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Reframing Incarnation: A Process-Panentheist Proposal

Traditional Christology has had significant difficulty in articulating its claim of “fully human, fully divine; two natures, one person.” This has seemed at best paradoxical, at worst contradictory. The difficulty stems, in part, from a prior understanding that treats God and created reality as polar opposites. How then do you conceive human and divine in union with one another? Panentheistic approaches avoid the traditional opposition of God and the world that results from positing an “infinite qualitative distinction.” Thus it is possible to make a more consistent and coherent articulation of this central Christological claim.

Panentheism, simply put, is the view that “God is in all things and all things are in God” from the Greek terms πᾶν “all things” ἐν “in” θεοῦ “God”). As Arthur Peacocke defines it, it is “the belief that the Being of God includes and indwells all things in the cosmos, while not being reducible to these things” (Peacocke 2001, p. 51). God is *really present* “in, with, and under” but always more than these. There is an immanent transcendence or a transcendent immanence in the divine life, in relation to the cosmos.

Within the family of panentheists, *process* approaches are especially helpful in reframing an understanding of the incarnation. This paper will explore a “reframing” that is assisted by two aspects of the process-panentheist approach: the insistence upon “internal relations” rather than “external relations” and the conviction that God should not be thought of as the exception to all the metaphysical principles, but rather their “chief exemplification.”

How May the Process-Panentheist Approach Reframe Incarnation?

Process-panentheism’s distinctive insights make a fresh understanding of incarnation possible. There is no inherent contradiction in affirming “fully human, fully divine; two natures, one person” for process-panentheism, for it embraces an understanding of God as *internally related* to all that is. Divine reality includes and does not exclude created reality. The world’s presence in God and God’s presence in the world—already a reality—is what we see revealed in the incarnation. (Making a somewhat distant connection, this is not unlike Barth’s claim that because of Jesus Christ, we know that there is “humanity in God.”)

The incarnation confers dignity--not only on human beings--but upon all of created existence as such. In incarnation, the potentiality and surpassing value and authentic reality of created existence as such is conveyed. This value is not simply “imputed” but rather “imparted.” What happens in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, is in fact emblematic of what is *already the case* about the whole of creation.

“Real Presence in World Process”

Drinking more deeply from the wells of process thought, we should note that Whitehead himself assumed an *incarnational universe*. As he said, “The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself” (*Religion in the Making*, p.151). What God does in Jesus of Nazareth is not an exception to God’s *ordinary* way of acting in the world but rather, the *chief exemplification* of it. Because there is in this person a responsiveness to divine initial aims, we are able to *see* in him what God is intending and doing everywhere and always. God’s intentions and actions for each and for all become *transparent* precisely here. Jesus the Christ, because of what God has done in him, becomes a place “where the light shines through,” if you will. Or, as Allan Galloway put it, “Once we have encountered God in Christ, we must encounter God in all things.” (Galloway 1951, p. 250). Incarnation is an instance of transparency to ultimate reality—not an exception to it.

For the most part, the meaning of Christian theology of incarnation has not yet been tapped for its deep significance in conveying God’s real presence in world process. Arthur Peacocke makes the connection, however. As he says,

The incarnation can thus be more explicitly and overtly understood as the God *in whom the world already exists* becoming manifest in the trajectory of a human being who is naturally in and of that world. In that person the world now becomes transparent, as it were, to the God in whom it exists: The Word which was before *incognito*, implicit, and hidden, now becomes known, explicit, and revealed. The epic of evolution has reached its apogee and consummation in God-in-a-human-person (Peacocke 2004, p. 154).

If we take this understanding of incarnation seriously it has implications for our sacramental theology as well. A panentheistic vision of God’s relation to the world admits of sacramental associations--that God is “in, with, and under” all that is. Divine presence in world process is a *co-inherent* presence that does not compromise the autonomy and integrity of world process. Sacraments are often spoken of as both *signs* and *instruments*—signs in the sense of showing forth or revealing divine presence and gracious action, and instruments in the sense of accomplishing God’s purposes of grace. That common elements such as bread and wine can do this is, *in itself*, a revelation that material reality has this openness to the divine at its heart.

That God can and does use material elements (in incarnation and sacrament) as means of divine grace, confers a dignity on all material elements and opens us to expectation of divine presence in all things. As Christopher Knight has observed, a sacrament may be said to be “an actualization of the potentiality of matter to become fully transparent to the purposes of God” (Knight, 2004, p. 55). This whole direction of thought is of course more fully developed in Greek Orthodox theology (no apologies for that, a Presbyterian can learn much here!) This orientation, according to Knight, sees the sacrament as “an aspect of the cosmos that has been returned or redeemed to its essential significance and purpose. It is a foretaste of the redemption of the whole cosmos... a sacrament is, “a revelation of the genuine *nature* of creation.” (Knight, 2004, p. 55).

So...Both incarnation and sacrament have the impact of conveying “real presence.” They are places of transparency, windows into the deeper reality of God in all things. “Jesus identified the mode of his incarnation and reconciliation of God and

humanity (“his body and blood”) with the very stuff of the universe when he took the bread, blessed, broke, and gave it to his disciples....” (Peacocke 2001, p. 149) Taken seriously, a notion of divine *real presence* in incarnation and reiterated in sacrament must entail a revaluation of all material reality as open to and indwelt by the divine.

Cosmic Christology/Cosmic Incarnation

This enlarged process-panentheist reading of the relation of God and the whole world as seen through the window of incarnation must surely also imply an enlarged understanding of divine *purposes* in the incarnation. We always say there is this inextricable connection between the “person” and the “work” of Jesus the Christ. The current predominating understanding of the meaning of the Christ event is often limited to “redeeming human beings from sin.” Such a narrowing has led to an “acosmic” Christology issuing in an “acosmic” Christianity preoccupied with “saving souls” and getting to a better world (Hayes, p. 25.1).

In spite of this predominating understanding there is within the broader Christian tradition an alternative vision of the Christ event as embracing the whole of creation. This is even without the process-panentheist lens; my claim is that this lens is just helping us to see better what is already there. This long-standing tradition, is found in a number of biblical texts (I Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 1:13-14; Colossians 1:15-20; Philippians 2:6-11; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14.). Cosmic Christology emerges most clearly in Col 1:15-20:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Here the Christ is the agent of all creation; all things are held together in him. He is the mediator of the reconciliation of all things in God. The understanding of the redemption that is ours in him must be, in its full and final form, a *cosmic transformation*, a new heaven and a new earth. As Joseph Sittler put it, “The sweep of God’s restorative action is no smaller than the six-times repeated *ta panta*” (Sittler, 2000, p. 52).

Sittler added to the cosmic Christology conversation an insight that Protestant Christianity has particularly constrained grace, making it captive to second article and soteriological concerns. Sittler was intent on expanding the picture of grace and nature and claiming a “holy naturalism” in which the whole world is “a place of grace.” As he insisted, grace is not something that begins with Jesus. Sittler sought to restore a theocentric focus to Christology. As he put it, “There is no future in Christians trying to be more christocentric than Jesus was” (Sittler, 1986, p. 106).

Sittler went on to say that grace is more than the “holy hypodermic whereby my sins are forgiven” (Sittler, 1986, p. 106). Instead, “the reality of grace is the fundamental

reality of God the Creator in his creation, God the Redeemer in his redemption and God the Sanctifier and Illuminator in all occasions of the common life where sanctifying grace is beheld, bestowed, and lived by” (Sittler, 1972, p. 88). Using the image of center and circumference Sittler affirmed that grace could be both “a comprehensive term for the created goodness of all reality, and a term wherewith to specify the incarnated presence and historical focus of that Light which is God” (Sittler, 1972, p. 73).

Cosmic Christology is prominent in notable theologians of the early church (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria). For Irenaeus, “the Incarnation and saving work of Jesus Christ meant that the promise of grace was held out to the whole of nature and that henceforth nothing could be called common or unclean” (Sittler, 2000, p. 52). 12th and 13th century theologians (Bonaventura, in particular) supported a cosmic Christology. (I would here commend the work of Zachary Hayes.) This view predominates in Greek Orthodox theology even today (Hayes, 25.4). To this way of thinking, the incarnation is no afterthought or emergency measure on God’s part to deal with human sin. The incarnation lies in the primordial creative intent of God. It is this synthesis of God and the world that God intends from the beginning. Thus the Christ event pertains to the fundamental structure of the universe (Hayes, 25.7). The Christ is the one in whom all things “hold together” (Col. 1-15-20) and he is the mediator of the reconciliation of all things to God; the harbinger of the *apokatastasis panton*, the “reconstitution of all things.” The goal of all creation is its relation in union with God--*theosis*. At that point, “God will be all in all.” (I Cor. 15:28) It is a redemption, reconciliation, reunification, and reconstitution of all things.

Christ’s work is redemptive precisely because this union with God--that is intended for all--is manifest in him. To quote Irenaeus, “He became as we are, that we might become as he is.” When the symbol of Chalcedon expresses who the Christ is understood to be--“truly God, truly human united in one and the same concrete being”—it at the same time expresses that union with God for which all things are intended. He is the sign and foretaste that God is bringing to completion what God has begun in creation. Themes of fulfillment and consummation take center stage. “God creates so that a (final) life-giving synthesis of God and world might be realized.” (Hayes 25.6)

In terms of the ethical implications, reclaiming this cosmic Christology/cosmic incarnation broadens our understanding of the divine intentionality and invites us into a much larger work than “saving souls.” As Sittler urged, “The way forward is from Christology expanded to its cosmic dimensions, made passionate by the pathos of this threatened earth, and made ethical by the love and the wrath of God.” (Sittler, 2000, p. 55) Thus, one of the implications of a cosmic Christology is a decentering of the human being and overcoming of anthropocentrism. Instead of being *incurvatus in se* (“curved in” on ourselves) we are reoriented--turned outward to the wider world and God’s purposes in it. A larger view of God’s project as a restoration that includes *all things* should imply the work of restoration as part of our vision of the human vocation relation to nature. The goal of *theosis* has implications for how we might live now in closer communion with nature, living into our destiny of reunion of all things in God.

What we see in God’s incarnation in Jesus the Christ is divine solidarity and self-giving love. It is a real presence a cosmic incarnation. There is here expressed a *saving solidarity* in the face of suffering and a *redemptive resistance* in the face of evil. There is an invitation into *sacramental life* wherein we see and experience God’s “real

presence” in common elements of material reality. The divine purposes are here revealed as “worldly” in nature and cosmic in scope. In Jesus the Christ, divine primordial purposes to be *in, with, and for creation* become transparent. At the heart of all created reality is an openness to God the Creator who both “unfolds” and also even “enfolds” the whole creation and will be “all in all.”

Resources:

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