

**A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE  
MONOTHEISTIC CONCEPT IN RELIGIOUS BELIEF  
AND PRACTICE**

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**ABSTRACT**

The term monotheism is a very popular and well known concept in the study of religious belief and practice to identify God as only one Supreme Being. According to the sacred texts of the monotheistic religions, first human being was not only introduced with this concept but also was commissioned to convey this message to other human beings. As contrast to this, most modern historians are, more or less, confused by their own findings about its origin and development. Nevertheless, some of them agree to earlier view with their logical reasoning. In this present paper monotheism is, therefore, discussed from a brief historical survey in order that more explicit knowledge to be reflected on its origin and development.

**Key-Points of the paper**

Before going to the details, let me shortly point out the key-points of the paper based on which this presentation will go on. The paper usually begins with a traditional introduction in which the gist of the whole discussion is supposed to be left. Then the paper defines monotheism from historical and philosophical point of view and it will be followed by a precise but valued historical survey of religions which will be, by turn, discussed under such seven sub-points as origin

and historical background of monotheism, monotheism in Greek religions, monotheism in Egyptian religions, monotheism in Indian religions, monotheism in Persian religion, monotheism in Semitic religions and monotheism in ancient Chinese religious thought. Finally the paper will sum-up the entire discussion in finishing remarks.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In its most general sense monotheism simply means one-God-ism, the concept that there is one and only one God. Neither historians nor anthropologists are of one mind, however, about when and how monotheism originated and developed. There are different theories regarding its early phases and later developments. But these do not satisfactorily account for the ascendancy of monotheism, even with the idea of some speculations based on various archeological documents and evidence from fossils of animals and human beings found in recent times. However, some philosophers and social scientists tried their best to prove the priority of monotheism, the concept of One-God-ism in comparison with various other conceptions of God or gods in the history of human religious life. According to them, many ancient religions, such as Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Indian and Chinese and even primitive religions initially affirmed a monotheistic concept of God, but later on, due to polytheistic practices, those monotheistic beliefs became merged with polytheism.

Similarly the Abrahamic religious traditions hold that the first man of the world received this concept of monotheism through divine knowledge given to him by his Creator, and then reasserted by the later prophets. Afterwards these traditions tell us, the majority of people turned away from this original monotheism to polytheism while still leaving some people adhering to some sort of monotheism though usually being misguided away from the straight path of their earlier prophets, especially after latter had died. Then again some of them

are said to have come back to monotheism by the sincere efforts of the later prophets. According to this view, the majority of people turned from monotheism to polytheism and then from polytheism a minority of them came back to monotheism. But, for a long time thereafter, most of the people remained engaged with polytheistic practices related to the concept of God or gods while some of them retained still monotheistic beliefs and practices.

However, after the establishment of such monotheistic religions as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the majority of people came back to monotheism in the course of time, while still leaving some others to polytheism. Thus, majority of people in the present world are more or less monotheists.

#### **DEFINITION OF MONOTHEISM**

Monotheism is the belief that there is only one God. It is totally opposite to polytheism, which is the belief that there is more than one god. Monotheism is one God-ism. According to John Hick, Monotheism is the belief that there is but one Supreme Being. In theology, monotheism is the belief in the existence of one deity or God, or in the oneness of God. The English word 'Monotheism' derives from the Greek word '*mono*', which means single or one and '*theos*', which means God; therefore, the term 'monotheism' clearly means belief in one God. The term monotheism refers to the religious experience and the philosophical perception that emphasize God as one, perfect, immutable creator of the world from nothing, distinct from the world, all powerfully involved in the world, personal, and worthy of being worshiped by all creatures. In this way, the term monotheism presupposes the idea of a divine being who is approachable through prayer. In this respect monotheism differs from deism and from the various forms of monism. It also presupposes the unity of the divine and raises one God exclusively to absolute supremacy and power, producing and governing everything according to the divine will. In this regard, monotheism differs from those views that accept a plurality of divine beings. In the strict sense,

monotheism best describes the idea of God in Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) especially in Judaism and Islam and in the philosophical systems based on these traditions.

But we can extend the term to include conceptions of deity in certain other traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and some forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, even though these traditions include somewhat different conceptions, such as the existence of evil forces alongside God, the nonpersonal nature of God, God's complete immanence in the world, or the fundamental unreality of the world.

### **Monothism in Historical Survey of Religions**

**i. Origin and historical background of Monotheism:** The concept of monotheism emerged through a gradual development out of notions of henotheism and monolatry. In the ancient Near East, each city had a local patron deity, such as Shamash at Larsa or Sin at Ur. The first claims of global supremacy of a specific god date to the Late Bronze Age, with Akhenaten's Great Hymn to Aten and subject to dating issues, Zoroaster's Gathas to Ahura Mazda. Currents of monism or monotheism emerged in Vedic India in the same period, the Nasadiya Sukta. Philosophical monotheism and the associated concept of absolute God in Classical Antiquity, notably with Plato, elaborated into the idea of the One in Neo-Platonism. Monotheistic ideas of Judaism and Platonic Idealism came into contact in the Hellenistic period and during Late Antiquity gave rise to Christian theology.

A monotheistic outlook thus has long been present in human religious history. Monotheism is like a river with many springs and many tributaries. Springs of monotheism can easily be discerned at the very earliest levels of known human cultural life, in the primordial high god of the archaic hunters. According to the theory of original monotheism developed by Wilhelm Schmidt and others, a primordial monotheism was the earliest form of human perception

of deity, whereas the plurality of gods and spirits found in most primal religions were degeneration from this original perception. This theory, however, is in opposition to many historians, philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists and others. According to a contemporary historian, J.E. Swan, monotheism came from polytheism. He clearly states : “the transition from polytheism to monotheism took place when God was accepted as more powerful than the others and was made supreme over them”.

Many research works in recent years have indicated that many primal or archaic peoples had conceptions of a high god who is creator of the world and has supreme authority over other gods and spirits and presides over human morality. Some of the most Archaic peoples, for instance, certain groups in Africa, Australian Aborigines, and the nomadic hunters of Tierra del fuego, have definite conceptions of a supreme god associated with the sky who is changeless, invisible and all powerful and who determines morality.

However, the archaic supreme high god characteristically is a remote god, too distant, all powerful, good and just to need worship or to be intimately involved in ordinary existence. There are lesser gods and spirits who play a much more active role in the lives of the people.

The streams of the monotheistic vision run dimly through the fertile valleys of archaic agricultural religions with their pluralistic experience of the forces of nature centered on Mother Earth. Here the high god tends to become head of the divine pantheon but as he is pushed into the background by earth gods of fecundity, the high god could rarely be the focus of a unifying perception of deity. Only a few high gods developed with supreme sovereignty and autonomy, as to be sources of fecundating power and guarantors of the order and norms of the world and of human society.

We can mention, for instance, Zeus and Jupiter who were ruling high gods fashioned in accordance with Greek and Roman notions of norms and laws. In

India we see Varuna as sovereign guardian of cosmic order whose role was taken over later by the great gods-Visnu and Siva. In the ancient Hebrews, Yahveh, their high God, showed himself as all powerful creator, absolute sovereign, and author of all norms and laws. Belief in these high gods, of course, provided the opportunity for reflections on the unity of divine reality as we can easily see in the following examples from ancient Greek, Egyptian, Persian, Indian as well as Chinese religious traditions.

**ii. Monotheistic view of ancient Greek Religions:**

Among Greek scholars, ideas of a unitary divine reality were expressed as a means of showing the order and reasonableness of the world. In pre-Socratic times, it definitely seems, philosophers like Xenophanes depicted the spiritual unity of the entire world in the notion of the All-One, uncreated, unchangeable, and immanent in all things. Plato stressed the unity of God who must be perfectly God, changeless, and the maker of the best possible world. Aristotle categorically identified the concept of God with the idea of goodness and the causal principle of all. He held that the unicity of the supreme First Mover follows from the unity of the physical world. He was of his opinion that God is one eternal and immutable. Later in the Hellenistic religions, the sense of God's unicity was expressed by raising one god or goddess to supremacy encompassing all others. For instance, Apuleis regarded Isis as the one Great Mother of all, who was worshipped in several names in different areas.

**iii. Monotheistic Approach in Egyptian Religions:**

In ancient Egyptian religions, historians found one of the earliest forms of exclusive monotheism. Within the elaborate and complicated polytheism of Egyptian religion there had long been rationalistic tendencies toward seeing various gods as different forms of one particular God, with an emphasis on the supremacy of the sun God, who tended to absorb other gods. Around 1375 BCE, Pharaoh Amunhetep IV repudiated the authority of the old gods and their priests

and devoted himself exclusively to Aton, the god appearing as the sun disk. He proclaimed himself the son of Aton, taking the name Akhenaton ('devoted Aton') and he imposed this worship on others. He declared Aton the creator and ruler of the world. He spoke of God as pure and gracious.

By royal decree Aton became the only God who exists, king not only of Egypt but of the entire world, embodying in his character and essence all the attributes of the other gods. Akhenaton's monotheism was related to protest against abuses in the cults of the gods as well as the then polytheistic practices; but it does not appear to have led to new ethical standards. Within twenty five years, Akhenaton was gone and his successors restored the old cults. Just after the ascendency of Akhenaton's son to the throne, the priests who resented to Akhenaton for his turn toward monotheism, restored polytheism as it was before. Thus Akhenaton's initiative toward monotheism ended with his death, after lasting for twenty years. In this context, J.E. Swain mentioned that monotheism in a pure form never was attained in ancient Egypt.

#### **iv. Monotheistic Tone in Hinduism**

In India Hindu belief in God ranges from polytheism through abstract monism to monotheism. Though the Vedas, the most ancient Hindu religious scriptures, are polytheistic in nature but there is a suggestion of monotheism when the Vedas declare that the same one reality is called by various names. This tendency of the Vedic polytheism towards monotheism is characterized by F. Max Muller as henotheism.

In India Hindu philosophy is characterized by monistic thought, which merges the divine reality with the world in a unity called Brahman. Here the unifying principle is strong, but the theistic quality of the unified divine reality is of lesser importance. There have always been theistic tendencies in Hinduism, but these have been associated with a variety of divine beings. Intense concern of *bhakti* ('devotion to a god') has sometimes led Hindus to raise up one god as

supreme ruler, or to see the various gods as manifestations of one God. It is strongly stated in *Rgveda*:

“They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and Agni -----, but the real is one although the sages give different names”.

Among Vaisnavas, Visnu tends to become the sole supreme reality, and the same is true of Siva among Saivas. Krsna, incarnatiuon of Visnu, can be put forth as the supreme God behind all names. It is stated: “Many are the paths people follow, but they all in the end come to me.” Thus Hinduism does recognize the oneness of the divine, and it includes theistic forms of worship, even worship of one God exclusively, without denying the reality of other gods.

#### **v. Monotheistic Inspiration also found in Buddhism**

Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism was silent about God when he was asked about God. From his silence his followers are divided into two groups – Theraveda and Mayayana. In Theraveda Buddhism we see an atheistic view regarding the concept of God while in Mahayana Buddhism the idea has arisen that some relevant beings who have realized their Buddhahood (i.e., Buddhas and Bodhisattvas) can function similarly to gods in theistic religions.

Mahayana Buddhism commonly holds the multiplicity of these powerful beings, but in certain schools one such Buddha becomes supreme and is worshipped exclusively. Such is the case with Amitabha (Japan., Amida), Budhisattava in Pure Land Buddhism, a stereological monolatri offering the hope of salvation for this degenerate age. Esoteric Buddhism has also developed a unified Cosmotheism, according to which the whole universe is the body of Mahavairocana, the Great Sun Buddha, with all Buddhas and bodhisattvas and thus all reality - united in this supreme Buddha reality.



**vi. Monotheistic Approach in Persian religion (Zoroastrianism)**

In ancient Persian civilization, we see the salient example of ethical monotheism taught by Zoroaster. Against various deities Zoroaster preached that Ahura Mazia was the only God to be worshipped. Emerging from the ancient Indo-Iranian polytheistic religion, Zoroastrianism unified all divine reality in the high god Ahura Mazda. Zarasthustra (Zoroaster) turned against some of the traditional cultic rituals and proclaimed the overthrow of polytheism. In his teaching Ahura Mazda is the one God who, to implement his will in the world, associates with himself the six Amesha Spentas ('holy immortals'), spirits or angels that represent moral attitudes and principles. Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, is good, just and moral; he creates only good things and gives only blessing to his worshippers. The one God is sovereign over history, working out the plan he has for the world. Humans are to assist God through upright deeds, and there will be a final judgment in which every soul will be judged to see if it is worthy of entering Paradise. Conflict is accounted for as the hostility of two primordial spirits: Spenta Mainyu, the good spirit and Angra Mainyu (Pahl., Ahriman) the evil spirit. Ahura Mazda apparently fathered these two spirits. The struggle between them has been going on since the beginning of time, when they chose between good and evil. It appears, then, that Ahura Mazda cannot be called omnipotent, for the realm of evil is beyond his control; in that sense it may be said that this is not a complete monotheism. Yet there is no doubt that Zoroastrianism considers the realm of Ahura Mazda to be ultimately victorious. Later Zoroastrianism brought some of the other gods back into the picture again, but in the teaching of Zorathushtra in the *Gathas* is to be found a unique monotheism with an ethico-dualistic accent.

**vii. Monotheistic Cocept in Semitic Religions**

The Semitic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam are generally held to be full expressions of monotheism. These three religions also arose against the

background of the polytheism of the ancient near East. These religions are closely related in that they grew from the Semitic cultural background and the foundations of the religion of ancient Israel. However, the respective followers of Semitic religions drew on the fundamental monotheistic vision of ancient Israel somewhat differently, each group filling out the picture of God with colorings and shapes drawn from its own particular culture.

Among the Semitic religions, however, Christianity is questionably monotheistic in the strict sense of the term because of its concept of Trinity, while both Judaism and Islam are strictly monotheistic religions due to their unqualified concept of the unity of God. Both Judaism and Islam simultaneously emphasize that God is One, Who has no image or shape or likeness to His creatures. Therefore He is considered utterly incomparable with His created beings and things. He does not share divinity with His created beings. He has no incarnation in any form, animal, human and other. He is conceptually and existentially true Being; He is only one and alone.

#### **viii. Monotheistic Idea in Sikhism**

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion which was developed through synthesizing the mystical tendency of Hinduism with ethical and personal tendencies of Islam. In the teachings of Guru Nanak (1469 – 1539 CE), founding father of Sikhism, there is only one God, who is immortal, unborn, self-existent, creator of all the universe, omniscient, formless, just, and loving. God is both transcendent as pure potentiality and immanent as world – embodiment. Thus God is present in everything. God is personal but is beyond complete knowledge and is to be worshipped mainly in rituals of repeating his name. Revelation comes through gurus who speak the divine word. Humans attain heaven or hell at the end of a lifetime, although they are involved in many rounds of births and deaths. Final salvation for human beings consists in the absorption into God's being like water blending with water.

**ix. Monotheistic Thought in ancient Chinese Religious Tradition**

In China we see that though early Chinese religion was associated with animism along with polytheism. But there was a tendency toward monotheism in the worship of *Shang Ti*, the highest Spirit of heavenly spirits. He is also identical with Heaven (*Ti'en*) Itself. Through the worship of many other spirits and their ancestors, the ancient Chinese tried to please *Shang Ti* as the supreme ruler of the heaven and earth. He is comparable to *Amita* in Buddhism or God in Christianity and Allah in Islam. He is purposive, personal and perfect. Until 1912, He was the Supreme Duty to Whom the emperor every year used to make sacrifice in behalf of the people.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Summing up this cross-cultural religio-historical survey, we see that monotheism has arisen in a number of ways. In some cases, it came through rationalization, seeing the logic of unified divine power. In others, mystical experience of everything as one and unified with the divine gave rise to monotheistic expressions. In still other cases, historical experiences of one powerful personal God led toward formulations of monotheist belief.

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