

No Need to Abandon a Realist, Theistic Conception of God

Published in *The Fourth R*, Vol. 29:2 (March-April, 2016) 19-24, 26

Several recent contributors to *The Fourth R* have taken direct issue with traditional Christian notions of God. The primary objections have been to theism, supernaturalism, and the view of God as a being or entity utterly distinct from and totally independent of the universe. Moreover, it has been assumed that theism necessarily entails supernaturalism and a view of God as separate from and pre-existent to what has traditionally been called the Creation. One contributor, Peter Steinberger, has gone so far as to claim that the question, Does God exist? is nonsensical, and that theism is an incoherent position. None of the contributors I have in mind has offered an alternative conception of God that might address what he finds to be most problematic about how God has usually been understood within Christianity – except perhaps to propose a non-realist conception of God, that is, a conception that is essentially a human mental construct that does not refer to any being or entity that might conceivably exist apart from the conception itself.

In this essay I claim that there are other live options for Christian theology after supernaturalism besides the abandonment of theism and a realist conception of God. In particular, I will argue that there is a form of theism known as panentheism that provides a coherent, non-supernatural, realist conception of God. Panentheism is a metaphysical conception of God and the world that does not regard God as non-contingent in relation to the world as a whole. Nor does panentheism regard the world as utterly contingent upon God. In most of its contemporary expressions, panentheism is known as process theology, and its adherents derive their metaphysical conception of the world and God chiefly from the work of philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Readers may find that this way of understanding God, and the relationship of God and the world, offers more than a refuge from corrosive critiques of traditional theistic theology that lead to non-theistic conclusions. They may find that this theological option is intellectually and experientially more persuasive and compelling as well.

Let me begin with Steinberger's claim that the question, Does God exist? is nonsensical, and that theism is an incoherent position. It is important to note that he also argues the same for atheism and agnosticism.¹ Steinberger also acknowledges, however, in response to my letter in the January-February 2015 issue, that we cannot coherently explain the existence of the universe. But, he claims, "we cannot coherently deny the existence of the world."² Of course, since he regards atheism as an incoherent position, he must also believe we cannot coherently deny the existence of God. Neither the existence of God nor the existence of the world seems to make sense on Steinberger's terms. Nonetheless, Steinberger seems to hold that we can experience and know "the world of cause and effect," but we cannot experience or know God.³ I cannot fully counter Steinberger's argument in this essay, but I hope to say enough to suggest why I find Steinberger's epistemology and metaphysics to be seriously flawed.

In an even more recent issue, Lloyd Geering has written appreciatively and approvingly of Don Cupitt's rejection of a "realist" understanding of God, that is (according to Geering), an

understanding of God “as an objective spiritual entity who, being supernatural, remains unseen and non-physical.”⁴ Traditional Christian theism has certainly always understood itself to be referring to a reality beyond human thought and imagination when it has spoken of God, although not necessarily precisely as identified by Geering. Geering himself, in the same article, recounts his own view that Christianity must become non-theistic, . . . affirming that “we must now take leave of God.” As I will argue below, the denial of the existence of God as a supernatural entity does not necessarily entail the rejection of theism in all its forms.

Readers might assume that these rejections of theism and/or any realistic conception of God are natural extensions of the Westar Institute’s work that has resulted in the historicizing of Jesus of Nazareth, demystifying and un-deifying the man of Galilee. If Jesus can no longer with intellectual credibility be regarded as the God-man, but rather must be seen as a first century Jewish peasant and peripatetic preacher, that clearly jeopardizes the divinity of one-third of the traditional Trinity. Our understanding of God must surely be modified in light of the conclusions of historical Jesus research and the implicit critique of traditional Christian theology that is further entailed in the continuing historical investigations carried out by the various Westar seminars.

I hope to show here, however, that there are some notable leaps to conclusions not justified by any historical work or theological argument in the claims of those who believe it is time for Christianity to abandon its theistic notions of God.

Let me first lay out what are likely points of agreement with those who will be reading these words. I heartily affirm the work that has been done by the Jesus Seminar in attempting to discern, so far as possible, the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. I do not believe there was anything ontologically unique about Jesus. He was a human being, a Jew, a product of his society and culture and time in history. Needless to say, I believe he was an extraordinary human being, but he was unique only in ways that any individual human being can be unique. He was not God. Nor do I regard him as divine – unless one wants to use the word divine to apply to any of us human beings insofar as we bear the image of God.

I also believe that traditional Christian understandings of God as Trinity must be abandoned. I believe this not only because I find no basis for elevating Jesus to the God-head, but also because I find no formulation of the Trinity to be intelligible and coherent. Perhaps at an earlier time in human history, when metaphysical conceptions of the world were rather different and the scientific worldview did not predominate – or even exist -- some formulations of the Trinity might have been plausible, but not today.

I also believe that prevailing views of Christian theism are intellectually indefensible. I come to this conclusion, not because of any work accomplished by the Jesus Seminar or its successor seminars, but because traditional theism assumes a supernaturalistic capacity of God to intervene in the causal nexus of events and make things happen that contravene, or at least supervene, the natural world of cause and effect. In traditional theism, God exists apart from the world, and is in no way dependent upon it. Ever since the second or third century CE, Christianity has

adhered to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing. The doctrine was intended to protect the sovereignty of God by emphasizing that God is in no way contingent upon the material world, which was viewed quite negatively in some quarters in the first centuries of the Common Era. But the doctrine is misguided and mistaken, for it hardly absolves God from responsibility for the creation, while it asserts an act of creation that has no correlate in human experience that might render it intelligible. Moreover, it is quite unbiblical, as even a cursory examination of the first verses of the book of Genesis makes clear. But the doctrine does corroborate the traditional theistic view of God as one who acts in history and world affairs and who, in addition to having called the world into being, at least in some theologies, continues the on-going work of creation. It remains to be seen whether the traditional theistic notion of God as one who acts within the world is inextricably tied to a supernatural conception of God.

Throughout most of the mid-twentieth century, the prevailing theology of academic theologians was termed neo-orthodoxy. As the name itself implies, theologians of this stripe, from Rudolf Bultmann to Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, from Reinhold Niebuhr to Paul Tillich, continued to espouse theological doctrines that were largely congruent with orthodox Christian teaching. At the same time, they were accepting of the historical-critical method when it came to biblical studies and interpretation. This gave them a certain freedom from biblical literalism, and allowed for creative reformulation of important Christian teaching. For example, in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr developed the traditional doctrine of original sin with profound psychological insight, but in clear departure from earlier orthodox assumptions such as the heritability of sin.

With perhaps the notable exception of Tillich, the major neo-orthodox theologians appear to have been theists. They placed great emphasis upon God's revelation to humankind mediated by word – the word of Scripture and the Word made flesh. If they had a theology of creation, it was underdeveloped, and did not fully engage the scientific worldview. In short, they implicitly if not explicitly affirmed divine engagement in *human* history – word being a very human medium – but they did not have much to say about how God exercised influence in the natural non-human world. Their theological method, such as it was, tended to make Jesus far more than an exemplar of the faith. Jesus functioned as a sort of linchpin, holding together the divine and the human, making intercourse possible between God and humankind. Jesus was not just *a* manifestation, but *the* manifestation, of how God related to, and exercised influence upon, the world. Jesus was God's Word of revelation, creation, judgment, love, forgiveness, redemption, and salvation.

I have no way to document what I'm going to say now, but it seems to me that some of the contributors to *The Fourth R* who have declared themselves to be divested of theistic beliefs have never come to terms with the theological deficiencies of neo-orthodoxy as the predominant expression of Christian theism for several decades of the twentieth century, deficiencies that have persisted in most forms of theological liberalism and the post-liberal theologies that are current in our day. To put it another way, these critics of traditional Christianity appear to be in revolt against some version of theism that never was very satisfactory in terms of its conceptualization of God – a “straw” version of theism if you will.

If the only forms of theism that exist in your mental universe of theological options are neo-orthodoxy, some forms of liberalism, or post-liberal theology, and if you find that Jesus of Nazareth can no longer bear the entire weight of the divine-human connection (e.g., as a result of the work of the Jesus Seminar), then neo-orthodoxy must be ruled out. That leaves liberal and post-liberal theologies as your only options. Theological liberalism tends to be either only nominally theistic, or fully humanistic. Post-liberal theology tends to sound a lot like neo-orthodoxy, in that it largely embraces the language and doctrine of traditional Christian theology, but it also tends to be deliberately opaque with respect to its possibly non-realist assumptions. What post-liberal theologians really mean by God is often quite unclear. If you eschew the mincing of words, or simply find yourself unable to affirm traditional Christian doctrines, post-liberal theology must be rejected. The contributors to *The Fourth R* who have abandoned realism are to be commended for not choosing the post-liberal path.

That leaves liberalism in some form. However, my sense is that the non-realist and non-theist contributors of late to *The Fourth R* might chafe at being identified with liberalism, either of the theological or the fully humanist variety. They appear to see themselves as staking out a radical position that moves beyond liberalism, one that still wants to claim Jesus but finds no need to claim anything that might resemble Jesus' God. In fact, contributor David Galston claims that "Jesus seemed not to need God to express his vision,"⁵ a claim that I find incredible, though there is not space to engage that argument here. Perhaps the phrase "radical humanism" would be apt to denote the views of these theism deniers.

For the sake of argument, however, let me entertain the possibility that some contributors of theological articles to *The Fourth R* may identify their position as a form of liberalism. Now it is possible to be a theological liberal who is also a realist. However, if it is assumed that a realist conception of God entails supernaturalism, as Geering claims and as has been the case with most Christian theism, then non-realism might make sense to anyone conversant with modern scientific understandings. And if non-realism makes sense, then why continue to speak of God at all? That seems disingenuous to me and, I suspect, to contributors like Geering, Cupitt, and Steinberger. Thus, it would seem that theism should be abandoned.

But not so fast. The fact is, a realist conception of God does not require or necessarily entail supernaturalism at all. That is because there is more than one way to think theistically about God. Traditional theism sees God and the world as entirely distinct and separate. The problem with traditional theism in our day is that it affords no coherent way to conceive of the relationship between God and the world. In particular, it provides no way to conceive of God's agency in a cosmos where all events are understood, more or less, in terms of their causes and effects. If God is not a part of the world, how can God enter into, or intervene within, the world without disrupting the causal nexus? And what evidence is there that God ever does so? In order to be a traditional theist, one must dogmatically posit that God intervenes, despite the lack of any clear evidence or reasonable argument to that effect.

Another form of theism that is actually very ancient is pantheism, the view that "all is God." The problem with pantheism, simply put, is that there is no meaningful distinction between God and

the world. All that exists is God, and God is all that exists. What we call the laws of nature may also be called the laws of God, but to what end? Perhaps it may in some ways enhance our appreciation to regard everything as God. But a pantheistic God must not only be in, but be identical with, the earthquake, wind, and fire, no less than the “still small voice.” When all is God, there is nothing that is not God. This can be quite confusing, to say the least. If life without God would make little or no sense (apart from what we do to create our own meanings), life with a pantheistic God also would make little or no sense – as there would be no difference in terms of what would actually transpire.

There is, however, yet another form of theism, called panentheism, in which God and the world may be understood as distinct, yet also inseparably in relationship. In panentheism, “all is *in* God.” The reverse is also generally said to be true, namely, that God is in all. Short of engaging in a lengthy metaphysical discourse in order to explain all the philosophical and empirical insights that inform this way of conceiving of the God-world relationship, suffice it to say that there is a metaphor that provides a kind of intuitive grasp of the kind of relationship that this conception of God entails. That metaphor is of God as the soul or mind of the world, and the world as the body of God. Neither God nor the world can exist or even be described and characterized apart from the other, but neither is reducible to the other. Just as in our everyday human experience what we call mind has the capacity to move one’s body, and just as one’s body – including the stimulation of our sense organs and the self-awareness that arises from internal bodily processes -- is utterly necessary to sustain the mind, so the relation of God and the world may be understood, at least in crude metaphor.

In employing this metaphor, I am assuming that the mind is not merely brain matter. Just what the mind is remains something of a mystery. Similarly, in panentheism God is not merely the world, or some portion thereof. As the mind can “act” within and in concert with the body, so God can “act” within and in concert with the world. And this happens without any violation of the presumed laws of nature. No supernaturalism is involved. What is essential, however, is a certain metaphysical understanding of the cosmos, one that is not mechanistic or reductionistic or exclusively materialistic. If one has a billiard ball view of the universe, where mathematical equations and geometric formulae are all that is required to account for the movement of any object, a panentheistic conception of God and the world will not be persuasive. But in truth a billiard ball view of the universe falls far short of describing, yet alone explaining, all that we can empirically observe, or cognitively, physiologically, and affectively experience.

Among Christian theologians, the main proponents of a panentheistic conception of God are called process theologians. Their metaphysical conception of the world and God is derived chiefly from the work of philosophers Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Process theologians are usually well-versed in the philosophy of science, and have developed their theology in conversation with contemporary scientific literature and understandings. Some of them are scientists as well as theologians. They reject all Christian notions that would necessarily involve supernatural causes, but they usually do so without assuming the posture of debunkers. They understand that the rejection of supernaturalism need not, by any means, entail the rejection of a realist, theistic conception of God. But they also recognize that many notions and doctrines

associated with traditional theism are not intellectually tenable or coherent.

I happen to believe that no theology is conceptually adequate without a metaphysics to warrant its claims about God. That is hardly a wildly popular or widely accepted view these days, but it gets to what is deficient in the prevailing forms of Christian theism. Traditional theism has no warrant for making supernatural claims, and no way to conceptualize how God can be significantly related to the world so as to make any difference to human life, or to the future of the planet or the cosmos. I've already touched on how this became a problem for neo-orthodoxy. Without a coherent metaphysics, claims about God tend to be dogmatic assertions. If based on scripture or tradition, such claims merely transpose the locus of authority from the contemporary individual or community to past individuals and communities, without any clear and compelling grounds for accepting one authority over another. Theological liberalism typically attempts to overcome the problem of authority by strong appeal to widely shared human experience that is taken to be manifestation of the divine. But unless it has a metaphysics, theological liberalism is handicapped by the inability to address all sorts of issues that arise in the face of conflicting experience.

A prime example of conflicting experience is the presence of what we call evil. There is no theological approach better equipped to address the so-called "problem of evil" than process theology, because process theologians recognize that conventional notions of divine omnipotence are neither desirable nor defensible. That is to say, God is not responsible for all that happens in the world, indeed, God is incapable of exercising anything even closely resembling absolute power. The world doesn't exactly have a life of its own, but it can never be fully conformed to divine intention or purpose. There is no Godly reason for this, e.g., the preservation of human freedom by virtue of divine Self-limitation, as traditional theists might argue. It is rather simply the way things are.

With the abandonment of theism and a realist conception of God, some Westar members seem ready to redefine theology as well. I believe that theo-logy is "talk about God," as the word itself indicates. Attempts to redefine theology as some other sort of enterprise, such as human meaning-creation or even perhaps "the practice of proposal-making"⁶ strike me as forms of dissembling. If one finds oneself unable to speak about God, one should not call oneself a theologian. There are other worthy occupations. It is unworthy of anyone to claim to be engaged in theology if God is no longer to be considered a reality that, or who, can be meaningfully said to exist. I am not opposed to reconceptualizing God. In fact, I think that is utterly necessary.⁷ But to define God out of existence, or to claim that God is a meaningless or nonsensical concept, is to move outside the bounds of theology. Among process theologians, in contradistinction, God is understood to possess the most crucial of those characteristics that have historically been associated with God in Christian thought.

In the course of my theological pilgrimage, there have been a handful of Christian theologians who have been most significant to my evolving understanding of God. It is striking to me that they are seldom if ever mentioned by contributors to *The Fourth R*, especially since none of these individuals, to my knowledge, adhered to a supernaturalist view of God. All of them, I

would judge, were conversant with historical-critical studies of the biblical texts. Whatever their views were, are, or would have been, of the Jesus Seminar or other work of the Westar Institute, I cannot be sure. But I am confident they were pursuers of truth in all its forms, not dogmaticians wedded to upholding traditional doctrines irrespective of the evidence or argument against them. At times I cannot help but wonder whether contributors to *The Fourth R* never made their acquaintance.

One of these theologians was H. Richard Niebuhr, whose rich and eloquent little book, *The Meaning of Revelation*, provides a non-supernaturalist account of this central Christian doctrine. Another was Bernard Meland, a process theologian who focused less on metaphysics than what he called “the realities of faith,” which he discerned and interpreted eloquently in his book bearing that title. Still another was James Gustafson, a theological ethicist who probably taught more professors of Christian ethics on the faculties of American colleges, universities, seminaries, and divinity schools, than anyone else in the twentieth century. Gustafson was averse to most metaphysics, which constrained him to rather modest epistemological claims about God, and he was exceptionally careful not to make claims about God that were inconsistent with what we can know about “the way things are” from the sciences and human experience. Then there is Sallie McFague, who understood and stated most clearly that all theological language is metaphorical. She is one who helped give currency to the mind-body metaphor for expressing the relation of God and world. Finally, I must mention the process theologians John Cobb and David Ray Griffin. Again, neither Cobb nor Griffin has given any aid or comfort to supernaturalists, but both have realist conceptions of a (panen)theistic God.

My main point in mentioning these individuals is to note that there are distinguished theologians working with the Christian tradition with intellectual integrity, who are receptive to historical-critical studies of scripture and tradition, who brook no supernaturalism, and yet remain theists (more particularly, and for the most part, panentheists) with realist conceptions of God. They all have taken seriously the knowledge that has come to us through the sciences as well as other disciplines, they are all deeply informed and broadly conversant with the work of other Christian theologians including those with whom they disagree, and they are cognizant of the work of scholars from other fields, other periods of history, and – at least in some cases – other cultures and other religious traditions.

There are live options in non-supernaturalist Christian theology that maintain a realist, theistic view of God, reconceived but hardly rejected. I find process theology in particular to provide a far more satisfying path, intellectually and spiritually, than any other alternatives to traditional theistic Christianity that have been presented in these pages.

Glossary

Theism: Belief in the existence of a God who is understood in some sense to be personal, and possessive of qualities that evoke worship and call for obedience or human conformity to divine will and purpose. Traditionally, God so understood is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, perfectly good, perfectly free, and the creator and sustainer of the universe. Unlike deism, in which God is often characterized by analogy to a watchmaker as the creator of the components and mechanisms of the universe who set them in motion but has no further involvement in human or earthly affairs, theism regards God as One who continues to act in human history and nature.

Pantheism: The view that sees God as the totality of reality, such that God and nature are essentially identical. The general meaning of the word is evident from its parts: “pan” = all; “theos” = God. In short, “all is God.” Historically, there are varieties of pantheism that differ based on their understanding of reality. The key difference between pantheism and theism, for purposes of this essay, is that pantheism obliterates any distinction between God and the world, and thus between the creator and the creation.

Panentheism: Also sometimes called “di-polar theism,” this is the view that “all is in God,” and usually conversely, that “God is in all.” In contrast to pantheism, panentheism does not obliterate the God-world distinction, because it claims that the reality of God is not exhausted by God’s inclusion of the world. In contrast to theism, however, panentheism views God and the world as inseparably related, such that the world is not external to God, nor God external to the world. The view that God and the world are external to each other follows from traditional theism’s claim that, given God’s omnipotence and perfect freedom, God cannot be contingent in any way upon the world. In panentheism, the qualities of divine omnipotence and freedom are redefined such that God is not arbitrarily free or omnipotent, but perfect in relationality, responsiveness, and dependence.⁸

Supernatural: A term to denote the attribution of some form of exceptional causation for an event or events, generally assumed to be the work of a higher spiritual being or power, whether benevolent or malevolent, with the capacity to intervene within and disrupt or alter what would otherwise be considered the natural course of events. In popular Christian thought, the term “miracle” is typically employed to denote what are presumed to be manifestations of God’s supernatural power.

Realism: The view that there exists a world or reality independent of the human mind and its capacities for perception. Even though the idea of God may be in many respects a human construct, a realist view of God maintains that God exists whether or not one believes God exists, and whether or not one apprehends that existence.

Non-realism: The view that, at least within a certain sphere of human thought, there is no independent reality or existence for that which is conceived by the human mind. A theological non-realist might say not only that we conceive God in our own image but also that, apart from

our activity in conceiving God and relating ourselves to this conception, there is no entity or actual referent we can call God.

Neo-orthodoxy: A theological movement that predominated in Protestant Europe and the United States throughout much of the mid-twentieth century, also known in Europe as theology of crisis or dialectical theology. Neo-orthodoxy arose in the aftermath of World War I, in large part as a critique of the theological liberalism that prevailed in academic circles through the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. The movement never possessed a unified or homogenous character. Generally speaking, however, neo-orthodox theologians sought to re-appropriate the teachings of the Protestant Reformation in the light of historical-critical study of the Bible, and typically placed great emphasis upon God's transcendence, the reality of human sin, and revelation as divine disclosure mediated by Scripture and Jesus Christ, the Word written and the Word made flesh.

Liberal theology: Specifically, a theological movement within Protestantism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but more generally, a form of Christian theology that seeks to be fully conversant with, and receptive to, contemporary thought, including the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities. Liberal theologians seek the truth wherever it may be found, in the conviction that there is continuity between secular truths and the truths of Christianity. Reason and experience count as much or more than scripture and tradition as sources of authority, and there is no radical disjunction between reason and revelation. Liberal Christianity has tended to focus on ethics and the character of Christianity as a way of life, often to the neglect of any comprehensive theological framework. Contemporary process theology is a notable exception.

Post-liberal theology: A theological movement that seeks to reclaim the language and thought of the Christian faith, in part by distinguishing itself from the language and thought of the larger culture. Great emphasis is placed on the "grammar" of faith, and the ancient creeds of the Church are accepted as normative precisely because they are regarded (even more so than scripture) as definitive of the Christian faith. To be a Christian is to speak the right language, with the proper grammar, and to regard and interpret one's life and the world through the cultural-linguistic lens afforded by orthodox Christian tradition. Post-liberal theologians seem largely unconcerned about the ontological status of the referents of their theological language, and often appear to be non-realists, though one can hardly be certain about this given their relative silence about the nature of reality or the ontological status of God.

Epistemology: The theory or methodology by which anything can be claimed to be known. Epistemologists seek to answer the question of how we know what we know or claim to know, including the manner and extent to which we may be justified in making knowledge claims.

Metaphysics: The study or theory of the structures or features of ultimate reality. As physics is the study or theory of what we call the natural or material or physical world, metaphysics is the study or theory that encompasses all things, all events, all entities – all of reality – by seeking to understand and characterize in a comprehensive way the nature or essence of all being.

1. “Why Atheists, True Believers, and Even Agnostics Must All Be Wrong” (July-August 2014)
2. Letter to the Editor (January-February 2015), 26
3. *Ibid.* Why the world of cause and effect but not God? According to the empiricist philosopher David Hume, we cannot experience cause and effect. I happen to think Hume was wrong, but for reasons that controvert Steinberger’s argument and also indicate why it can be said that we experience God..
4. “Don Cupitt’s *Creative Faith*” (July-August 2015)
5. “The Seminar on God and the Human Future” (May-June 2015), 14
6. See *The Fourth R* (May-June 2015), 21
7. Some process theologians, following Whitehead, define God as “the chief exemplification of the metaphysical principles,” and I take no exception to that. It would take many pages to define and explain what it means, however.
8. See John Cobb, “Panentheism,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 423