

Comments on Clancy, “Romantic Religion.”

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I have found Fr. Clancy’s paper very interesting and very illuminating, not only with regard to his own religious views and affiliations, but also with regard to their conceptual and psychological underpinnings. It is mainly on both of these fronts that I wish to comment. First, I would like to consider the notion of panentheism itself, as that has been recently described in a fine essay by Michael Brierley [ref.]. And then I would like to consider, along with Brierley, possible causes for the increased popularity of panentheism among theological intellectuals. And here I would like to add a suggestion of my own. Finally, I would like to take up one thread in Tim’s presentation and challenge it directly. But, first, what do most people mean by the term “panentheism”?

Brierley gives eight basic ingredients for the construct. I will distinguish two broad classes to which these concepts belong: (a) an attempt to characterize God’s relationship to the world, and (b) some implications of that account for our understanding both of God and of the world.

1. God and the world:

- a. Many panentheists assert that the cosmos is God’s body, and that embodiment (in this sense) is a requirement for deity. Often, this notion will draw on an analogy between God’s presence in the cosmos and the presence in a person of their mind. The idea is that there is an asymmetric dependence relation between God and the world. This is also, apparently, usually combined with a broadly “privative” (or Augustinian...and of course, originally Platonic) view of the nature of evil. The latter is to prevent sticky problems with making God responsible for evil.
- b. Many panentheists make regular use of the language of “in and through” to describe God’s activity in the world. Exploiting the person-mind analogy mentioned above, the

view seems to be that God's activity is also both immanent in the world and transcendent over the world, as is the activity of created agents with respect to their bodies. The preposition "in" carries with it the notion that God comes from "beyond" the world, and "through" carries the sense of God's acting by means of the world. The world, on this view, is the instrument of divine action as well as the field in which it occurs.

- c. Many panentheists also assert that the world has sacramental status. So far Brierley:

"...the sacraments are not restricted to certain rites of the church: the whole cosmos...is sacramental, for it is something under, in and through which God comes [to us]." The language of "in, with and under," or "in and through", as many of you will recognize, is almost proprietary to the Lutheran theological tradition, and Luther's sacramental thinking is sometimes, it seems, a part of the panentheist construct.
- d. Another type of language also often is part of this construct: the language of intertwining. Here is Brierley, again, on this point: "Subject and object are distinct entities but can never entirely be divorced, one from the other, since they are interdependent."

But, at this point the elements of our construct are starting to sound very similar to one another, and we are also treading on the next phase of the construct, which has to do with its implications for our understanding of the nature of God and the nature of the world itself. We might, however, summarize the first four elements of the construct in terms of "intimacy." What panentheists are apparently desiring is a maximally intimate relationship between God and the cosmos, while stopping short of outright identity between the two partners to that relationship. Thus, there is no desire to simply collapse the distinction between God and the world, between creator and creation. But there is a deep desire to make the connection itself a non-contingent as possible.

- 2. Implications of the relationship:

- a. God depends on the world. God, in some sense, needs the world, especially as the object of God's love. Once again, Brierley:

If embodiment is indeed an intrinsic feature of divinity, and if indeed the interconnections between God and cosmos cannot be completely undone, then this leads to the unorthodox assertion that God is dependent on the cosmos. God needs the cosmos for the fulfillment of God's nature of love. (p. 9)

This represents, interestingly enough, a return to an old doctrine of Origen (one that was, in due course, if memory serves me well, condemned by church councils, though the man himself was not condemned for holding it): that there must be a world of some kind, and thus that there is no time with there is no cosmos. Panentheists divide, it appears, over whether it is necessary for God to love this present world order, or whether it is enough that there be some world or other that God loves. Other distinctions between God the world (as, e.g. that the God is infinite and the world finite) are maintained, and thus the view seems also to be that while God depends on the world and the world depends on God, they do not depend on each other in the same way. (p. 10)

- b. On this view of things, the world also is assigned a net positive and intrinsic value: "That which is a part of God shares the same basic value as God's self." (p. 11).

Here I want also to add (largely for the sake of what comes later), that this view also entails that the world has an irreducible coherence and stability, loaned to it by virtue of the coherence and stability of God's person and God's love. The world is not about to suddenly disappear or suddenly fail us in any fundamental sense.

- c. A third implication of the hyper-intimate view of the relationship between God and the world, according to Brierley's survey of panentheistic opinion, is that God suffers together with the suffering of God's world. Thus, it is characteristic of this view, to hold that God is not impassible, as classic "perfect being theology" has always held. Such suffering arises both because God is responsive to the world that God loves and also because lovers hurt when their beloved suffers.

[Here, too, I want to enter a slight caveat. There has been much discussion among so-called "analytic theists" in recent years about divine impassibility. Many contemporary philosophers of theism, and especially those associated with the so-called "open theology" movement, deny that God can be impassible in the sense required by traditional doctrinal formulations. Many of the arguments for this view owe nothing to panentheism.]

- d. Finally, it is characteristic of panentheists to hold that the person of Christ is not fundamentally of a different nature from any other persons: "...those who hold a panentheistic model of God tend to think of Christ as different from other persons by degree rather than kind. This is because if God is somehow "in" the cosmos generally, then God's work in Christ needs to be related with some continuity to that cosmic work, and not isolated from it." (Brierley, p. 12) Such a "degree Christology", of course, is a substantial departure (if I may say so) from orthodox Chalcedonian Christological affirmations. And this is likely to be a point at which classical theists and panentheists part company quite sharply.

I hope that it is apparent from this presentation that panentheism encompasses a wide range of views. It appears that there is a lot of disagreement among them as to which of these eight elements are essential to the position, as also about which is the best way to understand any or all of these elements. Thus, we

should not think that pantheism is of a whole cloth. For it is not. And, indeed, it is not hard to see from Fr. Clancy's paper that while he would agree with many of the eight elements outlined above, he would (and indeed explicitly does) reject many others. There is probably not much profit to be had in trying to figure out what is the irreducible doctrinal deposit required to be a genuine pantheist. But here is Brierley's rather neat summary of the position: "...the doctrine of the cosmos being the good..."body"...or "sacrament" needed by God...with which God is inextricably intertwined, and "in and through" which God works and suffers." (pp. 12-13.

Brierley goes on in his essay to suggest that pantheism has become particularly popular among theological intellectuals in recent decades. He further argues that it represents

...an outgrowth of nineteenth century German idealism [Fr. Clancy will take special issue with this, I am sure].

...an assimilation of theological modeling to evolutionary values, and thus as a theological response to the rise of modern science.

...a more dynamic ontology to substitute for the failings of the "static" ontology of substances underlying and informing theological formulae in the traditions of classical theism.

...and as having more potential for grounding a lively moral critique of the modern world than has classical theism (rather in the mold of so-called liberation theology).

Now these, of course, are very large-scale historical theses, and I have almost nothing else to say about them. But perhaps we might pursue them in discussion with Fr. Clancy.

I do want to go on, however, and add something of my own regarding the origins of panentheism. It was W. H. Auden, in 1946, who first labeled the 20th century as “an age of anxiety.” And the label is a good one (though E. R. Dodds once labeled the fourth century as an age of anxiety, mimicking Auden quite deliberately) [see Dodds’ book *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*]. The horrendous and wide-spread sufferings of that century, notably in the two world wars, in repeated genocides, and in the invention and use of nuclear weapons, biological weapons and other weapons of mass destruction...all this has caused us to be more anxious perhaps than ever before in recorded history. And it may be that panentheism is a theological antidote to this anxiety. Let me characterize one form of this anxiety, one that I think often lies at the core of both philosophical and theological thinking. I call it “ontic anxiety.” It can be introduced by way of two cases.

The first is that of a student of mine in another university who once told me the following story. She was riding in the back seat of the family car, in early adolescence, as they were setting out on a family vacation. She gradually became acutely aware of the scenes passing on the periphery of her visual field, to the right and left of the car as it sped down the highway. It occurred to her that she could not be similarly aware of any of this once the scene had passed behind her. It then occurred to her to wonder about what it was that was behind her head while she was gazing directly ahead of her and only taking in the rest of the passing scene in this way. Suddenly she was overwhelmed with the deep conviction that if she could only turn her head fast enough, she would be looking into **nothing at all**. The abyss would have manifested itself to her. It is not surprising, in my view, that this woman’s main philosophical interests were in epistemology and metaphysics. The pursuit of philosophical theories was at least partly motivated by her deep need to find the world to be such a stable place that the abyss should have no opportunity actually to assert itself.

In another case, this one of a young borderline woman whom I treated in psychotherapy, a more persistent sense of basic ontological anxiety presents. Helen, as I shall call her, was a very intelligent, creative and seductive woman, also conventionally very beautiful. However, she more or less constantly felt that the surface of her skin was about to fail, and that she would have the experience of collapsing into a heap or a puddle...rather like the Senator in the first X-Men movie, who collapses into a puddle of sea-water. The

loss of fundamental bodily integrity, focused at the surface of her skin (which is, after all, the single largest organ in the human body), drove Helen regularly to wear several layers of very tight constrictive clothing (her all time favorite foundation was spandex). It gave her a sense of being held together that her own skin could not. She lived with this fear of an imminent and total collapse of her bodily integrity...**all the time**. Imagine what that would be like!

My point here is that I suspect many people in the modern world suffer from similar anxieties. And both philosophical and theological theories might be attractive to such persons (given certain other turns of mind), as attempts to stave off (in fantasy) the final catastrophic collapse. Such anxieties are versions of what D. W. Winnicott once called “the archaic anxieties”, such as falling forever. They are very terrible in their effects, and defenses against them are often desperately needed if the person is to succeed in functioning at all in adult life.

Now, as we have presented it, pantheism might be just such a defense. For on this view, the world is proof against such catastrophic failures or collapses. As the everlasting object of an everlasting divine love and activity, the world would be fire-proof against such failures. For persons deeply infected with ontic anxiety, pantheism, then, might make a good conceptual home.

Finally, I want to challenge directly one claim that seems to furnish a red-thread running throughout Fr. Clancy’s presentation of “romantic religion.” It seems to be his view that intimate personal relationships thrive on “mystery.” This seems to me a fundamental mistake. At the very least, it runs contrary to my own experience, both as a partner in intimate relationships and also as a professional listener to the personal experiences of others. Aristotle argues in the NE essay on friendship (*philia*) that the best kind of friendship depends on a community of values, and that what causes such relationships to fail, most often, is the concomitant failure of that commonality of values. In this, it seems to me, Aristotle was fundamentally correct. In my experience as a spouse and as a parent, as also as a friend in many friendships of virtue, it is not mystery that fuels the intimacy, but knowledge. Moreover, by “knowledge” here I do not mean anything especially esoteric or itself mysterious. I mean something like “justified, true belief”, as we might

also apply that concept to our most ordinary sensory experience of the world, to our memories of the world, and so on. Neither do I insist on any especially esoteric or “philosophical” criterion of justification (e.g. Bayesian confirmation, deductive proof, or the like). I know my wife, and her character, the values which inform that character, just as I know my own body, my own personal history, and have as much reason to trust these types of knowledge as I have to trust my senses. And, as Augustine once argued, while the senses may deceive us from time to time, and may, at any given time be deceiving us, a man is a fool not to trust his senses. I venture to suggest that intimacy between God and created persons, supposing that is possible (a matter I am entirely agnostic about), likewise thrives on knowledge and especially the mutual knowledge of both partners of the other’s character. I do not find the language of “first person” or “second person” or the like very helpful in illuminating such knowledge or the conditions for it (or, indeed, the conditions under which it might fail). Neither would I care to apply the sort of old-style positivism that seems to infect Fr. Clancy’s views of science, to such knowledge. It is much too mundane for that...and besides, positivism is false.

But now, perhaps, we have entirely too many issues to discuss, and to the discussion we should turn.

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