

About God:

Four main beliefs about the nature of God: Deism, Panentheism, Pantheism & Theism

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Note:

In this essay, we will use the term “*deity*” in a very broad, generic, gender-neutral sense to refer to a male God, or a female Goddess, or a group of Gods, or a set of Goddesses, or a pantheon of Gods and Goddesses — that is, any form of one or more supreme beings in which followers of a particular faith tradition believe.

The name(s), gender(s), and structure of deity:

According to David Barrett et al, editors of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, there are 19 major world religions which can be subdivided into a total of 270 large religious groups, and many thousands of smaller ones.¹ One is struck by the diversity of mutually exclusive beliefs about deity which are firmly held by followers of these thousands of faith groups. Many, perhaps most, believers in a given religion believe that their particular concept of deity was taught to humans through divine revelation. Thus, they often regard their belief system as the only true one. Many, perhaps most, believe that the founders and theologians of other religions are in error; their deities were created by humans.

Obviously, since no religion is followed by a majority of the world’s population, most people are simply mistaken in their beliefs.

Most religions define deity according to one of the following four theological belief systems. In alphabetic order, they are:

Belief system:

Very brief description:

Deism	Deity created the universe, started it functioning, but is no longer actively involved in it.
Panentheism	Deity is the inner spiritual essence of everything in the universe, but it exists beyond the universe as well.
Pantheism	Deity is the inner spiritual essence of everything in the universe.
Theism	Deity created the universe and continues to actively participate in the world’s activities and in human history.

Each of these four systems will be defined in greater detail later in this essay.

Theism can be subdivided into various types, according to the number and relative ranking of the deity or deities:

- Duotheism (a.k.a. Ditheism, Bitheism; belief in the existence of precisely two deities who are often approximately equal in power),
- Henotheism (belief in a main deity accompanied by many subservient deities),
- Monotheism (belief in a single, usually male, deity),
- Polytheism (belief in a pantheon of many deities, usually male and female), and
- Trinity (belief in three persons within a single deity; a version of monotheism).

Opposing Theism are three main religious beliefs:

- Agnosticism (indecision about whether deity exists),
- Atheism (possessing no belief in deity), and
- Strong Atheism (actively disbelieving in deity's existence).

For example:

- Most Christians are Theists who believe in the Trinity — a “*God in Three Persons*,” consisting of Jehovah, the Father; Jesus, the Son; and the Holy Spirit. Since they believe in a single composite God, they generally regard themselves as monotheists. However, many followers of other religions, like Islam and Judaism, dispute this stance.
- Most Muslims and Jews are also Theists. They are pure monotheists, since they believe in a single, indivisible, male deity.
- Wiccans are often considered Theists. Because of their belief in both a Goddess and a God, theologians generally refer to them as Duotheists or Ditheists or Bitheists.

The foundational concepts leading to beliefs in deity:

Some theologians regard the opposing concepts of transcendence and immanence to be the basic building blocks from which are formed the four different theological belief systems: Deism, Panentheism, Pantheism, and Theism:

- “*The term ‘transcendence’ derives from a Latin word meaning ‘to go beyond’.*”² It refers to deity as existing above, outside of, or beyond creation. It is generally a different and higher order of being than are humans and other living entities. For example, the ancient Hebrews viewed God as seated on a throne in Heaven above the firmament,³ where he could smell the delicious fragrance of meat cooking on temple altars below.
- “*Immanence*” is also derived “*from Latin, but conveys the polar opposite sense of ‘indwelling’ or the quality of ‘within-ness’.*”² Deity is seen as being within the universe, perhaps an “*...inner presence and Power that permeates, saturates, or infuses the universe and everything in it...*”⁴ For example, Taoists believe that the *Tao* a formless, unchanging and self-sufficient form of energy, which was present before the universe existed, and continues to be present in all things.

- Often confused with “*immanence*” is the unrelated word “*imminence*” which means “*nearness*.” For example, many Christians expect that the return of Jesus to earth in the Second Coming is imminent — they believe that it will happen in the near future.
- Unfortunately, both “*transcendence*” and “*immanence*” are used in two senses:

In a “*strong*” or “*ontological*” sense to refer to the being, nature, or essence of deity.

In a “*weak*” sense where

“*transcendence*” can mean elusive, or beyond perception.

“*immanence*” means activity by the deity in the universe.

This is in keeping with a widespread religious tradition of often assigning a single word to serve many different and often mutually exclusive meanings. The result is often chaos and an inability for persons of different faith traditions to enter into dialogue.

Transcendence and Immanence within the four theological systems:

- Deism was a byproduct of the Enlightenment during the 17th and 18th centuries. It became a major belief system among European intellectuals, such as Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Rousseau, John Tillotson, John Toland, and Voltaire. It was imported into America and adopted by John Quincy Adams, Ethan Allen, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison Thomas Paine, George Washington and many — perhaps most — of the leaders of the American Revolution. Deists assert that:

God exists: God created the universe, and its scientific and moral laws, in a state of perfection. Thus, after he set the universe in motion, his main task was completed. Since his creation was perfect, it did not need continual interference by God to keep it functioning as it was designed to operate.

God is transcendent: He is separate from, and above, his creation.

God is not immanent, except at the time of creation. Deists see no evidence of God currently working in nature. They believe that “*Only an inept God would have to step in to fix a faulty world....The God of deism had made a world precisely as it as supposed to be, and it functioned very nicely without divine intervention.*”⁵

Miracles do not happen, either in biblical times or at the present.

Prayer is not useful. Even if God were listening, he would not act.

During the 19th century, Deism lost much of its popularity. However, it is currently experiencing a surge in numbers.

- Panentheists assert that:

Deity is immanent: As noted above, it “*is an inner Presence and Power that permeates, saturates, or infuses the universe and everything in it (including the world and humanity, nature and human nature) from within.*”

Deity is also transcendent: In addition to infusing the universe and everything in it, there is some aspect of deity that is external to the universe.

- Pantheists:
Agree with Panentheists that deity is immanent, and permeates the universe.
Assert that deity is not transcendent. It has no aspect that is beyond the universe.
Deity may be permanently beyond our ability to perceive and conceptualize.
- Theists:
Visualize deity as transcendent, being separate from creation. A common expression is that "*God is not the universe and the universe is not God.*"
Believe that deity is immanent in the weak sense of the term: deity initially created the universe, and remains active in nature today.
Generally believe that deity suspends the laws of nature from time to time in order to generate miracles.
Generally believe in prayer as a means of personal communing with the deity, offering thanks, and asking for special favors.
Often assign infinite attributes to deity, such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresent, and all-loving. This inevitably leads to the apparently unsolvable problem of theodicy: how can an all-good, omnipotent deity tolerate the presence of evil and suffering?

References:

¹David Barrett et al, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative survey of churches and religions - AD 30 to 2200*, Oxford University Press, (2001).

²Paul Laughlin, *Remedial Christianity: What every believer should know about the Faith, but probably doesn't*, Polebridge Press, (2000), Page 42.

³A firmament is a rigid dome which was believed to exist a few hundred feet above the earth, and which separated the waters of heaven from the earth's atmosphere.

⁴Op cit, Laughlin, Page 55.

⁵Ibid, Page 50 & 52