

An Analysis of the Pantheistic Worldview Using Smart's Six Dimensions

Introduction

The term 'pantheism' is a relatively modern one that describes not an orthodox religious discipline, but rather a worldview or philosophical view within a religious context.¹ Without going into the lengthy and often contested details of pantheism, it can generally be described as the view that God and the cosmos are identical.² A common philosophical taxonomy of pantheism begins with an initial distinction between an 'atheistic pantheism', and a 'theistic pantheism'. Atheistic pantheism is a position that begins with the cosmos (alternately: nature, the universe, observable reality, etc.) and posits that it is synonymous with whatever can be conceived of as divine. In this view, there are no other attributes of a god or gods that exist outside of the cosmos. Theistic pantheism, on the other hand, generally begins with a concept of God and then includes the cosmos within God's being. While there are further arguments to be had in theistic pantheism about whether God is made of those parts or simply pervades those parts, it generally holds the position that God has divine attributes outside of the cosmos – generally a divine intellect or will.³ For the purposes of this paper, such established classifications will be set aside in favor of an analysis based on Smart's six dimensional approach.⁴ Further, an additional dimension of 'spiritual purpose' will be explored in the context of Smart's analytic framework.

¹ Mander, William, "Pantheism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/pantheism/>>.

² Ibid.

³ Adams, R. (2014). *Pantheism*. Lecture. Rutgers University.

⁴ Smart, N. (2000). *Worldviews* (3rd ed.). Up Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Smart's Six Dimensions

Rather than focus on the analysis of one or more religions or worldviews, themselves, Ninian Smart's work has instead concentrated on the theoretical aspect of *how* to study religion.⁵ Smart saw the inherent bias within the still-evolving study of religion in the Western world, and attempted to mitigate this by introducing a multidisciplinary and secular approach to the field. For example the earlier approach, theology, began with and remained within the Christian worldview. Following that, the discipline of comparative religion tended to see world religions as an evolutionary process with animism and polytheism at the primitive end and Christianity and the other monotheisms as a natural culmination. Smart, however, proposed an approach that emphasized objectivity through "structured empathy" – the structure or framework providing a dispassionate tool for analysis, leading to an empathy or understanding of the worldview under scrutiny.⁶ Smart's framework or structure is his six dimensional approach, which looks at religions in light of their: 1) philosophy and doctrine, 2) myth and narrative, 3) ethics and law, 4) ritual and practice, 5) experiential and emotional component, and 6) social and organizational aspect.⁷

The Philosophy and Doctrine of Pantheism

Pantheism is interesting as a worldview in that, like Marxism, it is not a religion per se, but like Hinduism it does seem concerned with the nature of the relationship between the human being and the divine reality. Also like Marxism, its foundational thoughts are found primarily in philosophical writings – most notably Baruch Spinoza's *Ethica*, published in 1677.

⁵ Rennie, B. (1999) The View of the Invisible World, Ninian Smart's Analysis of the Dimensions of Religion and of Religious Experience. *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* 63, Volume 28, Number 3. September.

⁶ Smart, N. (2000). *Worldviews* (3rd ed.). Up Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall. pp.11-19.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 8

In it, Spinoza devises a very clever kind of philosophical bait-and-switch in which he first lays out a proof that agrees with the contemporary theology of the day, that God does indeed exist. This God (essentially the Judeo-Christian God) included both the attributes of *infinite* and *transcendent* by popular definition. However, Spinoza goes on to argue that if God is infinite then He must necessarily incorporate all things into His being, to include the finite – namely the cosmos. Therefore, he concluded, that God cannot be transcendent, or standing apart from the cosmos, if He also includes the cosmos in his being. In this view, saying that the cosmos is separate from God, or that God somehow transcends it, ascribes a boundary to God – who is supposed to be infinite, without boundaries.⁸ While Spinoza never used the word ‘pantheism’, which wasn’t a moniker until at least 1705,⁹ *Ethica* has become the foundation of most arguments for pantheism in the modern West.

Later thinkers contributed to the philosophical body of pantheistic thought, especially during the so-called ‘pantheism controversy’ during the 1780’s involving German philosophers like Jacobi, Lessing, and Mendelssohn.¹⁰ Predating these modern philosophical discussions of pantheism are other works, some religious, that contain at least some measure of thought that may be rightly regarded as pantheistic. For example, the Bhagavad Gita repeatedly describes the changeless, indestructible divine reality as being ‘all-pervasive’:

“That Reality which pervades the universe is indestructible.”¹¹

“Know therefore that the Brahman, the all-pervading, is dwelling forever within this ritual.”¹²

⁸ Spinoza, B. ., Curley, E. M., & Spinoza, B. . (1994). A Spinoza reader: The Ethics and other works. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

⁹ Ibid. Mander.

¹⁰ Ibid. Adams.

¹¹ Prabhavananda, S. (2002). Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God. New York, NY: New American Library. p. 36.

¹² Ibid. 46.

“His eye in all things sees only Brahman.”¹³

While this expression of pantheism is explicit throughout the Bhagavad Gita, a similarly vivid description can sometimes be found unexpectedly in foundational Christian exegeses, such as in the writings of Saint Augustine and Saint Bernard:

“God is everywhere”, “is present everywhere”, “is diffused everywhere”, “is diffused through all things”, “fills all things”.¹⁴

“All things are in Him, so is He in all things.”¹⁵

It is these kinds of early Christian pantheistic thoughts that stand in stark contrast to many Bible verses that seem to clearly describe a God that is distinct and separate from His creation. For example:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”¹⁶

However, the Bible contains verses that seemingly define God as simultaneously separate from and synonymous with creation:

“For His invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”¹⁷

It is this tension within some religious doctrine, itself, that provides raw material for more modern arguments such as those found in Spinoza’s *Ethica*.

The Myth and Narrative of Pantheism

For pantheism in the West (being primarily a philosophical position within and about religious traditions) related myths and legends are essentially nonexistent. However in the East, a ready example of pantheistic mythology can be found in Sikhism. Central to Sikhism is

¹³ Ibid. 67.

¹⁴ Grabowski, S. St. Augustine and the Presence of God. Catholic University of America. Pp. 340-341.

¹⁵ Ibid. 352.

¹⁶ Genesis 1:1

¹⁷ Romans 1:20

a series of mythical stories, or *sakhis*, about the life of the religion's founder, Guru Nanak. Throughout, Guru Nanak describes a monotheistic god that is, much like the Christian God of the Bible, both transcendent and "everywhere present".¹⁸ In this way, Sikhism arrives at the pantheistic view that the world itself follows a kind of divine order whose understanding is synonymous with the understanding of God, a concept they call *hukam*.¹⁹ This *hukam* closely resembles the Tao of Chinese philosophy, itself containing much pantheistic thought. For example, Chuang Tzu writes in one of Taoism's founding documents (named after him):

*"Tung-kuo Tzu asked Chuang Tzu "Where is the Tao?"
'It is everywhere,' replied Chuang Tzu.
Tung-kuo Tzu said "You must be more specific."
"It is in the ant" said Chuang Tzu.
"Why go down so low?"
"It is in the weeds."
"Why even lower?"
"It is in a potsherd."
"Why still lower?"
"It is in the excrement and urine," said Chuang Tzu.*²⁰

In the West, a reasonable substitute for myth could be said to reside in art and literature. In this context Walt Whitman touches on the pantheistic, even echoing the Sikh idea of *hukam* in "Song of Myself" (Section 3): "The unseen is proven by the seen". Even in the quite recent *Star Wars* franchise one might find a kind of pantheism in the concept of 'the Force'. Its creator, George Lucas, said, "I put the Force into the movie in order to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people – more a belief in God rather than a belief in any particular religious system."²¹ That Jediism is considered by some to be a budding religious movement²² is indicative of the ongoing development of pantheistic mythology.

¹⁸ Ferguson, J. (1976). *Encyclopedia of Mysticism and Mystery Religions*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company. pp. 129.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ <https://www.pantheism.net/paul/history/chuang-tzu.htm>

²¹ <https://probe.org/the-worldview-of-star-wars/>

²² <https://www.templeofthejediorder.org/faq>

Pantheistic Ethics and Law

Pantheism may at first glance seem to lend itself quite naturally to an ethical outlook steeped in altruism and sympathy. This seems reasonable, as it may have been to Schopenhauer and more recently in the context of modern environmental movements, that “Pantheism provides a theological foundation for deep ecology”.²³ Because all of reality is divine, the argument goes, it naturally follows that all things should be treated with reverence and respect. Running as far contrary to this position as possible, the Bhagavad Gita’s entire narrative, not just *despite* its pantheistic undertones but *because* of them, is about Krishna convincing Arjuna that it is sinful to abstain from his duty to kill his relatives in combat. Whereas in the environmental context all life is sacred due to its divinity, the Bhagavad Gita posits that since everything is ultimately divine it is therefore indestructible in the grand scheme of things. Nowhere does the Bhagavad Gita more clearly state this than when Krishna tells Arjuna:

*“He Who dwells within all living bodies remains forever indestructible. Therefore you should never mourn for anyone...you ought not to hesitate; for, to a warrior, there is nothing nobler than a righteous war.”*²⁴

Luckily, it does not seem to be the cultural imperative of India or any other country to develop this viewpoint into a significant body of secular law. It may turn out that the first case, the one fueled by modern environmental and climate concerns, has the highest probability of influencing future regulations. In either case it seems that pantheism, by removing the external agency of God, places the responsibility to act ethically (no matter what those ethics are)

²³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2008.00904.x>

²⁴ Prabhavananda, S. (2002). *Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God*. New York, NY: New American Library. p. 38.

squarely in the lap of human beings. Therefore, it could be argued that *humanism* is the fundamental ethic resulting from pantheism.

Ritual and Practice in Pantheism

Pantheism does not necessarily possess a set of distinct rituals, of the kind that involve things like sacraments, ceremonies, incantations, etc. Rather, it has some distinct perceptions about rituals that make them important tools for understanding pantheism, itself. First, ritual can be embraced as a way to demonstrate the all-pervasiveness of God. Next, just as all creation can be thought of as sacred, all of one's life might be thought of as ritual. Finally, ritual can be rejected (especially in atheistic pantheism) as an unnecessary trapping of temporal religion. There is much overlap between these three ideas.

In the first case, the Bhagavad Gita again provides us an example. In it, Krishna uses the act of ritual, itself, to illustrate the all-pervasive nature of divinity:

“Brahman is the ritual,
Brahman is the offering,
Brahman is he who offers
To the fire that is Brahman.”²⁵

Here, Krishna refers to an earlier passage in the Bhagavad Gita in which he alludes to the second use of ritual in pantheism, where he exhorts Arjuna to “perform every action sacramentally”.²⁶ In this way, Arjuna's every thought and action becomes a sacrament in a lifelong ritual. Charles Eastman says this in nearly the same words about Native American spirituality: “...our whole life is prayer because every act of our life is, in a very real sense, a

²⁵ Prabhavananda, S. (2002). *Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God*. New York, NY: New American Library. p. 53.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 45.

religious act”.²⁷ The French philosopher and ethnologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl called this dissolution of boundaries between the self and the divine ‘mystical participation’.²⁸

Marx famously rejected religion altogether, and one would suppose its rituals as well insofar as they are some of “...the imaginary flowers on the chain [of religion] ...so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.”²⁹ Disputes about Marx’s actual religious views aside, this sentiment parallels a pantheistic viewpoint that ritual and religious trappings stand in the way of the actual, sacred experience that is right in front of us. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states, “Worship and prayer are not suitable to pantheism” because they “are basically directed at ... a being with personal characteristics separate and superior to oneself.”

The Experiential and Emotional Component of Pantheism

In a way, an individual’s pantheism may begin with the emotional and experiential dimension. Contrary to what some may believe, a pantheist or atheist worldview need not necessarily arise in a person due to rejection of or distaste for some previously held theistic view. Possibly the most famous self-professed pantheist, Albert Einstein received a secular upbringing from his parents and in 1930 described his concept of a “cosmic religious feeling” in the face of the “sublimity and marvelous order” of the universe.³⁰ For the previously non-religious a sudden mystical experience, the realization of the interconnectedness of all things within a vast and profoundly mysterious universe, need not necessarily lead to an acceptance of Allah, Yahweh, or Shiva. It could, rather, be the beginning of a journey into the development

²⁷ Eastman, C. (1911). *The Soul of an Indian* (2001 ed.). Novato, CA: New World Library. p. 13.

²⁸ Smart, N. (2000). *Worldviews* (3rd ed.). Up Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall. p. 124.

²⁹ Marx, K. (1844). Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right.

³⁰ Einstein, Albert (1930). "Religion and Science," *New York Times Magazine* (Nov. 9): 3-4.

of a discreet pantheistic worldview. This same kind of awe at the human-cosmos unity was expressed by Carl Sagan when he wrote, “The cosmos is also within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.”³¹ Such an idea, when fully taken onboard by the individual, can be the starting point of the pantheistic experience.

Columnist David Brooks concludes, “...people are equipped to experience the sacred, to have moments of elevated experience when they transcend boundaries and overflow with love.”³² Noted author and atheist Christopher Hitchens asserts that such experiences are not the sole property of the religious: “...we have a need for, what I would call, ‘the transcendent’ or ‘the numinous’ or even ‘the ecstatic’ that comes out in love and music, poetry, and landscape.”³³ It is this sense of the sublime, continuous commune with nature that the pantheist often reports. For example, Emily Dickinson, weighing her Calvinist views against these kinds of experiences, wrote: “The world allured me & in an unguarded moment I listened to her siren voice. From that moment I seemed to lose interest in heavenly things.”³⁴ Widely regarded as a pantheist, Walt Whitman recorded his experience as such:

*“To me, every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every inch of space is a miracle,
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same,
Every cubic foot of the interior swarms with the same;
Every spear of grass—the frames, limbs, organs,
of men and women, and all that concerns them,
All these to me are unspeakably perfect miracles.”³⁵*

³¹ Sagan, C., Druyan, A., Soter, S., Malone, A., Weidlinger, T., Haines-Stiles, G., Kennard, D., ... Polytel International. (2000). *Cosmos: A personal voyage*. Studio City, CA: Cosmos Studios.

³² <https://www.theatlantic.com/personal/archive/2008/05/our-pantheist-future/54074/>

³³ <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/articles/2009/12/17/christopher-hitchens>

³⁴ Barnstone, A. (2006). *Changing Rapture: Emily Dickinson's Poetic Development*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

³⁵ <https://poets.org/poem/miracles>

Social and Organizational Aspects of Pantheism

Pantheism has no formal church or other organization. Not having been a truly independent movement, historically it has not had the opportunity to directly shape a particular society in what one might call a measurable way. Being more of a philosophical worldview rather than a religion, but still underpinning some religious ideas, pantheism has no priestly class, no congregations, and no charitable outreach programs of its own. What Richard Dawkins said about atheists, namely, “organizing atheists has been compared to herding cats, because they tend to think independently and will not conform to authority”³⁶ could easily be applied to pantheists. However, just as this humorous claim was met with the equally droll “An Atheist’s Guide to Herding Cats”,³⁷ pantheists are now setting up webpages and social media accounts. Among these is a group called the World Pantheist Movement, a non-profit (and likely non-profit) corporation encouraging the organization of local pantheism groups and having its own magazine, *Pan*.³⁸

The Internet might be the primary medium by which budding pantheist organizations become organized. The very first pantheist organization to be recognized as a tax-exempt religion in the U.S., the Universal Pantheist Society, has “provided a network for Pantheists since 1975” but now carries on its operation online.³⁹ Other more recent pantheist organizations, such as the Pantheist Association for Nature⁴⁰ and the aptly-named Pantheism.com,⁴¹ began in the age of the Internet and are organized primarily online. Though a 2014 study found a strong correlation between the rise of the Internet and a decline in

³⁶ Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God Delusion*, Dawkins. Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

³⁷ <https://www.atheistrepublic.com/blog/casperrigsby/atheist-s-guide-herding-cats>

³⁸ <https://www.pantheism.net>

³⁹ <http://network.pantheist.net/>

⁴⁰ <http://naturepantheist.org/>

⁴¹ <https://pantheism.com/>

religious participation,⁴² other studies suggest the Internet empowers new organizations to greatly affect society.⁴³ If true, the timing could be auspicious for the relatively recent first efforts to mobilize pantheists into something like a religious movement.

Spiritual Purpose: A Seventh Dimension

Ninian Smart wades cautiously (perhaps understandably so) into the sensitive study of religion. His six-dimensional approach seeks to examine religion and religion-like worldviews in an objective and dispassionate way. It is perhaps this detachment taken to an excess, or even possibly an overload of information from what he calls religion's "web of doctrines"⁴⁴, that makes Smart's doctrinal/philosophical examination seem a bit diffuse. Lacking in particular is this dimension's focus on a religion's spiritual purpose, its *raison d'être*. Such a separate examination might directly address a religion's appeal to the individual. In a world where 86% of the population hold religious beliefs,⁴⁵ and where "beliefs have consequences"⁴⁶, spotlighting the *main goal* of a religion, apart from other doctrine, might have some utility.

Any casual observer might point out that any one religion or worldview may have (and likely does have) more than a single goal. This is especially true in religions that have been closely involved in the shaping of nations, where spiritual aims quickly become conflated with those of the state. For example, one may ask is the *goal* of Judaism the establishment of an Israeli state, or is the *goal* of Islam or Christianity to establish empires? Whatever the answers to these kinds of questions (and they are bound to be complex), no such temporal aims seem to be the main motivation of the individual convert or adherent. Take for example even more

⁴² <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/526111/how-the-internet-is-taking-away-americas-religion/>

⁴³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2011/01/18/the-social-side-of-the-internet/>

⁴⁴ Smart, N. (2000). *Worldviews* (3rd ed.). Up Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall. p. 8.

⁴⁵ <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WT4ruiB941I>

personably desirable goals such as the famous non-violence principle of Jainism. If simply not killing or injuring other living things was the goal of Jainism, why then also require a vow of celibacy? The answer to this question points to something more important lying behind these lesser objectives, each being merely a prerequisite for the ultimate spiritual purpose. In the case of Jainism, that purpose is liberation from the cycle of reincarnation.⁴⁷ For Judaism, the goal seems to be living in harmony with God's will,⁴⁸ while for Islam and Christianity the focus is on the salvation of eternal souls.

Pinning down a spiritual goal of pantheism is a difficult undertaking mainly because most authoritative thought and writing about it is extrinsic, examining what it is phenomenally. In this way, pantheistic ideas are generally discovered in certain disparate passages of some existing religious texts and then studied, discussed, and developed by philosophers and religious writers. Or, as discussed earlier, one may begin from an individual "cosmic religious feeling" and journey from that point to discover a purpose. In either case, no true dogma or canonical teachings inform us about the spiritual goals of pantheism in general. Nevertheless, *pantheism-as-explanation itself* may approximate a spiritual goal. Like Buddhism and Sufism, pantheism may be among the worldviews that venerate proximity to or unity with the divine. Unlike those religions however (which presuppose some existing state of separation between the worshiper and the divine), pantheism may be the answer to a question the individual has about a sense of divine unity they already possess either through reason or through some direct experience. In this way pantheism's 'goal', as it were, is to identify for the individual the consequences of these experiences.

⁴⁷ Ferguson, J. (1976). *Encyclopedia of Mysticism and Mystery Religions*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company. pp. 90.

⁴⁸ Cahn-Sherbok, D. (2003). *Judaism: history, belief, and practice* London: Routledge.

Conclusions

Pantheism can be thought of either as a philosophy that “lies at the core of many religions”⁴⁹, or as a burgeoning independent worldview. It is an old idea, perhaps thousands of years, but has only been named within academia for the last three-hundred years or so. Lacking much in the way of edicts and creeds, pantheism nonetheless provides a philosophical foundation for much religious thought and sacred writing. It boasts no robust system of ministry or history of imperial conquest, like many of the great religions, but nevertheless can exert a profound influence on one’s thoughts about his or her place in the universe, and relation to the divine. The digital age may yet see pantheism congeal into what could rightly be called a spiritual or religious movement, while authors and artists continue to build what one day might be seen as its ‘mythology’. As Carl Sagan wrote, “A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid. Mander.

⁵⁰ Sagan, C. (1994). *Pale blue dot: A vision of the human future in space*.