

Definition: **theism** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Belief in the existence of gods, but more specifically in that of a single personal God, at once immanent (active) in the created world and transcendent (separate) from it.

Summary Article: **Theism**

From *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*

Literally, belief in the existence of God. Though the concept seems to be as old as philosophy, the term itself appears to be of relatively recent origin. Some have suggested that it appeared in the seventeenth century in England to take the place of such words as “deism” and “deistic” when referring to belief in God. “Theism” is often used as the opposite of “atheism,” the term for denial of the existence of God, and distinguishes a theist from an atheist or agnostic without attempting any technical philosophical or theological connection. The term is also used as a label for religious believers, though again, there is no attempt to imply a particular theological or philosophical position. Finally, the term is used to denote certain philosophical or theological positions, regardless of whether this involves a religious relationship to the God of whom individuals speak.

God as Ultimate Reference Point.

In its broadest sense theism denotes a belief in some ultimate reference point that gives meaning and unity to everything. However, the God postulated in this sense is totally depersonalized and thoroughly transcendent, almost an abstract concept. Certain philosophical and theological positions seem to use “God” and “theism” in this way.

1. Paul Tillich's concept of theism is that God is whatever becomes a matter of ultimate concern, something that determines our being or nonbeing. Consequently, God is identified by Tillich as the ground of all being, or being-itself. While being-itself is certainly objective and not a mere creation of the mind, Tillich's God is totally depersonalized and abstract. This is demonstrated by Tillich's claim that the only nonsymbolic statement one can make about God is that he is being-itself or the ground of being. All words traditionally used to denote the attributes of God are entirely symbolic.

2. This broad sense of theism is also found in Hegel, who actually has several concepts of God, but at least one that fits this category. In Hegel's thought, one concept is that God is equivalent to the infinite. Philosophy, he says, rises to divinity or a divine viewpoint. Here “God” seems to be equivalent to transcendent, all-encompassing thought, but is not a personal God.

God as Immanent.

A narrower concept of theism sees God also as depersonalized and as the ultimate reference point, but gives God some kind of concrete manifestation. Nevertheless, the God of such theistic views is entirely immanent.

One example is *pantheism*, the view that everything is God. The most famous philosophical form is that of Spinoza, who held there is only one substance in the universe—God. Consequently, everything is merely a mode of that one substance. Such a God is not abstract but immanent.

By contrast, the biblical concept speaks of God as infinite, meaning, among other things, that God has

being to an infinite *degree*, but not to an infinite *amount*, a view that is qualitative but not quantitative being. Scripture further teaches that God is everywhere simultaneously (immensity) and is present at every spatial location in the totality of his being (omnipresence), i.e., God is present *at* but not *as* every point in space.

The broad difference between the pantheistic and biblical concepts on these matters is that the pantheist thinks God is present not only *at* every point in space but *as* every point. Furthermore, pantheism denies omnipresence, since the totality of God's being is present in no one place.

Another example of this concept is *process theism*, based on the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead (*Process and Reality*), sometimes known as bipolar or dipolar theism. Some of the better-known process theologians are Charles Hartshorne, Schubert Ogden, John Cobb, and David Griffin. According to this school, there are in God two poles: a primordial, eternal, potential pole, and a temporal, consequent, actual pole. In addition, there are certain eternal objects that may ingress into the world to become actual entities. Such eternal objects are pure potentials and, as such, cannot order and relate themselves as actual entities can. To order these eternal entities some nontemporal actual entity is needed, and this is God in his primordial nature. Here God is like a backstage director who lines up the forms, getting them ready to ingress onto the stage of the temporal world. However, God's primordial nature should not be seen as distinct from the order of eternal objects, which means the order is his primordial nature. Consequently, God is not a creator before creation, but with it in its concrescence at its very beginning. In his primordial pole, God is the principle of concretion, and this entirely depersonalizes God and makes him finite.

The same is true for God in his actual pole. According to bipolar theism, every actual entity (and God is perceived as such) needs a physical pole to complete the "vision" of its potential pole. The consequent nature of God, then, refers to all the entities in being in the temporal order. Given such a view, God can change and develop as his temporal pole does, and he is clearly finite. Moreover, God in his actual pole can perish, since all actual things can perish. In such a concept God is not the creator of the world, but rather the director of a world process. He is interdependent in the sense of being mutually dependent. Moreover, he does not have all perfections eternally and concurrently, but attains them successively and endlessly.

A final example of this form of theism is found in Hegel's conception of God as Spirit. This notion of Spirit does not allow God to be a person in the Judeo-Christian sense, but sees him as a force, or general consciousness, uniting all finite consciousness. In other words, he is not just all finite consciousnesses taken together, but rather the force that underlies and unites all intersubjectivity. Such a God is clearly immanent and not personal.

God as Personal.

A third sense of theism is that God is not an abstract concept nor even a concrete manifestation of some depersonalized idea. In this sense, the concept of God does take on personhood, though this is not to suggest that in all forms of this view God has interactions with persons. Despite the fact that such a God is an individual object (rather than a compilation of objects), he is not the equivalent of the Judeo-Christian concept. Normally, such a concept of God sees him in some way as finite. Two examples will illustrate this sense of theism.

1. Polytheism, of which the best known is perhaps the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods. Here there is a

multiplicity of gods, each representing and personifying some aspect of life or of the created universe. In spite of the fact that each god may represent only one quality of life (love, war, etc.), each is perceived as a person. As such, the gods are perceived as separate from, but participating in, the world and interacting with humans and with one another. In fact, the gods are perceived as having many of the foibles and failings of human beings. Such polytheistic perceptions of God view him as personal, but definitely finite. Such concepts are not equivalent to the Judeo-Christian notion of God.

2. According to deism, God is an individual being (personal in that sense) but one who does not interact with the world. He initially created the world but since then has withdrawn himself from it (impersonal in that sense). He does not act in the world or sustain it but remains thoroughly transcendent over it. There is a sense in which such a view renders God's existence inconsequential and certainly not equivalent to the Judeo-Christian conception.

God as Personal Creator and Sustainer.

A final perception is of God as creator and sustainer of the universe. He is infinite in attributes, and he is the only God. This monotheistic concept of God is held within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Three ways in particular have appeared.

1. *Theonomy*. According to his view, God is the law in the universe, and in particular, his will is law. Whatever rules of ethics, epistemology, etc., there are result from what God wills and could be otherwise if he so chose. No action in the universe is intrinsically good or evil or better or worse, but has its value in regard to the value God places upon it. The necessary rules are known through divine revelation rather than reason.

2. *Rationalism*. This school of thought is represented by the work of Leibniz. According to his system, all the laws of logic, ethics, and the like are necessary laws in the universe and are so in virtue of the principle of sufficient reason in accord with which everything must happen. In such a system God must create a world, and he must create the best of all possible worlds (for Leibniz, the best world is intelligible). The circumstances in such a universe are discernible by the light of pure reason unaided by revelation. If in theonomy the concept of God is prior to logic, in rationalism logic is prior to theology.

3. *Modified Rationalism*. There is a mediating position that, like theonomy, does not claim that everything is discernible by reason alone, nor that what is discernible is an expression of some necessary law. Modified rationalism does not demand that God create a world, but asserts that creating a world is something fitting for God to do. For a modified rationalist, there is no best possible world, only good and evil worlds. Modified rationalism differs from theonomy in that it claims that certain things are intrinsically good and intrinsically evil, apart from what God says about them. In such a universe, things are as they are according to reason, and in many cases one can discern why something is the case and what the case is by means of reason, though some things can be known only by revelation, a view historically typical of Judeo-Christian theologies.

Conclusion.

More needs to be said about theism as a philosophy, especially about certain questions traditionally attached to the philosophy of theism. For example, in speculating on theism, one of the questions that arises is about the relation of human language to God, i.e., How is human language (with its reference to finite beings) predicable of an infinite being? Another question deals with whether it is possible to demonstrate rationally, or at least to justify rationally, belief in God's existence. Philosophers of religion

also ask whether a particular mode of experience is specifically religious. Likewise, they ask about the relation of the providence and sovereignty of God to the freedom and responsibility of humans. Finally, there is the question about the internal consistency of theological systems that hold to the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving God along with the presence of evil in the world. Though many philosophers and theologians (Barthians, existentialists, logical empiricists, e.g.) have argued that it is impossible to give a rational justification of theism, nonetheless, many are ready to answer to the contrary.

See *also* Deism; God, Arguments for the Existence of; God, Attributes of; God, Doctrine of; Panentheism; Pantheism; Polytheism.

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