

# Polytheism

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**Polytheism** is belief in or worship of multiple gods (usually assembled in a pantheon) together with associated mythology and rituals.

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## Etymology

English *polytheism* is attested from the 17th century, loaned from French *polythéisme* (since 1580). In post-classical Latin, the term is *polytheismus*. The word is attested later than atheism but earlier than theism.

It ultimately derives from the Greek adjective πολυθεός (from πολύς "many" and θεός "god"), in the meaning "of or belonging to many gods" found in Aeschylus (*Suppliant Women* 424), in the meaning "believing in many gods" in Procopius (*Historia Arcana* 11).

Part of a series on

## Deities

### General approaches

Agnosticism · Atheism · Deism  
 Henotheism · Ignoticism · Misotheism  
 Monism · Monotheism · Nontheism  
 Pandeism · Panentheism · Pantheism  
**Polytheism** · Theism · Transcendence  
 Theology (natural · political · mystical)

### Specific conceptions

Names · "God" · Existence · Gender  
 Creator · Architect · Demiurge · Sustainer  
 Lord · Father · Monad · Oneness  
 Supreme Being · The All · Personal  
 Unitarianism · Ditheism · Trinity  
 Omniscience · Omnipotence  
 Omnipresence · Omnibenevolence  
 in Bahá'í · in Buddhism · in Christianity  
 in Hinduism · in Islam · in Judaism  
 in Sikhism

### Experience and practices

Faith · Prayer · Belief · Revelation  
 Fideism · Gnosis · Metaphysics  
 Mysticism · Hermeticism · Esotericism

### Related topics

Philosophy · Religion · Ontology  
 God complex · Neurotheology  
 Problem of evil (Euthyphro dilemma · Theodicy)

# Gods and divinity

The deities of polytheistic religions are agents in mythology, where they are portrayed as complex personages of greater or lesser status, with individual skills, needs, desires and histories. These gods are often seen as similar to humans (anthropomorphic) in their personality traits, but with additional individual powers, abilities, knowledge or perceptions.

Polytheism cannot be cleanly separated from the animist beliefs prevalent in most ethnic religions. The gods of polytheism are in many cases the highest order of a continuum of supernatural beings or spirits, which may include ancestors), demons, wights and others. In some cases these spirits are divided into celestial or chthonic classes, and belief in the existence of all these beings does not imply that all are worshipped.

## Variations

*Further information: Theology, Pantheon (gods), Euhemerism, Interpretatio graeca, Demigod, and Apotheosis*

Polytheists believe that gods are distinct and separate beings. They may believe in a unifying principle such as the "One" of the Platonists. The Greek gods provide an example. The ancient Greeks believed that their gods were independent deities who weren't aspects of a great deity and did stand on their own.

"Soft polytheists" regard their multiplicity of gods as being manifestations of either common entities, or representing different aspects or facets of a single personal god, the latter also sometimes known as "inclusive monotheists", as are many modern neopagan groups. Soft polytheism means that the person practicing a polytheistic religion believes that their gods are aspects of another god or goddess. In the case of the Ancient Egyptians this comes in the form of triads or triple gods or goddesses. They believed that certain gods were aspects of a greater god. Amon was an aspect of Ra and was usually known as Amon-Ra. The triple gods Ptah-Sokar-Osiris to give an example shows that even though their gods may have distinct personalities and traits, they are considered to be aspects of an another deity.

## Types of deities

*Further information: List of deities*

Types of deities often found in polytheism

- Sky god (celestial)
- Death deity (chthonic)
- Mother goddess
- Love goddess
- Creator deity
- Trickster deity
- Life-death-rebirth deity
- Culture hero

## In comparative religion

*Further information: Theism*

- Monotheism, in contrast with polytheism, is belief in the existence of only one god. It is found in the Abrahamic religions.
- Duotheism teaches that there are two independent eternal principles or realities, e.g.: such as God and Goddess in Wicca; or good and evil, as in Zoroastrianism.
- Monism teaches that there is one ultimate reality and that the material world is an illusion, there is therefore only one reality. Philosophical traditions that are associated with polytheistic religions, such as Hellenistic religion and Hinduism, are usually monistic in outlook. Such philosophical traditions are Neoplatonism and Advaita.
- Dualism is a monotheistic philosophy that teaches that a personal god is separate from his creation, there are therefore two ultimate realities such as Dvaita propounded by Madhvacharya in Hinduism.
- Animism, Shamanism and Ancestor worship do not contrast with polytheism, but are other perspectives on ethnic or traditional religious customs compatible, and typically co-occurring with polytheism.

## Mythology and religion

In the Classical era, Sallustius (4th century CE) categorised mythology into five types:

1. Theological
2. Physical
3. Psychological
4. Material
5. Mixed

The theological are those myths which use no bodily form but contemplate the very essence of the gods: e.g., Kronos swallowing his children. Since divinity is intellectual, and all intellect returns into itself, this myth expresses in allegory the essence of divinity.

Myths may be regarded physically when they express the activities of gods in the world: e.g., people before now have regarded Kronos as time, and calling the divisions of time his sons say that the sons are swallowed by the father.

The psychological way is to regard (myths as allegories of) the activities of the soul itself and or the soul's acts of thought.

The material is to regard material objects to actually be gods, for example: to call the earth Gaia, ocean Okeanos, or heat Typhon.

The mixed kind of myth may be seen in many instances: for example they say that in a banquet of the gods, Eris threw down a golden apple; the goddesses contended for it, and were sent by Zeus to Paris to be judged. (See also the Judgement of Paris.) Paris saw Aphrodite to be beautiful and gave her the apple. Here the banquet signifies the hypercosmic powers of the gods; that is why they are all together. The golden apple is the world, which being formed out of opposites, is naturally said to be 'thrown by Eris' (or Discord). The different

gods bestow different gifts upon the world, and are thus said to 'contend for the apple'. And the soul which lives according to sense - for that is what Paris is - not seeing the other powers in the world but only beauty, declares that the apple belongs to Aphrodite.

## Historical polytheism

Well-known historical polytheistic pantheons include the Sumerian gods and the Egyptian gods, and the classical attested pantheon which includes the Ancient Greek religion, and Roman Religion. Post classical polytheistic religions include Norse Æsir and Vanir, the Yoruba Orisha, the Aztec gods, and many others. Today, most historical polytheistic religions are pejoratively referred to as "mythology", though the stories cultures tell about their gods should be distinguished from their worship or religious practice. For instance deities portrayed in conflict in mythology would still be worshipped sometimes in the same temple side by side, illustrating the distinction in the devotees mind between the myth and the reality. It is speculated that there was once a Proto-Indo-European religion, from which the religions of the various Indo-European peoples derive, and that this religion was an essentially naturalist numenistic religion. An example of a religious notion from this shared past is the concept of *\*dyēus*, which is attested in several distinct religious systems.

In many civilizations, pantheons tended to grow over time. Deities first worshipped as the patrons of cities or places came to be collected together as empires extended over larger territories. Conquests could lead to the subordination of the elder culture's pantheon to a newer one, as in the Greek Titanomachia, and possibly also the case of the Æsir and Vanir in the Norse mythos. Cultural exchange could lead to "the same" deity being renowned in two places under different names, as with the Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans, and also to the introduction of elements of a "foreign" religion into a local cult, as with Egyptian Osiris worship brought to ancient Greece.

Most ancient belief systems held that gods influenced human lives. However, the Greek philosopher Epicurus held that the gods were living, incorruptible, blissful beings who did not trouble themselves with the affairs of mortals, but who could be perceived by the mind, especially during sleep. Epicurus believed that these gods were material, human-like, and that they inhabited the empty spaces between worlds.

Hellenistic religion may still be regarded as polytheistic, but with strong monistic components, and monotheism finally emerges out of Hellenistic traditions in Late Antiquity in the form of Neoplatonism and Christian theology.

### Bronze Age to Classical Antiquity

- Religions of the Ancient Near East
  - Ancient Egyptian religion
  - Ancient Semitic religion
- Historical Vedic religion
- Ancient Greek religion
- Ancient Roman religion
- Celtic polytheism

### Late Antiquity to High Middle Ages

- Germanic paganism
- Slavic paganism
- Baltic paganism
- Finnish paganism

## Polytheism in world religions

### Hinduism

*See also: Hindu views on monotheism*

The system prevalent in Hinduism is defined by the soft polytheistic Smartha philosophy and sect; this theory allows for the veneration of numberless deities, on the understanding that all of them are but manifestation of one impersonal divine power. That ultimate power is termed Brahman (not to be confused with Brahma) or Atman, and is believed to have no specific form, name or attribute. Because the ultimate power is impersonal, the system is monistic. Smarta theologians are influenced by the Advaita philosophy expounded by Sankara. By contrast, a Vaishnavite considers Vishnu as the only true God worthy of worship, and worship of other forms as subordinate or simply incorrect. Shaivite worshippers's position is usually similar to Vaishnavism. They worship Shiva alone as the supreme.

### Buddhism and Shinto

*See also God in Buddhism, Devas vs. Gods, and Nontheism in Buddhism*

In Buddhism, there are higher beings commonly designed (or designated) as gods, Devas. However, Buddhism, at its core, does not teach the notion of praying nor worship to the Devas or any god(s).

Devas, in general, are beings who have had more positive karma in their past lives than humans. Their lifespan eventually ends. When their lives end, they will be reborn as devas or as other beings. When they accumulate negative karma, they are reborn as either human or any of the other lower beings. Humans and other beings could also be reborn as a deva in their next rebirth, if they accumulate many positive karma, however it is not recommended.

Buddhism flourished in different countries, and some of those countries have polytheistic folk religions. Buddhism syncretizes easily with other religions because of its lack of a strict position on theism. Thus, Buddhism has mixed with the folk religions and emerged in polytheistic variants as well as nontheistic variants. For example, in Japan, Buddhism, mixed with Shinto, which worships kami, created a tradition which prays to the kami (plural beings; the same term exists for singular and plural). Thus, there may be elements of worship of gods in some forms of later Buddhism.

### Judaism

Judaism has categorically condemned polytheism since Biblical times. Rabbinic views make a distinction between *avodah zarah* (idolatry) and *shittuf* (lit. "association"), defined as any doctrine that recognizes one

supreme god, but ascribes power, albeit secondary, to a created being (the term refers to one who does not deny the monotheistic and exclusionary aspect of God, but "associates" something else with him). Judaism prohibits *shittuf* for Jews as idolatry; it is a matter of dispute if it is prohibited for non-Jews. The Tosafist Rabbeinu Tam, in Bekhorot 2b and Sanhedrin 63b, implies that trinitarianism could be permitted to gentiles as a form of *shittuf*. This view was echoed by Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet (Rivash, responsa 119) and apparently accepted by Rabbi Moses Isserles (Rema, Orah Hayyim 156:1.) Nevertheless, many rabbinic sources disagree and prohibit *shittuf* to gentiles as well. There are no rabbinic source that allow Jews to worship through any form of *shittuf*. The punishment for polytheism was death. There is also a theoretical death penalty for polytheistic worship in the seven Noahide Laws (Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 57a), and this is a factor in modern opposition to the notion of a Noahide legal system. Jewish scholars respond by noting that Jews today no longer carry out the death penalty, even within Jewish communities.

## Christianity

Christianity is descended from Judaism and its theology shows the monotheism of Judaism. However, it has evolved a doctrine of Trinity in post-Nicene Christianity, which is explicitly monotheistic, but denounced as polytheism in Islam, Judaism and Unitarianism. Veneration of Saints in folk Christianity, in particular the concept of patron saints "responsible" for a certain aspect of life or society, may in some cases become indistinguishable from polytheism, and indeed in many cases seamlessly continues pre-Christian traditions.<sup>[1]</sup> Some Critics of Christianity have also criticized the concept of the Trinity as soft polytheism. Also, some denominations of Christianity attack Mormonism for being polytheistic<sup>[2][3]</sup> The only good evidence of any true polytheism in Mormonism is this quote from Joseph Fielding Smith Jr, the tenth president of the LDS Church in his *Doctrines of Salvation* 2:48. which was quoted in the 1976 *Achieving a Celestial Marriage Student Manual* 132: "We will become gods and have jurisdiction over worlds, and these worlds will be peopled by our own offspring." The ten commandments an important Christian text states "I am the lord your god thou shall not have any gods before me".<sup>[4]</sup> Also Protestants during the reformation such as Martin Luther criticized Catholicism and its veneration of many saints as being polytheistic and Idolatrous.

## Islam

Islam, an Abrahamic religion, is also staunchly monotheistic. According to the Qur'an, polytheism (*shirk*) is the greatest of sins. The concept of the Trinity is also believed by all Muslims to be a form of polytheism.

## Folk religion

*Further information: Saint, Angel, Folk Catholicism, and Pre-Christian Alpine traditions*

The emphasis on monotheism during Christianization of Europe resulted in a re-casting of most gods of European traditions into either Saints or diminutive creatures of folklore such as fairies, wights, *sidhe* etc.

Explicit polytheism in contemporary folk religion is found in African traditional religion as well as African diasporic religions. In Eurasia, the Kalash are one of very few instances of surviving polytheism. There are also a large number of polytheist folk traditions subsumed in contemporary Hinduism, although Hinduism is doctrinally dominated by monist or monotheist theology (Bhakti, Advaita). Historical Vedic polytheist

ritualism survives as a very minor current in Hinduism, known as Shrauta.

## New religions movements

New religious movements advocating polytheism are usually summarized under "Neopaganism", although that term also extends to purely monist or pantheist philosophies. Among Neopagan movements, explicit polytheism is most explicit in polytheistic reconstructionism, which has the stated aim of reviving historical forms of polytheism.

## References

- ↑ "Polytheism and Christian Belief" by Michael C. Rea *\_The Journal of Theological Studies\_* 2006 57(1):133-148
- ↑ Catholic Answers The Gods of the Mormon Church ([http://www.catholic.com/library/Gods\\_of\\_the\\_Mormon\\_Church.asp](http://www.catholic.com/library/Gods_of_the_Mormon_Church.asp))
- ↑ The Mormon God: Just One of the Guys (<http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/1997/9712fea2.asp>)
- ↑ [1] (<http://cameronsmith.org/The%20Ten%20Commandments.htm>)

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(<http://www.manygods.org.uk/articles/traditions/polytheism.html>) . Quotation used here with the author's permission.

## Further reading

- Greer, John Michael; *A World Full of Gods: An Inquiry Into Polytheism*, ADF Publishing (2005), ISBN 0-976-56810-1
- Iles Johnston, Sarah; *Ancient Religions*, Belknap Press (September 15, 2007), ISBN 0-674-02548-2
- Paper, Jordan; *The Deities are Many: A Polytheistic Theology*, State University of New York Press (March 3, 2005), ISBN 978-0791463871

## See also

- Integrational Polytheism
- Polytheistic reconstructionism
- Shirk (polytheism)
- Idolatry
- Paganism
- Neopaganism
- Folk religion
- Folklore
- Myth and ritual
- Sacred king
- Apotheosis
- Hero cult
- Demigod

- Culture hero

## External links

- <http://www.manygods.org.uk/> The Association of Polytheist Traditions - APT, a UK-based community of Polytheists.
- <http://www.paganfed.org/> The Pagan Federation - A predominantly polytheistic educational and campaigning organisation serving the Pagan community.
- International Year Of Polytheism (<http://www.monochrom.at/polytheism>) Philosophical project promoting polytheism by group monochrom
- [godchecker.com](http://www.godchecker.com) (<http://www.godchecker.com>) – a very lighthearted and irreverent God database

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