

### THEISM AND MONISM—RECONCILED IN ABSOLUTISTIC WORLD VIEW

Many thinkers distinguish the theistic-numinous approach from the mystical one in religious experience and the theistic world view from the pantheistic in philosophy. That a certain distinction exists between the two approaches is undeniable; but the above classification seems to equate the mystical approach to pantheism which is misleading. While pantheism seeks its Divinity within the world by equating nature with God, mysticism insists on the need of transcending the natural order to realize the Divine or the Absolute. The mystico-unitive experience posits a world view that does not see nature or the human self (ego) as God, but sees God as within, behind and beyond the nature and the soul. This philosophy can be better understood as monism. That monism is often confused with pantheism even by such profound scholars as W.T. Stace is true, transcendental mystical experience can hardly be explained on the basis of pantheistic world view. While pantheism may well be opposed to a theistic approach, as it seems to deny the transcendence of the Divine Creator to the creature, monism can easily adopt itself to the needs of religion, as like theism it also emphasises the transcendence and supremacy of the Divine.

Thus we have three distinct philosophical approaches (leaving aside atheism), viz., theism, pantheism and monism. Though the first two are almost exclusive of each other, the last in a way includes both. It is possible to develop a version of monism which reconciles and synthesises both theism and pantheism. Since pantheistic approach is not accepted by any known religious tradition and also because a modified version of it can be included within monism, we shall leave pantheism out of the scope of the present paper. This leaves us with theism and monism as two distinct but not exclusive religio-philosophical world views.

According to theism, God is an other to the soul, or rather a wholly other. As a Creator He is not only transcendent to His creation, He is distinct from, or even external to, it. The Creator

God of St. Thomas is the efficient cause of the world<sup>1</sup> and like all efficient causes He is transcendent and extrinsic to His creation. What is more, God's essence can not be known in direct knowledge. While His existence is known through some sort of inferential knowledge from creation to the Creator, the nature of God can only be known on the authority of revelation. Thomas insists on God's transcendence and seeks to prove it by negating in Him all the attributes of finite creation. Thus God is infinite (not-finite), eternal (non-temporal), immutable (un-changeable) and so on.

The God of theism is not only a transcendental Being, but is also a Person. While it was difficult for St. Thomas to rationally support the view of God as a Person in the context of his extreme transcendentalism which denied the possibility of application of any intellectual categories to God, for a common theistic approach the two affirmations of God's transcendence and personal Being are correlated.<sup>2</sup> A person is always distinct from (or extrinsic) to other persons, as well as to his own acts or artifacts. Thus God as a Person is transcendent to, or distinct from, His creatures and the World.<sup>3</sup>

Once God's personal Being is granted, all the perfections known to man are attributed to Him. The attribution is made more acceptable with the help of high sounding philosophical terminology. The theistic philosopher argues that these perfections are attributed to God by way of analogy, that they belong to God in the primary sense, while they belong to men in a secondary or derivative sense.<sup>4</sup> It is further argued by Thomas that God is simple, even though an all-perfect Person, as all the perfections of God do not qualify Him as distinct attributes or predicates, but are identical with His essence.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Herman Lotze contends that though it is true that an opposition to the not-self is necessary to the being of a self (person), God is still a Person as the necessary opposition is provided by the contents of God's consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

But inspite of all the elaborate philosophical defence, the theistic world view seems still to project a finite God who is confronted by His own creation, which being extrinsic to Him seems to limit Him. It is repeatedly affirmed that theism asserts in the dignity of men by according to him individual existence, distinct from God, and freedom of will. Individual's distinct

existence and freedom seem to limit God further. God is said to be a Person who acts for the good of men, He has all the positive desirable qualities of human person;<sup>7</sup> or rather, He is the acknowledged source of all human perfections. But the source of evil and suffering cannot be attributed to Him. So, other causes are hypothesized for explaining the existence of evil, viz. original sin and freedom of will granted to man by God's grace. Apart from the question of the adequacy of these explanations, they do limit God by seeking an explanation of negative or undesirable facts of life outside God. Thus, there is certain tension within the theistic approach between the assertion of God's absolute transcendence and His personal Being; as also between His infinite and unconditional supremacy, as expressed in the doctrine of predetermination, and the desire to exempt Him from all responsibility for evil and suffering.

The Absolute of monistic philosophers, like the God of theism, is transcendent to the spatio-temporal world. But His transcendence is never conceived in spatial terms as over-there-ness. Rather, it is an ontological transcendence of the ground to its appearance, of the Absolute to the spatio-temporal world. It means that in the monist's assertion of the Absolute's transcendence there is an implicit ontological judgment as to the 'greater reality' of the Absolute in relation to the temporal order. The bolder monistic philosophers, such as the Advaitins, take this line of argument to its logical conclusion and assert that the Absolute alone is real, the world is not.

The Absolute can be realized through contemplative transcendence of all intellectual categories and empirical experience. At the level of rational thought, the Absolute can be best understood by distinguishing It from everything else of the universe. The *Brahman* is 'not-this, not-that', says the Upaniṣad. The Advaitic treatises describe an elaborate process of discriminative reasoning, called *anvaya vyatireka*, through which the ultimate Reality is distinguished from everything else. When all else, including the constituents of empirical personality, are discriminated as the not-Self, what remains is the contentless, self-luminous pure Consciousness which, to the Advaitins, is the Absolute Reality.<sup>8</sup>

Other monistic philosophers may not agree with the Advaitic version of the Absolute, but all equally recognize both the complete transcendence of the Absolute and Its immanence within the soul, as also in the creation. This immanence is differently understood and explained in different systems of thought, but it is always seen as a correlate of God's absolute transcendence. Paradoxical as it may seem, but the concepts of transcendence and immanence, when divested of their physical (spatio-temporal) context, are convergent, that is, a truly transcendent God alone can be truly immanent and vice versa. The absolute, conceived not as an external Creator, but as the Cause and Ground of the universe, as also the all-comprehensive Reality, is at once transcendent as the Cause and immanent as the sustaining Ground of the universe. Such an Absolute cannot be a Person, as the concept of personality implies opposition to a not-self, while the Infinite is such that nothing can be outside or other to It.<sup>9</sup> A corollary of this concept of the Divine is the denial, implicit or explicit, of the distinct being of the individual. This denial may take different forms, but almost all monistic philosophers conceive the innermost soul of man as in some way identical with, or included in, the Absolute.<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, the Absolute, conceived as the all-comprehensive Reality, immanent within the universe and yet supremely transcendent, is ontologically prior to and beyond all creation, so that no empirical or logical category can be applied to It. It means that this Absolute cannot be a person, at least as the term is conceived in the theistic context. It is a universally accepted tenet of all mystico-absolutistic philosophy that all determination is an implied negation, resulting in the limitation of the subject. As expressed by Pseudo Dionysius the Universal Cause is so transcendent that It is above all affirmations and negations.

The monist is critical of the theist's anthropomorphically conceived God, who seems to be less than the infinite, absolute Reality, demanded both by his reason and the mystic's intuitive experience. On the other hand, the theist is equally critical of the monistic concept of an indeterminate Absolute, which he finds very unsatisfactory on both philosophical and religious grounds. Pursuing their exclusive lines of approach both schools find themselves involved in self contradictions. The theist often

contradicts himself by asserting both God's absolute transcendence and His supremacy on the one hand and His personal Being and grace on the other. The monist starts with conceiving his Absolute as a totally relationless, attributeless, immutable Reality and then is faced with the problem of explaining the existence of the world. Even if the world were unreal, as the Advaitins seem to assert, it demands an explanation. And to seek an explanation thereof in something other than *Brahman*, viz., *māyā*, complicates the problem further. Real or unreal, if *māyā* is granted a locus in *Brahman*, then it would mean some kind of internal difference within Him; but if it is said to reside the *jīva* (soul), as distinct from *Brahman*, then the basic non-dualism is sacrificed.

There is an interesting discussion in the work of Hartshorne and W. L. Reese which is relevant in this context.<sup>11</sup> The writers point out the one sided or monopolar nature of all theories of religion which seek to emphasise some one aspect of the reality to the exclusion of all others. Thus, for the orthodox theism God is the independent universal Cause or Source, the universe the extrinsic effect or outcome. For pantheism God is the ultimate Reality and there is no cause different from the world. They argue that theism and pantheism can be combined in a new world view, which they call 'panentheism'. The latter is a synthesis of the two former approaches, and according to it God is not a cause outside series, but a constant cause which is also the effect. They argue that a cause cannot include its effect, but an all-inclusive reality can include a cause. Accordingly, for panentheism God is both a universal cause and an all-inclusive reality, which includes the totality of all effects. We have three alternatives—(a) that the world is wholly extrinsic to God (theism), (b) that the world is wholly intrinsic to God (pantheism), and (c) that it is extrinsic to something in God and intrinsic to God as a whole (panentheism).

The authors have contrasted theism to pantheism which is its logical contrary. Theism and monism can not be thus contrasted, or synthesised in another world view. Rather, monism can be so developed that it includes theism instead of negating it.

This would entail a distinction between two or more aspects of God. All the different theories of religion, as pointed out



by the authors, deny internal distinctions in God in accordance with their mono-polar bias. Not only theism conceives God as transcendent and simple, monism, seemingly an opposite world view, also conceives God as transcendent, indeterminate and simple. Thus, most or all of the theo-centric world views suffer from this defect of one-sidedness or mono-polar bias. In as much as theism and pantheism present two extreme view-points, they can be complementary to each other and synthesised in a more comprehensive world view. This world view can be provided by monism, not the monism as it has been developed so far, but a new absolutistic and all-comprehending monism.

It is not that any one trying to develop such a monism would have to start from the scratch. Instead, there are ample suggestions for such a world view in classical philosophies. As far back as the Vedas we have the description of the ultimate Reality as both all-inclusive and transcendent. "Having enveloped the earth on every side" says *Puruṣa Sūkta*, "He stands out beyond it the length of ten fingers..."<sup>12</sup> The apparently spatial terminology is only meant to suggest two aspects of the Absolute, one which is entirely transcendent and unrelated to the spatio-temporal world and the other which envelops this world. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* refers to two forms of *Brahman* which comprise the entire universe, as also its essence that is, *Brahman* or *Puruṣa* as He is in Himself :—

"Verily there are two forms of *Brahman*, gross and subtle, mortal and immortal, limited and unlimited, definite and indefinite."<sup>13</sup>

The idea is elaborated in mythological terms which cannot be useful in a philosophical system, but the definite suggestion as to two aspects of the ultimate Reality is undeniable. The passage can be better understood in the context of its preceding passages which describe the universe as truth and *Brahman* as the Truth of the truth the Source and Substance of all that there is.<sup>14</sup> All through the *Upaniṣads* the idea is emphatically affirmed: 'All this is *Brahman*'. And the phrase is explained as meaning that all this comes out of, is sustained by and merges into *Brahman*.<sup>15</sup> Thus *Brahman* is both all this, as well as the Source, Ground and End of all this.

The *Bhagwadgītā* likewise calls the entire universe comprising nature and souls as the *prakṛti* (power) of God. God in Himself is distinct from His power and yet His power is an integral part of Him.<sup>16</sup> This idea is not consistently developed in the *Gītā*. But there is another distinction between two aspects of God, which is very consistently adhered to in the *Gītā*, viz., His attributed Form and His transcendent Nature which is beyond all *guṇas* (attributes), is immutable and unrelated.<sup>17</sup> The *Bhagwadgītā* projects a highly personal God, an adequate Object of religious worship, but it repeatedly cautions the devotees that this personal aspect is not the whole truth about God and that beyond lies an aspect of God which is perhaps more real and basic. Of course, even this transcendent aspect of God, though beyond all attributes, is more or less a personal God. But He is also a God, who unlike the personal God of theism, is the Source and immanent Ground of the entire universe.<sup>18</sup>

Saṁkāra's distinction of *Brahman* and *Īśvara* is well known. Usually the distinction is explained by Him as due to *māyā* or *avidyā*. Thus *Īśvara* is *Brahman* plus *māyā*. But in as much as *māyā* cannot have an existence apart from *Brahman*, the being of *Īśvara* can not be conceived as some distinct entity. If so, *Īśvara* is just one aspect of *Brahman* in which the potential power of *māyā* has become explicit and active. *Īśvara* is *Brahman* as related to the world, its Creator and Sustainer, while *Brahman* is the ultimate Reality as He is in Himself. The above contention needs a longer statement for which we have no place in this paper. That for Saṁkāra *Īśvara* and *Brahman* were not two distinct entities, but one and the same is indisputable. There are innumerable passages in which he has not only equated them, but used the two terms interchangeably. Thus *Brahman-Ātman* or *Īśvara* is the acknowledged Cause (material and efficient) of the universe.<sup>19</sup> In as much as *Brahman-Ātman* is acknowledged as the Source or even Creator of the world, the postulation of *Īśvara* as some entity distinct from *Brahman* becomes unnecessary. Since Saṁkāra also distinguishes *Īśvara* from *Brahman*, that means this *Īśvara* must be some integral aspect of *Brahman*.

In spite of all Saṁkāra's illusionism *Brahman-Ātman* is still the ultimate Source, Substance and Self of the universe. The

universe does not exist apart from *Brahman*, either prior to, or during its existence, or after its dissolution.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, in all Vedānta *Brahman* is the material as well as efficient Cause of the world. The world is indistinguishable from *Brahman* or *Sat* which is its material Cause.<sup>21</sup> These texts are often given an illusionistic interpretation. But understood in their entire context, they only mean that *Brahman* as the Cause or Substance is immanent in the world, or that the world lives in and through its Cause—*Brahman*; while *Brahman* or *Sat* in Itself belongs to an ontologically higher level of existence.

Ramanuja advocates a typically theistic concept of a personal God of innumerable auspicious qualities, a God of love and grace. And yet strangely enough, this God is also an all-comprehensive Reality. The entire universe and all the souls are the body or attributes of *Brahman*, qualifying Him and included within Him. *Brahman* is not only the Source and Substance of the world (and souls), all this exists in and through *Brahman*, so that each single word that denotes some particular object or *jīva* also denotes *Brahman* as its primary referent.<sup>22</sup> There can not be a more clear expression of the absolutistic monism, we are trying to suggest. No object or individual soul is denied some kind of distinct individual existence. Indeed the Supreme Person, in as much as He is the supreme object of devotion, is distinct from the soul. And yet, being the all-comprehending Reality He in some way includes the soul within Himself. We have referred to above a conception of panentheism presented by Hartshorne and Reese; Ramanuja's philosophy appears to anticipate this conception :

“Since the sum total of all entities, animate and inanimate, constitutes the Lord's body.. the term *prakṛti* denotes the Lord, who is the soul of *prakṛiti*, as being modified by *prakṛti*. Likewise, the term *puruṣa* denotes the Lord, who is the soul of *puruṣa*”

“It follows, only that part of the Supreme Spirit that is constituted by *prakṛti*, is at all subject to transformations, that part in Him that is the substratum of this modification is not subject to them. Likewise, all obstacles in the spiritual life belong to that part of the Supreme Spirit that is constituted by the indi-



vidual soul; that part of Him that is the substratum of all modifications is the Controller, immutable and possessed of all perfections."<sup>23</sup>

In the more predominantly theistic Semitic traditions it is more difficult to find suggestions for a world view that reconciles theism and pantheism in a comprehensive Absolutism. Still we frequently find two very different kinds of descriptions of the ultimate Reality in the writings of one and the same philosopher, which very well suggest an implicit acceptance of two aspects of the ultimate Reality—personal and supra-personal. The theosophy of Eckhart is a good example. He clearly distinguishes Godhead from God. The Godhead of Eckhart is above being and non-being, as also above God.<sup>24</sup> Whereas God becomes and dis-becomes, Godhead remains an eternal, immutable and transcendent mystery. Rudolf Otto has tried to argue that this Godhead of Eckhart is still the dynamic Creator-God of theism. There seems to be a certain gulf between the two concepts of Creator God and the Godhead, which cannot be overlooked, if the two descriptions are taken as referring to one and the same Being. But they are easily reconciled, if they are taken as referring to two aspects of one Reality—Godhead or the Absolute as He is in Himself and the Creator God or the Absolute as He is in relation to His creation.

Ibnu'l Arabi has suggested a similar distinction between the finite God of religion and the infinite God of the mystics. The God of religion reveals Himself in various forms in different religions. It depends on the capacity of the believer as to which one of these forms he accepts. But the God of the mystics contains or includes all these forms. The God of the mystics or the Divine essence is pure, without attributes and beyond virtue and sin. In this Divine essence there is a complete unity of knower, known and knowledge. It is endowed with attributes when it manifests itself either in the universe or in men, for all created things are His attributes. Viewed as His attributes, they are identical with God; viewed apart from God, they are nothing. God does not create the universe. Creation only means manifestation of what already existed in God in a potential form. The

relation between God and the creatures is explained on the analogy of an object and innumerable mirrors. Like the images in the mirror the creatures cannot exist without Him and are Him in a way. Yet they are not He when they are viewed as existing independently.<sup>25</sup>

In our times, Paul Tillich has distinguished the God of religion and theology from the Absolute, or the 'God above God'. According to him, "the God of theological theism is a being besides others and as such a part of the whole of reality. He is supposed to be beyond the ontological elements and categories. But every statement subjects Him to them. He is seen as a self which has a world, as an ego which is related to a thou, as a cause which is separated from its effect.... He is a being and not being itself." Paul Tillich therefore, calls for a transcendence of theism and even mysticism into an experience of absolute faith. It agrees with mysticism in the latter's recognition of the need of transcending the theistic objectivation of God. He pleads for a further recognition of the trans-personal presence of the Divine within the subject. This does not negate the personal Being of God, but is to be understood rather as a complementary truth. Though he does not use the term, but he means what we have referred to as a bi-polar nature of the truth. It is brought out by what he calls the paradoxical nature of every prayer, of saying 'thou' to some body who is nearer to 'I' than the 'I' is to itself.<sup>26</sup>

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## NOTES

1. *Summa Theologia* Ia viii.2, in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Philosophical Texts*, Trans. and edited by Thomas Gilby (Oxford University Press, London, New York, 1952), p. 81.

2. See M. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity*, (MacMillan & Co London, 1971), Ch. I on Classical Theism.
3. See William Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, (MacMillan and Co., London, 1935), pp. 260 ff.
4. *Summa Theologia* Ia xiii.3 to 6, op. cit., pp. 93-95.
5. Ibid, Ia xiii.4, p. 95.
6. Herman Lotze, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion*, edited by F. C. Conybeare (George Allan and Unwin, London, 1916), pp. 57 ff.
7. John Caird, *The Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, Vol. II, pp. 135 ff.
8. Śaṅkārā, *Upadeśa Sahasri* II. 9.6; II 10.2; II.17, 67, 71, 81, etc.
9. "The Infinite brooks not otherness for itself, since being infinite naught exists outside It... The Infinite is alike these things and no one of them all." Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, quoted in Sidney Spencer, *Mysticism in World Religions*, (Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 242.
10. "If we admit It to be indivisible it would be particularly impossible for us to maintain that the individual self is either a part, a modification, or inherent power of the Supreme Self, or something different from It." Śaṅkārā Bhāṣya on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II.1.20, Transl. by Madhavanand, (Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1965).
11. C. Hartshorne and W. L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 17 ff., 499 ff.
12. *Ṛgveda* X. 90, quoted in M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1956) p. 42.
13. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II. 3.1, from the *Upaniṣads* trans. and edited by Nikhilanand, (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1963).
14. Ibid. II. 1.20.
15. Ibid II. 1.20, *Chhāṇdogya Upaniṣad* III. 14.1; *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, III. 1.1. etc.
16. *Bhagwadgītā* VII. 4-5.
17. Ibid. VII. 24-25; IX, 11.
18. Ibid VIII. 22; IX. 17-18; XIII. 15.

19. *Śaṅkara Bhāṣya* on *Bṛahma Sūtras*. I. 1.2; I. 1.11; I, 4.6; II. 1.1, transl. by Gambhiranand, (Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1965).
20. "Because everything springs from the Self, is dissolved in It and remains imbued with It during its existence.... As it can not be perceived apart from the Self, therefore, everything is the Self." *Śaṅkara Bhāṣya* on *Bṛhaduranyaka Upaniṣad* II. 4.6.
21. *Chhāṇḍogya Upaniṣad* VI. 1. 4-6 and *Śaṅkara Bhāṣya* on it.
22. Ramanuja, *Vedānta Saṁgraha* 75, trans. and edited by J. A. B. Bultanen, (Deccan College Monograph Series 16, Poona 1956), p. 234.
23. Ibid. 73, pp. 233-4.
24. Eckhart, quoted in Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West*, transl. by Bertha L. Bracey and Richendal, Payne, (The MacMillan & Co., New York, 1972), pp. 28 ff., 42, 206.
25. See Ram Landau, *The Philosophy of Abn 'Arabi*, (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1956), pp. 27 ff.
26. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, in *Philosophy of Religion* edited by George L. Abernethy and Thomas A. Longford, (The MacMillan Co., London, 1968), pp. 318-19.