Monotheism
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The concept of monotheism characterizes various religious traditions throughout the history of humanity. No boundaries have banned the interaction between religions around the globe, whereby diverse characteristics and cultural components are transferable. The term monotheism comes from the Greek mono (µόνο) meaning “only” and theos (Θ Nexus) meaning “god.” Hence, monotheism is the belief in the existence of a single God or in the oneness of God or simply that God is one. Monotheism is contrasted with polytheism, which is the belief in the existence of many gods, and with atheism, which is the denial of the existence of any god. In its recognition of God's presence and activity in every part of creation and its belief in a conscious, free God distinct from the physical world, monotheism is opposed to the religious philosophies of deism and pantheism.

The term itself was coined in fairly modern times by Henry More in 1680. In its contemporary use, monotheism designates the belief in the one supreme God, the Creator and Lord of the world, the eternal Spirit, almighty, all-wise, and all-good, the rewarder of good, and the punisher of evil.

As an ancient religious concept, it is argued that monotheism is a generalization that cannot be reduced to any modern category. Also, it always carries with it political constructs. This can be felt through the struggle for ideological and economic domination and for political legitimacy and power. In this world of differences, religious, political, and scholarly factors have furthered the dominance of a monotheistic system of belief, which has enabled humans to unite and mobilize in pursuit of great causes and, also, has forced them into brutal conflicts.

When, how, or even where the belief in one God first occurred will probably never be known, but the remarkable results are apparent in almost every aspect of the cultures and histories of the great monotheisms. In ancient Middle Eastern and Mediterranean religions, monotheistic elements are found. The monotheistic idea may have been derived from the centralized power of ancient empires, where everything seemed to flow from a single source. It can be said that one of the earliest instances of monotheism occurred in ancient Egypt in the 14th century BCE, during the rule of Akhenaton, who declared the one God. However, it did not long survive his death. Whether this reform is judged positively or not, it is apparent that Akhenaton’s theology, if not fully monotheistic, strongly tends toward monotheism.

At the beginning of the sixth century BCE, and continuing into the early centuries of the Christian Era, Judaic monotheism developed in the same direction, as did Christianity and also later Islam under the influence of Greek philosophy, becoming monotheistic in the strict sense of the word and affirming the one God for all humans everywhere. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the three most significant religions from the Middle East, which are called the Abrahamic faiths because they trace their origins to Abraham. Though these three are known as the monotheistic faiths, there are monotheistic dimensions to Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and other religious traditions of Asia as well.

Some theologians and philosophers believe that monotheism evolved from polytheism, holding that monotheistic faiths are more advanced ethically, culturally, and philosophically than polytheistic faiths. Also, as a system of belief, many scholars consider monotheism as a higher form of religion.
than polytheism, and they consider the former as a later development of the latter. But the difference is not just a question of many gods as opposed to the one God; it is more related to the attributes of God, such as His “uniqueness” as the embodiment of divine might and power.

It is perhaps debatable whether the terms *monotheism* and *polytheism* are helpful in thinking about divinity both in ancient cultures, with their systems of beliefs and practice, and in our time. In recent years, this distinction has been recognized as limited, reductive, and, thus, inadequate to accommodate the beliefs of the many spiritual practitioners around the world, with all the complexities involved.

We find exclusive monotheism at one extreme and unlimited polytheism at the other. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam adopt in the main exclusive monotheism, where only one God exists—the one and only true God. On the other hand, there is the extreme position of unlimited polytheism as, for instance, in the classical religions of Greece and Rome, where the number of divinities is large, and in principle unlimited, and the deities vary in their status, power, function, and influence.

Between the extremes of exclusive monotheism and unlimited polytheism are the middle positions of inclusive monotheism and “henotheism.” According to inclusive monotheism, which is related to the ancient Hellenic religions, there exist a great number of gods, but all gods are essentially one and the same. *Henotheism* is the belief in the worship of primarily one God, though the existence of other gods is acknowledged. The term *monolatry* is also used to refer to the worship of one God, whether or not the existence of other deities is posited. As a religious concept, henotheism was especially prevalent in some periods in the history of Babylonia and Egypt.

To regulate their experiences and their lives, people may adopt different positions regarding the transcendent reality. They can be theists, if they believe that there is such a transcendent reality, or they can be atheists, if they deny such existence. They can be monotheists, if they believe that there is only one such reality, or they can be polytheists, if they believe that there are many. They can be gnostics, if they believe that this transcendent reality is knowable, or they can be agnostics, if they believe that this transcendent reality is unknowable.

The monotheistic mentality is not limited to adherence to one of the three major monotheistic religions. Its most important aspect is the belief in absolute truth, which may be retained by people who are detached from any formal religious affiliation.

New forms of spirituality have emerged in the modern world, in which the revolutions in communication and information, migration, and globalization have all contributed to increased pluralism and religious interaction. This has affected all religions, which, in turn, has had a significant impact on globalization within the context of the diverse cultures of the world.

At various levels, religion and globalization share the concern for the meaning and purpose of human life. Both raise fundamental questions concerning self-identity and focus on our shared humanity. Spirituality, as an alternative to religion, has been characterized as transforming the tenets of religion into matters of personal opinion and has therefore been regarded by some as a threat to “authentic” religion.

World religions advocate both a worldview and a code of morality. They embody dissimilarities that reduce the possibility of finding common ground for cooperation as well as similarities that enhance it. Constructive dialogue among religious followers leads to greater tolerance and comprehension and

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brings greater peace and justice into our globalized world. The philosopher of religion John Hick argues that the ideals of interfaith dialogue correspond to their respective models of religious pluralism. He argues that all religions reflect the same ultimate reality and aspire to arrive at a fuller vision of the same reality. Hence, to achieve the best possible response to the reality is the principal condition of interfaith dialogue. Hick further claims that this may lead to the establishment of a world ecumenism, where differences between religious traditions appear less significant. However, he realizes that such a world ecumenism cannot be a single world religion. Rather, it should be a global theology of religions, which would consist of theories or hypotheses designed to interpret the religious experience of mankind.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a major contributor to interfaith dialogue and the field of comparative religion, regards different religious traditions as having “faith” in common, which is an essential human quality. In his view, what distinguish the various religions from each other are the respective forms the common faith takes. In this sense, monotheism and polytheism are simply different expressions of this common faith.

See also
Christianity, Global Religion, God, Goddess, Henotheism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Mahayana Buddhism, Polytheism, Sikhism, Theravada Buddhism, Vajrayana, Tibetan, World Theology

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