

Panentheism—Part One

By Dr. Norman Geisler

(from *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker, 1999)

Panentheism is not to be confused with *pantheism* (see Theological Dictionary last month). Pantheism literally means all (“pan”) is God (“theism”), but panentheism means “all in God.” It is also called *process theology* (since it views God as a changing Being), *bipolar theism* (since it believes God has two poles), *organicism* (since it views all that actually is as a gigantic organism), and *neoclassical theism* (because it believes God is finite and temporal, in contrast to classical theism).

Differences between theism and panentheism can be summarized:

Theism	Panentheism
God is Creator. Creation is <i>ex nihilo</i> . God is sovereign over world. God is independent over world. God is unchanging. God is absolutely perfect. God is mono-polar. God is actually infinite.	God is director. Creation is <i>ex materia</i> . God is working with world. God is dependent on world. God is changing. God is growing more perfect. God is bi-polar. God is actually finite.

Rather than viewing God as the infinite, unchanging sovereign Creator of the world who brought it into existence, panentheists think of God as a finite, changing, director of world affairs who works in cooperation with the world in order to achieve greater perfection in his nature.

Theism views God’s relation to the world as a painter to a painting. The painter exists independently of the painting; he brought the painting into existence, and yet his mind is expressed in the painting. By contrast, the panentheist views God’s relation to the world the way a mind is related to a body. Indeed, they believe the world is God’s “body” (one pole) and the “mind” is the other pole. This is why the term *bipolar* is used. However, like some modern materialists who believe the mind is dependent on the brain, panentheists believe God is dependent on the world. Yet there is a reciprocal dependence, a sense in which the world is dependent on God.

Variations on Panentheism. All panentheists agree that God has two poles, an actual pole (the world) and a potential pole (beyond the world). All agree that God is changing, finite, and temporal in his actual pole. And all agree that his potential pole is unchanging and eternal.

The major difference in how they view God is whether God in his actual pole is one actual entity (event) or a society of actual entities. Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) holds the former view, and Charles Hartshorne holds the latter.

Most other differences are primarily methodological. Whitehead’s approach is more empirical, while Hartshorne’s is more rational. Hence, Whitehead has a kind of teleological

argument for God, whereas Hartshorne is famous for his ontological argument. Some panentheists, such as John Cobb, reject the disjunction between the two poles in God. He claims that God acts as a unity, not simply in one pole or the other. But all agree that God has two poles which can be diagrammed:

Primordial Nature	Consequent Nature
potential pole eternal absolute unchanging imperishable unlimited conceptual abstract necessary eternal objects unconscious drive	actual pole temporal relative changing perishable limited physical concrete contingent actual entities conscious realization

Representatives of Panentheism. There were many forerunners of a process view of God. Plato's (428-348 B.C.) Demiurgos eternally struggled with the chaos to form it into the cosmos. This provided the dualistic background for God's two "poles." Even earlier (ca. 500 B.C.), Heraclitus's flux philosophy asserted that the world is a constantly changing process.

In the modern world, G. W. F. Hegel's (1770-1831) progressive unfolding of God in the world process took a significant step toward Panentheism. In the Cosmic Evolutionism of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) the universe is viewed as an unfolding and developing process. Henri Bergson (1851-1941) then proposed a creative evolution (1907) of a life force (*elan vital*) which drives evolution forward in "leaps." Later he identified this Force with God (1935). Even before this, Samuel Alexander's *Space, Time and Deity* (1920) pioneered a process view of God's relation to the temporal universe. The main fountainhead of panentheism, however, is Whitehead. His influence is manifest in Hartshorne, Schubert Ogden, Cobb, and others.

Basic Beliefs of Panentheism. Although there are intramural differences among panentheists, their basic worldview has the same essential elements. Elements included are:

The Nature of God. All panentheists agree that God has two poles. The consequent or concrete pole is God in reality. It is God as he actually is in his moment-by-moment existence. It is God in the actual particulars of his becoming. In this pole God is finite, relative, dependent, contingent, and in process. God's other pole is the primordial or abstract one. This is God in abstraction, what is common and constant in God's character no matter what world exists. The divine abstract pole gives a mere outline of God's existence without filling it out with concrete or particular content. In this pole God is infinite, absolute, independent, necessary; and immutable.

Panentheists agree that God's abstract pole is included in his concrete pole. His becoming or process characterizes all of reality. But this reality of God is not to be thought of as being, which is static and uncreative. Creativity pervades all that exists. And God is

supremely creative.

God is also viewed as personal. There is disagreement over whether he is one actual entity (as in Whitehead) or an ordered series of actual entities (as in Hartshorne). But almost all panentheists believe that God is personal.

Nature of the Universe. The universe is characterized by process, change, or becoming. This is so because it is constituted by a multitude of self-creative creatures that are constantly introducing change and novelty into the universe. Also, the universe is eternal. This does not necessarily mean that the present universe is eternal. Rather it could mean that there have been many universes throughout the infinite past. Some world has existed in some form always and some world in some form will always exist into the infinite future. Lastly, all panentheists reject the traditional theistic understanding of creation out of nothing, that is, *ex nihilo*. Some, including Ogden, accept the phrase *ex nihilo* but reinterpret creation to mean only that the present world or world-state once was not and was created out of a previous world. Others (like Whitehead and Hartshorne) reject even the notion of creation *ex nihilo* and affirm creation *ex materia* (out of preexistent material). Of course, since the material is really God's physical pole, so creation is also *ex deo*. In fact, the present universe is co-created by God and man out of the preexisting "stuff." God, of course, is the prime Transformer or Shaper of each world and of each world-state.

(to be continued)