


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

On Orthodox panentheism

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Abstract

Panentheism is the position that the world is in some sense ‘in’ God, and God ‘in’ the world, without the world being identical to God. Thus, it tries, like what I call mainstream theism and against pantheism, to protect the transcendence of God, while giving greater emphasis to his immanence in creation than the former. I aim to explicate an approach that I call Orthodox Panentheism. The word ‘orthodox’ is to be read in two ways. First, the picture is derived from the writings of some of the most important figures in Eastern Christian thought, so that it is Orthodox in the ‘big “O” sense’. Second, I hope to show that it is a legitimate Christian picture of the God–world relation which is both distinctive and worthy of being called ‘panentheism’ – an orthodox panentheism in the ‘little “o” sense’.

Keywords: Panentheism; theism; Eastern Orthodox

Introduction

‘Panentheism’, in its broadest sense, refers to a particular way of viewing the relation between God and the world, one which sees God as fully present within, while yet still transcending, the world. It aims to be a sort of middle ground between two alternative conceptions. On the one hand, there is the pantheistic God, which is said to be identical to the world.¹ On the other, there is a theistic conception of God as existing ‘alongside’ the world he created, a person whose primary relation to the world is that of maker or designer (though he may more or less regularly intervene in its workings). In contrast to the former, the panentheist insists upon a radical ontological difference between God and the world. In contrast to the latter, that God is both fully ‘in’ the world, and the world fully ‘in’ God. God is not (or not primarily) to be thought of as the Architect of the cosmos on this approach but rather as the inexpressible mystery at the centre of all things and of each particular thing while still transcending them.²

Of course, much depends on how we understand this idea that God is ‘in’ the world, and vice versa. What I’m going to try to do in this article is to discuss, and hopefully show the appeal of, one particular way of spelling out this idea which developed in the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition. Though the basic approach can be found in more or less developed ways throughout that tradition, it became most fully realized in the distinction utilized by the fourteenth-century monk and bishop Saint Gregory Palamas between God’s *essence* and his *energies*. The former is said to be unknowable and imparticipable, while the latter both provide knowledge of God and give created things their

being through participation. In particular, I will focus on the idea that the energies, that is, divine activities, constitute the forms of things.³

Before unpacking this distinction, I need to say a bit more about the label ‘pantheist’ and address a worry that may make this way of *framing* the project, at least, look like a non-starter. First, pantheism is most closely connected with the process theology of Charles Hartshorne and others who more or less explicitly reject central features of traditional conceptions of God. Indeed, in several recent treatments of the concept, it is assumed that pantheism must hold that God’s own being or existence in some way depends on creation.⁴ Second, it may seem that I have not done justice to theism in the above description, at least if I meant to distinguish it from holding the views I attributed to pantheism. For, it might be said, classical theism *does* claim that God is omnipresent, timeless, holds all things in being at every moment, etc.

Since I do want to defend a conception of God that is consistent with traditional, conciliar Christianity, both of these lines of thought push against the use of ‘pantheism’ as a helpful label. Since it risks being associated with clearly heterodox formulations, and since there seem to be resources within traditional theism for securing both the immanence and transcendence of God, why not eschew the former and stick to the latter? However, I think that there are reasons to find the label attractive.

The first is that much of what we might call ‘mainstream theism’ is not entirely consistent with the conception of God presupposed by much of philosophical theology up to the modern period. Thus, Brian Davies (2004), for example, feels the need to distinguish between two concepts of God, which he calls ‘classical theism’, on the one hand, and ‘theistic personalism’, on the other.⁵

The first he identifies initially by saying that it is the basic picture of God shared by the medieval Jewish, Islamic, and Christian philosophers Maimonides, Avicenna, and Aquinas. This concept starts with the idea of God as Creator, and from this draws the conclusion that God is both radically different from creation (thus not, strictly speaking, a being among other beings), and yet is constantly present to creatures as their sustaining cause (thus, in a way, Being itself). Classical theists go on to draw from these starting premises the whole panoply of traditional attributes of God: timelessness, immutability, impassibility, simplicity, etc.

The second concept of God is formed by laying primary stress on the idea that God is a person. Davies singles out, as an example of such a view, Richard Swinburne, who claims that a theist is ‘a man who believes that there is a God’, where by ‘God’, the theist ‘understands something like a “person without a body”’ (Swinburne (1993), 1). Later in the same work, Swinburne says that the claim ‘[t]hat God is a person, yet one without a body, seems the most elementary claim of theism’ (*ibid.*, 101). Insofar as any understanding of persons must be based on an understanding of ourselves, this picture of God is more or less explicitly anthropomorphic. From this starting point, theistic personalists often go on to reformulate or reject many of the classical attributes of God. For example, well-known and influential theistic philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and William Lane Craig have all gone on from this starting point to reject divine simplicity or timelessness (or both).

Though this distinction of Davies’ has not, as far as I can tell, been widely influential, it does strike me as capturing something very important about recent analytic philosophy of religion. It seems to me that what Davies calls theistic personalism is mainstream both among non-philosophers generally and among at least Protestant analytic philosophers, and that it is very different from what one finds in much of the classical Christian theological tradition. But if this is true, and if part of what I want to do is provide an alternative to the overly anthropomorphic picture of mainstream theism, why not just stick to Davies’ label of ‘classical theism’? Why pantheism? There are two reasons.

The first is that the label ‘classical theism’ is itself still somewhat contested. Some use it simply to refer to broadly orthodox views of God. I still remember my first course in the philosophy of religion (taught by someone taught by Plantinga), where ‘classical theism’ was used to pick out proponents of the three main theistic religions, and more specifically any view according to which God is both personal and creator. Thus, many of those whom Davies considers theistic personalists may consider themselves classical theists.

But second, and more importantly, Davies’ own use of ‘classical theism’ is too narrow. It refers explicitly to a broadly Aristotelian sort of medieval Latin or Arabic theology. The view I want to discuss, however, is not a part of that tradition. It is rather a part of the eastern, Greek-speaking, form of Christianity, as that became crystallized near the end of the Byzantine period. While perhaps not inconsistent with the former tradition, it was at the very least different in its emphases. The character of its metaphysics is more Platonic than Aristotelian, more mystical than scholastic. And, as we will see, these differences make the application of the label ‘panentheism’ more appropriate.

The preliminary evidence and the primary problem

As I’ve said, panentheism in the broadest sense is the claim that all things are in God (and vice versa), yet without God thereby being limited or identified with things. This is a position which can be found throughout the writings of the Church fathers. Indeed, the statements of it are so numerous and so striking, and so little discussed in the philosophical literature, that I think it is worth at least listing and pausing over several examples from different periods:

Who, looking at the universe, would be so feeble-minded as not to believe that God is all in all; that he clothes himself with the universe, and at the same time contains it and dwells in it? – St. Gregory of Nyssa, fourth century (*Catechetical Orations* 25 (PG 45, 65); quoted in Clement (1995), 35)

In thee alone all things dwell. With a single impulse all things find their goal in thee. Thou art the purpose of every creature. Thou art unique. Thou art each one and art not any. Thou art not a single creature nor art thou the sum of creatures; All names are thine; how shall I address thee; Who alone cannot be named? – St. Gregory the Theologian, fourth century (*Dogmatic Poems* (PG 37, 507–8); quoted in *ibid.*, 28)

God always was and is and will be – or better, God always *is*. For ‘was’ and ‘will be’ are divisions of the time we experience, of a nature that flows away; but he is always, and gives himself this name when he identifies himself to Moses on the Mountain. For he contains the whole of being in himself, without beginning or end, like an endless, boundless ocean of reality. – St. Gregory the Theologian, fourth century (*Oration* 38; in Daley (2006), 118)

God is self-existent, enclosing all things and enclosed by none; within all things according to His goodness and power, and yet without all [things] in His proper nature. – St. Athanasius, fourth century (*De Decretis* 3:11; in Schaff (ed.) (1892), 157)

For who could really understand or explain how God is completely in all things as a whole and is particularly in each individual thing yet neither has parts nor can be divided; how he is not multiplied in a variety of ways through the countless differences of things that exist and which he dwells in as the source of their being; how he is not made uniform through the special character of the unity that exists in things; how he offers no obstacle to the differences in created essences through the one, unifying totality of them all but truly is all in all things, without ever abandoning his own undivided simplicity? – St. Maximos the Confessor, seventh century (*Ambigua* (PG 91, 1257B); quoted in Balthasar (2003), 86)

God both is and is said to be the nature of all things, in so far as all things partake of him and subsist by means of this participation . . . In this sense he is the Being of all beings, the Form that is in all forms as the Author of form, the Wisdom of the wise and, simply, the All of all things. Yet he is not nature, because he transcends every nature; he is not a being because he transcends every being; and he is not nor does he possess a form, because he transcends every form . . . He is everywhere and nowhere; he has many names and he cannot be named; he is ever-moving and he is unmoved and, in short, he is everything and no-thing. – St Gregory Palamas, fourteenth century (*Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life*; in Palmer et al. (1986), 382)

These quotes all say things that look panentheistic in the very broad sense, and it is worth noting that these are not fringe figures – they are all important saints who played major roles defending the orthodox side in theological controversies. Nevertheless, they remain unilluminating in the way that the views of many contemporary defenders of panentheism are unilluminating. While they indicate that God is intimately connected with the world while yet transcending it, they don't on their own contain any *account* of how that works. And without such an account, it is not really clear what they are saying or if they offer a distinctive alternative to other conceptions. In an essay in the *Oxford Handbook to Science and Religion*, Owen C. Thomas singles this out as a primary problem facing panentheists:

There are some serious problems in the understanding and interpretation of panentheism in what has become a fairly widespread movement that has gathered under this banner. These problems arise from the fact that panentheism is not one particular view of the relationship of the divine to the world (universe), but rather, a large and diverse family of views involving quite different interpretations of the key metaphorical assertion that the world is *in* God. This is indicated by the common locution among panentheists that the world is 'in some sense' in God, and by the fact that few panentheists go on to specify clearly and in detail exactly what sense is intended. (Thomas (2008), 654)⁶

Thankfully, we get something like such an account in the writings of St Gregory Palamas.

St Gregory Palamas and his Platonic inheritance

To begin understanding St Gregory's conception of the God–world relation, it is helpful to place his picture in the context of the Platonism to which he and much of early Christianity was the heir.⁷ Plato famously believed that the world of everyday appearance is in a way less than fully real, that it lacks true being, and that what being it has it has through participation in what is truly real, the realm of forms or ideas. So a red thing, for example, or a beautiful thing, has its being as red or as beautiful only because of the relation it has to the form of Redness or Beauty.

This hierarchical and participatory metaphysics did explanatory work as well as provided a holistic worldview, complete with implications in epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. But it came with its own problems or puzzles, many of which Plato himself recognized and raised in his dialogue *Parmenides*. The problem it helps to solve is the problem of the one and the many, how it is that, say, all the many beautiful things can have one thing in common to varying degrees, namely, beauty. The being of the many is explained by their relation to the one.

But how exactly should we think of this relationship? Is Beauty somehow divvied up, so that each beautiful thing gets a part of it? But then it would itself be many, and, worse,

there would be no one thing truly shared by all beautiful things. So the Form must somehow be fully present in each beautiful thing. But won't this make it many as well? The same problems arise for the realm of the Forms as a whole. Insofar as they make up true Being, they must be unified in some way, must be one. Yet insofar as they are the formal (and, at least in Neoplatonism, efficient) causes of particular things, they must be in some sense multiple.

Thus, pressures which arise from any metaphysics of participation push towards thinking of Being as, in the words of Plotinus, 'One-Many'. As the formal cause of beings, it must be multiple, but as Being itself it must have a principle of absolute unity. How is it possible to reconcile these demands? The Neoplatonic answer is to make an ontological distinction between the First Cause, the One, which is beyond being and intelligibility, completely simple, and the first multiplicity, Intellect, which is an intermediary between it and the world of particular beings. The Forms are identified with the Intellect, though they are derived in some way (which we need not get into) from the primordial unity of the One.

Though the early Christians absorbed much of this Platonic background, and though they might look kindly on identifying the Forms with the objects of divine intellect, they could not accept the division between the First Cause and Intellect, with the latter as subordinate in nature or perfection, or any intermediary creator between the Supreme God and the world. Rather, the Christian form of response to the metaphysical pressures of participation took two main forms in the late medieval period, diverging between Latin West and Greek East.

Much earlier, Christians had taken the rather obvious move of connecting the Forms (or 'Ideas') with the divine Intellect in general, and in particular with the Word or Logos. But this raises its own problems. In particular, what would it mean for a creature to have its form or essence in God's mind or the Logos through participation?

The Aristotelian West took the position, for the most part, that, since divine simplicity implied that all in God is essence, seeing divine ideas (and thus essence) as the actual forms of creatures would lead to an objectionable pantheism: 'If, therefore, the divine being were the formal being of all things, all things would have to be absolutely one' (Aquinas (1264), I.26.3). Thus, Aquinas and others came to reject the view that God is the true formal cause of creatures. Rather, the divine ideas are merely *exemplary* causes. And while it is true that exemplary causes are often thought of as a type of formal cause, they are distinctive precisely in that for Aquinas they exert their influence only by way of being in God's mind as he creates rather than intrinsically.⁸ On this view creaturely perfections are not true ontological participations in God, but only present 'a certain similitude to the divine being'. Thus, Gregory Doolan summarizes a conclusion in his book-length treatment of exemplary causation:

Inasmuch as the divine ideas are the causes of things that God creates, they are exemplars; inasmuch as they are exemplars, they are the similitudes of both the essences and accidents of finite beings. But even though both essences and accidents share a likeness to their respective exemplar ideas, neither actually participates in those ideas: Socrates is indeed exemplified by the divine idea of Socrates, but he is who he is through his very essence, not through participation. (Doolan (2008), 242)

Palamas, on the other hand, as a culmination of the Greek-speaking tradition in theology, took a different route. He held onto the idea that God is the formal cause of creatures, and instead denied that divine simplicity required that all in God is *identical* to the essence. He claimed that in God there is both essence, which is beyond being and participation, and energy (or activity), *energeia*, which is participable, and through which we have knowledge

of God. It is through God's creative activity (or energy) that he is truly present as 'the Being of all beings, the Form that is present in all forms'.⁹

On the one hand, Palamas can appeal for the consistency of this distinction with divine simplicity to the doctrine of the Trinity. Just as we can say, according to orthodox Christian teaching, that each of the three Persons is fully and completely the one God, without introducing any division into parts, we can say that God is fully and completely present in each *energeia* and in all things without any division into parts. On the other, although there seems something antinomic or essentially mysterious about the claim (as in the case of the Trinity), it is exactly the sort of thing that seems capable of meeting the 'one-many' requirement of Being on any metaphysics of participation. The energies are many, at least insofar as they are participated in by creatures, but this multiplicity is but the manifestation of the one eternal creative will of God. And unlike in other Neoplatonists, there is no ontological distinction between the One beyond being and the Forms that are the Being of beings. There is just the one God who is both beyond being and beyond form or intelligibility in his essence, and Being itself and Form itself in his creative and sustaining activity.

Conclusion

To jump back to present-day concerns, it seems to me that St Gregory's view also goes beyond the vague claim that Owen Thomas, quoted above, sees as plaguing recent panentheism, that creation is merely 'in some sense' or other in God. Rather, it gives at least a somewhat determinate account, heir to a philosophical history, of both the way in which God transcends creation – in his essence – and the way in which God is fully present within creation – in his energies. Both the fact that something has being – its existence – and what sort of being it is – its essence – are had by it only as it participates in God's sustaining *energeia*. What a creature is and that it is consists in God's being fully present to it and in it. And insofar as it retains the (Neo)Platonic view that the forms/energies are the true formal causes of beings, it has a better claim to being panentheistic than the classical theism of the medieval Aristotelians mentioned by Davies.

This is not, of course, to say that the account, as it stands, is completely clear or free from doubts or objections. My main goal in the brief sketch given has just been to show that there is a philosophically interesting account of the God–world relation here, and that the account is panentheistic in at least a broad sense – that among other broadly orthodox understandings of God, it provides a particularly strong understanding of both the absolute transcendence and absolute immanence of God. It strikes me as a very attractive picture, and it is, at any rate, worthy of more attention and investigation, especially given the current popularity of panentheism.

Notes

1. This way of understanding pantheism seems to me somewhat unhelpful, as I'm not sure it describes any actually existing religious tradition. However, it is described this way in the contemporary literature (and defended as such by e.g. Buckareff (2022)), so for the sake of simplicity I'll stick to this definition. In this article, I'm concerned mainly with differentiating the Orthodox view from other forms of theism, and explaining why I think the label 'panentheism' fits. In other work, I hope to deal more fully with 'pantheism'.
2. In the recent philosophical literature, 'panentheism' is often identified with a view which sees creation as a mereological part of God, which is different from the view I will suggest here. I hope the fittingness of the term for the view will be motivated by the exposition that follows. For representative discussion of the more typical sort of view, Buckareff and Nagasawa (2015) is a good place to start.
3. The word translated here as 'energies' is the Greek *energeia*, which is perhaps most naturally translated instead as 'activities'. I say a bit more about this translation choice when I discuss the distinction more fully. See note 9.

4. See, for example, Stenmark (2019).
5. Diller and Kasher (2013), make a similar distinction, which has perhaps become more influential, between 'classical theism' and 'neo-classical theism'.
6. See also Mullins (2016) for a similar complaint.
7. I have been most helped in my understanding of St Gregory's philosophical background by Perl (1990). In particular, the idea that the defining difference between Palamite and Thomistic metaphysics comes down to God being the formal cause of creatures in the former but not the latter is, to my knowledge, original to Perl. The discussion here is deeply indebted to his. See also, for a detailed treatment, Bradshaw (2000).
8. Thus, according to a well-known textbook of Scholastic philosophy, 'The exemplar cause . . . is defined as That which the agent keeps in view in his work . . . it determines the work also, not indeed in an intrinsic manner, by composing it, but in its source or origin' (Br. Louis of Poissy (1893), 170).
9. I tend to prefer the use of 'energies' as a translation. Speaking of either 'activity' or 'energy' is likely to mislead in various ways. It is important to keep in mind that the energies are what God *does*, expressions of his essence, not something like an impersonal force. But when the tradition speaks of the *energeiai* as things that we can participate in, that God is fully *present* in his *energeia*, that being itself is an *energeia*, that *energeia* can even be experienced as a type of 'uncreated light', etc., 'energy' seems to me the better fit.

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