

Keith Ward's soft panentheism

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This article seeks to assess the general approach to a Christian interpretation of reality as popularly applied by Keith Ward. It is suggested that he employs panentheist criteria in his attempts to buttress a theological accommodation of both material and spiritual interpretations of reality. This assessment will take a general reformational theological approach. Suggestions will be included as to why panentheism has made such an impact amongst some Christians and why a bipolar approach to God appeals to some in the Christian community. Recommendations will then be made to be considered by those who may find the lure of Christian generic panentheism in different forms tempting enough to consider its interpretation replacing the traditional view of God.

Keith Ward se sagte panenteïsme. Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die algemene benadering tot 'n Christelike interpretasie van die werklikheid, soos algemeen toegepas deur Keith Ward, te evalueer. Dit word voorgestel dat hy panenteïstiese kriteria toepas in sy pogings om teologiese akkommodasie van 'n materiële en geestelike interpretasie van die werklikheid te steun. Hierdie evaluering volg 'n algemene reformatoriese teologiese perspektief. Voorstelle word gemaak om te verduidelik waarom panenteïsme so 'n impak op sommige Christene het dat hulle 'n bipolêre benadering tot God verkies. Verder word aanbevelings gemaak vir diegene wat 'n Christelike generiese panenteïsme in verskillende vorme aanloklik genoeg vind om dit sodoende as 'n alternatiewe interpretasie vir die tradisionele siening van God te oorweeg.

Introduction

When the curtain closes on Samuel Beckett's absurdist play, *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett 1965), Vladimir and Estragon are still waiting for Godot to come, despite a warning. Implicit in the play is the message that the pursuit of any purpose is meaningless.¹ God(ot)² never turns up, which some have interpreted to illustrate a 'God-hypothesis' (Piper 2007:15; cf. Dawkins 2008:51). Contrary to this interpretation of existential absurdity, was the impact of Schaeffer's book, *The God who is there* (1970). Schaeffer (1972:18–19) believed that the 'God who is there' gives purposeful meaning to creation and serves as a platform for meaningful conversation, both amongst academics and people in the street. Both of these aforementioned approaches acknowledge humankind's acceptance of the natural order of things. Interpretation is through basic observation as reflected in the simplicity and complexity of daily living, and a sense of the present, history and future. Humankind generally also reflects a persistent degree of consciousness of the transcendent. Identifying the transcendent as God would of course be presumptuous, for someone else may define it in more aesthetic terms and another in a deistic or material scientific manner, if at all.

This introduction serves to set the scene and tone for this paper. The Bible acknowledges that there are those who in their hearts deny the existence of God (Ps 14:1; cf. Ps 10:4). At the same time it goes to some length to make sure that its readers are aware that the God they meet in its pages and in the histories of the Jewish and Christian faithful is not to be confused with any other god. Classically, the Westminster Shorter Catechism's fifth question states: 'Are there more Gods than one?' with the reply: 'There is but one only, the living and true God' (Reymond 1998:130). This is a statement assumed by both the Old and New Testaments. Traditionally, the Bible's basic theism is seen to comprise a transcendent and personal deity who is creator and preserver of the universe, and who allows for the uniqueness of humankind. The classical model expressing God's activity in the flow of history is sometimes expressed through tracing Christian religious ground motifs (Sire 2004), such as God's activity expressing grace and mercy in the sequence of

1. For a number of interpretations of this play see *Waiting for Godot* in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting_for_Godot#Christian.

2. The play was originally written in French in which the word for God is *Dieu*. Some Christians see a play on the word God in Godot as being implicit in the play. Beckett on the other hand never committed to any meaning for Godot (Taylor-Batty & Taylor-Batty 2008:21).

creation-fall-redemption. In the 1970s it was fashionable to understand religious theism in terms of a sociological theory of religion that suggested the secularisation 'myth', such as propounded by Berger who suggests that humankind in the West interprets the world and their lives outside of religious interpretations (Berger 1990:108). This theory has since been reworked in the light of the persistence of the religious phenomenon. More recently, Taylor (2007:19) proposed that people reveal a search for fullness and that historically three theistic stages identify this ongoing search:

- The period prior to the Enlightenment was a period when it was impossible to believe in God (Taylor 2007:539), or to at least make sense of the world you needed God in the context of the visible, structured church.
- The Enlightenment ushered in a period when humankind took central stage to become an alternate option for meaning. Formulation of a deistic mechanical universe made the emergence of outspoken unbelief a possibility (Taylor *ibid*:9, 114, 716).
- The third stage of intellectual development was a move into the impossibility of any metaphysical justification outside of material belief at all (Taylor *ibid*:15–16), and yet it remains a struggle to explain an unexplained immanence of sanctification and pull in the midst of ordinary life (Taylor *ibid*:548–549). Although this in no way guarantees the transcendent (Taylor *ibid*:543), there still is the possibility of belief that lies in the dynamic power of language shaping '(religious) social realities' (Zavos 2008:27).

A material interpretation theism, and by implication morality, does not satisfy as rival explanations of the structures of reality. Religious theism is in fact regarded as a deadly toxin (Sullivan 2009:8) to be viewed with suspicion and put behind mature persons, because it is unable to deal with matters such as having been robbed of a relationship with God or the inevitable failure in trying to earn God's love (Arterburn & Felton 2001:3). It is within these categories that there has been some evidence of a rethink of classical Christian theism so as to meet the challenges of the day. The reworking into interpretative categories, such as mentioned above, generally seem to lean towards or even fit into a panentheistic structure. What I want to show is that even though some theologians deny being panentheists, they sometimes fall into the trap of what I call a soft panentheism. One such theologian is Keith Ward.

A brief introduction to the modern rise of panentheism

The relation to the theism of panentheism is the key to its identity. Pantheism equates the universe to God so that it and nature serve as two names of one immanent reality. Panentheism, on the other hand, is an 'all-in-God-ism' in which the world and all of reality is in God. While God immanently penetrates into creation, he at once transcends it ontologically (Cooper 2007:26–27). Some of these subtleties will be shown to be evident in Ward's theology.

A bipolar (transcendent vs. immanent) construct of God's existence and its relation to created reality has a long history.

Aristotle and Plato's philosophical thoughts eventually developed to allow for philosophical monotheism, but the latter's 'world-soul' concept and later Neo-Platonism were the seedbed for the development of panentheism (Cooper 2007:37–38, 62). The world was seen as an emanation of divine actualisation implicit in the nature of God maximising deity's cosmological greatness. In addition, ontological dialectical polarities (such as infinity vs. finitude, and immanence vs. transcendence) are only reconciled when they are unified and reconciled in, but not confused with, God (Cooper *ibid*:63). Early Christians saw many points of contact with these ideas (Cooper *ibid*).

Further exploration of these ideas may be traced to the scholastics, but it was Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) who grounded his God philosophically into a structure of bipolar attributes of thought and extension. Georg Hegel's triune God was identified with actualisation within historical time flow and space (cf. Cooper 2007:61).

In 1828, Karl Krause coined the term *panentheism* (Cross & Livingstone 1977:1027) with the basic meaning of 'everything-in-God'. Seventeenth-century modernity emphasised philosophy, science and reason, and presupposed that 'all processes can be fully comprehended and controlled' (Bosch 1991:265). According to McGrath (2008:78), the term and possibly the idea was introduced into English theology in New York during a series of lectures in 1906 by William Inge.

The process philosopher Alfred Whitehead also popularised panentheism, but its entrance into theology as process theology was through Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000). Some Christian theologians saw the worth of exploring the notion of a bipolar view of an immanent and transcendent God, involved and yet removed from the reality of the world.

Panentheism was seen to fit God neatly into categories of structure and reason. From within these confines, the interpretation of immanent theism seems to fit in with a rational scientific description of material reality. Its material hermeneutic concludes with a present (immanent) and removed (transcendent) God. The theism for a god concept sought by philosophers was hampered by divine attributes, such as that God is at once immanent and transcendent. Sanders (1998:141) brings another aspect to the fore for the historical development of these thoughts in Christianity. He claims the church fathers settled upon an understanding of God without taking into consideration the philosophical understanding of divine nature.

Clearly this bipolar structure of deity is reminiscent of the idea of an immanent and transcendent God as classically understood from the Judaeo-Christian-Islam traditions. Despite these similarities, the Christian tradition does not easily allow for an unequivocal equation between the two theisms. Not only does it not equate with its traditional and unique concept of deity, but also brings into question the sufficiency of their divine source of revelation: their scriptures.

Panentheism does not manifest itself consistently in Christian theology. Clayton (2004:249) cannot identify schools of panentheistic thought, but sees 'family resemblances'. Gregersen (2004:23, 34) recognises that there are different panentheisms, with some more clearly bipolar, and that they qualify as Christian panentheism. He suggests that one should clearly state what kind of panentheism is being endorsed. To that end, the schema proposed by Towne in reviewing the panentheisms expressed by 18 scientists and theologians, seems useful. He uses six issues (Towne 2005:779): 'the way God acts, how God's intimate relation to the world is to be described, the relation of God to spacetime, whether God is dependent upon the world, what type of language is used, and the problem of dipolar panentheism'. Congruence and variations of these give rise to a multiplicity of forms of panentheism.

Developing a new approach to theism in a religious vacuum caused by God's absence, or degree of absence, also reflects in various constructs of theistic models. It was for instance Martin Buber (Huston 2007:196) and Teilhard de Chardin (n.d.:305–307) who reinstated the possibility of God in authentic encounter with creation and, by implication, in time and humankind. For some persons involved in science, such as Ian Barbour, Paul Davies, Arthur Peacocke, Philip Clayton and John Polkinghorne, varying degrees of this relationship of God with this world is 'the most reasonable way of combining state-of-the-art science with belief in God' (Cooper 2007:301). It is my contention that Keith Ward's theism is but another expression of these sincere attempts of Christians to fit God into material and created reality.

Panentheism and process theology

Ever since the philosophical formulation of panentheism by Whitehead (Griffin & Sherburne 1978) and Hartshorne (2002), panentheism has served to make some interpretive sense of divine presence and absence. Some Christian leaders, such as Ware (2000) and Erickson (2003), are sceptical of any form of panentheism, seeing it as opposed to a personal God relationally connected to creation and people.

What made Hartshorne's contribution significant was the importation into theology of a reconception of the classical attributes of God to formulate a divinity who undergoes change (Hartshorne 1984:1). Latent in process of change is the idea that God actually becomes (Hartshorne *ibid*:9) and so changes the nature of meaning of the word 'God' (Hartshorne *ibid*:1). Process theology paved the way for a variety of forms of theism in its attempt to accommodate scientific thinking. Cooper (2007:345) cautions that not all that is punted as Christian panentheism deserves the label. In fact, he distinguishes historic Christianity from modern Christian pluralism on the one hand and traditional theism from contemporary panentheism on the other. This dividing line, in my opinion, does not allow sufficient latitude for the degrees of emphasis that has led to a range of panentheistic views, and so it accommodates the soft panentheism of some modern day theologians, such as Ward.

At the heart of developing panentheism was the shift in emphasis from orthodox Christianity's view of God's attributes to redefining the attributes of transcendence and immanence. Faber (2002:219), for instance, argues that the God-language of a Whiteheadian system of belief, integrates these contrasting attributes of God. This rationally brought deity's alterity into the realm of creativity through distinguishing God's immanence from transcendence; polarity avoiding monotheistic dissolution.

Hartshorne (2002:328) wrestled with the God of ordinary believers conceived by, in his opinion, theoretical theological constructs with the tendency to equate God's power as omnipotence. He obviated these tensions from a rational platform to redefine the traditional view of God into a bipolar composite expressing a panentheistic system of beliefs. A second concern was that former contradistinctions between science and theology (for example that theology [religion] essentially pertains to the immaterial and science to the material) would never find common ground for meaningful discussion and so be able to communicate with one another with space for redefined theism. God potentially becomes a legitimate item on the agenda for consideration in humankind's discussion with panentheism and, evident from his many publications, Ward joins the discussion.

Christians engaging panentheism

Cooper (2007:8) usefully lists various forms of Christian manifestations of panentheism:

- The Christo-centric panentheism of Teilhard de Chardin (cf. Salmon 2012:574).
- Tillich's religious naturalism expressed in existential panentheism grounded in being (cf. Nash 1988:253 fn. 3).
- Pannenberg's panentheistic force field (cf. Schwartz 2012:619).
- Panentheistic liberation and ecological theologies.
- Panentheism in theological cosmology.

To this list may be added theologian Moltmann (1985), and scientists such as Arthur Peacocke (2004a) and Russel Stannard (1989). I could add Thomas Oord's 'theocosmocentrism' (2010), the soft panentheism of open theism, Keith Ward's comparative theology and John Polkinghorne's critical realism (2009).

All these approaches, to my mind, resort to some degree of polarity of God. It is not the purpose of this paper to pursue finer polar distinctions such as dipolar and bipolar. The former suggests two poles separated such as God influencing creation and it in turn its creator (Bangert 2006:168), whereas bipolarity completes God's being implying interdependence between temporal and eternal poles. Marbaniang (2011:133), in dealing with Whitehead's approach, does not make this distinction. I use the term *bipolar* as a generic term to include suggestions of the structural definition of God's transcendence and immanence; to for instance accommodate a present and future reality into which deity must reasonably fit and function, and yet maintain separation from this world and evil whilst remaining within it.

Some of the criticism levelled against panentheism is that it is not commonly subjected to a rigorous critical theological scrutiny. This allows its bipolar structure of a necessary and contingent nature of divinity to define a metaphysical structure in which God is redefined to allow for some compatibility with a material worldview (Potgieter 2002). Redefinitions of classical theism, as defined by traditional Christian creeds, are basically formulations based upon relational theologies and relational ontologies, which networks God into space, temporality and causality (Cooper 2007:344–345). This reinterpretation is a move away from the view that creator God writes humanity's history as part of his story. Ward (2004a:71) claims not to subscribe to panentheism. In my view he does not subscribe to a full-blown panentheism, but his theological structure demonstrates so many obvious similarities to it that I propose that he holds to a soft version of panentheism. I contend that Ward's dynamic theology of God is an accommodation of classical transcendence and immanence, and reduces to a form of panentheism. The same is true, I believe, of scientist-theologian John Polkinghorne, though the two must not be equated in their theologies.

Both Ward and Polkinghorne's theologies generally seek to interpret reality to accommodate a scientific worldview. Their panentheistic leanings, in my view, allow them to propose an understanding of deity within the confines of a bipolar reality. God is not only limited to material reality. God, immanently accommodated, maintains credible transcendence. Ward lays claim to an open-ended (read 'process') structure of reality; an incarnational theism immanently encapsulating reality expressed in divine cooperation and struggle. I propose merely to highlight the generic commonalities with panentheism in this paper, in order to establish the premise that Ward does rely on a soft form of generic panentheism in Christian form to make his theological views credible.

Christians employing forms of panentheism

Classical theism is not exclusive property. It came about through clarification and formulation of doctrines by great theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, Scotus, reformers and puritans in the west, and John Chrysostom, Basil and the Gregories in the eastern traditions. Traditionally, it is generally agreed that God is to be maximally regarded as commonly expressed in terms of attributes ascribed to deity. God is seen to be present and supernaturally immanent and affecting the course of history; at once changeless and transcendent and not confused with, but separate from created reality. Nevertheless, this view has been under scrutiny. For instance, a social trinitarian perspective exploring connections between an immanent-trinitarian view with that of the economic trinity (Webster, Tanner & Torrance 2009:45). Eastern Orthodox theology with the development of its concept of divinisation (theosis) allows for human destiny to be understood as having similar undertones with panentheism (Webster *et al. ibid*:321). A form of panentheism (or 'pan-entheism') is held to explain God's necessary presence in creation for it to exist at all (OrthodoxWiki n.d.).

Barbour (2010) distinguishes between classical theism and efforts to maintain it. For him, process theologians see God's influence as persuasive, not coercive, in the process of redemptive transformation in this world, but conclude with a weak degree of the awe of deity. Because God is relational, and by implication responsible for good and evil, Barbour states that there must of necessity be a limit on power, while Polkinghorne and Peacocke hold to a voluntary self-limitation (Barbour *ibid*:249–250).

A broad sweep of Keith Ward's theology

Keith Ward aligns himself with other born again Christians, but not necessarily with the classical content or traditional confessional understanding of the Christian faith. He claims, for instance, that the tendency of 'proof-text' distorts meanings of scripture passages (Ward 2004b:1). His writings are noticeably absent of a liberal use of actual textual passages and references. He also rejects claims to an exclusive substitutionary theory of the atonement which, for him, is representative of but one of the many ways in which the world is reconciled to God (Ward *ibid*:2). Though certainly not exhaustive, this sample ought to establish that Ward is a creative thinker who does not necessarily think of himself as limited by traditional Christian theology. To my mind, this is a healthy challenge to all thinking Christians: that Ward is willing to challenge and rethink the content of the Christian faith for the times and commit his thoughts to writing for scrutiny and debate.

I want to make it clear that I am ambivalent to an *Ireanean regula fidei* or 'rule of faith'. Historically this rule, seemingly necessitating what had to be believed, was too inconsistent to become a hard and fast formula for the community of faith. My opinion is that faith has an element of latent ecumenicity. This allows for some degree of a heuristic approach to belief, so that different expressions of the same biblical content may be held to. Nevertheless, with Reymond (1979:11) I believe that the Bible teaches a total theism, worthy of defence, which may be proclaimed as a system of truth overarching all of life, and not just community. Whilst I do not make any claim to an exhaustive view of Ward's theology, I suggest that the following sample will allow for the consideration that Ward holds to a panentheistic form of theology. What I propose to do is to highlight some of Ward's approaches to revelation and God-experience that, in my opinion, he believes allow him to challenge the classical approach to the Christian faith and its theism. This brief study will show that Ward's theism includes tendencies to Christian theistic bipolarity, and therefore of panentheism.

A view of revelation

Ward's view of revelation does not seek to prove the existence of God. He is a philosopher-theologian; one who seeks to authenticate God-experience rather than prove deity's existence. Religion is the place to explore humankind's God-experience. For that reason he focuses on

patterns and stages of religion, from its historical infancy to the present (Ward 2008:219). This supposedly came about because of the emergence of consciousness giving rise to feelings of anxiety, guilt and superiority – implying signs of transcendent values and thus authoritative experiences. Page (2007:350) holds that this manner of identifying a pattern from levels of complexity to arrive at self-consciousness, deprecates the involvement of God and is inadequate as a description of evolution. The point, however, is that Ward does subscribe to God directing evolution in a revelatory process towards complexity and consciousness. Page (*ibid*:351) repudiates a deity who creates and deletes. Upon reaching a level of consciousness, Ward (*ibid*:240) accepts a crossover into metaphysical transcendence, and reasons for a higher consciousness and emergence of forms of wisdom, freedom, empathy and universal compassion. By its very inclusivity, all religions therefore share in varying shades of degrees in the same spiritual reality available to all. Each of these religions consequently expresses spiritual-experience, which some define as revelation and understand as a God-experience. For Ward, Christianity's uniqueness is its Christology, in particular the person of Jesus in whom revelation comes together (Ward 2004b:9). Revelation is immanently centralised in Jesus and not in classical propositional theology or creed expressing the teachings of the Bible. Jesus is consequently the God-experience of Christian revelation.

New disclosures of God's love are therefore possible for the continued God-experience. God's love is a basis for Ward's hermeneutic, which allows the church to engage in love as dynamic experience. Such unfathomable love encourages new disclosures and reveals that there is no unchangeable barrier set by God. So it is no surprise to find a quote such as: 'The Bible is a signpost to new exploration of the mind of God, not a barrier to all original thought' (Ward 2004b:16).

Comparing the above to classical views of revelation, there is some commonality, but there are also key elements that do not equate to the church's confessions. The God-experience in the reformed tradition, according to Robert Reymond (1998:131), is two-fold. It is found in humankind, who bears the image of God inclusive of an inherent *sensus deitatis* [*sense of deity*] allowing for religious experience of creation and providence. What makes Christianity unique is that God's providence manifests propositionally in the Scriptures; personally in his son, and savingly through the Word and Spirit (Reymond *ibid*:131–132): matters that Ward chooses not to pursue. There is a fullness in the Christ of the godhead that transcends revelation and its biblical account. God is trinity and Jesus is discharging his duty to the father who sent him (Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics n.d.:Chapter VIII) for disclosures of love outside of the cross, as Ward contends that in Jesus all revelation comes together. In my view, Ward does not allow for this fuller traditional understanding of revelation. His approach has a weak view of the interrelationship of the persons of the godhead as it relates to an immanent God-experience.

God-experience

The view of revelation as continued authentication of God, variously expressed as God-experiences, implies that, to some extent, God may be known. God's will and mind may be known in new ways to succeeding generations as Judaeo-Christian-Islamic traditions take their basis of authority from persons who have had auditory and visual experiences of God (Ward 2008:163). Cooper (2007:325) sounds the warning that Christian pantheists hold to a compatibilist view of God's creative actions. They maintain an experience of God's actions as free, enacted in love and as 'need-satisfying'. Ward (2004b:63) pursues this in a continued historical compound of revelation, which draws its support from a view of a patterned creation guided by wisdom, drawn from Colossians and Ephesians and emphasising the polarised transcendent cosmic Christ. This wisdom approach to theism applies to all religions in various ways. But what are these God-experiences humankind, and by implication Christians, is directed to?

Ward (1974:218; 1996:242) is not very specific, but seems to take for granted that it will include the widening horizon of knowledge to its present day form so that a holistic compound of God-experience may be gleaned from material science, biology, sociology and so on. A purely biological explanation for everything would appear as too exclusive by not taking all of humankind's knowledge and its experiential dimensions into account. By virtue of the complexity of this compound of immanent God-experience, the same must apply should chance be claimed as explaining the origin and operation of the universe, which is an inferior option to the God-hypothesis (Ward 2008:240).

Traditional reformed theology holds that God had no need to complement himself in creating the universe by virtue that God remained the same after this creative act as before. 'In sum, the God of Scripture is *self-contained* and *self-sufficient*, in no way ontologically correlative to his creation' (Reymond 1998:130-131).

The particular theism of Keith Ward

In my opinion, Ward's theism, loosely conditioned by classical theological traditions, finally develops to express a new theism. This is partly due, as shown above, to his acceptance of God-experiences as revelatory throughout humankind's history. In addition, Christological uniqueness gives Christianity its peculiar dynamic for a historically changing identity in engaging the world. And so he guides his readers into formulating a present-day polar theism.

A guide to formulating a credible present-day theism

A credible God-thesis

One of the issues Ward wants to address is the establishment of the right view of God for the present day: a transcendent God, timeless and immutable and creator of and involved with all of reality. He does so, on the basis of reason and God-experience (Ward 1996:242).

Ward addresses temporal creation, subject to contingency and change. One way that he does this is by means of his polar transitions: from objective value to supreme value, from spiritual reality to supreme spiritual reality, and from finite self to supreme self (Ward 2008:192, 224–225). Each quality exists identifiably and, by implication, relationally connects the finite to the infinite. I want to follow the basic argument of his use of science, within the system of reality and its implied supreme value, to show that what he says equally applies to theism implying the basics of a God-thesis.

The common view is that God is all-loving and does not want anyone to get hurt because (transcendent) God's sovereign almighty power grants the ability to do anything and stretches beyond the imaginable (Ward 2004b:64). Clearly this ability to prevent harm is not the immanent God-experience of humankind, the Christian faithful or of any other religion, and is contradicted by Isaiah 7:4. In fact, when this is compared to the scientific method of recording the consistency of data to eventually verify the existence of a natural law, then the classical God does not seem to fit.

The wisdom of God, in which Christ dwells, allows people to sensorily enjoy art, music and literature, and thereby enriching their human experience (Ward 2008:168). These same people believe in quantum events, string theory, the unobservable and unactualised. Without getting into the intricacies about views that the meaning of subjectivity is an illusion of consciousness confined to the brain's neural network as opposed to a strong commitment to reason buttressed by fallacy-free evidence, the implication is an insistence upon a theory that is basically consistent with the sensorial experience of humankind (Ward 2008:172–173). A God-thesis must be consistent with the workings of the universe and the experiences of humankind.

What Ward says of science objectively, must equally apply to his inclusive sensorial concept of God. Wisdom of God is immanently contained in scientific knowledge of the world and the universe. Nevertheless, it transcends it in complementing the comprehensiveness of all available knowledge. Because of this relation to deity, material science ought to be value-driven. Values such as truth, compassion and responsibility become significant and take on greater meaning, giving purpose for involvement in issues such as the fragility of the eco system, dying of species and care of AIDS sufferers.

If the wisdom of God develops (read 'process') historically in the unfolding of history in the universe, then science must reflect that wisdom in present day form. In other words, there is more known about God in the present than there was historically. It is upon this basis that Ward establishes a sensorial approach to religious truth following the argument throughout the system of reality. So much so that it becomes a matter of interpretation of humankind to establish the identity of deity as opposed to a material identity, hence the multiplicity of manifestations of deity of religions.

An identifiable God-thesis

For Ward, religious truth comprising a system of matter and the metaphysical must be related to a greater eternal source. This source must, of necessity, be in some form of hypostatisation to represent a relation of, for instance, value to supreme value (Ward 2008:180). To establish the relation between the objectivity of discerning truth, happiness, justice and beauty, the process can only be completed in striving towards the ideal. Ward (*ibid*:224–225) acknowledges that models of idealistic and theistic views, reasonably but not conclusively, suggest a relation between the finite and supreme self. This leap into metaphysical objectivity allows him to say: 'But a very natural place to put ideals of beauty, truth, and justice is in the mind of a God who is perfect beauty, truth and goodness' (Ward *ibid*:214). To extrapolate from beauty, truth and goodness to absolute beauty, truth and goodness is a matter of following the flow of the argument. When these ideals are united in a convergence of a supreme goal then it is a matter of semantic substitution for Ward to replace it with God. The principle is that belief in a God premise predisposes belief in the objectivity of value and purpose (Ward *ibid*:189) and allows for the schematic of a bipolar model in this model.

Let me elaborate on the attraction of following this route of reasoning. God, for Ward (2010:148; 1994:15), does reveal truth as an eternal reference to himself. But this so-called 'true knowledge' in this view of revelation is not one of classical unambiguity – quite the contrary. God, for instance, cooperates (also read 'luring') with humankind within the limits of the culture of the day, being changed through a process of influence and influencing (Ward 1994:109). A mysterious cooperation of faith as process embraces the very beginnings of all primal and subsequent religions. Interestingly enough is the view of Milbank, which questions such a sociological view of religion. Milbank (2001:2–3, 442) contends that Christian theology, based on an ontology of peace, has a better foundation than any vying cultural sociological construct for addressing a totality of reality. By its very nature theology seeks to broker an ontological peace in contrast to sociological constructs based on an ontology of violence.

A God-thesis with content

Ward states his basic theism as 'God sets out in creation to realise specific purposes. God experiences that realisation' (Ward 2002:216), implying that as part of creation, humankind and God are dynamically involved in a historical process towards bipolar potential and fulfilment. He suggests the concept of 'supreme moral ideal' as the coherent loadstone of human fulfilment (Ward 2008:206). God who, by virtue of the argument developed thus far (Ward *ibid*:207), is of necessity transcendent as the luring, supremely beautiful and good creator (Ward *ibid*:215). Immanent Christ hidden in wisdom unfolding and transcendently residing at God's right hand concludes in Christological pantheism. The faithful are lured to the supreme value within the context of God's creation in which immanent God reveals potentialities

and coherence of truth, beauty and goodness. Humankind is motivated by the objectivity of such values, which exist in the wisdom of God, revealed in the present to reach for the greater values.

Within a closed system, the laws of nature are read back into the Christian scriptures, which see them as God's servants. Although they do not perfectly express God's will and dominion over humankind, it does reflect the view of vulnerability in that change is accounted for. Ward does this in the grand classical Christian tradition of transformation. Transformation of God lies in Christ. I use the example of evil to illustrate.

Ward (1982:146) holds the opinion that one of the ways to explain evil is to realise that it is inevitable in a universe where God wills to achieve unobtainable goals. Immediately the sense of luring is incorporated into his scheme and so a move away from classical theology. God simply cannot prevent the evils consequent to randomness and evident in creation and humankind. But he does not go as far as to condone the idea that God's being includes the suffering and evil in this world so as to be part of the body of God (Ward 2004a:71). Nevertheless, because God is influenced by the evil, suffering and changes in this world, it is my contention that this shows that he adopts a softer pantheism than for instance that of Peacocke (2004b; 2004c).

For Ward, the implications are not just for the Christian faith. Indeed, regardless of belief in any peculiar identity of deity, both theist and nontheist religions postulate some concept of supreme spiritual reality. For Christian believers this is taken to be reflective of the one personal God of its tradition (2008:241).

The attraction for developing a Christianised pantheist model and a classical response

Ward commands a great deal of respect as a theologian in Britain. His interests are in comparative theology and in the relation between science and religious faith and, not least, the Christian faith.

He confirms that he tries to present Christianity cosmically. With insights into the purpose and meaning of its physical construct revealed by science (Ward 2002:11) and in the 'distinctive central core of religious belief that has something to contribute to human knowledge and understanding, and that it is quite different from scientific knowledge' (Ward 2008:4). His view of modern science is that it necessitates that theologians review their traditional views of Christian beliefs and, by implication, the beliefs of other religions as well. The hopeful outcome of these exercises would be some response from scientists acknowledging the possibility of the God-hypothesis and God-experience.

I have shown how Ward adopted his view of Christianity suggestive of his inclusive approach to other religions so as

to define the place science has within a holistic view of reality. A soft bipolar Christology is one of a variety of pantheist constructs (Cooper 2007) and proves to be attractive to its adherents for various reasons. This attraction is only possible because it questions the traditional Christian views of revelation and of God's uniqueness. I will now explore some of these.

God's vulnerability

The first attraction of a pantheist approach is the fact that God is portrayed as being vulnerable. This is a useful springboard for a serious approach to science from a theological perspective. Essentially, the scientific idea of the universe translated into macro and quantum physics overturns a static view of creation and instigates a search for origin compatible to its premises. The most plausible to date is a 'big bang' postulate, inclusive of the view that biotic life emerged spontaneously because conditions happened to favour the life we know. Any credible view of God must therefore allow for the serious entertainment of, for instance, a classical Newtonian postulate of determinism and the unpredictability of indeterminism. Theologians reacted variously to this material approach.

God's presence in history is in essence Pannenberg's approach. His pantheist platform serves as an invitation to scientist and theologian to dialogue and consider the implications of God in science. His premise is basically a statement of the unity of history as an experience of divine reality (Pannenberg 1993:75, 112). In this bipolar manner he attempts to preserve the aseity of God in the midst of a dynamic process history. Unity is possible through the content of the Christ event, which brings history together and anticipates finality (read 'process') in the eschaton (Pannenberg *ibid*:25, 48). Scientist-theologian Polkinghorne (2001:96) shies away from a determined interpretation of revelation and sees God's operation in this world kenotical. The laws of nature are 'the beautiful equations' of science describing its laws and are seen to reveal the work of God (Polkinghorne 2000:38; Weder 2000:189). God does not override natural processes but remains vulnerable in a 'free-process defense' love form for this world. Both theologians try to bring about a unified theological space, incorporating history and its dynamic processes to give credence to the experience of visible material reality and invisible deity. Ward's schema follows a similar vulnerable theism.

A traditional systematic theological approach holds that theologising takes place within the Church under the Lordship of Christ. This will affirm the ancient truths of the Bible correctly understood in each succeeding generation so that God will remain truly God, the God of the Bible (Reymond 1998:xxxiii). Biblical truth is more than a *Hinweis [drawing attention to]* so that Ward's theological inclination actually formulates itself into a form of pantheism'.

Ward, Pannenberg and Polkinghorne are persons who are respected and valued by the confessing church and

are theologians who unashamedly agree with Reymond (1998:16) that '[i]t is still biblical to insist that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God'. There is some consensus with Reymond's classical take on theology that to make sense of this reality, resorting to a theistic explanation is essential. But this is also where they separate.

Ward, Pannenberg and Polkinghorne will read the Bible together with the scientific scriptures of the day so as to, in their view, more adequately provide a holistic interpretation of reality. This is a shift from the classical tradition that relies on the revelation inscribed in the Bible to interpret reality. The loophole out of this approach to inspired revelation is to simply shift the focus to the Christ-event so that theology is largely equated to Christo-centric theology. Christ as the event in this view is the vulnerable one of history, adequate for all other events. Classically, knowledge of God is totally dependent on revelation (1 Cor 2:11). This is because, due to the fallen nature of humankind, revelation is suppressed and perverted and the only safe recourse is to take what the Scriptures say about God and what God does (Reymond 1998:153).

A platform for ecumenical Christianity

Cooper (2007:345) does not believe that pantheism is compatible with traditional Reformed theology, but admits that some forms of legitimate ecumenical Christianity may be expressed. In my view, it is important not to summarily dismiss Christian theologies that do not necessarily equate with one's own.

To understand the attraction of Ward's view of ecumenicity, one has to grapple with his views of revelation, concepts of God and religions other than Christianity. As shown above, religion is generally based on the hypothesis of a supreme cosmic consciousness. It has the power to lead one into experiences that intensifies and gives meaning to life (Ward 2002:15). People are 'vehicles of the divine life in the created cosmos' and the purpose of God and man is negotiating the pathway toward the kingdom of God as final purpose (Ward 2004b:34). All humankind, and therefore all religions, are involved in this purpose. In this cosmic ecumenicity there is firstly, for Ward, a dynamic relationship of humankind with God, secondly between God and humankind and finally humankind interacting within itself.

Ward's ecumenicity emerges naturally from the polar theism of his soft pantheism. In this catholic religious view, God will do almost anything to persuade humankind to know and to love him – an approach with a wide open door for any religious persuasion. To avoid the exclusivity of a Judaeo-Christian-Muslim view of revelation, Ward's ecumenical model is latitudinally broad enough to embrace the most primal, traditional and confessional religions. Truth, not necessarily biblical, is objective and includes the possibility of being accessible to all religions. Such penetration of the transcendent upon the basis of objective truth brings about humankind's response to God as knowable in the shared

event (Ward 2004b:15). Responses may vary relative to the religion (Ward 1994:97) and God is an open door in the process of history.

The ecumenical challenge for various religions is to acknowledge plural manifestations of the shared God, who is at the same time transcendent. Christianity is unique in its emphasis upon the trinity (Ward 2004b:16) and the incarnation of Jesus Christ (Ward 1994:197). Ward, in my opinion, is able to maintain the monotheistic view of the Christian God only in so far as it is discussed in the context of transcendency. Immanently, God's revelational plurality allows for a variety of manifestations of deity, which could converge transcendently. There is twofold movement in this world: from the world to God and from God to the world (Ward 2004b:37).

This soft pantheism, in my view, allows Ward to claim some of the same attributes of transcendent God to be evident in immanent God. It is therefore an ecumenicity based upon a shared religious God-hypothesis. For many, such a platform for interfaith discussion would be very attractive and even acceptable. It would at least allow for dialogue. But it does come with a price. Incorporating Christian religion with other religions is of course to risk losing its revelational identity for the sake of an event identity. The former relates to the classical tradition of the Christian faith and the latter to a new type of theism.

Conclusion

I think that it would be fair to conclude that what emerges from this paper is that some truths are more readily acceptable within their respective communities of faith. Ward commends recognition of truth, justice, goodness and beauty as those shared experiences of humankind that may lead to formulate value and an eventual God-hypothesis. On the other hand, the uniqueness of Christianity also makes for exclusion.

Its Trinitarian theism, nor its exclusion of some unto salvation and others not, is not easily assimilated outside of its community as it takes the historical and present person of Jesus seriously. The generic God-experience is not enough. Pantheism in its various forms may adjust traditional Christian theism into formulating a credible face meeting science, but the Christian perspective does not see justice to be fully done. Creator God remains ontologically self-sufficient, sovereign, immutably immanent and transcendent, despite the insights of a soft pantheism as suggested by Keith Ward. The challenge of determinacy and indeterminacy remains to be explored.

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