




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## ‘Orthodox panentheism’ is neither orthodox nor coherent

James Dominic Rooney 

Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR, China

Email: [jdrooney@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:jdrooney@hkbu.edu.hk)

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### Abstract

Jeremiah Carey presents a version of panentheism which he attributes to Gregory Palamas, as well as other Greek patristic thinkers. The Greek tradition, he alleges, is more open to panentheistic metaphysics than the Latin. Palamas, for instance, hold that God’s energies are participable, even if God’s essence is not. Carey uses Palamas’ metaphysics to sketch an account on which divine energies are the forms of created substances, and argues that it is open to Orthodox Christians to affirm that God is in all things as their formal cause. I argue that Carey’s reading is premised on a superficial examination of the patristic literature. More importantly, Palamas’ metaphysics is opposed to that of Carey, since Palamas’ distinction aims to uphold the view that created persons are only *contingent* participants in God. On this, Palamas and the Latins are in complete accord. In conclusion, I propose that panentheistic metaphysics begins from a false dilemma.

**Keywords:** panentheism; Palamas; Aquinas; Orthodoxy; simplicity

Panentheism has been experiencing a resurgence of interest (see Culp 2023). Jeremiah Carey is fascinated by panentheist metaphysics. In sum, Carey proposes that God’s energies are the ‘actual forms’ of created substances, rather than merely exemplar patterns on which God made the world (Carey 2023, 1–7). He proposes that panentheism represents an acceptable option for Orthodox Christians and that it reflects the deepest insights of the Eastern patristic tradition. It will be my task in what follows to show, first, that Carey has misunderstood the Eastern tradition (specifically, St Gregory Palamas, to whom Carey most prominently appeals) and, second, that the view is incoherent for reasons that are not parochial to any one tradition. Eastern theologians like Palamas knew of views on which God would be the soul of the world, and they rejected them as heretical. They had good metaphysical arguments for this. These show that Carey’s panentheism is unorthodox, with both a big and little ‘o’. And – what’s worse – Carey’s panentheism is not merely unorthodox but incoherent, as his panentheism makes God dependent upon the world for what He is.

### Carey's panentheist thesis

'Panentheism' is a slippery term. The concept is often employed in vague terms to delineate some 'intimate' relation between God and creation, again, often with spatial metaphors that God is 'in' all things, or that the world is 'in' God. These metaphors do little to clarify what is theoretically essential (Göcke 2015, 1–8). Anyone with a traditional doctrine of God's omnipresence (e.g. Eph. 4:6, Col. 3:11) would be committed to hold that God is 'in all'. Those who hold to classical, orthodox Christian metaphysics affirm this and, thus far, appear to agree nominally with panentheism. Yet it is obviously not the case that panentheists are in merely nominal disagreement with classical Christian metaphysics, since it is clear from the conclusions or implications that they draw from it that each holds a different *interpretation* of such claims as that God is 'in all'.

From my perspective, what panentheists want to affirm is that something like a *parthood* relation holds between God and creation. Different varieties of panentheism might be classified according to their views concerning the direction of that relation ('Is God a part of the world, or the world a part of God?') and the nature of parthood itself ('Are parts prior to wholes?' 'Are there multiple species of parthood relation?'). Nevertheless, for my purposes, it does not matter if the above generic characterization of panentheism is accurate, since Jeremiah Carey defends a view which implies that such a parthood relation is supposed to hold. Specifically, Carey holds that God is the 'formal cause of creatures' (Carey 2023, 5). God's energies are, he proposes, 'the forms of things', and, I will argue, Carey's views seem to imply that what is meant is some kind of ontological *constitution*, especially as Carey rules out weaker senses in which God's energies could be forms (e.g. exemplar causes).

Carey is not entirely clear on the meaning he gives to the phrase that God is a 'formal cause', since he never defines what he means by formal causality and instead only characterizes his view in off-hand remarks while opposing his views to those of others. Specifically, Carey is unclear whether he adopts a relational or constituent metaphysics in how he reads the 'participation' relation endorsed by Palamas. By itself, 'formal causes' could be either universals or particulars. The latter are (Aristotelian) substantial forms. But it would be hard to see a relational metaphysics of Platonic universals as constituting an individual substance in the way that a panentheist like Carey would be likely to accept, since those universals are not immanent to or intrinsic to each object.<sup>1</sup> I will propose that Carey means that the divine idea is *immanent* in an individual object, intrinsic to it. Rather than, for example, holding that God and the world compose a mathematical set, or that God is identical to a material composite whole of which our universe is a proper integral part, Carey means to propose that divine energies are formal constituents (forms). Presumably, divine energies would ground the essence or being of each object, as forms do in a classical Aristotelian metaphysics of substantial form.

The way he positions his view against other alternatives allows us to infer that Carey intends divine energies to be ontological constituents of created entities in this latter Aristotelian sense. Carey proposes his views as a middle-ground solution to the problems of the One and the Many. As he paints it, the problem concerns the nature of universals: 'all the many beautiful things can have one thing in common to varying degrees, namely, beauty. The being of the many is explained by their relation to the one. But how exactly should we think of this relationship? Is Beauty somehow divvied up, so that each beautiful thing gets a part of it?' (Carey 2023, 4–5). Carey rejects such a proposal and notes that Christian metaphysics has too. Christians held that the Forms (by which things shared properties or being) all related to the divine intellect or the Word/Logos. Yet Latin and Greek Christianity – as Carey tells the tale – disagreed on the way in which each creature has its form or essence in virtue of being related to God's intellect or Logos. Carey paints

the difference as a stark one dividing Latin and Greek theology: do creatures *participate* in the *Logos* Himself? Latins say 'No'. Greeks say 'Yes'.

On Carey's history, Latin theology rejected the view that God could be composite in any way. Everything in God must be strictly identical to His essence. These claims culminate in and are represented by St Thomas Aquinas' claims about divine simplicity. Since Aquinas' God was utterly simple, it would be impossible for the 'divine ideas (and thus essence)' to be 'the actual forms of creatures' (Carey 2023, 5). Call a 'substance' anything that is created and of which we can predicate that it exists *in re*, rather than as being a mere being of reason. A substantial form is that actuality which constitutes a given substance as a substance, as an individual substance of a given kind, as having its identity, and as an existing thing. Clearly, if a divine idea were literally the *substantial form* of a substance, and a divine idea is strictly identical to God, God would be the form of that substance. Since no substance exists without having a corresponding divine idea, then all substances have God as their form. Yet forms are what constitute anything as an instance of a kind and as an individual. If there were numerically one form for all things, there would be precisely one substance – God. The Latin vision of divine simplicity therefore required Latins like Aquinas to hold that divine ideas are not the substantial form of each substance. The most that Latin theology could uphold is that the divine ideas were the formal cause of each object as being the *exemplar* according to which everything is made, that 'pattern' in God's mind by which God created (Carey 2023, 5).

Carey argues Greek theology, represented by St Gregory Palamas, took a better path. For Palamas, it is not true that everything in God is identical with His essence. Instead, the participable 'energies' of God ('his creative and sustaining activity') are divine but are not identical to the essence. As Carey understands it, 'it is through God's creative activity (or energy) that he is truly present as 'the Being of all beings, the Form that is present in all forms' (Carey 2023, 6). Yet, since Palamas denies a 'strict' account of divine simplicity on which God's energies being a part of things entails that God's essence is a part of things, Carey believes that Palamas' ontology allows us to deny transitivity: even though God is a common constituent of each creature, it does not follow that God's essence is a part of each creature or their essence, or vice versa. In this way, Carey thinks, we can affirm that God is the form of every substance by means of His energies, and that God is 'in all things' as a part of them, without thereby 'introducing any division into parts' of God's being (Carey 2023, 6). Palamas can hold that God's divine energies are akin to the substantial form of each substance, without implying that there is only one substance – God.

Scholastic terminology would classify Carey's vision of divine energies, given their role as ontological constituents resembling substantial forms, as being *metaphysical parts* of created entities. So, in what follows, I refer to Carey's position as one on which divine energies are parts of created things. Yet, despite affirming explicitly that God and His energies 'constitute the forms of things', Carey might object that I have misunderstood him. Perhaps Carey, like other panentheists, rejects 'parthood' terminology and so would reject the view that God is a constituent *part* of created entities. I have difficulty seeing this response as anything more than nominal, since Carey uses explicitly the language of *constitution*. If one objects in principle to seeing Carey's position as involving parthood, one is welcome to substitute systematically 'constitution'-related terms for 'parthood'-related terms in the arguments that follow. I do not see that my arguments would thereby lose any force.

### The patristic data

A first problem, however, is that none of the 'proof texts' Carey points to in the patristic tradition support his extrapolations. Often, Carey does not attend to appropriate

qualifications introduced in the text. And this foreshadows serious problems in lifting passages from their context and giving them an interpretation to fit the overall paradigm, failing to attend to the underlying metaphysics of the Greek Fathers – which is opposed to Carey’s.

Carey’s quotation of Athanasius, for example, involves an explicit qualification that God is ‘within all things *according to His goodness and power*’. That is to say that God is present to all things by that power by which God sustains them in existence, namely, God’s efficient causality. Athanasius’ qualification would *prima facie* represent the ‘Latin’ theory, on Carey’s interpretation of the way in which God is present in all things, not the ‘Greek’ one he advocates on which God is present in all things by being their formal cause, that is, God being something akin to the essence, nature, or structure of each substance.

The citations from Gregory Nazianzen likewise have nothing to do *prima facie* with Carey’s views on formal causality. While Nazianzen notes God is that in which ‘alone all things dwell’, the purpose and goal of creation, and that God ‘contains the whole of being in himself’, these phrases do not support Carey’s views when taken in context. For example, the context of these phrases in Nazianzen’s *Oration 38* is that God’s life and being is eternal, simple, limitless, etc. ‘For in Himself He sums up and contains all Being, having neither beginning in the past nor end in the future; like some great Sea of Being, limitless and unbounded, transcending all conception of time and nature, only adumbrated by the mind’ (Gregory Nazianzen 1894, sec. VII). These claims by themselves have little to do with whether God is the formal cause of all things, in Carey’s sense.<sup>2</sup>

Carey also cites the first line of a response in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Catechetical Discourse* to an objection that it is impossible or strange for God to become human: ‘the divine is in everything, and clothed [with it], and encompassing [it], and residing [in it]’. But the subsequent qualifications (which Carey omits) are critical. The rest of Gregory’s response glosses that claim that the divine is ‘in’ everything as follows:

For existing things depend upon ‘the Existing One’ and nothing can exist that does not have existence in the Existing One. If, then, all things are in him and he in all, why are they ashamed at the economy of the mystery, which teaches that God has come to be in man, who not even now is believed to be outside man? For even if the manner of God’s presence in us is not the same as it was in that [case], but still it is agreed he is equally in us now and then. Now he is mixed with us, as the one who holds together nature in existence, but then he was mingled with what is ours, so that by admixture with the divine, what is ours might become divine . . . (Gregory of Nyssa 2019, 99–100)

In context, Gregory is affirming what Carey represents as Latin metaphysics. Nyssa straightforwardly seems to be saying: things depend upon God for existence, and nothing could exist except by God’s causing it to exist. While Nyssa suggestively says that things have existence ‘in the Existing One’, there is no reason to think this is supposed to mean that creatures are literally metaphysical constituents of God’s being or parts of Him (or vice versa). So too Gregory distinguishes the ‘mixing’ of the Incarnation from God’s omnipresence: God is ‘mixed’ insofar as He is ‘the one who holds together nature in existence’. Additionally, Gregory’s metaphor of being ‘clothed’ appeals to the analogies around the Incarnation, where Christ is ‘clothed’ in our humanity. These metaphors aim to preserve a distinction between divine and human nature, on the analogy that clothing remains distinct in nature and subsistence from the person wearing the clothing. Gregory choosing to say that God is ‘clothed’ with the universe militates against an interpretation on which God is anything like the substantial form of the universe.

There is a pattern here. Indeed, the fuller context of each citation Carey takes from a patristic author often in fact implies that they *reject* Carey's position. For instance, as with other patristic authors, Nyssa is familiar with objections from pagans (probably influenced by Neo-Platonism) who argued that God cannot be simple and immaterial, if He were to produce the material universe: 'For if [material things] are believed to have their existence from that source, they clearly come into existence after being in Him in some mysterious way . . . If the compound nature exists in Him, how is He simple, without parts and without combination?' (Gregory of Nyssa 1893a, XXIII.3). Pagans assume that God cannot create *ex nihilo* because they imagine that God emanates matter from His own substance, or that God needed a material substratum to create. Gregory rejects the pagan dilemma. The divine power is sufficient to cause the existence of matter *and* its form (Gregory of Nyssa (1893a), XIII.4). Gregory's response presupposes – contrary to Carey's reading – that creation *ex nihilo* is opposed to the possibility that material objects compose a part of God and thereby render God composite, or vice versa, that God could be a component of creation.

Gregory's work was intended to complete Basil the Great's *Hexameron*. And, while Basil is concerned (like Gregory) primarily to refute the idea that matter is co-eternal with God, Basil too notes that God creates both the matter and form of every object that exists (Basil 1895, Hom. 2). If the form and figures of objects are created, they are not identical with divine ideas. Indeed, both note that the world was unnecessary both because it is a product of God's free choices (which could have been otherwise) and that what exists does not exhaust God's power (Gregory of Nyssa 2019, 60, 66; Bradshaw 2011, 56–69). Thus, Basil:

that which was made was a very small part of the power of the Creator. In the same way that the potter, after having made with equal pains a great number of vessels, has not exhausted either his art or his talent; thus the Maker of the Universe, whose creative power, far from being bounded by one world, could extend to the infinite, needed only the impulse of His will to bring the immensities of the visible world into being. (Basil 1895, Hom. 1, 2)

In *On the Making of Man*, Nyssa too notes that the way God's Word is understood as image or exemplar of creation entails that the Word is not identical with creation: 'the image bears in all points the semblance of the archetypal excellence, if it had not a difference in some respect, being absolutely without divergence it would no longer be a likeness, but will in that case manifestly be absolutely identical with the Prototype' (Gregory of Nyssa 1893a, XVI.12). These claims were critical in the polemic against Arianism, which required distinguishing the way God begets the Son of God from how He creates. For instance, Gregory's Arian opponent Eunomius claims: 'For if all things that are made exist by no other but by Him . . . He Who made all the creation is assuredly something else besides the creation' (Gregory of Nyssa 1893b, bk III, 2). Eunomius holds that creature and Creator differ in essence. The Word is of the same essence as the Father, and so does not enter into any composition with what He creates. Gregory agrees with Eunomius' interpretation that, if the Word were 'created' in all of God's works, and thereby became identical with or a constituent of them, then 'in that case all things will not be by [Wisdom], but she will herself be counted with the things that were made' (Gregory of Nyssa 1893b, bk III, 3). Similarly, Gregory at one point criticizes a principle endorsed by Eunomius that 'things which are respectively active and passive share one another's nature', since Gregory points out that *all* created things are passive to God, and that, if anything passive to God shared His nature, that would imply that 'the whole creation [is] of one essence with its Maker' (Gregory of Nyssa 1893b, bk IV, 4). While Nyssa does not envision a distinction between God's essence and energies in this context, it is

reasonable to think that, if created objects were constituted by the divine ideas in the manner of substantial forms, his polemic would have been different. If Carey's reading was correct, Nyssa should have drawn a distinction according to which God *can be* 'counted with the things that were made', insofar as the Word constitutes a part of creation (Cross 2002, 373). Nyssa does not do this, however, instead unrestrictedly rejecting both that the Word is 'counted with the things that were made' and that creation could be 'of one essence with its Maker'.

When we turn to Carey's citation of Maximus Confessor, we find more of the same. The remote context of Maximus' doctrine of the Word's presence in all things is found in *Ambiguum* 7. Maximus teaches that the Word 'contained within Himself the preexisting *logoi* of created beings' (Maximus 2014, Amb. 7, 15–16). God knows all that exists and will come to be by means of these *logoi* (Maximus 2014, Amb. 7, 19). This sets up the possibility of cataphatic theological predication of the way in which each object resembles God, since 'all things are related to Him without being confused with Him . . . by virtue of the fact that all things have their being from God, they participate in God in a manner appropriate and proportionate to each' (Maximus 2014, Amb. 7, 16). Thus, Maximus notes that 'anyone who through fixed habit participates in virtue . . . is a 'portion of God', insofar as he exists, for he owes his existence to the *logos* of being that is in God; and he is a 'portion of God' insofar as he is good, for he owes his goodness to the *logos* of wellbeing that is in God; and he is a 'portion of God' insofar as he is God, owing to the *logos* of his eternal being that is in God' (Maximus 2014, Amb. 7, 21–22).

However, Maximus introduces this discussion by way of explicit qualification: 'we exclude the highest form of negative theology concerning the Logos – according to which . . . He is beyond all being, and is not participated in by any being whatsoever'. Only when 'we set this way of thinking aside', that is, prescind from those considerations, can it truly be said that 'the one Logos is many *logoi* and the many are One' (Maximus 2014, Amb. 7, 20). The qualifications make clear that Maximus does not intend to teach that the *logoi* are identical with the forms of created substances, as this would entail that the Logos is 'participated in' by beings. Further, given reference to 'pre-existent' *logoi* in God, Maximus would hold that all substances have pre-existent forms *necessarily* – even if those *logoi* were not actually functioning as forms constituting a created substance, the *logoi* themselves are as eternal as God. So, if human souls were such forms, then human souls would pre-exist their embodiment. But Maximus denies this, as he rejects Origen's view that human souls pre-exist their union with bodies (Maximus 2014, Amb. 7, 7).

Maximus also qualifies the passage which Carey cites from *Ambiguum* 22. 'God – who is truly none of the things that exist, and who, properly speaking, is all things and at the same time beyond them – is present in the *logos* of each thing in itself and in all the *logoi* together, according to which all things exist' (Maximus 2014, Amb. 22, 2). Created objects instantiate and exemplify those *logoi* – 'every divine energy indicates through itself the whole of God, indivisibly present in each particular thing, according to the *logos* through which that thing exists in its own way' (Maximus 2014, Amb. 22, 3) – not as literally being identical with those *logoi* that pre-exist, which are God the Word. If they were to have the *logoi* as formal causes in the sense of substantial forms, created substances would share the same hypostasis or act of being as the Word. Maximus therefore rejects the idea that individual objects participate either by sharing the essence or hypostasis of the Logos. Rather, all things participate in God by means of the divine activity or energies (Tollefsen 2008, 214–215, and further on *logoi*, 21–63).<sup>3</sup>

The final and most important authority Carey marshals is Gregory Palamas. Yet the one quotation that Carey supplies from Palamas involves qualification too: 'God both is and is said to be the nature of all things, *in so far as* all things partake of him and subsist

by means of this participation . . . *In this sense* he is the Being of all beings, the Form that is in all forms *as the Author of form* . . . [emphasis mine]' (Gregory Palamas 1986a, 382). Palamas' qualifications are probably intended to signify that all things subsist by means of God and He is the Author of whatever has form. With these qualifications, Palamas looks to be stating nothing more than that God is efficient cause of what exists – God is the *making* or *agent* cause of their being, not a formal part. Read straightforwardly, this passage does not support Carey's extrapolation that God is the form of all forms by being anything like a component of every object. Indeed, in the same paragraph, when Palamas does state that all things partake of God's being and subsist by means of participation in Him, he also states that God is *above nature/being* – God 'is not nor does He possess a form' (Gregory Palamas 1986a, 382, no. 78). Palamas cannot also affirm that God (or divine ideas or energies) is the *form* of each object, for that would be to say God is a (substantial) form.

The earlier chapters of the work from which Carey draws the quotation also undermine Carey's overall reading of Palamas. Palamas begins the *Topics* with a clear rejection of the view that God is the soul of the world or 'root and source' of every soul. Palamas is vehement: not only 'is there [no] such thing as a celestial or pancosmic soul', but 'it is nothing at all but the invention of an evil mind' (Gregory Palamas 1986a, 348, no. 3). He goes on to argue that Christianity prevents us from deifying the material world, as the pagan Greeks did, by thinking of God as its soul. God is the creator of the world, as well as its 'noetic' or spiritual world, not a component or constituent of these (Gregory Palamas 1986a, 357, no. 27). It would be hard to see how Palamas could consistently reject the view that God is the form of the world while holding the sort of view Carey advocates, on which God's ideas are the substantial forms of individual objects.

## The metaphysics

Whatever one thinks about the authority of the Fathers, Carey's panentheism is incoherent for independent metaphysical reasons. As Carey notes, despite God's energies being distinct from His essence, Palamas holds that this does not compromise divine simplicity (Gregory Palamas 1986a, 406, no. 128): 'essence and energy are in some sense one and are one God' (Demetracopoulos 2011, 274). It is not clear, for many interpreters, how this is true. But, even if interpreting Palamas around divine simplicity is perilous, a few points are clear. Palamas endorses St. John Damascene's definition of 'energy' as 'the natural force and activity of each essence' (Damascene 1899, bk II, c. 23). Palamas understands energies to ground or correspond to predications 'in relation to another', such as God being called 'Lord' or 'Master' or 'Creator'. In short, predications that connote God's relation to creation pertain to energies, whereas predications which do not connote any relation to another pertain to the essence (Gregory Palamas 1986a, 409, nos. 132–133). Finally, Palamas refers to energies repeatedly as 'uncreated' and holds that the energies themselves are eternal and essential to God (and are not Aristotelian accidents or properties inhering in the divine nature; Gregory Palamas 1986a, 410, no. 135), even though they involve temporal objects or effects: 'For in creating God begins and ceases . . . But the act of creating itself, with respect to which God begins and ceases, is a natural and uncreated energy of God' (Gregory Palamas 1986a, 408, no. 130).

It is ironic that Carey and other Orthodox panentheists appeal to Palamas. Palamas' distinction between God's essence and energies was aimed at responding to an allegation that participation in God's being (through grace) would involve a real relation holding between God and man (Russell 1988, 51–68). Palamas clearly distinguishes the *products* of the divine energies as contingent, whereas he holds that the energies themselves necessarily follow upon God's essence – God would not, for example, be without 'will',

one of the energies (Pino 2022, 120–121). These energies are supposed to be those properties by means of which God is suited to be Creator and related in various ways to what He does *ad extra*. Yet, Palamas' divine energies are also supposed to be 'natural properties' of God, which follow necessarily upon His essence, and which are necessarily identical with the one God (Pino 2022, 67). Carey's account on which the energies are ontological constituents or metaphysical parts of created objects akin to substantial forms would entail that God is a part of created things, since the energies *are* God in some sense. If God is a part of a thing, it appears as if created things would be divine.

Palamas himself rejects that created things *are* energies.

created things are not the energy of God, but they are the effects of the divine energy. For if the created things are the energy, either such things are uncreated . . . or else prior to created things God possesses no energy; and this is mere godlessness . . . creatures are not God's energy, but things that (whatever the precise terminology employed) have been actualized and effected. But God's energy, according to the theologians, is uncreated and coeternal with God. (Gregory Palamas 1986a, 412, no. 140)

If something were by its nature and form essentially eternal and infinite, that same thing cannot also by its nature and form be essentially temporal and finite, on pain of contradiction. Palamas thus explicitly denies that energies are identical with created things – created things are *effects* of divine energies. The consequences of confusing the two are serious.

Carey might argue that Palamas' argument confuses what results if a given energy is *identical with* a created entity with what results if a given energy is the *formal cause* of an entity. We can conceive of divine energies as if they were akin to human souls: intrinsically subsistent, constituting an object at some time and not another. And, clearly, Palamas thinks that energies can be participated in by creatures. So, Carey might respond, the energies might be at some times constituent of objects (or constitute an object) and at other times not constituents. But this response too rests on confusion. A formal cause, at least on the Aristotelian schema, does not account for its *coming* to compose a given whole. Rather, *efficient* causes account for the fact that a given form has come to inform a given portion of matter.

It is true that one energy might account (as an efficient cause) for why another energy comes to inform some matter, as that matter's form, but notice that this begins a regress where divine energies will need to reach into the other Aristotelian kinds of causality. Only a divine energy could (presumably) serve as an efficient cause that brought about a composition of another energy as the formal cause of some individual object. This threatens an occasionalism on which God (via His divine energies) is the only agent. But so too matter cannot be an entity independent of God's power. The material cause that corresponds to the formal character of a given divine energy cannot be less than divine, presumably, for it seems unmotivated to hold that material causes are less than identical with divine energies (otherwise, it would seem as if matter itself were a principle distinct from God).

Similarly serious problems concern the *material* principle which God's ideas/energies would inform. If Carey proposed that God efficiently causes matter to exist, as distinct from His own being, then it seems Carey undermines the basis for arguing that God efficiently causing created substantial forms would compromise God's immanence in creation. Presumably, the material principle is not a divine idea or energy. If the material principle were a divine energy or some such, then one must grapple with the fact that matter is 'in potentiality to' being informed by different forms. Since God *is* that matter



which acquires new forms, God would be causing Himself to acquire new forms over time (in virtue of those material objects, which He composes, changing over time). Further, if God were both matter and form of all objects, the view seems to collapse into simple pantheism.

Also, merely by considering the nature of a *formal* cause, we have a serious problem of coherence. A formal cause is the essence or nature of a substance. To say that divine energies are the forms of individual created substances is to say that God is a constituent of the essence or nature of an object, since, for example, what it is to be human involves essentially having a soul. Palamas himself notices and rejects that implication: ‘the things created are not of the very nature of the creator – God forbid!’ (cited in Pino 2022, 120–121). Palamas thus also rejects that deification cannot be on account of a ‘capacity inherent in human nature’ (viz. grace cannot be essential to what we are), as this would entail that ‘the person deified is by nature God’ (Gregory Palamas 1986b, 420, no. 2).

What is behind all such worries is that, if some relevant aspect of God (His energies or hypostases) functions like a *part*, God’s being is necessarily or essentially related to what He creates. Even if God’s essence or energies does not undergo a ‘change’ at any given time in history, His energies would need to be such that they *essentially constitute* the entities they do at a given point in time. This is the difference between conceiving energies as substantial ‘forms’ of created entities, as opposed to divine ideas as traditionally conceived (which are essentially that by which God causes creatures, and their essences, and which resemble those creatures essentially, but do not essentially *constitute* any of them and thus are not *intrinsic* to them). Thus, on Carey’s vision, God’s energies would by their essence be *parts* of created entities. But the entities they constitute are created and temporal (essentially). God would then have parts which are essentially created and temporal, contrary both to orthodox classical theism and to Palamas’ claim that energies are uncreated and eternal. The worry presented here does not arise from a parochial vision of doctrine of divine simplicity, since we do not need to hold any particular view of simplicity to hold that God (His essence, energies, hypostasis, *logoi*, etc.) acquiring a real or essential relation to what He creates is bad. The underlying logic of divine simplicity is that God does not depend upon another, namely, His aseity. Many other properties, such as eternity or impassibility, are merely working out the consequences of God existing as Being or Good, completely *a se*. The reason why the classical tradition rejects any form of composition in God is that such relations compromise God’s aseity and lead to a metaphysical absurdity: if God (or some part/aspect of Him) composed some whole, given His essence, then the essence of that whole is ‘prior’ to that of God.

If God’s energies composed created substances as essential parts of what those substances are, these energies/*logoi* would be metaphysical particulars (substantial forms) that necessarily or essentially are related to those wholes they compose, as my soul is essentially mine and nobody else’s.<sup>4</sup> God’s aseity would be compromised if what He is would become essentially related to what He does. We are not talking about God having essential properties such that He would be essentially *suited to be* Creator, as ‘being a songwriter’ is the sort of accident only a human being might have, but rather that God would essentially *be* Creator, as in the case that every human is necessarily a songwriter.<sup>5</sup> Carey’s speaking of God’s energies as *substantial forms* entails just this sort of relation, where each energy or idea is essentially related to some whole.

### Concluding reflections on ‘orthodox pantheism’

I hope to have shown that pantheism of Carey’s variety is neither orthodox nor coherent. Nor is Palamism logically necessary nor sufficient for pantheism. Whether God’s

essence and energies are distinct has no bearing on whether those energies are necessarily or essentially related (as parts are related to wholes, or some similar relation) to what God creates. Not only does no aspect of Palamas' distinction entail that God has a real relation to creation, but his distinctions also look positively intended to oppose such consequences.

Carey's panentheism is nevertheless representative of a stream in contemporary Orthodox academics, exemplified by David Bentley Hart, who similarly endorses a parthood relation between God's nature and ours: 'nature stands in relation to supernature as (in Aristotelian terms) prime matter to form. Nature in itself has no real existence and can have none' (Hart 2022, 15).<sup>6</sup> Hart's position derives from that of Sergius Bulgakov, interest in whose work seems to be fuelling the Orthodox interest in panentheism (Gavrilyuk 2015, 453). If my criticisms hit the mark with Carey's panentheism, they also call into question the coherence and viability of other attempts.

Notice, however, that my criticisms do not undermine attempts to find common ground with panentheists on doctrines that *the world* has a real relation by which it depends upon God, or, that what God does necessarily reflects who He is. Orthodox writers friendly to panentheism often insist upon the notion that God's relation to His world is necessarily personal or hypostatic (Nesteruk) or by means of His *logoi* or energies (Louth), and therefore that the world reflects God's character necessarily (Nesteruk 2004, 169–183; Louth 2004, 184–198). What differentiates these attempts from those of Carey and Hart is that the other attempts do not entail that *God* is really related to creation. For example, Kallistos Ware, while sympathetic with panentheism, was aware of worries that God being 'in' the world might imply that God has an essential relation to what He creates. He therefore clearly distinguished his position from these others by denying God necessarily creates: 'God did not have to create, but in creating he was in fact expressing his true self' (Ware 2004, 168).

The fact that other Orthodox thinkers can secure much common ground with panentheism without holding that God has a real relation with creation shows indirectly that views like that of Carey and Hart are motivated by false dilemmas (cf. Tabaczek 2021). For instance, Carey portrays theism as the view that 'God [exists] "alongside" the world he created, a person whose primary relation to the world is that of maker or designer (though he may more or less regularly intervene in its workings)' (Carey 2023, 1). Carey seems to be confusing theism with *deism*, on which God sets up the universe, as if a celestial mechanism, without any further relation to creation being necessary after that initial instant. Theism denies that being an efficient cause necessarily means that one is like a clockmaker in that way. Given that God is the efficient cause of creation *in all respects* of its being, the world is simply not autonomous in *any* way concerning what it is or that it is. Conversely, it would be foolish to think that distinguishing what/how God is from what/how creation is would undermine the Being of God in zero-sum fashion – as if there was only so much to go around! (cf. Tabaczek 2022, 611–642). God is not harmed or lessened as Being Itself Subsisting when He grants existence to creation. He is that Goodness which, in diffusing itself, cannot but be all in all.

The most persistent issue is simply clarity: what counts as sufficiently 'intimate' relation between God and the world? Why is specifically a parthood relation required? It seems to me that Orthodox panentheists like Carey or Hart would respond that they are motivated primarily by problems involving relations between nature and grace. Grace involves *having* or *participating* in God's life and these Orthodox panentheists do not see efficient causality as securing what naturally should be construed instead as a parthood relation.

Their perception is not entirely wrong. Palamas affirmed the essence/energy distinction *precisely* to affirm that God's life (His energies) is participable, and that humans

consequently do have God 'in' them. Palamas only denies (as do I) that God thereby is essentially or necessarily related to what His energies compose. That is exactly why Palamas insists the energies in which we participate are not God's essence. While Latin theology begins from different distinctions, the classical Latin explanation of participation in grace proposed by Aquinas also explicitly affirms that we participate in God's life *not* by efficient causality but in a way that resembles parthood: 'grace is said to make pleasing, not efficiently but formally' (ST I-II, q. 111, a. 1, ad. 1).

The important distinction that unites Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas against Carey, Hart, and others is that the former hold that the relation obtaining between God and the divinized is *contingent*.<sup>7</sup> Aquinas secures contingency by affirming that grace is an accidental form (a quality) inhering in the soul itself, rather than a substantial form. His reasoning is clear: 'grace is above human nature, it cannot be a substance or a substantial form, but is an accidental form of the soul . . . what is substantially in God, becomes accidental in the soul participating the Divine goodness' (ST I-II, q. 110, a. 2, ad. 2). Palamas secures contingency by affirming that energies are not God's essence. He defines a 'divine energy' as 'that which follows upon the divine nature' (Pino 2022, 67).<sup>8</sup> The point is then that energies are accidental to God's essence, so that what comes to participate in God via His energies does not thereby acquire an essential relation to God Himself. Ironically, Palamas' view of grace makes the point more directly than Aquinas, since Aquinas' claim above underscores that the relationship by which we participate in grace is not essential *to us*, whereas the upshot of Palamas' account rests on affirming that the relationship by which we participate in grace is not essential *to God*.

While it remains controversial to what extent a Thomistic account of divine simplicity is compatible with Palamas' distinction, I find it reasonable to hold that, at root, Palamas and Aquinas are expressing the same view (see Rooney 2023). I suggest that both Palamas and Aquinas reject that God (whether essence or energies) becomes an essential part of anything, and rather hold that what does the work in securing 'intimate' union is the special character of *persons* that allows persons to participate in God's *personal* being, that is, via energies that elevate their capacities to participate in the same *personal operations* that the divine Persons do. This is a relation unlike parthood,<sup>9</sup> but arguably more intimate in many ways than the panentheistic vision, since the identity of each person involved in loving union is maintained, rather than fused.

Nevertheless, what orthodoxy both East and West uncontroversially share is a rejection of the claim that God Himself enters any necessary relation with the universe. This has implications: God is not changed by creating, He is not the world-soul, His being is not the formal being of what exists, He can exist without creating anything, and so forth. Traditions Latin and Greek do not deny in the least that God is 'in' all things. What opposes thinkers like Hart and Bulgakov and Carey to the orthodox Christian tradition is that these new panentheists hold that there is a necessary relation between God and the world. The orthodox, by contrast, agree that the only kind of relation that can exist between God and creation is a *contingent* relation, one that could have been otherwise: any creature that exists is necessarily created by God, and would have a relation with God, but God does not necessarily bring anything into existence. This is simply what is required to affirm that, as creation is not a part of God or His essence, God could exist without the universe existing.

It seems to me (and others) that what unites panentheists, *qua* pantheist, is that they affirm a necessary relation between God and world (see Göcke 2013). I have argued that any such metaphysics is deeply incoherent. But what can go unnoticed is that the classical tradition already affirms that creation bears a uniquely personal character, given its relation to those divine Persons whose traces it bears.

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## Notes

1. But perhaps David Armstrong's account of universals as shared parts could represent something closer to the Neo-Platonic spirit of what Carey endorses.
2. A paradigm Latin, Aquinas, likewise refers to God as an 'infinite ocean' of Being, unhesitatingly adopting such terminology from the Greeks. See *Summa Theologiae* [ST] I, q. 13, a. 11, resp. (Aquinas 1920).
3. Pace Wood (2022, esp. 36); cf. Rooney (forthcoming).
4. Aquinas appeals to this fact in arguing against reincarnation; see *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, c. 83-84.
5. The example from an anonymous reviewer.
6. Instantiation or exemplification, by contrast, need not imply this essential or necessary relationship.
7. Thus, on questions whether the energies themselves are eternal/necessary or temporal/contingent, I prefer Pino (2022, 86–93) to Bradshaw (2004, 262).
8. Pino is citing *Energ.* 26 (PS 2:115.14, 23), Palamas in turn citing Cyril [sp.], *De Trinitate* 11 (PG 77:1145).
9. On my interpretation, Aquinas' claims about created grace are not in conflict with Palamas. Aquinas holds that God has something like a contingent parthood relation to the divinized, the way substances can compose artefacts without changing essentially. But the proper Thomistic parallel to Palamite participation in divine energies is to be found in Aquinas' doctrine of the divine indwelling. That is, God indwells by being intentionally present in our joint activities of knowledge and love with Him (via God's *operations* in the Trinitarian missions, viz. His energies). See ST q. 43, a. 3, ad. 1 and 3 (Aquinas 1920).

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