

Romantic Religion
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In romanticism, religion is about relationship. Of course, so is everything else, but religion concerns our ultimate relationship to what we take to be ultimately real, that defining relationship that reveals and informs the ultimate meaning and purpose of our lives. “Credo” comes from the Latin *cor*, heart and *do*, I give. My creed then is literally that to which I give my heart. Today I want to take this opportunity to share with you my understanding of that to which I have given my heart. The genre will be mixed, part philosophical reflection, part faith sharing, the romantic study of religion unavoidably implicates the inquirer, it is a study first and foremost of his or her own religious faith and practice. Only from within this relationship can one enter into dialogue with other religious traditions and come to more general philosophical conclusions about what we mean by God.

Dr. Calhoun originally approached me last year to invite me to talk about panentheism, the view that God and the world are neither identical nor separate, but that the world exists in some sense within what Teilhard refers to as “the divine milieu.” It seeks to chart a middle course between outright pantheism on the one hand in which the world can be understood as either “God or Nature” and a radical theism on the other that would see God and the world externally related to one another as two separate beings. Not surprisingly, as a middle way, panentheism is liable to misunderstandings from both sides, each seeing panentheism’s appropriation of their own religious insights as half hearted and even insincere—to the pantheist, still hiding vestiges of superstition or to the theist, an atheism that dare not speak its name.

So after sharing with you my current thoughts on religion I will turn to what I believe to be the implications of a romantic approach for a panentheistic view of God’s relationship with the world. Let me begin by confessing that my thoughts on God and God’s relation to us and the world in which we live have always been in a state of flux. I find myself swinging back and forth between more pantheistic and a more theistic emphases, largely I suspect in light of what I am currently reading and teaching or how I am praying at the time. I like to think of these revisions as an increasing maturity in religious and philosophical insight, but it is certainly change. All of what I say

then lies along a continuum from more settled conviction to more exploratory speculation. Nothing is utterly certain, my faith like every other aspect of my life, has never been wholly free of doubts, but nothing is sheer whim either, my beliefs have always been situated within the tradition of understanding and the faith and practice of my own religious community, Christianity, and more specifically, Roman Catholicism. I liked to think of it as a “Romantic Catholicism.”

Part of my original interest in philosophy was a desire to understand the faith within which I had been raised and which gave my life its fundamental meaning purpose (I was precociously religious growing up) as well as to quell the doubt and uncertainty that would periodically disrupt my peace of mind. Extrapolating to others, I was convinced that if there could be found incontrovertible proof of the existence God, then belief in the ultimate meaning of life and the infinite value of every individual would be assured, all would be motivated to follow God’s will and the Kingdom of God would be at hand. However while I eagerly devoured many persuasive arguments claiming to prove God’s existence, I also found criticisms of those proofs that would usually approach them from some unexpected angle which undermined the proofs’ ability to be fully compelling to me, let alone to all rational persons. I eventually came to Kierkegaard’s recognition that even if I were to find a proof that survived every criticism I could find, I still could not be assured that a telling refutation might not be published tomorrow. I was only too aware that the limits of what I could conceive were hardly coextensive with the limits of what may be true.

Indeed even Anselm, who argued that the existence of God necessarily followed from our very idea of God, recognized that there could still be “fools who say in their heart that there is no God.” He identified two ways in which one could doubt or even reject the existence of God. First one could misunderstand what we mean by God. I believe here is where the problem of evil draws its power. If I believe that God is much like Santa Claus, then my belief in God will waver, if not collapse, in the teeth of the evident and unavoidable suffering and tragedy in life. Secondly I can come to doubt if not deny the existence of God if God is not relevant to how I live my life in the first place, that is, if in Anselm’s words, “I live as if there were no God.”

I believe that it is this latter possibility that can explain how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries philosophical deism could have slid so quickly into atheism. With reason as the sole organ of revelation and with deism's rejection of institutional religion, the practice of religion became increasingly irrelevant in believers lives. Belief that there was a God at all came to function increasingly as an explanatory hypothesis for the order of nature and as the ground of moral obligation. Increasingly, especially after the emergence of the theory of evolution, rational people would come to say, as LaPlace allegedly said to Napoleon, "God? I have no need of that hypothesis".

I first encountered this argument against the efficacy of deductive and inductive arguments for the existence of God in reading William James. James argued that coming to believe in the existence of God was less like learning a scientific theory and more like entering into a friendship. To demand someone to prove that they truly are your friend before agreeing to be their friend, is a good way to have no friends. Friendship rather requires trust, what he called a "will to believe". Thus he argued that agnosticism was tantamount to atheism. To suspend religious belief and practice until one can be sure there is a God, is to live as if there were no God. Reason enters in later, to confirm and refine a religious way of life. But before choosing to live it one really does not know what it is like. Its kind of like the revelation that occurs when one falls in love. In retrospect one realizes that until then one had no idea what true love really meant. Kierkegaard makes the same point with his idea of the "leap of faith". Faith involves taking a risk, or better making a decision that reason cannot make for you. This may sound simplistic, but my response to agnosticism amounts to "Try it; you'll like it."

I believe that the importance of living as if there were a God to belief that there *is* a God has become more true than ever. For Anselm, to live as if there were no God, was to live a dissolute life governed by pleasure or power. But today one can find people who live as if there were no God, while still living admirable and meaningful lives. Today, more than ever, to believe that there *is* a God requires belief *in* God. Today more than ever, in matters religious, the mind follows the heart.

In theology we speak of Christologies *from above* that begin an understanding of Christ with a study of what is entailed in God becoming incarnate and Christologies *from below* that begin with the study of what it was in the life and teaching of Jesus that got people to see in him the very presence of God. In light of the above, I have come to believe that understandings of God are best

begun from below, that is from philosophical reflection on the religious belief and practice of particular historical communities of faith. In short that the study of theology can greatly aid the philosophical study of what people mean by God.

By contrast, I find it startling how confident critics outside the practice of religion are in thinking they know what believers mean by God, or worse yet, what they should mean. Most seem content with what they learned themselves in childhood and dismiss any need to study the historical practice of religion, let alone the reflections of believers who share the same kind and degree of education as themselves. As Richard Dawkins puts it in his latest attempt to prove to people that God does *not* exist, *The God Delusion* “You do not need to be a fairiologist to know that there is no such thing as fairies.” But if there are otherwise intelligent, rational people who actually still do believe in fairies would it not be incumbent upon a self-critical inquirer to learn just what people at least think they mean by fairies and study how their belief in fairies is carried out in practice in their everyday lives? To me, the view that one can claim to have an adequate concept of God without the study of philosophically informed critical reflection by believers over the meaning of their religious faith and practice is like claiming that one can have an adequate understanding of quarks without needing to study physics. Now one might retort that theology is not rocket science. And that’s true. Its harder. For you are trying to talk about something far more elusive, indeed something that is not thought of as a thing at all but as the ground of all things.

Indeed, for the romantic approach, religious language is not primarily talk *about* God at all, but rather talk addressed *to* God. That is, the original illocutionary force of religious language, the basic genre of religious discourse, is prayer. Talk *about* God is rather a second order reflection on what we mean by what we say and do when we pray to God. Traditionally this insight has been formulated in the rule of faith: *lex orandi est lex credendi*.—the law of prayer is the law of belief. Admittedly what one finds in reading those who do seek to understand what we actually do mean by God will only exasperate religion’s critics. For what one finds is that what we mean by God is mysterious, not merely in the sense that we do not know enough about God, but in the sense that the more we know, the more we realize how much we can never know about God.

This leads to the second great reversal in my thought about God. After a bachelor’s and master’s degree in philosophy and three years teaching philosophy here as a regent, I entered the

study of theology with many philosophical questions about God and our relationship to God. I knew there was a great deal that I did not understand and I was eager to finally have the opportunity to right my balance, to develop a theological understanding commensurate to my philosophical training. There was one thing though I thought I did already know: that if one were to be an intellectually honest and self-critical believer, whatever one said about God had to be consistent. However after four years of study I had become convinced that the opposite was more true: that the most adequate way of talking about God was to say contradictory things about God. I found that in religious discourse, a paradoxical, dialectical logic is preferable to a binary one, for it ensures that whatever we say about God we do not take too literally. By immediately following the attribution of a property to God with its polar opposite, we ensure that, in the words of the Buddhist warning, we do not mistake the moon for our finger pointing towards it. Such paradoxical language forces the mind to grope beyond its own finite comprehension, to transcend itself towards “There”, where language can only point.

This character of religious discourse is most clearly seen in the mystics. All mystics begin by acknowledging that no one can truly understand what we mean by God. In the words of Augustine, that if anyone claims to understand God, it is not God that he understands. Or as Franz von Baader a nineteenth century Catholic romantic put it “A God I can understand is too small to be God.”

I begin my philosophy of religion class by pointing out that we will be studying a wide array of thinkers, all of whom talk about what they will all readily admit cannot be talked about. Now Wittgenstein famously remarked that that about which we cannot talk, we must remain silent. But silence would only doom us to the fate of Deism. If we do not talk about God, God will become irrelevant to our lives, and belief in God will die. Mystics thus insist that they have to talk about what they cannot talk about, even if they also feel the need to apologize immediately afterwards. Indeed it is through such talk, inadequate as it may be, that our relationship with God can become more intimate, more vital, more real.

One of my favorite aphorisms now is a principle laid down by Pseudo-Dionysius, a fifth century Syrian monk whose thoughts on religious language have had a decisive influence on all subsequent Catholic, if not Christian theology. In his *Mystical Theology* he claims that whatever we

say about God is more false than true. God is beyond all finite concepts. To even call God “infinite” is not to attribute anything literal to God, for “infinte” merely means “not finite.” In fact even to say that the infinite is not finite is still misleading, as it is not as if finite things exist outside of the infinite either. The boundless has no bounds.

Now this is not to neglect the traditional divine attributes unpacked from the concept of infinite perfection. Rather it is to also recognize the traditional understanding of the divine attributes, that as with infinity, we do not literally know what we mean by them. Dionysius is one of the pioneers of the view that the divine attributes neither affirm nor deny of God their literal meaning, but rather points beyond both. Such learned ignorance is further intensified by the traditional claim that in the divine nature, these attributes must ultimately coincide. That is, that divine omnipotence, for example is not only beyond what we understand by either power or powerlessness, but that it coincides with divine omniscience, or divine immutability. There is much we can say about God, so long as we recognize that nothing of what we say is literal, that all is analogical or metaphorical.

This unknowing kind of knowing is not knowing in the scientific sense of knowledge at all but rather knowing in the relational sense of knowing a person. This is of a piece with the earlier claim that the primary form of religious discourse is relational, that is, prayer. As Augustine argues, the true idea of God is not an analytical concept, but a personal presence, the presence not of our words, but of God’s Word, Christ himself, a presence “more intimate to me than I am to myself.”

What then can be said about the controversy today among theists and atheists over whether science refutes the existence of God? Science can only refute the existence of God if the existence of God is itself a scientific hypothesis. But the existence of God cannot be a scientific hypothesis if the very idea of God is not even a scientific concept. Indeed traditionally in Christian theology God has not been understood as a being at all, but rather as the ground of all possible beings, as being in itself. A conservative Catholic postmodernist, Jean-Luc Marion prefers talk of God as “beyond being” altogether. I prefer a characterization inspired by Paul Tillich, one which gets closer to Aquinas’ characterization of God in the infinitive rather than the gerund, as *esse* in distinction to *ens*. To emphasize the living, dynamic character of our relationship with God, Tillich refers to God as the *power* of being. Taking this metaphor a step further, I am drawn to referring to God as the power to be.

From a romantic perspective, science and religion *cannot* come into conflict for while they address the same reality, they do so in very different ways. The scientific method adopts a radically third person approach to reality. The scientist is to bracket himself, to become a detached, impartial observer of what lies before him. But as I said at the beginning, religion is about relationship. It involves the adoption of a second person approach to reality, what Buber calls an “*Ich-Du*” or “I-You” relationship. In prayer then I do not observe reality, I behold it—literally I am held by it, I am in a relationship with it. Thus while the logic of a third person approach is inductive, that of a second person approach is dialogical. Far from scientific detachment, the religious attitude calls for personal commitment—to love God with all one’s heart and all one’s soul, all one’s mind and all one’s strength. Now a person can be both a scientist and religious, but scientific observation is not religious contemplation. So too science can supply data for religious reflection just as religion can inform the direction of scientific research. But to use religion to make a scientific claim is to no longer be religious but to adopt a scientific attitude towards religion. So too to use science to make a religious claim is to no longer be scientific but to adopt a religious attitude towards science. It is this kind of confusion that can lead Steven Weinberg, who won a Nobel in Physics, to famously claim, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.” —Only if the scientific explanation of an object precludes the adoption of a meaningful relationship to it.

Weinberg takes his claim to mean that science is making religion obsolete. But I believe that to the extent that his claim is true, the greater our need for what religion has to offer. The Latin root for religion, *re-ligio*, implies not only a relationship with reality, but literally rebinding or reconnecting to a reality from which we have become disconnected, isolated, alienated, leading to the pointlessness of which Weinberg speaks. In the West, this alienation has been treated as the result of willfulness, pride, literally seeking to be one’s own God. In the East, it has been more often seem to be due to the rise of self-consciousness itself, in the separation within consciousness of what is me from what is not me, forgetting in effect that ultimately we are one with all things. In both cases whether the paradigm is conversion— turning back to God-- or enlightenment —awakening to our true identity with the ground of all reality-- religion calls for us to transcend our empirical selves, and to appreciate our dependence upon what lies beyond the confines of our own skin.

One can see this difference between Eastern and Western religious faith and practice as the difference between a first person approach to reality and the second person approach I discussed earlier. In a first person approach all reality is treated as the expression of subjects, ultimately the expression of a single cosmic creative subject. In my ordinary life, I identify myself with my own empirical self-consciousness, but ultimately any and all distinctions between me and other beings are secondary, not really real. In meditation I can still my mind and deepen my attention to where I can awaken to a pure consciousness in which all distinctions between what is me and what is not me have fallen away. Indeed whether to call my ultimate self a self at all or even God is problematic. For language traffics in distinctions, and concepts are defined in terms of how they differ from one another. What lies beyond any and all distinction cannot be adequately talked about at all, not literally.

In a second person approach on the other hand, however intimate my relationship with God, I remain other than God. Now the paradigm of intimacy is of course love. What is ultimately real in romanticism is romance. Thus in Christianity we are not so much exhorted to *awaken* to our true self as we are called to *become* our true self by loving God, with all our heart and all our soul, all our mind and all our strength. Indeed as John says in his first epistle, “God *is* love and whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him.”

In a romantic approach, religion is also inevitably social. As Schleiermacher puts it, one cannot be truly religious by oneself. We need others to inspire and teach us how to find God, as well as others to share how we have been inspired. The spirit of a praying community or church is the very Spirit of God. Thus we relate to God not only through individual prayer and contemplation but also through communal sacrament and ritual. In reconnecting us with what is ultimately real, religion also reconnects us with our neighbor. As Jesus himself put it, to love God with all ones heart and soul, mind and strength is also to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

Now if religion is about our relationship with God and if the essence of our relationship with God is love, what does this entail about God and his relationship to us? What does this theology from below call for from a theology from above? Here my reflections will be more speculative and exploratory as well as more metaphorical and I fear, more abstruse.

First of all can we *be* other than God? If God is being itself and we are other than God, would that not mean that ultimately we are nothing? Meister Eckhart makes this very point arguing that insofar as we are other than God we *are* nothing, that we *only* are to the extent that we participate in the being of God. Our hold on being then is fragile and elusive, subject to the vagaries of our own sinfulness. Grace on the other hand is precisely our participation in the being of God.

Romanticism however makes a distinction between otherness and separation. We cannot be separate from God. Were we separate from being we would not be at all. Thus Schleiermacher defines religious piety as a feeling of utter dependence. Yet romance does require that we are still other than God. However much we purge away the nothingness of sin, we still have an individuality all our own. This individuality is not a matter of substantial independence but rather of the particular style with which we weave together and integrate our various relations of dependence. Thus one's individuality need not be a measure of one's relative nothingness, but rather constitutes the very otherness that God loves.

But *how* can we be other than God? How can there be *anything* other than God? We have traditionally imagined creation as an expression of God's power. However some recent theologians of science have argued that it may be more adequate to see creation rather as God restraining his power, that something other than God might come to be. Not an absolute restraint of course for God needs to sustain our existence if we are to be at all, but a relative restraint of his infinite power that finite powers might emerge, grow and evolve with a degree of relative freedom, not fully determined by God's own omnipotence. This understanding of creation has been dubbed "kenotic cosmology" in allusion to kenotic Christology. For as with the incarnation, the act of creation is seen here as a divine kenosis, or emptying, a relinquishing of power that empowers an other. Indeed creation and incarnation are seen as different aspects of the one eternal act of God. To paraphrase Philipians, in creation too, God does not cling to his divinity but empties himself, in order that something other than God might arise for him to love.

This is how I understand panentheism and how I see it as a middle ground between pantheism and at least a radical theism. We are not God, but neither are we separate from God. Once created, we do not exist independent from God, like a watch exists independent from its maker. Rather God's relationship with us is more like that of a pregnant mother's relationship with the new life gestating in her womb. The fetus is other than its mother, but its not separate or independent from her either. Once conceived, it continues to participate in her life. To paraphrase St. Paul, "in her it lives and moves and has its being."

As also with mother and child, Christianity has always taught that God's love for us is prior to our love for God, that we are to see our love for God as itself a response to God's love for us, indeed as enabled by God's love for us. I would like to draw some further implications for an understanding of God through exploring the logic of love.

First of all true love must be free. This conforms with the traditional insistence within Christianity that creation must be a free act on God's part, not one necessitated by his very nature. Here is the first place where the kind of romantic panentheism I espouse differs from the panentheism of process thought. In process theology, God's relationship to the world is like that of the soul to its body in idealism. There cannot be one without the other. The world is the expression of God. This particular world may not be necessary, and certainly not the particular beings that populate it, but there must be a world of some kind. To exist at all, God must express himself in some way and that expression is a world. On the romantic view though, God chooses to love. God could have remained like Aristotle's God, self-enclosed thought thinking thought. But he has chosen to create new life within his own divine life.

Secondly true love is reciprocal. God cannot force our hand anymore than we can force his. God loves *us*, not some divine image of us that would only reflect him back to himself. He beholds us as we behold him. His presence is attentive, calling forth our better selves, while respecting our freedom. God does not intervene in our affairs as if he were external to our world. Rather in surrendering ourselves to God's loving surrender of his own power towards us, we participate in his power and are ourselves empowered. Or, to put it in other words, in so far as we recognize God's loving recognition of us, we come to participate ever more intimately and ever more fully in God's

own power, the power of being itself. In this way God can be said to actively relate to us without determining us.

Meister Eckhart understands our participation in the being of God in a very intriguing and provocative manner. He argues that the just man, for example, in so far as he is just, is identical with justice itself, and so to that extent is identical with God. But the just man, insofar as he is a man, differs from justice itself, and so from God himself and so is to that extent nothing at all. Now I have argued above that on a romantic view individuality is not a matter of substantial independence but rather of the style with which one weaves together one's myriad relations of dependence. But I wonder whether we could not still say that to the extent that we participate in the divine attributes we participate in the very being of God. On the other hand, the manner in which we participate in any divine attribute will be inspired and informed by the history and context of all our other relationships. Thus the style with which we participate in the being of God is distinctively our own and keeps us other than God however intimately that participation becomes. Thus in the case of the just man, we could say that in so far as he is just, he participates in the very being of God, but that in so far as he is *this* man he incarnates justice with a style distinctively his own.

True love also inevitably involves vulnerability. As Aristotle puts it, in love our beloved becomes our second self, their happiness becomes part of our happiness, their sorrow our sorrow. Does God's love then in some sense render himself vulnerable? If God truly loves us our weal or woe must somehow matter to God. It is in this respect that the panentheism of process thought introduces change and temporality into God. Surely if God is to be truly a God of compassion he must in some sense suffer with us.

Here I do not quite know what to think. I prayer resonates more with the traditional view that the divine pole of the divine-human relationship does not change, not literally; that God's creative act is an eternal act which feels different to us only in virtue of our own ever fluctuating relationship to it. Thus as with God's more philosophical attributes, here too we perhaps ought to speak of a coincidence of opposites. For example, as the Lutheran mystic, Jacob Boehme remarks, God's love may feel to us like God's wrath, if rather than embracing our dependence on God, we resist it. And if what we mean by God is to have the power to console as well as inspire, God's attentive beholding of us must be colored by our sufferings as well as by our joys as we evolve and mature.

Finally true love also involves patience. Love rushed is love forced. Lovers must await the response of their beloved, and allow their love to grow, deepen and mature in its own time. Thus God's attentive presence to creation also involves patience, giving creation not only the *space* to be itself but also the *time* to grow and evolve at its own pace. The problem of evil is in part a recognition that in the present, God's creation always remains incomplete. Such evil calls upon us to join in God's creative act, to participate in his creative power by becoming co-creators with him in bringing creation to ever fuller fruition.

Thus for the romantic kenotic cosmologist God's presence and God's patience ultimately ground cosmic space and time. God can be found not only in church, but anywhere and everywhere. So too God encompasses past, present and future. His one creative act is at once the ultimate source, ground and end of all things. Now different theologians and mystics have oriented themselves more towards one or other of these temporal dimensions. Deism's talk of God as first cause and designer focused on God's activity as more in the past, at the origin of our existence. Process theology on the other hand talks more of God as the lure of the future breaking into the present. Romanticism however, taking its lead from the logic of love, speaks more of God dwelling in the here and now, where creation, incarnation and redemption coincide in God's eternal presence in the world without and in the ground of our soul within.

Ultimately, in this kind of romantic panentheism the relationship between the divine and the human mirrors the relationship between the divine and the human in Christ. In the words of Chalcedon, in Christ divine and human nature are united "without confusion or separation." In panentheism the world too has its being within God without confusion of identity and without separation. Now Chalcedon also affirms that in Jesus this coincidence of the divine and the human is also "unchanging and undivided." That is, Jesus' union with the Father was so transparent and so steadfast that he could say "whoever sees me, sees the Father." Our participation in God however is more tenuous and fragile, subject to ebb and flow, wrought with conflict and ambiguity. But again in the words of Meister Eckhart, the birth of the Son in our own soul is still "another Bethlehem," in which we too are reborn, to become sons and daughters of God.

As with some of my favorite mystics, I feel I should close by apologizing for taking you through my efforts to articulate what so evidently defies clear articulation. But as a hermeneutical thinker I fear that no part of what I could say could be properly understood without some sense of the whole to which it belongs. So in the words of the late Dr. Jerry Kohls of our department, I have “dumped the whole load.”

However I want to hasten to add, again in imitation of Meister Eckhart in his sermons, that if what I have said does not resonate with your own religious faith and practice then for God’s sake, literally, for God’s sake, don’t let it trouble you. I am not claiming God cannot be proven to your satisfaction. I am only saying he cannot be proven to mine. I am not claiming that the romantic approach is the only way to think about God, but that it is the approach I find most appealing. And as for what I say about God in latter part of this talk, its all but the exploration of a metaphor. If the metaphor does not speak to you, don’t use it. That’s part of the power of metaphor in religious discourse; it does not exclude others. But if you want to join me in exploring the adequacy of this romantic approach I am anxious to hear how what I have said resonates, irritates, confuses or otherwise strikes you.