



# Pantheist Vision

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## Why We Incorporated as a Church

by Harold Wood

Pantheist discussion boards on the Internet these days are rife with debates about whether Pantheism can be considered a “religion” or just a “philosophy,” with vigorous arguments by both proponents and opponents.

Observing these debates, I often find that opponents to the idea that Pantheism can be a religion have a very narrow, Eurocentric view, as if *all* religion is inherently authoritarian, theist, bigoted, intolerant, and based on a formal creed. That approach to religion is fairly common in the United States, though rare elsewhere in the world. Anyone who has studied even a bit of comparative religion quickly realizes that none of this is universally true. There are many religions that don’t have a god (Buddhism), nor a creed (Hinduism), nor are intolerant (Unitarian-Universalism), nor are authoritarian (Taoism). In most of the world, *religion* has nothing to do with creeds, beliefs, or theology. As Harvard theologian Harvey Cox says, most religion is simply, “a matter of seasonal rituals, ethical insights, and narratives handed down from generation to generation.” Certainly, Pantheism has all those elements, passed on by scores of artists, poets, scientists, and ordinary people, as we celebrate the turning of the seasons, the wheel of the galaxy, the rejection of anthropocentric ethics, using words, music, songs, and yes, perhaps most of all, the scientific study of Nature.

Another common fallacy is that religion necessitates some kind of highly formal structure. Again, just because that is commonplace in Western culture, that doesn’t mean that it is universal. Hinduism and many indigenous religions around the world do not have a top-down structure; people just spring up to help each other with their spiritual journeys. Even in the United States, there are many religions, especially Unitarian Universalism (UU), that include not only those who attend a church or “fellowship” on Sundays, but those they call “free-range” - they self-identify with UU, but don’t attend church or become members. I don’t think we should consider people like that as not being part of a “religion” just because they don’t attend a church, Synagogue, mosque, or temple, on particular days of the week!

My own journey to Pantheism started in high school. Conventional religion just didn’t do it for me anymore, but I felt a need to set aside some time for religious study and inspiration. I began experimenting with adapting conventional worship services for myself in a Pantheist format, and wrote essays imagining what a Pantheist church might be like. I tried to promote the idea with some friends in college but I didn’t find anyone who was very interested. Then, in 1974, I met Derham Giuliani.

Derham was a well-known “desert rat.” We went on camping trips together in the White and Inyo Mountains of California during the summer of 1974. It was during one of those trips that Derham mentioned that he thought Pantheists ought to have a church of their own. I immediately agreed, and told him that I had long held such an idea. We felt it was just plain wrong that none of the churches in North America that we knew of embraced Pantheism. There, in Silver Canyon of the White Mountains, high above the little town of Big Pine, we resolved we would not wait for someone else to do it, but would immediately commit ourselves to founding such a group.

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## Why We Incorporated as a Church *continued from front page*

The entire point of forming the Universal Pantheist Society in 1975 for us was to establish it as a church. We were not attempting to establish it as a religion, because it seemed obvious to us that it already was a religion. Yes, it was a religion defined by its adherents, and eschewed any form of priesthood or authoritarianism, and likewise rejected any single writing (past, present, or future) as sacred scripture. But we understood that religion, from a global perspective, didn't need any of those things. Religion is simply the heart-felt relationship of human beings to each other, to other life forms, and ultimately to the entire universe; which properly understood are all "sacred" – all divine. We saw no need to proselytize; all we needed was a *church* to help connect all those people who already understood themselves as Pantheists.

An early first step was to apply for non-profit status as a church to the Internal Revenue Service. We soon discovered that the civil servants running that agency had the same ignorance about the nature of religion as most North Americans, so we had some explaining to do. But ultimately, we prevailed and were incorporated specifically as a "church."

As the IRS eventually ruled, in their legal-speak, we were accepted as: "an organization described in [Internal Revenue Code] section 170(b)(1)(A)(i) and 509(a)(1)." More about that later. But how did we get that ruling?

First, they wrote to us saying our application was "incomplete in certain respects." They asked a series of some 13 questions in a detailed three-page letter. Some of the questions related to issues that might pertain to any organization, such as our staff, their qualifications and compensation; our operating facilities, whether fees are charged for services or publications, etc. But there were many questions clearly focused on whether we were a "church." For example, they asked, "do you perform any sacerdotal functions such as funerals, baptisms, marriages or ordination?" Is there "a recognized creed or form of worship?" Do you have a "definite and distinct ecclesiastical government?" Is there "a formal code of doctrine and discipline?" Do you have "a distinct religious history?" Do you have "a complete organization of ordained ministers ministering to their congregations and selected after completing prescribed courses of study?" Do you have "a literature of your own"? Do you have "established places of worship?" Is there "a regular congregation?" Do you have "regular religious services" and "Sunday schools for the religious instruction of the young?" "Please describe your 'religious services' in detail, including how these functions are carried out and by whom."

And the "killer question" was probably this one: "As you have stated that you follow no systematic creed or belief please state what aside from an appreciation and respect for nature you hope to communicate to your members. Is there no systematic beliefs of any kind which a member must profess in order to be a member?"

You can see that all these questions seem to assume traditional Protestant Christian kind of organization for a church. From the overall tone of this lengthy missive, I believe they expected us to fail their test miserably. The questions seem to be less real "questions" than assertive "arguments" about why we couldn't possibly be a "church" as we had requested.

But we answered with a detailed four-page letter that responded successfully to each of their questions.

With regard to "sacerdotal functions" we told them that we planned to offer such services to our members as weddings and funerals in the future. [We later adopted a "Sacerdotal Policy" which delineated how such services would operate. Part of that policy asserts "The Society disapproves any celebration, service, or ritual which is focused ... on supernatural or occult subjects, or oriented toward a single leader with a dominant personality."] We told them that our "ecclesiastical" form of government was defined in our bylaws - the typical structure of most non-profit organizations, with a President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, etc. We told them that we "have no formal creed in the sense of a listing of beliefs to which all members must adhere" and that we likewise had "no formal code or doctrine" other than as stated in the by-laws (which guarantees freedom of belief and prevents us from ever prescribing any kind of religious creed.) We quoted our bylaws: "Recognizing that freedom of belief is inherent in the Pantheist tradition, nothing in the purpose of this organization shall ever be utilized to require a particular interpretation of Pantheism or subscription to any particular dogma..."

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## The Everyday Pantheist

# A New Perspective

*Text and image by Sharon Wells*

A few years ago, a friend and I took a day trip on the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad in the mountains of western North Carolina, riding through woods beside the Tuckasegee River, then the Nantahala River Gorge, and alongside Fontana Lake. Riding that train in familiar territory helped me see my home and my life in a whole different light.

We started our journey on a beautiful sunny day, armed with a picnic lunch and a camera, the train windows wide open. The train didn't go fast, affording us plenty of time for sightseeing and picture taking. We saw kayakers navigating the river, house boats dotting the lake, waving picknickers and hikers on track-side trails. I'd made this trip by car on the highway on many occasions over the years, so I knew where I was during much of the ride, but at times we were far off from the road, away from its view, seeing mountain scenery, river bends, and houses and camps I'd never been able to see before. It was like being in a whole different place. I don't even know how to get to some of those places by car. They had a certain charm, including one old rock house surrounded by colorful flowers, built so close to the tracks that you could touch it out the window, and at one point we rode on the trestle over the lake rather than merely alongside it. I realized yet again what a beautiful place I live in and how big the wilderness area is, yet how little I really know about it. I see some of these views most days, yet I'm still awestruck by the mountains and the hold they have on me. While I never really get tired of living here, sometimes it's easy to take it for granted, but seeing it in another way, through different eyes, both mine and my friend's, changed my life.



When you need a fresh perspective, but can't afford that big vacation, consider taking a trip, even for an afternoon, through your own neck of the woods, on a different mode of travel (it could even be a boat or canoe), or with a new companion, so you see the familiar sites from another vantage point, from the "other side." Explore side roads you've never been on, meet people you've never seen. For me a simple train trip made me appreciate my home and my life so much more. Many of the details are still fresh in my mind ... ferns growing in huge clumps that I never remembered seeing before, wildflowers in shades of pink and purple, inspiring me to buy a book to identify them, the sounds of the rushing river, curiosity about the people living in houseboats, the desire to learn more of the history of this land where my ancestors settled. The air was sweet and refreshing, the sun warm on my arm out the window, the train itself noisy yet soothing. Even my simple sandwich and chips tasted better than I'd ever known. My senses were reinvigorated, and I was overcome with gratitude and a reverence and appreciation for life in general and for my life in particular.

### Looking for Pantheist inspired gifts?

Check out our site on Zazzle, with Pantheist t-shirts, tote bags, aprons and more. The tote shown features the Olympic rainforest and a John Muir quote, "The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness."

<https://www.zazzle.com/pansociety/products>



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## Why We Incorporated as a Church *continued from page 2*

We explained that we indeed had a “distinct religious history” in the Pantheist tradition, and cited a bibliography which included, among others, a reference to the 1878 publication in two volumes, each hundreds of pages long, by Constance Plumtre titled *General sketch of the history of pantheism*.

As for “clergy,” we explained that we intended to rely primarily on the use of lay clergy (as common in the Mormon and Catholic churches and other denominations), but planned eventually training and ordination of persons for the limited purpose of performing specific functions of worship and service to our members.

For the question about whether we had “established places of worship” we explained that “since worship is a highly personal affair to Pantheists, established places of worship are within the hearts and minds of the Pantheist, wherever he or she may be.” We explained that we did *not* envision “the construction of temples or edifices of human construction ... as such would be contrary to the Pantheist spirit.”

We did not rule out the possibility of future “religious services,” but envisioned them as consisting of “distribution of literature, formal discussion, congregational singing, musical performances, readings, talks, walks, field trips, slide programs, guest speakers, films, etc.”

With respect to the “killer question” as to whether we had “no systematic beliefs of any kind?” we explained that our position on freedom of belief was similar to that of the Unitarian-Universalist church. But our purpose is fully clarified in our bylaws: “Members of the Society shall consist of those persons who wish to further their own understanding of Pantheism, and through fellowship with others find purposive means of expressing their faith in daily life.”

Moreover, since the purpose of our Society is to unite all Pantheists into a *common* fellowship, we expected that membership would consist of those who substantially agree with the definitions of “Pantheist” in our bylaws. That definition states that Pantheists are simply “individuals who feel that fundamental religious experience involves an individual relationship with Nature.”

So, no “belief” or “creed” required. In fact - a creed is *prohibited!* What is relevant instead is *religious experience*.

We explained this was much more than a mere “appreciation and respect for nature” as the IRS accused us of; “namely the improvement of personal relationship with the Universe as the fundamental religious responsibility we have.” We also expressed our opposition to anthropocentrism, considering humanly-created deities – even of our own species – to be idolatrous.

Our letter went into the mail. We found out a month or so later that we had succeeded in convincing the Internal Revenue Service that we were indeed organized as a “church.”

In our Letter of Determination from the Internal Revenue Service, dated April 27, 1976, we were informed that we are classified as a “a church or a convention or association of churches” as defined in section 170(b)(1)(A) (i). This is the part of the Internal Revenue Code that allows individuals to deduct contributions to churches as a charitable donation. It also included a reference to section 509(a)(1), which is a circuitous cross-reference to “an organization described in section 170(b)(1)(A) (other than in clauses (vii) and (viii)).” The excepted sub-sections apply to certain “private foundations” which do not apply to us.

We consider this determination from the Internal Revenue Service as a significant advancement of public understanding of what a “church” is and can be. A church doesn’t need a creed, it doesn’t need a venal priesthood; it doesn’t even need weekly Sunday services.

The Universal Pantheist Society is a “church” in the eyes of the IRS, and we hope can be seen as such, in a positive way, among our members and among other churches, inter-denominational organizations, and secular societies, even though we reject most of the traditional trappings of conventional Western churches. Since the Universal Pantheist Society eschews both doctrine and the supernatural, we believe we have established ourselves as a “church” which is ready to embrace the future. ❁

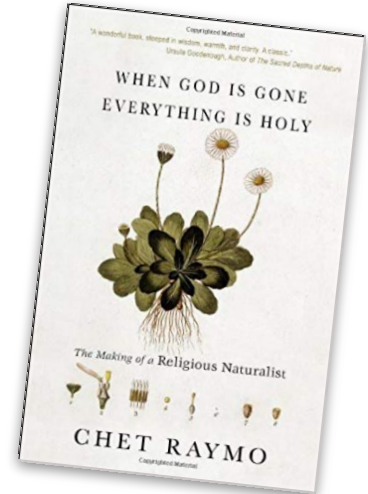


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# When God is Gone, Everything is Holy: The Making of a Religious Naturalist

Book Review by Harold Wood

Chet Raymo, a Ph.D physicist and popular science writer, was raised as a Catholic, and remained devout up through college. But soon, his science courses, even in a Jesuit college, led him to question traditional beliefs. As his understanding of science grew, so his attitude toward the meaning of God changed as well. Like many Catholics, Teilhard de Chardin was his avenue into adopting a spirituality based more on evolution, replacing the Bible or the teachings of the Church. Today, Raymo is a respected member of the Religious Naturalist Association Board of Advisors. He states his beliefs as follows:



So this is my Credo. I am an atheist, if by God one means a transcendent Person who acts willfully within the creation. I am an agnostic in that I believe our knowledge of "what is" is partial and tentative—a tiny flickering flame in the overwhelming shadows of our ignorance. I am a pantheist in that I believe empirical knowledge of the sensate world is the surest revelation of whatever is worth being called divine. I am a Catholic by accident of birth.

Much of the book deals with Raymo's insistence that to affirm "absolute belief" in *anything* is simply wrong; that with a scientific point of view we must *always* realize how ignorant we are of the facts of the world. We find answers to many questions using science, but those in turn inevitably raise new questions. The scientific enterprise is not intended to find the "ultimate" answers to the Big Questions about the meaning of life and the universe, but to find answers to the little questions. Raymo also completely rejects "cultural accretions that religious traditions" apply to "Mystery" - "the anthropomorphisms, misplaced pieties, triumphalism, intolerance toward "infidels," supposed miracles, and supernatural natural imaginings," which he calls "Memes without substance." Thus, Raymo forthrightly eschews anything supernatural, or any form of "deity" whatsoever. Inspired equally by Walt Whitman (see page 7 of this issue) and the latest brain science, he asserts that there is nothing in the human body or brain that could be the locus of a "soul." Yet, he still counts himself as among the "religious."

He explains that the reason he is a "religious" naturalist and not a purely *secular* naturalist is because he doesn't want to lose the experience of "the mind-stretching, jaw-dropping, in-your-face wonder of the universe itself, the Heraclitean mystery that hides in every rainbow, every snowflake, every living cell."

It is this latter sense of *mystery* that make Raymo embrace the term "agnostic" - not just in a traditional religious sense, but in a scientific sense. His insistence that we must accept that we never will know everything makes him reluctant to embrace Pantheism wholeheartedly. Like most Pantheists, he does believe the "sensate world" is indeed worthy of being called divine, but, again like most Pantheists, he fears falling into the trap of "certainty" about anything. Without more explanation than that slender reed, he says the term "Pantheist" isn't quite right for him. But why he thinks that a sense of "awe" and "wonder" and willingness to affirm that "we just don't know" everything no matter how deep our scientific expertise explores the world is inconsistent with Pantheism, I cannot fathom.

In fact, as Raymo says, "With the discovery of the universe of the galaxies, the geologic eons, the wonders of evolution, and the dance of the DNA, our eyes are opened to a majesty and a mystery of far greater dimension than the Olympian deities of our ancestors - or of the slightly more abstracted personal God worshipped by most believers today." To my mind, the logical result of these scientific discoveries makes the truth of Pantheism virtually self-evident. Our Creator is the Universe, and evolution and DNA is how it creates. The majesty and mystery in the natural world far exceeds those of "Olympian deities," — what can be more divine than that?



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## A New Perspective

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I realized that my train trip is a metaphor for dealing with life when we're in a rut. We need to look at things (or people, ideas, or issues) in a different way, from another side, getting excited and inspired, and learning something new. I never actually feel that I'm bored, because in this universe with so much to experience every minute, every place, I'm not sure that's even possible, but, again, sometimes I think most of us have gotten into a bit of a dull routine at one time or another, doing the same things day in and day out, almost mindlessly, needing something to shake us up a little bit, renew our zest for life, and help us to pay attention!

Recently, I found myself in one of those ruts. After a few stressful months, I felt burned out, like I was just sleepwalking through my days, with not a lot to give. My safe and familiar routines, while comfortable, were no longer satisfying. I didn't look forward to them anymore; I even began to resent some of them. I remembered that afternoon on the train and knew it was time for a change. I backed off of social media and online groups for a bit. I sat on my porch and enjoyed nature, rearranged my work schedule and my furniture, found new ways to interact with distant family, walked, changed my diet, made future travel plans, and just took a little break away from some of my responsibilities, giving myself time to look at my life through a different lens and get excited about it again. Like before, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude and inspiration, and realized there are many everyday adventures ahead, new experiences to have and people to meet. I was ready to wake up and feel the seasons change from summer to fall, to enjoy the colors and smells of autumn, to share again with my fellow Pantheists. That act of stepping back, looking at things differently, and paying attention, my inward journey, also led to a new appreciation for Pantheism, my philosophical and spiritual path, and for the Pantheist community that nurtures me in so many ways. I'm thankful for some good advice from supportive people who gave me the time to regroup.

Whether it's ordinary days or extra-special ones, routine experiences or one-of-a kind, an afternoon ride on an actual train or a virtual excursion through introspection and changing habits, life is one exciting journey.



## Pantheist Vision

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Pantheists are persons who derive their fundamental religious experience through their personal relationship with the Universe. They feel that Nature is the ultimate context for human existence, and seek to improve their relationship with the natural world as their fundamental religious responsibility.

Religion for Pantheists is a system of reverent behavior toward the Earth rather than subscription to a particular creed. Because Pantheists identify God with Nature rather than an anthropomorphic being, Pantheists oppose the arrogant world-view of anthropocentrism.

The Universal Pantheist Society is a non-profit religious corporation, founded in 1975. The purposes of the Society are: "to unite Pantheists everywhere into a common fellowship, to spread information about Pantheism to the public, to facilitate discussion and communication among Pantheists, to provide for the mutual aid and defense of Pantheists everywhere, to stimulate a revision of social attitudes away from anthropocentrism and toward reverence for the Earth and a vision of Nature as the ultimate context for human existence, and to take appropriate action toward the protection and restoration of the Earth."

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## Pantheist Viewpoints

*excerpts from "I Sing the Body Electric"*

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred,  
No matter who it is, it is sacred—is it the meanest one in the laborers' gang?  
Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?  
Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just as much as you,  
Each has his or her place in the procession.

(All is a procession,  
The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.) ...

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you,  
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that they are the soul,)  
I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,  
Man's, woman's, child's, youth's, wife's, husband's, mother's, father's, young man's, young woman's poems,  
Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,  
Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the waking and sleeping of the lids,  
Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw hinges  
Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition,  
Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck, neck-slue,  
Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shoulders, and the ample side-round of the chest,  
Upper-arm, armpit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews, arm-bones,  
Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, forefinger, finger-joints, finger-nails,  
Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-bone, breast-side,  
Ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the backbone,  
Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man-root,  
Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,  
Leg fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg,  
Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel;  
All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body or of any one's body, male or female,  
The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean,  
The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,  
Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,  
Womanhood, and all that is a woman, and the man that comes from woman,  
The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping, love-looks, love-perturbations and risings  
The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud,  
Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking, swimming,  
Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-curving and tightening,  
The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around the eyes,  
The skin, the sunburnt shade, freckles, hair,  
The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body,  
The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out,  
The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence downward toward the knees,  
The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones,  
The exquisite realization of health;  
O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,  
O I say now these are the soul!

- Walt Whitman, in *Leaves of Grass*, 1855

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Universal Pantheist Society

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*We seek renewed reverence for the Earth  
and a vision of Nature as the ultimate  
context for human existence...*