

Pantheism as Heresy

This article is about pantheism, but I think it applies equally to pandeism.

Why did the Christian Church reject the obvious truth of pantheism, the view that God and the Universe are one? In order to understand this we could look at the monumental History of the Christian Church in eight volumes by Philip Schaff. Schaff (1819 – 1893) was a Swiss-born, German-educated Protestant theologian and a Church historian who spent most of his adult life living and teaching in the United States. The following are quotes from his book:

“A view of history which overlooks or undervalues the divine factor starts from deism and consistently runs into atheism; while the opposite view, which overlooks the free agency of man and his moral responsibility and guilt, is essentially fatalistic and pantheistic.”

We see here one of the key reasons for the rejection of pantheism: The need to emphasize the guilt of human beings for their transgressions against an Almighty Creator God.

Schaff goes on to consider a verse from Pindar, the Greek poet of the 5th century B.C.: “One race of men and gods, from one mother breathe we all.” He comments:

“It is evident, however, that all these passages were understood by their heathen authors in a materialistic and pantheistic sense, which would make nature or the earth the mother of gods and men. Paul in his masterly address to the Athenians, without endorsing the error, recognizes the element of truth in pantheism, viz., the divine origin of man and the immanence of God in the world and in humanity.”

This quote from St. Paul indicates that he was actually rather close to pantheism: “It is no longer I (my own sinful self) that lives, but it is Christ that lives in me: and that life

which I now live in the flesh, I live in faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me." Schaff, though, dismisses any suggestion of pantheism: "It (The doctrine of Christian life) consists in a vital union with Christ, the crucified and risen Redeemer, who is the indwelling, all-pervading, and controlling life of the believer; but the union is no pantheistic confusion or absorption; the believer continues to live as a self-conscious and distinct personality."

The second century A.D. saw the "Paganizing or Gnostic heresy", exemplified by the teachings of Simon Magus. Schaff notes that Magus "unquestionably adulterated Christianity with pagan ideas and practices, and gave himself out, in pantheistic style, for an emanation of God."

"The direct assault upon Christianity, by works devoted to the purpose, began about the middle of the second century, and was very ably conducted by a Grecian philosopher, Celsus.... At one time he advocates the popular heathen religion, as, for instance, its doctrine of demons; at another time he rises above the polytheistic notions to a pantheistic or sceptical view.... Celsus thus denies the whole idea of revelation, now in pantheistic style, now in the levity of Epicurean deism; and thereby at the same time abandons the ground of the popular heathen religion. In his view Christianity has no rational foundation at all, but is supported by the imaginary terrors of future punishment."

Although Celsus was derided by Christian writers, he hit the nail on the head when he identified the scare tactics of the Christian Church. These tactics would have been unsuccessful had the Church accepted pantheism.

"Marcus Aurelius, the last and best representative of Stoicism, ruled the Roman Empire for twenty years (A.D. 161-180) at the height of its power and prosperity.... His morality and religion were blended. But he had no clear

views of the divinity. He alternately uses the language of the polytheist, the deist, and the pantheist. He worshipped the deity of the universe and in his own breast... He was mild, amiable, and gentle; in these respects the very reverse of a hard and severe Stoic, and nearly approaching a disciple of Jesus... The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius are full of beautiful moral maxims, strung together without system. They bear a striking resemblance to Christian ethics."

Schaff is here forced to admit that pantheism is quite compatible with admirable ethical behaviour.

NOËTUS of Smyrna published his views in A.D. 200. He was influenced by the pantheistic philosophy of Heraclitus who "viewed nature as the harmony of all antitheses, and called the universe at once dissoluble and indissoluble, originated and unoriginated, mortal and immortal; and thus Noëtus supposed that the same divine subject must be able to combine opposite attributes in itself."

Sabellius (fl. ca. 215) was a third-century priest and theologian who most likely taught in Rome, but may have been a North African from Libya. To quote Schaff, "His fundamental thought is, that the unity of God, without distinction in itself, unfolds or extends itself in the course of the world's development in three different forms and periods of revelation and, after the completion of redemption, returns into unity." Sabellius would thus seem to be one of the first pandeists. Schaff continues:

"Athanasius traced the doctrine of Sabellius to the Stoic philosophy. The common element is the pantheistic leading view of an expansion and contraction of the divine nature immanent in the world."

The McClintock and Strong Biblical Cyclopedia has this to say of Sabellius: "The divine substance does not manifest itself simultaneously in three forms, but as each new manifestation is made the previous one ceases; and when, finally, all three

stages have been passed, the triad will again return into the monad, and the divine substance will again be all and in all. Thus appears the pantheistic tendency of Sabellianism as a whole. God is the abstract substance which evolves itself into the world of reality, traverses the stage of finite life, and eventually retires within itself. Some of the fathers traced the doctrine of Sabellius to the Stoic system. The only common element, however, is the pantheistic expansion and contraction of the divine nature immanent in the world.”

<http://www.biblicalcyclopedia.com/S/sabellius.html>