

C. Modern Europe and America

Monotheism is not a term that appears in the Bible; nor does it appear in biblical theology before the 17th century. In 1660, the philosopher and theologian Henry More contrasted monotheism with polytheism. In his commentary on the book of Revelation (1680), he used the term in the context of a critique of the Islamic concept of God, which denied the divinity of Christ. Here, he also might have had in mind the Unitarians of his time, who rejected the trinitarian understanding of God. In any event, the term did not carry a merely neutral, descriptive meaning for More: it was pejorative, and was invoked from a specific Christian understanding of the single triune God.

In 1663, Herbert of Cherbury declared monotheism to be the natural religion and the source of religion in general. Later on, in discussions of the phenomenology of religion in the 18th and 19th centuries, the term was used to describe and classify a type of religion in which only one God is worshiped, in contrast to polytheism. In these contexts, too, the term was not always merely descriptive; often it was connected with a value judgment in which monotheism was presented as the supreme form of religion. This latter approach is precisely what we find in Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*. For him, monotheism is the purest form of religious consciousness in which one's total dependence on the single and infinite ground of reality is realized. In stressing God's unity, Schleiermacher pushed back against the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity. When, in the 20th century, trinitarian doctrine underwent a renaissance – above all in the theology of Karl Barth – the relationship between the unity and trinity of God took on a fresh urgency. Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians

of the 20th century argued that the fact of God's unity does not exclude the inner-relationality of God in his trinitarian being. Indeed, they saw God's unity as consisting in this inner-relationality.

In the second half of the 20th century, three discussions were of utmost importance in shaping the meaning of monotheism:

(1) In political theology (for example, that of Jürgen Moltmann), monotheism was critiqued as being a religious ideology that could be used to justify autocratic forms of domination. Against this, Moltmann highlighted the motif of the *kenosis* of the word of God in the passion of Christ, in which God (co-)suffered, along with the theme of the inner-relationality of the Trinity. Biblical passages connected to the suffering-God theme included the suffering servant songs in Deutero-Isaiah, Jesus' lament about being forsaken on the cross (Mark 15:34), and the hymn to Christ in Phil 2.

(2) In cultural and religious studies, monotheism was critiqued as possessing a latent tendency towards intolerant claims of absolute truth. It was seen as a threat to religious freedom, something which could incite persecution of the adherents of rival belief systems. Recently, Jan Assmann in particular has made this accusation. In Assmann's view, Moses, in his effort to distinguish between worshipping the true God and practicing idolatry, introduced into ancient religion a monotheism (traceable ultimately to Akhenaten) that was set in opposition to polytheism. By this act, according to Assmann, Moses left his mark on the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic concept of God. This "Mosaic distinction" led to a battle for the one true God, to the detriment of the worship of the other gods. Assmann's thesis has been critiqued using exegetical, literary, and historical arguments. Although his distinctive claim that monotheism involves an innate tendency towards violence is not something that in fact can be proven, it is often invoked. David Hume stated something similar in the *Natural History of Religion* (1757, §IX): "The intolerance of almost all religions which have maintained the unity of God is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists." Sigmund Freud, in his "historical novel" *Moses and Monotheism* (*Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*, 1939), also portrayed Jewish monotheism as a religion of the father, which led to suppression and spiritualization of the natural instincts. In his view, it leads to auto-aggression which then also turns into aggression against others. Thus, Freud saw a connection between monotheism and intolerance: "with the belief in one sole God, it is inevitable that religious intolerance is born" (§2.2).

(3) In interreligious discourse concerning the relation between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, monotheism is seen as a point of unity on the one hand; on the other, Jewish and Islamic scholars see the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as incompati-

ble with a monotheistic understanding of God. Within this discussion, there are in fact two opposing concepts of monotheism: one that emphasizes the inner unity of God (in contrast to an immanent-trinitarian differentiation), and another that denotes the uniqueness of a God beside whom there are no other gods. For its own part, Christian theology has insisted that the “outer” uniqueness of God can be maintained along with the “inner” differentiation in God, i.e., with the Trinity. In regard to the “outer” uniqueness of God (over against other gods) one can distinguish between an “exclusive” or “inclusive” monotheism. Exclusive monotheism rejects the existence of other gods, or classifies them as idols. Inclusive monotheism says that the one and only God may be worshiped by means of various divine figures, and addressed by various names. In this inclusive model, other gods can be integrated into a single system by being subordinated to the monotheistic God-concept, or identified with the one and only God – as was the case in the religion of the Roman Empire (*Interpretatio Romana*). This integrative approach of the Romans grew out of political concerns: it helped to give the vast empire a single unifying religion, and to prevent religious conflicts.

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