

# Worldviews - Deism, Pantheism and Theism

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## Three Basic Worldviews

No doubt one of the reasons for the popularity of the television serial “X files” is the fact that it presents its viewers with two competing worldviews, modernism and post-modernism. In nearly every episode the agents are challenged with an extraordinary event, which agent Scully will attempt to explain in purely empirical, scientific terms, but for which agent Mulder presents a supra-natural, para-normal explanation. If the story of their investigations favours Scully’s scientific interpretation, the last scene is sure to offer a convincing para-normal alternative from Mulder, and vice versa. The viewer is not only challenged to opt for one or other solution, but in doing so is subtly directed to define his own worldview in terms of one of these alternatives.

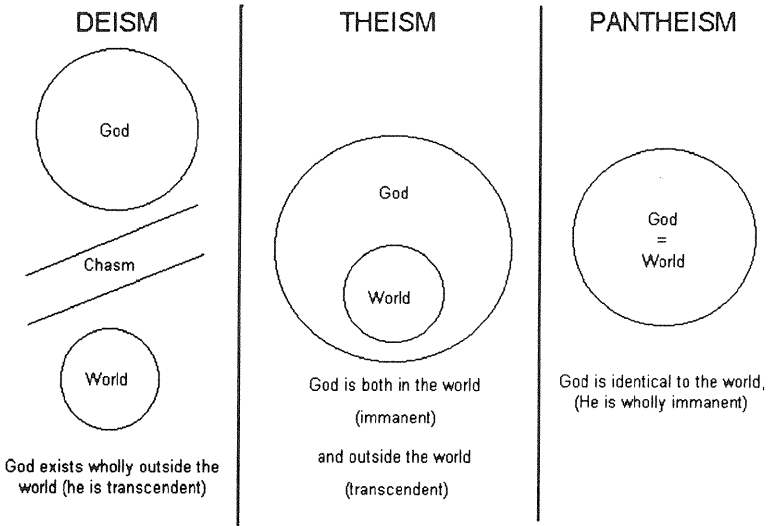
One worldview which is not represented other than in an occasional passing reference is the Christian world-view of theism. The modernistic worldview of Scully allows for some outward religion (in some episodes she visits the Catholic Church), but Divine intervention is only seldom considered as an answer to the problems investigated. Her worldview is basically deistic, if there is a God, he left this world to be governed by the laws of physics and other scientific disciplines. Similarly, while the post-modernism represented by Mulder may be open to a pantheistic “God within”, Mulder himself tends to seek a more immediate answer, such as the presence of occult powers or the involvement of extra-terrestrials.

In a way the serial gives a fairly useful insight into where our society is at. Today’s competing worldviews, which find popular representation in the media and are represented in the schools and universities, are the deism of modernism and the pantheism of post-modernism. The theism of Christianity is largely left out of the picture, and yet, theism is by far the richest option, in that it recognises both the immanence and transcendence of God.

For the deist God is only transcendent. He exists out there, beyond man's reach and investigation, or perhaps he does not exist at all. Here we should note that agnosticism and atheism are the natural outcome of deism. Since its inception, deism was the worldview of the "God of the gaps". Every time the deist met with a fact that could not be explained from within his system it was attributed to God. Typically it was the origin of the world and scientific laws that were explained in this fashion. But as science came up with alternate answers, with the evolution and the "Big Bang" theories claiming to account for the origin of life and the universe, the gaps were closed, so that the hypothesis of God became unnecessary.

Pantheism limited itself to the other alternative presented by theism, the immanence of God. *Deus sive natura*, Spinoza posited, "God is nature". Since God and creation are one he may not only be found within man, but within every other creature and feature of creation. While the pantheist is not likely to identify him or herself as an atheist, the God of pantheism may amount to no more than an impersonal force.

Diagrammatically the three positions may be presented as follows:



Theism recognises both the immanence and transcendence of God. The Christian Scriptures give ample evidence that God upholds this world with his presence. Job affirms, “In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:10). Isaiah writes, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” (Is. 61:1). The doctrine of God’s omnipresence also implies God’s immanence, as when the psalmist asks:

Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. (Ps. 139:7,8)

As to God’s transcendence, Solomon observed that heaven and earth cannot contain him (1 Ki 8:27). The psalmists express much the same idea when they observe that God’s glory reaches above the heavens (Ps. 8:1; 57:5,11). Indeed, both the divine immanence and transcendence come together in Paul’s doxology that God is “over all, and through all, and in all” (Eph. 4:6).

For a biblical theistic worldview it is important that Christians give due recognition to both the immanence and the transcendence of God. History provides many examples which show that where Christians have failed to give due consideration to both these aspects of divinity it has done damage to the Christian faith. Here we think firstly of those movements which leave no room for God’s immanent activity in the world today. Insisting that all that happens must have a scientific explanation is basically a form of deism, which restricts God’s involvement in this world to the time when he created the laws of science. This approach denies the possibility of any divine supernatural works in the way of miracles.

In more conservative Christian circles an example of stressing God’s transcendence at the expense of his immanence can be found in the hyper-calvinism which emphasises God’s eternal decrees to an extent that it leaves no room for God’s full involvement in the world today. This static view of God typically emphasises his impassibility in a way which does not see God as interacting with his creatures. Again, a God who does not interact with man, by responding to prayer and worship, is really the God of deism.

Where Christianity has overstressed God's immanence at the expense of his transcendence other problems arise. The liberal approaches of the last century, which stressed human experience and feeling as a way to knowing God, placed all the stress on the immanence of God. The failure to recognise fully God's transcendence went hand in hand with a failure to acknowledge God's revelation. We find a similar trend in the historic manifestations of Christian mysticism. The Christian mystic's emphasis on meditation and contemplation as ways to communion with God often came with a disregard for the Church and the Scriptures. Thus mysticism is defined by C.G. Thorne as:

... a psychological or an epistemological experience in which the mystic, **apart from a religious institution or sacred book**, has religious knowledge directly from the divine. (emphasis mine)<sup>1</sup>

Thorne identifies Quakerism as a Christian example of this approach, but here we can also add more recent Pentecostal and Charismatic groups which direct spiritual guidance apart from Scripture.

More extreme pantheistic tendencies can be found in those Charismatic groups that attribute man himself with divinity. This emphasis can be found with many of the so-called "health and wealth" preachers of today who emphasise tapping into the divine presence within man as a way to a fuller and richer life. With this emphasis on the immanent presence of God we should not be surprised to find that some who follow this approach have gone as far as to claim that man himself is God.<sup>2</sup>

Another recent movement within Christianity emphasising the immanence of God is Process Theology<sup>3</sup>. While Process Theologians do not fully equate God with nature, as is the case in pantheism, they nevertheless cannot conceive of God apart from the natural order. Identifying their own position as pan-entheism, the Process Theologians regard the

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<sup>1</sup> C.G. Thorne Jr., "Mysticism", in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 692.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of this form of pantheism see Dave Hunt, *The Seduction of Christianity*. Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> This theology, based on the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead, looks upon God as developing in a manner the parallels the evolution of the universe.

relationship between the natural order and God as analogous to the relationship between the body and soul of the human being.

These recent developments in theology have, to a large degree, paralleled the move from modernism to post-modernism in society at large. The move from modernism to post-modernism is at its roots a move from a deistic to a pantheistic understanding of reality. Knowing this will help us understand why at times the one worldview may seem more sympathetic to Christian thinking, and at other times the other. Inasmuch as these movements recognise either God's immanence or his transcendence, they are sympathetic to Christianity, but inasmuch as they deny the other they contradict the Christian understanding. Let me illustrate this:

Some times modernism comes across as threatening to Christians, as when it denies the active participation of the supernatural in the world. Modernism has no time for revelation, prayer or miracles. Post-modernism, on the other hand, is wide open to the supernatural. But post-modernism comes with other threats. Thus it looks upon all truth as relative, and would therefore place all religious experience on an equal footing. Here Christians feel more comfortable with modernism, because modernism regards truth as absolute. What leads modernists and post-modernists to these different positions? It is their underlying worldview, whether they regard God as fully immanent in the world, or transcendent from it (if he exists at all).

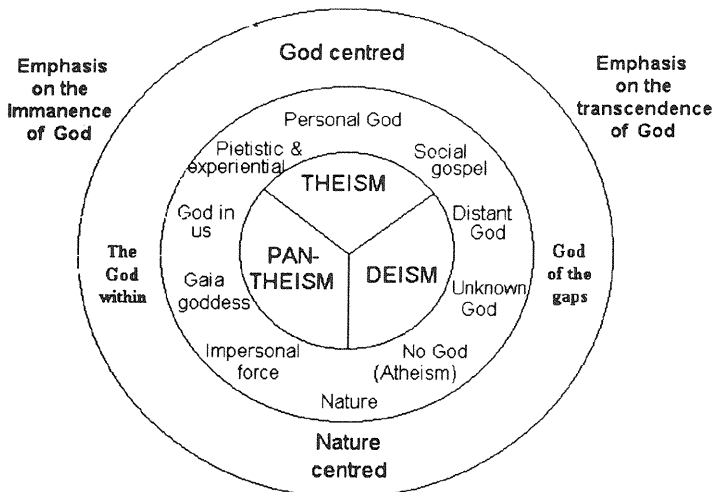
The Christian worldview, which recognises both the immanence and transcendence of God, is open both to the involvement of the supernatural in the world, and the recognition of truth as absolute. As the immanent God, he does miracles, hears prayers, and reveals himself in his Word. As the transcendent God, he is absolute, untouched by the world, and the ultimate embodiment of all truth.

One may ask why, if modernism and post-modernism have such different presuppositions, they can co-exist together in the one society. Or again, why society is moving so easily from the modern to the post-modern position. The reason is that, despite their different starting points, the two positions meet at their extremes. Here both pantheism and deism leave behind the idea of a personal God, and identify nature itself as the sum total of reality.

Those who approach this position from the deistic starting point typically identify themselves as atheists or agnostics. But the deist approach needs absolutes to account for the order and truth they claim to find in the world. In the vacuum left behind with the abandonment of God they therefore begin to look for an absolute in nature itself. Ironically, this often goes hand in hand with a tendency to personalise the absolute as “mother nature”.

Among those who approach the deification of nature from the pantheistic starting point this often comes with a depersonalised conception of deity. Here we can think both of Buddhism, for which the personality of the deity is an illusion, and those New Age adherents who think of the absolute in terms of an all-pervasive force (“may the force be with you!”). There is only a small step between those who conceive of ultimate reality in terms of a pantheistic identification of the absolute with nature, and those who regard nature itself as the only absolute.

If on the one side of their spectrum the extremes of pantheism and deism meet in an atheistic personification of nature, at the other end of their spectrum they meet where God is recognised as being both immanent and transcendent, i.e., in theism. Diagrammatically we can represent the relationship of these three basic worldviews as follows:



In the diagram above the three main worldviews are identified in the inner circle. The next circle from the centre identifies some viewpoints on God and religion. Here it will be noted that within theism, where the accent is unduly placed on the immanence of God, this degenerates Christianity into a world-shy pietism, where all attention is given to the personal experience of God. On the other hand, if the emphasis is unduly placed on God's transcendence, this makes Christianity too world centred. The social gospel movement is a typical example of this approach.

## A Closer Examination of Theism

In our examination of theism we are concerned primarily with Christian theism. One reason for this is our conviction that only the unique Christian belief in a Triune God does justice to both the immanence and transcendence of God. On this Stephen Williams observes:

... on a trinitarian view of God, the possibility of fully personal immanence along with personal transcendence and personal appearance is due to the reality of the personal being of the Holy Spirit alongside that of the Father and the Son.<sup>4</sup>

In a similar way Henri Blocher, while affirming the transcendence and immanence of each of the Persons of the Godhead, argues that the divine transcendence is best appropriated to the Father, the divine immanence to the Holy Spirit, while "the Son, the second Person in trinitarian order, prevents us from understanding transcendence and immanence in dialectic fashion."<sup>5</sup>

Having established that the Christian worldview must flow out of the recognition that the Triune God we worship is both immanent and transcendent, it now remains for us to determine what characteristics such a worldview must have. We will present our findings as a series of

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Williams, "The Trinity and 'Other Religions'", in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Blocher, "Immanence and Transcendence in Trinitarian Theology", in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, 122, 123.

propositions, in the recognition that we cannot begin to do justice to the full implications of this recognition.

*About reality:*

- The theistic worldview rejects any identification of God with the created order. God, who created the world out of nothing (cf. Heb. 11:3), is totally independent of the created order.
- The theistic worldview denies the pantheistic notion and that all is one and one is all. For the pantheist this holds true because God is all, and all is God. The Christian recognition of God's transcendence does not allow for this identification.
- The theistic worldview therefore rejects the pantheistic notion that all differences are mere illusions. In the beginning God separated light from darkness, the sky from the earth and land from water. Moreover he made each species to reproduce after its kind, and made humankind as male and female (Gen 1). These distinctions are therefore created realities.
- The theistic worldview recognises that the universe would cease to exist the moment God withdrew his providential care. God's abiding immanence is a necessary aspect of the created order (Heb. 11:3).
- The theistic worldview therefore recognises that God's revelation of himself is not limited to creation, as maintained by the deist, but that he daily reveals himself in his works of providence (Acts 14:17).
- The theistic worldview recognises a sovereign God who is omnipotent, and therefore rejects the notion that anything should happen by chance.

*Concerning the status of man before God:*

- The theistic worldview recognises the wide gulf between God, the Creator, and the creature made in his image (Ps. 8:4f.). It rejects any teaching which promotes the deification of man. It recognises that



man, created in the image of God, can only reflect God's immanent attributes (such as love, goodness, mercy), and not his transcendent ones (such as infinity, immutability, omnipotence).<sup>6</sup>

- The theistic worldview acknowledges that moral requirements have an absolute basis in the transcendent God, who requires man to be holy even as he is holy (Lev. 11:44,45). It repudiates the moral relativism of post-modern pantheism which holds that each individual may act as he feels led by the "God within".
- The theistic worldview recognises that God's transcendence implies man's need for divine revelation for accurate knowledge of God and ultimate reality. It also recognises that such revelation is necessary for man to live in a God-pleasing manner in a world under the blight of sin.

*Concerning man's place in the environment:*

- The theistic worldview accepts that human beings, made in the image of God, have a different status from the other creatures with whom he shares this world. As the image bearer of the transcendent God, man is to rule over, develop and protect nature. However, as a result of the fall, he may responsibly use nature for his own benefit in the preparation of food, clothing, serums, etc. On this point Christians differ with the pantheists who regard all species as bearing the full stamp of the divine nature.
- While encouraging and supporting human efforts to protect the environment, the theistic worldview recognises that the ultimate state of the created order is not in the hands of man, but of God. Responsible citizens of God's Kingdom, acknowledging God's reign, seek to be good stewards of God's world. Knowing that God, in his common grace, actively upholds the world even in its fallen state, they look forward to the time when God will renew all of creation.

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<sup>6</sup> For the classification of attributes as immanent or transcendent see Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan: F.H. Revell Co., 1907), 247 ff.

### *Concerning learning and education*

- The theistic worldview recognises the omniscient Creator as the fountain of all knowledge. All of reality is the outworking of his sovereign will. His knowledge is archetypal of all human knowledge, so that in his most lucid discoveries man can do no more than think God's thought after him.
- The theistic worldview recognises God as the author of world history. As the transcendent, sovereign Lord he determines all that comes to pass, and through the immanent omnipresence of his Spirit he directs all events according to his decrees.
- The theistic worldview recognises that God created the world in wisdom, so that, apart from those distortions brought in through sin, everything is by nature the best that it can be for its purpose.
- The theistic worldview recognises a God who is omnipresent. The fact that every area of creation is under God's control means that there can be no neutral terrain as far as learning is concerned.
- The theistic worldview recognises a perfect God who makes and does things to perfection. Every imperfection in this world must therefore be attributed to the entry of sin as an unnatural intrusion into God's world.

The above list can only serve as an introduction to all the implications of the theistic worldview. We hope this small beginning will encourage readers always to try to think and act in a way that will reflect the theistic understanding of reality.