

# Pantheism and Classical Theism

## An argument from religious experience in favor of pantheism

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In contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, the view that God is omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect, immutable, and ontologically distinct from the universe (classical theism) remains prevalent. In this article, I will explain why God's distinctness from the universe poses a problem for classical theistic accounts of religious experiences and I will show why this attribute -with reference to immanence- does not pose a problem for pantheistic accounts of religious experiences. I will also argue that if classical theism cannot account for these certain types of religious experiences, and if pantheism is able to account for these certain types of religious experiences, then the traditional theistic understanding of God is false, and pantheism may be a strong alternative to it. To accomplish this, I will accept the view that religious experiences are not merely pathological, and I won't include naturalistic accounts of religious experiences.

### **Pantheism and classical theism**

Classical theism is the view that God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, morally perfect, eternal, immutable, creator, sustainer of the universe and an ontologically independent being from its own creation. The main difference between Pantheism and Classical Theism is a disagreement over the attributes of God. Pantheism denies that God possesses one or more of the aforementioned attributes (Buckareff, 2022, pp. 1-2). I will take pantheism as the view that God is identical to the universe. Although there are many differences between pantheism and theism that may arise due to the different ways of considering the attributes of God, I have confined myself to the transcendence and immanence of God, since addressing all these differences would exceed the scope of this article and would also require addressing the attributes not related to religious experience.

Since I am interested in which of these two positions better explain religious experience, I will focus on the immanence of God in pantheism and the transcendence of God in classical theism. But first, I will define the types of religious experiences I will mention.

## Types of religious experiences

Religious experiences can be defined as experiences that seem to be a part of objective reality and experiences that make us aware of the existence of God. Although it is quite difficult to define religious experience due to the ambiguity of the concept, such definition seems to be acceptable. The main point that distinguishes religious experience from our other everyday perceptual experiences is that religious experiences are not predictable, they are not perceivable in any desired situation, and in certain cases they are not even describable due to the limits of language.

Richard Swinburne categorizes religious experiences in this way: The first is when a person does not directly evoke any spiritual or religious feelings, but indirectly has an experience through inferences about an object. Apart from these types of experience, Swinburne also mentions three other types of experience where the object of experience can be described even though it cannot be experienced by someone else, where the object of experience cannot be described in any way, and where the experience is direct and does not involve any sensory mediation (Reçber, 2004, p. 93).

As I infer from these definitions, I will categorize religious experiences into two categories: those that directly inform us of the existence of God and those that indirectly inform us of the existence of God.

What I mean by direct and indirect religious experiences depends on the basic categorization of such religious experiences. It seems to me that some religious experiences, such as perceiving ordinary objects in a religious context or believing that you are protected by God, are examples of indirect experiences of God/God's Divine Attributes. Also, hard-to-explain-religious-experiences such as perceiving a religious object (e.g. God) or other ineffable religious experiences involving a religious object are direct experiences of God. Although examples of the types of religious experiences can be multiplied, these two types are sufficient for the main argument.

Another issue I would like to address is what makes religious experiences truly experiences of God. For religious experiences to be truly experiences of God, the object of experience must be cognitively separate from the experiencing subject. As a result of this, if religious experiences are truly experiences of God, God must be present in our experience directly or indirectly. Because religious experience, by definition, has to make us aware of God in some way, and it does not seem possible to be aware of God unless he is manifested (indirectly or directly) in our experience. This serves an important point in building my argument.

## Transcendence and immanence of God in pantheism and classical theism

As I mentioned before, if religious experiences are truly experiences of God, God must be present in our experience. As a matter of fact, I believe that classical theistic accounts of indirect religious experiences are on par with pantheistic accounts of indirect religious experiences. Because both of these views are able to account for indirect religious experiences such as ordinary experiences with a religious context. But when it comes to direct religious experiences, classical theism fails to explain this certain kind of experiences because of the classical theistic understanding of God as a transcendent being. But how so?

Since the classical theistic view of God presupposes that God is external and immutable, God cannot be present in our experience as a consequence of the limits of our sensory experience. Thus, in classical theistic views of religious experience, God must be materialized in order to be present in our experience. But this is not possible as a consequence of God's immutability.

But, Pantheistic views of God, allows God to be present in our experiences directly. In these views, since God is immanent to universe, God is free from the materialization process that is necessary for the external God of classical theism to be present in our religious experiences. The liberation of God from such a process of materialization is both compatible with the relevant attributes and seems to solve the problem in favor of pantheism.

A formulation of the argument would be as such:

**P1.** If religious experiences are truly experiences of God and they are not merely pathological (or all naturalistic accounts of religious experience fail to explain this phenomenon), God must be present in our perception when a direct religious experience occurs.

**P2.** Classical theism's understanding of God (with reference to transcendence of God) does not allow God to be directly present in our perception when a *direct* religious experience occurs and Pantheism's understanding of God (with reference to immanence of God) allows God to be directly present in our perception when a religious experience occurs.

**C.** Therefore, it is more reasonable to expect the pantheistic understanding of God to be true.

On closer inspection, the argument seems convincing for someone who takes a realist position on religious experiences. Since my aim is explanatory clarity on a much more specific issue rather than a general comparison of conceptions, one can at least argue that pantheistic explanations of religious experience are much more plausible than theistic explanations.

In the first premise, since I think that the object of religious experience is indeed God, I have excluded naturalistic explanations of certain kind of religious experiences. The problem with classical theism in the second premise can be addressed more explicitly with immutability, as I mentioned earlier, and also with divine simplicity. Since one cannot speak of divine simplicity without divine atemporality and divine immutability, if the transcendent God of classical theism requires such temporality and mutability for religious experience, then it is plausible to expect the conclusion.

The perception of God *via* his attributes seems to be the only type of religious experience that the theistic view can explain. And if this is the case, pantheism seems to be more advantageous in terms of explaining religious experience. In this case, for someone who takes a realist position on religious experience, pantheism is a more plausible position than theism.

### **Possible answers to the possible objections**

One of the first objections that might come to mind is that the pantheistic God is impersonal and therefore an impersonal God cannot be present in experience. But is this really the case?

I think there are possible responses to such an objection. It must be shown by the objector that God's personality is necessary for God to be present in our experience. Also, such objections seem to deny personal interpretations of the pantheistic God. In the debate over pantheism, a major point of contention is whether the pantheistic God is personal or not. According to Levine "there appears to be no *prima facie* case for attributing personality to the pantheistic deity, and plenty of reason to reject it" (Levine, 1994) But for other philosophers, like Petter Forrest, this is not the case. I am not going to argue for a personal pantheistic account of God, but it seems to me that, since there is no apparent logical contradiction between pantheism and a personal conception of God, the burden of proof is on those who claim that a personal pantheistic conception of God is contradictory.

Another objection might be that in classical theism, the fact that religious experience evokes a non-physical object is sufficient for it to count as religious experience, but this is not the case in pantheism. In such an objection, it is not clear why, in a pantheistic conception of the universe, religious experiences cannot evoke a non-physical

structure. Since pantheism may entail a kind of naturalism, the objection may seem to hold, but since the naturalism entailed by pantheism is not equivalent to physicalism, it does not seem to be a plausible objection. If, as claimed, the evocation of a non-physical object in experience is sufficient for this experience to count as religious experience, the same would be true for various conceptions of pantheism. Such as pantheistic conceptions that correspond to certain types of cosmopsychistic views. On this view, we can argue that religious experience can count as religious experience when it informs us of some kind of divine mind.

With religious diversity, it seems that an objection to classical theism can also be made to pantheism. If religious experience is really the experience of a single God, how do different religions' conceptions of God and religious experiences differ? This seems to be a problem that both theism and pantheism have to deal with. If the emergence of different kinds of conceptions of God in religious experience is a problem for both theism and pantheism, one could argue that pantheism still has an advantage in certain respects (such as explaining the direct manifestation of God in religious experience). But I must concede that this appears to be the most successful of all the objections.

## Conclusion

Despite these objections, I remain convinced that a pantheistic conception of religious experience is far more plausible and advantageous than a classical theistic conception of religious experience. Although it is not a general assessment across conceptions, the fact that theism suffers from such a deficiency opens the door to debates about the plausibility of alternative theistic views. And among these alternative theistic views, I think the most reasonable position, despite its problems, is pantheism and its varieties. Once we accept that pantheism provides a coherent alternative to theism, I think we can make the position most robust in terms of its compatibility with panpsychism and cosmopsychism. Another issue, as I mentioned in the objections, seems to be determining which of the personal or impersonal pantheistic conceptions is more robust. Although I cannot discuss them in detail here, I believe that these would be our main problems in a situation where the argument in favor of pantheism is successful.

## References

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