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From the Selected Works of Mary-Jane Rubenstein

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Review of Pantheologies

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mary_jane_rubenstein/82/

The logo features the letters 'AAR' in a large, bold, serif font. A thick, black, curved line arches underneath the letters. To the right of 'AAR', the words 'BOOK REVIEW' are written in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font.

Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters. By Mary-Jane Rubenstein. Columbia University Press, 2018. 320 pages. \$35.00 (cloth), \$34.99 (e-book).

The discipline of theology tends to be a stagnant branch of knowledge. This ancient field has not survived through paradigm shifts so much as through preservation techniques. Theology itself may be on the verge of extinction—as the mainline denominational institutions that have long sheltered it here in the United States seem to be. Or theology might yet reinvent itself, becoming woven into new disciplinary frontiers. Many contemporary theologians have certainly taken great pains to confront broader interdisciplinary trends in critical thought (gender studies, critical race studies, environmental thought, evolutionary theory, etc.). And in rare moments, theology does appear to be making interdisciplinary forays into other fields—as political theology has done in literature or political theory. But nontheological scholars have been largely drawn to political theology to critique the genealogies of secularism, recognizing Christianity’s role in shaping the secular. Even in these interdisciplinary contexts, theology tends to find its center of gravity in Christianity—dedicated, once again, to the maintenance and reproduction of Christian thought.

To be fair, theological studies has been slowly pluralizing. There are more scholars doing comparative theology than ever before. And it is becoming increasingly commonplace to speak about theology as something that scholars in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, or other traditions are *also* doing when they reflect on their own practices and philosophical traditions. But theology is a critical exercise that seems most easily applied to monotheisms: those traditions that keep the singular God in *theos*. If the *theos* in theology has the potential to gesture toward something more ambiguously and chaotically “divine,” attempts to make this case are few and far between. Because of this, Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters* should be read as much more than a book about an ancient and enduring heresy. It should also be understood as a model for thinking more creatively, adventurously (and, let us be honest, more accurately) about what theologies actually look like, what disciplines they emerge

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from, or how they struggle to make sense of what might be called “divine” today. Indeed, as Rubenstein suggests, it may be the case that theorists in the sciences and social sciences are as actively engaged in producing “theologies” as academic theologians.

What Rubenstein offers in this book is—on the simplest level—a history of the idea of pantheism that she was never able to find when she set out to conduct her own research on the topic. What Rubenstein discovered, while attempting to investigate the claims of heresy that have often shrouded pantheism, is that pantheism has never really been anything but a polemical term. In this sense, pantheism functions through negation; it offers Christian theology a negative example against which to construct itself. “We cannot possibly affirm X,” this sort of rhetoric claims, “because X would lead to *pantheism*” (xx). Surveying the Western philosophical tradition, Rubenstein finds the source of this perpetual antipathy in the destabilizing equivocation of God and nature. Baruch Spinoza’s famous formulation *Deus sive natura*, of course, threw the divine and nature into an either/or relation of equivocation (“God-or-nature”), suggesting that they are one and the same. But Rubenstein observes that unsettling the God/world binary so central to classical metaphysics also leaves in disarray a series of other binaries embedded within this tradition: male versus female, light versus dark, good versus evil, the material versus the spiritual, and the human versus the nonhuman. Pantheistic thought makes a mess of these allegedly stable categories, troubling discourses on gender, race, morality, and species being. Pantheologies create “monstrosities” in the Foucauldian sense: mixtures of realms or “transgression(s) of classification” (2). The god Pan (part human, part goat) is himself a liminal creature who embodies this transgression. Indeed, Pan has long generated *panic* among Christians, evoking what Ninian Smart has called “the horror of pantheism” (4). Perhaps this is why even contemporary movements such as ecotheology—affirming an intimacy between God and nature—embrace *panentheism*, calling upon a cautious “en” to differentiate between God and world, refuting pantheism (4).

For her part, Rubenstein is not advocating an *embrace* or deployment of pantheologies. She is more interested in “conceptual (re)construction” than “theological apologetics.” She is not seeking to defend pantheism against critics or to win converts. But she does think it worth allowing this “ancient-modern heresy to have its say before it gets laughed off the stage” (28). And she finds something promising, or intriguing, in the “monstrosity” of pantheism. At the heart of its transgressive nature, Rubenstein finds a resistant capacity that promisingly threatens to unsettle the hierarchies of Western metaphysics that keep misogyny, white supremacy, and anthropocentrism entrenched in our thinking. In this, she finds common cause with feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen, who believed that pantheism could offer a method for recoding the notion of divinity entirely—challenging the hierarchical logic of mastery in Western metaphysics and affirming divinity as “the vibrant multiplicity of the material world itself” (11). Echoing Jantzen, Rubenstein poses that thinking pantheologically might

allow us to catch a glimpse of “strange new sites of divinity” where ancient and novel divinities emerge a bit monstrously from our “multispecies midst” in “unforeseen crossings and alliances” (190). Rethinking that which has always seemed terrifying to a theology forged from the classical metaphysical tradition, in other words, might allow us to finally—really—rethink theology completely.

Not all pantheologies are equal, however. Rubenstein explores two genealogies of pantheism. Borrowing from a distinction developed by William James, she argues that the pantheistic equivocation of God and nature can appear as either *monistic* (God/nature is the All) or *pluralistic* (God/nature is constituted by its expression within all things). Much of the book (the first two of four total chapters) explores what pantheism might “most compellingly mean” (32) if we critique its monistic genealogies and affirm its pluralist dimensions. In this narrative, Spinoza occupies a complex position. His thought might be read as affirming *both* genealogies. Rubenstein argues that the monistic reading of Spinoza emerges primarily from the work of Hegel. Echoing classical theistic critiques of pantheism, which claimed that to see God *everywhere* is ultimately to see God *nowhere*, Hegel posed that Spinoza’s *Deus sive natura* ignores concrete particulars, throwing everything into an abyss of sameness by subsuming it within absolute divine substance. Hegel argued that this “acosmic” view effectively denies the reality of nature and finitude (36–38). And, if this were the case, it would exemplify what Rubenstein is calling the monistic form of pantheism. But Rubenstein argues that it is possible to read an incipient pluralistic pantheism in Spinoza’s work. Working with Spinoza’s claim that substance is comprised of infinite modes, Rubenstein reads this (perhaps a bit against Spinoza, himself) *not* as a claim that God is “the compendium of all things—some massively aggregated All” but instead that “all things are expressions and modifications of an essentially dynamic” form of divinity so that “all things both reflect and compose the God-or-nature that expresses, enfolds, and inhabits all things” (57). All things create God-or-nature, as God-or-nature creates all things. Therefore, the world creates the divine as much the divine creates the world. Rubenstein argues that this pluralist pantheism of divine multiplicity resonates with many indigenous cosmologies traditionally described (by Western anthropologists) as “animist,” which reject or complicate binary distinctions between spirit and matter. This resonance, of course, was upsetting for many classical theists, who deemed the West (versus “the rest”) to be the tradition that upholds that binary between matter and spirit, or God and world.

Rubenstein finds representatives of a pluralistically pantheological “school of thought” not in theological studies but, instead, in other disciplines (primarily the sciences). The third chapter of the book, “Cosmos,” explores the Gaia theory, particularly in the work of biologist Lynn Margulis. It may be the case that theorists and philosophers of science, such as Bruno Latour, have attempted to protect Gaia from divinization. But Rubenstein’s analysis of the theory strongly suggests that he is unable to cordon off the system that is Gaia from an affiliation with a

divine multiplicity. On the other hand, although Rubenstein notes that Einstein was faced with charges of pantheism in his own commentaries on God, she argues that he actually fell just short of affirming a pluralistic form of pantheism, affirming instead a more rational cosmos with fixed distinctions between things (such as subjects and objects, or God and world). What Rubenstein is ultimately looking for are views from those in the sciences that push beyond theism without leaving theological thinking behind.

This is a dense and ambitious book with arguably as many as three different agendas working alongside one another: the presentation of a new view on religion and science, a historical survey of pantheism, and the development of an experimental form of theological thinking. Rubenstein's critical readings are cogent and deft. The book is both erudite and adventurous. Given the multiple agendas unfolding in the book, I sometimes found certain intriguing lines of thinking underdeveloped. *Pantheologies*, for instance, may have the capacity to shift how we think and speak theologically about issues related to gender, species, or race. To be convinced this is the case, however, I would prefer more emphasis on the analysis of authors such as Octavia Butler and Alice Walker than on Einstein. On the other hand, this leaves open a lot of critical space in which to explore the monstrous possibilities of thinking pantheologically.

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