

# Pantheistic God-Concepts: Ancient, Contemporary, Popular, and Plausible Alternatives to Classical Theism

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## Introduction

Scholarly arguments for God's existence in Western academia tend to focus on the Judeo-Christian god, and unsurprisingly, are often proffered by those scholars who personally profess the Christian faith. Respected and influential Christian philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga goes so far as to implore his fellow believing philosophers to use their skills in advocating and promoting the Judeo-Christian God.<sup>1</sup> However, the majority of philosophical arguments for God's existence, including Plantinga's lauded ontological argument, do not successfully identify the hypothetical god in question as any particular god, let alone the Judeo-Christian deity.<sup>2</sup> For example, William Lane Craig's *Kalam* cosmological argument merely indicates a creator (actually, it only indicates a cause); it does not identify the creator, or specify that the creator is itself uncreated.<sup>3</sup> Teleological and axiomatic arguments only indicate some sort of design in the universe. Plantinga's ontological argument indicates a maximally great being; again, the argument does not specify the identity of this being. Additionally, Plantinga acknowledges the grave error of those who wish to use his

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga, 'Advice to Christian Philosophers', *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1984), pp. 253-271.

<sup>2</sup> Considerations of 'gods' in the plural and the plausibility of polytheism are beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>3</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), p. 111.

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argument as a ‘proof’ of God, by acknowledging the difference between epistemic possibility and actual or physical possibility.<sup>4</sup>

This unspecific nature leaves open the possibility that even if such arguments were sound, they could ‘prove’ the existence of another god, even one that is a different type of god, and incompatible with the preferred god of these Christian theological philosophers. While theistic religions purport a separation between creator and created, pantheism provides a monistic view; all is one, and all is god. This leads to many important differences between the two mutually exclusive views, further leading to an intellectual conflict. There are a number of forms of pantheism, which can be found from antiquity to among contemporary sources, which shall be explored. Many New Age and contemporary Pagan religions are pantheistic to some extent. Furthermore, pantheism, as relative to classical theism (itself one of the many possible monotheisms), seems to fit many philosophical arguments for God’s existence equally well, and may even be a logically superior possibility. Brief discussions on logical plausibility reveal many pantheisms to be relatively simple, and plausible, God-conceptions. In referring to God, gender-neutrality has been considered.

### **Various Pantheisms, and Their Differences From Monotheisms**

Etymologically, ‘generic’ pantheism merely asserts that God is everything and everything is God. There are also naturalistic forms of pantheism, in which God is essentially a redundant concept, reduced to a synonym for the natural world; in this view there are no supernatural entities.<sup>5</sup> One particularly interesting form of pantheism is pandeism, which involves a creative act that is somewhat similar to that in traditional monotheism. In pandeistic scenarios, there is a powerful deity who sacrificed itself in order to create the universe. In this case, one possibility is that the deity is not fully ‘consumed’ by the creative process, and some remnant remains which can be described by panendeism, a conflation of deism and panentheism. The latter is the view that the universe is and is in God, but that God is yet greater or more substantial. Despite the great variety of pantheisms, they tend to share one crucial element, which leads to numerous differences

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<sup>4</sup> Alvin Plantinga and James F. Sennett, *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 65-71.

<sup>5</sup> World Pantheist Movement. ‘Commentary on the WPM belief statement’, at [www.pantheism.net/about/manifest-note.htm](http://www.pantheism.net/about/manifest-note.htm). Accessed 18/01/2013.

from monotheistic traditions: the Universe, and all that lies within, is God. That is, it consists of divine ‘stuff’.

All these God-conceptions share the idea that God and the universe are of the same substance, or essence. Even in pantheism, a seeming attempt to continue positing a ‘superior’ and ‘separate’ god, the creation is of the same essence as the creator. This directly opposes theistic notions of transcendence, that the creation is separate from God.<sup>6</sup> One example of the incompatibility of these opposing views is demonstrated by the Judeo-Christian traditions’ prohibitions on idolatry.<sup>7</sup> If all is God, it would be counter-intuitive to outlaw reverence towards trees, heroes, statues and other objects. And while the God of theism is personal, the pantheistic God is possibly impersonal; in fact, under pantheism, it may be considered that the God that did exist, no longer exists as God, and humankind is largely left to its own devices (as in deism). Another significant difference is that monotheism generally implores adherents to seek and to please God. In many forms of pantheism such action is unnecessary and even fruitless. For God is within, and humankind’s only ‘requirement’ would be to *be*; seemingly all a pantheistic God would desire of us, if anything.

Various forms of pantheism, such as naturalistic pantheism and pantheism, provide some measure of support to the scepticism of modern secularists who sometimes point to the lack of scientific evidence for God, with a strong focus on monotheistic gods and associated fundamentalisms.<sup>8</sup> The clear lack of dogmatic adherence to a particular god in many pantheisms may foster greater religious tolerance, and could lead to wider acceptance of non-theistic and possibly more open religions such as Buddhism, Daoism, or indigenous animisms. Pantheistic worldviews tend to be very inclusive, and could thus have positive societal impacts. Rather than teaching that there exists a special race of people, from a special species, chosen by the one true God, pantheists understand that ‘all are one’. God does not choose one people/species, and command them to kill

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Craig (ed.), *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 590.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 20:4.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007); Christopher R. Cotter, ‘Consciousness Raising: The Critique, Agenda, and Inherent Precariousness of Contemporary Anglophone Atheism’, *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2011), pp. 77-103.

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or subjugate other peoples/species who do not please him/her, as may be the case with certain incarnations of classical theism.<sup>9</sup> Rather, all people are God. All species are God. And all that is, is God. A worldview that encourages reverence for humanity and nature may increase the chances of cooperation, egalitarianism and unity, and could result in ecological benefits.<sup>10</sup>

### **Ancient Examples**

While theism enjoys a rich history, which extends beyond the origins of Christianity, pantheistic concepts too are not without historical precedent. It is relatively easy to find pantheistic ideas among early indigenous, animistic and Pagan traditions; the identifying of divinity in animals, plants and even inanimate objects, and reverence for the natural world are found in many early religious traditions and are compatible with pantheism. Certain (and early) streams of Indian religions (such as Advaita Vedanta) however, express unambiguous and clear pantheistic, or panentheistic, teachings via the concept of Brahman.<sup>11</sup> Brahman is reality; all that exists is incorporated into it. Brahman is indistinguishable from the natural world leading some Hindus to assert *aham Brahmasmi*, “I am Brahman”.<sup>12</sup> Panentheism, a pantheistic variant entailing a world contained within God rather than being necessarily equivalent to God, is commonly found among the ancient South Asian traditions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> W. S. Urquhart, ‘The Fascination of Pantheism’, *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1911), p. 323; Michael P. Levine, ‘Pantheism, Ethics and Ecology’, *Environmental Values*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1994), pp. 121-138; Robert S. Corrington, ‘Deep Pantheism’, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2007), pp. 503-507.

<sup>11</sup> W. S. Urquhart, ‘The Fascination of Pantheism’, *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1911), p. 313.

<sup>12</sup> Ted Peters, ‘Models of God’, *Philosophia*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2007), p. 281.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen Stansell and Stephen H. Phillips, ‘Hartshorne and Indian Panentheism’, *Sophia*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2010), pp. 285-295. For more examples, including a defense of the plausibility of panentheism relative to monotheism or classical theism, see Raphael Lataster, ‘The Attractiveness of Panentheism—a Reply to Benedikt Paul Göcke’, *Sophia*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2014), pp. 389-395; and Raphael Lataster, ‘Theists Misrepresenting Panentheism—Another Reply to Benedikt Paul Göcke’, *Sophia*, vol. 54, no. 1 (2015), pp. 93-98.

The Chinese concept of the *Dao* also seems synonymous with the all-encompassing pantheistic ‘divine’ and may have influenced Zen Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> From the *Daodejing*, attributed to Laozi, we find that the *Dao*, apparently the essence of the pantheistic God, is eternal and all-encompassing; said to be older and greater than ‘God’ or the universe.<sup>15</sup> From another influential Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi, “The universe and I exist together, and all things and I are one.”<sup>16</sup> Zhuangzi further explained that the *Dao* is everywhere, even in the ‘excrement and urine’.<sup>17</sup> Pantheistic elements can also be found among certain – often ‘mystical’ – streams of traditionally theistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>18</sup> There are also various Chinese folk myths about Pángǔ, a primordial being who created the universe and simultaneously destroyed himself, with his body parts said to have formed many aspects of our world.<sup>19</sup> That this pandeistic concept of the god that became the universe could be a misinterpretation of the original texts, does not diminish the truth that the concept had taken root, perhaps as an elaborated myth, and in any case there is a clear indication of a divine, transformative process. The motif of the world being formed from the bodies of slain powerful beings can also be found among Babylonian, Scandinavian, and Polynesian myths, demonstrating the antiquity of these concepts.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Marty Heitz, ‘Knocking on Heaven’s Door: Meister Eckhart and Zhuangzi on the Breakthrough’, *Dao*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2007), p. 57; Merv Fowler, *Zen Buddhism: Beliefs and Practices* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> *Daodejing* 4, 25; Wing-Tsit Chan (ed.), *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 152.

<sup>16</sup> *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> Nils Bjorn Kvastad, ‘Pantheism and Mysticism, Part I’, *Sophia*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1975), pp. 1-15; G. J. Stokes, ‘Gnosticism and Modern Pantheism’, *Mind*, vol. 4, no. 15 (1895), p. 320.

<sup>19</sup> Xiaodong Wu, ‘The Rhinoceros Totem and Pangu Myth: An Exploration of the Archetype of Pangu’, *Oral Tradition*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2001), pp. 364-380; Xiaodong Wu, ‘Pangu and the Origin of the Universe’, in *China’s Creation and Origin Myths: Cross-Cultural Explorations in Oral and Written Traditions*, eds Mineke Schipper, Shuxian Ye, and Hubin Yin (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> L. W. King, *The Seven Tablets of Creation: The Babylonian and Assyrian Legends Concerning the Creation of the World and of Mankind* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), pp. 75-77, 87; David Toshio Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaokampf Theory in the Old Testament* (Warsaw, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), p. 194; William Morris and Eirikr Magnusson, *The Story of the Volsungs* (London: Walter Scott Press, 1888), pp. 9-10; Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches*

### **Modern Expressions**

Pantheism is not merely an ancient God-model; it can also be found in contemporary contexts. New Religious Movements, for example New Age or contemporary Pagan religions, often contain many pantheistic elements, such as an all-pervading divinity, interconnectedness, tolerance, and reverence for nature.<sup>21</sup> In responding to physicist Leonard Mlodinow on the *Larry King Live* television program, New Age guru and best-selling author Deepak Chopra demonstrated his pantheistic, or specifically pandeistic, worldview:

In fact, he says in the book that at least 10 to the power of 500 universes could possibly exist in super position of possibility at this level, which to me suggests an omniscient being. The only difference I have was God did not create the universe, God became the universe.<sup>22</sup>

Academics from varying fields have either noted modern pantheistic trends, or otherwise argued for pantheism. Religious Studies scholar Carole Cusack asserts that the West has gradually become ‘Easternised’,<sup>23</sup> with a move from its more traditional values, such as monotheism, to foreign concepts such as deep ecology and pantheism.<sup>24</sup> Many scholars have identified the decline of theism in the West, particularly in Europe, and the increasing acceptance of religious plurality and alternative spiritualities.<sup>25</sup>

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*into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 312-314.

<sup>21</sup> Ted Peters, ‘Models of God’, p. 282; Dennis D. Carpenter, ‘Emergent Nature Spirituality: An Examination of the Major Spiritual Contours of the Contemporary Pagan Worldview’, in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 35-72.

<sup>22</sup> CNN, ‘CNN Larry King Live (Transcript): Interview With Stephen Hawking; Science and Religion’, at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1009/10/1kl.01.html>. Accessed 07/01/2013.

<sup>23</sup> This might confuse those in the East, who wish to become ‘Westernised’, seemingly demonstrating the truism that the ‘grass is always greener on the other side’. See Frank C. Darling, *The Westernization of Asia: A Comparative Political Analysis* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979); Gopa Bagchi, Pradosh Kumar Rath, and Guru Saran Lal, ‘Westernisation of Indian Culture: A Study of Chhattisgarh’, *Shodh Sanchayan*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2011), pp. 25-29.

<sup>24</sup> Carole M. Cusack, ‘The Western Reception of Buddhism: Celebrity and Popular Cultural Media as Agents of Familiarisation’, *Australian Religion Studies Review*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2011), p. 308; Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> Colin Campbell, ‘The Easternisation of the West’, in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, eds Bryan R. Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (London: Routledge,

In an earlier article, Cusack noted the pantheistic tendencies of the Pagan Church of All Worlds, particularly the concept that is so offensive to many monotheists, ‘Thou art God’, as well as themes of unity. Cusack ends the article with a possibly hopeful idea; as early Christian, Buddhists, Zoroastrians and Daoists may have been unable to predict the degree of their respective creed’s global penetration, so too might pantheistic new religious movements become influential in future.<sup>26</sup>

Theoretical physicist Paola Zizzi also seems to support a pantheistic view, arguing that at the end of cosmic inflation (occurring almost simultaneously with the Big Bang), the universe could have had a “primordial conscious experience” in which the universe ‘selected’ one out of many possible universes.<sup>27</sup> Such a possibility should not be viewed upon as particularly irrational, given that many small parts of the universe actually are ‘conscious’. There is no logical reason to dismiss the possibility that the universe itself is, or was at some point, conscious. This is further made plausible by various contemporary theories on consciousness, and eventually, on ‘life’. Cognitive scientist Marvin Minsky, for example, theorises that there is nothing particularly significant about consciousness; that thoughts and emotions are merely products of natural and physical processes.<sup>28</sup> In other words, human beings are not necessarily as significant as classical theologians might have us believe. We are merely machines, made of the same materials as mountains, oceans, stars, and recalling the humble Daoist thinkers, shit.

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1999); Anne-Marie Korte, ‘A Unique Instability? Exploring the Boundaries of Monotheism’, in *The Boundaries of Monotheism: Interdisciplinary Explorations into the Foundations of Western Monotheism*, eds Anne-Marie Korte and Maaïke De Haardt (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 1-8; Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, “‘Being Religious’ or ‘Being Spiritual’ in America: A Zero-Sum Proposition?”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2002), pp. 289-300; Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Carole M. Cusack, ‘Science Fiction as Scripture: Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* and the Church of All Worlds’, *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2009), pp. 73, 90.

<sup>27</sup> Paola A. Zizzi, ‘Emergent Consciousness: From the Early Universe to Our Mind’, *NeuroQuantology*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2003): 310.

<sup>28</sup> Marvin Lee Minsky, *The Emotion Machine: Commensense Thinking, Artificial Intelligence, and the Future of the Human Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

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Astrophysicist Bernard Haisch recently espoused a pandeistic worldview, implying that it combines scientific knowledge with more inclusive religious ideas.<sup>29</sup> Physicist Albert Einstein personally held some sort of pantheistic worldview: “I believe in Spinoza’s God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings”.<sup>30</sup> Historian Arnold Toynbee, who took special interest in the rise and fall of civilisations, went so far as to argue that if humankind did not move from monotheistic faith towards pantheistic ideals, self-destruction could result.<sup>31</sup> Astronomer and physical cosmologist Carl Sagan seemed to espouse a naturalistic pantheism in his popular book, *Pale Blue Dot* (which also alluded to the relative insignificance of humankind):

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.<sup>32</sup>

Pantheism has also been made accessible to modern audiences, through films and popular books. One example is the film *Avatar* (2009), which presents themes of interconnectedness, nature-worship, sustainability (balance), simplicity, and respect for all.<sup>33</sup> One interesting scene explains that, much like an impersonal pantheistic God (and as a not-so-subtle critique of theism), the Great Mother “does not take sides”. *Avatar* has become the highest-grossing film of all-time, which may have more to do with the West becoming increasingly receptive towards ‘Eastern’ and pantheistic ideals, and less to do with its award-winning special effects.<sup>34</sup> In his best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, biologist Richard Dawkins briefly

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<sup>29</sup> Bernard Haisch, *The God Theory: Universes, Zero-Point Fields, and What’s Behind It All* (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 2006); Bernard Haisch, *The Purpose-Guided Universe: Believing in Einstein, Darwin, and God* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Ronald W. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1971), pp. 413-414.

<sup>31</sup> Arnold Toynbee, ‘The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis’, *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, vol. 3, nos 1-4 (1972), pp. 141-146.

<sup>32</sup> Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 77.

<sup>33</sup> James Cameron, *Avatar* (Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2009), Film.

<sup>34</sup> Ken Hillis, ‘From Capital to Karma: James Cameron’s *Avatar*’, *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2009), at [http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/postmodern\\_culture/v019/19.3.hillis.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/postmodern_culture/v019/19.3.hillis.html). Accessed DATE.



mentions naturalistic pantheism, describing it as “sexed-up atheism”, while philosopher Martin Yalcin, somewhat similarly sees pantheism as “a version of theism that has been naturalized, but only half-heartedly”.<sup>35</sup> While the term ‘pantheism’ may be unknown to most, its principles and unifying ideals seem to resonate deeply with those dissatisfied with a contemporary or consumerist lifestyle.

### **The Logical Plausibility of Pantheistic Models**

Philosophical arguments for God’s existence in the analytic tradition are often put forth by Christian Philosophers of Religion, in support of the theistic (and generally, the Judeo-Christian) God. Even a cursory glance over these arguments makes clear that not only do the majority of these arguments not identify the theistic god in question, but they do not necessitate that the god in question must be theistic (or monotheistic) in the first place. In his apologetic *magnum opus*, William Lane Craig presents a clear and thorough cumulative case for God’s existence.<sup>36</sup> He presents an argument from contingency, his noted *Kalam* cosmological argument, a teleological argument from fine-tuning, an axiomatic argument, an ontological argument, a quasi-argument from personal experience, and finally his Christological argument. Respectively, these arguments conclude that there exists at least one necessary being, the universe has a cause of its existence, the universe was designed, there is an absolute moral law-giver, a maximally great being exists, some supernatural entity speaks directly to believers like Craig, and that Jesus was resurrected. These arguments are typically unsound, but can be assumed sound in order to entertain the possibility of various gods and God-conceptions.

Apart from Craig’s Christological argument (and also Swinburne’s supposedly Bayesian Christological argument), these arguments do not specify that the god in question must be Yahweh, the god of the Judeo-Christian religions.<sup>37</sup> Nor do these conclusions necessitate that the god in question must be of the theistic tradition. A pandeistic god for example,

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), p. 18; Martin O. Yalcin, ‘American Naturalism on Pantheism’, *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2011), p. 178.

<sup>36</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*. Page ref?

<sup>37</sup> For my refutation of the former, see Raphael Lataster, ‘A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of William Lane Craig’s Resurrection of Jesus Argument’, *Think*, vol. 14, no. 39 (2015), pp. 59-71.

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could be a necessary and maximally great being, who created and designed (in terms of intelligent life and moral standards) the universe, and whose spiritual essence manifests itself as miracles and ‘personal communications with the divine’. Even when considering Christological arguments, granting the resurrection of Jesus still leaves open the possibility that the god in question is Zeus, Odin, or some pantheistic god. In the pandeistic example above, Jesus may have been more in tune with his spiritual and ultimately divine essence than most, allowing him to overcome death. Another type of pantheistic and maximally great god could also have shown mercy towards Jesus and other great prophets, despite the great confusion that would result (that it was the lesser or even non-existing god, Yahweh, that raised Jesus from the dead).

Also, there is nothing in these arguments to suggest that all the conclusions must apply to the same entity. There may be a maximally great entity for example, that created a Demiurge-like being, which then created the universe, while her ‘sister-god’ designed or refined it and provided moral instruction. There are all manner of possibilities with numbers and even numbers of ‘levels’ of gods, similar to the complex hierarchy of divine entities found in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.<sup>38</sup> It can be concluded that the generic and specific arguments for God’s existence leave open the possibility of a pantheistic-type god, as well as a theistic god. Furthermore, there may be a case to be made that pantheism, or some variant thereof, is the more plausible view. One way to demonstrate this may be through consistent application of Plantinga’s (which Craig summarises in *Reasonable Faith*) lauded ontological argument.

### **Would a Maximally Great Being Be Pantheistic?**

The ontological argument is perhaps the only argument presented by Christian Philosophers of Religion that move the discussion from merely a creator, designer or moral-lawgiver, to the greatest being that exists, or specifically, the greatest being imaginable and possible; what many believers and non-believers alike would consider to be God. Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument essentially states that if it possible for a “maximally great being” (God) to exist, it must exist in some possible world and in every possible world, which therefore means that it exists in

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<sup>38</sup> John Milton and Dennis Richard Danielson, *Paradise Lost* (London: Broadview Press, 2012 [1667]).

our actual world.<sup>39</sup> There are problems with this argument, such as the first premise being merely epistemically possible, in the sense that we do not know if such a being exists or not so the truth could be either, but it is not demonstrably physically or actually possible. Plantinga himself admits to this limitation, only noting that the concept does not seem irrational, and concedes that his argument is not a ‘proof’ of God, before alluding to his reformed epistemological notion that belief in God is rational and warranted, without the need for proof. If the argument were assumed to be sound, it would be interesting to identify what sort of God would exist, if such a maximally great God does exist.

Though Plantinga is of the opinion that this argument demonstrates the rationality of his belief in God, it does not specify the Judeo-Christian God, nor does it demonstrate the plausibility of classical theism. In fact, the subject of this argument may be a god who is greater than the Judeo-Christian god. For example, various passages in the Jewish Scriptures possibly point to the existence of other gods, and to at least one that may be superior to Yahweh, the god of Judeo-Christianity, if the antiquity and reliability of the Septuagint is upheld.<sup>40</sup> More interesting however, is the God-concept of pantheism. While a theistic god such as Yahweh could be conceived as the ‘greatest possible being’ (though it may contradict the Jewish Scriptures which espouse him), the all-inclusive God of pantheism can also be conceived. The question is whether this pantheistic God can be considered ‘greater’.

According to Plantinga, “maximal greatness” includes the properties of omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection. Whilst this is arbitrary, a pantheistic God could certainly demonstrate these properties. My assertion is that if the concept of “omniessence” (not to be confused with omniscience, with *esse* being Latin for ‘being’) were included into this concept of “maximal greatness,” then the traditional monotheistic God of Christianity becomes impossible, and pantheism is the only logically possible God-conception. Omniessence is a concept relating to being and existence. There is a clear separation or duality in the monotheistic worldview; there is God and there is the Creation, whether that is Earth, the known universe, or a hypothetical multiverse or “complete description of

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<sup>39</sup> Alvin Plantinga and James F. Sennett, *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 65-71.

<sup>40</sup> Deuteronomy 11:16, Joshua 24:2, Deuteronomy 32:8-9, Psalm 82:1.

reality.” If omniessence were a valid property of a maximally great entity, such a ‘dualistic God’ would not be considered maximally great. The pantheistic God however, incorporates the Creation, and is thus a much stronger candidate for being this maximally great entity. Interestingly, this concept of omniessence is compatible with the concept of omnipresence (which is not mentioned in Plantinga’s argument) and omniscience. In fact, omniessence might be a requirement of omniscience.

Omniscience is a characteristic commonly attributed to God by philosophers of religion such as Plantinga, and also has Biblical precedent.<sup>41</sup> In order for an all-knowing God to know what a person feels when they burn their hand, it may not be enough for God to understand that intense heat causes pain to human beings; God might have to *be* that person, in order to acquire the experiential knowledge. If God were not that person, its experience is only theoretical and derived, rather than perceptual and immediate.<sup>42</sup> Philosopher William Mander (University of Oxford) agrees that on the basis of knowledge, only a pantheistic God could exist.<sup>43</sup> New Age theorist Neale Donald Walsch also describes his pantheistic God as creating the universe in order to experience his theoretical knowledge directly, or experientially.<sup>44</sup> In this case God would not merely be ‘part’ of the totality of all that exists; God would ‘be’ the totality of all that exists. And thus, omniscience could imply omniessence. Such a God seems intuitively and conceptually greater than the seemingly limited monotheistic God. And conception strikes at the very origins of the ontological argument.

One critical flaw with such reasoning is that there is no established logical reason to demonstrate that an omniessent being would be necessarily greater than one that is not all-encompassing. The same could of course be said about other traditional aspects of God and maximally great beings, such as moral perfection. Of great relevance towards Christian Philosophers of Religion, the concept that a “bigger” or “more substantial” god is a greater god may also have Biblical precedent, whereby the Judeo-

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<sup>41</sup> Job 37:16, Psalm 147:5, Matthew 10:30.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Francks, ‘Omniscience, Omnipotence and Pantheism’, *Philosophy*, vol. 54, no. 209 (1979), p. 396.

<sup>43</sup> William J. Mander, ‘Omniscience and Pantheism’, *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2000): 199-208.

<sup>44</sup> Neale Donald Walsch, *Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue, Book 1* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1996), pp. 21-30, 75.

Christian Scriptures equate size and/or substance with greatness, indicating that a smaller Temple or even the “heavens” cannot contain God.<sup>45</sup> When ‘more substance’ or ‘more essence’ is clearly associated with greatness, it seems logical to deduce that maximal essence, or omniscience, could, if not should, be a characteristic of maximal greatness.

This point is perhaps unexpectedly conceded by contemporary theologian and philosopher LeRon Shults of the University of Agder, Norway, who claims that if God is not equivalent with the universe or the multiverse, then God and “the world” would be parts of “the Whole”.<sup>46</sup> God would be merely a part of the universe, as we all are; as is the humble tufted titmouse. Such a god may still exist, but may be more accurately described as a powerful extra-terrestrial, such as Lord Xenu, the intergalactic dictator of Scientology.<sup>47</sup> In Shults’ scenario, there would be at *least one* entity that seems to be greater: the universe itself. To avoid the embarrassment that God is not the greatest being in existence, the believer would be compelled to accept the pantheistic conclusion that God is one with the Creation. A possible limitation with this view however, is the assumption that ‘God plus the Creation’ can be considered to be a single entity, and also the aforementioned issue that bigger is not necessarily better (such as a cake not being as sweet as the sugar that partly comprises it).

Certainly, a pantheistic god can be conceived (which lies at the heart of historical ontological arguments), and does not seem any less rational than a theistic god. Whether such a god is necessarily greater is open to discussion, largely hinging on the inclusion of ‘omniscience’ as a property of ‘maximal greatness’. Recall that the elements that make up a ‘maximally great being’ were arbitrarily chosen. If the case can be made that a maximally great being must demonstrate omniscience (or even omnipresence), in addition to omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection, then monotheism is instantly rendered logically inferior to various forms of pantheism. Given that such ontological arguments are

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<sup>45</sup> Chronicles 2:5-6.

<sup>46</sup> F. LeRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 161-164.

<sup>47</sup> Mikael Rothstein, “‘His Name Was Xenu. He Used Renegades...’: Aspects of Scientology’s Founding Myth”, in *Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), page refs.

historically concerned with what can be imagined, logically proving that God should demonstrate omniscience may actually be unnecessary; though this would hardly be convincing to those whose beliefs do not hinge on ontological arguments.<sup>48</sup> Another way in which pantheism could possibly be presented as the more plausible worldview, hinges on levels of uncertainty.

### ***Creatio Ex Nihilo***

Dualistic theists, such as Swinburne and Craig, tend to accept the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. If a God brought into existence the Creation (whether that be the known universe, or the totality of all that exists), it could have done this in three ways: from pre-existing material, *creatio ex materia*,<sup>49</sup> from God's own substance or essence, *creatio ex deo*, or from 'nothing', *creatio ex nihilo*. Consider that *creatio ex materia* essentially serves the sceptic. If God created the cosmos from pre-existing material (actually a popular concept amongst process theologians), a further three possibilities are raised, with two of these being redundant. The first is that the material was produced by God, from God, leading to pantheism, and being equivalent to *creatio ex deo*. The second is that the material was produced by God from nothing, which is equivalent to *creatio ex nihilo*. These possibilities raise the same questions, albeit at another level. The third possibility presents the most interesting option. Perhaps this material is eternal, and existed independently of God; this 'material' could then serve as an 'alternative' to God. If this were the case, the precedent is set that the universe, like this pre-existing material (perhaps they are identical) could be eternal, uncaused, and independent of God. In this case, God simply is not necessary, making it difficult to 'force' God's existence by way of cosmological arguments. As this article briefly considers the relative (and not absolute) plausibility of pantheism and monotheism, *creatio ex materia* shall be ignored, with the focus being on *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio ex deo*.

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<sup>48</sup> It should be noted that ontological arguments may be necessary in moving God from the realm of 'mere' great entities to 'maximally great' beings. For example, it is the only argument in Craig's cumulative case that portrays an all-powerful god.

<sup>49</sup> Edward Craig (ed.), *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 180, 318.

Many prominent and popular theistic and Christian philosophers of religion do hold to the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, evidenced by Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Paul Copan and William Lane Craig.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of whether certain theists accept the doctrine or not, without it, there is no rational reason to reject pantheism (or a godless and eternal reality). Indeed, there are pantheistic and even atheistic Christians, though they are few, and are not the focus of this article. There is no logical problem with the concept that an extremely powerful Creator-god created something from itself. It would certainly make content those who hold to laws of conservation (whether of matter, energy, aether, essence, or spirit), given that pre-Creation, there is supposedly nought but God. Pantheism, or pandeism (assuming a Creative act), asks us to assume that God can use part of his essence to fashion some other object. This certainly does not seem irrational, considering laws of conservation and precedent from the natural world. Many birds for example use part of themselves, their saliva, to construct nests. There is no logical reason to think that an all-powerful god could also not use part of its self to create another object.

There are however, serious question marks over the validity of the traditional theistic and dualistic concept that God created the universe from ‘nothing’, and is thus separated from it. Monotheisms that depend on *creatio ex nihilo* rely on greater uncertainty. There is no empirical precedent for anything having come from a state of absolute nothingness. Indeed, the very concept of ‘nothing’ is itself up for debate. When astrophysicists and cosmologists such as Lawrence Krauss discuss “nothing,” they refer to “something” that contains much potentiality, as noted by popular theological philosopher, William Lane Craig.<sup>51</sup> The scientists’ view of nothing renders Creation a natural process, removing the need for a Creator-god. The theological concept of ‘nothing’ then seems to be merely a concept such as infinity (though that is arguable), with no

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<sup>50</sup> Alvin Plantinga and James F. Sennett, *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 20; Richard Swinburne, ‘Reply to Grünbaum’, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 51, no. 3 (2000), pp. 482-484; Richard Swinburne, ‘Second Reply to Grünbaum’, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 56, no. 4 (2005), p. 925; Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 90.

<sup>51</sup> Lawrence Maxwell Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, p. 115.

obvious and tangible application in the real world. If such theologians wish to assert that God created the universe out of nothing, they must first establish that there is or was ‘nothing’. This is admittedly a tough task, given that there is no philosophical or empirical evidence for the existence of ‘nothing’. Indeed, proving the existence of some sort of ‘absolute nothing’ may be impossible, given the very existence of the person asking the question, and how ‘nothing’ is typically defined.

When both the existence of an incredibly powerful God and the Creation event are assumed, *creatio ex deo*, which leads to pantheism (specifically, a pandeism or a type of pantheism), requires the prospective believer to accept no more controversial premises. Not so with arguments revolving around *creatio ex nihilo* (leading to Plantinga’s brand of theism), which asks the audience to accept the unproven premises that the theological concept of ‘nothing’ is sound, and that something can be made to arise from this ‘nothing’. In a pre-Creation world, the dualist may believe that only God exists, prompting theologians to ponder on the location and scope of the ‘nothing’ and whether God, a supposedly maximally-great entity, could possibly be constrained by it or a hypothetical God-nothing barrier.<sup>52</sup> In comparison with *creatio ex deo*, hypotheses revolving around *creatio ex nihilo* beg the question to a greater extent. Such philosophical theologians confidently assert that their unproven God created the cosmos out of unsubstantiated nothing, by way of unknown methods. The empirical and *a priori* proof for all this, including the very existence of ‘nothing’, is of course, nothing. In this sense, based on current knowledge (in a quasi-Bayesian epistemological sense), pandeistic forms of pantheism could be considered to be more plausible than monotheism, and the most probable god-models, in general.

On this note, the removal of more and more assumptions will potentially lead to the concept that there is no deity at all being the most logically plausible. Theism (at least those forms reliant on *creatio ex nihilo*), for example, relies on many assumptions, including the concept of nothing and the method by which something can come from nothing. When rejecting these unjustified assumptions, pandeism seems to be the more plausible view. For example, its lack of a personal god currently interested in human affairs coheres well with the lack of contemporary empirical

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<sup>52</sup> Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 125.



evidence for such a god. And yet pandeism relies on the assumption of a creative act. Dismissing this controversial premise renders 'straight pantheism' a more plausible view still. And even this view relies on the assumption that the universe is somehow conscious or divine. Once that assumption is rejected, naturalistic pantheism or naturalism (or 'strong atheism' as some may prefer to call it) sits alone, atop the probability pyramid.

## **Conclusion**

By surveying primary and secondary sources of ancient religions and mythologies, pantheism and its variants were shown to be ancient, and quite common, particularly in South Asia, East Asia, and amongst indigenous cultures. Shifting focus to the present, it became clear that our evolving modern society is becoming increasingly exposed to, and receptive of, Eastern, indigenous and pantheistic views. Though the term 'pantheism' is not so widely disseminated, pantheistic concepts and ideals can be found in popular culture, academic writings, and New Religious Movements such as contemporary Paganism and the Church of All Worlds. The differences between pantheisms and classical theism were made obvious, with brief discussions on societal and environmental factors. It was also discovered that many influential philosophical arguments used to demonstrate the existence of a theistic god, are actually generic in nature and do not necessarily imply theism; various forms of pantheism can also be deduced from these arguments' conclusions. It was further explained that more specific arguments, such as Christological arguments revolving around Jesus' alleged resurrection, could also be explained through pantheistic hypotheses.

Brief considerations of issues such as the Biblically supported notion of a relation between God's size and her greatness, and also the crucial monotheistic and dualistic concept of *creatio ex nihilo* being reliant on many controversial premises, leave open the possibility that many forms of pantheism may be more probable than theism. It is surprising that such a relatively logical and inclusive worldview is given little attention by scholars and laypeople alike, especially in light of the attention accorded to the major monotheistic faiths. It is hoped that this article, intending to be more rational and philosophical than polemical, will play some small role in alerting the global community to the limitations of theism, and the logical plausibility and possible societal/environmental benefits of

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pantheism. Considering the abundance of scholars occupied with studying the great monotheistic faiths, coupled with the gradual decline of theism in the West, and the associated increasing tolerance towards native spiritualities and ecological theology (including the shift towards personal religiosity), it is also hoped that pantheistic religions will be accorded more attention in the academy.