

The World's Participation in God's Trinitarian Life

Samel M. Powell

SAMUEL M. POWELL has taught at Point Loma Nazarene University since 1986. He is the editor (with Michael Lodahl) of *Embodied Holiness* (InterVarsity, 1999), and the author of *The Trinity in German Thought* (Cambridge UP, 2001), *Participating in God* (Fortress, 2003), and *A Theology of Christian Spirituality* (Abingdon, 2005). E-mail: <spowell@point-loma.edu>.

ABSTRACT: Like process theism, Christian theology affirms the immanence of God in the world and of the world in God. Unlike process theism, it also affirms the ontological priority of God over the world. As a result, Christian theologians will object to describing God's relation to the world by analogy with the mind's relation to the body or in terms of whole-part relations. In Christian history, the God-world relation has been more often described in terms of "participation." The world is said to participate in God, keeping in mind that this language is highly metaphorical. The idea of participation is a development of themes enunciated by Plato and Aristotle, but adapted by Christian theologians to trinitarian ends. The created world participates in God by reflecting the trinitarian life of identity and difference. This establishes an organic and internal relation between God and the world.

In an effort to contribute to the dialogue between process theism and Christian evangelical theology, I will discuss God's relation to the world by comparing Charles Hartshorne's understanding of panentheism with a Christian view that employs the notion that the world participates in God. I hope thereby to 1) clarify the differences between Hartshorne's views and those of the Christian tradition, and 2) show that the understanding of God's relation to the world exhibited in the Christian tradition is more flexible than process theists sometimes suppose. I will take *evangelical theology* to mean theology that takes both the Bible and the Christian theological tradition with the utmost seriousness and as authoritative sources from which theological reflection should be conducted. Evangelical theology, in other words, proceeds from a particular tradition of doctrinal commitments. However, it should not be supposed that evangelical theology is equivalent to the thinking that is popularly represented as evangelical. It is not, in other words, identical with the tradition that

runs from B.B. Warfield to Carl Henry and their successors in the Evangelical Theological Society. To the contrary, it is a broader tradition that encompasses all those whose theological posture is substantively shaped by the Bible and the Christian theological tradition.

As a Wesleyan, I am more sympathetic to the claims of process theism than many other evangelicals would be. Nonetheless, my purpose in this essay will be critical, not constructive. I will not attempt to build on points of agreement between process theism and the Christian tradition. Instead I will work to distinguish them in order to challenge process theism to take more seriously several doctrinal commitments that are indispensable to Christian theology.

Before proceeding much further, however, it may be useful to ask about the traditional Christian notion of God because, I fear, process theists sometimes assume that it is equivalent to what they describe as “classical theism.” Tyron L. Inbody, for instance, provides a typical summary of the divine attributes according to classical theism: “aseity, creator *ex nihilo*, immutability, apatheia, omnipotence, omniscience, and so forth” (170). In the narrative that process theists often offer, Christian theologians rather quickly abandoned the Bible’s vision of the living God and assimilated hellenistic views of God. The result was the intrusion of an alien metaphysics onto the soil of the gospel, with theologians awkwardly and incoherently combining the immutability of God with convictions about God’s lively interaction with the world. This narrative is not wholly false. It is true that traditional Christian theology ascribes features such as immutability to God.¹ It is also true that early and medieval Christian theologians had a profound appreciation for and made extensive use of classical philosophy and its doctrine of God. However, I contest the conclusion that this use of classical philosophy amounts to an incoherent juxtaposition of the god of the philosophers and the living God of the Bible. On the contrary, I contend that there is more continuity between the Bible’s teaching about God and the patristic/medieval doctrine than is sometimes supposed. That is because early and medieval Christian writers did not simply adopt classical philosophy but also made substantial changes to its account of God. Consequently, Christian theology ascribes features and actions to God that compel us to see that “classical theism” is far from encompassing all that Christian theology has to say about God. Christian doctrines about creation, the incarnation, and salvation all point toward a richer view of God and

God's relation to the world than is suggested by "classical theism." In particular, it is a fundamental conviction of Christian theology that God's relation to the world is not merely external but internal as well. That is why Christian theologians have been unsatisfied with metaphors of creation drawn from the world of engineering and architecture (as in the watchmaker metaphor). At the same time, Christian theologians typically do not regard God's internal relation to the world as nullifying God's transcendence and independence from the world and as making the doctrine of creation from nothing impossible.

It may be that these more inclusive Christian convictions can be intellectually sustained only by something like Hartshorne's neo-classical theism. Nonetheless, I think that this broadly Christian doctrine of God's relation to the world is defensible. I will accordingly explore the Christian doctrine of God's relation to the world and attempt to show that, when properly understood, Christian theology challenges process theism by providing an account of God's relation to the world no less compelling than that offered by Hartshorne.

A BRIEF EXPOSITION OF PANENTHEISM ACCORDING TO HARTSHORNE

Panentheistic theology comes in several varieties; however, Charles Hartshorne's remains one of the most accessible because of its clear exposition and because of the way in which he relates the body-soul analogy to the part-whole relationship. Consequently, Hartshorne furnishes us with one of the best partners for a dialogue with Christian theology.

According to Hartshorne, panentheism "affirms God as containing both an all-independent, all-causative actor *and* the totality of effects. . . . God *as C* [the universal cause] conforms to classical theism, *as W* [the all-inclusive whole of reality], to classical pantheism. . . . [Affirming that] 'God is truly independent and truly dependent' is no absurdity" (*PSG* 505). Hartshorne, then, thinks of classical theism as containing an important yet partial truth about God. God is indeed, in some respects, independent of the world. At the same time, the truth of theism has to be subsumed under a broader truth that encompasses the claim that God is the unity or wholeness of the cosmos.

The critical issue, then, is whether the cosmos has its being in God and thus partly constitutes God's being: "It is popular to say that God is immanent as well as transcendent; but this largely misses the point. The cause is of course in the effect. . . . But is God merely cause, merely C, or

is he CW? This is the critical question; and it is not answered by asserting both world immanence and world transcendence of God. The important question . . . is whether the world is immanent in God" (*Philosophers* 506). In Hartshorne's view, what distinguishes panentheism from classical theism is its conviction that the world dwells within God. I will not debate whether Hartshorne is correct in claiming that this is the central issue distinguishing panentheism from classical theism. But I do deny that the issue of the world's immanence in God distinguishes panentheism from all Christian theology. On the contrary, there is a long history in Christian theology of representing the created world as dwelling within God. Admittedly, this dwelling is presented in the Christian tradition in a large variety of ways and with constant attention to the metaphorical character of language. But a Christian theologian has no objection in principle to declaring that God is the all-inclusive reality. Of course, Christian theology has no interest in denying the ontological autonomy of entities in the cosmos; otherwise, we would be affirming a simple form of pantheism. But Hartshorne likewise affirms this sort of autonomy, so on this point I think we find substantive agreement.

Once Hartshorne has established the importance of seeing the cosmos as being in God, the next task is to portray God's relation to the world in the best way. What is the best metaphor for representing the world's being in God? For Hartshorne, the answer lies in seeing God as the world's soul and the world as God's body: "The mind-body relation is not a one-to-one relation but a one-to-many relation . . . Similarly, God's cosmic body is a society of individuals . . . God, the World Soul, is the *individual integrity* of 'the world,' which otherwise is just the myriad creatures. As each of us is the supercellular individual of the cellular society called a human body, so God is the super-creaturely individual of the inclusive creaturely society. . . . God is superior to all these in a manner of which the person-to-cell analogy gives only a faint idea" (*OOTM* 59). Although seeing God as the world's mind or soul provides us only "a faint idea" of God's relation to the world, it is a fruitful analogy, for it tells us that God is the experiential unity of the cosmos, just as the mind is the experiential unity of the cells that constitute the human body. Now at this point the Christian theologian will be more than a bit nervous. It is one thing to say that the world has its being in God. It is another thing to say that God is the soul or mind of the cosmos. The problem is that, based upon our current understanding, minds are purely derivative from their bodies. The

mind, in other words, comes to be as a result of the body's development. The body, therefore, has in one sense an ontological priority over the mind. The case of comatose people shows us that the body can function at some levels in the absence of the mind. From a Christian theological perspective, there is little to be gained by portraying God's relation to the world in terms of the mind's relation to the body. What is lost in this analogy is the notion of God's ontological priority to the world.

It is true that Hartshorne allows that God is the world's supreme cause in the sense that God is that reality that everything else requires and depends upon (*PSG* 503). However, the way in which he qualifies this notion will hardly satisfy the Christian intuition that God must be ontologically prior to the world. Hartshorne appeals to developments in 20th century physics to argue that a cause is "related to its effect, not by necessity but by probability. . . . The cause necessitates the occurrence of some effect or other" but no particular effect (*PSG* 500-01). Applying this to God, Hartshorne declares that "God's existence makes it inevitable that there be a world but only possible that there be just this sort of world (*PSG* 501). But what is the nature of this divine causation that makes a world inevitable? He allows that, to the extent that divine causation is concrete, it is as much effect as cause. It is, in other words, a part of the network of causes and effects that we find in the cosmos and that mutually condition one another. This sort of divine causation is clearly not primordial or ontologically prior. But he allows for another aspect of divine causation: "God, *qua* universal or supreme cause, is not concrete but abstract" (*PSG* 501). It is, I suggest, difficult to see how something abstract can be ontologically prior. At least in customary philosophical discourse, the abstract is something that depends on the concrete. Hartshorne seeks to mitigate this understanding of *abstract* by likening God's abstract causality to the efficacy of an idea: "Could there not be a primordial mind with an *unacquired* ideal, thus one which was never an effect? And would this ideal not have effects? In its mere possession of this ideal, the primordial mind would be purely cause rather than effect. . . . Ideas and ideals, being abstract, have, in proportion to their abstractness, a certain independence of the concrete alternatives of existence" (*PSG* 502). The problem here lies in understanding how something abstract can be ontologically prior to all else. It is not enough to say that ideas, being abstract, are independent of the concrete. That is the problem. By distinguishing God's concrete and abstract features and identifying God's primordality with the abstract, Hartshorne has closed

the door to God's ontological priority. This is because for him the abstract features of God are simply the permanent and unchanging features of God and because there is nothing about the concepts of permanent and unchanging that in themselves imply ontological priority. In Plato's philosophy, for example, the forms are ontologically prior, not because they are permanent and unchanging but instead because they are (with respect to any given quality) the maximum of that quality. We can see this from the fact that every form is eternal and unchanging, yet some forms are ontologically prior to others. Similarly, Aristotle believed that living forms are permanent and unchanging, yet they are clearly not ultimate since they are embedded in the sub-lunar world. Being permanent and unchanging then (being abstract, in Hartshorne's conception) does not imply ontological priority.

Because God is the cosmos' unity, the God-world relation can be recast in terms of part-whole relations: "God is a whole whose whole-properties are distinct from the properties of the parts. . . . What is in the parts is in the whole; so, for example, our misdeeds are in God; but not as his misdeeds, or his deeds at all" (*PSG* 511). However, God is not a whole in the sense of being a collection. On the contrary, God is a whole in the way in which the mind is a whole. It is in this sense that God is concrete. To speak of God being the cosmos' whole is to say that in God, the universe comes together in an experiential unity that is more than the sum total of cosmic events in any instant. God is the whole of the universe by being the experience (or sequence of experiences) of the universe in its totality: "Suppose a mind truly cosmic, able to enjoy the universe as content of its knowledge. Then every new beauty of experienced anywhere will be added to the cosmic experience, plus any emergent values due to the synthesis of the various values, new and old, in the cosmic experience" (*PSG* 506). Consequently, Hartshorne can describe God as "a living, sensitive, free personality." I will return later to the idea of God as a person; however it is important to point out here that Hartshorne's view of God owes a great debt to a modern or romantic conception of the person according to which the goal of life is aesthetic enrichment. To be a subject, in this view, is to enjoy experiences. The measure of life is the richness of those experiences. To some extent, every age fashions a portrait of God conformable to its ideals; however, it should be obvious that the Christian faith, which is about salvation, will have comparatively little interest in a theology whose divinity is driven principally by aesthetic concerns (*PSG* 514).

If, as Hartshorne argues, the world is to God as parts are to their whole, then there is an important sense in which God depends on the world: "That inclusiveness means dependence is self-evident; for a whole that could be, in all respects, just what it is were its parts otherwise than they are is nonsense. . . . Accordingly, *as* independent, God is exclusive, not inclusive; and, if this independent factor be all of God, then God-and-what-is-other-than-God must be a total reality greater (more inclusive) than God" (*PSG* 505). Just as there can be no wholes without constituent parts, there can be no God who is the cosmos' unity without a cosmos. Although Hartshorne concedes a sense in which God is independent (this is the partial truth of classical theism), this aspect is not God's entire being. If it were—if God were simply independent of the cosmos—then God would exist in a merely external relation to the universe. G.W.F. Hegel and more recently Wolfhart Pannenberg have drawn attention to the conceptual problems with portraying God as having a merely external relation to the cosmos. They argue that such a picture destroys God of true infinity, for, as Hartshorne points out, God would be defined over against a limiting reality. God would thus be conceived as a part of a larger system that included both God and the world. Consequently, Christian theology has no interest in representing God as dwelling in a strictly external relation to the world.

God's dependence on the cosmos does not, for Hartshorne, entirely rule out God's independence and transcendence. "God in his essence is independent of any world in particular, though not of world-as-such; God in his concrete total being at a given moment . . . contains just the actual world that then exists or at least has existed" (*PSG* 506). This mode of independence gives God a distinctive sort of transcendence: "God as CW 'transcends' the world, not only as every whole transcends each and every one of its parts, but in the uniquely radical way of containing an essence or element of self-identity absolutely independent of whichever among possible contingent things are actual as parts of the Whole" (*PSG* 506). God, in other words, is a concrete being by virtue of God's being the experiential unity of the cosmos. But we can abstract from God's concreteness an essence, i.e., those features of God that are true regardless of God's relation to any particular state of the cosmos.

A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF HARTSHORNE

There are several points about Hartshorne's presentation of panentheism that many Christian theologians will disagree with.

1. A way of getting at the first issue is to ask why, within the structure of Hartshorne's theology, God exists. If we set aside Hartshorne's adaptation of the ontological argument to argue that perfection must exist, then the existence of God as the cosmos' mind and experiential unity seems merely posited. There seems to be no reason why this cosmic mind should exist, for it should have a cause as do other minds. This is because God's concreteness is, in Hartshorne's conception, a property emergent from the universe. In the case of finite minds, we can point to factors outside individual minds that bring these emergent realities into existence: the social world, linguistic practices and other phenomena that bring the mind into existence from the brain states that constitute it. But there are no factors outside God that would bring the divine cosmic mind into being. The existence of God, in other words, is in Hartshorne's system simply posited as a reality, even though, as a mind and an emergent property, God's existence should be subject to the same sorts of factors that cause finite minds to emerge.

2. Along similar lines, there is nothing in Hartshorne's theory that tells us why God's experience should be a unity. To the extent that God is analogous to an embodied human mind, it seems unlikely that God would have this sort of experiential unity. After all, even human experience is far from unified; it is instead characterized by ragged edges and gaps. The universe, in turn, as a whole is more diverse than is an individual body. Consequently, it is less likely that God would attain a unified experience than that a finite mind should attain such experience. Briefly put, can Hartshorne show, on the basis of his system, why God should be the experiential unity of the cosmos? What does it mean to say that the universe, in its vast diversity, is unified in a single experience? Is this a conceivable idea?

3. The part-whole relation is an inadequate category for understanding God's relation to the world because it is not an ultimate category. The part-whole relation is a species of the identity-difference relation. This is because a whole is the principle of whatever identity and unity its parts have among one another and because parts differ from each and from the whole other in so far as they are distinct. The identity-relation differ-

ence, as a more inclusive category, is, accordingly, far superior as a tool for thinking of God's relation to the world. Beyond this consideration, Christian theologians will have difficulty with the notion that God is a whole consisting of parts. The problem is not the affirmation that God stands in an internal relation to the world. The problem is instead that Hartshorne conceives of this relation as a matter of God "containing" the world. Admittedly, Hartshorne's language of containment is metaphorical. Nonetheless, Christian theologians will feel that a more suitable image of God's relation to the world is required if the ontological priority of God is to be preserved in our thinking. I contend that the notion of the world's participation in God preserves many of the strengths of panentheism while doing justice to Christian theological concerns about God.

4. Hartshorne's presentation of God as the unity of experience inclines him to view God as a person; however, the category of person is ill-suited to help us understand the doctrine of God, for it tends to assimilate God too closely to human beings. Hartshorne's panentheism, in other words, implies too definite a view of God's subjectivity, a view that portrays God as suspiciously similar to human subjectivity. Of course, Hartshorne understands that to speak of God as a personality is to speak analogically of God. Nonetheless, it is difficult to avoid the impression that in Hartshorne's conception God differs from finite persons only in order of magnitude, due to the cosmic scope of God's integrating experience. This account, however, fails to sufficiently preserve the otherness of God.

5. Finally, Hartshorne's panentheism presents the concreteness of God's nature as the result of events in the world. God's actuality is thus derivative. Christian theology, however, insists on the ontological priority of God. Admittedly, this priority is understood in various ways. Nonetheless, Hartshorne's view remains unsatisfactory in so far as it posits the existence of a physical universe that is in itself everlasting and that, in an important sense, determines the character of God's experience. From a Christian theological perspective, it is important to affirm that the concreteness and specificity of the world results from God, even if theologians debate about the best way of expressing the way in which the world results from God.

THE MOTIF OF PARTICIPATING IN GOD AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO HARTSHORNE'S PANENTHEISM

Christian theology affirms that the world dwells in God. It rejects the notion that the world exists outside of God. It thus posits an organic

and not a merely external relation between God and the world. But in disagreement with Hartshorne's panentheism, Christian theology does not portray this dwelling in terms of the relation of body to soul or of parts to whole. How does it portray this relation?

The first thing to note is that Christian theologians have always recognized the metaphorical character of theological language. Consequently, we find the God-world relation portrayed in a variety of ways, all of which use figurative language. That is why, for example, the New Testament can speak about our being in God as well as God being in us. Similarly, the language of participation could be exchanged for the language of communion or sharing. The importance of this point is what it says about Christian convictions about God. To say that theological language is metaphorical is to say that God is incomprehensible. It is also to affirm the insight of apophatic theology that our language does a poor job of telling us what God is. The language of participation, then, must be understood accordingly. It is not a theoretical model but is instead a pictorial way of affirming that, in spite of God's independence from the world, God is for the world and comes to the world in grace and love. It says that God comes to the world not as a stranger but as a sustainer. For this reason, Hartshorne's view of God as the cosmos' mind and as the whole composed of constituent parts claims, from a Christian perspective, too much. Of course, Hartshorne does present these as analogies; however, Hartshorne's entire argument depends on God actually being a mind and a whole. Consideration must be given to the fact that Hartshorne's writings are a species of philosophical theology. Nonetheless, Hartshorne seems far more confident about the descriptive capacity of theological language than is warranted.

The Christian version of the world's participation in God (and God's presence in the world) is first expressed in several New Testament passages. There is, for instance, the Johannine metaphor of the vine and the branches: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in Him, he bears much fruit" (John 15:6, NASB). There is also the related discourse of John 17: ". . . That they may all be one, even as you, Father, are in Me, and I in you, that they also may be in us" (v. 21). These passages present to us the ideas of a mutual indwelling and of an organic relation between the divine and the human. The disciples live in Jesus Christ and he lives in them. They interpenetrate each other as do vines and their branches. Moreover, in this Gospel Jesus affirms

that the Father lives in the Son and the Son lives in the Father and prays that the disciples may be drawn into this trinitarian relation of mutual indwelling. Several points here deserve note. First, in John's Gospel and in the New Testament generally, the divine-world relation is presented almost exclusively in soteriological terms. The saying about the vine and the branches applies only to Jesus and the disciples. It is not a statement about God's relation to the entire created world. Second, much of this language is overtly metaphorical. Consequently, it is not sound to draw too much significance from these passages. Nonetheless, it is no exaggeration to say that, in the Johannine conception, despite God's otherness from the world (emphasized in numerous ways) the possibility of entering into the divine life is offered to human beings. Third, the divine life that is offered is a trinitarian life—the fellowship of the Father and Son that is possible through the Holy Spirit.

The trinitarian character of our participation in God is supported in Paul's letters, where it is expressed in the twin notions of our existence in Christ (emphasizing the corporate dimension of life in God) and in the Spirit (emphasizing the ethical dimension of life in God). Of course, the Pauline tradition could also speak about Jesus Christ being in us (e.g., in Colossians 1:27), so we don't want to make too much out of the language of our being *in* Christ and the Spirit. Once again we are reminded that theological language about God is flexible and metaphorical. Nonetheless, this language does reinforce the impression gathered from John's Gospel that the New Testament presents our relation to God as one of dwelling in the triune God. For Paul, to be related to God is to have our existence in and through the new corporate reality of which Jesus is the head and whose body is the church and also to live a transformed life in and through the power of the Spirit.

Finally, it is worth pointing to 2 Peter 1:4, which speaks of our becoming partakers (*koinonoi*) of the divine nature. In its context, this saying probably has reference to the results of sharing in God's life, namely immortality and an escape from the corrupting effects of sin. As such, this passage, like the Johannine and Pauline passages discussed above are interested in God's relation to the world only in soteriological terms. Nonetheless, it is notable that this text can present God in quasi-Platonic terms as a nature that can be shared in.

Christian theology after the New Testament drew substantially upon the classical philosophical heritage in trying to articulate the New

Testament's convictions about God's relation to the world, especially as it sought to think about this relation in terms broader than the New Testament's soteriological focus. Noteworthy in this respect are Plato's understanding of the relation of forms to physical entities, Aristotle's understanding of the divine act of *theoria* and the wise person's capacity to share in it, and the Stoics' view of human sharing in the *logos*.

Plato impressed the Christian tradition with the notion that the physical cosmos is an image of eternal realities, the forms. The physical, according to Plato, shares in (*metechein*) or has communion (*koinonia*) with the eternal forms. The relation between the two is one of reflection, for what is true of the eternal is true also of the physical, except in a diminished way and with a loss of the forms' unity. Plato thus establishes a relation between the eternal and the temporal that preserves their difference while acknowledging a remote sense of their identity. The cosmos is, for him, the way the forms appear in the condition of finitude: imperfect and diverse.

However, Plato's account of this relation could not be wholly satisfactory for Christian theologians, since in his conception the eternal lacks movement or, we would say, life. Here Aristotle's account of the unmoved mover becomes important. This first mover is, according to Aristotle, the eternal actuality of *theoria*, or knowledge of first principles. The wise person is the one who engages in the act of *theoria* and who thus shares in the divine life for as long as he or she engages in this activity. Like Plato, Aristotle holds that the relation of the eternal to the temporal is the relation of an original reality to its physical reflection; however, for Aristotle the eternal and original reality is not a quality but instead an actuality. As a result, its reflection in the cosmos is not a diminished quality but instead an activity. Human participation in the eternal, therefore, is not merely the reflection of a reality but is also the sharing in an activity as the wise person reproduces in thought the divine *theoria*. In this way, Aristotle improves on Plato by connecting human participation in the divine more closely to his philosophical anthropology.

Finally, from the Stoics the Christian tradition drew the conviction that rationality is not only our reflection of the divine but also the presence of the divine *logos* within us. The Stoics, in other words, thought of the relation of the eternal and the temporal in terms far more organic than did Plato and Aristotle. In the Stoic conception, the sharp distinction between time and eternity is softened through

the conviction that the *logos* is present in the world, not only as natural law but also as human rationality. The Stoic conception contributed the idea that there is one principle of the cosmos' rationality and of human rationality and that this principle is divine. It thus yielded a more positive assessment of the cosmos than is possible in Plato's and even Aristotle's philosophies

The Christian theological tradition, drawing on the New Testament as well as classical philosophy, began developing a conception of God's relation to the world and expressed it with the language of participation.

Illustrative in this development is Athanasius, according to whom it is through our participation in the *logos* that we attain goodness: "Those who partake of Him and are made wise by Him . . . receive power and reason in Him" (*Against the Heathen* §46). More broadly, the world "partakes of the Word [the *logos*] . . . and is helped by Him so as to exist, lest that should come to it which would have come but for the maintenance of it by the Word,—namely, dissolution" (*Against the Heathen* §41). It is through its participation in the *logos*, in other words, that the world is maintained in being and preserved from the nothingness from which it was created. We see here one of the ways in which early Christian writers built on the New Testament's soteriological focus of God's relation to the world and produced a more cosmic vision of that relation. At the same time, soteriological concerns are not far from Athanasius' thinking, for it is only through the world's participation in the *logos* that it is preserved from nothingness. So instead of saying that Athanasius adds a cosmic aspect to the New Testament's soteriological focus, it is more accurate to say that Athanasius has extended the soteriological scope of participation in God from the human dimension to the cosmic dimension. Participation, in other words, is more than an explanation of the world's features. It is also a statement about the way in which the world depends utterly on God for its being.

An important point for Athanasius and the entire Christian tradition is that the God-world relation is in an important sense asymmetrical, for while we depend on *logos*, it does not depend on us: "He is in creation, and yet does not partake of its nature in the least degree, but rather all things partake of His power" (*On the Incarnation* §43.6). For Athanasius, the *logos* is the original reality. The world comes to be and to be an ordered cosmos by participating in the *logos*. But the *logos* is the principle

of being and of order. As a principle, the *logos* determines the shape of the world but is not determined by the world. So, even though the world shares in the *logos* and the *logos* is present in the world, the *logos* retains its independence in relation to the world. We can see here a residue of the Platonic and Aristotelian conception of the relation of the eternal and the temporal. But it is more than a residue, for the Christian tradition saw in this conception a philosophical statement of the conviction it drew from the Bible, a conviction about the absolute priority of God. According to this conviction, the direction of determination runs in one direction, from God to the world. And yet, this does not imply that God is bereft of concreteness. In Hartshorne's conception, God gains concreteness by integrating the events in the cosmos into a unity that constitutes God's experience. But this conception equates concreteness with experience and finds an analogy between God's experience and that of finite subjects like us. If we instead think along Platonic lines (as Athanasius and other early Christian writers did), then we can see that the principle of being, which has ontological priority, is fully concrete and that entities in the cosmos lack concreteness. Of course, this view requires us to think of concreteness in terms of being and not in terms of experience. Readers will have to judge for themselves; however, the Christian tradition has found no contradiction in this Platonic way of looking at concreteness and in seeing God as a fullness of being which extends being in such a way that the world is created.

The Platonic tradition was carried on by Thomas Aquinas, who marks an important step forward in Christian thinking about participation in God. Thomas' thought is Platonic in so far as he describes the world's relation to God in terms of the world's capacity to be an image of God. Plato, according to Thomas,

laid down separate ideas of "being" and of "one," and these he called absolute being and absolute oneness; and by participation of [i.e., "in"] these, everything [in the created world] was called "being" or "one"; and what was thus absolute being and absolute one, he said was the supreme good. And because good is convertible with being, as one is also . . . he called God the absolute good, from whom all things are called good by way of participation . . . Hence [Thomas argued] from the first being . . . and good, everything can be called good and a being, inasmuch as it participates in it by way of a certain assimilation which is far removed and defective . . . Everything is called good by

reason of the similitude of the divine goodness belonging to it, which is formally its own goodness. (*Summa Theologica* 1.6.4)

Thomas makes several affirmations here. First, God is the absolute, i.e., supreme being and good. *Absolute* in this context means, not unrelated, but highest. Second, entities in the created world have being and goodness through their participation in this highest being and highest good, God. Through this participation, each entity shares (analogically) a formal characteristic with God. Third, this participation is such that entities' likeness to God is remote. As does Plato, Thomas argues that worldly beings reflect God in a derivative and attenuated way. Participation, accordingly, means having a likeness to the divine nature and sharing the form of being and goodness with God.

From this understanding of participation as likeness, Thomas can affirm that the universe as a whole and each thing in the universe is an image of God's nature:

[God] brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them. And because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates [in] the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any given single creature. (*Summa Theologica* 1.47.1)

We see here a version of the Platonic view that the unity of the eternal is reflected in the multiplicity of the temporal. The one supreme goodness that is God is, through participation, multiplied in a multitude of ways as each sort of entity shares in the divine nature in ways that differ from the ways in which other sorts of entity share. Consequently, "Every creature has its own proper species, according to which it participates in some way in the likeness of the divine essence" (*Summa Theologica* 1.15.2). The diversity of creatures is a function of the diverse modes of participation in God.

Thomas contributes to the Christian tradition's understanding of God's relation to the world in two ways. First, he shows that each sort of entity participates in God in a distinctive way. As noted above, this is a Platonic theme; however, whereas for Plato part of the reason why there is a multiplicity of entities is that there is a multiplicity of forms, for Thomas multiplicity of entities arises from the multitude of ways in which God's perfection (which in itself is a unity) can be reflected in the world. This

analysis helps us see that God's relation to the world can best be understood with the relation between identity and difference. The divine life, which remains identical to itself, creates a world of diverse entities that differ from one another and from God. Yet the differences that distinguish entities do not negate their identity in and with God. Each entity differs from others in so far as it embodies a distinctive way of reflecting God's perfection. Yet because each entity has its being by participating in God, who is being itself, each entity is in one sense formally identical to every other entity, for each entity shares with every entity the essential property of having its being by participation in God. Moreover, each entity differs from God and yet, by virtue of participation, shares a remote sense of identity with God. The dialectics of identity and difference thus becomes a key to understanding the God-world relation.

A second contribution of Thomas to Christian thinking about God's relation to the world is his underdeveloped idea that within the participation of entities in God we can detect a trinitarian structure:

In all creatures there is found the trace of the Trinity, inasmuch as in every creature are found some things which are necessarily reduced to [i.e., traceable to] the divine Persons as to their cause . . . [1] As subsisting in its own being . . . [each creature] represents the cause and principle; and in this manner it reveals the Person of the Father . . . [2] According as it has a form and species, it represents the Word, for the form of a thing made by art is from the conception of the craftsman. [3] According as it has relation of order, it represents the Holy Ghost, inasmuch as He is love, because the order of the effect to something else is from the will of the Creator. (*Summa Theologica* 1.45.7)

This insight into the trinitarian structure of creaturely participation was not further developed by Thomas. Nonetheless, it provides us with resources for strengthening the connection between the New Testament's soteriological focus and the cosmological interests of the philosophers. It does so by suggesting that the divine nature in which every creature participates is the triune God. This suggestion has the effect of extending the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity from its soteriological base to the doctrine of creation. The task that Thomas began but did not complete is to give an account of the God-world relation in terms of creatures' participation not simply in God but in the Trinity. In this way, cosmology and soteriology can be seamlessly united in a single Christian account of the created world.

A TRINITARIAN ACCOUNT OF THE WORLD'S PARTICIPATION IN GOD

A Trinitarian view of God's relation to the world rests on several premises:

1. The divine life is a movement from the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, returning to the Father. The basis of this premise is the New Testament's conviction that salvation comes from the Father, is mediated to us through the Son, sustains us by the power of the Spirit, and returns, through the mediation of the Son, to the Father in the form of worship and obedience. The doctrine of the Trinity is an extrapolation from this conviction about salvation. It declares that this Trinitarian structure of God's revelation in the world corresponds to God's eternal being, even though we cannot comprehend God's eternal being. The Christian claim is that the historical revelation of the triune God is the extension of the eternal, triune life of God into the created world.

2. At the same time it is important to note that the divine life is a movement among the trinitarian persons. As always, *life* is used here metaphorically. This term is used to point to the conviction that, as a movement among the trinitarian persons, God's being is internally differentiated and also a unity. The divine life is, accordingly, a life of identity and difference. Just as, in Thomas' analysis, we must see the God-world relation in terms of the dialectics of identity and difference, so we can best understand God's own life with the same dialectics. Consequently, God is neither a self-identical, static monad nor a heap of diverse qualities or entities. On the contrary, God is an eternal movement from identity to difference to identity. The doctrine of the Trinity is the theological exposition of this belief. This is one reason why Christian theologians will not accept Hartshorne's judgment that the divine concreteness requires God's interaction with and dependence on the world. In the traditional Christian view, the divine life is an eternal fullness. The created world results from the extension of this fullness beyond God. The resulting world thus participates in the structure of God's life but in a remote and attenuated way.

3. The created world is the articulation of the divine life of identity and difference. The world's entities reflect, in various ways, the structure of identity and difference that is God's life. For example, a cell is a whole composed of parts. As I have already noted, the whole-part relation is a species of the identity-difference relation. The cell's parts differ from one another both numerically and qualitatively. They differ also from the cell

itself. Yet we can meaningfully speak of the cell as having a principle of identity—it is, so to speak, the same entity over time, even though its parts may change. As we think about the cell we find our thought moving from the cell's identity as a single entity to the difference of its parts and back to its identity. We are now in a position to see that the cell thus reflects, in a remote way, the dialectics of God's life. The cell exhibits a part-whole structure because this is the way in which it reflects and participates in God's trinitarian life of identity and difference. Another example is human subjectivity, which is in part temporally structured. We live in the present but our subjectivity is constituted by our memory and our capacity to project into the future. Here, too, we see the structure of identity and difference, for, on one hand, we possess identity over time and, on the other hand, the three modes of time mean that our identity is something constructed from our past and projected onto our future. To understand human subjectivity is to see the way in which our identity is constructed out of the three differing modes of time.

Everything in the created world, from sub-atomic particles to galaxies to human persons and societies, likewise exhibits the structure of identity and difference, each (as Thomas pointed out) in distinctive ways. Examples could be multiplied,² but the main point is that every creature participates in the trinitarian life of God, a life that we can best understand through the dialectics of identity and difference. Each creature exhibits this dialectical structure in one or more ways and thus reflects the divine life.

I have claimed that this view of creatures' participation in God describes the God-world relation as an internal relation and not an external relation. How is this so? In what sense is this an organic relation and not a case of one reality reflecting another? After all, a mirror reflects light from an object without thereby having an internal relation to that object. The answer to these questions is found in the position that Christian theology has staked out from its beginning, namely that the world is neither identical with God (a simple pantheism) nor simply different from God. That the world is not simply different from God can be seen from two considerations. First, as already noted, if the world were merely a reality different from God and lying (so to speak) outside the divine being, then God would not be supreme and infinite. The true infinite must include (in some sense) the finite and not be related to the finite as a merely distinct reality. Second, if the world were simply different from God, then there would be no basis for the conviction that the world reflects God's nature.

If the world were an autonomous reality alongside God, any likeness of the world to God would be either fortuitous or due to God's and the world's common sharing in a higher reality. In that case, God would not be supreme and infinite. Given the doctrinal commitments of traditional Christian theology, it is necessary to affirm that the world differs from God (in order to avoid pantheism) but that the world does not simply differ from God. Instead, as the true infinite, God's being embraces the world while allowing for a measure of autonomy. Worldly entities, accordingly, are not God and are not divine. But they participate in God because the structures of finite being are grounded in the structure of God's being.

It is true that in this perspective the internal relation between God and the world seems one-sided. God, after all, does not depend on the world. God is the original reality who enjoys a fullness of being. God does not need supplementing from the world. However, this is not the full extent of Christian conviction about God. Although it is a theological axiom that God is independent of the world, it is also true that God comes into the world. Words such as revelation and salvation point to this coming into the world. The presence of God in the world means that God binds the divine being to the world in an unexpected way. Consequently, Christian theology significantly modifies the doctrine of God that it borrows from classical philosophy.

What does it mean to say that God binds the divine being to the world? How does this affect our understanding of God's independence? Anselm shed some light on this matter when, in *Cur Deus Homo*, he argued that although God was under no necessity of creating a world, once having created a world God was, so to speak, covenantally bound to bring about redemption if the world would fall into sin. That is, the divine decision to create a world brings with it a divine determination to fulfill God's purposes for creation. For Anselm, it was unthinkable that God could create a world and abandon it to sin. More recently, Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued that in creating the world God puts the divine lordship at risk. As long as in history humankind remains in sin and God's will is not fulfilled, there is a real sense in which God is not yet the Lord. God's lordship is thus bound to the course of the world. Although from the perspective of eternity God's lordship is, it seems settled, the reality of the created world means that the full settlement of God's lordship awaits the culmination of history. Or, to take an example from the Bible: Ezekiel asserts that Israel has profaned God's name. So although God was not

obliged to elect Israel as the holy people, having done so, God's honor and name are tied to Israel's history.

This line of argument from the Bible to Anselm to Pannenberg shows us that the Christian tradition has a rich understanding of God's relation to the world and of God's independence from the world. On one hand, as the fullness of being, God does not require a world. Yet, as creator, God does not merely produce an object but instead joins the divine being to the created world so that the world's history is enfolded into God's history with the world. To speak metaphorically, God's fortunes thus come to depend on the course of the world. Yet in all this God remains the fullness of being so that the world's incorporation into God means the salvation of the world. The supreme illustration of this is the doctrine of the incarnation. According to the doctrine, God identifies with the world to the extent of becoming human. And not just human in a general sense. God identifies with humankind to the extent of sharing in the consequences of our sinful world. At the extreme, God takes into the divine being humankind's alienation from God and then tastes death. And yet in all this God remains God. God's being is such that God can pass over into what is not God and yet remain God. God can identify with humankind in its sin and yet remain the holy God. God can taste death and yet remain the living God. This is the central paradox of the Christian faith: that God's identity encompasses the extreme of difference, that the divine life can embrace the extinction of life without ceasing to be the source of life. Armed with this paradox, Christian theology affirms that God is eternally the fullness of being, having no need of the world but also that God identifies with the world in its difference and alienation, that God becomes what God is not without ceasing to be God. It is in this way that God's relation to the world is an internal relation, yet God does not depend on the world.

The persuasiveness of this view depends on many factors. Those who have sympathy with the vision of an original reality characterized by fullness grounding a derivative reality that reflects the original will be attracted to the Christian view of the world's participation in God. Those who can conceive of God's fullness of being only through its interaction with the world will be instead attracted to Hartshorne. The strength of Hartshorne's view is that it rests on the intuition that God is analogous to us—that God is a personality or mind who seeks to maximize values and who enjoys experiences as we do. There is an important truth in

this intuition. However, this strength becomes a weakness when it is not joined to a sense of God's otherness. It is not enough to say that God is analogous to us, only greater. We must go on to say that God's infinity is such that God is more unlike than like us, that our participation in God is so remote and attenuated that the divine-human analogy is stretched to its limits. Such a view will be attractive only for those who are gripped by a sense for God's mystery and God's otherness and who can think of God only in the language of paradox and dialectics.

NOTES

1. Throughout this essay I refer to "Christian theology" and the "Christian tradition." Limitations of space prevent the careful distinguishing of positions within this tradition that this subject deserves. Accordingly, I will ignore the differences among the various types of theology and strands of the Christian tradition. I will also, for simplicity of exposition, refer to "Christian theologians" generally and will not spend much time expounding the ideas of particular theologians.

2. See my *Participating in God: Trinity and Creation. Theology and the Sciences*, 61-159, for more examples

WORKS CITED

- Athanasius. "Against the Heathen." <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2801.htm>>.
- Athanasius. "On the Incarnation of the Word." <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm>>.
- Inbody, Tyron L. "Reconceptions of Divine Power in John Wesley, Panentheism, and Trinitarian Theology." *Thy Nature and Thy Name Is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue*. Ed. Bryan P. Stone and Thomas Jay Oord. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001. 169-91.
- Hartshorne, Charles. *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1984.
- Hartshorne, Charles, and William L. Reese. *Philosophers Speak of God*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1953.
- Powell, Samuel M. *Participating in God: Trinity and Creation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2003.
- Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. <<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>>.