

Are You a Pantheist?

An ancient spiritual impulse wins new followers

BY ANJULA RAZDAN

IF YOU SEE DIVINITY in a moonlit sky or a field full of daylilies; if a walk outdoors fills you with reverence more than stepping into a grand cathedral, synagogue, or mosque, chances are good that you are a pantheist.

If so, you're in good company. Albert Einstein, Georgia O'Keeffe, Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Margaret Atwood, Stephen Hawking, Sitting Bull, and Mikhail Gorbachev are just some of the notables who have counted themselves as pantheists, subscribing to the fundamental notion that nature and the universe merit deep reverence and awe. Believing that the universe itself is divine, pantheists have no use for a personal, anthropomorphic God, much less supernatural realms like heaven and hell. As Canadian novelist and poet Atwood elegantly put it, "God is not the voice in the whirlwind; god is the whirlwind."

"We want to . . . take in fully the beauty, the wonder, the mystery of things just as they are," says Paul Harrison, author of the book *Elements of Pantheism: Understanding the Divinity in Nature and the Universe* (Element Books). "Seeing in all this the reflection of some transcendent creator-figure with a humanlike mind seems to miss the point, to pass by the reality that's right in front of our noses."

The term *pantheism* (not to be confused with *panentheism*, which holds that everything, including the universe, is contained within the supreme being of God) was coined in 1705 by Irish writer John Toland. But the underlying doctrine dates back to the ancient Greeks—most notably the sixth-century philosopher Heraclitus, who denied the existence of God, believ-

ing instead in a living cosmos where everything in the universe—you, me, the trees, the stars, the sun—is connected in a profound unity.

Although pantheistic philosophy dominated antiquity, influencing everything from Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism to Western philosophies like Stoicism, Neoplatonism, and Epicureanism, it was eclipsed for some 1,200 years by the spread of Christianity and Islam. Then the scientific revolution in the 17th century—in which Copernicus proved that the earth actually moved around the sun, thereby challenging our title as the center of the universe—laid the foundation for intellectuals like Giordano Bruno, Benedict Spinoza, and Toland to dare publish works advocating pantheistic principles. By the late 18th and the 19th century, Harrison writes, pantheism had become the "religious heart" of romantic poets and philosophers like Goethe, Blake, Hegel, Wordsworth, and Whitman.

But pantheism waned in the first half of the 20th century as a new faith in the power of technology took center stage; but mounting environmental problems and the recent expansion of movements like deep ecology have granted pantheism a renaissance of sorts. And in 1998, Harrison founded the World Pantheist Movement (www.pantheism.net) to knit together the global pantheistic community.

The organization now has more than 2,000 members and anticipates that there are millions upon millions of pantheists out there who just don't know there is a name—or group—for their beliefs. But here's the question: If pantheism has been around forever, why organize now? After all, modern pantheists seem to pride themselves on how amorphous and unstructured

their practice actually is. It can be a religion, a philosophy, or simply a way of life; rituals are strictly optional—some pantheists choose to celebrate solstices and equinoxes and Thoreau's birthday; others, like Harrison, choose to spend at least half an hour every day exploring nature—and many pantheist traditions seem right in line with the environmental activism already espoused by many organized groups.

"Some people think that pantheists should just commune with trees alone and bump into other pantheists

only by chance," Harrison says. "That's fine as long as they're happy with it. But we know that many pantheists feel quite isolated, especially in largely Christian America." Harrison believes millions of people are becoming dissatisfied with traditional religions and are searching for alternatives. "We want to make sure that there is a rational, evidence-respecting, nature-revering option on offer."

CAFÉ UTNE: Discuss pantheism in the Spirit forum at www.utne.com/cafe

Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium.

By Richard Cimino and Don Lattin. Jossey-Bass, 224 pp., \$22.00.

THE HARD STATISTICS on church membership, religious attendance and belief have not changed much lately, but religion's "softer" side is in flux. The undercurrents of change have to do with spiritual experience, with divine imageries and sacred realities, with a search for meaning and belonging. Veteran religion journalists Richard Cimino and Don Lattin capture these undercurrents in vivid personal stories from which they draw major inferences about the rapid and often barely visible transformation of the religious landscape. Indeed, they do a better job of portraying these changes in "lived religion" than do many sociologists and commentators who rely primarily on institutional analysis and statistics.

Cimino and Lattin show that people

today not only choose between religious options but have considerable control over the formations of religious identity. People move across old boundaries, drawing on the spiritual teachings and wisdom of various traditions. Our vast, multifarious spiritual marketplace is broader than the traditional religious structures it overlaps. Much of what is available in this marketplace is little more than secular spirituality. But our spiritual stirrings also lead to new formulations of faith and environmental consciousness, to changing sensitivities to gender-related spirituality, to the rediscovery of long-buried religious traditions, to social service and acts of charity and to involvement in community organizing. Though these are all themes deeply rooted in or inspired by faith communities, concern for them must often be reactivated. American religious life is bumptious and eruptive, ever capable of forming new configurations of meaning and conviction. As always, religion's life-giving and sustaining po-

tential expresses itself around particular causes and concerns.

An ambivalent note rings throughout the book. "Shopping for faith," the authors say, "can trivialize religion or empower the spiritual search." American religion has always been vulnerable to the first, but the fact that religion can be trivialized should not blind us to its ability to empower.

Cimino and Lattin speak of "varieties of spirituality," but do not provide complete profiles of the kinds of people who embody them, or show how people of the different groups differ in lifestyle and outlook. Given an expanded spiritual marketplace, we need to know more about the suppliers as well as the consumers of religion. In particular, we need greater clarity about the emerging subcultures of those who say they are "spiritual but not religious," those who claim to be "both spiritual and religious," and those who reject spiritual (and perhaps even religious) discourse altogether in identifying themselves.

The big question for religious communities is what to make of all the current talk about spirituality. Much of it is shallow, offering promise after promise of instant enlightenment, personal well-being, health and prosperity. "How did we move from Isaiah to *The Celestine Prophecy*? From Donne's *Devotions* to *A Course in Miracles*?" asks Philip Zaleski in the *New York Times Book Review*. We cannot answer that question without attending to the massive shifts in religious culture or realizing the role that mass media and expanded cultural production play in making spiritual themes all the more pronounced. People's search for coherence amidst the fragmentation of our culture invites seemingly endless genres of narrative construction. These are not issues that Cimino and Lattin address. They simply describe the lay of the land.

Religious communities should not act as if the larger spiritual climate does not exist—even within their own borders. Today's spiritual-quest cul-

ture cannot be neatly contained. Life inside and outside the religious establishment is fluid and multilayered. Religious leaders need to explore more deeply the resources within religious traditions and the affinities between these resources and people's spiritual questions and concerns. Traditional languages of faith and current rhetorics of spiritual searching already represent a gigantic cultural divide for many, especially the young. For religious communities, the creative and perhaps religiously responsible course would be to structure ways in which believers and seekers might learn from one another and work toward creating a shared vocabulary and practice. To presume that seekers must, or necessarily will, come around to some normative standard set by believers will certainly drive seekers away. Religious leaders and scholars would do well to ponder the many pressing questions raised by Cimino and Lattin's impressive book.

Reviewed by Wade Clark Roof, the J. F. Rowley Professor of Religion and Society at the University of California at Santa Barbara.