

## More on Pantheism

### Introduction

Pantheism (pan = all; theos = God) is the world view which understands there to be an intimate connection or outright identification of God and all there is: God is all; all is God. Everything that exists constitutes a unity and this unity is divine. The apparent infinity and eternity of the universe have been seen as the qualities that entail its divinity. Pantheism has a source in a widespread capacity of and for awe and wonder in the face of the grandeur of the universe and of the apparent unity of things (from the theistic perspective, of course, this is nothing other than old fashioned idolatry). A pantheistic world view (or metaphysics) provides a grammar or logical explanation of these human emotions, and has therefore found numerous exponents and survived over a lengthy period of time. It is a doctrine that usually occurs in religions and philosophies in which there are already tolerably clear conceptions of God and of the universe and the question becomes how to connect them. Pantheism is often the result.

Like most world views, there are a variety of pantheistic perspectives, nuances, or genres. The following typology is one way to understand this basic variety:

- Absolute pantheism: Parmenides (5th century B. C.) and Vedic pantheism of Hinduism which holds that there is only one being in the universe; all else that appears to exist does not really exist.
- Emanational pantheism: Plotinus (3rd century A. D.) argued that everything flows out of God the way a flower flows out of a seed. Some interpreters are reluctant to call Plotinus' neo-platonism a pantheism because "although it views the material world as an emanation from the divine, the fallen and radically imperfect and undivine character of that world is always emphasized" (Encyclopedia of Philosophy 6: 32).
- Developmental pantheism: G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831; *Phenomenology of Mind*) who saw the events of history as the unfolding manifestation of the Absolute Spirit.
- Modal pantheism: Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) suggested that there is only one absolute Substance in which all finite things are merely modes or moments.

- Multilevel pantheism: this is found in some forms of Hinduism, especially expressed by Radhakrishnan who says there are various levels or manifestations of God, the highest level manifesting God as the Absolute One and the lower levels successively manifesting God in greater multiplicity.
- Popular pantheism: this is the kind of pantheism that finds expression in the Western world in which various aspects of Eastern pantheistic religious concepts are embraced. This would include the New Age Movement; Zen Buddhism (cf. D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*; Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen*); and the kind of permeational pantheism found in the Star Wars movie trilogy.
- Poetic pantheism: in England, a poetic pantheism appeared in Shelley and Wordsworth; in Shelley it co-existed with something much closer to atheism and in Wordsworth with a Christianity that later displaced it.

Other classifications are also possible. There is the distinction between religious and philosophical pantheism. Philosophical pantheism is typically a western phenomenon and has been elaborated by a variety of Western thinkers in close connection with Christian ideas (see below). Religious pantheism is generally associated with the Hindu or Buddhist and mystical religions and has found popular expression today among Westerners.<sup>1</sup> Another distinction is between Western and Eastern pantheism. Though we traditionally understand pantheism to be an Eastern religious outlook, it has actually had a distinguished career in Western philosophical thought. The material below will survey both Western and Eastern pantheisms.

## I. Western Philosophical Pantheism

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<sup>1</sup> According to Geisler and Watkins (Appendix A, p. 290), the following religions may be considered pantheistic: Ananda Marga Yoga Society; Association for Research and Enlightenment (Edgar Cayce); Bahaim; Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh; Buddhism; Christian Science; Church Universal and Triumphant; Divine Light Mission; Eckankar; est (The Forum); Foundation of Human Understanding (Roy Masters); Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy (Swami Rami); Hinduism; International Society of Krishna Consciousness; Sathya Sai Baba; Science of Mind Church (Terry Cole Whittaker); Shree Gurudev Siddha Yoga Ashram (Muktanada Paramahansa); Silva Mind Control; Spiritualism; Sri Chinmoy; Sufism; Swami Kriyananda; Toaism; Theosophy; Transcendental Meditatio; Unity School of Christianity; Vedanta Society (Swami Vivekananda).

## A. Pantheism in the classical period

1. Parmenides (born c. 510 B.C.; lived in Elea, a colony founded by refuge Greeks in southwestern Italy where he gave his city laws and established a new school of philosophy the followers of which were called Eleatics; his chief pupil was Zeno and on a visit to Athens he is said to have met Plato).

Given the nature of the absolute as unchanging, eternal and necessary, the notion of change or coming into being or becoming was impossible. The logic is as follows. For change to occur, some form of being must come from being or non-being:

If it comes from being, then it already is and hence there is no change or becoming.

If it comes from non-being, it is necessary to treat non-being as something in order to avoid the contradiction of saying that something comes from nothing.

In either case, if there is any change, it is from being to being in which case there is no change because both before and after the change, the being from which the change came is still the same! Hence, the phenomena of change is basically an illusion.

2. Xenophanes: he believed that objects in the world were infused with a divine power or substance which conferred life and movement. Along with his critique of the all too anthropomorphic and immoral gods of the Homeric and Hesiodic polytheism, he added this notion, according to Aristotle, that the One was god. It may be, however, that he failed to distinguish clearly between asserting that an object was divine and that a divine power informed the object's movement.

3. Marcus Aurelius, a Stoic and possibly pantheist thinker, addressed the Universe as divinity; however, he did not so address it in the sense of all that is, but rather in the sense of some principle or law that pervades and informs all that is.

4. Ionian physical monists. For the first time the following philosophers raised questions about the ultimate nature of things and made the first attempts to understand what nature really consisted of. Essentially they were all monists, Ionian physical monists.

- Thales: water
- Anaximander: the infinite boundless
- Anaximenes: air

## B. Pantheism in the Middle Ages

The characteristic pantheism of the Middle Ages asserted that because God alone truly is, all that is must in some sense be God, or at least a manifestation of God. Insofar as this view implies a notion of true being at the top of the chain or scale of being, it is platonic or neo-platonic in ancestry.

### 1. Plotinus (205-270 A. D.; *The Six Enneads*)

He held that all modes of being, whether material or immaterial, temporal or eternal, are constituted by the expansion or "overflow" of a single immaterial and impersonal force, which he identified with the "One" of Parmenides and the "Good" of Plato's *Republic*, though this "force" is strictly immune to predication or description. As the "One" it is the ground of all existence; as the Good, it is the source of all values. Reality may be pictured figuratively as concentric circles resulting from the expansion of the One.

### 2. John Scotus Erigena (c. 810-c. 877 A. D.)

This writer's *De Divisione Naturae* broke with traditional monotheism and its separation of God and nature. According to Erigena, the whole, NATURA, is composed of four species of being: (1) that which creates and is not created; (2) that which is created and creates; (3) that which is created and does not create; (4) that which is not created and does not create. The first is God as creator; the last is God as that into which all created beings have returned. The second and the third are the created universe which is in process of passing from God in his first form to God in his last form. Each class of beings belongs to a different period in historical unfolding. Natura, according to Erigena, is eternal; the whole process is eternally present, and everything is THEOPHANIA, a manifestation of God. He attempted to interpret in a pantheistic sense both the Biblical doctrine of creation and a doctrine of time when God will be all in all.

### 3. Ibn-Rushd (Averroës; 1126-1198)

This Islamic interpreter of Aristotle (known as "The Commentator") whose discussions of the relation of human to divine intelligence aroused suspicion of pantheism, and despite his statements of fidelity to the Koran, he was condemned as a heretic. According to him, God, the Prime Mover, is entirely separated from the world, in which He exercises no Providence, while the celestial spheres are intelligences, emanating from God in a descent series until they reach man (neo-platonism). He taught the eternity and potentiality of matter and the unity of the human intellect (monopsychism), that is, the doctrine that only one intellect exists for the whole world in which every individual participates, to the exclusion of personal immortality.

#### 4. Giordano Bruno (1548-1600)

Bruno was an explicitly anti-Christian pantheist. He viewed God as the immanent cause and goal of nature, distinct from each finite particular only because he includes them all within his own being. The divine life which informs everything also informs the human mind and soul, and the soul is immortal because it is part of the divine. Since God is not distinct from the world, he can have no particular providential intentions. Since divine law equally rules all events, miracles cannot occur. Whatever happens, happens in accordance with law, and our freedom consists in identifying ourselves with the course of things. The Bible, insofar as it errs on these points, is simply mistaken.

#### 5. Jakob Boehme (1575-1624)

Boehme was a shoemaker, a Lutheran, and a mystic who remained in the church and received the sacraments until his death. His pantheism was the result of what he allegedly learned from an inward mystical illumination. He saw the foundation of all things in the divine *Ungrund*, in which the TRIAD of Everything, Nothing, and the Divine Agony which results from their encounter produces out of itself a procession of less ultimate triads which constitute the natural and human worlds. Boehme made no distinction between nature and spirit, for nature was the manifestation of spirit. He incurred the wrath of the Lutheran clergy for his views.

## 6. Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677; *Ethics*)

Spinoza is the most thorough-going modern exponent of pantheism. The foundation of his system is his idea of God as the substance which is "causa sui" (cause of itself) or "natura naturans" (nature as active) from which it follows logically that the world is "natura naturata" (nature as passive). This substance (God/Nature) is infinite with an infinite number of attributes of which, however, only two—thought (*cogitatio*) and extension (*extensio*) are known to man. All individual things are modes of these two attributes (modal pantheism), being either bodies or ideas, between which there is a perfect parallelism. The human mind is part of the divine impersonal intellect which works according to necessity. Thus Spinoza denies both freedom and necessity, the permanence of personality and immortality. The highest human activity is the loving contemplation of the necessity in God (*amor Dei intellectualis*) which becomes possible after the complete victory over the passions. The conceptions of a personal God and immortal soul being ruled out, his ideas were purely rationalist. As a matter of fact, his is a deductive system in which every proposition follows from a set of initial axioms, postulates and definitions—a system that mirrors reality in which all things flow from the divine nature.

### C. German pantheism

In the 18th century, a specifically pantheistic tradition arose (the word pantheist was first used in 1705 by John Toland). With the increased questioning of Christianity during this time, and an unwillingness to adopt atheism, pantheism became an increasingly popular outlook.

#### 1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

He sought to combine what he took to be the pagan attitude to nature and the redemptive values of Christianity. Goethe established a theology which enabled him to identify the divine with the natural and to separate them. The infinite creativity of nature is what he took to be divine.

#### 2. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781)

Lessing was one of the principal figures of the Enlightenment who found a kernel of truth in all religions via a neutral version of Spinozism. His pantheism allowed him to see

Judaism, Christianity and Islam as distorted versions of the same truth because they confuse historical events with metaphysical essences. He said that "the accidental truths of history can never become the proof of the necessary truths of reason" (Lessing's ditch").

3. F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834)

His goal was to make Christianity acceptable to the cultured unbelievers of his time. He defined religion as "a sense and taste for the infinite." Religion is based on intuition and feeling and independent of all dogma, and its highest experience was union with the Infinite. Religion is the feeling of "absolute dependence" He spoke of God in both monotheistic and pantheistic terms, but seemed in places to commit himself to pantheism by asserting that it is the totality that is divine.

4. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814)

His view is called an "ethical pantheism" in which God and the universe are identified. The objects of our knowledge are the products of the consciousness of the ego in awareness of both their form and matter. This ego is not the individual "I" but the Absolute Ego which can be known only by philosophical intuition. It develops in three stages: (1) it first posits itself; (2) it posits a non-ego against itself; (3) it posits itself as limited non-ego. God is absolute Ego, "the living operative moral order" but he is not personal. True religion is "joyously doing right" and when morality is finally the norm in society, the existence of the Church will no longer be necessary. The world is nothing but the material through which the EGO realizes its infinite moral vocation, and the Divine is nothing but the moral order that includes both world and ego. The divine cannot be personal and cannot have been the external creator of the world.

5. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854)

In his early thought, he acknowledged only one reality, the infinite and absolute EGO of which the universe was the expression. Later his abstract pantheism was modified in the direction of his concept of "naturphilosophie" according to which nature was an absolute being which works unconsciously, though purposively. The problem of the relationship of nature and spirit gave rise to his "identity-

philosophy" in which nature and spirit are but manifestations of one and the same being, absolute identity being the ground of all things (Spinozism here). Later on, he became even more neo-platonic explaining the universe as the fall of ideas into matter and redemption as the return to the world of ideas. Schelling's earlier teaching was the starting point for Hegel's outlook.

#### 6. G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831)

Hegel's system, proverbially difficult to understand, grew out of the critical idealism of Immanuel Kant, which was carried forward by Fichte and Schelling, and found its ultimate development in Hegel's "Absolute Idealism." The Hegelian absolute idea pre-exists its finite manifestation logically but not temporally. It receives its full embodiment only at the end of history when it is incorporated in a social and moral order fully conscious of its own nature and of its place in history. The Absolute Idea or Spirit has no existence apart from or over and above its actual and possible manifestations in nature and history. The divine is the totality.