

***The Heart of Christianity – Rediscovering a Life of Faith***©2003

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**Excerpt from Chapter 4 – *God the Heart of Reality***

Pages 65-70

(Of course, I suggest reading the entire book to get the context of these paragraphs, Gary)

***Two Concepts of God***

***How are we to think of “the More”?*** [*“the More” is a term borrowed from William James word for God in “The Varieties of Religious Experiences” – published in 1902*] Concepts of God concern what we think the word “God” refers to as well as how we think of the relationship between God and the world, the “God-world relationship.” Is God “out there”? Or “right here”? Or both?

In the history of Christianity, there are ***two primary ways of thinking about God and the God-world relationship***. In common with many others, I call these two concepts of God “***supernatural theism***” and “***panentheism***.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the central themes of Karen Armstrong’s impressive best-selling book *A History of God* is that these two concepts of God run side by side throughout the history of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. ***Both are ancient, going back to the beginnings of each.***

***Supernatural theism*** imagines God as a personlike being. To be sure, God is an exceedingly superlative personlike being, is indeed the supreme being. A long time ago, this personlike being created the world as something separate from God. Thus God and the world are sharply distinguished: God is “up in heaven,” “out there,” beyond the universe.

It follows from this image of God that the ***God-world relationship is seen in interventionist terms***; namely, from “out there” God occasionally intervenes in this world. For supernatural theism in Christian form, these interventions include the spectacular events reported in the Bible, especially those associated with Jesus: his birth, miracles, death, and resurrection. Moreover, supernatural theists generally affirm that ***God continues to intervene to this day, especially in response to prayer.***

***Panentheism***, the second way of thinking about God, imagines God and the God-world relationship differently. Though the ***word “panentheism” is only about two hundred years old, the notion is very ancient.*** Rather than imagining God as a personlike being “out there,” this concept ***imagines God as the encompassing Spirit in whom everything that is, is. The universe is not separate from God, but in God.*** Indeed, this is the meaning of the Greek roots of the word “panentheism”: pan means “everything,” en means “in,” and theism comes from the Greek word for “God,” theos.”

Like the language of supernatural theism, this notion is **also found in the Bible**. Its clearest compact expression is attributed to **Paul in the book of Acts: God is the one in whom “we live and move and have our being.”**<sup>6</sup> [Acts 17:28] Notice how the language works. Where are we in relation to God? **We are in God; we live in God, move in God, have our being in God. God is not “out there,” but “right here,” all around us.**

Significantly, this concept of God does not reduce God to the universe or identify God with the universe. As the encompassing Spirit, God is more than everything, even as everything is in God. Thus, **God is not only “right here,” but also “more than right here.”**

Though the word “panentheism” is unfamiliar to many Christians, the notion really shouldn’t be. Most of us who grew up in the church heard God being spoken of both as “up in heaven” and as “everywhere,” that is, as omnipresent. **The traditional terms for these two dimensions of God are transcendence and immanence: the “moreness” and the “presence” of God. Combining these two affirmations produces the central claim of panentheism: God is “the More” who is “right here.”** Panentheism is not a modern invention, but an ancient and traditional concept of God.

Thinking of God as the encompassing Spirit leads to a **different way of thinking about the God-world relationship**. The notion of “intervention” disappears in the precise sense in which I define it: intervention presupposes that God is “out there,” somewhere else and not here; thus God must intervene in order to act here. But **thinking of God as “right here” (as well as “more than right here”), as present as well as transcendent, leads to a different model of the God-world relationship. Rather than speaking of divine intervention, panentheism speaks of divine intention and divine interaction.** Or, to use *sacramental language*, it sees the **presence of God “in, with, and under” everything—not as the direct cause of events, but as a presence beneath and within our everyday lives.**

Because panentheism does not speak of divine intervention, people often wonder **what happens to prayer in this context**. This is another of the ten most frequently asked questions in my life as a lecturer. If we don’t affirm divine intervention, what happens to petitionary and intercessory prayer, our prayers for “help” for ourselves and others?

Panentheism does not deny the efficacy of such prayer. Its framework allows for prayers to have effects, including prayers for healing. It does not rule out extraordinary events. But it **refuses to see efficacious prayer or extraordinary events as the result of divine intervention**. It does so for more than one reason. Intervention counters its notion of God: it does not see God as absent, but present. Moreover, it sees the notion of divine intervention as having an insuperable difficulty: **if God sometimes intervenes, how does one account for the**

***noninterventions? Given all of the horrible things that happen, does the notion that God ever intervenes make any sense?***

If God could have intervened to stop the Holocaust but chose not to, what kind of sense does that make? Does it make sense to think that God could intervene to stop terrorist attacks, but (at least sometimes) chooses not to? That God could choose to keep a plane from crashing or a tornado from striking? If so, why some and not others? And then there are all the tragedies that don't make the news: accidents, disfigurements, abuse, premature deaths from illness, and on and on. ***To suppose that God intervenes implies that God does so for some, but not for others.***

And so ***panentheism rejects the language of "divine intervention."*** From its point of view, interventionism not only has insurmountable difficulties, but claims to know too much; namely, it claims to know that "intervention" is the explanatory mechanism for God's relation to the world. Except in the very general sense of "divine intentionality" and "divine interactivity," ***panentheism does not claim to have an explanation of the God-world relation. It is content not to know.***<sup>7</sup>

As already mentioned, both supernatural theism and panentheism are deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, but for the last few hundred years supernatural theism has become dominant in Western Christianity. The primary reason is once again the Enlightenment. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the universe was increasingly thought of as a natural system separate from God. God was thus removed from nature, creating a thorough "disenchantment of nature."<sup>8</sup> Separated from the universe, God came increasingly to be thought of as only "out there."

The dominance of supernatural theism in modern Western Christianity has had serious consequences. ***When "out there" is emphasized and separated from "right here," God's relation to the world is distorted, and the notion of God becomes harder and harder to accept.*** "Out there" means something different for us than it meant when our premodern ancestors used this language. For them, "up there" or "out there" was not very far away. They thought of the universe as small with the earth at its center; the sun, moon, planets, and stars were mounted on a dome not very far above the earth. It is difficult to know how literally they took this language, but the basic notion of a small universe was shared by all.

In that context, thinking of God as "our Father who art in heaven" did not make God very far away. But for us, "up there" or "out there" is very far away. If God is only "out there," as supernatural theism suggests, then God is very distant, not intimately close. God becomes remote, absent. And the difference between a remote and absent God and "no God" is slender.

So common is supernatural theism in our time that many people think its concept of God is the only meaning the word "God" can have. For them, believing in God means believing in a personlike being "out there." Not believing this means not believing in God.

I encounter this in my university students. Every term one or more of them says to me after class, “This is all very interesting, but I have a problem every time you use the word ‘God,’ because, you see”—here there’s usually a pause and a deep breath—“I really don’t believe in God.” I always respond the same way: “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.” Invariably, it is the God of supernatural theism. I then tell them that I don’t believe in that God either. They are surprised, for they know that I believe in God. They’re simply not aware that there is an option other than supernatural theism.

That option, of course, is panentheism. Significantly, it is a form of theism. Thus I do not speak of the “end of theism,” as a few religious thinkers in our time do. I understand them to mean the “end of supernatural theism”; namely, that for many people supernatural theism is no longer compelling and persuasive. With this, I agree. But I think it is confusing to call this the “end of theism.” To many people, this sounds like rejection of the very idea of God; in their minds, not surprisingly, the alternative to theism is atheism.

**But a panentheistic way of thinking about God is an alternative form of theism.** It is just as biblical as supernatural theism. Indeed, in an important respect, it is more biblical and more orthodox than supernatural theism, for it **emphasizes both the transcendence and presence of God, whereas supernatural theism in its modern form emphasizes only the transcendence of God.**

As I end this section on concepts of God, there are two more considerations. The first concerns the meaning of the word “God” itself. To echo a comment made a half century ago by **Paul Tillich**, one of the twentieth century’s two most important Protestant theologians: if, when you think of the word “God,” you are thinking of a reality that may or may not exist, you are not thinking of God. Tillich’s point is that the word “God” does not refer to a particular existing being (that’s the God of supernatural theism). Rather, **the word “God” is the most common Western name for “what is,” for “ultimate reality,” for “the ground of being,” for “Being itself,” for “isness.”**

Very important, God is not simply a name for “what is” as defined by the modern worldview, not simply a poetic name for the space-time universe of matter and energy. Rather, to use a phrase from Thomas Keating, a contemporary Benedictine teacher of contemplative prayer, **God is the name we use for “isness without limitations,” “isness” without limits.**<sup>9</sup> To ask what seems like a silly question, is “isness”? Of course. And so the question of God is not the question “Is there another being, a supreme being, in addition to the universe?” It is the question of how you are going to name, how you are going to see, “isness.”

The second consideration concerns our language about God. The religions of the world often emphasize that God or the sacred is beyond all words, beyond all language. The semitechnical word for this is “ineffable.” Lao Tzu, a sixth-century

BCE Chinese religious figure, spoke of the sacred as the “Tao” (pronounced “dow”). The opening line of the *Tao te Ching*, the collection of sayings attributed to him, says, “The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao.” ***If you name the sacred, you are distinguishing it from the rest of reality and thus you are no longer talking about it. The sacred, the Tao, is beyond all our words.***

Belden Lane, a contemporary Christian theologian, makes the same point about language about God:

We must speak, yet we cannot speak without stammering. . . .  
[Language about God] stalks the borderland of the limits of language, using speech to confound speech, speaking in riddles, calling us to humble silence in the presence of mystery.<sup>10</sup>

***God is the name we use for the nonmaterial stupendous, wondrous “More” that includes the universe even as God transcends the universe.*** This is God as the “encompassing Spirit,” the one in whom “we live and move and have our being,” the one who is all around us and within us. ***God is the one in whom the universe is, even as God is more than the universe; the Mystery who is beyond all names, even as we name the sacred Mystery in our various ways.***