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## INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL TEXTS IN CONTEMPORARY PANENTHEISTIC DISCOURSE

**Abstract.** This article addresses the issue of the interpretation of biblical texts by representatives of contemporary panentheistic thought. While examining the issue of the “God – world” relationship, they not only used fragments of the Holy Scripture to develop their concepts, but at the same time gave these fragments a panentheistic tone. Therefore, understanding the specificity of the panentheistic interpretation of such fragments in the works of individual authors becomes possible only after taking into account the internal logic of this or that concept.

The article presents the panentheistic understanding of biblical fragments in the context of Ch. Hartshorne’s processual panentheism, where certain fragments of the Holy Scripture are understood as a pattern of quasi-panentheistic thought. The paper also includes the concept of the “field of rationality” by J. Życiński; the value of biblical texts in the soteriological panentheism presented by N. Gregersen is emphasized, and the panentheistic interpretations of the description of the creation of the world in the works of Ph. Clayton and D. Griffin are discussed. The conducted analysis allows us to state that the specificity of some panentheistic concepts determines the selection of these and not other biblical texts. These texts not only emphasize God’s immanence in the world, but also His transcendence.

**Keywords:** panentheism; Holy Scripture; biblical hermeneutics; processual theology; field of rationality

The problem of the relationship between “God and the world” in philosophical and religious thought is often considered to be the interface of rational philosophical reflection and texts on supernatural Revelation presented in Sacred Scripture. The analytic philosophy of religion, which emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, was no exception here, and at certain stages of its development, it began

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to be interested in theological questions, trying to understand them using logical tools. This process coincides chronologically with the so-called “panentheistic turn” in the philosophy of religion, presented by Ch. Hartshorn, A. Peacock, Ph. Clayton, J. Życiński, S. McFague and others. Representatives of the “turn” critically approached both classical theism and pantheism, trying to find the golden mean in the panentheistic concept, which assumes the existence of “everything in God.”

The panentheistic argumentation of most of the mentioned authors was not limited to metaphysical theories, but also included various metaphors and biblical quotes within their methodology. The texts of the Holy Scriptures not only inspired researchers to develop their panentheistic theories, but served as a reliable argument in defense of their beliefs. Therefore, the article aims to present the specificity of the interpretation of biblical texts in the context of several panentheistic concepts.

In order to understand the specificity of the interpretation of biblical texts by Ch. Hartshorne (a follower of A.N. Whitehead’s process philosophy) and other representatives of contemporary panentheistic thought, it is necessary to briefly discuss their concepts. Namely, in Hartshorne’s „bipolar” concept, God is represented by the formula  $A_iW_j$ , in which the “absolute” element  $A_i$  denotes an unchanging, timeless feature of the Divine nature, while the “relative” element  $W_j$  denotes the properties belonging to God entering temporality and characterizing His relationship with the world. Immediately, „in the simple schemes of traditional theism, the idealization of  $W_j = 0$  was introduced, and all attributes of God were interpreted as absolute. Departure from such simplifications allows for a fuller understanding of the rich reality of God’s existence.<sup>1</sup>

In the work *Philosophers Speak on God*, Hartshorne connects the beginnings of theistic thought with biblical texts, citing the following fragments: Gen 1; Ps 103:8–13; Mal 3:5–17; Mt 13:24–30; 1 J 4:7–9. The above-mentioned fragments, like other religious texts (e.g. the Egyptian “Hymn to Aten,” “Tao Te Ching,” and some Vedic texts), he calls “ancient quasi-panentheism.”<sup>2</sup>

As Hartshorne notes, in contrast to the sacred Egyptian texts, one cannot seek the deification of some natural element, for example, the sun, in biblical fragments. Man is indeed presented in Scripture as the “image of God,” and it is difficult to deny the presence of a large number of anthropomorphisms in the biblical texts. At the same time, the biblical authors did not try to avoid

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<sup>1</sup> Józef Życiński, *Teizm i filozofia analityczna*, vol. 2. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1992): 136.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak on God* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1953): 29–36.

“spiritual or psychological predicates of Deity, such as will, knowledge, and love,” to outline the *monopolar* characteristics of the Absolute. Hartshorne draws attention to certain subtleties in the metaphorical expression of God’s attributes. If we speak, for example, of God’s anger (or His pity for creation), of course, we cannot use the words “anger” or “pity” in the same sense as human emotional states; on the other hand, it can be argued that, for God, the affairs of this world are not something neutral or insignificant. In pointing this out, Hartshorne draws attention to the inconsistency of those theologians who try to claim both God’s lack of involvement in the world’s affairs and recognize His qualities such as love and sensitivity.<sup>3</sup>

In presenting quasi-panentheistic ideas, Hartshorne provides a biblical description of the world (Gen 1–2,3), a description of God as a merciful Lord favorable to those who fear Him (Ps 103:8–13), an announcement of God’s coming judgment with a call for the chosen people to convert (Mal 3:5–7), the Gospel parable of the sower (Mt 13:24–30), and the commandment to love one’s neighbor (1 Jn 4:7–9). In the following commentary, Hartshorne asks about the possibility of discovering panentheistic ideas in the given passages. Regarding the description of the creation of the world, Hartshorne pays special attention to the fact that every day of creation evokes God’s approval. Therefore, he claims that Scripture states that the world evokes a certain change in God, which is expressed in His reaction.

Hartshorne asks: if someone sees only anthropomorphisms in God’s reactions that do not express any essential truths, then what religious or philosophical content can we find in such a description? Similarly, in Mal 3:5–7, one cannot find God’s metaphysical monopolarity: although He is presented as unchanging in relation to his decisions, God nevertheless declares his readiness to change his behavior in the event of Israel’s conversion. In the parable of the sower Hartshorne finds, first, confirmation of the thesis that God, being the source of ideal models to imitate, does not determine that man perform specific actions; second, God acts not only as a reaper, but as one who also enjoys the effects of his work.<sup>4</sup>

Although, as Hartshorne points out, the Bible does not directly state that God suffers with people, we can claim this based on these texts, in which he is presented as a conscious and sensitive Being.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, 36–37.

The whole doctrine of the Incarnation and the sending of the Son of God seems an implicit expression of divine passivity and passion. And the evasion that “love” means mere “outpouring” of benefits, not sympathetic sensitivity to the deeds and the joys and sorrows of others, is, we suggest, foreign to the spiritual atmosphere of the New Testament and not really in accord with the Old.<sup>5</sup>

With the help of the above texts, Hartshorne tries to demonstrate the correctness of the bipolar understanding of God, thus rejecting traditional attempts to present Him only as an unchanging Absolute. In his opinion, the bipolar image of God is the best option, because here He no longer appears as an abstract Being separated from the world, but as a dynamic participant in the processes taking place in creation. Thus, panentheism should, to a greater extent, reflect the intentions of the biblical authors regarding how God’s nature is presented, including His intimate relationship with the world using the “law of polarity.”

Analyzing Hartshorne’s panentheistic concept, Polish theologian J. Życiński notes that the fragment of Acts 17:28 (“in Him [God - A.P.] we live and move and have our being”) is its “central point.”<sup>6</sup> Hartshorne, however, in his extensive work “Philosophers Speak on God” mentions this fragment only once, and that in reference to Schelling’s views as a representative of “modern panentheism.”<sup>7</sup>

J. Życiński linked the need to emphasize God’s immanence, especially evident in panentheism, with the need for a correct understanding of biblical texts. In his opinion, theological errors, which are a consequence of the fundamentalist interpretation of the Holy Scripture, are directly related to the underestimation of the thesis of God’s immanence in the world: “When God appears exclusively as a distant ruler of the transcendent afterlife, fundamentalists reserve for themselves all responsibility for the fate of the world, in which, in the style of Persian metaphysics, one can draw a strict distinction between the forces of progress and the power of evil.”<sup>8</sup>

As in the case of Hartshorne, Życiński’s panentheistic interpretation of the Holy Scripture requires knowledge of his concept, which he calls the “concept of the field of rationality.”<sup>9</sup> “Accepting the hypothesis of the rationality field,”

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Życiński, *Teizm i filozofia analityczna*, 136–137.

<sup>7</sup> Hartshorne and Reese, *Philosophers Speak on God*, 233.

<sup>8</sup> Józef Życiński, “Parainteletekualne korzenie fundamentalizmu,” *Zagadnienia Filozoficzne w Nauce* 12 (1990): 32.

<sup>9</sup> Alternative descriptions of the “field of rationality” could also be the “field of potentiality” (Whitehead), “formal field,” “nomic structure,” “world matrix,” “Logos,” and “mind of God.” Michał Heller, “Józefa Życińskiego idea pola racjonalności”, *Media – Kultura – Dialog. W piątą rocznicę*

writes the Polish theologian, “I claim that its structures defined (“encoded”) the universe of all physical states that could in principle find physical realization in the existing universe.”<sup>10</sup> Specifying his position, Życiński continues:

In this approach, God’s “containment” in nature consists in the fact that He is present in all physical processes as a rationality field. Although He is the ontological reason for the mathematicality of nature, His immanent being goes beyond the categories of space and time on the same principle that it is impossible to assign a strict spatial location to our feelings or thoughts.<sup>11</sup>

According to Życiński, the panentheistic concept of the rational field

leads to a fascinating philosophical vision. The stability and mathematicality of the structures of nature appear in philosophical categories as a manifestation of the rational field, and in the perspectives of faith as the One “in Whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).<sup>12</sup>

Thus, according to Życiński, panentheism encompasses both the philosophical version (the concept of the rational field) and the purely religious, Christian version, expressed by St. Paul on the Areopagus. Expressing this idea in the terminology of the late Wittgenstein, one can say that a given biblical fragment expresses a panentheistic worldview in a “Christian language game” that can be translated into the language game of analytic philosophy.

Życiński is convinced that his panentheistic concept of the field of rationality does not contradict biblical texts that clearly emphasize the transcendence of God, as in 1 Tim 6:15: “The blessed and only Ruler of all, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who alone is immortal, whose home is in inaccessible light, whom no human being has seen or is able to see.” The quoted citation does not oppose the „purely panentheistic” fragment of Acts 17:28 (according to Wojtysiak – “Życiński’s favorite fragment”), but complements it, together creating “a panentheistic image of nature, in which due attention is paid to God’s immanence in the world of creation.”<sup>13</sup>

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*śmierci arcybiskupa Józefa Życińskiego* (Kraków: Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie, 2017): 28.

<sup>10</sup> Życiński, *Teizm i filozofia analityczna*, 72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 147–148.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 146.

<sup>13</sup> Józef Życiński, “Panteizm a panenteizm w kontekście filozoficznych kontrowersji średnio-wieczna,” *Analecta Cracoviensia* 25 (1993): 606; Jacek Wojtysiak, “Panenteizm. W związku z poglądami

In *Socratic Meditations* Życiński, once again turning to Acts 17:28, presents a profound anthropological perspective on this fragment: “In his opinion, the truth about the bond of human existence with the Divine Absolute is also reflected by other truths, such as the immaterial soul, immortality, salvation and grace.”<sup>14</sup> In this understanding, God is a person close to man, accessible thanks to the grace in which man is immersed. Such a state of immersion in grace may not always be visible to man himself: this spiritual reality may differ from visible events (e.g., natural phenomena or intersubjective relationships), but may often remain unnoticed. The fact is that God enters man’s everyday life not only in a clearly “religious” context, but also in the experience of pain, joy, various problems, etc. Man is endowed with grace precisely through the world of nature, which is why it would be inappropriate to oppose grace and nature as two realities isolated from each other. At the same time, grace and nature interpenetrate and complement each other to such an extent that any attempt to draw a clear boundary between them is doomed to fail.<sup>15</sup>

Życiński compares the divine reality presented in Acts 17:28 to the gravitational field that surrounds man, which is like a field directing his life towards ideals, values and norms. Therefore, the search for God should be directed deep into reality, its center is located.<sup>16</sup> The process of man’s spiritual immersion is basically endless: “The next levels of God’s existence indicate the existence of even deeper layers.”<sup>17</sup> In characterizing the evolutionist views of A.L. Moore, W. Temple and others, according to which God realizes his intentions through natural laws and his patterns, Życiński once again quotes a fragment of Acts 17:28, in which, according to him, “man’s ontological status and his evolutionary dependence on the Divine Creator” was expressed.<sup>18</sup>

Among other New Testament texts that characterize the panentheistic vision of the “God–world” relationship, Życiński mentions 1 Cor 15:28, where St. Paul writes about God who is “all in all,” as well as fragments of the Gospel of St. John 1:3–10 and 15:1–10, where Christ is presented as the eternal Logos, through whom the world was created, and the vine is the union that ensures the vitality

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Józefa Życińskiego, Charlesa Hartshorne’a i innych przedstawicieli «zwrotu panenteistycznego»,” *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 60(4) (2012): 314.

<sup>14</sup> Karol Jasiński, “Józefa Życińskiego koncepcja transcendencji Boga jako głębi bytu,” *IDEA – Studia nad strukturą i rozwojem pojęć filozoficznych* 26 (2014): 207.

<sup>15</sup> Józef Życiński, *Medytacje sokratejskie* (Lublin: Edycja Paulińska, 1991): 132, 134, 148–151.

<sup>16</sup> J. Życiński, *Bóg Abrahama i Whiteheada* (Tarnów: Biblos, 1992): 165.

<sup>17</sup> Jasiński, “Józefa Życińskiego koncepcja transcendencji Boga jako głębi bytu,” 208.

<sup>18</sup> Józef Życiński, “Ewolucyjna wizja przyrody a XIX-wieczny teizm.” *Studia Philosophiae Christianae* 32(1) (1996): 88.

of the branches. The Polish scholar points out the inadmissibility of accusing the authors of these texts of heterodoxy, and connects the genesis of the panentheistic concept with the efforts of “sympathizers” of Christian Neoplatonism (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, and others), aimed at translating similar biblical expressions into philosophical language. Therefore, according to Życiński, the above-mentioned authors set themselves the task of explaining “that all things exist in God, because God constitutes their essence, understood either as *forma omnium* or as *essentia omnium*.”<sup>19</sup>

A separate aspect of Życiński’s panentheistic interpretation of the Holy Scripture is the motif of God’s wisdom presented in Prov 8:22–31. God is present in his creation even before the act of creation and “His presence enriches the work of creation and the sphere of human experience”; God also experiences the joy of being with the people he created. The image of God’s Wisdom is an anticipation of the incarnation of the Logos (Jn 1:16).<sup>20</sup> Like Hartshorne, Życiński writes about God being compassionate and sensitive towards creation, present “both in earthquakes and volcanic eruptions and in the discreet breath of a summer breeze (1 Kgs 19:12).”<sup>21</sup> According to Życiński, the concept of the field of rationality also reflects the idea of God’s immanence in the world, expressed in Ps 138: “You search and know me, O Lord. You know my rest and my rising...”<sup>22</sup>

According to Philip Clayton, the biblical descriptions of the creation of the world clearly indicate both the impossibility of identifying God with the world (pantheism) and the inadmissibility of their complete separation (classical theism, and especially deism). In the Old Testament, in his opinion, there is a strong emphasis on God’s transcendence in the world.<sup>23</sup> God appears in the world as the unlimited Creator and Lord of all things, including animate and inanimate beings, the laws that govern them, as well as time and space. At the same time, God’s creative action is not limited to the initial act, but is actualized according to the principle of *creatio continua* through the laws of nature. On the other hand, analyzing the texts of the New Testament, Clayton presents several fragments that may indicate a panentheistic vision of the “God – world” relationship. For

<sup>19</sup> Józef Życiński, “Panteizm a panenteizm w kontekście filozoficznych kontrowersji średniowiecza,” 598.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, 607.

<sup>21</sup> Józef Życiński, *Wszechświat emergentny: Bóg w ewolucji przyrody* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2009), 129.

<sup>22</sup> Życiński, *Teizm i filozofia analityczna*, 148.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 17, 21, 23–24; Philip Clayton, “Kenotic Trinitarian Panentheism,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44(3) (2005): 251.

example, in the letters of the apostle Paul, we find over 90 cases of the use of the expression “in Christ,” and the Gospel according to St. John testifies to “the existence and participation of believers in the Spirit.” Just like Życiński, Clayton draws attention to the panentheistic nature of the fragment of Acts 17:28.<sup>24</sup>

An interesting analysis of the panentheistic interpretation of New Testament texts is conducted by N. Gregersen, discussing the so-called “soteriological panentheism.” According to him, the existence of the world „in God” is not something that has existed naturally from the beginning, but is a gift from God: “It is only by the redeeming grace of God that the world can dwell in God; not everything shares automatically in divine life. Wickedness and sin, for example, have no place in the reign of God.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, “pure” panentheism is in fact a future perspective of creation: the words of the apostle Paul about God as “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28) are not a statement of a *fait accompli*, but a goal that the Creator realizes in the present. The logic of soteriological panentheism also assumes, according to Gregersen, applying the biblical concept of the “kingdom of God.”

This concept should clarify certain issues related to theodicy: since the kingdom of God cannot be reconciled with various manifestations of evil (“cowardice, greed, hatred, torture, war”), according to 1 Cor 15:50, it cannot be inherited by “flesh and blood.” On the other hand, the positive features of the reality of the kingdom of God are the virtues of faith, hope and love, thanks to which it becomes possible to build an interpersonal network of relationships in God (cf. 1 Cor 13:13). The above quotes from 1 Cor are supplemented by the Johannine tradition: “We have recognized for ourselves, and put our faith in, the Love God has for us. God is Love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him” (1 Jn 4:16). In relation to this, Gregersen concludes that “abiding in God” means readiness to sacrifice oneself, “communicative Love that binds all things together.”<sup>26</sup>

As can be seen, soteriological panentheism is dynamic in nature. Assuming a broad application of biblical texts, it is guided by the logic of salvation history. The world created by God is not yet the ultimate “panentheistic” reality, but is directed towards eschatological fulfillment “in God.” At the same time, it seems that partial “abiding in God” is possible thanks to perseverance in faith,

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<sup>24</sup> Philip Clayton, “Pantheisms East and West,” *Sophia* 49(2) (2010): 186.

<sup>25</sup> Niels H. 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 Robert Peacocke (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 27.



hope and love already in the process of realizing God's plan for the world; man's choice in favor of true values brings this fulfillment closer, thus making him an active partner of God in this matter.

Namely, fulfilling "everything in God" has a clear axiological character: the logic of belonging to the kingdom of God does not assume manifestations of evil in it; therefore, since the state of the world depends on man's moral choices, the term "everything (in God)" must assume a common fate of man and the rest of creation. Therefore, "being in God" in this understanding means the ability to live in Love (i.e., in God). Due to the above, it can be firmly stated that in soteriological panentheism, unlike other types of panentheism, the New Testament message sounds clearer, while attempts at metaphysical speculation are manifested to a much lesser extent.

The problem of evil in the world is also taken up by D. Griffin in his panentheistic reflection. He devotes chapter IV of his monograph<sup>27</sup> to this issue and bases his argument on Genesis 1. In his opinion, any serious discussion about God's action in the world cannot avoid the problem of evil. Like other panentheists, Griffin criticizes traditional theism for its inconsistency: "It assumes that the world was created by a good and omnipotent Creator, but things happen as if no such person existed."<sup>28</sup>

The author rejects the thesis of the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, defending the validity of the idea that the world was created from chaos. At the same time, he points out the inaccuracy of most translations of the beginning of the Book of Genesis (1:1–2a), which, according to him, should be read as follows: "When God began to create the heaven and the earth, the world was without form and void." According to Griffin, such a reading of the biblical passage is consistent with Whitehead's processual panentheistic theodicy, who also claimed that the world came into being from chaos. God's action, as he writes, does not consist in controlling the entire creation, but only in persuasion: "The world is in God, after all, and God – through his intervention – does not disrupt the established cause-and-effect patterns. Therefore, this type of panentheism is – Griffin points out – a version of naturalistic theism."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> David R. Griffin, *Panentheism and Scientific Naturalism. Rethinking Evil, Morality, Religious Experience, Religious Pluralism, and the Academic Study of Religion* (Claremont: Process Century Press 2014): 99–131.

<sup>28</sup> Paweł Sokołowski, [review], "Panentheism and Scientific Naturalism: Rethinking Evil, Morality, Religious Experience, Religious Pluralism, and the Academic Study of Religion," David Ray Griffin, Claremont, 2014," *Forum Teologiczne* 16 (2015): 253.

<sup>29</sup> Paweł Sokołowski, "Panenteizm jako postmodernistyczne objawienie? Kilka uwag krytycznych na marginesie książki Davida Ray'a Griffina «Panentheism and Scientific Naturalism»,» *Studia Nauk Teologicznych* 10 (2015): 229.

## CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis of the panentheistic interpretation of the Bible by representatives of contemporary panentheism allows us to state that the specificity of understanding the biblical texts given by these authors emerges only in the context of individual concepts (Hartshorne's "law of polarity," Życiński's "field of rationality," etc.), each of which, despite certain common features, differs in its internal logic. On the one hand, fragments of the Holy Scripture fit into every type of such logic, serving as biblical arguments in favor of appropriate religious and philosophical concepts. On the other hand, they are filled with a specific meaning, characteristic of the panentheistic vision of the "God – world" relationship.

The diversity of approaches to contemporary panentheistic thought determines one or another set of biblical texts that the authors qualify as "panentheistic" (mainly those that emphasize God's immanence in the world). At the same time, fragments presenting God as radically transcendent towards the world are interpreted by them (above all in processional panentheism) as arguments emphasizing the unchanging aspect of the divine nature, without thereby denying the possibility of the world's influence on Him, meaning the changing aspect. The second of these aspects, according to the representatives of panentheism, should explain the entire richness and depth of the relationship between the Creator and the creature, thus bringing philosophical reflection closer to specifically biblical ideas.

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## INTERPRETACJA TEKSTÓW BIBLIJNYCH WE WSPÓŁCZESNYM DYSKURSIE PANENTEISTYCZNYM

### Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule podjęto problematykę interpretacji tekstów biblijnych przez przedstawicieli współczesnej myśli panenteistycznej. Badając problematykę relacji „Bóg–świat”, posługiwali się oni nie tylko fragmentami Pisma Świętego dla rozwoju własnych koncepcji, ale nadawali jednocześnie tym fragmentom brzmienie panenteistyczne. Wobec tego zrozumienie specyfiki panenteistycznej interpretacji takich fragmentów w dziełach poszczególnych autorów staje się możliwe tylko po uwzględnieniu logiki wewnętrznej tej czy innej koncepcji. W artykule przedstawiono panenteistyczne rozumienie fragmentów biblijnych w kontekście procesualnego panenteizmu Ch. Hartshorne'a, gdzie pewne myśli Pisma Świętego rozumie się jako wzorzec myśli quasi-panenteistycznej, a także jako koncepcję „pola racjonalności” J. Życińskiego; podkreślono wartość tekstów biblijnych w panenteizmie soteriologicznym prezentowanym przez N. Gregersena, a także omówiono panenteistyczne interpretacje opisu stworzenia świata w pracach Ph. Claytona i D. Griffina. Przeprowadzona analiza pozwala stwierdzić, że specyfika niektórych koncepcji

panenteistycznych determinuje wybór tych, a nie innych tekstów biblijnych, które nie tylko podkreślają immanencję Boga w świecie, ale także akcentują Jego transcendencję.

**Słowa kluczowe:** panenteizm; Pismo Święte; hermeneutyka biblijna; teologia procesualna; pole racjonalności