Religion and the Modern World: Towards a Naturalistic Panentheism

By Matthew Segall

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Jacob Sherman, PhD
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“Dear people, let the flower in the meadow show you how to please God and be beautiful at the same time.
—The rose does not ask why. It blooms because it blooms. It pays no attention to itself nor does it wonder if anyone sees it.” –Angelus Silesius (1624-1677), Cherubinic Wanderer, 1:288-289

Introduction

The last century has arguably brought more change to the Earth, measured either in terms of increased complexity (of culture and consciousness), or in terms of entropy release (as pollution), than any other 100-year period in the biosphere's history. Human civilization, and the disenchanted technoscientific way of life which has come to dominate it, is largely responsible for this rapid transformation. Whether it be the population explosion and global poverty, the continuing threat of nuclear war, civil rights, feminist, and other social justice movements, peak oil, or the ecological crisis, ours' is a world with much at stake for whom the fast approaching future may just as easily bring tragedy or triumph, or perhaps equal doses of each.

In such an unstable and uncertain context as this, how is humanity to orient itself cosmologically, and in the service of what ideals is it to direct its spiritual aspirations? These are not peripheral questions—they inevitably burn in the hearts of every individual faced with the aforementioned chaos. Answering them in an integral enough way so as to overcome political divisiveness while at the same time avoiding the subsumption of cultural difference is essential to assuring the future flourishing of our species and the planet. The possibility of a planetary civilization rests upon re-inventing our complex human identity, such that it is inclusive of our origins as embodied earthlings and our
destiny as immortal spirits.

Whether our aim is scientific investigation of the cosmos, or religious worship of the divine, sooner or later we are going to have to articulate a conception of human nature. Are we creatures of God, or products of Nature? Or, is there an alternative conception of humanity (of God, of Nature) that overcomes this false dichotomy? The following essay is my attempt to provide such an alternative: an integral anthropology, or theory of the human, that is neither exclusively theological nor cosmological. After Raimon Pinnikar, my approach in what follows might be called "cosmotheandric," in that I am attempting to tell a story about human origins and destiny that does justice to our traditional spiritual intuitions and is adequate to our modern scientific realizations. Contemporary debates, especially in popular media outlets, tend to collapse the complexity of the science/religion dialectic into easily digestible slogans derived from the most extreme ends of the spectrum of opinion. The cosmological options are typically dichotomously construed as atheistic scientific naturalism vs. literalistic creationism. These are not the only options. Before moving into a discussion of a third option emerging out of Alfred North Whitehead's naturalistic panentheism, I will provide an example the popular discourse that surrounds these issues.

**Religion in the News**

The power of religious and cultural ideology, according to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, is the single most important issue facing human civilization in the 21st century. During a recent debate in Toronto with author, Christopher Hitchens, Blair cautioned against the wholesale desire to rid the world of religious belief:
“The 20th century was a century scarred by visions that had precisely that imagining at their heart, [giving] us Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot. In this vision, obedience to the will of God was for the weak, it was the will of man that should dominate.”

Hitchens, an outspoken atheist, argued that the divide between religion and philosophy is foundational. For him, reason and faith, scientific skepticism and scriptural sanctification, are unambiguously opposed ideals. Not the will of God, but basic respect for human dignity ought to be the basis of morality:

“We don’t require divine permission to know right from wrong. We don’t need tablets administered to us ten at a time on pain of death to be able to have a moral argument. No, we have the reasoning and the moral persuasion of Socrates and our own abilities, we don’t need dictatorship to give us right from wrong.”

The crux of the disagreement between Blair and Hitchens seems clear: For Hitchens, our values can and should emerge on the horizontal plane of history out of basic human sympathy and autonomous reason, while for Blair, the nature of Goodness is revealed by a divine authority, inserted into time along the vertical axis of eternity. Hitchens rejects all notions of “celestial dictatorship,” while Blair rejects the hubris that lack of faith in a higher power implies. But, despite their differing emphases, the two men may still be carrying the same cross. It cannot be overlooked that Hitchens, in mentioning Plato’s teacher, Socrates, implicates himself in an idealist tradition of verticality. And Blair, a life-long politician, cannot deny the power of common sympathy and the importance of rational discourse on the horizontal plane.
Both men, it seems, are bound by the interpenetrating axes of time and eternity, the conscience of each of them called to bleed for something larger than their own skin in order to make sense of life. Each is compelled, by reason or revelation, to reach beyond mortality in their measurement of life’s ends. Hitchens, a materialist, argues that modern science has provided an awe-inspiring vision of an immense and mysterious cosmos, but that this awe is more terrifying than edifying. Not divine providence, but suicide by over-expansion is, in Hitchen’s eyes, the true fate of our universe. He does not shy away from suggesting that, without God, our carnal existence is ultimately meaningless but for brief encounters with “the important matter” of what he is willing to call “numinous,” “transcendent,” and “ecstatic.” He desires to clearly distinguish between belief in a “supernatural dictator”—an idea he finds morally and intellectually bankrupt—and the sense of the transcendent and numinous.

On this final point, Hitchens and Whitehead would be in agreement. Traditional notions of an all-powerful extra-cosmic Creator deity capable of entering into and re-directing the causal course of natural events upon a whim do not align with our scientific knowledge, nor for that matter with our moral intuitions of how a benevolent God should behave. An all-powerful deity that does not prevent the evils that are a daily fact of creaturely life cannot also be all-good.

Whitehead, like Blair, is an example of one for whom philosophy and religion are not at odds. As Blair put it, belief in God is for him “clear, insistent, and rational.” The challenge for philosophy is not necessarily to oppose the religious impulse, but to adequately articulate how God and the world are related.
The moral and intellectual arguments that Hitchens marshals against religious belief are not relevant to Whitehead’s philosophy of naturalistic panentheism. Hitchens’ brand of atheism, though it is perhaps a reasonable response to those strands of Abrahamic monotheism that conceive of God in the image of an imperial ruler, nonetheless remains an inadequate cosmological and psychological basis for civilized life. In the next section, I attempt to demonstrate why.

A New View of Religion

“Philosophy attains its chief importance,” according to Whitehead, “by fusing the two, namely, religion and science, into one rational scheme of thought” (p. 15). The revelations of modern science concerning the regularities of nature have made belief in miracles seem antiquated and superstitious, but the religious impulse itself seems to run deeper than the need for magic tricks offering proof of the divine.\(^1\) As Hitchens admits, humanity’s sense of the numinous and transcendent—of “something beyond the material, or not quite consistent with it”—is what distinguishes us from other primates. We are not only the wise, but also the uncanny species. To be human is to participate in both time and eternity, to be embedded in history with an intuition of infinity, our birthright an experience of what Thomas Berry called incendence.

The vast majority of human beings feel compelled to respond to this feeling of incendence religiously, either as evidence of a personal deity (as in the Abrahamic and some Vedic traditions) or as evidence of an impersonal creative plenum or ground of being (as in Buddhism, Taoism, and many indigenous traditions). Whitehead's dual

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\(^1\) Matthew 16:4 – “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of Jonah.” Matthew 12:40 – “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”
conception of the ultimate in terms of God and Creativity, respectively, helps us understand these cultural differences, as will be explicated below. A naturalistic panentheism both acknowledges the nearly universal human proclivity to religiosity, and indeed the reality of the divine, while at the same time providing a cosmological picture that satisfies Hitchens' demands for non-supernatural scientific adequacy.

There are three distinct but related questions that must be considered in order to unpack Whitehead's speculative scheme: (1) "is there a divine reality (to which experiences of the numinous, transcendent, and ecstatic refer)?", (2) "do our inherited cultural expressions of this reality pass basic ethical and epistemological tests of adequacy (that is, do these traditions align with our moral and intellectual intuitions)?", and (3) "is relating and giving voice to the numinous basic to human nature, and therefore to civilized life?"

These three questions correspond to (1) the metaphysical/ontological, (2) the practical/theoretical, and (3) the anthropological relevance of the divine. Each question will be explored in turn.

(1) For many atheists like Hitchens, modern science and philosophy are interpreted to have all but eliminated the need for and evidence of a divine reality. The physical universe is understood to be meaningless and non-teleological, the seemingly "finely-tuned" constants underlying its mathematical regularities deemed entirely accidental. Whitehead, on the other hand, takes the same empirical evidence and interprets it through a more adequate metaphysical lens. Rather than relying upon the notion of randomness to account for the excessive order and harmony of the universe (which, it should be said, is the exact opposite of an explanation), Whitehead's naturalistic panentheism overcomes
the misplaced concreteness\(^2\) that allows abstract entities like “randomness” and dead mechanical “forces” to pass for satisfying causal explanations of natural phenomena. Stepping out of Hitchen’s mechanistic cosmology of explosions, colliding surfaces, and entropy and into Whitehead’s living universe of interpenetrating wholes requires a cognitive and somatic gestalt shift in perception. Whitehead is not just providing a new set of ideas to account for the order of the external world; his metaphysics is an attempt to make perceptible a way of thinking with the cosmos so as to achieve co-presence with and as the Wisdom of an eternal and ever-lasting God. This God is not extra-cosmic, but directly participates in the unfolding of the universe by luring its creative longing toward certain ideals.

“[God] does not create the world,” writes Whitehead,

“he saves it: or, more accurately, he is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness” (PR, p. 346).

Unlike traditional theism, for which the trend toward order "[arises] from the imposed will of a transcendent God," for Whitehead, these trends arise because "the existents in nature are sharing in the nature of [an] immanent God" (AI, p. 130). The existence of a divine reality is affirmed while avoiding attributing it with the supernatural power to create ex nihilo that has been criticized by many philosophers, including David Hume. Whitehead sought to “add another speaker to that masterpiece,” namely, Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (PR, p. 343). Divine causation, rather than being an imposition from outside the natural world based on power alone, instead works within this world based on moral persuasion. It could be argued in summation that, for

\(^2\) This fallacy is explored more thorough on p. 10
Whitehead, ours in an ordered and beautiful universe because God desires that it be so, and because all creatures, as participants in God’s nature, tend to grow toward these divine ideals.

Skeptical atheists like Hitchens interpret modern scientific cosmology, specifically Georges Lemaître’s inflationary theory and Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory, to have proven beyond much doubt that our species, an interesting but peripheral and accidental twig on the billion year old tree of life, has mysteriously awoken to consciousness in a hapless universe moving inevitably toward heat death.

As Hitchens put it so eloquently, if also partially, during his debate with Blair:

“I come before you as a materialist. If we give up religion, we discover what actually we know already, whether we're religious or not, which is that we are somewhat imperfectly evolved primates, on a very small planet in a very unimportant suburb of a solar system that is itself a negligible part of a very rapidly expanding and blowing apart cosmic phenomenon.”

Hitchens here emphasizes the absurdity of our purely empirico-physical understanding of the larger cosmos. Based only on sensory observation of primary qualities like mass and motion, and mathematical analysis of them in terms of measurable quantities, the universe reveals no apparent purpose. It is only the poetic indulgence of the human imagination that fools us into believing otherwise.

Whitehead laments the consequences of such a disenchanted perspective on the cosmos:

“The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves [turning] them into odes of self-congratulations on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless,
colorless; merely the hurrying of material endlessly, meaninglessly” (SMW, p. 54).

In responding to Hitchens rather disheartening philosophical interpretation of scientific data concerning the larger cosmos, it would be instructive to recall Whitehead’s statement in the opening pages of *Process and Reality* that “the chief error in philosophy is overstatement” (p. 7). The mechanistic materialism that was born during the Scientific Revolution has proven immensely useful for technological endeavors, but in attempting to give an account of the universe entirely in terms of meaningless matter in motion, it commits what Whitehead calls the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness*. This fallacy concerns the false attribution of concrete actuality to what remain abstract conceptual models.

The philosopher Jean Borella has located the cause of this false attribution in what he terms the “epistemic closure of the concept,” which Wolfgang Smith suggests “consists in the elimination from the concept of everything that proves recalcitrant to linguistic or formal expression” (SM, p. 50). Borella’s analysis is based upon the distinction he makes between language and thought, wherein thought is assigned primacy and language is defined by its supportive and communicative function. The “epistemic closure of the concept” is the very foundation of scientific materialism, because unlike the conceptual thought of the philosopher, for whom maintaining a certain “openness to being” is paramount, the scientist is after exact, formalizable definitions. While the philosopher’s aim is to use concepts in order to achieve a non-discursive contemplative vision of the truth, the scientific materialist “is constrained to reduce phenomena to ‘pure relations,’ that is to say, relations which are independent of the beings which enter into them” (ibid.,
p. 51). In other words, abstract mathematical formalisms describing the relations between actual occasions obscure the complex reality of those occasions, committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

Borella explains:

“[There is thus in scientific materialism an identification of] the concept and its object, since the latter is likewise a concept, whereas in philosophical knowing the concept is only a means by which the object is known: essentially transitive, it remains thus ontologically open. The Galilean universe is therefore a universe of object-concepts which move in a conceived space-time” (ibid.).

Although Whitehead’s cosmology challenges many of the same assumptions of Aristotelian physics that Galileo was lead to criticize, he nonetheless recognized that mechanistic accounts of natural phenomena couldn’t be the whole story. The Galilean approach, though it provides for a great deal of prediction and control of non-living matter, does so at the expense of a comprehensive, qualitative account of the cosmos as a whole (which includes the more-than-physical phenomena of life and intelligence).

While for a materialist like Hitchens, cosmic inflation suggests only a dead universe whose random and fleeting order is destined to evaporate into nothing, for a panentheist like Whitehead, “…the expansion of the universe…is the first meaning of ‘organism’” (PR, p. 215). Like Plato before him, Whitehead recognizes in the macrocosmic processes something analogous to the growth and development of a living thing.

Similarly, while for Hitchens the doctrine of evolution implies that organic life is a directionless wandering motivated only by the desire to survive the blind selection of an
uncaring external world, for Whitehead “the whole point of the modern doctrine is the evolution of the complex organisms from antecedent states of less complex organisms,” wherein the more complex organisms represented stages of “emergent value” (SMW, p. 107). In other words, if Darwin’s evolutionary theory is non-teleological, then it is an incomplete theory, since the history of the universe, both beyond and upon our planet, clearly displays a tendency toward greater states of organizational complexity. Of course, Darwin was only trying to account for the process of speciation among plants and animals on Earth, not for that among the microscopic organisms studied by particle physics (electrons, protons, atoms, etc.). But even among earthly bodies, if mere survival were the only game in town, matter would have been quite content to remain in the mineral state. Why trouble itself with the challenges of eating and procreation if life as a rock would have sufficed?

Whitehead’s evolutionary cosmology, besides avoiding the bifurcation of nature into organic v. inorganic, attributes the experience of “enjoyment” to all enduring forms of order that arise amidst the cosmic process. Organisms do not just stoically endure their existence by responding passively to the harsh givens of their environment; they feel compelled to take the speculative risks necessary to deepen their experience and enjoyment of existence. Evolution is the story of the great successes of speculation of countless generations of diverse organisms to come before us upon this planet and within this universe. Every moment of our human experience as organized beings—as cosmotheandric organisms—inherits a relevant past billions of years in the making. Our human bodies are the accumulated achievements of the decisions of ancient bacteria. Within the nucleus of bacteria are the accumulated achievements of primordial hydrogen
atoms who suffered a transmutation into heavier elements within the core of a prior generation of stars. Life seeks not just survival, but an increase in the intensity of its enjoyment, which is to say a refinement of the contrasts available within experience for conceptual valuation. In short, the more capable an organism is of perceiving and expressing truth, goodness, and beauty, the more evolved it is. The desire to move toward the end of heightened experience is described by Whitehead as an adventure of ideas. This desire, or Eros (divine lure), is the reason for evolution from simplicity to complexity. Deeper beauty, purer truth, and greater goodness are the ends of Eros.

The metaphysical background of modern scientific cosmology, as brought to the surface and articulated by Hitchens, is an overstatement based on a narrow range of facts. His conclusions about human nature and the fate of the universe, though rightfully rid of supernaturalism, represent an inadequate appraisal of the full spectrum of evidence available to human experience. Purpose is not simply a human contrivance, but can be seen and felt at work throughout the universe. The excessive harmony and upward trend toward complexity evident in our universe testify to the presence of an immanent divine lure. The epistemic closure of scientific materialism occludes one’s view of the presence of these trends, such that the clear, formal definitions of an abstract system come to replace our immediate perception of a value-rich world.

(2) The notion of a persuasive God working from within the world to bring about the most beauty and goodness that is possible is not entirely without precedent in humanity's cultural expressions of divinity, but for the vast majority of those practicing within the Abrahamic traditions, the idea probably sounds foreign. Hitchens major criticisms of
religion center around the ethical and epistemological inadequacies of orthodox theology, wherein an all-powerful and all-knowing God designs and creates the world from nothing, a world that then somehow falls from grace into sin. In this scenario, according to Hitchens, it seems that God "makes us objects in a cruel experiment, whereby we are created sick, and commanded to be well."

From Whitehead's perspective, such a cruel picture is clearly an inadequate basis upon which to worship the divine, whose nature, even for orthodox believers, is also supposedly all-loving and all-good. That humanity has, for the most part, poorly depicted the nature of God in its popular cultural expressions is no argument against the reality of the divine. This shortfall demands of us not the abolition of religion, but a more philosophically coherent response to the sense of incendence that makes our species uniquely religious.

"Religion," says Whitehead,

"is an ultimate craving to infuse into the insistent particularity of emotion that non-temporal generality which primarily belongs to conceptual thought alone" (PR, p. 16).

The role of philosophy, which finds the numinous and transcendent "among the data of experience," is to weave the particular religious impulses that result from such experiences into some general scheme of thought. Philosophy, without developing a close relationship with religion, would become psychologically ineffectual; and religion, without calling upon philosophy, would sink into emotional tedium. Some "supreme fusion" between the situatedness of particular emotions and the universality of ideas must be effected.
As Whitehead put it,

"The two sides of the [human] organism require a reconciliation in which emotional experiences illustrate a conceptual justification, and conceptual experiences find an emotional illustration" (PR, p. 16).

Through an ideal interplay between the emotions of religion and the concepts of philosophy, Whitehead sought to widen humanity's moral outlook, so that the interests of individuals might begin to align with the general good (PR, p. 15). Not a culturally exclusive set of doctrines and dogmas violently clung to, but a universal respect for the goodness of life: this is the essence and end of the religious impulse for Whitehead.

As was shown in answering question (1), Whitehead's God is not all-powerful in the traditional sense, nor is God entirely transcendent. The evils of the world-process are suffered as much by God as by finite creatures, since God is in effect the soul of the universe. God is understood to be the original creature of Creativity, its "primordial, non-temporal accident" (PR, p. 7). Creativity is "the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact" (PR, p. 21), and also "that ultimate notion of the highest generality at the base of actuality" (PR, p. 31). The true omnipotence of God is expressed, not as the ability to alter events from an unaffected state beyond the universe, but as the ability to remember and incorporate for all eternity the character of each and every actual occasion as it arose from and receded into the flux of the creative process. God perpetually unifies the ongoing cosmic process by providing the initial aims and perceiving the final results of the concrescence of all finite creatures, including the universe itself. God is the assurance of permanence amidst the unstable dynamism at the root of reality.
Process is considered ultimate for Whitehead (PR, p. 7), seemingly making it more eminently real than at least God’s primordial nature. But God is complex, relating to the world through more than one face. The consequent nature of God must also be considered, wherein due to interpenetration with time and process, the divine transacts with the actual world to shape and be shaped by its enduring characteristics of order. “Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty,” says Whitehead. “Either of them, God and the World, is the instrument of novelty for the other” (PR, p. 349).

Some non-Western traditions, like Buddhism and Taoism, express the ultimate nature of reality in terms of an impersonal creative principle. Whitehead points out that, by relativizing God’s power in respect to Creativity, his cosmology may seem to have more in common with Indic and Chinese conceptions of the ultimate (PR, p. 7). Creativity, however, can never exist by itself, but only as embodied or exemplified by some actual entity (following Whitehead’s categorical scheme, wherein only res verae are real); God and the World are those actual entities by which creativity is instantiated and made actual (PR, p. 29). Finite creatures never experience Creativity in the absence of its having been characterized by God and worldly actualities (RWS, p. 283). This is not to say that non-theistic religious traditions like Buddhism are incorrect in their assessment of ultimate reality, but that what makes experiences of Śūnyatā, or Emptiness, distinctively religious (because numinous and transcendent) is that “Creativity as prehensively experienced is always characterized by divine attributes” (RWS, p. 284). Even within many Buddhist traditions, Emptiness is characterized as wise and compassionate, which lends support to the notion of God’s participation in all our experience of reality.
If Blair is right, and the sociopolitical power of religion is the most important issue of the coming century, then inter-religious dialogue ought to be our civilization’s most pressing concern. No civilization, according to Whitehead, can continue its adventure in rationality absent a vigorous expression of the human sense of sacredness (MT, p. 120). Without some widespread cultural consensus regarding its nature, the sacred is bound to “retire into a recessive factor in experience” (ibid.). The consequences of such an apparent lack of universal orientation towards the sacred are evidenced by our global society’s increasing dependence upon the marketplace to determine its values. Money and property have overshadowed wisdom and compassion as the measures of individual and communal well-being. The inevitable result of failing to come to general cosmological consensus regarding our species’ spiritual aspirations will be the continued forfeiture of ultimate metaphysical authority to the shallow, entirely relative trends of the consumer economy. Widespread balkanization and the eventual triumph of barbarism seem like the most probable outcomes of this trajectory. Philosophical\(^3\) dialogue across cultures concerning religion is not a mere academic curiosity, but will be the source of the vitality of any continuing civilization humanity may hope to bring forth.

(3) As with all attempts to philosophically assess the ultimate nature of reality, and to determine how civilization ought to orient itself around this reality, a naturalistic panentheism must finally articulate its theory of human nature, or anthropology. Are the transcendent, the numinous, and the ecstatic basic to human experience? Even Hitchens

\(^3\) “Philosophy is love of the divine Sophia, that is to say, the self-revelation of the Principle itself; it is the desire for the knowledge by which the Absolute knows itself” (Jean Borella, quoted in SM, p. 50).
agrees that they are, but still disagrees with Whitehead about how this fundamental feature of human nature is to be interpreted and culturally expressed in religious forms.

For Whitehead, our experience of moral ideals—our conscience—“is the experience of the deity of the universe” (MT, p. 103). The very fact that we can disagree about ethical situations is evidence that some standard of judgment, some intuitive sense of what is just, exists to arbitrate our claims. Disagreements are opportunities to see the world from a wider and more complex perspective, to be more inclusive of differing expressions of the ultimately and incomprehensibly real.\(^4\)

“When the Western world accepted Christianity,” writes Whitehead, “Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers” (PR, p. 342). Whitehead goes on to criticize the “idolatry” of what became the Holy Roman Empire, namely its projection of the structure and function of Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rule onto the court of heaven. All the Abrahamic forms of religion that have come to dominate Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East have been infused with tragedy, according to Whitehead, because their willingness to obey tyrannical rule produced histories full of divisiveness and bloodshed (ibid.). “The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar” (ibid.).

Christianity’s Galilean origins also suggest another, humbler possibility, however. Historically realized in the person of Jesus Christ is the great potential hidden in every human heart: the ability “to slowly and in quietness operate by love,” finding enjoyment not in some future reward, but in “the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world” (PR, p. 343). Jesus presents us with a God whose nature is not that of the kings of Earth,

\(^4\) Reality is “incomprehensible” not because it is irrational, but because reality is ultimately process, forever outrunning its own completion in order to reach toward novelty.
ruthless and brusque, but that of a more heavenly patience, able to suffer even death and to wait millennia for the mass of humanity to awaken to his message.

Whether or not human nature is inherently Christ-like, or that of “imperfectly evolved primates,” as Hitchens claims, makes all the difference in the world. In the former case, we are capable of self-transcending love. In the latter, we are limited by our own selfish instinctual desire for pleasure, helping others only in cases where it does not harm ourselves. The contrast between the animal/cosmic and the angelic/spiritual aspect of our nature need not be drawn so starkly, however. As has been shown above, a continuity can be said to exist between God, humanity, and the universe.

“There is a kind of perichoresis, ‘dwelling within one another,’” writes Panikkar, “of these three dimensions of reality: the Divine, the Human, and the Cosmic—the I, the you, and the It” (MFH, p. 214).

Holding in mind Whitehead’s doctrine of divine participation in the becoming of the world, it could be said that within the human being, the cosmos is giving birth to a new God. God, like the cosmos and the human being, is “an incompletion in process of production” (PR, p. 215). The birth, death, and resurrection of Christ could be said to be taking place through the historical awakening of the human spirit to itself and to the divine milieu within which it is embedded. But two thousand years after the presence of the kingdom of heaven was announced as at hand, we are still struggling to develop the ears to hear and eyes to see it.

Poets are perhaps those most immediately aware of the incarnational process unfolding deep within the human soul. Their heightened intuition raises to consciousness the subtler, more obscure dimensions of experience, perhaps approaching the creative skill of
divinity in their finest moments of imaginative reverie. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake beautifully expresses the false assumptions of orthodox theology and contrasts them with the true implications of the Word’s becoming flesh:

“All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors.

1. That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul.

2. That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body, & that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul.

3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.

But the following Contraries to these are True.

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.

2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.

3. Energy is Eternal Delight.”

Blake’s intuition concerning the experiential delight that energy takes in its activity contradicts both materialist interpretations of modern physics, for which energy is the blind ability to do work, and ascetic interpretations of orthodox monotheism, for which instinctual energies are sinful, leading us astray from God. Like Whitehead, his imaginative vision of the human soul’s relationship to the larger cosmos overcomes the bifurcation between the spiritual and the material that runs through so much of Greek philosophy and Middle Eastern theology alike.

The human being, from the panentheist perspective here expressed, is not a peripheral feature of cosmogenesis. Because of the complexity of our organization, we are perhaps
unique among earthlings in our ability to attain full consciousness of eternity, and thus also of time. This makes each of our moment-by-moment decisions of special importance to God, for whom complete actuality “must also be understood as a multiplicity of actual components in process of creation” (PR, p. 350). God’s consequent nature is “God in his function of the kingdom of heaven” (ibid.), biding together all living things into a unified cosmos. The excess of creative freedom and degree of appetition achieved by the organization of the human organism means we have a deeper intuition of the primordial nature, and a larger impact upon the consequent nature of God than any other finite creatures (at least on Earth). Human consciousness can potentially come to know God’s ends, and it can rejoice in their continual accomplishment. Not only that, but when we express love and kindness, it allows God’s moral relation to and concrete reality within the world to become that much stronger, just as our expressions of fear and greediness pushes God that much further into irrelevance.

Whitehead’s understanding of human nature is such that both God and the cosmos are of the essence, as a thorough anthropological study inevitably leads to uncovering, challenging, and revising our theological and cosmological pre-suppositions. His is a prime example of a cosmotheandric metaphysics.

Panikkar’s cosmotheandric principle suggests that no account of reality can be complete unless it recognizes the interdependence of the universe, the divine, and the human. Christianity in particular has continued relevance in our age not as pure theology, but as anthropology. This is not because, as in Feuerbach’s philosophy, God is conceived merely as a human projection or ideal. Rather, Christianity is the natural culmination of anthropology, a lotus still sprouting from the murky soil of human civilization. And
humanity is similarly the product of a cosmic longing for what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called *personalization*. To continue the Teilhardian terminology: Cosmogenesis is anthropogenesis, and anthropogenesis is Christogenesis.\(^5\)

**Conclusion**

A naturalist panentheism does not build its case for the existence and importance of God upon logical or sensori-empirical proofs. Rather, the evidence for God, it can only be suggested, lies for the most part buried in the prediscursive silence of the human heart, which William James proclaimed is “our deepest organ of communication with the nature of things” (TWB, p. 62).

This non-sensuous perception of the divine’s presence in and influence upon the world is the reason for religion. Human beings cannot help but overflow with the desire to worship the Wisdom that has created and shaped the nature of all things. This worship, when ideally expressed, becomes the play of spirit with itself. A planetary awakening to the true, cross-cultural nature of the sacred would require nothing less than the widespread transfiguration of individual consciousness to a form historically experienced only by a few contemplatives and mystics. Given a clear vision of the divine-human-cosmic connection, our civilization may gain the reinvigorated spirit of adventure it so desperately needs.

“God is the fire within me,” writes Angelus Silesius,

“and I am the light in him. Do we not belong to each other intimately? I am as rich as God. There is no grain of dust that I do not have in common

\(^5\) Paul writes in Galatians 6:14 that the world itself was crucified upon the cross, implying that Christ’s Resurrection is also the creation of a new cosmos.
with him; dear people, believe me…God loves me above himself. If I love him above myself, I give him as much as he gives me…The bird is in the air, the stone lies on the land, the fish lives in the water, and my spirit is in God’s hand…If you are born of God, then God flowers in you, and his divinity is your sap and adornment” (CW, 1:11-80).

Materialistic anthropology reifies the non-discursive experiential origins of religion, back-grounding its true sources by drawing our attention away from the meaningful ambiguities constituting perceptual reality. It directs us instead to a simplistic definition: “a set of beliefs in the supernatural.” This definition of religion produces epistemic closure, a closure effecting how both contemporary religious and secular people think about their lives and the world. Theories and other verbalizable “beliefs” about reality overshadow and conceal the complex (but still common!) experience of incendence that comes along with being born and dying as a human being.

“What are you chasing after? Heaven is within you. If you are looking for God anywhere else, you will always miss him” (ibid., 1:81-82).

The religious impulse is central to human life and provides the moral foundation for civilization. It is of our nature as human beings to be “spirits in God’s hand,” to be participants in the heavenly economy of love while alive on Earth. The old concept of religion, wherein God is a thing to be believed in, must be re-conceived in light of the cosmotheandric revelation of today: God is a Self to be experienced, and heaven an earthly paradise.
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