

PANTHEISM AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

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INTRODUCTION

A resurgence of an interest in spirituality is one characteristic of Post-Modernity. This phenomenon is observed in the revitalization of animism and shamanism in traditional societies, the spread of the New Age Movement in advanced countries, and consistent folk religious practice within the established religions. Although their identification varies, they hold a common worldview in their core belief. The worldview permeating these contemporary people's minds is the denial of the Absolute Being. Pantheism is one of the most influential worldviews and religious beliefs that denies an uncontingent and Absolute Being¹ Understanding pantheism, therefore, is crucial for Christian mission today. This paper attempts to analyze Pantheistic thoughts systematically and consider some points that Christians should communicate in proclaiming the Gospel to the Pantheistic mind.

PANTHEISM AND NON-JUDEO CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

Judeo-Christian religions² are distinct in their belief in the absolute and personal God, because primary religious traditions basically deny the Absolute and Personal Being. The denial of the Absolute Being is the fundamental belief of pantheism. In this regard, most non-Judeo-Christian religions hold the pantheistic worldview in their foundations of thoughts and their implications.

Hinduism, for example, among some Upanishads observed a basic view that the universe is one entity. In this monistic view all the gods and objects in the universe were conceived to be elements derived by self-distribution from one originative source, a cosmic Person or Cow, sacrificing itself by self-dismemberment.³ In the Hindu pantheon, the

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¹Pluralism and relativism belong to the same category in their denial of the Absolute Being.

²Islam is included in this category as one that relies on the doctrinal sources from the Old Testament.

³David S. Noss and John B. Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*, 9th ed., (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 101.

thirty- three million deities are all placed with little distinction from other creatures. George Braswell points out that in the pantheistic nature of Hinduism, “God, principle, humankind, animals and nature are all basically one. A primary goal of Hinduism is union or absorption of all the parts into the whole.”⁴

Buddhism, too, especially in Hinayana sects, which have been less influenced by the Judeo-Christian worldview, demonstrates little concern for the life beyond this world.⁵ Buddha’s primary teaching was centered on life philosophy, and does not emphasize the concept of eternity or that of Creator God.⁶ An ancient Buddhist canon records that Buddha dared not reply to his disciple’s question about life after death. His disciple reflects this position of his master when he states, “He (Buddha) did not comment whether the world is eternal or not, whether the world is infinite or not, whether soul and body is identical or not, whether men exist after death or not.”⁷

Buddha admonished this disciple to focus on our duty in this world, trusting that outcomes in the other world are just. Nobuo Watanabe explains:

The concept of “emptiness” in Buddhism denies any form of concrete substance. Therefore, it eventually denies all fixed ideas on spiritual entity or spiritual realm in its subjective perspective, and it also rejects the idea of the ultimate being as the Creator of the universe in its objective perspective.⁸

Buddhism, thus, shows little concern for the absolute realm, directing his disciples’ focus to the significance of the ascetic training in this world.

Confucianism is basically the religious and ethical code that teaches the importance of “xiao,” honoring parents, ancestors and

⁴George W. Braswell, Jr., *Understanding World Religions: A Christian Perspective*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983), 193.

⁵The fact that Mahayana Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism were developed in the Tang dynasty in China provides a possibility of Nestorian influence, for Nestorian Christianity as well as other foreign religions were active in Sian, the capital city. Thus, their less strict approach to the Buddha’s teaching than Hinayana Buddhism is explained.

⁶Primary teachings of Buddha are the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Right Path, which focus on mental discipline and ethical actions for attaining Nirvana.

⁷Masato Nagao, ed., “Metaphor of a Poisoned Arrow,” in *Canon of Brahmanism, Ancient Buddhist Canon*, 473-78 (Tokyo: Chuoukouron sha, 1979).

⁸Nobuo Watanabe, *Christianity and Japanese Religions* (Tokyo: Word of Life Press, 1983), 11.

elders. Confucius did hold the concept of Heaven, but it was influenced by the primal Chinese worldview which they called “Shang Di,” the Ruler on High. Although it refers to a supreme being, the concept is rather pantheistic. David Noss and John Noss explain its pantheistic nature as follows:

This Ruler on High...was a sort of ancestral figure, a vaguely conceived being located in the upper regions of the sky; he was far from being the Almighty God of Western religions, it seems, for he had no clearly defined character and sent down no messages preserved in scriptures.⁹

Taoism is regarded as one form of pantheism in its belief in the impersonal being. Tao, the Way, is a name of Absolute Cosmic Law, or the Order of the universe. Tao is the path the whole universe flows out and follows, and all things evolve from it. Tao is at once immanent and transcendent; it includes and pervades all that exists. Yet Taoism denies the personal being about Tao. This denial of personality in the Supreme Being is identical with that of pantheism.¹⁰

Communism belongs to the same category with its religious elements such as the founder, the believers, a belief system, eschatology, organization and so forth. Communism is based on the materialistic worldview of history, which simultaneously denies the absolute God the Creator. In this sense, Communism also retains the Pantheistic worldview.

As observed above, pantheism provides the fundamental worldview to a variety of beliefs and practices in this world. This inclusive nature is observed in the introduction of the World Pantheist Movement:

But almost all of what we say applies to all the spiritual orientations that find shelter in the WPM. They include scientific pantheism, religious humanism, religious naturalism, religious atheism, deep ecology, nature-worship, philosophical Taoism, modern Stoicism, Gaian religion, as well as to those forms of wicca and paganism that see magic and the gods as symbols rather than realities, also Western forms of Buddhism that celebrate nature and everyday life, and to those in Unitarian Universalism or paganism who do not believe in supernatural beings, organizational structure, doctrine, salvation, eschatology and so forth.¹¹

⁹Noss and Noss, 280.

¹⁰David Burnett, *Clash of Worlds: A Christian's Handbook on Cultures, World Religions and Evangelism*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), 92.

¹¹World Pantheist Movement, available from <http://www.pantheism.net/index.htm>; Internet, accessed August 31, 2003.

PAN-THEOLOGY

As studied above, a variety of pantheism exists both in explicit and implicit ways.¹² While theists believe God is self-sufficient, uncontingent, and the Prime Mover with personality, Pantheists believe in the cosmic being as god without recognizing the personality. Because of this worldview difference between pantheism and Christianity, the Pantheistic cosmology, anthropology, soteriology, eschatology and other areas of theology are different from the biblical ones.

Pantheistic Theology Proper

Pantheists believe in a divine Being. However, they call the Being the divine “Unity” of the universe. Even though they use the term “being,” they deny its personality. This position shows an internal conflict between term and concept. The term “theism” presupposes God, but the pantheists deny a God who has personality. Michael Levine explains the confusion:

Pantheism is non-theistic, but it is not atheistic. It is a form of non-theistic monotheism, or even non-personal theism. It is the belief in one God, a God identical to the all-inclusive unity, but pantheists (generally) do not believe God is a person or anything like a person.¹³

They explain the logic by creating the concept of God as “impersonal being,” which is also a composition of two conflicting concepts. Considering the fact that the term “God” generically implies the personal Being, pantheists’ denial of the personality of God seems logically inconsistent.

The existence of God is determined only when the definition of the term is identified. In order to avoid the confusion, some pantheists substituted the term *pantheos* with the impersonal expression, divine “Unity”. However, there is no one common definition of the term “God” among the diverse pantheistic groups. Therefore, no attribute is articulated for the term “divine Unity.” In this regard, pantheists face two problems at the outset of developing their theology. The first is their belief in the divine Being and their denial of His personality. The

¹²Edward A. Pace, “Definition of Pantheism,” available from <http://www.ourladyswarriors.org/dissent/defpanth.htm>; Internet, accessed August 31, 2003.

¹³Michael Levine, “pantheism,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

second is their ambiguous definition of the term “*theos*.” Without any clarification of the definition, not even the existence of such a being can be identified.

Pan-Anthropology

By refusing the idea of a Creator and His creation, Pantheists also deny the origin of humans as God’s creation. Humans, for pantheists, are a mere part of the universe. All existence is explained in the model of raindrops that fall into the ocean and become one with it.¹⁴ Edward Pace elucidates, “Human personality is a mere illusion: what we call the individual man is only one of the countless fragments that make up the Divine Being; and since the All is impersonal no single part of it can validly claim personality,”¹⁵ In pantheism, one person or one element in the universe does not carry inherent value. Thus, pantheism, contradictory to its emphasis, degrades the value of nature and its members.

Pan-Soteriology

Pantheists consider evil a product of God’s laws. When God is not considered a moral standard, evil cannot be a factor. Due to the lack of a moral standard, such as God’s law or His righteousness, Pantheists recognize evil when things disturb the divine all-inclusive “Unity” of the universe. Thus, pantheists do not see the necessity of salvation from sin or punishment of sin. They regard the term “salvation” as applicable only to a theistic concept. The ultimate achievement for them is to fulfill the “essential nature”. Happiness is up to how well one fulfills the “essential nature” in the harmony and in the order of the divine “Unity.”¹⁶

Another significant soteriological point for Pantheists is the denial of life after death. Pantheists deny God as the cosmic personal Being; they also reject the idea of personal immortality. Levine states:

Historically, the denial of personal immortality is one of pantheism’s most distinctive features. This is partly because it is in clear opposition to the theistic

¹⁴“Critical considerations regarding Pantheist religions and philosophy,” available from <http://www.comparativereligion.com/pantheism.html>; Internet; accessed August 31, 2003.

¹⁵Pace, 4.

¹⁶Levine, 11-12.

view. But, it is primarily significant because it is constitutive of the pantheist's world-view and ethos, and so has implications for pantheistic practice.¹⁷

Because of these points, pantheism is often classified as atheism. Pantheists actually believe in immortality, but in an impersonal sense. They assert that it is natural for humans to long for impersonal immortality, just as both theists and atheists long to be remembered or remain as another part of the material realm after physical death. For Pantheists, death is the time to return to and merge with God. Levine furthers explains the idea, quoting Jeffers:

What is distinctively significant is the recognition of the individual as apart of the Unity--what Jeffers calls the one organic whole . . . this one God. The "parts change and pass, or die, people and races and rocks and stars," but the whole remains. . . . all its parts are different expression of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, influencing each other, therefore parts of one organic whole.¹⁸

Pan-Christology

If sin is not acknowledged, no Savior is expected by Pantheists. In the denial of the personality of God, there is no possibility of His Son coming to earth. Since Pantheists do not expect a Savior to come, any who would claim to be one may be seen as arrogant and controlling. A Pantheist relates his view of a Savior, "I am my own personal savior. I believe that Jesus was a savior for one and only one person: himself. Furthermore, in my opinion, I think Jesus failed to save himself."¹⁹

Pan-Ecclesiology

Compared to the number of adherents to pantheism, organizational structure is not as well developed as it is in other religions. This is a result of the fact that pantheism is spread more as a worldview than as a religious system with scriptures, doctrines, and organizations. Therefore, within the Pantheistic circle, a variety of sects emerged and developed their own variations of beliefs and practices. With such doctrinal ambiguity, pantheism also attracts a wider group of potential followers. The World Pantheist Movement posts this invitation:

¹⁷Ibid., 13.

¹⁸Ibid., 14.

¹⁹Available from http://www.omnifarious.org/~eljay/rel_qna.html; Internet, accessed August 31, 2003.

Do you find it impossible to believe in supernatural beings, and difficult to conceive of anything more worthy of reverence than the beauty of nature or the power of the universe? If you answered yes to these questions, then you will feel thoroughly at home in the World Pantheist Movement. Our caring and celebratory approach focuses on nature rather than the supernatural, on what we can see and do and live out rather than on invisible entities that we can only imagine.²⁰

Pan- Eschatology

Pantheism basically holds to a monistic cosmology, and does not concern itself with what may exist beyond the universe. The universe itself is divine. Therefore, Heaven is not of interest for pantheism. The Universe was there from the beginning, just as the biblical God claims about Himself, "I am that I am" (Exod. 3:14). Eschatology is not related to the end of time when God will destroy all evil or the material universe. The ultimate goal for Pantheists is a state of mind called "perfect harmony with the divine Unity." There is no concept of judgment or evil as theistic religions hold. There is no Heaven ruled by God other than the present universe. Nor is there a God who judges the sinful. Thus, entering heaven is not a focus for Pantheists. Rather, the ultimate goal is to attain the perfect peace of mind, which can be possible when one has a right relationship with divine Unity.²¹

As studied above, pantheism contrasts sharply to Christian theism. Some of the points have totally different perspectives from each other, while others seem simply to substitute theistic terms with Pantheistic terms. These similarities and differences make it difficult for Pantheists to pursue Christian truth through scripture and doctrines.

CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO PANTHEISM

Based on the understanding of pantheism presented above, several key points for Christians in approaching Pantheists are suggested in this section.

²⁰World Pantheistic Movement; available from <http://www.pantheism.net/index.htm>; Internet; accessed February 15, 2003.

²¹Levine, 18.

God as the Absolute Transcendent Being and the Creator

Most Pantheists take the monistic position which holds that the universe is the only reality. Pantheists identify God with the universe or the “divine Unity” within the universe. In order for them to understand the Christian gospel, creating the mental realm for the reality beyond the universe is an imperative step. As the Scripture declares, God’s realm is beyond the material universe²²

Secondly, in their denial of the Creator, Pantheists discard all the personal attributes of God. Therefore, God’s personal attributes should be clearly presented. God’s action, disposition, and sovereignty are needed to emphasize his personality. Regarding God’s action, He creates, rules, communicates, acts, performs miracles, reveals, and has fellowship with humans. Regarding His dispositional attributes, He is loving, righteous, holy, caring, merciful, gentle, bold, jealous, and many others things. Regarding His sovereignty, He possesses omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. God himself is infinite. Thus, his attributes should be understood as unlimited.

Humans as Heirs of the Creator

Christian teaching on the origin of humans renders the highest value to humanity. While Pantheists do not recognize the individual value of each person, Scripture teaches that each individual is created in the *Imago Dei*. Carrying the image of God implies that we inherit God’s life and his attributes and that we are heirs of God, just as human children resemble their parents. While Pantheists hold that humans are not different from other creatures, Scripture teaches that humans are a special creation in the *Imago Dei*. God commissioned man to name and rule all creation, proving that humans are not a mere part of the universe, but ones who are to manage the universe.

Not only is the origin of humans different in pantheism and Christianity, but also the purpose for which humanity was created is different. As pantheism denies the personal God and Creator, the purpose of the existence of the universe is not certain. Just as the universe is something that “flows forth,” without a specific reason,

²²What to call this realm can differ according to the audience. For pantheists, as a contrast with a material universe, the “spiritual universe” can be one way of conceptualization.

humans do not find the purpose and goal of their existence in the Pantheistic view. In this outlook, a possible goal for humans is to maintain the divine Unity of the universe, which the Pantheists call their god. The scriptural teaching on humans as the special creation with specific goals and mission needs to be clearly presented.

Angels and Satan

Pantheists see the whole universe as a being, and therefore every existing thing is seen as a mere part of the being. They do not recognize Satan or evil spirits as parts of the being. However, Scripture explains the reality of angelic beings as servants of God and Satan with Satan's subjects in rebellion against God. Satan's character, as a rebel, contradicts God's benevolent nature. While God is loving, righteous and creative, Satan is characterized by hatred, unrighteousness, and destruction. The position of Satan in salvific history seems to be underemphasized, especially among Evangelicals. Salvation is comfortably interpreted in terms of renewal and life improvement by God's power. The reality of Satan and his scheme and purpose to destroy humans through sin is not adequately focused. The lack of adequate teaching on spiritual phenomena has caused confusion about Christian spirituality. The biblical worldview, articulating the reality and position of angels, Satan, and evil spirits under the sovereign rule of the Triune God, needs to be explained. Additionally, in order to avoid the animistic perspective which views Satan and God in conflict with similar power, Christians should identify Satan as part of God's creation in rebellion against the Creator. God's salvific plan for humanity is to be clearly understood from the "spiritual" and cosmological perspective.

Sin and Salvation

Pantheists have no concern for sin; they consider sin an outcome of theistic belief.²³ Scripture describes the origin of sin as the first human's disbelief and disobedience to God's Word, and the consequential separation between God and humans. When the first humans chose to believe Satan's words and follow his suggestions, they came under the control of Satan. At this moment humanity lost its

²³Levine, 8.

relationship with God and all His inheritance. The restoration of the relationship between the created humans and the Creator is thus possible only by the worshiper's absolute submission to His Word. The fall degraded the human position from heir of God to slave of sin.

Eternal life is one of God's attributes (upper level in Diagram 1). Once humans were separated from God, their immortality was also lost. Therefore, sin became the cause of death for humans. Paul calls this the "law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2). Satan causes death, but he was not wrong in bringing death to sinners. The only person who does not deserve death is the sinless Son of God. Thus, the fallen creation needs a Savior to come for the restoration of the original state of the *Imago Dei*.

The Word of God

The biblical God is characterized by communication to human beings, while the Pantheistic "god," as an impersonal being, does not do so. The biblical God created the whole universe with His Word, commanded the first humans not to take fruit from one tree in the garden, and called out his faithful followers as his covenant vessels. Noah was chosen to be God's vessel of salvation, for he believed what God spoke about the flood and prepared the ark despite the ridicule of his neighbors. Abraham believed in God's promises and command to leave his own land. Abraham's whole life, including his willingness to sacrifice Isaac to the Lord, was a test of his belief and obedience to God's Word.

The Decalogue is not merely a list of prohibitions or religious commands for God's pleasure. The Decalogue reminded the Israelites of their identity as God's people. By number, the commandments reminded Israel of: (1) God's *absoluteness* as an almighty God; (2) His sovereignty and distinctiveness over all the creation; (3) His nature and sovereign authority as God; (4) The purpose of human existence to glorify and worship God; (5) God, the Creator; (6-10) Their original creation in the *Imago Dei*, and that they are not supposed to do what Satan would do. The Israelites, as witnesses of God and the priestly nation for fallen humanity, were to demonstrate God's character. Thus, the word of God was the means for God's revelation and the means for the Israelites to show their faith and obedience to God.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God

In pantheism, no Savior is expected, for they do not recognize the need for salvation. The necessity and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, therefore, should be emphasized to Pantheists. In history many individuals claimed to be deity incarnated. However, being the Son of God cannot be sustained just by self-declaration. Jesus Christ proved himself to be the One by fulfilling all the messianic prophecies given throughout the Old Testament period.²⁴

The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is another significant evidence of his divine origin. In order for God to be fully human, two things should happen: (1) It should not depend on human mechanism of birth, for it becomes a wholly human act; and (2) It should start from the very beginning of life. The Scripture records that by the miraculous intervention of God's Spirit, Mary was conceived without the involvement of an earthly father.

Jesus' sinless life is another proof of His divinity. Nobody could find any crime, nor any charge for punishment in Jesus Christ (e.g., Matt 27:4; Luke 23:4,14,22; John 18:38). The only charge against Jesus was his claim to be the King of the Jews. The centurion who witnessed Jesus Christ's crucifixion also declared that Jesus is the true Son of God (Mark 15:39).

His teaching was supreme by moral and ethical standards. It fulfilled all the laws in the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17), and was different from others, as it was declared with authority. The authority was also demonstrated in a series of miracles, such as transforming the water into wine, calming storms, walking on water, feeding the five thousand, healing the sick, forgiving sins, raising the dead, and casting out demons. These miraculous deeds proved that Jesus is the One who

²⁴*Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v., "prophecy" identifies over 300 Messianic prophecies in the Bible fulfilled in the life of Jesus Christ. Specific details given by these prophecies include his tribe (Gen 49:10), his birthplace (Mic 5:2), dates of his birth and death (Dan 9:25-26), his forerunner John the Baptist (Mal 3:1; 4:5; Matt 11:10), his career and ministry (Isa 52:13-53:12), his crucifixion (Ps 22:1-18), his resurrection (Ps 16:8-11; Acts 2:25-28), his ascension (Ps 2; Acts 13:33), and his exaltation as a priest-king (Ps 110; Acts 2:34). The kingly magnificence of his second coming is also graphically portrayed. Ps 2; 45, and Ps. 110 picture his conquest and dominion over the nations. His kingdom is characterized in Psalm 72. Events leading up to and including the first and second advents of Christ are described in the two burdens of the prophet Zechariah (Zech 9-11; 12:1-14:21).

is above nature, “the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:2), and spiritual entities. In short, Jesus is God who is beyond Satan, the evil spirits and all the creation.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Jesus’ death was the mission from God the Father. It was prophesied in the Old Testament at different times in history and fulfilled in Jesus’ death on the cross. It is interpreted in various ways, such as that Jesus died in order to: (1) Propitiate God; (2) Satisfy God’s holiness; (3) Redeem human life; and (4) Be the substitute for humans’ punishment for their sin.

Another perspective is Satan’s failure in killing the sinless Christ. Satan, by killing the sinless Son of God, made his greatest mistake, and lost his right and dominion and power over this world. Thus, Jesus could win the victory over Satan only through his death.

Jesus died physically. However, He, as the sinless One, did not have to remain dead, as Acts 2:24 states: “But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him”. He was resurrected from the dead and appeared to his disciples. His resurrection is the evidence and promise for the victory over “sin and death.” His resurrection is not a mere supernatural phenomenon or mystery of nature, as Pantheists may interpret. It was one of the primary purposes of his incarnation; and it is the means for God to save fallen sinners from eternal punishment.

Various critiques have been suggested by those who would deny the resurrection. Some examples are the swoon theory, the stealing theory, the wrong tomb theory, and the phantasm theory. All such theories have been proven to be false accusations against the biblical records.²⁵ Pantheists are faced with the proven fact that Jesus Christ historically resurrected.²⁶

Pentecost and the Holy Spirit

Since the bondage of sin and death was broken, humans may receive the indwelling Spirit of God. The immanence of the

²⁵Murray J. Harris discusses the issue further in his *Three Crucial Questions about Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 31-64.

²⁶Ibid.

transcendent God was made possible in the experience of Pentecost recorded in the book of Acts. Pantheists, who believe in the immanence and perfection of their god, cannot still deny the fact of evil in the present world. Pantheists need a solution for the reality of evil in the world. Logically, the belief in the immanence of God leaves no further expectation for God's intervention. To the contrary, Christian teaching on the descent of the Holy Spirit and his indwelling believers gives the assurance of salvation through Christ, his presence in them, and the hope of eternal life as proven by his resurrection. The Holy Spirit is not an unknown spiritual entity, as Pantheists may believe. The Holy Spirit gives life, reveals the divine truth, works on human conscience, convicts men of sin, and helps bring humans to repentance and faith. He also teaches what the Scriptures say, heals the sick and comforts the hurt, empowers believers in witnessing, and seals believers with the promise of eternal life. Thus, the transcendent God can indwell the believer through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The immanence of the transcendent God is what the Pantheists pursue, while their concepts of crucial issues such as evil and life after death remain elusive. Christians can present to the Pantheists the comprehensive and coherent truth, revealed by the living God and encompassing all aspects of human life and history. Talking to the Athenians, the apostle Paul said, "He is not far from each of us. For in him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:27-28)

CONCLUSION

Christian churches in Asia, in the very heart of Pantheist territory, must hold firmly to the uniqueness of the Christian truth and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as the only way revealed to people by the true living God. Then Pantheists will see the Truth which human wisdom and speculation cannot attain. With the restored *Imago Dei* offered by God the Father through God the Son, and by the help of the immanent Spirit of God, mankind will see the true beauty of nature. Mankind will also see that the whole Creation has been revealed to bring glory to God, the Creator.

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