
UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO THEISM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Is there a God? God is one or many? Do celestial beings (gods, angels, spirits, and demons) exist? Is there life after death? Is religion a need for modern human? If there is a God then why evil exists? Can man comprehend God? Can the human communicate with God? Does God answer prayers? There are many existential questions raised by humans in the realm of religion, spirituality and metaphysics. Theism is a philosophical ideology which answers the questions arose above in its affirmative. In simple words theism is an ideology that propagates belief in the existence of God or gods. The term 'theism' is synonymous to "having belief in God". In the broadest sense, a theist is a person with the belief that at least one deity (God) exists. This God can be addressed as The Absolute, The Being, Ground of Being, The Ultimate, The World-Soul, the Supreme Good, The Truth, The First Cause, The Supreme Value, The Thing in Itself, The Mystery etc. Theism acknowledges that this god is a living being having personality, will and emotions. Theists believe in a personal God who is the creator and sustainer of life. The answers for the questions 'Who is god?' 'What is god?' are attempted by the theists.

In discussing theism there arises another important question. It is like when was the human mind started to think about God? Many theistic theologians believe that "God consciousness" is innate in the human mind. But while we study the phenomenon of religion one understands that "God consciousness" in humans came first through experiencing fear. Here fear can be seen as the sense of "the sacred". In this search of the "Sacred" emerges theism in the form of animism, then polytheism, then gradually in to henotheism, and at last developed in to monotheism. In monotheism religion becomes institutionalised, cold, and formal. The sense of the "sacred" is lost and institutionalism paves way for doctrines, creeds, and confessions. Fortunately in this postmodern era humans are searching back to their original religiosity in which the "Other" the "Absolute" manifests in multiple forms.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The term theism derives from the Greek theos meaning "god". The term theism was first used by Ralph Cudworth (1617–88). The view usually entails the idea that God is beyond human comprehension, perfect and self-sustained, but also peculiarly involved in the world and its events. Advaitins define god as '*neti*

neti’, which means ‘not this not that’ to prove the fact that God is an ‘another kind of being’ which cannot be described by finite human speculations. A famous western theologian Paul Tillich attempts a definition of God in his book *Systematic Theology*: “God is a being who transcends the realm of ordinary experience in power and meaning. It/He is the image of human nature or subhuman powers raised to a superhuman realm.” Traditionally God can be defined as an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent Being who is self-existent, immutable, self-conscious and personal. God is genderless because God does not come under the category of the comprehensible. God thus can be addressed as He/She/It because God is definitely some another kind of being who does not come under phenomenological expressions of the human mind. The God of theism is intelligent and powerful. This God is self-revealing, active in relation to humans, and is worthy of worship. The God of the theists communicates His will to humans, creates, preserves, and destroys. He is the all in all, absolute sovereign in all things in relation to the universe.

1.2 TYPES OF THEISM

Monism

Monism is a philosophical position that maintains that Reality is One. It means reality is an undivided or undifferentiated oneness or unity. Monism holds a very prominent position in Advaitic Hinduism. Monism is the belief that only God is real and all other things are unreal. Advaita attributes individual’s reasoning of existence to *maya* or illusion. God is the only real and all diversities the human mind experiences are unreal. According to Sankara everything we perceive as individual and particular –objects, people, thoughts, even gods— are real only in the sense that they are one with the Absolute, the Brahman. This is an ideology which says the universe is the manifestation of god within his/its own essential unity. God of the monists is the Absolute and is abstract. This God cannot be described or defined by the limited human language. God is incomprehensible and not communicable. Ascribing personality, emotions, intellect, and other anthropomorphic or zoomorphic attributes to God is the manifestation of a lower or carnal human mind and religiosity. These attributes do not belong to the “Being” of God.

Monotheism

Monotheism is the belief that only one deity exists. Some modern day monotheistic religions include Christianity, Islam, Judaism and some forms of Buddhism and Advaitic Hinduism. Some scholars (ex. Sigmund Freud) argue that monotheism might have had its origin in Egypt. In his article *The Origins of Religion*, Freud says the King Akhenaton reintroduced the worship of the Sun god Aten in 1375 BCE. Akhenaton made Aten’s religion as the sole religion and projected Aten as the monotheistic God. He also prohibited any other forms of religion and worshipping of other gods by royal decree. Freud suggests that Moses the founder of Judaism might have been influenced by the monotheism of Akhenaton when he carved the concept of one God for the Jews. Some people, for example, the conservative Christians and the Orthodox Muslims and Jews believe that the original self-revelation of God was His singularity. In the Hebrew Torah and the Bible we read the *Shema*, “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is One Lord”. In Islam also we see this idea in the Holy Quran. The Quran teaches that God is one and has no partners to share His divine glory. Muslims regularly recite the Shahadah, “there is no God but

Allah". Christianity goes slightly away from the traditional monotheism of Judaism and Islam because of the concept of Trinity, in which the Christians see One God in Three personalities. When the traditional monotheistic faiths like Judaism, Christianity and Islam are scrutinized from a rational perspective they fail to be monotheistic, they all tend to be either henotheistic or promote monolatry. If a person says he/she believes in the existence of only one God then one has to believe that this God is called in different names in different places and times. Let's for example think about water. Where ever we go in this planet the chemical component of water is the same H₂O. The name humans address the water varies from place to place. In English we call water, Tamil- *thaneer*, Hindi-*pani*, Sanskrit-*jal*, Malayalam-*vellam*, Manipuri-*ising* and so on. Same say if only one God exists then God is named differently by different people. But this view is not at all accepted by the major monotheistic faiths of the world.

Polytheism

Polytheism is the belief that there is more than one deity. It is a belief in plurality; and in the plurality that manifests in many forms. It is a system of symbolizing reality in a plural way in order to give meaningful account for the multifaceted religiosity experienced by humans.

In practice, polytheism is not just the belief that there are multiple gods; it usually includes belief in the existence of a specific pantheon of distinct deities. Polytheism is seen wide spread in almost all cultures. Popular Hinduism, Egyptian religion, Greek religion etc are overtly polytheistic. People worship various gods and goddesses. High ritualistic practises are common among the polytheists. The priestly class is at most benefited by polytheism. Polytheism makes the religious life vibrant. Many temples can be built and various myths and epics can be circulated. Polytheism is gaining prominence in this postmodern era due to the factor that polytheistic belief promotes and assimilates all the indigenous and popular narratives. The idea of the "many" opens way for all forms of beliefs, worship and religiosity.

Henotheism

The viewpoint/belief that there exists more than one deity, but outmost worship is of only one of them. The henotheist exclusively worship only one God, while agreeing the fact that other deities exist and they may be legitimately worshiped by other people groups. Henotheist also believes that the God whom they worship is the Supreme of the pantheon of existing deities. This view is akin to the Yahweh worship of Mosaic Judaism of the pre-prophetic era.

Kathenotheism

The viewpoint/belief that there is more than one deity, but only one deity is worshipped at a time or ever, and another may be worthy of worship at another time or place. If they are worshipped one at a time, then each is supreme in turn. Kathenotheism is often common in polytheistic religions in which natural forces are worshipped. Deities such as the Rain god is worshipped when there is need for rain. Sun god is worshipped in times of harvest, god of fertility is invoked in marriage and god of education is communed when children go for exams, etc.

Monolatry

It is the belief that there may be more than one deity, but that only one is

worthy of being worshipped. Sometimes people who claim to be monotheists fall into the category of Monolatry when they try to be polemic against the people of other faiths. Monolatry sometimes makes people to desecrate the deities whom they do not revere. Religious fundamentalism is a form of Monolatry in which the devotee of a particular deity tries to force his religion or deity as the “Absolute” on the fellow humans.

Pantheism

The belief that the physical universe is equivalent to a god or gods, and that there is no division between a Creator and the substance of its creation. In other words, God and the world is identical. Pantheism states that “God is all in all.” God pervades all things, contains all things, subsumes all things, and is found within all things. Nothing exists apart from God, and all things are in some or other way identified with God. The Universe is God and God is the Universe. All is God and God is All. This is another form or an idea similar to Monism.

Panentheism

Panentheism is belief that the physical universe is joined to a god or gods. However, it also believes that a god or gods are greater than the material universe. Panentheism means “all is in God”. It means that the universe is in God, but God also exists beyond the universe. Here God is seen to be with the creation. Panentheism denotes the belief that the reality of the world and the whole created order does not exhaust the reality of God without remainder. Yet it also holds in common with pantheism that God’s presence and active agency permeates the world, actively sustaining it in every part. Panentheism stresses foremost the divine immanence but does not deny divine transcendence altogether.

Deism

Deism is the belief that at least one deity exists and created the world, but that the creator(s) does/do not alter the original plan for the universe. Deism typically rejects supernatural events (such as prophecies, miracles, and divine revelations) prominent in organized religion. Instead, Deism holds that religious beliefs must be founded on human reason and observed features of the natural world, and that these sources reveal the existence of a supreme being as creator.

Autotheism

Autotheism is the viewpoint that, whether divinity is also external or not, it is inherently within ‘oneself’ and that one has a duty to become perfect (or divine). Autotheism can also refer to the belief that one’s self is a deity.

1.3 KINDS OF THEISM

Classical Theism

Classical theism refers to a form of Theism in distinction to modern ideas about God such as Theistic Personalism, Open Theism and Process Theism. Classical Theism began with the works of the Greek philosophers, especially Platonists and Neoplatonists and was developed into Christian Theology by the Scholastics, primarily by Thomas Aquinas (1224-1275). Among the leading defenders of classical theism were Augustine (354–430), Anselm (1033–1109), and Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274). In the modern world perhaps the most popular exponents

of classical theism were William Paley (1743–1805) and C. S. Lewis (1898–1963). One of the fundamental points of Classical Theism is: how do we acquire knowledge of God? Knowledge of God cannot be gained by *a priori* methods. Therefore, the philosophical methodology of Classical Theism is *a posteriori*. Classical Theism holds first of all that in order to establish the nature of God we have to prove His existence. This is done by a posteriori methodology which proceeds from the effect to the existence and nature of its cause. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas used the famous Five Ways (all of them metaphysical proofs) to prove God's existence. Other philosophical arguments adherents use to support Classical Theism include the argument from morality, and the teleological argument. Major arguments against Classical Theism include the problem of evil and the hiddenness of God. Classical Theism is primarily and historically based on doctrines of several classical philosophers, but primarily on Aristotelian metaphysics.

Existential Theism

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is the proponent of Existential Theism. Existential Theism begins with some of the same propositions of classic theism. It starts with the existence of God, and his character as shown in religious scriptures. God is infinite, benevolent, and sovereign. Existential Theism sees the universe as being created by God, operating according to the laws He set up, yet continually under God's direction, an "open system." This form of existentialism focuses on subjective, personal human experience. Here existence precedes essence. Existential Theism offers meaning to a life experience full of seeming contradictions; a world we can never fully understand. Existentialism finds ultimate meaning in relationships. Existential Theism realizes that adherence to a creed and a set of moral standards is not enough. True religion is acted out by showing love to others, and true faith opens a direct, intimate communication between the soul and God. One of the positive aspects of Existential Theism is that it deemphasizes the role of Scripture as God's primary means of self-revelation, choosing instead to begin with human experience.

Existential Theism insists that each person must take the "blind leap of faith" to believe in God. These theists hold to the view that no one can ever really know "transcendent" truth. But choose to cope in such a world by believing that there is a meaning, even if we can't understand it. To an Existential theist religion starts with ourselves, not with God. Therefore the absurdity of life is realized clearly. Although s/he does not immediately perceive that God exists, s/he chooses to believe so based upon the very real need for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Thus, the question of whether or not God exists is not solved by reason, but rather by faith.

Empirical Theism

The Reverend Thomas Reid, (1710 –1796), was the founder of the Scottish School of Common Sense. The laws of nature, according to Reid, are the laws by which God's agency manifests itself and insofar as natural science and philosophy reveal the laws of nature, they reveal God's intentions. God could have willed that the laws were otherwise than they are and he could suspend or alter a law of nature (resulting in a miracle). But so long as the laws of nature that God wills are in place, the events over which they range are governed by necessity. To put this in contemporary terms, the events that come about in accordance with the laws of nature are nomologically necessary rather than metaphysically necessary. To the question then why do not all humans come to

the awareness of God, Reid proposes an answer. He says that as God is the basic background of the universe, and as such, the situation is like that of a fish in water. The fish can not find the water because it is the medium he is constantly in; looking through the water all the time for his entire existence the fish sees only the other things that show up through the water. This indicates that though humans could be looking at God all the time (so to speak) and not aware of seeing God, have the concepts in our minds that pertain to him.

Idealistic Theism

George Berkeley (1685 — 1753), who also known as Bishop Berkeley (Bishop of Cloyne), is the proponent of Idealistic Theism. Berkeley believed God to be present as an immediate cause of all our experiences. He did not evade the question of the external source of the diversity of the sense data at the disposal of the human individual. He strove simply to show that the causes of sensations could not be things, because what we called things, and considered without grounds to be something different from our sensations, were built up wholly from sensations. There must consequently be some other external source of the inexhaustible diversity of sensations, the source of our sensations, Berkeley concluded, could only be God. Berkeley's theistic (mystic) idealism, claimed that nothing separated man and God (except materialist misconceptions, of course), since nature or matter did not exist as a reality independent of consciousness. The revelation of God was directly accessible to man, according to this doctrine; it was the sense-perceived world, the world of man's sensations, which came to him from on high for him to decipher and so grasp the divine purpose. Theistic Idealism is an ontology that holds that reality itself is essentially spirit or consciousness. God is "Consciousness". This view holds that consciousness, not matter, is the ground of all being.

Pragmatic Theism

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) is the proponent of Pragmatic Theism. Pragmatism refers to experimental, empirical, and purposive thought "based on and applying to experience". Pragmatism begins with the idea that belief is that on which one is prepared to act. Peirce believed in God, and characterized such belief as founded in an instinct exploratory in musing over the worlds of ideas, brute facts, and evolving habits — and it is a belief in God not as an actual or existent being (in Peirce's sense of those words), but all the same as a real being. In his hypothesis God is a "necessary Being". He also says that God is an "infinitely incomprehensible Being". He sees God as independent from actual human opinions but yet discoverable by inquiry. Inquiry is a kind of inference process, a manner of thinking and semiosis. Peirce held that all thought is in signs, issuing in and from interpretation, where 'sign' is the word for the broadest variety of conceivable semblances, diagrams, metaphors, symptoms, signals, designations, symbols, texts, even mental concepts and ideas, all as determinations of a mind or quasi-mind, that which at least functions like a mind.

Peirce feels that belief in God is not a momentary mode of consciousness; it is a habit of mind essentially enduring for some time, and mostly (at least) unconscious; and like other habits, it is, perfectly self-satisfied. The need for belief arises in doubt. For him doubt is a state in which habitual actions are blocked or confused and from which organic irritation and irresolution result. Resolution and unobstructed conduct, on the other hand, are products of belief, which is a form of stability and satisfaction. It is the function of scientific thought

to produce true beliefs. Thus in pragmatic theism confused signs about God are translated into clearer signs by the power of inquiry.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

The unit gives a descriptive picture about theism. With the treatment of definition of theism as belief in God, the unit elaborates on different types and kinds of theism. As an introduction to theism the unit does justice to giving merely details of theism.

1.5 KEY WORDS

Pragmatic Theism	: Pragmatism refers to experimental, empirical, and purposive thought “based on and applying to experience.
Idealistic Theism	: Berkeley believed God to be present as an immediate cause of all our experiences. He did not evade the question of the external source of the diversity of the sense data at the disposal of the human individual.

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