculative problem in classical metaphysics of how God and creation can co-exist without the concomitant danger of either pantheism or dualism. Entities can presumably share comparable activities with one another much easier than their very identity as different kinds of entities.

One other contemporary school of thought on the issue of panentheism that Gregersen did not mention in his overview is that inspired by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and currently represented by Beatrice Bruteau, founder of a network of Christian contemplatives, Ilia Delio and John Haught of the Woodstock Center at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., Ursula King at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom, Mary Evelyn Tucker at Yale Divinity School, and many others (see e.g., Duffy 2010). I have compared the metaphysical vision of Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead and concluded that both of them seemed to presuppose an underlying metaphysics of intersubjectivity for their respective cosmologies that was never worked out in detail (Bracken 2010, 163-71). In this article I will only call attention to one feature of Teilhard's version of panentheism with which I take issue, namely, his vision of the Cosmic Christ as the goal of the cosmic process on this earth and with respect to the salvation of the human race. As I see it, Teilhard was working within the framework of Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics in trying to articulate his metaphysical vision. As a result, he interpreted the growth and overall directionality of the evolutionary process in terms of final causality in a deterministic sense. While Christian belief in the Cosmic Christ is grounded in the Pauline epistles (Eph. 1, 3-10; Col. 1, 15-20) within the New Testament, it cannot be empirically verified by careful analysis of the actual workings of the evolutionary process to date. There is too much contingency at work, especially at the level of living organisms to warrant that conclusion on a scientific basis. Thus Whitehead's comment in *Process and Reality* to the effect that "the general purpose pervading nature" is the ongoing growth of more complex "structured societies" of actual entities (Whitehead 1978, 100) would seem to be more in line with the thinking of contemporary natural scientists. A Christian can certainly affirm the goal of transcendent union with the Cosmic Christ at the end of the world. But this is a faith-statement, not a necessary consequence of an empirically established scientific hypothesis.

Celia Deane-Drummond, both natural scientist and Christian systematic theologian at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, is likewise critical of Teilhard de Chardin's identification of Christian belief in the Cosmic Christ at the end of Salvation History with the ultimate goal of the cosmic process. In her view, Teilhard's understanding of evolution "seems to rest on metaphysical theory and cosmology rather than the evolutionary biology of Charles Darwin" (Deane-Drummond 2009, 40). As a result, "Christ becomes embedded in the [evolutionary] process as such, thus endorsing that process, rather than being freely given by God to creation" (30). In her view, "if a panentheistic model of the relationship between God and the world is to be *Christian* rather than simply *theist*, it requires proper reflection on the radical particularity of Christ as the revelation of God expressed in the mystery of the incarnation" (Deane-Drummond 2004, 233). Moreover, Jesus as the unique historical embodiment of both the Logos and the Wisdom traditions in the New Testament gives the secular notion of panentheism further meaning and value in terms of the redemption of the world from the pain and suffering caused by the reality of natural and moral evil in the cosmic process (240-42). This focus on the incarnation of the Divine Word in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the key to a Christian understanding of panentheism naturally limits the applicability of her views on panentheism for non-Christian but still theistic philosopher/theologians. But her intention is clearly to move away from more secular process-oriented views on panentheism such as that espoused by Charles Hartshorne with his metaphor of God as the soul of the universe and the universe as the body of God (Deane-Drummond 2004, 234-35; 2009, 28-30).

Ruth Page, lecturer in systematic theology at Otago University in Dunedin, New Zealand, is also critical of the idea that process means progress rather than simply change in form and function for a given species.

"Increasing complexity in one direction decreases flexibility in another" (Page 2004, 223). Humans are small, slow creatures in comparison with other animal species who excel in speed or size. Likewise, self-consciousness enables human beings to transcend their immediate situation and needs, but also is a source of anxiety and frustration in that human beings can remember the past and anticipate the future (Page 2004, 223). Finally, human self-consciousness is achieved only at the cost of the gradual extinction of over 90% of other life forms in the course of the evolutionary process (Page 2004, 223). All these criticisms, of course, apply to Teilhard's belief that the growth in order and complexity within the cosmic process will lead inevitably beyond the evolution of mind to the hyper-personal, the Omega Point where the Cosmic Christ incorporates into itself everything within the cosmic process that can be "personalized", in the first place, human beings (Teilhard de Chardin 1959, 26-63; 297-98).

Ilia Delio, both natural scientist and systematic theology, finds the thought of Teilhard de Chardin quite attractive for her own work in science and religion. For example, she uses the notion of "strange attractor" in contemporary chaos theory to indicate how Christ is subtly influencing the minds and hearts of not just Christians but people of various religious and non-religious backgrounds to work for a more peaceful and just world order. As she explains, in open-ended or far from equilibrium systems within nature "spontaneous basins of attraction can appear that pull the system into new behaviors or new patterns over time" (Delio 2011, 145). Christ is a "strange attractor" in contemporary life because the symbol of the Cosmic Christ gives rise to "Christ fields" that are appearing spontaneously, pulling local currents of human energy into new patterns of community, oneness of heart, and relationship with the earth (145). This, of course, is a faith-based belief with which I am quite sympathetic even though I recognize that it cannot be confirmed empirically from a strictly scientific perspective. Mary Evelyn Tucker sees the value of Teilhard's notion of a "divine milieu" as the basis of a much needed ecological spirituality in spiritual life: "Timely and timeless, it [the notion of the divine milieu] provides a rich resource for our own period, one in which the deleterious effects of global climate change have become more evident. As we witness the extinction of species and the devastation of ecosystems, we would be wise to bring Teilhard's sense of geological time into our discussions. Only a large-scale evolutionary framework will help us understand and interpret our loss" (Tucker 2010, 33). The divine milieu, of course, is itself centered on the Cosmic Christ as the Omega Point of Evolution: "a *distinct Centre radiating at the core of a system of centres*; a grouping in which personalisation of the All and personalisations of the elements reach their maximum, simultaneously and without merging, under the influence of a supremely autonomous focus of union" (Teilhard de Chardin 1959, 262-63). There is, of course, some ambiguity here with the age-old problem of the One and the Many. A transcendent One tends to subordinate the Many to itself with covert monism (in this case, pantheism) a danger as a result. A One that is emergent out of the interplay of the Many, i.e., the One as a system of entities rather than a transcendent individual entity, is much more consistent with the idea of panentheism, as I shall indicate shortly in the exposition of my own version of panentheism. But here too, of course, there is no way from a scientific perspective to prove that there is an ultimate goal of the cosmic process and that the Cosmic Christ is that ultimate goal or Omega Point of the process.

The image of the divine milieu in Teilhard's mystical vision also figures prominently in a recent article by Ursula King on Teilhard's cosmic spirituality. On the one hand, milieu clearly means environment or context. "On the other hand, 'milieu' also means a central point, a center where all realities come together, meet, and converge" (King 2010, 21). Given that Teilhard was "an incarnational Trinitarian theist" (25), it might be better to describe the divine milieu as the structured field of activity first for the ongoing dynamic interrelation of the three divine persons and then, by the free decision of these same divine persons, the ground of being or vital source of activity for the world of creation from the Big Bang onward. In this way, creation literally exists within what might be called the Kingdom of God. The key point here is to avoid identifying the divine milieu with an individual entity, even the Cosmic Christ; one has to employ a socially oriented concept such as the Kingdom of God in which the divine persons and all their creatures are co-participants, albeit in different ways and in varying degrees. Fields of activity like systems (as noted above) are objective specifically social realities which are brought into being and continually sustained by the interrelated activity of their constituent parts or members (from a Whiteheadian perspective, constituent actual entities as dynamically interrelated subjects of experience). Moreover, since both systems and fields

of activity are process-oriented realities, they can be hierarchically ordered with lower-order systems serving as the infrastructure for higher-order systems, and fields of activity for entities with less internal organization being incorporated into fields of activity for entities with more internal structure and mode of operation. One thinks here of the way that molecules with their limited mode of operation are combined into cells with a much more complex mode of operation. Yet, at the same time, the molecules retain their reality as molecules of a certain type within the higher-order existence and activity of the cell as a higher-order "structured society" (Whitehead 1978, 99). The divine milieu, then, is the higher-order system or structured field of activity within which creation as itself an ongoing network or mega-society of subordinate societies can be integrated. In this way, the divine milieu can radiate "throughout all levels of the universe, through matter, life, and human experience" (King 2010, 21) without any risk of pantheism as a result.

In an article entitled "Teilhard and the Question of Life's Suffering," John Haught claims that more is needed for the explanation of suffering in this world, especially gratuitous or seemingly pointless suffering, than the standard Darwinian understanding of suffering as "an adaptation that enhances the probability of survival and reproductive success in complex organisms" (Haught 2010, 53). For, "according to Darwin, sentient subjects have to *struggle* for existence. Struggling, of course, is an instance of *striving*, but it is only subjects that can strive or aim intentionally at achieving a goal" (58). With his premise that there is an "inside" as well as an "outside" for every molecule, however, Teilhard presupposes the existence of subjectivity everywhere in the world (Teilhard 1959, 72). Even more important for understanding the role of suffering within the evolutionary process, says Haught, is that Teilhard "views suffering in the context of an *unfinished creation* rather than exclusively in terms of expiation" (Haught 2010, 60). Suffering is not a consequence of sin to be paid for by the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross, but rather as a sacrificial moment in the movement toward a final goal, "a future cosmic unity in the everlasting care of a God who calls the universe into being from up ahead in the future" (63). This is an inspirational idea but I myself am suspicious that it still reflects an Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of final causality with the implication of a predetermined divine goal for the cosmic process. In line with the thinking of Whitehead, I would readily concede that the future as well as the past figures heavily in the self-constitution of an actual entity in the present moment. That is, the past is what bears upon the actual entity's self-constituting decision in terms of settled fact, and the future impacts upon the present in terms of realizable (as opposed to fanciful) possibilities. Hence, "the future has *objective* reality in the present, but no *formal* actuality" (Whitehead 1978, 215). Likewise, God's care for a universe still in the making is for Whitehead and myself not from up ahead in the future but in the present moment: "The revolts of destructive evil, purely self-regarding, are dismissed into their triviality of individual facts; and yet the good they did achieve in individual joy, in individual sorrow, in the introduction of needed contrast, is yet saved by its relation to the completed whole" (346). So in a Whiteheadian process-oriented universe, the whole is achieved moment by moment. Unlike the Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of the whole, it does not lie in the future except as a possibility for future growth.

Finally, Beatrice Bruteau likewise draws inspiration from Teilhard for her vision of the cosmic process as the "ecstasy" of God, God's self-manifestation in what is other than Godself (Bruteau 1997, 21). The underlying philosophical insight for her belief that the world is God's ecstasy is an understanding of the relation between the One and the Many that I myself share: "The many are not reduced to the one, and the one is not scattered into the many" (18). The three divine persons of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity are both "enstatic" and "ecstatic," existing both in themselves and outside of themselves in the other two Persons (97). Then, in line with Teilhard's vision of the "within" as well as the "without" of everything in this world (Teilhard 1959, 68-74), she claims that the wholeness characteristic of the communitarian life of the three divine persons is likewise the distinguishing mark of the ongoing evolution of the cosmic process since the Big Bang. The physical world consists of systems based on intersubjectivity, the sharing of existence and activity among dynamically interrelated subjects of experience (Bruteau 1997, 43; 48- 50; Teilhard 1959, 43-44). Two theologically oriented metaphors fill out her cosmic vision of the God-world relationship: Incarnation and *Theotokos* (in Greek, God-bearer). The Incarnation is "the cosmos as God taking form as the finite, God 'coming down' into/as the world. This is God's act, for God's reasons, God's

self-expression" (Bruteau 1997, 21). As the title of her book states, the cosmos is God's ecstasy, God's singular self-manifestation. The *Theotokos*, on the contrary, is the cosmos as "giving birth to God, bringing the creative act full circle" (Bruteau 1997, 21). The descent of the Infinite God into the finite world is thereby matched with the ascent of the finite world into symbiotic relationship with God as God's Child. But the world is still separate from God as a child is separate from the parent who gave it birth and shares its genes with the child (Bruteau 1997, 41).

Much can be said in praise of Bruteau's understanding of the God-world relationship. It is clearly in line with Teilhard's cosmic vision that the triune God is both the Alpha and the Omega of the evolutionary process on this earth. Yet, for the same reason, I am wary of a too close relationship between God and the world with the danger of an implicit pantheism as a result. For example, in referring to the universe as the Child of the Trinity, is she implying that the universe is of the same nature as God, just as a human child is of the same nature as its parents, a different individual but sharing the same human nature? Naturally, Bruteau would object that this is to take the metaphor too seriously, to treat it as a literal description of the God-world relationship rather than an imperfect analogy or model of that relationship. But if God as the Infinite or foundational Being is necessarily involved in the progressive growth of system or community at all the different levels of existence and activity within the universe (Bruteau 1997, 18-19), then pantheism (God as everything and/or everything as God), however unintentionally, seems to fit her cosmic vision. That is, either God incorporates the world into God's self-fulfillment (God's Ecstasy) or the world as the ongoing symbiosis of the One and the Many includes God, specifically the Cosmic Christ, as its supreme actualization or instantiation.

To sum up my review of various positions on the notion of panentheism thus far, I conclude that Gregersen is correct in thinking that "the concept of panentheism is not stable in itself. The little word 'in' is the hinge of it all. There may be as many panentheisms as there are ways of qualifying the world's being 'in God'" (Gregersen 2004, 19). Hence, I offer a brief sketch of my own version of panentheism as a way to end this essay. It too, of course, is no more than a symbolic representation of what cannot be observed and thus be capable of empirical verification (Barbour 1997, 119). In line with Alfred North Whitehead, I presuppose that physical reality is constituted by actual entities, momentary self-constituting subjects of experience that rapidly follow one another and thereby preserve what Whitehead calls a "common element of form" or "defining characteristic" (Whitehead 1978, 34). I differ from Whitehead in claiming that the aggregates or "societies" of actual entities that thus result have an objective reality over and above their constituent actual entities in their dynamic interrelation from moment to moment. They equivalently become enduring things or Aristotelian substances, albeit enduring things that evolve in terms of that same common element of form or defining characteristic as a consequence of having constituent parts or members that are in constant flux. Hence, whereas an Aristotelian substance has a fixed substantial form that actively governs the way its constituent parts or members are ordered to one another and to itself, a Whiteheadian society in my view is the ongoing byproduct or objective result of the agency of its constituent actual entities from moment to moment. Thus a Whiteheadian society is a process more than it is an enduring thing. To highlight its objective enduring reality, I prefer to think of a Whiteheadian society as an enduring structured field of activity for successive generations of actual entities or as a tightly organized ongoing system of such actual entities. Finally, thus understood these structured fields of activity or systems of actual entities can be hierarchically ordered vis-à-vis one another so as to constitute progressively more comprehensive fields of activity or mega-systems with multiple subsystems as their constituent parts or members.

Given that systems-oriented approach to physical reality, I can then proceed to describe the communitarian life of the three divine persons of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as also a system, in fact, as the primordial system within the hierarchy of systems characteristic of physical reality. Moreover, if a system presupposes for its operation a shared field of activity for the ongoing interrelation of its parts or members, then the shared field of activity for the ongoing interaction of the divine persons could conceivably be the "space" within which the cosmic process originated billions of years ago and into which it is destined to be more and more fully integrated as time goes on. Gregersen, to be sure, cautioned in his article "Three Varieties of Panentheism" against the uncritical use of spatial metaphors to imagine what is meant by the term panentheism on the grounds that "the transcendence of God would be understood

as mere extension of the world's space" (Gregersen 1997, 20). But in my own "spatial" metaphor for the God-world relationship, it is rather the world that exists within God's space or "roominess", as Gregersen puts it. Furthermore, if one presupposes that within a systems-oriented approach to reality, there is both a top-down and a bottom-up causation between hierarchically ordered systems (the higher-order system in each case being constrained in its existence and activity by the mode of operation of the lower-order system(s) and vice-versa the lower-order system(s) being constrained in their existence and activity by the mode of operation of the higher-order system), then there is no need for a "causal joint" to explain how God impacts on the world and the world impacts on God. The classic unbridgeable differences between the natural and the supernatural orders in systematic theology tend to disappear in an ongoing "symbiosis", to use Bruteau's term, of divine and creaturely activity in this world. I am still thinking metaphorically here to describe something beyond human comprehension. But systematic theology is metaphorically grounded, as I see it. I use the metaphor of "system"; classical systematic theology, in line with Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, used the metaphor of "substance" or individual entity as its foundational concept. "Substance" presupposes a metaphysics of being; "system" presupposes a metaphysics based on becoming or change.

Here, of course, one can counter-argue that conventional human experience testifies to the ontological priority of entities to the systems in which they participate. One must first exist in order to act (*agere sequitur esse*). But, if, as Whitehead argued in *Science and the Modern World*, conventional human experience is largely based on convenient abstractions from the enormous complexity of what is going on in the world around us (Whitehead 1967, 50-51), then perhaps the opposite is the case. Entities exist and are perceived as such by human beings only in virtue of antecedent interrelated activities (*esse sequitur agere*). Entities are the byproducts of activities, not vice-versa. I argue this point in much greater detail in a forthcoming book (Bracken 2014). But here I simply argue that the most of the conceptual problems associated with explanation of the term panentheism might be due to a choice of the wrong foundational concepts. Within the classical metaphysics of being, panentheism is problematic; within a metaphysics based on becoming or change panentheism as a model of the God-world relationship might make much more sense, even be seen as obvious. One is, of course, still working with a model or symbolic representation of a humanly incomprehensible reality. But, as most natural scientists would agree, some models make more sense than others (e.g., McMullin, 697-709).

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