

Pantheism—Part One

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Pantheism means all (“pan”) is God (“theism”). It is the worldview held by most Hindus, many Buddhists, and other New Age religions. It is also the worldview of Christian Science, Unity, and Scientology.

According to pantheism, God “is all in all.” God pervades all things, contains all things, subsumes all things, and is found within all things. Nothing exists apart from God, and all things are in some way identified with God. The world is God, and God is the world. But more precisely, in pantheism all is God, and God is all.

Pantheism has a long history in both the East and the West. From the Eastern mysticism of Hindu sages and seers to the rationalism of such Western philosophers as Parmenides, Benedict Spinoza, and G. W. F. Hegel, pantheism has always had advocates.

Kinds of Pantheism. There are differing types of belief within pantheism. An *absolute* pantheism is represented by the thought of the fifth-century B.C. Greek philosopher Parmenides and the Vedanta school of Hinduism. Absolute pantheism teaches that there is only one being in the world, God, and that all else that appears to exist actually does not. Another type is *emanational* pantheism, which was set forth by the third century A.D. philosopher, Plotinus. According to this view, everything flows from God in the same way a flower unfolds from a seed. There is also the *developmental* pantheism of Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel viewed the events of history as the unfolding manifestations of Absolute Spirit. The *modal* pantheism of the seventeenth-century rationalist Spinoza argued that there is only one absolute substance in which all finite things are merely modes or moments. The *multilevel* pantheism is found in some forms of Hinduism, especially as expressed by Radhakrishnan. This view sees various levels of manifestation of God, with the highest level manifesting God as the Absolute One, and lower levels showing him in increasing multiplicity. *Permeational* pantheism is the view popularized by the *Star Wars* movies of George Lucas, in which the Force (*Tao*) penetrates all things. This belief is found in Zen Buddhism.

Basic Beliefs. There are other types of pantheism, but these lay out the worldview’s commonalities. Each of these types identifies God with the world, but they vary in the conception of this identity. All pantheists believe that God and the real world are one, but they differ as to how God and the world are united. The following are basic beliefs of a pantheistic worldview.

Nature of God. God and reality are ultimately impersonal. Personality, consciousness, and intellect are characteristics of lower manifestations of God, but they are not to be confused with God in his being. In God there is the absolute simplicity of one. There are no parts. Multiplicity may flow from it, but in and of itself it is simple, not multiple.

Nature of the Universe. Those pantheists who grant any kind of reality to the universe agree that it was created *ex deo*, “out of God,” not *ex nihilo*, “out of nothing,” as theism maintains. There is only one “Being” or Existent in the universe; everything else is an emanation or manifestation of it. Of course, absolute pantheists hold that the universe is

not even a manifestation. We are all simply part of an elaborate illusion. Creation simply does not exist. God exists. Nothing else.

God in Relation to the Universe. In contrast to theists, who view God as beyond and separate from the universe, pantheists believe that God and the universe are one. The theist grants some reality to the universe of multiplicity, while the pantheist does not. Those who deny the existence of the universe, of course, see no real relation between God and the universe. But all pantheists agree that whatever reality exists, it is God.

Miracles. An implication of pantheism is that miracles are impossible. For if all is God, and God is all, nothing exists apart from God that could be interrupted or broken into, which is what the nature of a miracle requires. Since pantheists agree that God is simple (has no parts) and is all there is, then God could not perform any miracles, for a miracle implies a God who is in some sense “outside” of the world in which he “intervenes.” The only sense in which God “intervenes” in the world is by a regular penetration of it in accordance with repeated higher spiritual laws, such as the law of *karma*. Therefore, the pantheistic worldview rules out miracles.

Human Beings. Pantheists either believe that the human as a distinct being is absolutely unreal (absolute pantheism) or else that humanity is real but far less real than God. The primary teaching of absolute pantheism is that humans must overcome their ignorance and realize that they *are* God. Those who put a distance between God and humanity teach a dualistic view of the person—a body and a soul. The body holds the human down, keeping him or her from uniting with God. So each must purge his or her body so the soul can be released to attain oneness with the Absolute One. For all pantheists, the chief goal or end of humanity is to unite with God.

Ethics. Pantheists usually strive to live moral lives and to encourage others to do so. Often their writings are filled with exhortations to use good judgment, to be devoted to truth, and to selflessly love others.

However, these exhortations usually apply to a lower level of spiritual attainment. Once a person has achieved union with God, he has no further concern with moral laws. Nonattachment or utter unconcern for one’s actions and their results are often taught as a prerequisite to achieving oneness with God. Since God is beyond good and evil, the person must transcend them to reach God. Morality is stressed as only a temporary concern, and underlying this is no absolute basis for right or wrong. Prabhavananda and Christopher Usherwood admit as much when they say, “Every action, under certain circumstances and for certain people, may be a stepping-stone to spiritual growth—if it is done in the spirit of nonattachment. All good and all evil is relative to the individual point of growth.... But, in the highest sense, there can be neither good nor evil” (*Bhagavad-Gita*, 140).

Thus, for the pantheist, ethical conduct is a means, not an end in itself. It is used only to help one attain a higher level of spirituality. Ultimately reality is neither good nor evil. As Prabhavananda puts it: “If we say, ‘I am good,’ or ‘I am bad,’ we are only talking the language of *maya* [the world of illusion]. ‘I am Brahman,’ is the only true statement regarding ourselves that any of us can make” (*Spiritual Heritage*, 203).

History and Human Destiny. Pantheists hardly ever talk about history except in modified forms of pantheism usually influenced by Western theism (as in Hegel). They are not concerned with it, for either it does not exist, or it is regarded as an aspect of the world of appearances, a thing to be transcended. History has no ultimate goal or end. Whenever it is granted a kind of reality, it is always (except in Hegel’s pantheism) considered to be cyclical. Like the wheel of *samsara*, history forever repeats itself. There are no unique

events or final events of history. There is no millennium, utopia, or eschaton.

As to individual human destiny, most pantheists, especially Eastern varieties, believe in reincarnation. After the soul leaves the body it enters into another mortal body to work off its *karma*. Eventually the goal is to leave the body and, in the case of most pantheists, merge with God. This is called *Nirvana*, and it means the loss of individuality. Ultimate salvation in this kind of pantheistic system is *from* one's individuality, not in it as Christians believe.

Evaluation

Contributions of Pantheism. Pantheism attempts to explain all of reality, rather than parts of it. If we are part of a universe, then any worldview must seek to embrace that unity. Pantheism does have a holistic view of things. Any comprehensive view of God must include God's immanent presence and activity in the world. A God who will not or cannot relate to humanity will not receive worship from many, nor will many think he deserves it. Pantheism rightly stresses that God is in the world and intimately related to it. He is not transcendently remote and totally removed from the universe.

Pantheism teaches that only God is absolute and necessary. Anything and everything else must be less than absolute and be utterly dependent upon God. Unless God exists, nothing else could exist either. Surely, it is necessary for a worldview to so relate everything to the ultimate.

Finally, the stress pantheism places on not ascribing limitations to God in our language about him is appropriate. If God is unlimited and transcendent, then all limitations must be negated from terms that are applied to him. Without this, verbal idolatry results. The Infinite cannot be encompassed by our finite conceptions.

Criticisms. Absolute pantheism is self-defeating. The absolute pantheist claims: "I am God." But God is the changeless Absolute. However, humanity goes through a process of change called enlightenment because he has this awareness. So how could people be God when people change but God does not?

Pantheists attempt to escape this criticism by allowing some reality to humanity, whether it be emanational, modal, or manifestational. But if we are really only modes of God, then why are we oblivious to it? H.P. Owen describes this as a "metaphysical amnesia" that pervades all our lives. If we are being deceived about the consciousness of our own individual existence, how do we know that the pantheist is not also being deceived in claiming to be conscious of reality as ultimately one?

In fact, if the world is really an illusion, how can we distinguish between reality and fantasy at all? Lao-tse puts the question well: "If, when I was asleep I was a man dreaming I was a butterfly, how do I know when I am awake I am not a butterfly dreaming I am a man?" (Guinness, 14). If what we continually perceive to be real is not, how could we ever distinguish between reality and fantasy? Maybe when we cross a busy street, with three lanes of traffic coming toward us, we should not worry, for it's all an illusion anyway. Indeed, should we even look when crossing the street, if we, the traffic, and the street do not really exist? If pantheists would live out their pantheism consistently, there would be no pantheists left.

(to be continued)