

Title: There Are Pantheists Among Us. Might You Be One?

There are probably more grass-roots pantheists than Protestants or theists, according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Who are they? Prominent philosophers, theologians, writers, and artists from ancient Greece to the present have espoused a worldview that is best described as pantheism: the belief that the universe, with all its existing laws and properties, is an interconnected whole that we can rightly consider sacred. Bob Weekley will explore this history which, in the light of modern science, has taken on new relevance and attracted a new generation.

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From the earliest evidence of homo sapiens we can see evidence of the religious impulse. Every time paleontologists unearth another layer of history, we learn again that our most ancient ancestors had a preoccupation with the supernatural. Rituals of human burial with their valued possessions for use in some afterlife, rituals to make sacrifices of living things in order to obtain favors from gods, rituals to ward off evil by supernatural spirits, ... we can cite innumerable religious practices that sprang up and persisted in all cultures.

Some scientists believe that this religious impulse is imbedded in the architecture of our brain. People have a tendency to believe in a god or gods --

1. Because we are evolutionarily adapted to believe in what psychologists call an agent, something outside ourselves that could affect us. For example, if there is a ripple in the tall grass, humans who see it as possibly an evil lion would have a better survival rate than those who assume it is the wind.
2. Because we are evolutionarily adapted to create narratives and explanations. Certain marks in the sand could mean a deer -- good for dinner -- passed this way.
3. Because we are evolutionarily adapted, as social animals, to understand that other people have minds. We cannot see what these invisible minds are thinking or planning, but we would be wise to anticipate whether they are friendly or angry. These are invisible forces.

Many of us experience this sense of the supernatural, or at least a curiosity about the supernatural. Look at the popularity of horror movies that rely on supernatural beings, whether vampires, extra-terrestrial aliens, ghosts, or a rebirth of satanic creatures. I used to visit my cousin on the farm and as 8-year old boys we would sleep out under the Colorado stars. We had heard that the Bible warns that no one can see the face of God and live. So we would watch the rolling clouds on a moonlit night looking for God, hoping just to get a quick look at his face, then turn away. A few times we thought we saw him but we kept it to ourselves in case the word got back to God and he would kill us.

I love reading Homer and Virgil, their vivid accounts of human struggle despite the constant intervention of the various gods to help or hinder, to play with people as a cat plays with a mouse. But in the western world as early as the 6th century BCE, a philosophy developed in Greece that rejected mythological and supernatural

explanations. Long before the modern age of science, some started viewing the world through a lens of rationality. These early rationalists began to reject the supernatural projections of human-like gods, living in the sky, interacting with human affairs. They began to see the universe as one interconnected whole, and rather than being manipulated by an outside God, or gods, the whole interconnected process was divine. God was the process.

We now call this view pantheism, and those who hold it are pantheists. My talk today was inspired by a wonderful little book, *Standing In the Light: My Life As a Pantheist*, by Sharman Apt Russell. She does not claim to be a philosopher, but a naturalist writer. The religion she practices, sporadically, is Quaker. I have borrowed many of her explanations in this talk, and I will read some of her views to you later. She defines pantheism as “the belief that the universe, with all its existing laws and properties, is an interconnected whole that we can rightly call sacred.”

Is pantheism just one of the many “isms” like Catholicism, Methodism, Mormonism, paganism, Unitarian Universalism, or Atheism? No, pantheism is not an offshoot of anything but stands on its own. It is not an organization but a viewpoint. It can be aligned with some other “isms;” for example, there are Christian pantheists, Buddhist pantheists, and Hindu pantheists,.

One of the first to write of these pantheistic views was Thales (THAY lez), a Greek from Miletus born in the 6th century BCE. Thales is known as the world’s first scientist, a man who studied the natural world in a systematic way. He concluded that the whole universe was made of some single, underlying substance, material -- yet somehow divine. Thales and his philosophic successors from Miletus first suggested the principle of evolution, speculating that animal life originated in moist matter heated by the sun -- a starkly heretical view from the supernatural explanations of original heavenly fathers and mothers that dominated most cultures. It would be more than 20 centuries before their views began to be validated by our modern scientific observations.

Another Greek was from Ephesus: Heraclitus. He took this philosophy a step further. Heraclitus concluded

- (1) that all things are in a constant state of change, and
- (2) that all things are one, they are all made of the same thing.

These ideas would be scoffed at for many centuries. The universe was seen to be constant, unchanging, and made of of distinct things. But Heraclitus’ ancient wisdom has been vindicated as we have come to understand that everything is in constant movement, from the innards of the atom to the stars and galaxies. And, we are discovering that the world is made of the same thing -- quantum energy, energetic waves, vibrations, that can have their state as energy or material. Heraclitus’ understanding of the universe became a way to think of God, not as a human-like king on a cloud but as this vast universe of interconnectedness of which we are all a part. We have learned that we literally are made of stardust; the organic material of which we are constituted arrived on the earth from the explosions of supernovas, blown across the vastness of space. We literally ARE connected to the whole universe. More on this later.

After Heraclitus, other Greek schools of philosophers elaborated variants on this pantheistic theme. The Epicureans and the Stoics focused their philosophy on the natural rather than the supernatural world. They rejected Plato's concept that there are two worlds, the material and the immaterial. They came to believe that matter was interpenetrated with energy that followed the laws of the universe and could be described as God. Later the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, a confirmed follower of the Stoic philosophy, wrote that he, also, regarded the universe as a living organism; all its parts formed a divine whole. "Everything is interwoven, and the web is holy" he wrote.

Many centuries later, as Europe began to emerge from the dark ages of repression of knowledge and research, this pantheistic theme was picked up by a studious monk by the name of Giordano Bruno. He came to admire some of the early Egyptian cults who worshiped nature, seeing God in all things. He was excommunicated for his heretical ideas and fled to Switzerland where his views likewise offended the Calvinists. They threw him in jail. Later he moved to Germany, England, and other countries where he lectured and wrote on his philosophy about the universe as a divine unity. Finally, back in Italy, he was tortured and burned at the stake by the Roman Inquisition.

The philosopher who had the greatest impact articulating pantheist views, although the word "Pantheism" was not yet coined, was Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza, a Dutch Jew, was imbued with the spirit of inquiry. He was eventually excommunicated and cursed from his Jewish community as he also would be condemned later by the Christian community. Spinoza was strongly influenced by the newly formed Quakerism of the time -- looking inward for spiritual answers rather than accepting dogma. He believed that God is in all things and in each of us. No priest is required. Spinoza's major work was a tome called *Ethics* which had a profound effect on later writers and generations. He explained God as an infinite something, identical with nature. When he set aside his relationship with a personal God, he replaced that with a relationship to everything in the world -- a web of all existence. Some three centuries later Albert Einstein, in his rejection of conventional theism, would declare "I believe in Spinoza's God."

Soon the romantic poets and later philosophers were reading Spinoza's *Ethics*. Goethe wrote that Spinoza had affected his entire way of thinking. The poet William Blake "was seeing eternity in a grain of sand and infinity in a wildflower." The philosopher Hegel wrote that "What God creates, he himself is." Schelling wrote that "Nature is visible Spirit; spirit is invisible Nature." William Wordsworth, though not self-declared as such, was considered a pantheist. Listen to his words.

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels

All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things. Therefore, am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth ...

Closer to home we often quote William Cullen Bryant's thoroughly pantheistic poem, "Thanatopsis," especially at funerals. It begins "To him, who in the love of Nature, holds communion with her visible forms." and it closes with "Approach thy grave as one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams."

In the Unitarian tradition we have the Transcendentalists of the 19th century. The Transcendentalists rejected the idea of a personal God, a guy you talk to. But they held that there is something in us that transcends matter. In this sense they opposed both established religion and cold, scientific rationalism.

- Henry David Thoreau wrote, "I was born to be a pantheist--if that be the name of me."
- Ralph Waldo Emerson emphasized spirit over matter. He acknowledged the importance of the material world but went on to affirm something more, a "higher nature... . Everything is God, and God is consciousness."
- Another Unitarian transcendentalist and pantheist whose bicentennial birthday we will be celebrating in 2010 is Margaret Fuller, the early feminist.

Walt Whitman stated his pantheism most clearly:

And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I, who am curious about each, am not curious about God;
(No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God, and about death.)

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least.
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then;
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass;

I find letters from God dropt in the street--and every one is sign'd by God's name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.

Other more recent, writers, scholars, and artists have shared their pantheistic outlook.

Carl Jung -- expressed his awareness of God as a "transpersonal force whose name and metaphor varies"

D.H. Lawrence wrote about saving his soul by accomplishing a pure relationship with people, animals, trees, flowers, the earth, the sun, the stars, the moon. He

wrote of "...the subtle perfected relation between me and my whole circumbient universe."

The poet Robinson Jeffers wrote: "I believe that the universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, therefore parts of one organic whole. ... The whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled to love it and to think of it as divine."

Frank Lloyd Wright wrote: "I believe in God, only I spell it Nature."

Margaret Atwood wrote: "God is not the voice in the whirlwind; God is the whirlwind."

Pantheism is not a western invention. The eastern religions were infused with a pantheistic outlook long before the western world.

- The Tao te Ching is "one of the most articulated and thoroughly pantheistic positions there is," according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- The great Tao flows everywhere, infinite and eternal. It underlies and sustains all things. It is impersonal, nameless, and beyond words."
- Buddhism also sees the world as an interconnected whole.
- Hinduism embodies pantheistic concepts. Brahma, the creator, had transformed himself into all things.

The Hebrew and Christian sacred texts include pantheistic references woven into the Old Testament and the New Testament that indicate at least some acknowledgement of pantheism.

- In Psalms 90: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations."
- Paul, the Evangelist, was definitely not a pantheist. But when he was in Athens explaining Christianity to pantheists -- the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers -- he said, "God...is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being,. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" Acts 17.
- Again, in Romans 1:20, Paul wrote "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities... have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

When we bring the pantheistic outlook into the world of science we see striking resonances.

In Karen Armstrong's latest book, *The Case for God*, she analyzes the history of science and religion. Symbolism was essential to premodern religion, because it was only possible to speak about the ultimate reality -- God, Tao, Brahman --in metaphor and allegory. Jews and Christians both developed innovative and figurative methods of reading the Bible, and every statement of the Quran is called a parable. St. Augustine, a major authority for both Catholics and Protestants, insisted that if a biblical text contradicted reputable science, it must then be interpreted allegorically. This remained standard practice in the West until the 17th century. In the ancient world the great stories of cosmology were not regarded as factual but were primarily therapeutic. Stories were needed to give comfort, and to give meaning to the suffering in the world.

But in the 17th century the development of modern science led to an attempt to show that science proved the existence of God. Sir Isaac Newton and others discovered and elaborated the universal laws that govern bodies in motion, the exchange of energy, and in general, the day-to-day workings of our world. Newton claimed that his cosmic system “proved beyond doubt the existence of an intelligent, omniscient, and omnipotent creator who was obviously ‘very well skilled in Mechanics and Geometry.’”

But as we moved toward and into the 20th century it became clear that Newton’s laws were approximations, valid only under certain conditions. Rather than providing proof of the existence of God, science, under the influence of Darwin, Einstein, and others, established the conclusion that a creator God was unnecessary. As we acquired the technology to look out into the vast universe, back to the first moments after the big bang, we didn’t see God any longer -- at least not the God Newton thought he had proven.

In quantum theory, we now have a vision of the universe as one dynamic network, a pattern in which the parts always change and are always interconnected... all the parts make up a cosmic Unity or Oneness -- what the physicists call the quantum field. Quantum theory forces us to see the universe not as a collection of physical objects, but rather as a complex web of relations between the various parts of a constantly changing, unified whole. Like the Buddha's interdependence. Or, here we are back to that perceptive Greek, Heraclitus, from four centuries BCE: “All things are one, and all things are in a constant state of change.”

It gets even weirder, or more wondrous, depending on your point of view. It has been observed that subatomic particles, removed from each other by great distance, communicate instantaneously with each other -- faster than the speed of light. The only plausible explanation is that although they are far apart they are still a part of the same thing -- here we go again -- the “oneness” of everything. The implication is that all things in the universe are infinitely interconnected.

Where does this leave God? For pantheists, it leaves God right where they have come to look, woven into every aspect of existence, all around, giving life and light, interconnected with us and with the whole web of all existence. Is such a God too dry, too cerebral? Is it not better to have a God who looks like an awesome, bearded man who does things for us if we beg and are good? Pantheists wouldn’t say so.

In closing I would like to read some lines by Sharman Russell and you can feel her sense of joy and wonder in the presence of the God she knows.

(While walking on Sacaton Mesa, New Mexico) I feel what the transcendentalists might have called a correspondence. This beauty is not a doorway into something better. This beauty is my other half. This sky, this majesty, is my other self. I feel the yearning to reunite, join with the sky. In some way we reflect each other. I am transparent, and the clouds pass through me. I have felt this before on Sacaton Mesa, and I am careful now not to get too excited or try to hold onto the moment with words. The Quaker

tradition of silence works best. There is something under the words. There is something calm and whole under the words. (pp. 181-182)

Bob Weekley
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