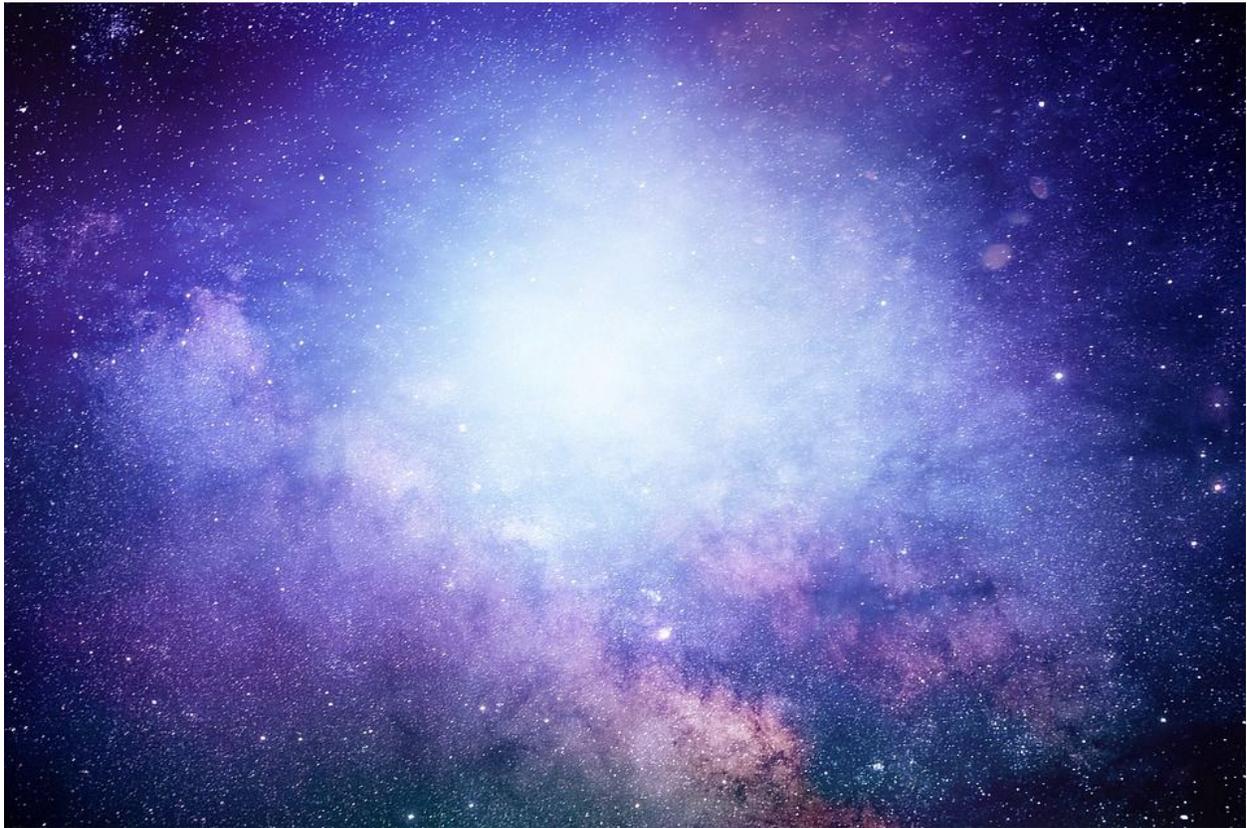




OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Panentheism - God Within Nature

-Rev. Robert McCluskey



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The writer Alice Walker once described some serious problems she has with the church and its theology. The church she was baptized and brought up in had taught black people to accept suffering and degradation as their due. "But I did not see that they were evil; that my parents should be cursed because they were black, because my mother was a woman. They were as innocent as trees, I felt. And, at heart, generous and sweet."¹ Nor could she understand how her parents had sinned:

"Just because a very long time ago a snake had given a white woman an apple and she had eaten it and given a bite to her cravenhearted husband. This was insulting to the most drowsy intelligence, I thought. We recognized Jesus Christ as one of us, but a rebel and revolutionary, consistently speaking up for the poor, the sick, and the discriminated against, and going up against the bossmen. I also loved that, after Moses and Joshua, he is the greatest magician in the Bible. He was also, I realized later, a fabulous masseur, healing by the power of touch and the laying on of hands."

Thinking back to a time when her mother worked in the fields, and would occasionally pause to take a rest, Walker asks:

"What God rescued my mother? Was it the God who said women deserved to suffer and were evil anyway, or was it the God of non-judgmental Nature, calming and soothing her with the green coolness of the tree she slept under and the warm earth she lay upon? I try to imagine my mother and the other women calling on God as they gave birth, and shuddering at the image of Him they must have conjured. I think now, and it hurts me to think it, of how tormented the true believers in our church must have been, wondering if in heaven Jesus Christ, a white man, the only good one besides Santa Claus and Abraham Lincoln they'd ever heard of, would deign to sit near them. . . . It is ironic, to say the least, that the very woman out of whose body I came, whose arms still held me, willingly indoctrinated me away from herself and the earth from which both of us received sustenance, and toward a frightful, jealous, cruel, murderous

¹ Walker, Alice. *The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven*. Adapted from a speech given at Auburn Theological Seminary, April 25, 1995. Copyright ©1995 by Alice Walker

‘God’ of another race and tribe of people, and expected me to forget the very breasts that had fed me and that I still leaned against. But such is the power of centuries-old indoctrination.”²

She lamented that her parents were not given a choice, but rather, in their innocence, embraced the inherited image of a deity that denied them their human freedom.

I strongly concur with her concerns that the Christian church for far too long was, and to some extent still is, complicit in various forms of discrimination and systems of oppression, and that its position is often supported by doctrine drawn from the literal sense of the Word. For far too long, the church divided spirit and nature, and taught that the body is a prison, and the world is a vale of tears.

At the same time, I cannot go along with her in pitting the "God of non-judgmental nature" against a "frightful, jealous, cruel, murderous 'God' of another race and tribe of people." I cannot subscribe to the belief that it is nature that in fact sustains us in our humanity.

Before science, nature and God were seen as fully united. The inner world of dreams, intuition, and imagination, and the outer world of crops, wars, and so on, were all one thing. Nature was "animated"--alive and responsive to human and divine intervention, to chants, rituals, and potions. Even within the Christian church, a magical sense of nature remained, now referred to as miracles, which were understood as "God's magic." This thinking continued uncontested in the eighteenth century.

But the emergence of science in the last two hundred years shattered this long-lived sense of animated nature. The whole realm of nature worship, magic, superstition, fortune telling, and so on was banished, along with a God who might be petitioned to intervene in nature. No more praying to the gods of rain, sun, health, or crops. God and nature were separated, seen as utterly distinct. Even the idea of miracles, which in some sense was nature worship cast in spiritual guise, became suspect. Nature was rendered lifeless, and soon became a mere extension of human greed; God was rendered ineffective, far off, waiting for us to die before he could deal with us or communicate with us directly.

² Ibid.

One response to this is materialism. The Russian astronauts returning from the first human space flight remarked, "We saw no angels up there!" Everything unseen is suspect; nature is all there is, because we can't see God. All that is left is a tradition of belief in a God who is somehow both vengeful and merciful, and is now forced to keep company with magic, illusion, and superstition.

Another response is to reject science and take refuge in magical or wishful thinking, a pre-scientific return to nature, to an intuitive sense of unity, health, and well-being--to live as if nature, and nature alone, sustained us. Along with this comes a rejection of the rational tradition in found religion. Walker wants to get back to nature in order to escape the rhetorical traps of the church. The whole enterprise of theology is dismissed as culturally bound and prejudiced.

The New Church teaches that we do not have an either/or choice between a distant, inscrutable God (theism) and the irrational, dispassionate forces of nature (pantheism). It is not a simplistic choice between etheric spirit and material nature. Instead, we are given the challenge of uniting and balancing the two in our lives. The best model for such unity is "panentheism": God within nature.

The very fact that human beings are able to appreciate nature as we do can be seen as evidence that we are spiritual beings. There is something in us that is able to stand outside of nature and see ourselves in relationship to it. We are one with nature . . . and yet we are also distinct from it: nature itself is unreflective; it cannot see itself as beautiful, grand, or meaningful.

Seeing behind the veil of natural creation does not take anything away from nature, but increases our understanding of it. As a covering or representative of something higher, nature reveals within it both the divine and the human--for God is a person. Beyond the sense of order, peace, beauty, power, and wonder we may feel when reflecting on the world of nature, we can also discern the Divine Humanity that is both transcendent and immanent; above and beyond nature, but at the same time within it.

Just as the soul is the ordering spirit within our body--which "re-presents" our inner person or spirit--so there is a soul within nature, an ordering principle that forms it to some particular use, and

shows forth, or represents, the spirit in material form. "The body is the mind's external" (*Divine Love and Wisdom* #369).

We appreciate nature not just for what it is, but for what it signifies. All things in nature are connected, with each part supporting and involving the whole. All things are defined by their use in the larger context of the whole. Beyond this, nature's highest use is to serve and embody the spirit--to sustain humanity, the unique instance in nature capable of experiencing genuine unity with the Divine. God and nature are linked in the human experience. The different parts of nature are but forms of use; they are formations on the material plane of the existence of divine love and wisdom flowing from God. They exist for a purpose: that there might be a joining together of the Creator with creation through the conscious human life that is supported by the world of nature.

The whole created universe reflects its Creator just as our body reflects our mind. The word "reflect" is very apt, since an image in a mirror shows how something on one plane of reality can come from and reflect something that is on a totally distinct plane. The image in the mirror exactly corresponds to or represents the person. As long as the person is there, the image is there; when the person moves, it moves. Yet there is nothing of the person's own being in the mirror. Break the mirror and it harms the person not at all. The two are utterly distinct.

Science has rendered God distant and unreal, and nature lifeless. But it has not saved us. We sense the vacuum. We sense that the god of human reason is powerless to give us what we most need and want.

Pantheism, or God within nature, allows us to gain a true perception of the relationship between creator and creation, between reality and image, between life itself and its appearance in time and space, between heaven and earth. Pantheism reveals the Divine Love and Wisdom that fashioned both in its image, and who therefore exists in and through all things.

Suggested Readings:

Psalm 33, John 1:1-5, Arcana Coelestia §5115