

This is the draft I produced for a chapter in the book *The Harvest Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Harvest House, 2018).

What is Panentheism and its Fatal Flaw?

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Introduction

How is it that when some people talk about God, they sound a lot like a Christian one moment and then much like a Hindu the next? Perhaps they are panentheists. From the Greek words meaning “all in God,” panentheism envisions the world as being inside of God ($W \rightarrow G$) and God as being inside the world ($G \rightarrow W$). By also insisting that God exists beyond the world and is more than the world is ($G \geq W$), panentheism steers a course between pantheism, which holds God and the world as identical ($G=W$), and theism, which views God as totally distinct from the world ($G \mid W$).

History

The term *panentheism* was coined in 1828 by Karl Krause to distinguish the views of Shelling, Hegel, and his own from those of Spinoza. Prior to this distinction being made, the term *pantheism*, coined over 120 years earlier, covered both pantheistic and panentheistic notions. This is why Shelling and Schleiermacher, for example, famously identified themselves as pantheists despite quite clearly being what would later be called panentheists. As Krause’s term only began to gain wide acceptance in the 1950s, it is still quite normal for panentheists to be mislabeled as pantheists today.¹

While panentheism is relatively new as a classification, as a worldview it is ancient. Some hear panentheistic undertones in the monotheistic reforms of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton (d.1358 BC) and in some of India's oldest holy books—the *Rig Veda* (~1,100 BC), the *Bhagavad Gita* (500-200 BC), and the *Upanishads* (100 BC - 400 AD). Certainly a few Hindu schools of thought have been more panentheistic than pantheistic and some modern Buddhist thinkers prefer their metaphysical model to be classified as panentheistic rather than atheistic. Panentheism also echoes in the writings of a few thinkers from Islamic Sufism, kabbalistic Judaism, and some other mystical traditions of the world.²

Its real nursery, however, was ancient Greece. Platonism and Neoplatonism had seminal roles in the development of the many variations of panentheistic God-world models in the West. While it may be too great of a stretch to say that Plato himself was a panentheist, he should at least qualify as a “proto-panentheist.”³ After all, one of Plato's ideas would inspire the highly contagious panentheistic tradition that flows through Shelling, Schleiermacher and theologically liberal Christianity, German Romanticism, English Idealism, English Romanticism, Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, Jonathan Edwards, and C.S. Pierce. Through his Neoplatonic interpreters, some of Plato's other ideas would inspire another panentheist stream that can be traced through Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, Böhme, Hegel, Henri Bergson, and A.N. Whitehead.⁴ Whitehead is famous for exaggerating the entire sweep of European philosophy as nothing more than “a series of footnotes to Plato.”⁵ His pronouncement may not be so exaggerated when applied to his own panentheistic philosophy and its sources.

Varieties

Precisely which way or ways is God in the world? There are differences of opinion about the degree to which God permeates, animates, sustains, influences, and experiences the world.

Some see God's energies working in the world to redeem it and gradually turn it into something more indistinguishable from God. Others see God expressing Itself into the world and returning back to God. Some suggest God suffers along with the world and others say God evolves as the world evolves. In all variations, the line between Creator and creation becomes blurred.

Is the world a necessary part of God? Or is it a voluntary extension of God? Does God determine everything that happens in the world? Or is there cooperation between creatures and Creator? Is God personal or is It nonpersonal? Not all panentheists answer the same way.⁶ Many assume God to be nonpersonal while some argue that It is personal. Most say God produced the world out of Its self while some say God created the world out of nothing.⁷ The former may tend to analogize the relationship between God and the world to the relationship between our minds and bodies. The latter may prefer to liken the God-world relationship to that of an adult mother carrying a developing infant inside of her womb.

Some panentheistic God-world models are influenced more by the Plato-Schelling stream while others take their cue from the Plotinus-Hegel stream; some are intoxicated by both. Some may be more influenced by Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Kaballism, Swedenborgism, or Theosophy while others may be more influenced by Spinoza, Stoicism, Hinduism, or Buddhism. Some variations adapt parts of Christianity to their framework while others are antagonistic to it. Similarly, some lean more towards the pantheistic end of the spectrum while others try to stay closer to theism.

Panentheism's Appeal

The panentheistic God-world model has some curb appeal. For some, it can shine like the new model on the block that sits between two dusty, dented, worn-out antiques. Attempting to

find a happy medium between extremes, this adaptable view capitalizes on some of the strengths of pantheism and theism while distancing itself from some of their perceived weaknesses. In affirming God's radical immanence without denying Its transcendence, it appeals to those who think the God of pantheism too impersonal and the theistic God uncomfortably personal.⁸ It also may also provide a framework which traditional religions like Christianity and Buddhism can be reinterpreted into and enhanced by. Perhaps someday a panentheistic God-world model will become the ecumenical bridge between the great religious traditions of East and West.⁹

The most modern panentheistic models offer tantalizing fusions and compromises. They try to blend some of the latest trends in science with benign notions of spirituality.¹⁰ This is attractive to those who believe that life evolved basically as Darwin imagined, but with a little help here and there from an intelligent designer who is intertwined with the world. By selectively confusing the supernatural world with the natural world, those who feel the need for some type of unobtrusive God can embrace most of the naturalism (and anti-supernaturalism) that dominates scientific academia today without totally rejecting some notion of the divine.

The problem of evil and suffering can also incline some towards adopting the God of pantheism. Such a dynamic God may somehow seem exempt from accusations of blame for the problem of evil.¹¹ Others find solace in the idea that God's nexus with our world implies that It suffers when we suffer. The idea that God also suffers when the world itself is harmed is helping pantheism grow in popularity among those who are concerned with the ecological health of the earth. These are some of the main reasons why the panentheistic model of God has quietly replaced the traditional view of God in many divinity schools, pulpits, and universities.

Problems with “Christian Panentheism”

The biggest problem with all the attempts to “reinterpret” Christianity into a panentheistic framework is that the biblical data does not ultimately favor it. The scripture passages panentheists offer as proof-texts are few in number and are heavily outnumbered by many less ambiguous passages which stress God’s transcendence, otherness, and separateness from the world. Also, their proof texts may be interpreted better in theistic ways. Take, for example, the 17th chapter of the book of Acts, which contains what may be the most powerful proof-text Christian panentheists can cite. While reasoning with Stoic philosophers (:18), the Apostle Paul quoted the Stoic poet Epimenides, saying, “for in him [Zeus] we live and move and have our being” (:28). Since Paul seems to quote this favorably, we are left wondering if Paul is sympathetic to pantheistic and panentheistic views of God. But, when the quote is viewed in its larger context, it becomes clear that Paul was not sympathetic to Stoicism at all. He was correcting their misguided metaphysic. He said that they did not know God at all (:23), that they were ignorant (:30), and that they needed to learn the basics of the proper, Hebraic God-world view. The points he proceeded to make oppose pantheistic, panentheistic, and polytheistic God-world models: God made the world and does not live in any part of it (:24); humans do not contribute anything to God or satisfy any of God’s needs (:25); humans are not part of God (:26-27); God is nothing like the things we form from created matter (:29). This is in harmony with the rest of the scriptures which never depict earth as an emanation of, extension of, or dwelling place of God—it is never his temple. The Bible regularly depicts heaven¹² as the throne which God sits upon and the earth as his “footstool” (Isaiah 66:1; Matthew 5:35; Acts 7:49).

The attempts by panentheists to discredit classical theism’s view of God as being “the God of the philosophers” (in contrast with the God of the Bible) deserve to be discredited. It is true that both Augustine and Aquinas were extremely familiar with Neoplatonism and influenced

by it in some significant ways. But they rejected all of its parts that were not reconcilable with the writings of the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament apostles, and the early church fathers.¹³ Meanwhile, every panentheistic model has been built mainly of blocks from many pagan philosophers. Panentheism then is, to understate it, “the other God of the philosophers.”¹⁴ No theology can develop in a philosophical vacuum. Bucking one philosophical trend simply entails the adoption of another. The choice here is not between a pure theology that is wholly uninfluenced by the metaphysical philosophizing of the ancient Greeks and a theology tainted by it. The choice, rather, is whether philosophy will serve theology, in harmony with divine revelation, or will theology be forced to fit a pagan philosophy that it is at odds with revelation. At the risk of oversimplification, the choice is between Aquinas and Plotinus.

The Fatal Flaw of Panentheism

Our world is limited in size, limited in age, caused, and changing. God is not. At the outset, it seems like a fool’s errand to try to mix these logically unmixable things together. But this is what the hard-core panentheists so audaciously do. Whitehead, for example, concluded that God and the World are somehow both permanent and fluent, one and many, immanent in one another, transcendent to one another, and created by the other.¹⁵ The god imagined by John Cobb is constantly being destroyed and recreated in every moment of world history.¹⁶ What philosophical arguments can they rally to commend and defend such credulity-straining Gods?

They assume that the traditional reasons given for theism were overturned long ago and, therefore, they don’t really need to compete in that arena.¹⁷ Doubting that reason should play a heavy role in faith about a God that exists outside of our universe might help explain their shift towards a more world-centered, scientifically trendy God. Even so, some arguments have been advanced. Some, for example, have argued that since God is absolutely infinite in every possible

way, it must be impossible for anything else to exist outside of God.¹⁸ But the insistence that an infinite God is somehow too limited to create a world that fits in the palm of his hand (Psalm 95:3-5), so to speak, while not being confusable with his hand, seems a little presumptuous. As Whitehead's God-world model is acclaimed as one of the most brilliant panentheistic models to date, we might expect to find persuasive arguments in his writings. Cobb, one of the foremost experts on Whitehead, concludes that "Whiteheadian theology is not for those who seek certainty" because our understanding of the world is constantly changing.¹⁹ Commending a changing worldview about a changing God based on our changing understanding of our changing world would be a challenge for anyone.

Not surprisingly then, both Cobb and Whitehead wrote and taught "as though there were no philosophical reason for affirming [their view] of God other than the demand of a coherent completion of the idea of God as actual entity." Only twice did Whitehead begin to make a half-hearted and "obscure" argument for his God.²⁰ "Has Whitehead 'proved' the existence of God?" Cobb asks. "Obviously the answer to these questions is no," he answers. "Nothing is proved in this sense. ... Whitehead's argument for the existence of God, insofar as there is an argument at all, is primarily the traditional one from the order of the universe to a ground of order."²¹ But since it is impossible for the panentheist to even know where to draw the line between Artist and artwork, the argument for God from order fits better with classical theism. For those seeking a logical, intellectually satisfying God-world model, panentheism may dazzle then disappoint. By contrast, the case for a God that is entirely different from everything else proves far more logically compelling.

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Bio

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¹ Hegel is often labeled pantheist when panentheist is more accurate. Spinoza, whose writings influenced Shelling, Hegel, and countless other panentheists and pantheists alike, is normally classified as a pantheist. However, based on a few of his writings, a case can be made that he may have occasionally thought as a panentheist.

² Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton, eds., *Panentheism Across the World's Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³ James W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 32-38.

⁴ James Cooper's *Panentheism* provides the most extensive job of tracing the philosophic influences upon panentheism. Geisler provides a more intensive effort in explaining process thought, one of the more prominent forms of panentheism. Norman L. Geisler, *The History of Western Philosophy, Volume II: Modern and Post-Modern* (Matthews, NC: Bastion Books, 2012), 404-435. Although he does not distinguish between pantheism and panentheism, Herrick provides a very helpful historical survey. James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality: The Eclipse of Western Religious Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 39.

⁶ Most of these distinctions are taken from J. Cooper, *Panentheism*, 27-30, and Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Three Varieties of Panentheism," *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being*, eds. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids: MI: WM. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 21.

⁷ Griffin posits "most of the problems of Christian theology, I have emphasized, have been due to, or at least aggravated by the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, which was introduced at the end of the second Christian century." David Griffin, *Two Great Truths* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 83. The term creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) may have been coined in the second century but the underlying concept is implied in many passages in books of the Bible that date back many centuries prior.

⁸ Albert Einstein, a believer in the non-personal God of Spinoza, asserted, “The main source of the present-day conflicts between the spheres of religion and science lies in the concept of a personal God.” Philipp Frank, *Einstein: His Life and Times* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 285-286.

⁹ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 119-120, 167, 188.

¹⁰ A survey of a few the titles and subtitles of panentheistic books from the early 21st century show the importance of this fusion to the movement: *Two Great Truths: A New Synthesis of Scientific Naturalism and Christian Faith*; *Panentheism and Scientific Naturalism: Rethinking Evil, Morality, Religious Experience, Religious Pluralism, and the Academic Study of Religion*; *All That Is: A Naturalistic Faith for the Twenty-First Century*; *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming-Natural, Divine and Human*; *Paths from Science Towards God: The End of all Our Exploring*; *The Cyclic God Hypothesis: Why and How God Experiences the Universe through You: A Brief Introduction to General and Special Scientific Panentheism*; *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?*

¹¹ Whitehead argued that “traditional theism, by regarding God as having created the world out of absolute nothingness, left no alternative except to discern in [God] the origin of all evil as well as of all good.” David Griffin, *Two Great Truths* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 88. One possible answer to this objection is that evil a privation of something good rather than a created thing. God created the conditions where evil becomes possible but did not create evil itself.

¹² It is important to clarify which of the three senses the Hebrew concept of “heaven” is in focus here. Most immediately, heaven may refer to the sky immediately above us where birds fly and clouds float—the troposphere. Second, it may refer to the larger area where the moon, planets, and stars can be found—the “outer-space” beyond the earth’s atmosphere. Third, it may be a place entirely outside of our universe. It is this this third sense is the one I am using here. In 2nd Corinthians 12:2, Paul refers to the realm where God lives as “the third heaven.” This corresponds with the third sense. Similarly, Solomon gave no room for a panentheistic view of the world when he prayed, “But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, *heaven and the highest heaven* cannot contain you, how much less this house [temple] I have built ... for your name, then hear from heaven *your dwelling place* their prayer and their pleas” (2 Chronicles 6:18, 39, italics added). Although God is fully able to reach into our universe and can even manifest himself in some localized way at any time he chooses, he does not, contrary to the panentheistic models, dwell inside of our universe.

¹³ Gilson, for example, says, “There is a great deal of Neoplatonism in Augustine, but there is a point, and it is a decisive one, at which he parts company with Plotinus: there is nothing above God in the Christian world of Augustine, and, since God is being, there is nothing above being. ... he parted from Plotinus on this fundamental principle of the primacy of Being.” Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 31.

¹⁴ Cooper summarizes, “Most contemporary alternatives to classical theism are branches of a single-family tree with roots in Plato and Neoplatonism. Broadly speaking, this is the ancient

tradition of panentheism. ... it is not, however, possible simply to equate Neoplatonism and panentheism..." Cooper, *Panentheism*, 17-19.

¹⁵ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 104. Cobb points out that these "antitheses" which Whitehead is famous for are not in violation of the law of non-contradiction because God has two "natures" and therefore these propositions are true in slightly different ways.

¹⁶ That this god that is constantly being recreated every moment was made clear in a public debate between classical theist Norm Geisler and process panentheist John Cobb. "Process Theism versus Classical Theism." April, 1988. <http://normangeisler.com/listen>. Like Whitehead, his God has an infinite pole beyond the world and a finite pole in the world. It is easier to imagine their view as two separate Gods—one great, unchanging, uncreated, and infinite God in the metaphysical world, and a lesser, changing, created, dying, recreated, temporal god inside our physical world. But then the two have to be cobbled back together into one internally inconsistent and impossible God.

¹⁷ Panentheists generally assume that the five ways Thomas Aquinas used to argue logically for the existence of God were discredited by modern philosophers like Hume and Kant. Feser, however, argues that they did not understand Aquinas properly and only succeeded in knocking over straw men. Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (London, England: OneWorld, 2009), 8-9; Edward Feser, "Taking Aquinas Seriously," *First Things*, June 30, 2017, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/06/taking-aquinas-seriously>; Edward Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Cooper, *Panentheism*, 339.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 138.

²⁰ Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology*, 104-105.

²¹ *Ibid*, 106-107.