

# **‘THE EVIL ONE *IN* GOD’? A THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PAUL S. FIDDES’ PANENTHEISTIC DOCTRINE OF GOD TO ACCOUNT FOR A ROBUST ONTOLOGY OF THE SATAN<sup>1</sup> AND DEMONIC.**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Anglican ecclesial theologian Michael Brierley has named the panentheistic turn in modern theology a “quiet revolution.” Indeed, he names over 80 theologians past and present, including this paper’s primary source Paul S. Fiddes, who tread this middle path between the poles of classical theism and pantheism whether by adhering to process theism, self-identifying as a panentheist, or labelled as a panentheist by others.<sup>2</sup> Given that theology can be described as the investigation into how all things interact and relate to God, it should not be surprising that in light of rapid developments and progress with regard to our understanding of the natural world and human nature, new ideas have been proffered *vis-a-vis* divine interaction with the world and vice versa.

A standard definition of Panentheism is that it is “the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in Him, but (as against Pantheism) that His being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe.”<sup>3</sup> While this is a good definition to start with, any perusal of the panentheism literature quickly unearths significant disagreement and debate over the nature and breadth of the preposition “in” and what it means that “all is *in* God.” Moreover, states Gregersen, we need to qualify what “pan” refers to and whether it is literal or not, and most crucially define the ontological position of panentheism in terms of whether there is a two-way interaction with the world somehow contained in God and God receiving a “return” of the world into the divine life. To aid the discussion, Gregersen articulates the three main varieties of panentheism, variations and syntheses of which all panentheisms fall under: *soteriological panentheism*, where God’s presence and being in the world is a gift and only at the eschaton will God totally be “all in all”; *revelational (or expressivist) panentheism*, in which God’s Spirit expresses his divinity by departing from God, interacting with the world and returning to God having been enriched by the world and his interaction with it; finally, *dipolar panentheism* of Whitehead et al, in which some

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the grammatical clumsiness of the title ‘The Satan,’ the definite article shall be used throughout the article when referring to the title and symbol of the Hebrew noun שָׂטָן and Greek noun ὁ Σατανᾶς as this better reflects the biblical authors’ usage of the noun and best represents the various images and mosaic picture of the spiritual being who is portrayed as the evil archetype behind all nefarious malevolence.

<sup>2</sup> Michael W. Brierley, “Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Panentheistic Turn in Modern Theology,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1–15.

<sup>3</sup> F. L. Cross, and E. A. Livingstone (eds.). *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1213.

aspects of God as understood in the classic sense as eternal while the other pole of God (hence the term “dipolar”) is consequent, that is temporal, spatial and affected by the world.<sup>4</sup>

Parallel to this debate about the meaning of panentheism is the claim - one which connects to the subject matter of this paper—that panentheism is by-and-large most popular among philosophical theologians and less so with systematic or biblical theologians. The main reason for this, asserts leading modern panentheist Philip Clayton, is that when theology enters into inter-disciplinary dialogue with science, metaphysics, ethics or political philosophy, the panentheistic conceptual structure is superior to traditional doctrinal language for addressing problems in these other disciplines, hence entering into the more inter-disciplinary domain of the philosophical theologian.<sup>5</sup>

So if, as I reason to be the case, panentheism is currently enjoying popularity and prevalence in parts of the contemporary theology scene and the theological idea that “all is in God” is widely held to be true, what are the epistemic consequences with regard to the question of the existence of evil? Put differently, how and where does evil exist without concluding that the source of all evil is in God and so is a characteristic of God and therefore caused by God? More specifically, in this paper I want to deliberately focus on another claim made by Clayton that most, if not all, panentheisms follow Augustine and subscribe to a privative view of evil in which the goodness of God works in and through the cosmos to eliminate evil since, he continues, panentheisms that do not take the privative view offer no helpful theodicy since God remains responsible for evil, just as he does in classical theology.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, if what Clayton asserts is true, then there appears to be an incompatibility between a panentheistic model of God and an ontological account of evil. In this short paper, I am not arguing against the privation of the good in the doctrine of evil<sup>7</sup> but rather want to explore whether or not this apparent incongruence between panentheism and ontological evil is actually real. To do this I will attempt to argue that, in counterpoint to Clayton’s assertion, one can espouse a panentheistic doctrine of God which is defined and capacious enough to account for the presence and phenomenon of ontological evil. To do this I am going to extensively delineate the panentheistic doctrine of God of Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes, and then draw from his inimitable account that presents constructive possibilities which can be developed further than Fiddes does himself in order to establish an ontology of evil within the panentheistic reality of God.<sup>8</sup> If successful, then this will near-jettison God’s overall responsibility for evil and could replace the often held privative view of evil within God’s panentheistic realm by offering a counter-theology with a robust ontological account of The Satan and demonic, which has traditionally been held within the Christian faith.

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<sup>4</sup> Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Three Varieties of Panentheism,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 20–34.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Clayton, “Panentheism in Metaphysical and Scientific Perspective,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 74.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Clayton, “The Panentheistic Turn in Christian Theology,” *Dialog* 38 (1999): 293.

<sup>7</sup> In a paper of this length, it is simply beyond its scope to account for the tradition of the privation of the good and whether or not it is correct.

<sup>8</sup> In this article I will not be analysing Fiddes’ theology or critiquing his use of sources. Rather, I will construct a theological case assuming a *prima facie* acceptance of his theology as a starting point.

## A FIDDESIAN ACCOUNT OF PANENTHEISM

Despite panentheism being a theological proclivity of philosophical theologians, the inclusion of Fiddes, a systematic-constructive theologian, in the ever-growing list of theologians who espouse panentheism, demonstrates that Fiddes breaks the mould somewhat and walks his own unique path within systematics. Fiddes is a self-identifying panentheist stating, “My own proposal is that ‘pan-entheism’ as the participating of everything in God is a sharing in interweaving movements of relational love.”<sup>9</sup> As robustly worked out in his magnum opus, *The Creative Suffering of God*, he claims that a panentheistic participative doctrine of God is superior to both the classic and pantheistic doctrines of God in order to account for existence, being and non-being in God and creation, and how moral and natural evil affect a passible God of suffering love.<sup>10</sup>

Fundamentally, as a constructive theologian<sup>11</sup> within the Baptist tradition, Fiddes seeks to undergird his philosophical and theological ideas primarily with biblical exegesis. While he accepts that God can and does speak to creation through non-Christian texts and sources, known as the word (small “w”) of God,<sup>12</sup> the canon of scripture has a sufficiency because of its openness and created space in order to meet and participate in God.<sup>13</sup> The covenantal nature of panentheism is, for Fiddes, intrinsically rooted in the earliest biblical covenant expressed in scripture. All of creation shares in the divine perichoresis<sup>14</sup> from the moment God makes a post-flood Noahic covenant with all living creation in Genesis 9:8–17. As a genuine covenant, this makes room for creation to respond to God and participate in God to greater or lesser degrees.<sup>15</sup>

Since this covenant is never reversed (symbolically reiterated by every appearance of a rainbow) then there is a natural and biblical building on this foundational principle explicated by certain other key biblical texts. In the Hebrew Bible the psalmist declares in Psalm 139 that there is nowhere in all of creation where God’s Spirit is not,<sup>16</sup> and the prophets unequivocally announce that God makes other covenants with creation and has relations with other peoples while maintaining a particular covenant with Israel (Hosea 2:18, Amos 9:7, Isaiah 45:1-4).<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, in the New Testament Jesus prays that all believers will be *in*

<sup>9</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2000), 292.

<sup>10</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 146–267.

<sup>11</sup> He accepts the label ‘systematic theologian’ but thinks of himself as a constructive theologian who writes connectional theology between disciplines. Paul Fiddes, personal communication with the author, 15 & 16 March 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “A Review of ‘Persuade us to Rejoice. The Liberating Power of Fiction’ by Robert McAfee Brown,” *Literature and Theology* 9 (1995): 110–11.

<sup>13</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “The Canon as Space and Place,” in *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons/The Unity of Scripture and the Diversity of the Canon. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*, eds. John Barton and Michael Wolter (Bd. 118, Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2003), 128–32, 142–45.

<sup>14</sup> Fiddes claims, surprisingly, that perichoresis is a theological conviction he sourced, not from Moltmann, but from C. S. Lewis. Paul S. Fiddes, “For the Dance all Things Were Made: The Great Dance in C.S. Lewis’ *Perelandra*,” in *C. S. Lewis’s Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*, eds. Judith Wolfe and Brendan Wolfe. (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2013), 37–41.

<sup>15</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Participating in the Trinity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33 (2006): 388–90; Paul S. Fiddes, “Preface,” in *Covenant and Church for Rough Sleepers. A Baptist Ecclesiology in Conversation with the Trinitarian Pastoral Theology of Paul S. Fiddes*, by Daniel Sutcliffe-Pratt. Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies, Occasional Papers 14 (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2017), 1–4.

<sup>16</sup> Fiddes agrees with Hopkins that this Psalm shows God indwelling all the ubiquitous inscapes of the world. Paul S. Fiddes, “G. M. Hopkins,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*, ed. R. Lemon and C. Rowland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 572–73.

<sup>17</sup> Fiddes, “Preface,” 2–3; Paul S. Fiddes, “Covenant and Participation: A Personal Review of the Essays,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 44 (2017): 127–28. For agreement by Hebrew Bible scholars on what Brueggemann calls a “sandal of particularity” see Walter

the Triune God just as the Father and Son are *in* each other (John 17:20-23),<sup>18</sup> and Paul, using the small “w” word of God from Cretan philosophy, states that all humanity lives, moves and has its being in God (Acts 17:28).<sup>19</sup> Most centrally for Fiddes, the Petrine school spiritually encourages readers by promising that the calling and election of Christian believers results in their participation in the divine nature of God (2 Peter 1:4), a promise from which Fiddes develops his ‘participation as relations’ rubric of panentheism.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, this biblical-theological foundation of God’s universal and pantheistic omnipresence enables further application and extrapolation into Fiddes’ two other academic disciplines: the relationship between literature and theology, and the ecclesiological nature of the church. Concerning the former, since God can speak in and through non-Christian literature, wisdom can be identified and received not only through observation and mediation but through participation in the world which is participating in God.<sup>21</sup> Fiddes defines this as the *fear of the Lord*, and it is categorised by an open pluralism and boundless knowledge of the world,<sup>22</sup> a world which has holistic completion since God in his pantheistic glory relates to each part of it within himself.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding ecclesiological matters, a covenant theology of panentheism comprises a covenant ecclesiology as the broken church body of Christ, a vertical and horizontal covenant through which God uses the local church as the centre point in order to interact and partner with creation.<sup>24</sup> The pantheistic nature of these covenants is the spiritual blueprint for God’s relationship with the church and creation. God indeed opens up his triune self for creation and the church to share in the life of God, the very life that God determines for himself.<sup>25</sup> Revealing himself to all creation enables God to make different covenants that go beyond the church:<sup>26</sup> he makes a covenant with the world and then an inimitable type of covenant with

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Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 74–76; David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 247; J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 125–26.

<sup>18</sup> Fiddes takes issue with Volp’s comment that humans cannot indwell in the person of the Spirit, but only his ambience. This simply undermines the obvious understanding of Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21, that the disciples may be in ‘us’ (i.e. the Triune God). Seeing participation as relations, argues Fiddes, helps paint the mutual indwelling of humans in the divine perichoresis. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 46–48, cf. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 211.

<sup>19</sup> Fiddes, “Covenant and Participation,” 128–29; Paul S. Fiddes, “Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Fiddes, “Participating in the Trinity,” 375.

<sup>21</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 203–12.

<sup>22</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?: Job 28 as a Riddle for Ancient and Modern Readers” in *After the Exile: Essays in Honour of Rex Mason*, eds. John Barton and David J. Reimer. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996), 186–90.

<sup>23</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Old Testament Principles of Wholeness,” in *Iosif Ton - orizonturi noi în spiritualitate și slujire*, eds. Sorin Sabou and Dorothy Ghittea. (Oradea: Editura Cartea Crestina, 2004), 36–38.

<sup>24</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “An Ecclesiology of an Undivided Christ,” in *Worship, Tradition, and Engagement: Essays in Honour of Timothy George*, eds. David S. Dockery, James Earl Massey and Robert Smith Jnr. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 212–14; Paul S. Fiddes, “Covenant and the Inheritance of Separatism,” in *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation: The Covenant Ecclesiology of Anabaptists, English Separatists, and Early General Baptists*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes, William H. Brackney and Malcolm B. Yarnell III. Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies, Volume 17 (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2018), 69–72.

<sup>25</sup> Paul S. Fiddes (ed.), *Believing and Being Baptized: Baptism, so-called re-baptism, and children in the church*. The Faith and Unity Executive Committee. Doctrine and Worship Committee (London: Baptist Union, 1996), 19, 44; Paul S. Fiddes, “Christianity, Culture and Education: A Baptist Perspective,” in *The Scholarly Vocation and the Baptist Academy: Essays on the Future of Baptist Higher Education*, ed. R. Ward and D. Gushee (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008), 9–10; Fiddes gives full credit to Barth for the grace-filled and free basis of God’s covenant with creation which is inseparable from God’s own inner communion of life where God ‘freely determines to be God.’ Paul S. Fiddes, “Walking Together: The Place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life Yesterday and Today,” in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B. R. White*, eds. Paul S. Fiddes, William H. Brackney, and John H. Y. Briggs. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), 58–63; cf. CD II/2, §33.2, 161–94.

<sup>26</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Baptists and Theological Education: A Vision for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Baptist Identity into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Essays in Honour of Ken Manley*, ed. Frank Rees. (Melbourne: Whitley College, 2016), 188–92.

Christians.<sup>27</sup> This “Christian-type” covenant is one of the three vertical covenants God enters into with his people: a covenant of grace with human beings for their salvation in Christ; a divine covenant between the Persons of the Triune God; and a covenantal agreement God makes corporately with a church or a group of churches.<sup>28</sup>

As mentioned above, Fiddes’ central theological tenet of “participation as relations” in God is very much the warp and woof of his articulated panentheistic doctrine of God; indeed, by his own admission, Fiddes believes that this is his *unique* contribution to trinitarian theology.<sup>29</sup> For, asserts Fiddes, “An ‘event of relationships’ is a participatory concept that makes sense only in actual events of daily life. This does not replace revelation with human experience, but locates the self-disclosure of God where God wants to be.”<sup>30</sup> Consequently we exist within a universe of participation with relationships at the epicentre, all of which is experienced within the very being of God. The entire universe is engaging in God like this, and so into this experienced framework, we should place all other existential questions which are asked.<sup>31</sup> In interlocution with other theologians, he claims not only is this the most appropriate language that we have to speak of the persons of the Trinity,<sup>32</sup> but is also methodologically sound: it uses the majority of theological sources (scripture, tradition and experience) and was the approach of the early Church fathers who defined hypostasis subjectively and relationally, not objectively.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, purports Fiddes, there are significant advantages of this form of panentheism that include: explaining divine agency in a world state of flux and decay, since the world is a living organism and the creator of the world has to work from inside the organism;<sup>34</sup> delineating God’s metaphysical and relational ontology in ways which undermine historical abuses of power and hierarchy in both the church and the world;<sup>35</sup> helping humanity in its relationships through forgiveness which is a two-staged journey of discovery

<sup>27</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Christian Doctrine and Free Church Ecclesiology: Recent Developments among Baptists in the Southern United States,” *Ecclesiology* 7.2 (2011): 216–19.

<sup>28</sup> It is the second type of vertical covenant, a divine transactional covenant between the persons of the Trinity which is the basis for “persons as relations” participatory panentheistic theology. Paul S. Fiddes, “Theology of Covenant,” in *A Dictionary of European Baptist Life and Thought*, ed. John H. Y. Briggs. Studies in Baptist History and Thought Volume 33 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 124–26; Paul S. Fiddes, “Church and Sect: Cross-currents in Early Baptist Life,” in *Exploring Baptist Origins*, eds. Anthony R. Cross and Nicholas J. Wood. Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies Volume 1 (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2010), 43–50.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Fiddes, personal communication with the author, 15 & 16 March 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Relational Trinity: Radical Perspective,” in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason Sexton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 185.

<sup>31</sup> “What is God [parts 1&2]?” Paul S. Fiddes, accessed October 21, 2021, (<https://www.closetotruth.com/series/immortality-and-personal-consciousness#video-2221>).

<sup>32</sup> McCall is seriously critical of Fiddes’ notion of relationality without involving language of persons. He claims that the emphasis on relations means a jettisoning of classic Christology and embracement of degree Christology. Thomas H. McCall, “Response to Paul S. Fiddes,” in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason Sexton. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 197–203. Fiddes’ rejoinder is that all human language falls short and that our own human experiences of living in relations with others can be seen to reflect and participate in the relations in God. Paul S. Fiddes, “Rejoinder Comments and Clarification,” in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason Sexton. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 205–06. Concerning the charge of classic or degree Christology, Fiddes remains ambiguous. See Paul S. Fiddes, review of *Christology in Conflict. The Identity of a Saviour in Rahner and Barth* by Bruce Marshall. *Journal of Theological Studies* 40 (1989): 700–703.

<sup>33</sup> Holmes disagrees, claiming that the Eastern Fathers were committed to divine simplicity more than Fiddes acknowledges and that the concept of ‘relations’ does not connect to the idea of personhood, as claimed by Fiddes. Stephen R. Holmes, “Response to Paul S. Fiddes,” in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason Sexton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 188–90. For a sustained defence of this rebuttal point, see Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God’s Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), 97–120.

<sup>34</sup> Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering*, 37–42.

<sup>35</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 62–108.

and endurance;<sup>36</sup> enhancing intercessory prayer, since humans pray “in God” and this influences God’s persuasive activity and directs the urgings of the Holy Spirit;<sup>37</sup> and the use and application of love in creative ways as the Trinity affirms that love is relational and not simply attitudinal.<sup>38</sup> Ontologically, God is love and has loving right relations within his triune self and so the optimal way to describe this is via the language of participation.

Overall, Fiddes’ claim of “participation as relations” situates him in a unique position within trinitarian theology and creates a challenge when any attempt is made to situate him on the continuum of panentheistic understanding, which some suggest currently exists.<sup>39</sup> Vital to this positioning exercise are the various ontologies of bilateral relations between God and the world which seek to elucidate the degree to which the world is somehow contained in God and God’s perfection is influenced and affected by the world and creation.

Space limitation precludes a full articulation of Fiddes’ answer to this question; but in light of his description of panentheism as a sharing in interweaving movements of relational love, his increasing openness to *experience* as a legitimate source of theological formulation,<sup>40</sup> his insistence on holding the incarnation of Christ as the key to understanding the world as God’s body, and his constructive work on panentheism, forgiveness and reconciliation, collectively all justify placing him on the continuum as one example of a *Christian* panentheist: the qualified view that states that God necessarily exists without any creation, that the creation cannot exist without God, and that God willingly opens up his self-sufficiency to contingent creation in order to have a genuine, bi-lateral reality to his panentheistic nature that he has freely-determined to have with the world.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Fiddes’ belief in post-death development and progressive possibilities<sup>42</sup> also aligns him with *soteriological* panentheism which frames God ‘all-in-all’ talk in eschatological terms recognising the future consummation of all things dwelling in God in the eschaton.

<sup>36</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 192–220.

<sup>37</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 116–26, 131–44.

<sup>38</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Creation Out of Love,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne. (London: SPCK, 2001), 167–91.

<sup>39</sup> The fact that Fiddes is situated somewhere on the continuum is factually accurate since he goes to lengths to differentiate his position from both pantheism and classical theism. He strongly opposes Molnar’s classic theistic assertion that God is totally unaffected by the events of the world, and he corrects Molnar’s conflation of pantheism and panentheism stating that God can be conceived as one who desires contributions to his satisfied and blissful state by creation without reducing God to a deity who *depends* upon finite things external to himself. Paul S. Fiddes, “Response to Paul D. Molnar,” in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason Sexton. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 104–08.

<sup>40</sup> Fiddes, “Relational Trinity,” 162–63, 182–85. It appears that a later, more developed, emphasis of Fiddes is that not all experiences can become normative but only those which witness to the revelation of God in Christ. Paul S. Fiddes, “A Response to Andrew Moore” (paper presented at the one-day colloquium on the Doctrine of God in conversation with Paul Fiddes, St Mary’s School of Divinity, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Fife, 16 April 2016). Notwithstanding the previous warnings against boxing in or labelling a theologian, this openness to much experience could tentatively identify Fiddes as a theologian who utilises a broad conservative approach to theological construction, which is open to using both reason and experience (especially phenomenological-empirical evidence) in order to gain new and fresh reflections on God and subsequently revise traditional doctrines. “The great theologians of each generation have realized that merely repeating particular formulations inherited from the previous generations would only preserve the gospel by petrifying it.” F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 201.

<sup>41</sup> My strong suggestion in order to help Fiddes clarify his position would be to use as one of his defending scriptures Acts 17:24–28, not v.28 alone, as the five verses collectively establish both God’s self-existent ontology and panentheistic reality.

<sup>42</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 49–52, 133–35; Paul S. Fiddes, “The Making of a Christian Mind,” in *Faith in the Centre*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Press, 2001), 12–14; Paul S. Fiddes, “Acceptance and Resistance in a Theology of Death,” *Modern Believing* 56 (2015): 228–36.

## ONTOLOGICAL EVIL AND THE PANENTHEISTIC REALITY OF GOD

Having established the fundamental elements of Fiddes' panentheistic doctrine of God, undergirded by his unique 'participation as relations' trinitarian theology, let us now turn attention to Clayton's assertion of an apparent incompatibility between a panentheistic model of God and an ontological account of evil. Here I will offer, in counterpoint, an outline of a panentheistic doctrine of God which accounts for the presence and phenomenon of ontological evil, one that near-jettisons God's responsibility for evil and strongly aligns with the scriptural witness of the final eradication of all evil in the eschaton. In other words, I want to now address *how* and *where* evil exists within God's omnipresent holiness and goodness without making God the primary cause of evil.

From the outset, it needs noting that Fiddes rejects Moltmann's concept of *zimisum*, arguing that it implies that evil is a necessity of creation<sup>43</sup> but instead, like other panentheists, promulgates Augustine's *privatio boni*. Fiddes juxtaposes this privative view with both a nuanced, dialectical understanding of Barth's *das Nichtige* account and Heideggerian being and non-being, in order to develop an understanding of evil as a slipping into nothingness and a definition of hostile and alienating non-being of the fallen world that represents the foreign nature of suffering which arises from a free creation. This non-being is that which befalls the sovereign God as he exposes himself to it and suffers from it.<sup>44</sup>

A significant corollary of Fiddes' *a-priori* commitment to a panentheistic-participatory doctrine of God, which, he concludes, coheres better with evil as non-ontological *privatio boni*,<sup>45</sup> is that any definition of evil as a negation of the good means that when answering the *how* and *where* of evil's co-existence with God's omnipresent holiness and goodness, there is no lacunae for the scriptural witness of malevolent spiritual beings rebelling against God and creation, nor a place of perdition for all sentient beings who, as a consequence of their freewill defiance and apostasy, come under the judgement and wrath of God. This becomes problematic when one wants to align with the tradition of the faith, purport the *prima facie* understanding of the biblical witness regarding the demonic and evil realm, and seriously account for personal experience and phenomena of evil and spiritual warfare as a valid source for theological formulation.

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<sup>43</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, "Something will come of nothing: on *A Theology of the Dark Side*," in *Challenging to Change: dialogues with a radical Baptist theologian. Essays presented to Dr Nigel G. Wright on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Pieter J. Lalleman (London: Spurgeon's College, 2009), 93–95; cf. Nigel G. Wright, *A Theology of the Dark Side: Putting the Power of Evil in its Place* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 77. In this conclusion Fiddes agrees with Wright that the necessary result of creation is not evil, but rather than evil is a distinct possibility of creation and so is to be viewed as a threat to creation. Both Wright and Fiddes' analysis of Moltmann's *zimisum* is accurate given that Moltmann states that the *nihil* created by God's withdrawn presence in which he creates his creation, is non-avoidable God-forsakenness, hell, and absolute death. It is this forsakenness, i.e., nothingness, that God on the cross enters into, overcomes, and makes part of the eternality of God. This is his omnipresence, as reflected by the Psalmist in Psalm 139:8. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 86–93.

<sup>44</sup> Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering*, 261–67. Of course, claims Fiddes, the consequence of the death of the living God on the cross is the allowance of death and non-being within God himself. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering*, 193–200. Significantly, Fiddes' dialectical approach to Barth reflects well the tension in Barth's articulation of "nothingness" which strongly asserts an inevitability of the ontic reality of nothingness alongside creation but the emphatic denial that neither God nor creation is the author of nothingness since "nothingness is neither as the Creator or creature is." CD III/3, §50.4, 349–68.

<sup>45</sup> Fiddes, "Something will come," 94–95; Paul S. Fiddes, "Tragedy as Rhetoric of Evil," in *Rhetorik des Bösen / The Rhetoric of Evil*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes and Jochen Schmidt (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2013), 170.

Indeed, there is a constructive-theological case to be made via greater interlocution of contemporary constructions of ontology as naked existence which does not preclude *privatio esse* but remains situational within a panentheistic definition of God's omnipresence. A number of theologians draw on Boethius' definition of personhood as 'individual substance of rational nature,' thereby proposing a minimalist definition of existence and sentience that could be applied to The Satan and demonic in order to defend their ontological particularity without bestowing full personhood as found in humanity,<sup>46</sup> a kind of semi-real ontology without human personhood.<sup>47</sup> Now, while I acknowledge that there are forms of *privatio boni* which hold a robust account of The Satan,<sup>48</sup> and some panentheistic accounts that adhere to an ontological The Satan and demons with volition and sentience,<sup>49</sup> I propose that the greatest potential for this construction lies in Fiddes' use of von Balthasar's theology of the Trinity, specifically the room within the "yes" between the Father and Son for a creation with volition to rebel by stating an emphatic and rebellious "no" within the triune relations of God.

Fiddes' appeal to and use of von Balthasar's "yes" and "no" in the relations between the Father and Son has become a persistent and permeating idea in his more recent compilation of work<sup>50</sup> and he draws heavily upon von Balthasar's work on dramatic soteriology, specifically the exploration of the initiation of the incarnated Son into the divine life of the Trinity and the central role played by libertarian freedom. This results in a delineation of the drama of the Trinity, a drama of kenosis couched in both divine and creaturely freedom. The creation of the world is the first and most significant act of kenosis, a freely given divine act

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas A. Noble, "The Spirit World: A Theological Approach," in *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm*, ed. Anthony N. S. Lane. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 217–19; Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 117; Wright, *A Theology*, 81–82.

<sup>47</sup> E. Janet Warren, *Cleansing the Cosmos* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 260–76.

<sup>48</sup> As highlighted by Kirkpatrick, Dante's description of The Satan is both ontological and parasitical. He is described as "that creature who had once appeared so fair," a reference to Lucifer, one of the sons of light, who has now become a parasitical figure and exists as a "negative image of ultimate truth." This is specifically illustrated by his three faces parodying as the ultimate negative of the Holy Trinity - hatred, ignorance, impotence. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Books, 2012), Canto 34, 154–58, 533–35.

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Edwards is a salient example. Strong and persuasive cases have been made that his doctrine of God is both neoplatonic and panentheistic; a "qualified (christian)" panentheism, to use Gregersen's terminology. For a convincing case that Edwards' God is a simple and free being and creation is a necessary output of God's creative nature and like an emanation from God see Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 138–63. Moreover, within his panentheistic doctrine of God Edwards holds to a personalist-ontological account of The Satan which he proffers in his works. For instance, in *The Nature of True Virtue* Edwards argues that both virtue and vice is proportionate to greatness or malevolence of being, and that human disapprobation of conscience results in quintessential wickedness of the human heart. As a result, these nefarious persons are conjoined to the devil and his demonic angels—spiritual beings who lack any virtue and are extremely evil and cursed—to be sent away into the everlasting fire. See Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, ed. Taylor Drummond. (Poland: Independent Publisher, 2020), 63–77.

<sup>50</sup> In my research on Fiddes it first appears in 2006 in Fiddes, "Participating in the Trinity," 388–90, and since then has reappeared with much regularity, especially within his corpus of work on ecclesiology. Select works include Paul S. Fiddes, "Dual Citizenship in Athens and Jerusalem: The Place of the Christian Scholar in the Life of the Church," in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes*, ed. A. R. Cross and R. Gouldbourne. Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies Volume 6 (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2011), 133–36; Paul S. Fiddes, "Preface," in *Tradition and the Baptist Academy*, ed. Roger A. Ward and Philip E. Thompson. Studies in Baptist History and Thought 31 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2011), xi–xviii; Paul S. Fiddes, "A Conversation in Context: An Introduction to the Report, The Word of God in the Life of the Church," *American Baptist Quarterly*, 31 (2012): 19–21; Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes and Richard Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints: A Theology of Covenanted Disciples* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 95–101; Paul S. Fiddes, "Koinonia: The Church in and for the World." Comment on the Final Part of *The Church – Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order Paper 214)," in *Baptist Faith and Witness, Book 5*, ed. Eron Henry. Papers of the Commission on Mission, Evangelism and Theological Reflection of the Baptist World Alliance 2010-2015 (McLean: BWA, 2016), 41–44; Paul S. Fiddes, "The Trinity, Modern Art, and Participation in God," in *Christian Theology and the Transformation of Natural Religion: From Incarnation to Sacramentality. Essays in Honour of David Brown*, ed. Christopher R. Brewer (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 96. As Fiddes said to me in person, "there is only one place that anyone can say 'no' to God and this is in the 'yes' of the Son to the Father." Paul Fiddes, personal communication with the author, 15 & 16 March 2016.



that brings forth the Son and posits an absolute and infinite distance that can contain all other distances including that of sin.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, within this infinite distance is contingent creaturely freedom, an act of autonomy that is expressed in a rebellious “no,” a refusal to concede truth, and denial of origin. As von Balthasar declares, “the Father’s self-surrender to the Son and their relationship in the Spirit (which grounds everything) - human freedom participates in the divine autonomy, both when it says Yes and when it says No.”<sup>52</sup> When creation says “no,” a twisted knot in the Son’s pouring out of himself within the relation with the Father is realised, which is a situation made possible because it is only within the Son’s *eucharistia* to the Father that human freedom and perversion is exercised.<sup>53</sup>

Consequently, when defining the demonic and evil realm in terms of personalist ontology, von Balthasar offers some threads of enquiry and development not so easily discernible in Barth or Fiddes. Von Balthasar postulates a kenotic theology of covenant, one that avoids internal innocuous suffering in the Trinity while grounding all experiences of suffering in God. So, within the infinite distance between Father and Son when the Son is freely brought forth in an act of divine kenosis, there is a resultant incomprehensible separation of God from himself in which exists a twisted knot - a dark, malevolent, bitter reality of separation predicated upon creaturely freedom, both physical and spiritual, and including the possibility of hell, given the free but absolute segregation of the Father and Son.<sup>54</sup>

So, in order to make a constructive-theological case for God’s omnipresent, panentheistic nature, which accommodates a personalist-ontological account of evil, we need to go beyond Fiddes’ use of von Balthasar. To adapt von Balthasar’s theological construct to allow for the nefarious rebellious “no” of ontological evil located within the “yes” of the Son to the Father, exploration and expansion needs to be posited regarding the malleable degrees of God’s omnipresence, and consideration of the origin and freewill of evil sentient beings who have volition and self-awareness. If, because of the freely desired segregation of the Father and Son, as argued by von Balthasar, there is an infinite and incomprehensible distance which contains all other distances, sin and wicked forms of separation including hell, then arguably this distance is not static and closed but rather resistant to definition, mutable and open to adaptation, which could include the containment of personalist-ontological evil.<sup>55</sup>

Ultimately, if as already proffered, the rebellious “no” that constitutes a twisted knot in the “yes” between Father and Son is autonomy that denies both *truth* and *origin*, then the maximal expression of that

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<sup>51</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory. Vol. IV - The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 319–28.

<sup>52</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Vol. IV*, 328.

<sup>53</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Vol. IV*, 328–32; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), ix, cf. Paul S. Fiddes, “Sacrifice, Atonement and Renewal: Intersections between Girard, Kristeva, and Von Balthasar,” in *Sacrifice and the Modern World*, eds. Johannes Zachhuber and Julia Meszaros. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 61–62; Fiddes, “Participating in the Trinity,” 389.

<sup>54</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Vol. IV*, 319–28.

<sup>55</sup> It is the openness and malleable nature of the relations within the Triune God that Fiddes claims grounds human experience such as a measure of music, a sequence of thought in science, or the blow of a chisel, within the dynamic flow of God’s triune life. Fiddes, “Relational Trinity,” 178.

rebellion is surely the biblical-mythical account of the angelic fall<sup>56</sup> and subsequent existence of Lucifer, otherwise known as the devil or The Satan, the one represented behind the number of the beast, 666 (Revelation 13:18). This number best signifies an ultimate falling short of divine perfection and represents a spiritual being who exercises disproportionate maniacal power as the ultimate denier of his own creaturely origin. As a created being currently in a state of ultimate rebellion, therefore, The Satan has a place within the relations of the Trinity, specifically in the twisted “no” knot found in the “yes” between the Son and the Father.<sup>57</sup>

In contradistinction to Fiddes’ claim that because the world is God’s there is no room for The Satan but only internal and external structures of evil,<sup>58</sup> it needs to be maintained that it is plausible to locate all evil, including personified evil in God, specifically in the rebellious ‘no’ within the infinite distance of the “yes” between the Father and Son. For this to be *theologically* convincing and satisfying one needs to articulate, as described above, an understanding of The Satan and his minions which comfortably situates *via media* between the demythologised, non-personalist position of Fiddes and the fully personal and autonomous view of many popular spiritual warfare advocates.<sup>59</sup> However, despite these differences, Fiddes’ panentheism can still be utilised since it is a qualified Christian soteriological panentheism, which allows for the exercising of creaturely freedom in positive and negative ways, differing intensifications of God’s Holy Spirit, and degrees of divine presence and hiddenness. In other words, at present, creaturely and spiritual rebellion exists *within* God’s omnipresence.

In sum, therefore, it can be concluded that all origins and expressions of evil can be located within the near-realised soteriological panentheism of God without God being the sole author and originator of evil. Ontological evil is located in the extreme twisted “no” within the “yes” between the Father and Son, an extreme knot in the relations of the Trinity. The reason for its presence is the irrevocable autonomy given to creation, both physical and spiritual, which has manifested itself in choices of extreme rebellion as well as adherence. Therefore, as claimed by Fiddes, God is not free of all responsibility for evil since he created

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<sup>56</sup> I use the term “biblical-mythical” not to suggest an untrue account but rather to better reflect the mystery and ambiguity of Isaiah 14:12-21 and Ezekiel 28:1-17.

<sup>57</sup> One obvious but unanswerable question concerns the lapsarian implication of whether the kenotic “yes” between the Father and Son was logically *and* chronologically prior or consequent to the fall of spiritual beings. Not only does this question posit unknowable qualities of God’s transcendent *esse* within his triune self to the fore, but all certainty remains illusive when it comes to questions of the origin of The Satan, evil and the demonic. For not only, despite the equivocation of the serpent with The Satan in Revelation 12 and 20, are there various views concerning the chronology of the fall of The Satan in relation to the birth and ministry of Christ incarnate, but also, as Wink makes clear in his seminal works on The Powers, scripture reveals a malleable and changing The Satan, one who defies definition since he evolves from a divine viceroy residing in God’s presence (Job 1-2) to the antithetical malevolent enemy of God who will ultimately meet his end before the full consummation of the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 20:7-10). Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 9–40.

<sup>58</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Internal and External Powers. A Response to ‘Journeying in Hope; Paul’s Letter to the Romans and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and *The Holy War* in Conversation,’ by Scott C. Ryan,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 33 (2014): 324.

<sup>59</sup> See for example Anglican minister David Watson, David C. K. Watson, *God’s Freedom Fighters* (London: Movement Books, 1972), 50–67.

a world of freewill-possibilities for good or ill.<sup>60</sup> This minor divine culpability he faces is the reason why he participates and suffers in solidarity with creation.<sup>61</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In this paper it has been contended that defining God's nature and character in panentheistic terms need not necessarily determine a privative definition of evil to the preclusion of an ontologically semi-real account of The Satan and demons with volition and sentience. Fiddes' central theological tenet of God's panentheistic omnipresence via creation's participation in the divine triune nature of God has been used and developed in order to construct a theology of panentheism capacious enough to locate within it the reality of demonic personalist-ontological spiritual beings. By examining Fiddes' covenantal form of panentheism organised around "persons as relations" participation and subsequently developing von Balthasar's twisted "no" in the "yes" of the Father and Son, as used by Fiddes, I have proffered a way to theologically promulgate the all-encompassing sovereign presence of God that co-exists with the irrevocable libertarian freedom of creatures, both physical *and* spiritual, to either rebel or follow their original design.

Moreover, crucial to the construction of this case was the taking of and developing von Balthasar's trinitarian theology in his work on dramatic soteriology into the uncharted theological realm of spiritual beings who have autonomy, volition, self-awareness and, following Boethius, a minimal definition of quasi-being and personhood. While outside of the scope of this paper, this understanding, I would argue, better attests to the scriptural narrative, contemporary experience of demonization and exorcism, and makes more sense pastorally by nullifying a number of pastoral difficulties that arise when a robust ontological account of The Satan and demonic, as traditionally held in the Christian church, is replaced by a privative-only view of evil, since this fails to better reflect the majority-prevalent practices and beliefs of the contemporary Christian faith.

It is regrettable that in adopting an *a-priori* commitment to evil as privation, Fiddes has limited his definition of panentheism in a way that does not allow for serious exegetical engagement of biblical texts on the demonic and phenomenological investigation of modern-day accounts of deliverance ministry. He is potentially open to the same well-known criticism of Barth, who was arraigned for his rejection of the idea of an angelic fall through lack of exegesis of the salient passages historically and traditionally held to describe what Augustine called the "angelic catastrophe."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, there seems no conclusive reason, as held by

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<sup>60</sup> Philosophically and analogously, however, God is only to blame as much as, say, the brainchild behind the invention of the gun is every time a gun is used in a fatal shooting. The inventor may have speculated guns being used this way in the future but that does not render him responsible and culpable for each death by shooting.

<sup>61</sup> Fiddes, "Something will come," 99-100; Paul S. Fiddes, "Christianity, Atonement and Evil," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Paul Mosser and Chad Meister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 217-18. Fiddes offers this argument in response to Hick's claim about evil's place in the divine aim. Fiddes contends that Hick's argument still doesn't offer a satisfactory answer to Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov's moral question about whether or not the universe, as it is, is worth the tears of one tortured child.

<sup>62</sup> Barth's denial that demons are fallen angels is primarily based upon two major concerns: First, it conflicts with his argument that, contrary to common misconception, demons belong to intrinsic evil known as the nothingness not the negative side of creation, and second, in light of how little is known about the nature of human freedom, it is far too speculative to postulate about angelic

Fiddes and other modern panentheists, to restrict an understanding of divine panentheism which has to account for the existence of evil only to a *privatio boni* understanding of evil. Despite the lack of conclusive, non-ambiguous biblical data on the origins and necessary nature of evil, scripture together with tradition and experience does allow one, to use Barth's nomenclature, to construct a biblical demonology without descending into a speculative philosophy of demons,<sup>63</sup> and explicate a theological case that accounts for situations and experiences of ontological evil while maintaining that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it; in God we live, move, and have our being; and we may participate in the divine nature" (Psalm 24:1; Acts 17:28; 2 Peter 1:4).

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spiritual freedom that, it is claimed, led to the rebellion of Lucifer and one-third of the angels. *CD* III/3, §51.3, 530–31. Barth's strong stance against any notion of an angelic fall has, notes Bromiley, seriously undermines Barth's excellent work on making angels a subject of theological investigation and left him vulnerable to the charge of marginalising the demonic and whether he is indeed "obeying scripture as the criterion of dogmatic purity and truth?" Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 155.

<sup>63</sup> Barth pleaded that we not allow theology to become philosophy: an angelology should not be confused with a philosophy of angels. *CD* III/3, §51.1, 410–12.