

Swami Vivekananda, the Modern Panentheism Movement, and the New Biology (I)

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Defined broadly, Qualified Non-dualism (Vishishtādvaita) is the doctrine that everything in the universe (including both matter-body and thought-mind) is a transformation, mode, aspect, idea, word, name, form, secondary attribute, fragment, externalization, objectification, modification, emanation, projection, reflection, shadow, image, and/or ectype of Brahman-God (or ultimate Reality). This process involves an essential change in substance and form, and not an accidental change, in the production of the universe from the Supreme Being. A continuous one-way flow occurs from the substantial cause to its effect. There is identity since the universe derives its being from Brahman-God, and difference because as an effect the nature of the universe differs considerably from that of Brahman-God, the cause (Identity-in-difference). The process is one of involution or privation since the effect is always less than the cause. The perfection of the Lord remains untarnished by the defects of the universe. An analogy in the Upanishads compares it to the web coming out of a spider. We can call this Pantheism (all-in-God) or Transcendental Pantheism since it states that Brahman-God is also transcendent.

A more moderate form is the doctrine of Panentheism (all-in-God) that the universe is contained within Brahman-God, and Brahman-God within (or pervading) the universe (Theoenpanism, God-in-all). This

coinherence is possible because the Supreme Being is Omnipresent. In addition, in both forms Brahman-God and the world are ontologically different. The Divine Being is more than the universe, being both immanent and transcendent and therefore not exhausted by, dependent on, or tainted by the imperfections of the world. The Apostle Paul said of God, 'In him we live, and move, and have our being' (Acts 17:28). The modern doctrine of Panentheism arose from the writings of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), was developed by Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000), and has reached its most mature form in the writings of Arthur Peacocke and Philip Clayton, with additional contributions from many others. This differs from Creationism whereby the Lord creates the phenomenal world *ex nihilo* (from nothing). Most important, working independently of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), panentheists have added confirmation to some of the ideas he taught over a century ago.

As the British biochemist and theologian Arthur Peacocke (1924-2006) from Oxford and Cambridge universities wrote, 'God is best conceived of as the circumambient Reality enclosing all existing entities, structures and processes; and as operating in and through all, while being more than all. Hence, all that is not God has its existence within God's operation and Being.' The Being of Brahman-God includes and penetrates the whole universe,

so that every part of it exists in the Divine Reality.¹

Philip Clayton a professor at Claremont School of Theology in Southern California signified, ‘Finite space is contained within absolute space, the world is contained within God; yet the world is not identical to God. Precisely this is the core of Panentheism. In this sense, the world is not outside of God who immediately perceives everything through His omnipresence.’ Traditional theistic (Indian dualistic) systems often stress the difference between Brahman-God and the world, while Panentheism emphasizes the Divine Being’s active presence in the world. Creatures though different from Brahman-God, receive their existence through participation in the infinite Being of the Lord. There is a similarity-in-difference between Brahman-God and humans, remaining distinct in regards to Infinite/finite, necessary/contingent, and perfect/imperfect.²

A Panentheistic Brahman-God who contains the entire world is apt to show more concern for it than a Divine Being who exists separate from it. Brahman-God reacts to the human situation as a Divine Incarnation (*Avatāra*), being affected by what people do. His/Her intention is to liberate and save people and to improve human conditions on earth.³ We exert an influence on the Lord for example, when the Divine Being responds to our prayers.

Difficult theological problems

Not accepting the idea of God (Brahman) as having two aspects *Nirguna* (without qualities) and *Saguna* (with qualities) as the Hindus have, has caused Christian thinkers to have to deal with difficult theological problems. They ask the questions: How can God be timeless, and yet act in time? How can God both act in space and yet be non-spatial having no spatial

location?⁴ How can God be both immutable and mutable, impersonal and personal, partless and with parts, Infinite and with finite form, transcending and within time and space, simple and a trinity?

A solution was worked out by two Panentheists, Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne:

Hartshorne’s contention is that God is best conceived in ‘dipolar’ [also bipolar] terms, that is, as having *both immutable and mutable aspects*. The error of traditional theism, he feels, is that in seeking to preserve God’s absolute perfection, it has paid him the unnecessary and erroneous metaphysical compliment of conceiving His nature as monopolar—as pure Being, devoid of becoming, as wholly immutable, without a dynamic aspect, etc. Hartshorne insists that a more adequate conception of the Divine reality is to conceive God as dipolar [an idea that originates with Alfred North Whitehead]: He is both immutable (in his intrinsic, eternal essence) and mutable (in his experience of and response to his creatures); He is the supreme cause of all things, yet is affected by the acts of his creatures; His intrinsic being is an immutable (ie, steadfast) ethical character, yet His nature becomes (processes) as He expresses that character in response to the contingent acts and decisions of his creatures; He is infinite in his knowledge of all potentiality, yet finite in His awareness of the world’s contingency (for the latter is finite); etc. . . . Against those who contend that the dipolar interpretation of beings results in an untenable paradox of juxtaposing polar opposite categories within a single being, Hartshorne’s response is to point out that each being exemplifies the polar categories in different aspects—not the same aspects—of its nature. ‘The law of contradiction,’ he notes, ‘does not bar the presence of contrary determinations in the same entity, but only requires . . . a distinction of aspects . . . in which the contraries hold.’⁵

**Brahman-God's continuous
creation from within**

Vivekananda indicates that the ongoing creation of the universe originates internally:

A second explanation of knowledge is that the explanation of a thing must come from inside and not from outside. There had been the belief that, when a man threw up a stone and it fell, some demon dragged it down. Many occurrences which are really natural phenomena are attributed by people to unnatural beings. That a ghost dragged down the stone was an explanation that was not in the thing itself, it was an explanation from outside; but the second explanation of gravitation is something in the nature of the stone; the explanation is coming from inside. This tendency you will find throughout modern thought; in one word, what is meant by science is that the explanations of things are in their own nature, and that no external beings or existences are required to explain what is going on in the universe. The chemist never requires demons, or ghosts, or anything of that sort, to explain his phenomena. The physicist never requires anyone of these to explain the things he knows, nor does any other scientist. And this is one of the features of science which I mean to apply to religion. In this religions are found wanting and that is why they are crumbling into pieces. Every science wants its explanations from inside, from the very nature of things; and the religions are not able to supply this. There is an ancient theory of a personal deity entirely separate from the universe, which has been held from the very earliest time. The arguments in favour of this have been repeated again and again, how it is necessary to have a God entirely separate from the universe, an extra-cosmic deity, who has created the universe out of his will, and is conceived by religion to be its ruler. We find, apart from all these arguments, the Almighty God painted as the All-merciful, and at the same time, inequalities remain in the world. These things do not concern the

philosopher at all, but he says the heart of the thing was wrong; it was an explanation from outside, and not inside. What is the cause of the universe? Something outside of it, some being who is moving this universe! And just as it was found insufficient to explain the phenomenon of the falling stone, so this was found insufficient to explain religion. And religions are falling to pieces, because they cannot give a better explanation than that. . . . It is unnecessary to seek for any cause outside. This also is breaking down religion. What I mean by breaking down religion is that religions that have held on to the idea of an extra-cosmic deity, that he is a very big man and nothing else, can no more stand on their feet; they have been pulled down, as it were.⁶

Vivekananda adds that the idea that the universe was created by a Personal God (*Ishvara*) outside of nature, 'holds that the effect is not the cause, that the cause is entirely separate from the effect. Yet all human knowledge shows that the effect is but the cause in another form.' 'Everything should be explained from its own nature. There may have been people who thought that every apple that fell to the ground was dragged down by a ghost, but the explanation is the law of gravitation; and although we know it is not a perfect explanation, yet it is much better than the other, because it is derived from the nature of the thing itself, while the other posits an extraneous cause. So throughout the whole range of our knowledge; the explanation which is based upon the nature of the thing itself is a scientific explanation, and an explanation which brings in an outside agent is unscientific.' '... it is the nature of ignorance to seek for causes outside of effects. If a stone falls, it has been thrown by a devil or a ghost, says the ignorant man, but the scientific man says it is the law of nature, the law of gravitation.' 'Science and religion will meet and shake hands. Poetry and

philosophy will become friends. This will be the religion of the future, and if we can work it out, we may be sure that it will be for all times and peoples.⁷

An essential task of the Panentheists is to explain how Brahman-God works on the universe. Applying the scientific ideas of the New Biology and other realms of modern science, Arthur Peacocke came to the following conclusions that echo Vivekananda's teachings. 'The world system is causally closed. . . . In this model the proposed kinds of interactions of God with the world system would not be from "outside" but from "inside" it. That's why the world system is regarded as being "in God."⁸ He continues:

We have to emphasize anew the immanence of God as creator 'in with, and under' the natural processes of the world unveiled by the sciences in accord with all that the sciences have revealed since those debates in the nineteenth century. At no point do modern natural scientists have to invoke any nonnatural causes to explain their observations and inferences about the past. . . . God is creating at every moment of the world's existence through perpetually giving creativity to the very stuff of the world. All of this reinforces the need to reaffirm more urgently than at any other time in Christian (and Jewish and Islamic) history that, in a very strong sense, God is the immanent creator creating through the processes of the natural order. . . . The processes revealed by the sciences are in themselves God acting as creator, and God is not to be found as some kind of additional influence or factor added on to the processes of the world God is creating. This perspective can properly be called 'theistic naturalism' and is not Deism *redivivus* [reborn], for it conceives of God as actively and (in the light of an analogy developed below) personally creating through the processes of the world.⁹

Likewise, for traditional Hinduism,

Sushanta Sen pointed out that:

One distinctive feature of the Hindu conception of the Creator God lies in that, after creating the world, God does not stand outside but remains within it. The concept of a God residing in Heaven above the universe and occasionally interfering with the affairs of the world at moments of crisis is quite alien to the Hindu mind. God, according to Hinduism, remains in the very bosom of the Universe, pervades and permeates the whole of it, and controls it while remaining within it. Hence, God has been described in the Hindu scriptures as the inherent creator and inner controller of the world, or the *Antaryàmin* . . . though God resides within the world and pervades the whole of it, God's being is not wholly exhausted in it; God is also beyond the world. God is both immanent and transcendent in relation to the world.¹⁰

Arthur Peacocke has emphasized that God as the perpetual creator of the universe is maintaining and changing the universe it at each instance of time:

But to speak thus is to recognize also that God is creating now and continuously in and through the inherent, inbuilt creativity of the natural order, both physical and biological a creativity that is itself God in the process of creating. So we have to see God's action as being in the processes themselves, as they are revealed by the physical and biological sciences, and this means we must stress more than ever before God's immanence in the world. If the world is in any sense what God has created and that through which he acts and expresses His own inner being, then there is a sense in which God is never absent from his world and He is as much in his world as, say Beethoven is in his Seventh Symphony during a performance of it. . . . Thus the inorganic, biological, and human worlds are not just the stage of God's action—they are in themselves a mode of God in action, a mode that has traditionally been associated with the designation 'Holy Spirit,' the creator Spirit.¹¹

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MOVEMENT, AND THE NEW BIOLOGY (I)

New modes of existence come into being, and old ones often pass away. In the world new entities, structures and processes appear in the course of time, so that God's action as Creator is both past and present: it is continuous. Any notion of God as Creator must now take into account, more than ever before in the history of theology, that God is continuously creating, that God is *semper* [always] *Creator*. In this respect, God has to be regarded as related to created time as the continuously creating Creator. Thus it is that the scientific perspective obliges us to take more seriously and concretely than hitherto in theology the notion of the immanence of God as Creator—that God is the Immanent Creator creating in and through the processes of the natural order.¹²

According to modern science, the universe as a whole is a closed system of matter and energy, not open to input from outside since its total energy remains constant (the principle of the conservation of energy). If Brahman-God acted from outside the universe, He/She could not add in

additional energy. In continuously modifying every aspect of the universe at each moment of time, Brahman-God is simultaneously involved in creation of the new, and preservation or destruction of the old. They represent a single not three separate events.

These ideas are in agreement with Swami Vivekananda's statements on the subject, 'It is not that this world was created the other day, not that a God came and created the world and since that time has been sleeping; for that cannot be. The creative energy is still going on. God is eternally creating—is never at rest. Remember the passage in the Gita [3:24] where Krishna says, "If I remain at rest for one moment, this universe will be destroyed." If that creative energy which is working all around us, day and night, stops for a second, the whole thing falls to the ground. There never was a time when that energy did not work throughout the universe.'¹³ ■

(To be continued)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Arthur Peacocke, *Paths From Science Towards God* (Oxford: One World, 2001), pp. 139, 56-58, 138, 140-42, 145-46. For an overview of Panentheism see Web: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panentheism>
- 2 Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm B Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 89-91, 102-05.
- 3 Clayton (1997), p. 94.
- 4 Arthur Peacocke, *Theology For a Scientific Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 128.
- 5 J. Norman King, and Barry L. Whitney, 'Rahner and Hartshorne on Divine Immutability,' *International Philosophical Quarterly* (1982), pp. 197-99.
- 6 *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (hereafter *CW*), I, pp. 370-72.
- 7 *CW*, II, pp. 330-31; III, p. 423; II, p. 140.
- 8 Peacocke (2001), p. 147.
- 9 P. Clayton and A. Peacocke ed., *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmann, 2004), pp. 143-44.
- 10 *Concepts of the Ultimate*, ed. Linda Tessier (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 92, 94.
- 11 *Chaos and Complexity*, eds. Robert John Russell, et. al. (Berkeley, CA: The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1995), p. 139.
- 12 Peacocke (1993), p. 105.
- 13 *CW*, III, pp. 122-23.

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