

Pantheisticon: John Toland's Cosmic Mass

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Dr Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes introduces us to the private 1720 book *Pantheisticon*, written by the Irish early-Enlightenment philosopher and political activist John Toland, who first used the word 'Pantheist' in English, classifying himself through it. Toland was a self-confessed contrarian, and came perilously close to persecution by the command of the Church. He is credited (or accused) by some to have been a key figure in the formation of modern Druidry and Freemasonry. Regardless of the veiled truth of which, we see in the *Pantheisticon* the forging of a Pantheist creed and sect, and with it a sought return to European paganism, in terms of philosophic belief and ordered ritual.

'The Sun is my Father,
the Earth my Mother,
the World's my Country,
and all Men are my Relations.'

– John Toland,
Pantheisticon (1720)

Sunrise

As the sight of the cosmos becomes clearer with humanity's advance, so does the view of the varieties of consciousness. Theories that were once considered intellectual heresy are now taken more and more seriously in academic circles. One such view is *Pantheism*: that All (*pan*) is God (*theos*). But by 'God' is *not* meant a personal deity so much as a vast universal mind, a mind that is *not separate* from the universe but is the internal mental aspect of the universe – just as one might consider the human mind as not separate from the human body but an internal aspect thereof. Thus Pantheism is often Monism (without duality) – the clearest modern example of which is that of [Benedict de Spinoza](#), the Jewish Dutch philosopher who died in 1677.

But Pantheism has deep historical roots – we see it for instance in ancient Vedanta, Neoplatonism, Stoicism, Sufism, in Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, and other ancient Greeks. Plato's distinction between the *pantheistic* World Soul (*anima mundi*) and the more *monotheistic* creator god Demiurge – in the *Timaeus* (c. 360BC) – can be seen to have resulted in a divine antagonism causing tension throughout European history. The burning of the pantheists Bruno (1600), and Vanini (1619) by the Inquisition flare up as symptoms of it; Alan Watts considered the prohibition of psychedelics as another symptom of that tension.

We see the first known use of the term 'Pantheism' (as '*Pantheismum*') in 1697, twenty years after Spinoza's death. The English Newtonian, Joseph Raphson uses the Latin word to refer specifically to the systems of Spinoza and Vedanta, opposing Pantheism to 'Panhyllism': pure physicalism or materialism. For Spinoza, 'God is a thinking thing' (*Ethics*, II, P1), and in Vedanta 'Brahman' is somewhat spiritually akin. Raphson, however, uses the term Pantheism negatively, complaining that 'Pantheism is still retained by the Hindus today, the Brahmins

... . Among the Europeans, moreover, certain Fanatics and Enthusiasts seem to profess Pantheism' (*Of Real Space or Infinite Being*). More than twenty years later, we see such an enthusiast in the Irish intellectual, John Toland (1670 – 1722) who sought to bring other such Pantheists together in a secret ritual sect through his 1720 tome, *Pantheisticon*.

We shall therefore explore the somewhat elusive identity of Toland, and then the contents of the *Pantheisticon* – with their curious relations to Freemasonry, Druidry, the religious politics of the Enlightenment, and to theories of consciousness.

John Toland

John Toland's real name, he claimed, was *Janus Junius*, so named at his birth near Londonderry in the north of Ireland in 1670. Janus was the Roman two-faced deity: god of transitions, doors, gateways – often of the transition from war to peace. As such, Janus was a well-matched moniker for Toland who wrote of the necessity of esoteric (private or secret), in contrast to exoteric (public), forms of communication. Janus changed his public-facing name to John, and closed the door upon his family and culture's Roman Catholicism at the age of sixteen. Now as a Protestant, Toland was then educated in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Leiden in the Holland, and Oxford. He thereafter moved to London, his base. But throughout his life he travelled throughout Europe, befriending the Lords, Ladies, cognoscenti and Royalty of the Continent and the British Isles during tempestuous times relating to the conflict between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. But who was he? Toland has been known under many classifications, many of which conflict: He has been known as a philosopher, political pamphleteer, satirist, public intellectual, publisher, translator, biographer, republican, anti-Jacobite, Jewish ally, Hanoverian, Whig, diplomat, spy, contrarian, man of letters, propagandist, celtic advocate, linguist, liberal, freethinker, freemason, druid, naturalist, Brunian, pagan, protestant, atheist, deist, and pantheist. We shall unknot this as we arc along, beginning with Margaret Jacob's contradictory-yet-correct assertion that 'Toland ... was a Protestant for political reasons but he was not a Christian.' (*The Radical Enlightenment*, 1981/2006, p. 122)

Toland made his name, or his notoriety, in 1696 with his book, *Christianity not Mysterious*, The book was burned by the Catholic authorities in his homeland because of its Deist claims that reason rather than revelation provides the basis of true religion. Toland was first and foremost a sworn enemy of priestcraft, or the tyranny of the beliefs of powerful dogmatists that stall free thinking, that stall the intellectual progress of society. As such he was representative of the early Enlightenment. Of course, the priesthood did not much appreciate this, but his affiliations with the aristocracy and royalty saved him from severe persecution. Thus did he promote, through publishing and diplomatic missions, the Protestant dominance in Europe, fearing the more stringent Roman Catholicism that still threatened post-Reformation, especially the strenuous form gestating in France from Louis XIV. Toland, with his aristocratic Whig (contra Tory) tendencies, supported the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 whereby the Roman Catholic King of England and Scotland, James II/VII, was driven out by the Dutch forces led by Protestant William III, landing his fleet in Brixham, Devon. William became King of England, Scotland, and Ireland alongside his wife Mary II, James' daughter. Toland wanted to secure the non-Catholicity of the British Isles and so helped the Prussian, Protestant House of Hanover take over the British monarchy, which succeeded in 1714 with George I. Toland went on diplomatic missions to meet the Hanoverians, befriending Princess

Sophia of the Palatinat, mother of George I, and her daughter, Sophia Charlotte of Hanover, Queen of Prussia – and incidentally meeting Leibniz when there (they did not get on).

The Sophias became one of Toland's sponsors, and Toland dedicated a book to Queen Sophia, the 1704 *Letters to Serena*, wherein Toland explores immortality, heathenry, and Spinoza's philosophy, offering minor criticisms of it (mostly that Spinoza should have prioritized motion over matter – it was not a critique of his Pantheism as such).

In 1705 Toland publishes the pamphlet *Socinianism Truly Stated* in which the *English* word 'Pantheist' is first used, and is moreover used *positively* (in contrast to Raphson). We only find the word twice here, and it is never explained. Toland identifies himself in the pamphlet as a Pantheist on the title page: 'Socinianism truly Stated: Being an Example of Fair Dealing in all Theological Controversys. To which is Prefixt, Indifference in Disputes. Recommended by a PANTHEIST to an Orthodox Friend.' In the text Toland writes that Pantheists enjoy disputes, taking them unemotionally, in a calm rational manner. He does not identify as a Socinian – a Protestant Christian view, later embraced as Unitarianism – a belief that denies the holy trinity, denying that Jesus was God, and as such more in line with the Deism that he espoused. A 'Deist' is one 'who acknowledges the existence of a God upon the testimony of reason, but rejects revealed religion' (Oxford English Dictionary) – Deism being also known as 'natural religion'. In this sense, a Pantheist could be considered a type of Deist, rather than distinct from it, in that one might form a pantheistic conception of God through reason – as Spinoza is believed to have done through the various logical definition, axioms, and inferences of his masterwork, the *Ethics* (1677).

It should be noted that Spinozism, often synonymous with Pantheism, was at the time considered a darkly threatening doctrine, often incorrectly identified with Materialism or Atheism. It threatened the Monotheism upholding the legitimacy of the Church and all of the political structures that were webbed around it. Spinoza himself was excommunicated by his fellow Jews in Amsterdam, he cautiously published anonymously, his masterwork posthumously; his books were banned by the Church, and the charge of Spinozism was a serious, potentially life-changing accusation until the nineteenth century, following the well-documented German 'Pantheism Controversy' of the 1780s – almost a century after the pantheism controversies encircling Toland. But like Bruno, Toland's intellectual curiosity overruled his prudence. Even in 1700, in his political poem *Clito*, a poem that scorns priestly superstition and tyranny, Toland reveals Pantheist sympathies:

'Or if he's only but the World's great Soul;
Or parts the Creatures are, and God the whole.'

This is rather reminiscent of, perhaps inspirational to, Alexander Pope's celebrated pantheistic lines from his 1733 *Essay on Man*:

'All are but Parts of one stupendous Whole,
Whose Body Nature is, and God the Soul'

God the Soul: Pantheism, as mentioned, was often mistaken for Atheism or Materialism (Panhylism) because, it was argued, if 'God' simply is the universe, and is not transcendent of it, then all that exists is this spatiotemporal, physical universe – which is equal to saying that there exists no God at all. But the error here was to assume that the 'All' of *Pan* – *i.e.* the universe, Nature, existence – is merely physical. As we see in the *monist* Spinoza, and in

Toland, the All/Pan, that is the universe, *is in itself more than matter, though it is not a dualism*: the universe includes as an aspect of itself *Mind*, the Universal Mind: poetically, ‘God the Soul’, or, the ‘infinite intellect’. For Spinoza, after whom ‘Pantheism’ was named, the physical was merely one of an infinity of expressions (or ‘Attributes’) of Nature, the Cosmos. That is, the ‘physical’ is merely an abstraction, a limited expression of a richer, more concrete reality. The suffix *theos* in *Pantheism* necessarily denotes a mental aspect (but *not* anthropocentric personality) – mentality is an *essential* aspect of deity (lest the gods be mere statues or machines). Thus Pantheism is necessarily Cosmopsychism (that the cosmos is itself mental). It seems that a number of Atheists adopted the mistaken accusations of Pantheism as Physicalism (Panhylism), and identified and identify therewith – but Atheistic, Physicalist Pantheism is a contradiction in terms as the *-theism* refutes the *physicalism*. However, if those who want to revere Nature without bequeathing it Cosmic Mind want to identify as Pantheists, so be it – though I see it more as a Sentimental Scientism (see my forthcoming academic article: ‘Pantheism: One and All’ for a detailed breakdown of the types and mistypes of Pantheism).

Of course if one were to accept the existence of cosmic mind then one would also be inclined to approach Nature in a more reverential fashion. Toland was arguably interested in returning Europe to paganism, even though he was critical of the Druids as an intolerant priesthood in his c.1718 *History of the Druids*. Yet in the *Pantheisticon* he switches face and is reverent of these ancient sages of Britain. Ronald Hutton states that ‘modern Druids have recognized Toland as an ancestor’ (*Blood and Mistletoe*, 2009/2022, p. 83). Moreover the founder of the world’s largest druid body, The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD), Ross Nichols, claimed that Toland established in 1717 the druid order which finally became OBOD, with *Pantheisticon* as its primal ritual text. Others, such as Margaret Jacob, has suggested that Toland was a central figure in the establishment of organized Freemasonry, with evidence suggesting he helped set up the lodge in The Hague. But there seems to be no absolute evidence of either Toland’s Druidry or Masonry. Thomas Paine argued that Masonry itself derived from the druids, the ‘priests of the sun’ – but the relations between Freemasonry and Druidry are lost to the misty secrecy of the past. Yet it seems we can at least accept Jacob’s statement that, as a champion of celtic culture and an enemy of priestcrafted Christianity, ‘Toland was seeking ... a restoration of this indigenous paganism’ (op. cit., p. 123). Let us look at the *Pantheisticon* to see what it may offer us.

Pantheisticon

The *Pantheisticon* was written in Latin and printed in 1720 – but was not for sale. It is the only book upon which we see his real name, Janus Junius. It was handed out to Toland’s companions, fellow freethinkers. In 1751 an English translation was published. Its full title is: *Pantheisticon: or, the Form of Celebrating the Socratic-Society*. The book is essentially a monograph and *liturgy*: a guide for holding rituals along with the pantheistic doctrines and tenets for which those rituals are held – a cosmic mass. As such, one might see it as a mocking, or a replacement, of the Church Mass. But actually it is more an intended *discussion club*, with good food and merriment, and the freedom to discuss anything whatsoever behind closed doors. It is not the Black Mass dedicated to Satan but, one might say, a Cosmic Mass dedicated to the God that is Nature. In fact, Toland does at times *represent* Nature as the Earth Mother goddesses Isis, Cybele, and even (though disputed) the god of intoxication Bacchus or Dionysus.

Many thinkers have been proposed as its intellectual basis, but Toland was well-read and we should not stick to one figure alone. Undoubtedly inspiration comes from, at minimum, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Virgil, Cicero, Socrates, Plato, and Xenophon – the last of whom both published Socratic treatises on *symposia* upon which this liturgy or club is explicitly inspired.

The first third of the book begins with exposition in metaphysics, astronomy, and ethics relating to Pantheism, or to the beliefs of the ‘Socratic brotherhood’ that he is here seeking to form (‘Socratic’ in the sense of debating philosophers). The second part is the liturgical text itself, or an Order of Mass, split into three parts. Here the President of the society says his lines, after which the companions respond, and so on. For example:

President:

Keep off the Prophane People.

Companions:

The Coast is clear, the Doors are shut, all’s safe.

President:

All Things in the World are one,
And one is All in all Things.

Companions:

What’s All in all things is God,
Eternal and Immense,
Never begotten, nor ever to perish ...

Reason is the true and first Law.’

(§2, pp. 402f., 2022 Watson ed.)

The third part of the book is an essay on the ‘Philosophy of the Pantheists’, wherein he states that ‘The Pantheists can deservedly be stiled the *Mystes* [Mystics] and *Hierophants* [priestly interpreters] of Nature; for as formerly the Druids, Men of an elevated Genius ... were versed in the Knowledge of the most abstruse Things ... [so] the Socratic Companions strenuously ruminate upon the same Studies’ (op. cit., p. 417). In fact, much of the *Pantheisticon* concerns astronomy, with an emphasis on Motion and the relativity of rest.

But, as the title suggests, there is a philosophic pantheist doctrine here, the first native English one (as the later 1751 translation). Its first statement is given thus:

‘They are called, for the most part, *Pantheists*, upon account of an opinion concerning God and the Universe, peculiar to themselves; but diametrically opposite to the Epicureans, Chaologists, and Oneiropolists, as they acknowledged no first Confusion, no Fortune, much less Chance, to be the Maker of the World.’ (pp. 373f.)

What stands out here from the beginning of modern Pantheism is that it is ‘diametrically opposed’ to Epicureanism, a physicalist philosophy, and to the views of those that declare the universe to be a result of chaos or chance. Like Bruno, Toland argues that the universe is

infinite in time and space, with infinite worlds, and ‘in virtue’ (p. 374: implying there is no real evil in the cosmos) – a Spinozist point echoed again more elegantly in the later words of Alexander Pope:

‘All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
All Discord, Harmony, not understood;
All partial Evil, universal Good;
And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason’s spite,
One truth is clear, “Whatever is, is Right.’
(op. cit. Ep. 1)

Toland is explicit in *identifying Nature with God*, the essence of *Pantheism*:

‘[The] Force and Energy of the whole ... is God, whom you may call the *Mind*, if you please, and the *Soul* of the Universe [*anima mundi*]; and hence it is that the Socratic Brethren, by a peculiar term ... are called Pantheists’ (p. 375).

‘All the Things in the World [are] ... comprised in *an intelligent Nature*, endowed with perfect *Reason*, and the same *Eternal* This Force they [the Pantheists] call the Soul of the World, as also a Mind, and perfect Wisdom, and consequently God.’ (p. 406, uttered in liturgy by the President)

We here emphasise that a cosmic mind is part of Toland’s definition of ‘Pantheism’. This mind is not a personal one that cares for humanity but more like an intrinsic organizing intelligence, somewhat akin to the *Logos* of Heraclitus or the *Nous* of Anaxagoras. Naturally the political cause of raising reason above religion can lead to the religion of reason with a god of pure intellect. One here glimpses power politics molding theology.

Later Toland fortifies the pantheology in prescribing another utterance, a quotation from Roman poet Virgil, spoken by the President and Companions in unison during the liturgy:

‘That to the Bees an energy divine,
And Part of the celestial Mind, is giv’n;
For that a God, diffus’d thro’ all the Mass,
Pervades the Earth, the Sea, and Deep of Air:
Hence Men, and Cattle, Herds, and savage Beasts,
All at their Births receive ethereal Life;
Hither again, dissolv’d, they back return’.
(Virgil, *Georgics*; op. cit., p. 407)

All things in the universe for Toland are Motions, or we might say today, waves or vibrations, frequencies. Toland now claims that even ‘Thought ... is a peculiar Motion of the Brain ... continued in the Spinal Marrow, and in the Nerves’ (p. 377). This does *prima facie* look like a modern physicalist neuroessentialist theory of consciousness: that the brain is necessary and sufficient for mind. But then Toland introduces us to the *Ethereal Fire* (with its Heraclitean motif complementing Virgil’s ‘energy divine’). Toland writes that there is an ether that pervades the cosmos, flowing through us. The human brain is receptive to this ether, as it is to other external objects, and this ether excites various ideas, imaginations, conceptualizations, dreams, etc. This invisible but perceived Ethereal Fire ‘is Soul, Mind’ (p.

378) – *the Ethereal Fire is the Mind of God* of which we therefore are within. Just as our bodies are in the cosmic body, so our minds are within the cosmic mind, *as two faces are embedded in one coin*. Toland, like Spinoza, is a Monist not a Dualist. Thus for Toland *the brain is necessary but not sufficient* for the consciousness we have: we both generate and receive the content of our sentience, including our *qualia* (a word I was surprised to see used already in this book of 1720/1751).

A further interesting claim that Toland makes is that there is no absolute distinction between the organic and the inorganic, the animate and the inanimate – everything is alive. This is akin to the *Panpsychism* developed by the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (d. 1947) in what he calls a ‘Philosophy of Organism’. Toland writes that:

‘Stones, Minerals and Metals, which are not less vegetable and organic ... the Pantheists think ... [are] a different Kind of Life ... there’s no reason he should believe they were less actuated with Life. ... every Thing in the Earth is organic...’ (pp. 380 et seq.).

This statement is followed by the poem that begins this essay: ‘The Sun is my Father...’, referring both to this living cosmos (and also possibly, implicitly, to the belief that the Druids worshipped the Sun – think Stonehenge as aligning with the sun at the solstices). We see here too that these *Pantheists are also Panpsychists*. The life of this burning cold God lights up all things. Today Panpsychism means that *minds are* ubiquitous in Nature, rather than the Pantheist view that *Mind is* Nature – but when the Venetian Platonist Patrizi coined ‘Panpsychism’ in 1591, he originally meant by it the belief in the more Pantheistic *anima mundi*. In any case, Pantheism often ramifies down into Panpsychism, though not so often the other way up.

Sundown

Whether the *Pantheisticon* was used and developed into forms of alternate religious worship is uncertain. Regardless of proposed masonic or druidical legacies, the fact remains that Pantheism itself has never crystallized into an established religion in the West. Pantheism has preserved itself for the most in academic philosophy, but also to a certain extent, though less explicitly, in Nature Mysticism and in more secular practices that revere Nature. One sees Spinoza’s direct influence, for instance, on Deep Ecology. Toland died two years after the release of *Pantheisticon*, prudently writing his own epitaph with words stating that ‘He himself will undoubtedly arise to eternal life, but will never be the same Toland’, in line with the impersonal theory of immortality given by Spinoza. As a liturgy, the *Pantheisticon* does not provide much in the way of detailed arguments for Pantheism – unlike Spinoza’s *Ethics*. But it does offer a blueprint for a Pantheistic religious practice, and it does open the door to bring us face to face with what Pantheism originally meant at its European inception – long before the German Pantheism controversy that led to English Romanticism and Absolute Idealism. *Pantheisticon* and its freethinking mode of Pantheism offers a vision of a brighter, freer, cosmic future, one that still holds.
