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CHAPTER 8 SIGNS OF EMERGING PANTHEISM WITHIN AMERICAN CULTURE

Quantitative Signs of Pantheism on the Internet

Still to be investigated is the extent to which pantheism is penetrating American culture. One way to obtain a quick quantitative snapshot of cultural penetration is by conducting internet searches of the key terms at issue in this study. Because Paganism, Pantheism, and Panentheism are terms that all have some understanding of the sacred in nature, these are the terms that I contrasted and studied. I undertook such a project on March 29, 2008, with the outcome listed in the following table:

Search Results on 03- 29-08	MySpace	Facebook	Yahoo Groups	Google Groups	Yahoo Search (approx.)	Google Search (approx.)
Pantheism	1,990	34	348	16	1,600,000	520,000
Pantheist	1,820	25	237	19	754,000	338,000
Panentheism	250	3	144	18	274,000	94,400
Panentheist	131	2	7	1	49,600	16,300
Paganism	29,600	234	19,394	388	11,700,000	3,780,000
Pagan	130,000	1,039+	11,580	480	60,100,000	25,400,000

The table demonstrates that the terms “paganism”/“pagan” are far more common by more than an order of magnitude than either “pantheism”/“pantheist” or “panentheism”/“panentheist.” Also, using MySpace and Facebook, I looked at the top results to determine the type of paganism that was being displayed. One site referred to “Scientific Paganism,” and defined it in a way consistent with what this investigation refers to as naturalistic pantheism. However, the overwhelming majority of pagan sites showed some references to “magic,” “Wicca,” “witches,” “goddesses,” “shamanism,” and had images of goddesses and/or the pagan pentagram on the sites. It was clear that pagan members and groups on MySpace and Facebook demonstrated the characteristics described by Pike. In contrast, the sites that contained either pantheism/pantheist were substantially in the category of naturalistic pantheism. Thus, on these sites, the OED1 definition was the one operative. The sites

that contained either panentheism/panentheist used the term as defined in this project, namely, to affirm belief in a deity that was immanent in this universe, but also transcended it. This exercise provides evidence that the manner these terms have been defined herein are consistent with actual usage in the larger culture.

To obtain another quantitative snapshot, I also visited Meetup.com. A visit to the “About Meetup” page on March 30, 2008 provided the following explanation fo Meetup:

About Meetup
“Real Groups Make a Real Difference”

Meetup is the world's largest network of self-organized clubs and community groups.

Meetups help people:

- Find others in their area who share their interests
- Learn, teach, and share things
- Make friends and have fun
- Rise up, stand up, unite, and make a difference
- Be a part of something bigger—both locally and globally

People visiting the Meetup.com site can search any term related to an interest, such as “pagan” or “pantheism” and find out if there are active Meetups in the searcher’s area related to the searched topic. If there are no local Meetups, anyone can try to start a new Meetup in their area on a new topic or interest.

I searched two terms “pagan” or “pantheism” on March 29, 2008, with these results:

Search Results on 03- 29-08	Members	Interested	Meetups existing	Cities	Countries	Events so far
Pantheism	934	760	14	12	3	268
Pagan	28,646	22,965	382	273	5	10,025

The results for “pantheism” were sufficiently small that I could visit each site. This disclosed that only 8 of the 14 reported Meetups were actually pantheist. These eight Meetups (New York City,

Washington, DC, Atlanta, GA, San Francisco Bay Area, London, San Diego, and Los Angeles, Worcester, MA) were all naturalistic pantheism groups, while a visit to the top ten pagan meetups demonstrated that they also conformed to the neopagan type described by Pike. Thus, this additional exercise provides evidence that this project's definition of terms in regard to paganism and pantheism is consistent with stable actual usage in the larger culture.

Pantheism Organizations

There are two organizations, organized in the United States, that actively promote pantheism. They are the World Pantheism Movement and the Universal Pantheist Society. I will discuss each in turn.

The World Pantheism Movement ("WPM"), was founded on 1998 and has developed a Pantheist Credo as a general description of its core beliefs.¹ At its website, the WPM notes Rachael Carson, Albert Einstein, novelist Margaret Atwood, Mikhail Gorbachev, Chief Sitting Bull, Stephen Hawking, Carl Sagan, and Thoreau as exemplars of naturalistic pantheism. The website discloses four honorary advisors: the biologists David Suzuki and Ursula Goodenough, the chemist James Lovelock (originator of the Gaia Hypothesis), and the skeptic, Michael Shermer. The Credo notes Pantheism's reverence "for the self-organizing universe's overwhelming power, beauty and fundamental mystery" and views "all matter, energy, and life as an interconnected unity." The WPM "has a strongly naturalistic base. Nature, the entire living and non-living universe, is all that exists. There are no supernatural entities and no separate spirit realms." Thus, the WPM expressly rejects forms of spiritualized pantheism. "Consciousness and mind are emergent qualities of energy/matter. The senses and science are our best means of developing our ongoing knowledge

¹ Paul Harrison, "World Pantheism Movement," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London & New York: Continuum International, 2005). See also www.pantheism.net.

of the universe, and the most solid basis for aesthetic and religious feelings about reality. Nature is seen as the only real basis on which religious feeling can be built.”

Consistent with this, the WPM views death “naturalistically, as a return to nature through the natural recycling of our elements, which should be facilitated by cremation or natural burial in simple linen shrouds or wicker baskets. There is no afterlife for the individual consciousness, but we live on through our actions, our ideas and memories of us, giving us a powerful incentive to do good.”² Paul Harrison, the WPM’s founder, is currently the facilitator of the Los Angeles Pantheism Meetup Group, discussed above.

The Universal Pantheist Society, founded in 1975, seeks 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.” The UPS expressly declares that it is “not tied to any single view of pantheism, but rather recogniz[es] a diversity of viewpoints within it. UPS accepts and explores various interpretations of pantheism, stressing the importance of each member’s personal pantheistic beliefs.” Stressing “that freedom of belief is inherent in the Pantheist tradition, the UPS’s bylaws prohibit [insisting upon] any particular interpretation of Pantheism or imposition of any particular dogma.”³ This openness on the part of the UPS to more spiritual interpretations distinguishes it from the World Pantheism Movement.

Pantheism and the Deep Ecology Movement

There are significant parallels between the Deep Ecology Movement and naturalistic

² Harrison, "World Pantheism Movement."

³ Harold Wood, Jr., "Universal Pantheist Society," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London & New York: Continuum International, 2005). See also www.pantheist.net.

pantheism. Bron Taylor notes

. . . most deep ecologists . . . trace their perspective to personal experiences of connection to and wholeness in wild nature, experiences which are the ground of their intuitive, affective perception of the sacredness and interconnection of all life. Those who have experienced such a transformation of consciousness (experiencing what is sometimes called one's "ecological self" in these movements) view the self not as separate from and superior to all else, but rather as a small part of the entire cosmos. From such experience flows the conclusion that all life and even ecosystems themselves have inherent or intrinsic value—that is, value independently of whether they are useful to humans.⁴

In Chapter 3, I laid out Michael Levine's argument that to call something *sacred* and/or *God* is to declare that it has *value*. Deep ecologists, like naturalistic pantheists, find value in the entirety of existence and use language of the sacred to denote that value. The primary difference between deep ecologists and naturalistic pantheists is that most deep ecologists, notwithstanding their general comfort with the term *sacred*, generally refrain from using the word *God*, perhaps because of the cultural baggage the term carries.

Pantheism in the Movies

Metaphysical ideas, including pantheism, can appear in popular movies. One of the most famous examples is the 1977 movie, *Star Wars*. In that movie, set "Long, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away," one of the heroes of the movie, Obi-Wan Kenobi, is a Jedi Knight, which in the course of the movie viewers learn is an old and disappearing religion. Obi-Wan tells Luke Skywalker about one of the tenets of this religion, namely belief in "The Force" which is "an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us, penetrates us, it binds the galaxy together." In this, we hear strong echoes of Acts 17:28. Later, Kenobi, just before sacrificing himself in a saber battle with Darth Vader, a former Jedi that uses the force for evil, declares "You can't win Darth, you can strike me

⁴ Bron Taylor, "Deep Ecology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London & New York: Continuum International, 2005), 456.

down, I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine,” apparently confident that he will survive in some spiritual form, which in fact turns out to be the case. Kenobi, guiding Skywalker to successful engagement in battle from his new, spiritualized form, intones, “Remember, the Force will be with you, Always.” Here, George Lucas, the screenwriter of this initial episode of the Star Wars saga, is parroting, almost word for word, Jesus command to his disciples, post-resurrection, in the final sentence of Matthew’s Gospel, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” In *Star Wars*, it is an impersonal, morally ambiguous, pantheistic Force that is eternally present, with potential to lend redemptive assistance. *Star Wars* then is an example of spiritualized pantheism. This cosmos is still the focus of concern. The after-life, as evidenced in the original movie and even more so in the sequels, occurs in this Cosmos.

Another example of pantheism is found in Disney’s 1995 animated feature film, *Pocahontas*. The primary pantheistic content is conveyed in a scene where Pocahontas sings the song, “Colors of the Wind” (whose lyrics were written by Steven Schwartz), to Captain John Smith. The pertinent content is the following:

You think I'm an ignorant savage. . . ,
You think you own whatever land you land on,
The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim,
But I know every rock and tree and creature,
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name. . .
Come run the hidden pine trails of the forest,
Come taste the sunsweet berries of the Earth,
Come roll in all the riches all around you,
And for once, never wonder what they're worth.
The rainstorm and the river are my brothers,
The heron and the otter are my friends,
And we are all connected to each other,
In a circle, in a hoop that never ends. . .

Earlier in movie, Pocahontas goes to consult a talking willow tree named Grandmother Willow. When Pocahontas approaches the tree, the side of the tree becomes animated and takes the form of

an old woman's human face, and begins talking to Pocahontas. Given these supernaturalistic, animistic elements, the ideas expressed in *Pocahontas* are an example of spiritualized pantheism. "Colors Of The Wind" was also a major hit in 1995 for the singer Vanessa Williams. Thus, the pantheistic message was disseminated both through the movie itself and via radio play and soundtrack sales.

I mentioned in Chapter 1 the 2007 movie, *Evan Almighty*. Evan, a newly elected, Hummer-driving, congressman, is directed by God, in the form of Morgan Freeman, to build an ark to save the animals because a second flood is coming. God gives Evan an "Ark Building for Dummies" book. The key pantheistic scene shows Evan propped up in bed, about to read the book, and he opens the cover and the audience can read: "About the Author: God is the creator of the Heavens and the Earth. He lives in all things and has 6,717,323,711 children." Then Evan reads the words aloud. This movie generated some controversy, not because it was teaching pantheism, but because a question was raised if Hollywood was inappropriately targeting church audiences with such fare.⁵ The movie portrays a supernaturalistic, personal God who can materialize and disappear at will. However, as Corrington's exposition of pantheism demonstrates, pantheism can be supernaturalistic. Notwithstanding the supernatural elements, the God portrayed in *Evan Almighty* nevertheless "lives" in this universe and in all parts of this universe. No suggestion is made that God transcends this universe, or that there is any portion of this universe that God does not penetrate. Thus, *Evan Almighty* meets this project's definition of pantheism, albeit, spiritualized pantheism, because this universe is the only reality affirmed, and that reality is implicitly sacred due to the fact that God lives in all parts of it.

⁵ Jeff Brumley, "Are religious films crossing the lines?" *The Florida Times-Union*, July 12, 2007, Page A1, Column 1 http://www.jacksonville.com/tu-online/stories/071207/met_183888983.shtml

Another movie with a pantheistic theme was the 1999 movie, *Stigmata*.⁶ The movie was a demon possession horror movie in a similar vein to *The Exorcist*. The pantheist twist is that Frankie Paige, the possessed young woman, while experiencing episodes of possession by an unidentified supernatural entity, says the following in the Aramaic language: “Jesus said the Kingdom of God is within you, not in buildings of wood and stone. Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift a stone and you will find me.” The first part of the first sentence is from Luke 17:21.⁷ The second and third sentences are from Saying 77 of the Gospel of Thomas found at Nag Hammadi in 1945.⁸

The Jesus Seminar, a group of new testament scholars who met from 1985 to 1998, in analyzing whether this verse might have come from Jesus, concluded: “The kind of pantheism—God in everything, God everywhere—reflected in 77:2-3 is unknown from other sources, either gnostic or Christian. Jesus would scarcely have considered himself omnipresent.” Hence, they concluded it was not an authentic saying from the historical Jesus.⁹ However, Hollywood took interest.

The rest of the movie unfolds a plot by the Vatican seeking to suppress a new gospel containing these, and presumably other, formerly unknown sayings of Jesus. Through the course

⁶ *Stigmata*, Dir. Rupert Wainwright, MGM (DVD), 1999.

⁷ The King James Version of Luke 17:21 reads “the kingdom of God is within you.” The New Revised Standard Version reads “the kingdom of God is among you.” However, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* notes that other ancient manuscripts of Luke use “within” instead of “among.” See Michael D. Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), at page 130 (New Testament), in footnote *d* to Luke 17:21.

⁸ The whole saying reads: “¹Jesus said, ‘I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all has come forth, and to me all has reached. ²Split a piece of wood; I am there. ³Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.’” Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 149. See also, Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1979), for information on the Nag Hammadi find.

⁹ Robert Walter Funk and Roy W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 515.

of the movie, viewers learn that the supernatural entity possessing Frankie is the ghost of a deceased priest who had been involved, along with two other priests, with translating a newly found gospel, and that this ghost is trying to transmit the contents of this unknown gospel. The core of this narrative is transmitted to the viewers through the following dialogue between another of the three translators, Father Petrocelli, and Father Andrew Kiernan, the priest that is investigating for the Vatican Frankie's possession and her stigmata:

Kiernan (K): [after being shown a picture of a document] What is this?

Petrocelli (P): It is maybe the most significant Christian relic ever found.

K: Why?

P: It's an Aramaic scroll from the first century discovered near the caves of the Dead Sea scrolls outside Jerusalem. Alameida and I concluded that it is a gospel of Jesus Christ in his own words, Aramaic. But there are some factions in the Vatican who believe that this document could destroy the authority of the modern church.

K: How?

P: It was Jesus words to his disciples on the night of his last supper. His instructions to them on how to continue his church after his death.

K: Why would that be so threatening?

P: When we gave our initial conclusions to the gospel commission [Vatican Cardinal] Houseman ordered us to stop our work immediately. Alameida refused. He stole the document and disappeared. Houseman excommunicated us in our absence.

K: You have no idea where he is?

P: He doesn't want to be caught until he finishes the translation. [P shows a picture to K with three men, including himself]. That's Delmonico, me, and Alameida. We were all translating the gospel together.

K: I've seen this man, three weeks ago, in Brazil. He's dead. I saw him in his coffin in his church in Belo Quinto. Sorry.

P: Then it is all over. It's gone forever.

K: Why was your work stopped? What is so threatening about this gospel?

P: Look around you father. What do you see?

K: I see a church.

P: It's a building. The true church of Jesus Christ is so much more! Not in buildings made of wood and stone. I love Jesus! I don't need an institution between him and me. You see! Just God and man. No priests, no churches. The first words in Jesus gospel "The Kingdom of God is inside you and all around you. Not in buildings of wood and stone. Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift the stone,

P and AK in unison: and you will find me.

P: Yes brother. . .

K: . . . She's [Frankie] just his [Alameida's ghost] messenger.
P: Houseman will never let this gospel get out.¹⁰

As the story further unfolds, in a dramatic exorcism scene where Cardinal Houseman attempts to murder Frankie and thereby suppress the new gospel but is thwarted by Kiernan, Kiernan promises Alameida's ghost he will work to get the new gospel out to the world, and the ghost then releases Frankie from possession. In the final scene of the movie, Kiernan has gone to a rural, remote Catholic church in Belo Quinto, Southeast Brazil, and finds the hidden scrolls, while the saying noted in for foregoing is dramatically intoned. The screen fades to black, and then the following three sentences in a sequence of three darkened screens are presented to the audience to read: (1) "In 1945, A scroll was discovered in Nag Hamadi, which is described as 'The Secret Sayings of the Living Jesus'"; (2) "This scroll, the Gospel of St. Thomas, has been claimed by scholars around the world to be the closest record we have of the words of the historical Jesus"¹¹; (3) "The Vatican refuses to recognize this Gospel and has described it as heresy." Thus, the film explicitly includes information about recent finds and developments in New Testament scholarship. However, why was the most pantheistic text in Thomas chosen?

The story as originally developed by screenwriter Tom Lazarus did not have this element to it, and did not in any way relate to the Gospel of Thomas or its pantheistic message. It was the director, Rupert Wainwright, who took the film in this direction.¹² In the director's commentary track on the DVD, Wainwright says about the three statements at the end: "These cards at the end are all true, and it was a huge fight to get these cards on, because some people believed it was a

¹⁰ *Stigmata*, at 1h:22m:56s, and following.

¹¹ For scholarship supporting this statement, see Elaine H. Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2003).

¹² Telephone interview with Tom Lazarus, March 22, 2008

distraction for the audience. I believe that what it did was it points the audience towards other facts about the movie that happen to be true. The movie is not about the Gospel of St. Thomas, but it refers to that gospel and other gospels like it. So I would encourage you to if you are at all interested in this material to look further.”¹³

Why did Wainwright pick Thomas’ pantheistic saying? Did Wainwright think this would be the verse most interesting to audiences or was it the verse most interesting to him? This is unknown.¹⁴ However, Wainwright’s disclaimer that the movie is not about the Gospel of Thomas notwithstanding, the central dramatic tension of the movie derives from the idea that a pantheistic understanding of Jesus and God, which is indeed contrary to traditional understandings of Christianity as set forth in the Nicene Creed and other traditional Christian creeds, is a threat to established religious institutions. The director expressly encourages his viewers to “look further.” So, for the purposes of this project, I conclude that *Stigmata* is one sign that pantheistic ideas are emerging into and being taken up in at least some sectors of American popular culture. In this case, a movie director expressly encouraged his viewers to learn more about recent developments in New Testament scholarship and its new pantheistic finds.

The next movie with strong sense of ecstatic naturalism/pantheism is 1999's *American Beauty*. Two long speeches occur in this movie that display pantheism. One is by the character Ricky Fitts, as he plays a video tape of plastic bag swirling in the wind, and he explains what he was feeling as he filmed it to his girlfriend:

It was one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing and there's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it. And this bag was, like, dancing with me.

¹³ *Stigmata*, at 1h:35m:43s, and following.

¹⁴ At the time this thesis was being, I learned via email that Wainwright was then in Moscow, Russia, and not readily available for an interview.

Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. And that's the day I knew there was this entire life behind things, and . . . this incredibly benevolent force, that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid, ever. Video's a poor excuse, I know. But it helps me remember . . . and I need to remember . . . Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it, like my heart's going to cave in.

The other main speech is when Lester Burnham gives his final speech to the audience in the final moments of the movie after he's just been murdered by his homophobic next door neighbor:

I had always heard your entire life flashes in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second isn't a second at all, it stretches on forever, like an ocean of time. . . For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars. . . And yellow leaves, from the maple trees, that lined my street. . . Or my grandmother's hands, and the way her skin seemed like paper. . . And the first time I saw my cousin Tony's brand new Firebird. . . And Janie. . . And Janie. . . And. . . Carolyn. I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me. . . but it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst. . . And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life. . . You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure. But don't worry. . . you will someday.

This film won the Best Picture Oscar, so these scenes were very evocatively acted. It is hard to experience the effect of these passages on the written page, but, as acted, they portrayed an ecstatic message that everyone should celebrate their existence, and celebrate that they have been lucky enough to win the cosmic lotto by being here at all. Bill Bryson, in the introduction to his book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, evocatively articulates this same theme.¹⁵ Julia Sweeney, in

¹⁵ Bryson welcomes his readers with this following celebration of existence: "Welcome. And congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn't easy, I know; In fact, I suspect it was a little tougher than you realize. To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and intriguingly obliging manner to create you. It's an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years (we hope) these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, cooperative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally underappreciated state known as existence. . . To be here now, alive in the twenty-first century and smart enough to know it, you also had to be the beneficiary of an extraordinary string of biological good fortune. . . Not one of your pertinent

her one-woman comedic lesson in metaphysics, declares she is a “naturalist” who, after the epiphany of her conversion to a naturalistic perspective, is “astonished” that she is “here at all. The smallest things in life just seem amazing to me now... I used to think there are no coincidences. Now I think there are coincidences!!! Wow, coincidence!!! If this is all there is, everything means more, not less!” She expresses pity for the “*anaturalists*,” a term she coined to label for those who reject a naturalistic perspective.¹⁶ These examples are similar or identical to the ecstatic naturalistic pantheism of Abbey.

Pantheism in Television

Pantheism showed up in television in the 1970's perhaps most prominently in the television series *Kung Fu*, whose television pilot aired on February 22, 1972 and whose 62 episodes ran from October 1972 to April 19, 1975.¹⁷ The “Writers’ Guide” manual produced by Warner Brothers Television indicated that writers were to draw the show’s philosophical content from “Confucianism, Taoism and Zen,” though predominately from Confucianism “because it is the most optimistic” in outlook.¹⁸ *Kung Fu* was set in the 1870s and follows the story of a Shaolin priest, Kwai Chang Caine, born in China to an American father and a Chinese mother, who after being

ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life's quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result—eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly—in you. This is a book about how it happened—in particular how we went from there being nothing at all to there being something, and then how a little of that something turned into us. . .” Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, 1st ed. (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 1-4.

¹⁶ Julia Sweeney, *Letting Go of God (Audio CD)* (Indefatigable Inc., 2006).

¹⁷ Herbie J. Pilato, *The Kung Fu Book of Caine: The Complete Guide to Tv's First Mystical Eastern Western*, 1st ed. (Boston: Tuttle Co., 1993), 57, 150.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

orphaned is brought up in a Shaolin temple. After killing a royal nephew of the Chinese emperor, Caine flees to the American West and searches for his half-brother, with bounty hunters always pursuing him. Each episode depicted some dramatic story, interlaced with flashbacks to scenes of his training at the Shaolin Temple, and his two main teachers, Master Kan and Master Po.

In one such flashback in Episode 1, Master Kan tells young Cain, “To know nature is to put oneself in harmony with the Universe. Heaven and Earth are one.”¹⁹ Master Kan further teaches Caine in Episode 4 that “All life is sacred”²⁰ and in Episode 20 that to “be a man is to be one with the Universe.”²¹ In the series pilot, Kan teaches that “All creatures, the low and the high, are one with Nature. If we have the wisdom to learn, all may teach us their virtues.”²² In Episode 4, Master Po teaches Caine that to “be one with the Universe is to know bird, sun, cloud,”²³ and in Episode 50 that the “Sage says: ‘The beginning of the Universe is the Mother of all things.’”²⁴ Finally, this example, again from Master Kan in Episode 46: “Do wars, famine, disease and death exist? Do lust, greed, and hate exist? They are [humanity]’s creations . . . brought into being by the dark side of nature.” Thus, in pantheistic fashion, the metaphysics of *Kung Fu* taught that nature and the Universe were the only and self-creating reality, that humans can learn the nature of reality by studying the natural world, that mortality is the way of nature (not even the possibility of

¹⁹ ———, *The Kung Fu Book of Wisdom: Sage Advice from the Original Tv Series*, 1st ed. (Boston: C.E. Tuttle, 1995), 20.

²⁰ Ibid.; Pilato, *The Kung Fu Book of Caine: The Complete Guide to Tv's First Mystical Eastern Western*, 71.

²¹ Ibid., 101.

²² ———, *The Kung Fu Book of Wisdom: Sage Advice from the Original Tv Series*, 26.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 106.

reincarnation is suggested), that nature is morally ambiguous (as with “The Force” in *Star Wars*), and that thus a wise person seeks to live in alignment with the forces of nature and the universe as much as possible. Levine noted the close coherence between Taoism and pantheism, and this affinity is visible in *Kung Fu*.

After the original series, *Kung Fu - The Movie*, a made-for TV movie aired February 1, 1986,²⁵ and a new television series, *Kung Fu - The Legend Continues*, continued the storyline into the present day. That series ran with 83 episodes from January 1993 to January 1997. The main character was still Kwai Chang Caine, who is the grandson of the Caine of the original series, again he is a Shaolin monk, now residing in a large American city. He continued to dispense the pantheistic wisdom of the original series. Numerous clips of both series are presently available on YouTube, and continue to have cultural influence.

Pantheism in Popular Music

At about the same time of the debut of the original Kung Fu series, the United States was experiencing another missionary of pantheism in the person of popular folk rock singer, John Denver (born Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr.). According to *Newsweek*, in 1976, Denver was “an ecoaware pantheist” who was “the most popular pop singer in America.”²⁶ Four years earlier, in September 1972, Denver released his album *Rocky Mountain High*, whose title track was an autobiographical paean to the glories of nature that in March 1973 made it to number nine on

²⁵ ———, *The Kung Fu Book of Caine: The Complete Guide to Tv's First Mystical Eastern Western*, 154.

²⁶ Maureen Orth, Peter S. Greenberg, and Janet Huck, "John Denver: The Sunshine Boy," *Newsweek*, Dec. 20, 1976.

Billboard's Hot 100 list.²⁷ On March 12, 2007, the song became Colorado's second state song.²⁸ In this autobiographical song, which was inspired by watching the Persied meteor shower on a dark night in the Rocky Mountains,²⁹ Denver describes himself as someone who in "his 27th year" was, invoking Christian imagery, "born again" through his transforming encounters with nature and thereby came "home to a place he'd never been before." After this epiphany, Denver tells his listeners, speaking about himself in the third-person,

Now he walks in quiet solitude the forest and the streams
seeking grace in ev'ry step he takes.
His sight has turned inside himself to try and understand
the serenity of a clear blue mountain lake.

As a result of this inward meditation, Denver can, through nature, "talk to God and listen to the casual reply." However, the song tells further that this new intimacy with God through nature comes with a price:

Now his life is full of wonder but his heart still knows some fear,
of a simple thing he cannot comprehend.
Why they try to tear the mountains down to bring in a couple more,
more people more scars upon the land?

Though he now knows "he'd be a poorer man if he never saw an eagle fly," this new intimacy with sacred nature had attached to it a new concern for the fate of the environment.³⁰ Denver could no longer be indifferent to the fate of creation.

²⁷ Fred Bronson, *The Billboard Book of Number 1 Hits*, Updated and Expanded 5th ed. (New York: Billboard Books, 2003), 360.

²⁸ <http://www.colorado.gov/dpa/doit/archives/history/symbemb.htm#RMH>
(retrieved 03-29-2008)

²⁹ Hence, the song's reference to seeing it "rainin' fire in the sky." John Denver and Arthur Tobier, *Take Me Home: An Autobiography*, 1st ed. (New York: Harmony Books, 1994), 108-09.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

“Rocky Mountain High” was the first song on the album. With his song, “Spring,” he concluded that album with a rapturous hymn of connection to nature:

Open up your eyes and see the brand new day,
a clear blue sky and brightly shining sun,
open up your ears and hear the breezes say
ev’rything that’s cold and gray is gone.
Open up your hands and feel the rain come on down,
taste the wind and smell the flowers’ sweet perfume.
Open up your mind and let the light shine in,
the earth has been reborn and life goes on.

And do you care what’s happening around you?
Do your senses know the changes when they come?
Can you see yourself reflected in the seasons?
Can you understand the need to carry on?

Riding on the tapestry of all there is to see,
so many ways, and oh, so many things.
Rejoicing the differences, there’s no one just like me,
Yet as different as we are, we’re still the same.

And oh, I love the life within me,
I feel a part of ev’rything I see.
And oh, I love the life around me,
a part of ev’rything is here in me. . .

Over the remaining 25 years of his career, cut short by his death in plane crash in 1997, Denver continued to explore nature-centered understandings of the sacred. In his album, *Spirit*, released in August 1976, he included a song with strong pantheistic elements entitled “The Wings That Fly Us Home,” wherein Denver tells his listening public that he knows “that love is seeing all the infinite in one,” and that “You’re never alone” because

the spirit fills the darkness of the heavens,
It fills the endless yearning of the soul,
It lives within a star too far to dream of,
It lives within each part and is the whole.³¹

³¹ Ibid., 253.

In November 1977, Denver released his album, *I Want To Live*, that included his song, “Singing Skies and Dancing Waters,” which describes the lament of someone, perhaps himself, struggling with loss of faith in a traditional god. The despairing seeker in the song laments to God “I just couldn't see you; I thought that I'd lost you; I never felt so much alone; Are you still with me?” God responds to the seeker’s plea, explaining that “I'm with you in, Singing skies and dancing waters, Laughing children, growing old, And in the heart, and in the spirit, And in the truth when it is told.”³²

In the title track of his September 1983 album, *It's About Time*, in a line reminiscent of Edward Abbey, Denver tells his audience that “It’s about time we start to see it, the Earth is our only home; It’s about time we start to face it, we can’t make it here” without the rest of Earth’s family of creatures. Then, in his song “Children of the Universe,” from his 1990 *Earth Songs* album, Denver describes reality in this way:

The cosmic ocean knows no bounds,
For all that live are brothers,
The whippoorwill, the grizzly bear,
The elephant, the whale,
All children of the universe,
All weavers of the tale.³³

In his song “Raven’s Child,” from his 1990 album, *The Flower That Shattered the Stone*, after describing various human kings (drug kings, oil baron kings, arms dealer kings (complete with a reference to Ronald Reagan’s Star Wars missile shield)) who all sit on an “arrogant throne, away, and above, and apart,” Denver invokes biblical language of God as King, but this pantheistic

true King sits on a heavenly throne,
Never away, nor above, nor apart,

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 255.

With wisdom and mercy and constant compassion,
He lives in the love, that lives in our hearts.³⁴

As a final example of Denver's pantheistic lyrics, I'll conclude with this from the title track of his *The Flower That Shattered The Stone* album:

The earth is our mother just turning around,
with her trees in the forest and roots underground,
Our father above us whose sigh is the wind,
paint us a rainbow without any end.

Here, Denver uses the Amerindian imagery of Mother Earth and Father Sky to understand the divine as immanent within the Cosmos.

John Denver continues to impact American culture. A search of "john denver" on MySpace.com on March 30, 2008, yields 33,700 results. Sampling the search results reveals John Denver Tribute sites, numerous clips of John Denver songs, as well as MySpace members that list Denver as a favorite artist. A YouTube.com search of the same phrase yielded 2,810 related clips. At least one fan-written book has been written exploring Denver's spirituality.³⁵ His pantheistic influence continues in present culture.

I will give one more example of popular musician whose lyrics show clear elements of pantheism, the late Dan Fogelberg (1951-2007). Fogelberg's music career, like Denver's, became successful in the early 1970s. However, his most nature-centered metaphysical albums were in the 1990s. In the title track to his 1990 *The Wild Places*, Fogelberg included these thoughts:

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Christine Smith, *A Mountain in the Wind: An Exploration of the Spirituality of John Denver* (Findhorn, Scotland; Tallahassee, FL: Findhorn Press, 2001). Smith's title is drawn from Denver's song, "The Wings That Fly Us Home," treated herein.

. . . There's a heaven on earth that so few ever find,
Though the map's in your soul and the road's in your mind.
. . . When you sleep on the ground with the stars in your face,
You can feel the full length of the beauty and grace.
In the wild places man is an unwelcome guest,
But it's here that I'm found and it's here I feel blessed.

Here, echoing Thoreau and John Muir's love of wildness and experience of wild places as the place of achieving "blessing," Fogelberg tells his listeners that "heaven is on earth." In his followup album that he considered the second volume of a two volume work, Fogelberg released "Magic Every Moment" on his 1993 *River of Souls* album. Here,

There's a magic every moment
There are miracles each day. . .
On a high and windy island I was gazing out to sea
When a long forgotten feeling came and took control of me
It was then the clouds burst open and the sun came pouring through
When it hit those dancing waters in an instant all eternity I knew. . .
You can see forever in a single drop of dew
You can see that same forever if you look down deep inside of you
There's a spark of the creator in every living thing. . .

These examples have a mystical quality to them and reveal more of spiritualized pantheism than a naturalistic pantheism. But the element of sacred focus remains this Cosmos.

In discussing these albums and these songs, Fogelberg said "I know metaphysical songs aren't going to sell on the radio," but "I felt there was no way we could save this planet unless we learned to love it [here, echoing Thomas Berry]. So these songs were about my love for nature."³⁶

Pantheism in Dawkins, Dennett and Harris

Pantheism also shows up in another surprising place. *Newsweek* has referred to biologist Richard Dawkins, philosopher Daniel Dennett, and neuroscientist Sam Harris as "The New

³⁶ <http://www.danfogelberg.com/biography.html> (Retrieved 3-30-2008).

Naysayers.”³⁷ Indeed, the three can be considered the new evangelical atheists, vigorously spreading atheism’s good news. The trio are usually mentioned together. However, a close reading of their works yields some surprises.

Richard Dawkins, in his 2006 book, *The God Delusion*, makes clear that for him it is the belief that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us”³⁸ that he believes is delusional. He further states that his title, *The God Delusion*, “does not refer to the God of Einstein and other enlightened scientists. . . I am talking only about *supernatural* gods. . .”³⁹ “I am calling only supernatural gods delusional.”⁴⁰ Given that Dawkins expressly states that he is not challenging Einstein’s God, a deeper investigation into Einstein’s notion of God is necessary.

Kocku von Stuckrad notes that Einstein always regarded himself as a “religious” scientist, even while rejecting the idea of a personal god who might interfere with human affairs or with nature. According to Stuckrad, Einstein “definitely had a kind of pantheistic religious attitude.” In his 1934 book, *The World As I See It*, Einstein expressed pantheistic ideas, talking about the mystery of the eternity of life, and his endeavor “to comprehend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the reason that manifests itself in nature.” Stuckrad characterizes Einstein’s self-described “rapturous amazement” at the harmony of natural law as a sort of mysticism.⁴¹

³⁷ Jerry Adler, "The New Naysayers: In the Midst of Religious Revival, Three Scholars Argue That Atheism Is Smarter," *Newsweek*, Sept. 11, 2006.

³⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴¹ Kocku von Stuckrad, "Einstein, Albert," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron Taylor (London & New York: Continuum International, 2005).

Einstein's recent biographer, Walter Isaacson, confirms Stuckrad's conclusions. Einstein expressly rejected the label "atheist" on a number of occasions. Indeed, on one occasion, Einstein declared "I do not share the crusading spirit of the professional atheist whose fervor is mostly due to a painful act of liberation from the fetters of religious indoctrination received in youth." Instead, he elsewhere said "I am fascinated by Spinoza's pantheism, but I admire even more his contribution to modern thought because he is the first philosopher to deal with the soul and body as one, and not two separate things." When asked if he believed in immortality, Einstein said "No. And one life is enough for me." In response to a Rabbi's 1929 telegram, asking specifically, "Do you believe in God?," Einstein replied, "I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind."⁴²

Dawkins, however, objects to labeling as *religion* "the pantheistic reverence which many of us share with its most distinguished exponent, Albert Einstein."⁴³ Does Dawkins include himself among those who share Einstein's "pantheistic reverence" for the cosmos? He does not expressly say so, and he does not expressly preclude that conclusion. While making it clear that it is only "supernatural gods" that he is challenging, Dawkins does express a desire that physicists refrain, to avoid confusion of terms, from using the term *God* because the "metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible."⁴⁴ It seems fair though to conclude that Dawkins' is at least tolerant of naturalistic pantheism and may himself share in pantheistic reverence as

⁴² Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 386-90.

⁴³ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 14.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

defined in this study. The following is suggestive of Dawkins a ecstatic wonderment:

. . . The evolution of complex life, indeed its very existence in a universe obeying physical laws, is wonderfully surprising. . . Think about it. On one planet, and possibly only one planet in the entire universe, molecules that would normally make nothing more complicated than a chunk of rock, gather themselves together into chunks of rock-sized matter of such staggering complexity that they are capable of running, jumping, swimming, flying, seeing, hearing, capturing and eating other such animated chunks of complexity; capable in some cases of thinking and feeling, and falling in love with yet other chunks of complex matter. We now understand essentially how the trick is done, but only since 1859. Before 1859 it would have seemed very very odd indeed. Now, thanks to Darwin, it is merely very odd. Darwin seized the window . . . [and let] in a flood of understanding whose dazzling novelty, and power to uplift the human spirit, perhaps had no precedent. . .

. . . I [have] tried to convey how lucky we are to be alive, given that the vast majority of people who could potentially be thrown up by the combinatorial lottery of DNA will in fact never be born. . . We are staggeringly lucky to find ourselves in the spotlight. However brief our time in the sun, if we waste a second of it, or complain that it is dull or barren or (like a child) boring, couldn't this be seen as a callous insult to those unborn trillions who will never even be offered life in the first place? As many atheists have said better than me, the knowledge that we have only one life should make it all the more precious. The atheist view is correspondingly life-affirming and life-enhancing, while at the same time never being tainted with self-delusion, wishful thinking, or the whingeing self-pity of those who feel that life owes them something. Emily Dickinson said,

That it will never come again
Is what makes life so sweet.⁴⁵

Another alleged atheist, Daniel Dennett, declares that “The world is sacred.” Because Dennett is one of contemporary culture’s most well-known advocates of atheism, the full quote where he makes this surprising claim is warranted:

Benedict Spinoza, in the seventeenth century, *identified* God and Nature, arguing that scientific research was the true path of theology. . . [I]n proposing his scientific simplification, was he personifying Nature or depersonalizing God?. . . Should Spinoza be counted as an atheist or a pantheist? He saw the glory of nature and then saw a way of eliminating the middleman! As I said at the end of my earlier book:

The Tree of Life is neither perfect nor infinite in space or time, but it is actual, and . . . it is surely a being that is greater than anything any of us will ever conceive of in detail worthy of its detail. Is something sacred? Yes, say I with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its

⁴⁵ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 366-67.

magnificence. The world is sacred.
Does that make me an atheist? Certainly, in the obvious sense. If what you hold sacred is not any kind of Person you could pray to, or consider to be an appropriate recipient of gratitude (or anger, when a loved one is senselessly killed), you're an atheist in my book.⁴⁶

Thus Dennett, who (like Dawkins) foreswears any elements of supernaturalism, describes himself with all the attributes characteristic of naturalistic pantheism. He uses language of the sacred to describe his affirmation of the universe's "magnificence." However, along with Schopenhauer years ago, he chooses to describe this viewpoint as atheism instead of pantheism. He claims Spinoza for atheism rather than join in the usual understanding of Spinoza's metaphysics as pantheism.

Sam Harris, best known for his books, *The End of Faith*⁴⁷ and *Letter to a Christian Nation*,⁴⁸ self-describes as an atheist. Yet, in his *Newsweek*-sponsored debate with evangelical Christian pastor, Rick Warren, Harris said the following:

You can have your spirituality. You can go into a cave and practice meditation and transform yourself, and then we can talk about why that happened and how it could be replicated. . . Let's realize that there's a power in contemplating the mystery of the universe, and in reminding yourself how much you love the people closest to you, and how much more you could love the people you haven't met yet. There is nothing you have to believe on insufficient evidence in order to talk about that possibility. . . You can feel yourself to be one with the universe.⁴⁹

In *End of Faith*, Harris describes himself as agnostic on the question of an after-life (thereby leaving open the possibility), and extols "spirituality" and "mysticism."⁵⁰ Like Dawkins and Dennett, when

⁴⁶ Daniel Clement Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), 244-45.

⁴⁷ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004).

⁴⁸ ———, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2006).

⁴⁹ Jon Meacham, "The God Debate," *Newsweek* 149 (2007).

⁵⁰ Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, 205, 08.

Harris declares himself to be an atheist, he is merely declaring his disbelief in supernaturalistic gods as commonly understood. Yet, he celebrates “the mystery of the universe” and a feeling of oneness with it in a way that closely parallels or is, at least arguably, identical with many of the expressions of naturalistic pantheism explored in this study.

CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

Pantheism's embrace of this universe and this planet is increasingly offering a form of religious meaning to satisfy the metaphysical void that Weber spoke of, and which allows people who are disinclined to speculate about dimensions beyond time, beyond death, and beyond this universe a metaphysical stance around which to orient their lives. However, the term itself, remains relatively little known in American culture, and subject to various definitions. People with a pantheistic stance often do not use the term for self-description, either because they do not even know of it (Sharman Russell states she did not learn of the term until she was forty-two¹), because they wish to avoid its heretical associations within the Abrahamic traditions, or because they wish to avoid any association with any metaphysical stance that has any association with the term "God," pantheistic or otherwise. However, this study has demonstrated that the geography of the sacred laid out by a pantheistic metaphysics is present in American culture, in some cases explicitly (as with Einstein and Abbey), and in many other cases implicitly.

This study has given examples of signs of the presence of pantheistic thought, both spiritualized and naturalistic, in American culture and laid out a framework for detecting pantheistic beliefs in American culture. Thomas Berry has said "Without a fascination with the grandeur of the North American continent, the energy needed for its preservation will never be developed."² And the great theologian and humanitarian physician to Africa, Albert Schweitzer, in articulating his principle of "Reverence for Life," argued that humans are "ethical only when life, as such, is sacred

¹ Sharman A. Russell, *Standing in the Light: My Life as a Pantheist* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 5.

² Thomas Mary Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 33.

. . ., that of plants and animals [as well] as that of³ their fellow humans. If Schweitzer was right, the fact that our natural world is increasingly being regarded as the locus of the sacred may be good news for a planet facing an accelerating environmental crisis.⁴ However, the full extent of the penetration of pantheistic thought into American culture and whether such ideas actually modify environmental behaviors remains for further research.

³ Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*, trans. Charles Thomas Campion (New York: H. Holt & Co., 1933), 156-59.

⁴ Jeffrey Kluger, "Be Worried, Be Very Worried: Global Warming Heats Up," *Time*, 167, no. 14 (2006).

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bernard Daley Zaleha graduated first in his class with highest honors from California State University, San Bernardino, with a Bachelor of Arts dual major in environmental studies and geography in 1983. He received his Juris Doctor, *magna cum laude*, from Lewis and Clark College Northwestern School of Law, with a certificate in Environmental and Natural Resource Law in 1987. He spent most of the last two decades practicing environmental law and has defended environmental civil disobedience protesters, both civilly and criminally. He is published legal scholar in the areas of federal public land management and the federal law of wetlands protection. Mr. Zaleha has been an environmental activist for the last quarter century. He is presently serving his second term on the national board of directors of the Sierra Club and from March 2004 to May 2006 served as its 62nd national Vice President. He is the founding president of the Fund for Christian Ecology, and has received recognition as a lay eco-theologian, primarily for authoring two essays, *Recovering Christian Pantheism as a Lost Gospel of Creation* and *Befriending the Earth*. His professional interests include the ongoing emergence of Christian Pantheism as a new this-worldly, ecological interpretation of the Christian tradition; the efficacy (or lack thereof) of religious values in inspiring environmental activism; and the potential role of intelligent design/creationism as a factor retarding or suppressing environmental concern.