

Calendar

Pantheists Aren't Atheists in Disguise

Summer Solstice Celebration

My father was a Methodist, so that was the default religion for me," says Andrew C. Millard, who is a pantheist now.

He grew up in England and studied science at Cambridge. "As I was going to school, I had a lot of [philosophical] questions," Millard says, "and was interested in Hinduism. Then one day, while looking for a Hindu quote on the Web, I came across a site on pantheism — on a particular variety of it. And I read the description, and said, 'Yes, that describes me.'"

By then, he was in the United States, earning a Ph.D. in physics at Princeton.

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Until that time, he had erroneously thought, as do many people,

that pantheism was polytheism — belief in many gods.

"All pantheists consider the universe to be the ultimate divinity," says Millard. "There are lots of definitions of God. The supernatural big-person-in-the-sky isn't the only possibility. But whatever a person happens to consider God, it is always the highest power, the object most deserving of reverence. And, you could argue, those things apply to the universe."

The postdoctoral researcher in chemistry at UCSD says he chose science as his profession "because it makes the most sense to me."

"I take it to be a reliable way to get

information about the world."

Science also forms the basis for his religion. While other pantheists — for example, some Native Americans — believe in the supernatural, souls, spirits, even reincarnation — Millard and others base their pantheistic beliefs "on what science is discovering."

While most people don't object to a mingling of philosophy and religion, it's controversial to do the same with science and religion. Referring to the Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, Millard says, "[Gould] thinks science and religion are separate but complementary and that they should have nothing whatsoever to say about one another. I think that's wrong. Although they are separate, they can inform one another. Science is directed, if you like, to the 'what' and the 'how' of the universe. Religion tries to answer the 'why' questions that science just cannot answer and will never be able to."

Millard acknowledges that the boundary between pantheists and just plain nature-lovers is "fuzzy." As he sees it, one's label depends on one's approach. Ordinary environmentalists, motivated by self-interest, "worry that, because we are dependent on the environment for survival, we shouldn't keep trashing it." Those with a "deep ecology outlook," on the other hand, "believe the earth in its own right is worth preserving." Then you have the science-based pantheists, like Millard, who say that the environment is "part of something greater, which we should appreciate and revere."



Pantheist gathering at the Wild Animal Park

Some religions are famed for proselytizing. Rest assured, no pantheist will come knocking on your door. But Millard is a founding member of a new organization, the Pantheists of Southern California, that is seeking members.

"Until recently, it's been a passive process of people coming across us on a link to the website of the World Pantheist Movement. But the problem is, if you don't know the word pantheism, you don't know it describes your beliefs. And you won't know to search for it."

The present membership of 45 has twice monthly meetings in San Diego and Los Angeles. It's a varied group, including "someone from Chula Vista who works for the Navy; someone in Los Angeles who is an apartment-complex manager and who writes percussive meditation music that people can meditate by; a philosophy professor recently retired from SDSU; somebody who is a child-welfare counselor from Riverside; and somebody who used to be a nun — in fact, a mother superior — who lives in Oceanside."

Their activities range from discussions to field trips. They have been to the Wild Animal Park, Birch Aquarium, La Brea Tar pits, and, on this past spring's equinox, the Griffith Observatory in Hollywood.

A summer solstice celebration will be their first attempt at doing something "ceremonial." Some people, like the ex-nun, are wary of ritual,

coming as she does from a religion steeped in it. But ceremony is exactly what other members are seeking.

"We're thinking of incorporating objects that will help us to appreciate our sensory connection to the universe, whether it's a flower to smell, or a piece of chocolate to taste. We'll probably also have sounds — the music of the percussive musician."

Millard knows pantheists are sometimes called "atheists in disguise." But who would imagine atheists celebrating the solstice?

Besides, he says, "Most atheists are not so much anti-God as anti-religion — although I do think they have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. A lot of them are impressed with the universe and like going to the mountains and forests and being surrounded by nature. But because they're denying that religion can at all be a good thing, they're missing out on a way to go the next step with their feelings."

— Jeanne Schinto

**Summer Solstice and Celebration
Pantheists of Southern California
Sunday, June 25
Noon (celebration); 2:00 p.m.
(potluck picnic)
Area 7 of Felicita County Park
742 Clarence Lane, Escondido
Just west of I-5 between
Lake Hodges and Escondido
Free, but bring something to
share at the picnic
Info: 858-457-2959**



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