Rethinking Monotheism in the Classroom

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Rethinking Monotheism in the Classroom: How to Illustrate a Problem

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Most students walk into the religious studies classroom with at least two assumptions about monotheism and polytheism, even if they have never articulated the assumptions: Monotheism means that one god exists ("God"), and that a person only worships that one God (whatever "worship" entails). Polytheism means that one imagines many gods exist, and a person worships a number of them. This assumption pertains to singularity versus plurality. For the vast majority of students there is a second unarticulated assumption: Monotheism is better, or more "evolved," than polytheism. Polytheism is pagan. Or wild. Or at least, Other. This assumption, deeply embedded in the way "monotheists" view the religions of others, is a qualitative and moral evaluation about how monotheism and polytheism differ. The first assumption is a misconception. The second assumption has been one of many ideological rationales for justifying a pernicious history of colonialism and racism. Here, I will not offer a scholarly analysis or critique of the categories "monotheism" or "polytheism," but rather, offer a pedagogical exercise for getting students to think about these categories in more sophisticated and attentive ways.

A Theory & Method class for religious studies majors offers the necessary time to explore this topic in depth. But when teaching an introductory-level religion class that must cover a great deal of material in the course of one semester, how does one inspire students to think hard about these assumptions without the time to assign a complex reading or to devote an entire week to it? The exercise I use involves the entire class, relaxes the lecture/note-taking structure, and allows students to simply draw on their own knowledge, experience, and observations. As a group, we fill in the "data" and then think about it together. There is no right or wrong in this exercise— "right" and "wrong" are replaced by, "Wow- I've never thought about it like this before." The exercise can take as little as fifteen minutes, or as long as you have time. Even better, the exercise is a self-contained, mobile "unit" that can be dropped in anywhere; because "monotheism" is uttered repeatedly throughout the semester, and because most textbooks promote and reinforce these tacit assumptions, the exercise can be done in any given class session, whenever the professor can fit it in. But in my experience, it works best to do this exercise early in the semester so that students can encounter or employ the terms "monotheism" and "polytheism" with much greater circumspection (if at all).

I begin by drawing a very large circle on the board. I label the circle "Polytheism." I ask students, "Who lives in this invisible world?" We crowd-source the answers—they simply shout out whatever comes to mind. Because this is a New Testament class, most of the answers are derived from what they know of ancient Mediterranean religions.[1] As they offer ideas, I fill in the circle: numerous gods, demi-gods (e.g., Heracles or Orpheus), ghosts, mythological figures (centaurs, nymphs), *daimones* (low level deities who can mess with you or even help you out), the family ancestors, underworld judges (e.g., Minos), deified humans (e.g., Asklepios), etc. Before long, this circle becomes chaotic and full with many types of invisible beings who were thought to be part of the divine world in ancient Mediterranean "polytheism." Nothing in this circle comes as a surprise to anyone in the room, save one detail: the "top" gods that the students are thinking of were never considered creator gods. Zeus, Hera, Apollo, etc were third-generation deities. There were ancient theories of the origins of the cosmos, and that often begins with a creator god (call it *theos*, demiurge, etc). So, we must fill that in (see Fig. 1).
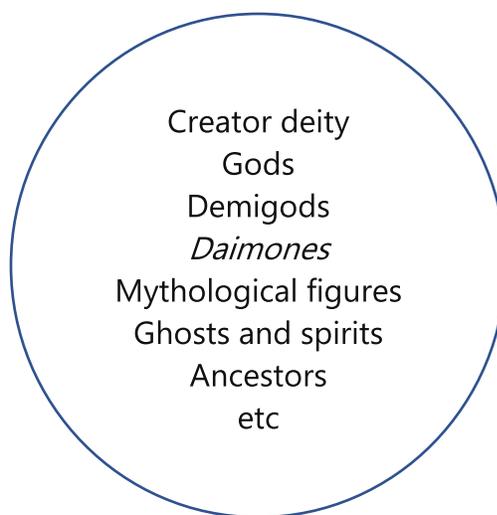

Creator deity
Gods
Demigods
Daimones
Mythological figures
Ghosts and spirits
Ancestors
etc

Figure 1. A basic arrangement of deities in polytheism

I draw a second large circle and label it "Monotheism." We begin the exercise again, and it quickly becomes disorienting. As would be expected, the first being recorded is "God." At that point I step back and we all behold two circles—one is richly filled and the other only has one word in it. So I ask, "Does God live alone in this realm?" The unanimous answer is,

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1 This exercise can be adapted for any general religious studies class or for more specialized seminars in which the topics of monotheism or polytheism arise. Indeed, I find a way to use this exercise in nearly every religion class I teach.

of course, no. Who lives with this deity? The answers, in this case, are derived either from the Hebrew Bible or New Testament: Jesus, the Holy Spirit, saints, etc. Does this deity rule the underworld, or a place of punishment? No. So, we fill in Satan. Does Satan work alone? No. Thus, we get demons and devils. Don't forget ghosts, angels, archangels, guardian angels, etc. Some students are being silly, but I take them seriously, when they offer Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, Jack Frost, Mother Nature, the Grim Reaper, or the Tooth Fairy (see Fig 2).

     I am relieved when some students push back. I *want* them to push back; they should not participate in this conversation without thinking about it critically. Santa Claus and Jack Frost are not real deities. Or are they? (At what point to people decide that Santa Claus is not a *real* deity, and move on to a bigger, *more real* deity? Do these "children's gods," as Erin Roberts has called them, simply prep youngsters to step into the role of venerating the made-for-adults God?)[2] And the Hebrew Bible does not include all of these other saints, the Holy Spirit, etc. And what about Islam? So we consider angels and jinns in Islam, the Nephilim, the fact that Elohim is grammatically plural. Any version of "monotheism" that we can think of as a group arrives at a similar place: the circle for monotheism is as richly varied and densely populated as the circle for polytheism.
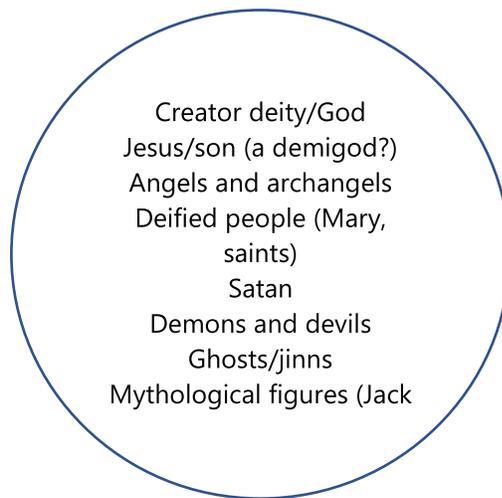
Creator deity/God
Jesus/son (a demigod?)
Angels and archangels
Deified people (Mary,
saints)
Satan
Demons and devils
Ghosts/jinns
Mythological figures (Jack

Figure 2. A rudimentary arrangement of deities in "monotheism," using American versions of Christianity as one example

     We are now at crossroads. The two circles look strikingly similar, but at the outset students typically have assumed they are quite different. This is when I turn the task over to their critical minds and query, "What do we make of this?" The practice of comparison

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2 I thank Erin Roberts (in an unpublished paper) for her notion of "children's gods" as primers for bigger, adult gods.

necessarily includes accounting for similarities and differences, so we cannot conclude they are simply the same. Is the difference merely rank? Polytheists spend more time acknowledging and developing relationships with second, third, and fourth generation deities, whereas monotheists focus on the "first" generation (the creator)? That cannot be the case because Jesus is a son, and Catholics worldwide pray as often to the Virgin Mary and to various saints (deified humans) as they do to the creator god, directly. Regardless of the officially recognized theology of a given monotheistic religion, how do people actually relate to deities in the practice of so-called monotheism, and is it substantially different from how people relate to deities in polytheism? Even if the class concludes that monotheism and polytheism are unhelpful categories ultimately, we still must think about the work that is accomplished by the use of the terms: what do they actually index, what do they say about how we conceptualize religions, and why do self-identified monotheists hold monotheism in higher regard than polytheism?

At this point, the exercise can stop. A point has been illuminated and visually illustrated. When time permits, however, this exercise becomes a starting point for a larger conversation that sometimes persists throughout the semester, in which we read aloud various biblical passages indicating the polytheism of Israelites, in which we briefly trace the origins of the idea of "monotheism," in which we talk about the ramifications of centralized worship of one deity on domestic religion and on gender. We talk about how consolidating the functions of many gods into the capacities of one single god renders that single god profoundly multiform and subject to infinite interpretations and usages (i.e., instead of a god of war and a separate god of peace, the "one" god becomes the god of war, of peace, and everything in between). We talk about my own position, which is that monotheism is a moral claim asserted by self-described monotheists to distinguish themselves from pagans, polytheists, etc. In terms of practical content, "monotheism" is fairly empty; that is to say, understood as a taxonomic category that should entail features that make it distinct from polytheism, "monotheism" lacks such distinguishing features. Students, of course, need not agree with me. But visualizing the two spheres—both of them well populated by beings that are hierarchically arranged—has proved to be an excellent way to prompt students to think deeply about their unexamined assumptions about religiosity as well as the human propensity to imagine the divine realm as a place that is well populated and hierarchically arranged—not unlike like the social world(s) of living humans.