

## “Deep” Theology and the Christo-Pagan Turn

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### Abstract

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In the last several decades, what was once an often-hostile relationship between Christian and Pagan traditions has taken a “Christo-Pagan turn,” an ideological and ritualistic shift away from traditional anthropocentric Christianity towards a more ecological and existential spiritualism. Christo-Paganism takes a non-anthropocentric view of divinity with an appreciation for, and commitment to serve, all creation in all its varied forms, while leaving room for modified versions of the Christian theological concepts of kenosis and incarnation. Primarily a popular movement, academic research has focused on cataloging practices and beliefs; the *prima facie* theological difficulties of combining deist and dogmatic Christian doctrine with contemporary nature-focused Pagan beliefs and perspectives have not been addressed. This paper examines the Christian pantheist “Deep” theology of Niels Henrik Gregersen and Jan-Olav Henriksen, suggesting that in Deep theology divinity, religion, dogma, and the *imago Dei* take a decidedly Christo-Pagan turn and may be the foundation for a Christo-Pagan “theology.”

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**Keywords:** Pantheism, Deep Incarnation, Christo-Paganism, Theological Anthropology, Kenosis, *imago Dei*

### Introduction

In the last several decades, contemporary Christian theology has attempted to reconcile theology with theoretical science. Franciscan, Lutheran, and Catholic theologians have developed new interpretations of long-standing Christian theological conundrums that leverage chaos theory, complexity, emergence, information theory, anthropology, and niche evolution from the physical sciences.

The goals of this new ‘consilience’ are to articulate an understanding of Christian theology derived from the perspective of various scientific disciplines, free Christianity from some no longer tenable dogmas, and emphasize social and environmental responsibility. Although the adaptations of chaos, complexity, emergence, and evolution have become increasingly technical and astute over time, the effort still has its challenges. For example, any application of evolutionary theory to the relationship between the divine and the human, especially the niche evolution approach of van Huyssteen (van Huyssteen, 2017a and 2017b), instantly calls into question the credibility of religious claims to Truth. And even if consilient theology successfully escapes the Scylla of fundamentalist dogmatic Christianity, it still faces the Charybdis of panpsychism (Clayton, 2017; du Toit, 2016).

One aspect of these efforts in contemporary theology that has gone largely unnoticed is a second consilience between the Christian and nature-based Pagan religions. My focus here is to examine the work of two contemporary theologians, Niels Henrik Gregersen and Jan-Olav Henriksen, to suggest that these new excursions into scientific theology in fact evince and support what I call the Christo-Pagan turn, a pervasive but ill-defined ideological shift away from traditional anthropocentric Christianity towards a more ecological and existential spiritualism.

### 1. The Christo-Pagan “Turn”

“Christo-Paganism” can be defined in several ways. It can mean the adaptation of traditional Christian doctrines and practices to fit a non-Christian culture during its conversion to Christianity. It can mean the incorporation of Pagan rituals or perspectives into one’s own mainstream Christian religious practices, or vice versa. And it can refer to an ideological and theological shift away from a Trinitarian and Bible focused Christianity, as represented and promulgated by the Western Protestant and Catholic mainstream sects, towards a pantheist view of the relationship between divinity and humans.

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As used here, Christo-Pagan refers to any theological/philosophical position that melds a non-anthropocentric view of divinity with an appreciation for, and commitment to serve, all creation in all its varied forms, while leaving room for modified versions of the Christian theological concepts of kenosis and incarnation.

Anyone familiar with the participatory emphasis of the Eastern Christian church or the ecological (“cosmic”) emphasis of Franciscan theology may with good reason ask, “How is this *pagan*?” The answer lies in what Christo-Paganism rejects in, not what it retains from, mainstream Christianity. Christo-Paganism is not an ecological sympathy attached to traditional fundamentalist, evangelical Christianity as that is instantiated for example in the United States. It is not Bible-centric and rejects some of the Western European Christian dogma, doctrines, and social prejudices derived from that source text, especially those aspects that Robert Daly calls the “violent Christianity” of the Western church (Daly, 2007). It may disregard trinitarian views of God while still maintaining the human Jesus as a divinely-inspired, divine exemplar, and it often combines ceremonial aspects of modern nature-religion practices with Christian ritual practices.

Socio-politically, Christo-Paganism shares with Progressive Christianity and The Christian Left an emphasis on social justice, compassion, and freedom, but not their belief that the Bible is the only divinely inspired work. Its doctrines and ritualistic practices, when articulated by self-identifying Christo-Pagans, are remarkably eclectic, drawing from Medieval High Magick, modern Wicca, perspectives and ceremonies of indigenous populations, and, of course, contemporary Christian practices.

I refer to the Christo-Pagan “turn” because Christo-Paganism is less a religion than it is a stance towards religion and spirituality. Although modern *Paganism* (primarily Wicca or witchcraft) has become an acceptable arena for academic research (e.g., Hutton, 2007, and Schutten& Rogers, 2011), little attention has been given to the roots of the *Christo-Pagan* movement in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by academic researchers. If and when that research is conducted it will surely find that the movement had multiple causes: Deep Ecology (Naess, 1973 and 1987; Deval, 2001), the hostility towards doctrinal Genesis-focused Christianity (White, 1967; Grula, 2008), and the proliferation of books on various forms of Paganism for the general reader. As these roots suggest, Christo-Paganism is found in social, not academic, “circles”. With the exception of one brief account of the “tenets” of Christo-Paganism (Elsecott, 2008) – which, significantly, includes both kenosis and theosis – the movement has no articulated theology and most of the activity within the movement is in virtual space: blogs, Tumblr, ritual instruction web sites, etc.

Another reason Christo-Paganism has received so little attention may be the misleading data in Gwendolyn Reece’s otherwise excellent 2012 survey of Pagan affiliations and beliefs (Reece, 2014a; Reece, 2014b). In Reece’s study, only 4% of respondents (n=3318) self-identified as Christo-Pagan, but those results are questionable for several reasons. In the absence of a generally accepted definition or established set of doctrines and beliefs, self-identification is not as reliable a criterion as it might be for, say, “Methodist”. Not everyone who adopted Pagan rituals into their Christian worship (or vice versa) would have considered themselves “Christo-Pagan” in 2012, but the “turn” was already well underway.

Christian Wicca and Christian Witchcraft are excellent examples. Nancy Chandler Pittman’s 2003 *Christian Wicca* was subtitled “The Trinitarian Tradition,” placing Wiccan and Christian devotion in the same ‘path’. Adelina St. Clair’s *The Path of a Christian Witch* in 2010 gave voice to a growing number of Christians using Pagan (often referred to as “witch”) rituals in their daily Christian practice. The “Christian Witches” so active in the Tumblr blogosphere some years ago self-identified as Christian and often defended their practices from both Biblical and Christian theological perspectives. Furthermore, many Pagans had lived in an interfaith world since the 1980s and the Christo epithet was inappropriate or unnecessary: Mathew Fox’s *Original Blessing* (1983) and *One River, Many Wells* (2000) were already part of the Pagan ‘consciousness.’ And as Rev. Mark Townsend’s *Jesus Through Pagan Eyes* (2012) amply showed, many Pagan trajectories already saw Jesus as a moral and spiritual exemplar and were sensitive to the overlap between Christian and Pagan beliefs and practices.

Despite differences in ritual practices and visions of “divinity”, Pagan religions share a deep commitment to caring for the physical world with which we are fundamentally, metaphysically united. That commitment is where “Deep” theology and Paganism begin to cross “paths”.

## 2. Deep Incarnation and God “As” the World

Niels Henrik Gregersen originally conceived Deep Incarnation as a means to understand suffering in the world: God’s incarnation in Jesus was also God’s demonstration of the kinship of life and death, pleasure and pain. However, Gregersen also believes that unless we expand that insight into God’s action across history and across species, we have reduced God’s work and the Christian message to an arbitrarily historicist and anthropocentric vision of divinity.

Combining the Pauline and Johannine Christologies, Gregersen proposes a different view of Jesus, of Logos, and of God's presence in the world. The incarnation occurred into "the whole fabric of physical and biological creation" (Gregersen, 2016b). This means when God became "flesh" (*sarx*), God-in-the-Son became "everything material, from cosmic dust to mud, to the life-forms of grass and weed onwards to animal and human existence".

God is literally omnipresent: He simply and fully "is" in the time that seems to unfold around us, in the spaces and things that seem to appear before us in that temporal field, and in the self that we rely upon to make those individual appearances coherent and knowable. Adding "as" to the Lutheran "in, with, and under," Gregersen suggests that the incarnation was the *realization* of the divine in and *as* the world (Gregersen, 2013).

Being "human" is not a state, it is a combination of relationships and dependencies. We achieve 'human-ness' by and through our *collective* lives and thoughts and emotions. The degree to which "our" humanity develops and thrives is dependent upon our spatio-temporal situation – our place in history, in a social niche and within a larger culture, and our interaction with our physical environments. The Logos that imbues the world in the *Gospel of John* is not "word", it is both mind and speech. Logos is innately expressive: it assumes someone is listening, and it has something to share (Gregersen, 2010). The tiny speck of vitality that we refer to as "me" is a phantasm. "I" am the living Logos; that Logos is not within me, I am within it.

Gregersen suggests that if we want to understand spiritual or religious 'evolution' we should be looking at organisms and their cultural and socially institutionalized environment, not genetics or anthropological psychology. Genetics and the cognitive psychology of religion can describe predispositions to behaving one way rather than another, but it is our immediate (and evolving) environment that prompts and nurtures some predispositions rather than others. Kinship, for example, whether looked at internally as a felt-sensation or externally as a behavior, is based on social interactions as much as genetics.

More importantly, genetics and cognitive theory cannot explain the "containment" metaphors of religion – the Son "in" Jesus, God "in" time, Logos "in" the world. That "in-ness" is not conceptual; it is experienced, naively, in the same sense we experience play, in our social interactions when we lose the awareness of "me as observer" and "you as agent" and respond more holistically, in ensemble.

To put an explicitly Gadamerian slant on this, Gregersen's position makes any and all religious experience a hermeneutic experience (Gadamer, 1989). Whether we are engaged in a ritual, or haggling with another over theological terms, or consumed with rapture, we are fusing our own history ("my-story") with the present ("your-story" or "God's-story"). The human capacity for religious experience is the experience of play. Play is an effort undertaken for its own sake, it unfolds, it evolves, as you and I and God are on the field and responding to each other's moves.

### 3. "Deep" Symbolism and Evolving Divinity

Jan-Olav Henriksen expands upon Gregersen's socio-evolutionary theme (Henriksen, 2013), but his emphasis is on the phenomenal aspects of religious experience rather than the ontology of God *per se*. He accepts the view of current genetic and psychological anthropology that our capacity for religious experience evolved as humans did. Our neurological and biochemical composition had some part to play in our eventual development into beings who could experience wonder, awe, love, grace, and (to use Marcus Borg's term) the sacred. Henriksen points out that we live in a virtual world comprising concepts and feelings, a world in which something we call "me" is somehow "aware" of things and thoughts and feelings. This virtual world also seems to span space and time and perceived reality: we have a sense of possibilities; we are sensitive to regret. These are not physical adaptations; they are physically underpinned mental capacities that exceed the physical, natural processes that support them.

Henriksen, following many other philosophers of this and the prior century, calls this 'symbolic' behavior. Symbolism is the mechanism by which we grasp concepts and images *as* concepts and images, utter and receive noises we all understand to be "dog" or "breakfast". We can also "recode" inner experience in words and doctrines, behaviors and rituals, and physical entities such as books and artwork. Symbolic experiences let us contemplate reflectively such things as self, self-hood, and the world beyond our immediate senses. They bridge the void between my inner world of mind and your inner world of mind. To merge Henriksen and Gregersen, what we simplistically think of as "world" and "others" is an active, vital kinship.

Religion, for Henriksen, is not a system of doctrinal statements and codified behaviors (at least not initially). It is “a mode of being in the world, which is oriented by and mediated by different types of symbolic activity ... narratives, practices, concepts, symbols, different ways of organizing social groups, etc.” (Henriksen, 2013, 172). However, our innate capacity for symbolic re-coding, the expression of our symbolic mode of being in the world, changes. For example, we all experience the development of our inner self over time, just as we ‘watch the world pass by’ as we age.

Henriksen invokes Gregersen’s Deep Incarnation theology to bind human symbolic behavior to the divine. Hereiterates Gregersen’s view of “flesh” in Gregersen’s much-cited article “The Emotional Christ” (Gregersen, 2016a). If God penetrated all of creation, Henriksen argues, that makes Christ both “the peak of creation and the firstborn of the new creation” (Henriksen, 2013, 178). For *Homo sapiens sapiens* living at or after the incarnation, we have as part of our symbolic world a new experience – the call of the (new) *imago Dei*, where we in the image of God have a duty to “represent God in creation and to represent Creation before God in a form of worship that includes prayers for the pre-human and the post-human as well” (Henriksen, 2013, 179).

More importantly, Henriksen believes that *all* living beings have *always* had some relationship to God and that God has *always* related to them according to their capacities. Henriksen agrees with Gregersen that we are part of a much larger family of creatures than just those that are considered special in the typical Christian interpretation of both incarnation and salvation. But he goes further than Gregersen, claiming that religious capacity varies over time and across species as the kinship between particular species and God evolves. We cannot arbitrarily exclude any hominin from salvation simply because they were born before a specific date. Theology and comparative religious studies should focus on how humans understand the call of the *imago Dei*, and the God we are to represent.

Such studies may lead us to startling outcomes. As Wessel Bentley puts it: “... as humans we can only be aware of God Incarnate in the person of Jesus, as this is where God manifests in a language that we understand” (Bentley, 2016). In a deeply incarnated world, clams have some relationship with God and thus have value as something other than fried food. But we will probably never fully understand what that value or relationship is because clams demonstrate no symbolic behavior as we know it. Nevertheless, in a deeply incarnated cosmos, *everything matters*.

As do *all* religious behaviors, icons, rituals, doctrines, etc. No particular human, no religious sect, no culture can claim to possess or profess the ‘one true’ *imago Dei*. If we take Gregersen and Henriksen seriously, there is no “one true faith”. The similarities in religious statements found in Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* or C. S. Lewis’ appendix to *The Abolition of Man* are not historical curiosities. They must all be understood as equally legitimate, if also equally incomplete, expressions of what Gregersen and Henriksen see as the Logos incarnated in us all.

#### 4.A Radical Re-Visioning of “Religion”

The panentheist god of Henriksen and Gregersen is a “radical God” in the same sense that theologians have recently revived the “radical Jesus” and the “radical Paul”. “Radical” is an unfortunate term because it implicitly adds authenticity to the common misconception that the Christian message is solely about sin, atonement, and eventual reinstatement in the good graces of some aloof ruler of the cosmos. In contrast, the panentheist god is immanent and phenomenally knowable: intercession and purification are not prerequisites to the experience; a deep aesthetic *and* ethical appreciation for the beauty of the natural world is sufficient. Devotion and compassion replace compliance; social responsibility is an intrinsic duty not a means to a salvific end; and love not atonement invigorates humanity’s relationship with God.

It is a bold vision, and while both Henriksen and Gregersen continue to refine it in terms of traditional Christian theology (Henriksen, 2016; Lenow, 2018), it also links the Christian and Pagan traditions. It makes creation and evolution, not the Bible, the basis for religious experience of the divine. In a deeply incarnated world, and in much of nature-based Paganism, life and death, joy and suffering, predator and prey, even the rise and fall of entire species are moments in a meta-historical and cosmological ritual of imbuelement. Issues that used to be marginal to Christianity but essential to Pagan beliefs – animal rights, ecological responsibility, and environmental awareness – become part of the covenant between the divine and *Homo sapiens* in Deep theology. Deep incarnation and evolution theology establish a credible consilience between science and theology and at the same time (perhaps inadvertently) provide the philosophical and theological foundation for Christo-Paganism.

Three key components of this foundation are outlined below.

#### 4.1 No Privileged Religious Symbolism

Deep theology's coupling of symbolic activity with evolution and religion supports the existence of, but not the veracity of, any and all religious doctrines. Kenosis describes a relationship between divinity and non-divinity, not an historical event by one or more Persons of the Christian Trinity. That relationship, not its symbolic representations *per se*, is what supports religious/spiritual behavior. "Christian" kenosis is a specific symbolic and constitutive stance in the world. Like all other religious cognitions and experiences, it is based upon the symbolic and environmental niche in which it appears and within that niche 'articulates' the intersection of the divine and mundane.

That does not mean any specific religion has the 'correct' symbolism. Symbols overlay the 'reality' and are the means by which we think and communicate it. George Murphy's assertion that the New Testament gospels were written when the Christian God kenotically entered the gospel authors (Murphy, 2012) has the same truth value as Aleister Crowley's claim that Aiwass delivered *Liber AL vel Legis* to the world through him (Crowley, 1904).

More importantly, they could both have the same Ultimate Author. All doctrines and texts and rituals and religious ethical percepts are "created equal" to echo a famous secular Declaration. There is no comparative hierarchy of truth (or falsehood) on evolutionary panentheistic grounds; all expressions are niche-dependent and individual-dependent (van Huyssteen, 2017a and 2017b).

#### 4.2 Deep Panentheism Means Mutual Dependence

Henriksen's coupling deep incarnation with deep symbolism leads him to an intriguing definition of panentheism. Panentheism "articulates the close, intimate, and reciprocal relationship between God and the world, in which the two are dependent on each other in order to realize themselves fully" (Henriksen, 2017). For Henriksen, the world is sacramental: God reveals Godself by means of the world, we apprehend God through "disclosure." Disclosure is an intuitive experience that lies somewhere between ecstatic revelation and normal perception. In layperson terms, it is akin to the "Ah ha!" moment, but what is disclosed is more significant than simply "getting the point". In the religious experience of disclosure, we see God as "constitutive" –we apprehend (although we may not be able to articulate) the structure and necessity and basis of an experience.

This constitutive experience is more than realizing a causal connection between God's creation and my ability to bear witness to it. Even a Deist understands that God is the source of the world we live in and can accept God *as* God. Henriksen is after something more significant here: an inter-dependent relationship between God and God's creation. For Henriksen, "dependence goes both ways"; the world's sacramental nature is dependent upon God's creation and all that entails, while God is dependent upon that created world to "mediate" (that is, to realize, actualize, enable, evolve in time) the call to "communion" with God (Henriksen, 2017).

What does it mean in real terms to say that God and the world have a reciprocal relationship, that God depends upon us for His manifestation as much as we depend upon Him for our (and all creation's) being? Henriksen does not explore this dependence in our mundane experience, so let me illustrate it here.

When we say to someone "I'm depending on you to do that by tomorrow morning," we can mean two different things. We can mean that we could do it ourselves but we've delegated that to you and we expect you to do it or there will be consequences (for example, you will be fired). Or we can be saying that I cannot do that myself, that you alone can and should do it because we both need this to be done, and thus it is your responsibility to me and to yourself to do this. It is the latter kind of dependence Henriksen is after.

God is not aloof and all-powerful and demanding; he is a visionary, a team-player who understands his teammates' strengths and weaknesses, and who plays to their strengths and accommodates their weaknesses. And we, in turn, attempt the tasks at hand with "best intentions" and with our "best effort" – not for personal reward but for the team, not to revel in the glory of the win but instead to know the satisfaction of the task itself, done not for ourselves but for others. In this moment of satisfaction there is both promise and commitment – the coach was right and we all *can* do this; we can do this *again*; *so let's go do it!*

This is the communion Henriksen speaks of in the symbolism of his Christian theological rhetoric. Like selflessness, sacrifice, love, and ekstasis it is visceral, an embodied pervasive yearning to act beside and with and for and through God while you and your actions make Godself real. In more Pagan terms, it is the visceral sense of unity with all other entities in the cosmos, irrespective of proximity or utility, tempered by the recognition that life and death are immediately and universally linked, and for everything gained something else is lost.

### 4.3 Our *imago Dei* Reflects Downward

Deep Incarnation is not only a ‘solution’ to the problem of kenosis, it is also a revival of an environment-centric view of theology that is at least as old as Francis of Assisi (Gregersen, 2016a). “Environment” is not restricted to the physical situation we find ourselves in. It includes the entirety of the niche and its “physiological, behavioural, psychological historical, social, and symbolic” aspects (van Huyssteen, 2017a).

I am the product of my environment, but the environment is a product of my actions. I eat at a fast food restaurant rather than home because I commute 35 miles to work, and the plastic and paper I discard into the waste bin on my departure find their way into the environment around me – not *my* living room, which is why ecological awareness is so difficult to attain, but in some other entity’s living space – soil, ocean, etc.

Deep Incarnation, taken literally, means that the table I sit at, the beef and fries and bread I consume, the plastic utensils, and the landfill or sea current that eventually becomes the waste’s home *is God*. This goes far beyond the issue of whether the hosts in communion are symbolically or actually the body and blood of the second Person of the Trinity – the hosts, and everything else in the world, *is God* (and if one accepts a trinitarian view, the Son and Spirit as well). But, for the same reasons, so are mass murderers, fascist leaders who exterminate members of some out-group, volcanoes that obliterate plants, animals, and sometimes humans, and diseases. All of these are also God. That statement is problematic only if you believe that God and religion exist to support your salvation, to free you from the pain and threats of this veil of tears. It is also a problem if your religion is transactional – one behaves well in order to secure a reward of some sort. And it is a problem if you believe the world and God are separate.

But for “Deep” theology and the more existentialist-inclined Pagan perspectives it is not a problem. It is an affirmation and an invitation. Gregersen emphasizes the suffering of an incarnated God’s “humility, poverty, continence, and the obedient subjugation under unfair conditions” (Gregersen, 2016a) and the “intertwinement of life and death for the benefit of all creatures who in their own bodies experience life’s blossoming but also – and often painfully prematurely – become familiar with suffering and with the untimely termination of life” (Gregersen, 2010). God incarnated affirms and exemplifies God’s compassion, a promise and a commitment to other-ness, especially to the disadvantaged and the doomed.

Deep theology’s re-visioning of the *imago Dei* goes far beyond the simplistic “Love Thy Neighbor” dictum. In the “radical” re-visioning of the *imago Dei*, the Perfect embraces imperfection; the Loving embraces violence, hatred, prejudice; the Eternal embraces the finite; the Immutable embraces evolution and the growth/decay/death of individuals and of species. This re-vision conjoins Christianity with Pagan nature religions, wherein life, decay, and death are natural and inescapable, not to be “accepted” but to be revered and celebrated.

That celebration may not be pleasant or easy. In the symbolic terms of Deep theology, celebration is learning to embrace *God’s* pain with your own inclusive and unflinching compassion and forgiveness. In the symbolic terms of nature Paganism, celebration is attending to and caring for the well-being of all physical entities, from humans to clams to rocks; it is a “charity of regret” because Pagans understand too well that their own existence requires, and yet often disrupts or terminates, the existence of so many other entities. For both Deep theology and Christo-Paganism, the Great Chain of Being does not represent an ascending hierarchy of value, it reveals increasing responsibility and “Deeper” awareness, and therewith a greater opportunity to embody and to actualize the sacred.

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