



# Who Is God?

## SESSION 2

*Theology means thinking about God. Christians have done that through the centuries and created a number of models for thinking about God. This can be fun, and it can be confusing. Which model is best? Is only one true? What does the Bible say?*

### Pantheism

The word *pantheism* places *pan*, meaning “all,” in front of the Greek word for belief in God, *theism*. Pantheism is the belief that all things are divine.

Pantheists distinguish between plurality and unity. Our everyday experience seems to indicate that the world is plural, made up of a wide diversity of things. Even you as a subjective person seem to be an individual, one person among others. However, this is an illusion. Down deep, below the level of perception, all things are only one thing. That one thing is the divine reality. The spiritual task is to get beneath the surface illusion and discover the deeper unity, to realize that even you as an apparently independent self are at one with the All, the divine whole of reality.

The Hindus in India call the All or unity of reality *Brahman*. When Hindus speak of the gods, *devas*, they mean intermediate entities such as Shiva or Vishnu who represent Brahman to our finite and limited human minds. Brahman is a reality that lies beyond the gods. What is transcendent for a Hindu is Brahman.

In our own era in the Western world, pantheism is on the rise. New Age spirituality has incorporated pantheism. The New Age emphasizes the sacredness of all things. This translates into ecological ethics. By emphasizing that the planet earth is divine and hence sacred in its depths, some ecologists argue that we should leave nature alone. We should withdraw our attempts to transform nature through technology because this is a form of profaning what is sacred. Rather, we should acknowledge that the natural world is intrinsically valuable and protect the ecosphere from further deterioration.



Can a Christian be a pantheist? Certainly not, if the God of Israel is equated with Shiva or Vishnu. These Hindu gods are less than ultimate. They merely mediate Brahman, which is more ultimate. Well then, can a Christian equate God with Brahman? No, not quite. Both Brahman and God are ultimate, to be sure. Yet, there is a decisive difference. Brahman is impersonal. God, according to Christians, in sharp contrast, is personal.

God for the Christian stands against the world while loving the world. The world is not a manifestation of the divine for Christians. The world is a creation, something God created from nothing. God relates to the world as something other than God. God loves the world, and love requires that the world be other in relationship to

God. God does not love the world as an extension of God's own being.

Even so, one aspect of pantheism is attractive to Christian eyes, namely, the idea that the sacred is everywhere present, that we need only look beneath the surface to see the presence of the ultimate divine reality. Christians agree with Hindus and New Agers on this point. However, the New Age version of pantheism that renders all of nature sacred and decrees technology to be profane presents a problem. For Christian theology, nature is not sacred. Only God is sacred. God may be present everywhere in the world of nature, to be sure; but this does not make nature itself sacred.

## Polytheism and Henotheism

*Polytheism* is belief in many gods, as the prefix *poly* implies. In its most primitive or basic form, polytheists believe spirits inhabit and direct the forces of nature. Native Americans before the arrival of the Europeans believed in the *manitoos*, spirits belonging to various species of animals they would hunt. Jesuit missionaries from France in the sixteenth century tried to convey what Christians mean by God and found it a challenge. They invented the concept of the "Great Spirit," who is the source of all the elemental spirits. The natives resisted joining the Christian church, but they loved the idea of the Great Spirit. The concept of the single Great Spirit spread from tribe to tribe across the continent and became a major part of Native American religion.

In biblical times the polytheism of Greece and Rome framed the experience of the first Christians. The gods were associated with natural forces. Zeus in Greece, renamed Jupiter in Rome, was the sky god, with the thunderbolt as his emblem. Aphrodite in Greece, renamed Venus in Rome, was the goddess of love, and her son, Eros, or Cupid, is still seen on Valentine cards with an arrow aimed right at your heart.

*Henotheism* is polytheism with an emphasis on loyalty to only one of the gods or on the superiority of one's own god over the gods of foreigners. In the ancient world, when one nation would conquer another, the statues of the native gods would be torn down and replaced with statues of those of the conquerors. Change rulers, change gods. In the biblical story of Ruth, Naomi in Moab tells Ruth she will follow her back to Israel. Naomi's words have become the song "Whither Thou Goest," sung today at weddings. "And Ruth said, Intreat me not to

leave thee, [or] to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people [shall be] my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16 KJV). Note that when Ruth moves to Israel, she worships the God of Israel. Change countries, change gods. This is henotheism.

The Hindus combine pantheism and polytheism. Every individual Hindu can select which god to worship, because the worship of a god is a means to a further end, namely, the acknowledgment of Brahman. The various gods are subordinate to Brahman. The plurality of gods funnels down into the unity of the one, Brahman.

Can Christians make themselves at home with polytheism? No, not likely. Already in New Testament times the Christians realized that their belief in the one God of Moses and Jesus could not be reconciled with the nationalistic gods of the various peoples or with the nature gods of polytheism. Christians steadfastly avoided ascribing symbols or pictures of God the Father for more than a thousand years because they wanted to avoid any resemblance between their concept of God and that of Zeus or Jupiter. From the Christian point of view, the gods of polytheism are too ordinary, too this-worldly, to match the sublime majesty of the Holy One of Israel.

## Theism or Monotheism

If Christians would be compelled to join a club of believers in God, they would most likely join with other monotheists such as Jews and Muslims. The word *theism* simply means belief in God, and *monotheism* confirms belief in one divine reality, not many. What is distinctive to theism has to do with God's relationship with the world. According to theists, God is *a se*, that is, totally independent and totally free. Without God, the world would not exist.

Further, theists claim that God created the world out of nothing. Without God, the Big Bang could not have banged. Even today, the world of nature is utterly dependent on the will of God to sustain it in existence. Should God change the divine mind and withdraw support, all of reality would suddenly drop into nonbeing, and we would not even be aware of the loss. Everything, including our consciousness, would blink out of existence. Conversely, the fact that we wake up in the morning and celebrate the singing of the birds is a gift of God's grace through creation.

The key element in this model of God is creation out of nothing, known as *creatio ex nihilo* in Latin. God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17).

Because God begins with nothing and then creates the world, we have testimony that God is all-powerful. Biblical symbols such as Lord and King suggest that we construct a model of God with *aseity* and omnipotence.

There is more to theism. In contrast to deism, God for the theists is active. Rather than let the world just run itself, the God of theism monitors nature and history in such a way as to ensure that over the long run the divine will is done. God daily provides for the world; theologians use the word *providence* to describe God’s continued activity in the world.

Theists tend to believe in miracles and also in prayer. Miracles are rare, because God’s main way of providing for the world is through matter, energy, and the laws of nature. Theists are close to deists here. Yet, God may intervene from time to time in an act of special providence. This is a miracle. Miracles are invisible to science, because they cannot be reduced to an incident within the laws of nature as those laws are currently in effect.

Similarly, theists pray for rain and healing and comfort and world peace. When theists pray, they expect God to listen and to incorporate such prayers into the divine will for the entire creation.

Recently, some American evangelical theologians have been proposing *open theism*. By *open* they mean God is open to an interdependent relation with the world. God begins with *aseity* and freedom, but then God sacrifices this independence. God decides freely to limit the divine self. God decides to limit the exercise of divine power. This divine self-limitation opens up freedom for the world to engage in self-organization and even to fall into sin and evil. By being open, God then abides with the fallen world and works within the world for its redemption.

In summary, in contrast to deists, theists believe God acts in the world. In contrast to polytheists, theists believe there is only one divine reality. In contrast to pantheists, theists believe God is personal and that God is qualitatively different from the world; God loves the world as one person would love another. Although most

## A BIBLE QUIZ ALONG THE WAY

Take a look at what Paul says in Acts 17:28. “For ‘In him [God] we live and move and have our being.’” Now, which model best interprets what is said here? Pantheism? Theism? Panentheism?

Christians over the centuries have been theists, some have considered other options, such as panentheism.

## Panentheism

As the word *panentheism* indicates, what is affirmed here is that all things exist within God’s being. The entire world of nature and history exists within God’s being; but these things do not exhaust God’s being. There is a little bit of God left over, so to speak.

Sometimes panentheists use a human analogy. They say that God relates to the world like our mind relates to our body. Our mind is totally dependent on our body to exist, of course, yet our thinking seems to transcend our body at certain points. Our mind can look at our body and even guide our body. The world is God’s body, and God is the mind of the world.

This means that God did not create the world out of nothing. Panentheists reject *creatio ex nihilo*. They prefer the idea of continuing creation, *creatio continua*, to emphasize the shared temporal relationship between the world and God. Continuing creation for the panentheist is similar to providence for the theist.

This further implies that the world must have existed backwards in time just as long as God has. And, the world will continue to exist into the future as long as there is a God.

The God of panentheism is finite, not infinite. Big, maybe, but not infinite. The physical body of God is coextensive with the physical makeup of the universe. Only the mind of God transcends the physical plenitude.

This also means that God cannot love the world as we would love another person; rather, God must love the world as we would love our own body. God’s love for the world is a form of self-love.

Process theologians and some contemporary feminist theologians find panentheism attractive. They object to the cultural connotations of theism, where God is pictured as an omnipotent King or Lord or Father.

CONCEPT OF GOD	CREATOR?	ACTIVE IN THE WORLD?	INDEPENDENT?
Atheism	No	No	No
Agnosticism	No?	No?	No?
Deism	Yes	No	Yes
Pantheism	Yes	No	No
Polytheism	No	Yes	No
Henotheism	No	Yes	No
Theism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Panentheism	No	Yes	No
Trinitarian Theism	Yes	Yes	Yes

These symbols of dominance have tended to reinforce hierarchical thinking and patriarchy over the centuries. Feminists object as well to the idea of creation out of nothing, because it implies total power over the world. Panentheism provides an attractive alternative model for feminists, because it pictures God as connected, as more relational.

## Conclusion

As of this point you have just reviewed the standard models of God, many of which have been floating around religious circles for centuries. As we noted above, most Christians in the past have conceived of God according to the model of theism, or monotheism. This model requires that God and the world be different, separate, independent of each other. Yet, as we look forward to the future God has promised, we look forward to a world in which God dwells fully. That future world—the one God declares to be “very good”—will enter and remain *within* the divine life. The creation will no longer be other. It will dwell within God’s own personal and interactive life. The term *panentheism* is the best one to describe what God promises. We may be theists today but panentheists tomorrow.

Much more could and should be said about God. We have provided here only the briefest description of some of the mental models of God articulated in the minds of Christians and non-Christians. In the two millennia of Christian tradition, theism—especially Trinitarian theism—has become the preferred model for conceptualizing God. The reality of God in Godself, however, is not reducible to the theistic model or any other model. God is fundamentally mysterious. “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” writes Paul (Rom. 11:33).

We relate to God through our faith, not through knowledge that eliminates the divine mystery. Yet, our faith seeks understanding. And constructing concepts of God is one way to pursue further understanding.

## About the Writer

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