

Pantheism

By Douglas Groothuis, Ph.D.

Term Coined: 1705 by Irish deist John Toland, though the concept has existed for millennia.

Pantheistic Religions: Sikhism,¹ Hinduism,² Confucianism, Taoism,³ Zen Buddhism,⁴ amongst others

Popular Pantheists: Albert Einstein, Carl Sagan, Frederick Nietzsche, Baruch Spinoza, Carl Jung, Giordano Bruno, Erwin Schrödinger, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, David Henry Thoreau, Ludwig Van Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

INTRODUCTION

Whether found in religion or philosophy, pantheism is the worldview that claims that everything is divine. Put negatively, there is no distinction between the Creator and the creation, which is the doctrine taught by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Rather, God is all and all is God. Pantheism should be distinguished from its metaphysical cousin and alphabetical lookalike, *panentheism*. This is the belief that the world is divine, and God is *in all things*, but there is more to God than the world. The universe is an emanation of God, not God's creation. (Panentheists may or may not believe God is personal.)⁵ For pantheism, the concept of God is not that of a personal and infinite being, but, rather of an impersonal and infinite being. The word "theism" in pan-theism does not affirm distinct, living, personal, and relational being. As Francis Schaeffer put it, by

using the root theism a connotation of the personal is brought in, when by definition the impersonal is meant. In my discussions I never let anybody talk unthinkingly about pantheism. Somewhere along the way I try to make the point that it is not really pantheism, with its semantic illusion of personality, but *paneverythingism*.⁶

Pantheists often default to personal language about God when, in fact, these are murky metaphors with no personal referent. This is what Schaeffer called "semantic mysticism"—words are used to connote a meaning that the worldview cannot support. When Jesus instructs believers to pray to "Our Father in heaven...", he, too, is using a metaphor—since God is not a literal father—however, God is a personal and paternal being. Thus, the metaphor is apt and normative.

INFLUENCE OF PANTHEISM

Before providing an explain of basic pantheism, a look at its comparison to a biblical worldview, and its logical defects deserves consideration. One should consider its history in broad strokes. Perhaps no one has summarized the influence of pantheism, better than C. S. Lewis in *Miracles*:

Pantheism is congenial to our minds not because it is the final stage in a slow process of enlightenment, but because it is almost as old as we are. It may even be the most primitive of all religions. . . It is immemorial in India. The Greeks rose above it only at their peak, in the thought of Plato and Aristotle; their successors relapsed into the great Pantheistic system of the Stoics. Modern Europe escaped it only while she remained predominantly Christian; with Giordano Bruno and Spinoza it returned. With Hegel it became almost the agreed philosophy of highly educated people, while the more popular Pantheism of Wordsworth, Carlyle and Emerson conveyed the same doctrine to those on a slightly lower cultural level.⁷

Lewis further claimed that pantheism "is in fact the permanent natural bent of the human mind. . . It is the attitude into which the human mind automatically falls when left to itself." Writing in 1947, Lewis said that it "is nearly as strong today as it was in ancient India or in ancient Rome. Theosophy and the worship of the life-force are both forms of it."⁸

Lewis is wrong that pantheism "may be the oldest of all religions," since original monotheism has stronger support historically as well as receiving biblical endorsement (Romans 1:18-32).⁹

Nevertheless, he rightly observes the sway than pantheism has had over the unregenerate mind down through the ages.

Lewis wrote before the ascent of the counterculture from the 1960s and the New Age movement from the middle to later 1970s, but much the alternative spiritualities that emerged and began to flourish at this time and since drank heartily from the wells of pantheism, as I documented in *Unmasking the New Age*.¹⁰ Transcendental Meditation (TM), a secularized form of Hinduism, came to the West in the later 1960s and was popularized by the Beatles. Various human potential methods and movements aimed to find and free the “higher self” or “the God within” as did a raft of gurus, swamis, masters, adepts, and yogis, as well as mediums and channelers with messages from purportedly higher realms. The New Age is no longer an item of interest, because so many of its practices, such as yoga and divination, entered the mainstream of American society as did the philosophy of pantheism, which is advocated by the likes of Deepak Chopra,¹¹ Oprah Winfrey,¹² and many others. Marianne Williamson, a longtime devotee of the pantheistic teachings in *A Course in Miracles*,¹³ surprised many by campaigning for the Democratic nomination for President for 2020.¹⁴

DOCTRINE OF PANTHEISM

Pantheism comes in various kinds.¹⁵ The Dutch, Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1623-1677) is sometimes called a pantheist, but his version is rationalist and not mystical. He used complex deductive arguments to claim that there is one substance, which can be considered as either God or Nature. His thinking has been influential in several areas of philosophy, but his worldview has little popular appeal.¹⁶

The most commonly found version in the West is nondualistic or monistic pantheism, which is deeply rooted in Hinduism and in some forms of Buddhism, such as Zen. Pantheism sometimes creeps into Christianity, usually through the reports of some mystics, but, as one will see, it finds no home there philosophically or existentially. Consider Hindu pantheism, particularly that of the Advaita Vedanta school, which is monist or nondualistic.

Hinduism is a large tent with many divergent beliefs. However, all Hindus affirm the inspiration of the four Vedas as well as the karma-reincarnation system, maya, the caste system, some form of yoga,¹⁷ and the goal of spiritual liberation. Pantheistic Hinduism is found in an interpretation of a sacred scripture known as the Upanishads. This text anchors the doctrine; it is a dialogue between a father and a son contained in one of the twelve Upanishads. After the son asks his father to instruct him in wisdom, the father replies.

In the beginning was only Being, One without a second. Out of himself he brought forth the cosmos And entered into everything in it. There is nothing that does not come from him. Of everything he is the inmost Self. He is the truth; he is the Self supreme. You are that, Shvetaketu; you are that.¹⁸

First, the original Being is “One without a second.” The idea of oneness or nondualism is crucial to this passage and to Advaita Vedanta Hinduism. Second, the cosmos emanates from this Being and he is everything’s inmost Self or essence. Third, Shvetaketu is *identified* with the Self Supreme. The father is not saying that his son is part of this Being or that part of the son is one with this Being. Rather, the Self supreme is one with the son and with everything else. The text refers to Being and Self supreme as “himself,” but “itself,” is probably a better description.

These statements, and others like them, have traditionally been interpreted by saying that “Atman is Brahma,” although those words do not appear in the quotation above. This indicates that the self or individual (the Atman) is really one the universal or supreme Self (Brahman).¹⁹ Consider images such as the wave being one with the ocean. If we take the wave to be separate from the ocean, we misidentify it, and are lost in the world of maya or illusion.

In his foreword to his translation to *The Upanishads*, Eknath Easwaran writes.

This tremendous equation— “the Self is Brahman” —is the central discovery of the Upanishads. Its most famous formulation is one of the mahavakyas or “great formulae”: Tat tvam asi, “You are That.” “That” is the characteristic way the Upanishads point to a Reality that cannot be described; and “you,” of course, is not the petty, finite personality, but that pure consciousness “which makes the eye see and the mind think”: the Self.²⁰

For pantheism, spiritual liberation is found through realizing oneness with Brahman through yoga. The Self, or the God within, is supposedly universal and comprehensive, but also elusive, since so many think their “finite personality” is real objectively. Until final liberation is achieved, the Atman is consigned to the wheel of reincarnation (or samsara) that is regulated by the law of karma.

PROBLEMS IN PANTHEISM

Panthicism is a competing worldview to biblical teaching and presents logical inconsistencies that makes it inimical to human flourishing.

First, an infinite and impersonal God cannot explain the intelligent design of the universe as a whole nor of biology. There must be a Mind behind the cosmos that explains its complexity, improbability, and beauty. An impersonal something is not up to the job. The increasing strength of the design argument for a personal God increasingly weakens the idea of an impersonal god as the supreme reality.²¹

Second, an infinite and impersonal God can neither explain objective morality nor be the source of moral duty. For pantheism, good and evil are illusions of the unenlightened mind. The false deity is beyond personality and thus morality. But if so, morality loses its grounding and there is no reason to seek goodness and shun evil. No healthy relationship and no civil polity could be based on such an account of reality. But that is what pantheism offers.

Third, an infinite and impersonal God cannot provide the loving and truth-based relationship that humans crave. Human loves will fail or love will be based on untruths about the lover or the loved or both. But an impersonal being—even if taken to be infinite—lacks the quintessential element for a truthful and loving relationship—a personality that values veracity and seeks to love.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The Bible begins with a ringing metaphysical declaration that contradicts any pantheistic account of God, the world, or human beings. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Similarly, the Gospel of John begins with these memorable words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1-3).

Before created human beings, Genesis One tells us in verses 10, 12, 18, 21, and 25 that “And God saw that it was good.” On day six, God did something different. God stated, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures...” (Genesis 1:26).

God says to Himself (perhaps a reference to the Trinity) that He will make a new kind of creature, fashioned in His own image and likeness, and they will procreate and have a unique jurisdiction over the rest of creation. Then “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.”

Genesis and John teach that the Creator is metaphysically distinct from His creation. There is the Maker and the made, the Creator and the creation. This is reason to worship God: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (Revelation 4:11).

Human beings, unlike the rest of the creation, are made in God’s image. We thus reflect and represent God in the world and are given the gifts of personality (creativity, rationality, relationality) to accomplish this under God (Psalm 8). Human beings are more like God than any other creature, but are still infinitely short of being God since we lack self-existence (Acts 17:25), omniscience (Psalm 139:1-6), omnipresence (Psalm 139:7-12), and omnipotence (Genesis 18:14; Jeremiah 32:17). Nor are we incorruptible and eternally good, as is God (Malachi 3:6; Mark 10:18).

In Scripture, when mere mortals claim divine prerogatives, they are strictly judged as absurd imposters. The prophet Ezekiel declared this to the King of Tyre.

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: “In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.’ But you are a mere mortal and not a god...”’ (Ezekiel 28:2) Therefore, this God-imposer is judged. “You will die the death of the uncircumcised at the hands of foreigners. I have spoken, declares the Sovereign Lord” (Ezekiel 28:10; see also Isaiah 14:12-27; Acts 12:21-24).

To review the metaphysics: God is infinite (unlimited and perfect) and personal. As a Trinity, God is intrapersonal as well as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Humans are finite (limited and imperfect) and personal. In other words, Atman is not Brahma. The self is not the supreme reality.

However, being finite and person is not the human problem. That comes from sin, which is our infraction of God’s law and our rebellion against Him, which results in our alienation from God and

in our need for His provision of salvation through the matchless achievements of Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Unlike the teachings of pantheism, which bid one to find “the God within,” Christianity declares that the forgiveness of sins and eternal life are found outside of ourselves—in Jesus Christ. As the apostle John wrote of Jesus:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God (John 1:12-13).

Pantheistic interpretations of Jesus rob Him of His unique deity and claim that He was one of many gurus, avatars, or masters, all of whom taught us to find the divine within the self. But Jesus came preaching repentance and need for faith in Him in order to be born again, to avoid hell, and to experience eternal life (Matthew 4:11; John 3:16-18; 8:28). It is through His death and resurrection that we find a hope that does not disappoint us (Romans 5:5). Looking for the divine within will always disappoint us, since it does not exist!

In 1988, I spoke briefly on a live Seattle TV news program that had a short segment on the New Age worldview. My remarks followed comments by local New Age enthusiast, who spoke much of love in a vague way. I responded, “The New Age speaks much of love, but it believes in an impersonal god who cannot love. The wind cannot love you. The waves cannot love you. Christianity teaches that God loves us enough to die on the cross of for us. That’s real love, that’s bloody love, and the New Age knows nothing of it.”

God knows the truth of who we are: We are sinners. But his love extends to us through the work of Jesus Christ: our Savior. He came to set us right with God. As the apostle Paul wrote:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8)..

That is real love, and pantheism knows nothing of it. But let us all embrace the cross-shaped love of God found in Christ alone.

Notes

- 1 A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Brady Blevins, “Sikhism,” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2022). A complete collection of Profiles (over 600 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at: <https://www.watchman.org/Sikh.pdf>
- 2 Fred Smith, “Hinduism,” <https://www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileHinduism.pdf>
- 3 Douglas Groothuis, “Daoism,” http://www.watchman.org/Daoism_Profile.pdf
- 4 Watchman Fellowship has profiles covering various views of Buddhism that follow a pantheistic ideology. For more information see: Nichiren Shoshu/Soka Gakkai Buddhism (<https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/nichirenprofile.pdf>), Tibetan Buddhism (<https://www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileTibetanBuddhism.pdf>), Zen Buddhism (<https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/zenprofile.pdf>)
- 5 See Douglas Groothuis, “Pantheism,” *The Dictionary of Christianity and Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).
- 6 Schaeffer, Francis. *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Kindle Edition; emphasis added.
- 7 Lewis, C.S., *Miracles*, London & Glasgow: Collins/Fontana 1947, p. 373.
- 8 All quotes from Lewis, C. S. *Miracles* (Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis) (pp. 131-133). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.
- 9 See Douglas Groothuis, “Original Monotheism,” *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2022). In more detail, Winfried Corduan, *In the Beginning God* (Broadman, Holman, 2013).
- 10 Douglas Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986); see also James W. Sire, “A Separate Universe: The New Age—Spirituality Without Religion,” *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*, 6th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).
- 11 Jason Barker, “Deepak Chopra,” <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/chopraprofile.pdf>
- 12 Bob Waldrep, “Oprah Winfrey,” <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/oprahprofile.pdf>
- 13 Rick Branch, “A Course in Miracles,” <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/courseinmiraclesprofile.pdf>
- 14 See Douglas Groothuis, “What is This Thing Called Love? Marianne Williamson Runs for President,” *Juicy Ecumenism* (September 13, 2019), <https://juicyecumenism.com/2019/09/13/marianne-williamson>.
- 15 On the various kinds of pantheism, see David K. Clark and Norman Geisler, *Apologetics in the New Age: A Christian Critique of Pantheism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004).
- 16 See Roger Scruton: *Spinoza: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 17 Robert Velarde, “Yoga,” <https://www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileYoga.pdf>
- 18 Easwaran, Eknath. *The Upanishads* (Easwaran’s Classics of Indian Spirituality) (p. 133). Nilgiri Press. Kindle Edition.
- 19 Atman can also mean the universal Self, but “Atman is Brahman” is a common way of saying that small self is really the big Self.
- 20 Easwaran, Eknath. *The Upanishads* (Easwaran’s Classics of Indian Spirituality) (pp. 38-39). Nilgiri Press. Kindle Edition.
- 21 See Groothuis, “The Design Argument: Cosmic Fine-Tuning,” “The Argument from Beauty,” and “Evidence of Intelligent Design,” in *Christian Apologetics*.



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