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Monotheism

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The term monotheism is of relatively recent origin. Its earliest use in English can be traced back to Henry More in the seventeenth century. There has been intense scholarly debate concerning the meaning of the term, and whether it is useful or accurate when applied to the religious traditions normally associated with it. Nevertheless, the religions that have claimed the term for themselves and applied it to their beliefs (in particular those sometimes referred to as the Abrahamic faiths) all have some central affirmation of divine unity or oneness which predates the English term. And so, while theologians may wish to discuss normative definitions of the concept, and analytic philosophers will assess the coherence or otherwise of such definitions, the student of religion will be concerned primarily with the role that the term plays in a particular religious system—and in some instances, with the reasons why the term is affirmed in spite of apparent incongruities with the system so labeled.

Monotheism shares the characteristics of henotheism and monolatry (nuanced and defined in different ways, but both ultimately denoting the worship of one god without denying the existence of others). It adds to exclusive worship the belief that the one deity in question is unique and supreme not only in subjective terms (the only deity for a particular individual, group, or nation) or temporarily (the only one believed to be able to save in a particular crisis or help with a particular problem) but objectively, in terms of priority and power. It is arguably too restrictive to limit the application of the term monotheism to only those groups and belief systems which use the term "God" for only this figure. Cases such as that of early Judaism—in which the term "gods" could be applied to "angels," whose status was emphatically that of entities created by and inferior to the supreme God—appear to go beyond monolatry even while using "gods" in the plural. Yet if such religious phenomena are rightly labeled "monotheistic," it is essential that what is meant by "monotheism" in such instances be clearly defined, and distinguished where necessary from popular usage in the present day.

Among the elements of unhelpful baggage that the term monotheism carries from its origin and history of use are the dichotomizing of religion into true monotheistic and false polytheistic or "pagan" religions, and the idea of an evolutionary progression from animism through polytheism to monotheism (and possibly beyond). Yet precisely as a term coined for polemical use by a tradition seeking to define itself as monotheistic over against others which are not, the term is useful as a descriptor of religions with precisely the aforementioned polemical stance relating to belief in one unique and supreme deity.

Characteristics and Nuances of Monotheism

In order to avoid the unhelpful situation created by imposing an arbitrary definition of monotheism on religions and their literature, Larry Hurtado has emphasized the need to work inductively from the data. "If we are to avoid *a priori* definitions and the imposition of our own theological judgments, we have no choice but to accept as monotheism the religion of those who profess to be monotheists, however much their religion varies and may seem 'complicated' with other beings in addition to the one God" (Hurtado 2005: 114). The religious studies approach to monotheism, in other words, must aim to describe the beliefs of those who self-identify as monotheists. Yet this approach faces potential obstacles, inasmuch as monotheistic-sounding language is encountered, in particular in the context of worship and prayer, in religious traditions which very clearly do not either claim that only one God exists, or require the exclusive worship of one God alone. Such facets of religion will,

at the very least, require that any investigation of monotheism not be guided solely by language that sounds monotheistic. At the very least, evidence must be found that language of exclusive devotion to a single deity, or of a particular deity's supremacy, is not coupled with the practice of similar-sounding words being addressed to another deity by the same worshippers. Nevertheless, where we find textual and ideally also archaeological evidence of exclusive worship of one God, and belief in that deity's absolute supremacy, coupled with the testimony of outsiders that this same group refused to worship other gods than one alone, the historian and scholar of religion can feel confident that they are in the presence of something that deserves to be called monotheism (McGrath 2009: 22–29).

Monotheistic religions can take an exclusive or an inclusive approach to other names for and approaches to the divine. The stance that there are many names for one God was commonplace in Greco-Roman literature, for instance. Max Müller wrote of a similar outlook in the Vedas, using the term "henotheism" (coined earlier by Friedrich Schelling) to refer to it. Some reserve the term monotheism only for exclusivistic forms of belief. Regina Schwartz writes, "Whether as singleness (this God against the others) or totality (this is all the God there is), monotheism abhors, reviles, rejects, and ejects whatever it defines as outside its compass" (1997: 63). Yet while monotheism can be found coupled with violence and intolerance in history, at other times it has been associated with the idea that one God implies that all are equally God's children and worthy of respect. Mark S. Smith writes, "In the history of the Ancient Near East, violence is not inherent in either monotheism or polytheism. It is not a function of the form of theism, whether polytheism or monotheism; it is a function of power and the capacity to wield it" (2008: 28). It seems that, as arguably is the case with most religious ideas and practices, monotheism does not lead inexorably to particular social expressions, and in fact may be put to different uses in different social contexts even by adherents of the same religious tradition.

Although not unique to monotheism, exclusive worship is often the practical expression and delineating feature of monotheistic religion of an exclusive sort. This might be said to be the key distinction between Jewish and Christian monotheism on the one hand, and "pagan" monotheism in Late Antiquity on the other. Inclusive monotheists may be willing to participate in worship addressed to a number of divine figures, understanding them all ultimately to be one and the same. Exclusive monotheists, on the other hand, often regarded refusal to do so as the defining affirmation of their allegiance to the one true God.

Given the importance of worship as a corollary of monotheism, there have been attempts to define what sort of worship served this purpose by being reserved exclusively for the supreme deity. The term "worship" (and its closest equivalent in other languages) can denote a range of practices, from bowing before another figure, prayer, and singing, to the offering of incense or animal sacrifice. Different scholars situate the boundary marker in different places, and this may in some cases reflect different viewpoints expressed within a given tradition's literature. For instance, while all or nearly all ancient Jews and Christians would have agreed in abstaining from sacrifice to the gods of Rome, there were disagreements about matters such as the eating of meat that had previously been sacrificed. And while some Jews and Christians may have regarded prostration before a mere human being as always inappropriate, others felt that such an act of "worship" was acceptable before a divinely appointed agent (see the discussion in McGrath 2009: 18–19 and *passim*).

Be that as it may, clearly monolatry does not always imply monotheism, even if monotheism characteristically expresses itself in monolatry. Therefore, exclusive worship alone cannot serve as a guide for identifying monotheistic religion. The one God's status as Creator of all else is another important characteristic feature of monotheism.

In those traditions which developed a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, the distinction is starker; in others, God's priority and distinctiveness may have boundaries which are rather more blurry, as emanations emerge from the divine essence, or pre-existing chaos is molded and organized but not brought into being. Since many systems of thought placed one deity at the pinnacle of the chain of being, as the origin of all else, it will be the combination of supreme status and priority with exclusive worship that will characterize a tradition as monotheistic. Monotheism characteristically posits that the supreme deity always existed, while non-monotheistic systems may feature some account of the origin even of the oldest deities, or a plurality of initial deities.

Along with creation and receipt of worship, the one God in monotheistic systems also often retains other prerogatives that are associated with the deity's unique power, authority, and status. These may include sovereignty over history, the ability to forgive sins, among others. Some monotheistic systems allow for God to share such prerogatives with a principal agent. Sometimes the agent is emphatically depicted as created and subordinate, such as an angel, while at other times it may be a personified divine attribute such as God's Word or Wisdom, which may or may not genuinely represent anything more than an extension of God's own person and activity. Subordination to the supreme God, and inclusion within the supreme God, both represent ways that monotheistic systems of thought have sought to allow for the existence of powerful mediating figures while retaining the monotheistic character of their religious system.

Monotheism in Specific Religious Traditions

The origin and the spread of monotheism have historically been connected with Judaism and its precursors in Israelite tradition. The combined picture offered by archaeology and Biblical sources suggests that not only monotheism but also monolatry did not appear as early in Israel's history as the Biblical texts claims. During much of their history, Israelite worship closely resembled that of other peoples in the region, not only in terms of practices and terminology, but also in terms of the objects, and number of recipients, of their devotion. Irrespective of when the idea was first introduced and when it was first officially mandated, the scholar of religion faces the challenge of making historical sense of the introduction of a demand for exclusive worship into a context in which the usual practice and understanding was previously otherwise.

Those who date the origins of Israelite monotheism early have sometimes appealed to the possibility of Egyptian influence (Akhenaten's failed monolatrous revolution). Even if one posits an early date for the idea, however, one must still account for the fact that its implementation is relatively late—beginning with what Morton Smith and Bernard Lang have called the Yahweh-alone movement in the ninth and eighth centuries, and continuing with reforms by Hezekiah and Josiah in the eighth and seventh centuries, the compilation of texts offering an interpretation of the history of Judah and Israel from this perspective in the exilic period, and beyond.

There has been significant debate about whether the term "monotheism" should be applied to ancient Judaism at all. If monotheism requires a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, then the mainstream position in Judaism cannot be defined as "monotheistic" in any period prior to the Middle Ages. Even thereafter, Jewish mysticism would continue to explore ideas about divine emanations. Those who continue to find the term "monotheism" applicable acknowledge that what is denoted by the term is not static throughout history. Either way, the term "monotheism" accurately indicates at least one distinctive feature that characterized post-exilic Jewish religion, in contrast both with what some have reconstructed as the form of earlier Israelite religion, as well as with other traditions characteristically said to be "polytheistic." In

the latter, the supreme deity has a consort, and thus to the extent that there is any ultimate or supreme deity, there is a *pair* of them. While earlier Israelite religion seems to have featured Asherah as consort of Yahweh, by the time the Pentateuch was put into its present form, one God alone was believed to be above all and the source of all.

Christianity began as a movement within first-century Judaism, and to the extent that mono-theism is considered an appropriate term to use in connection with first-century Jewish exclusive devotion to one God, Christian sources affirm that same allegiance. The Synoptic Gospels depict Jesus as affirming the Shema, and even the Gospel of John, which connects Jesus with the pre-existent Word that was God, also depicts Jesus as referring to the Father as "the only true God" (Jn 17:3). The letters of Paul likewise affirm an ultimate subordination of the Son to God (1 Cor 15:27–28), and even when Jesus is said in Philippians 2:6–11 to receive the divine name, and with it the reverence, submission, and acclamation of all creation, it is still God who is said to exalt him in this way, and the worship described is said to be "to the glory of God the Father."

Over the longer term, the emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity raised major issues regarding monotheism for the Christian tradition. While other Abrahamic traditions have tended to view God as one in the sense of a single personal entity, Trinitarian Christianity has maintained that God is characterized not only by oneness but also three-ness (the Latin word for this, *Trinitas*, being the source of the term Trinity). The Council of Nicaea defined divine oneness in terms of a single divine essence (Greek *ousia*). In the creed's translation in the Latin west, the term used was substance (Latin *substantia*). These different terms reflect, and at the same time are reflected in, the different forms of Trinitarian theology and different empha-ses which have tended to characterize Eastern and Western Christian theology. While Christian theologians have generally been concerned to assert the monotheistic character of Trinitarian belief, critics from both within and without have often objected either that Trinitarianism of any sort is inherently unmonotheistic, or that a par-ticular form of Trinitarianism is no different from *tritheism*.

The terminology of monotheism seems emi-nently applicable to Islam, a religion whose most important creedal statement, the *shahada*, states, "There is no god but God." Islam has a long tradi-tion of summarizing this point through the use of the term *tawhid*, "oneness" or "unity." This doctrine is expressed succinctly in the 112th sura of the Quran:

> Say: He is God, the One and Only;
> God, the Eternal, Absolute;
> He begets not, nor is he begotten;
> And there is none like unto him.

Nevertheless, Islam has not been exempted from discussions about the meaning and implications of its monotheistic affirmation. Discussion of whether the Quran is eternal and, if so, whether this is compatible with monotheism, paralleled the discussion of the relationship of the Logos (Word) to God in Christianity. And for Sufi mystics, the *shahada* has been taken to mean that nothing but God exists, leading to a panentheistic under-standing of monotheism—and accusations of pantheism.

The traditional religions of India have had to interact with conquering powers that adhered to a monotheistic religion in the eras of both Islamic and British rule. Such a context elicited an empha-sis on the monotheistic character of Indian reli-gion. Many modern Hindus emphasize that the plethora of Hindu deities represents a diverse expression of one ultimate reality, the Brahman. Although the use of the term "monotheism" may reflect concerns related to the experience of colo-nialism, there are core elements in the Hindu Scriptures that leave room for such an adapta-tion. Most notable among them is Rig Veda 10.129, which speaks of an original "one" in terms reminis-cent of philosophical and mystical monotheisms: "Then was not non-existent nor existent . . . The

one thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever."

And so, while the adoption of the term by Hindus might seem to some to illustrate the term's flexibility, and to others might seem to be a misuse, in fact the self-description of Hinduism as monotheistic highlights some key underlying issues related to the term and the concept. Those traditions most typically referred to as monotheistic define God as one over against all else, while some streams of Hinduism define God/Brahman as the one and only reality (monism). Both are thinking of God in terms of oneness. Thus the Hindu claim to be monotheistic offers an opportunity to reflect on how a term which could simply denote "belief in a single deity" has come to mean something much more specific, to the exclusion not only of polytheism, but also other possible definitions of monotheism itself, as well as of other possible understandings of the nature of the divine.

Other religious traditions which are characterized by monotheism, or which have claimed to be monotheistic, include Baha'i, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Mandaism and other forms of Gnosticism, and Deism.

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