

In Defense of Monotheism

Some scholars and pundits have recently renewed claims that monotheism, as found in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, is inherently dangerous. They rightly point out that the history of these religions is replete with intolerance toward others, including violence in the name of the one true God. They tend to view polytheistic religious environments as more accommodating and accepting of religious diversity.

Their arguments leave much to be desired, however. First, they typically ignore the question of ultimate reality. They express no interest in whether there really is but one God or many gods, focusing only on what they judge to be the effects of religious theism. Second, they are rather selective in the evidence they employ to argue that monotheism is more problematic than polytheism with respect to consequences for human society.

Regarding the effects of religious beliefs, so much depends on our human conceptions of God or the gods. Throughout human history, from well before the appearance of monotheism, groups, clans, and tribes have typically claimed that “our god(s) is/are better than your god(s).” This has been so regardless of how many gods are believed to exist. Moreover, these groups, clans, and tribes have typically invoked their god or gods whenever they have gone to war or engaged in other forms of violence. Since the rise of the modern nation-state, nationalism has often functioned in place of, or in league with, various forms of theism to provide similar justification for intolerance, aggression, and violence. People tend to conceive the god(s) they need to justify the causes they determine to pursue, especially when great sacrifice and violence are involved.

What we really need is a robust monotheism that clearly grasps that God lies beyond all the gods of our choosing and that, insofar as God is a God of power, that power is love. Only a God who is beyond our capacities of language and imagination, of manipulation and exploitation, can begin to deliver us from the treacheries of human pride and aggression. Only a God who evokes humility and awe rather than energizes our baser passions and legitimizes our self-serving rationalizations can save us from the dangers to which all other forms of theism have too frequently succumbed. So long as we are inclined to keep God in our hip pocket, or use God to aggress against others, theistic religion will be more bane than blessing.

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