The term henotheism continues to allow for greater precision in the classification of religious belief systems.

Introduction

Henotheism (from the Greek heis theos or “one god”) refers to religious belief systems that accept the existence of many gods (such as polytheism) but worship one deity as supreme. Such belief systems have been found throughout history and across the world’s cultures. The term was first coined by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854) to describe what he thought to be an earlier stage to monotheism, and was later brought into common usage by linguist Max Müller (1823–1900) in order to characterize religious beliefs found in the Vedas of Hinduism. Subsequently, anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) conceived of henotheism as a natural phase in the progression of religious development whereby cultures supposedly evolved from polytheism, through henotheism, to a culmination in monotheism as the supreme manifestation of religious thought. However, this evolutionary view of religion has generated much debate for it denies the position of the Abrahamic religions that God was monotheistic.
from the start. Nevertheless, the term henotheism continues to allow for greater precision in the classification of religious belief systems.

Henotheism as a Category of Religion

“Henotheism” as a term is not widely used by the general public but it has featured prominently as a point of discussion in academic debates about the nature and development of religion. The academic study of religion distinguishes several categories of religious belief found throughout the world including monotheism, polytheism, deism, pantheism, and henotheism (among others). The term “henotheism” was used predominantly by linguists and anthropologists and has been associated with other academic categories of religion. For example, Max Müller used the term interchangeably with *kathenotheism* (from the Greek *kath’hena*, “one by one”), in reference to the Vedas where there are different supreme gods at different times. Similarly, henotheism should not be confused with monolatry, where many gods are believed to exist, but can only exert their power on those who worship them. While the monolator exclusively worships one god, the henotheist may worship any god within their specific pantheon, depending on various circumstances.

Varieties of Henotheism Found in Human Culture

**Classical Graeco-Roman Henotheism**

Perhaps the most salient example of henotheism is found in the ancient cultures of classical Greece and Rome. Greco-Roman religion began as polytheism, but became thoroughly henotheistic over time. While the Greeks believed in multiple gods, each of whom took on specific roles or personalities, it was clear that Zeus, god of the sky and thunder, was the superior deity, presiding over the Greek Olympic pantheon and fathering many of the other heroes and heroines.
The twelve gods of the Greek Olympic pantheon with Zeus at the center reigning supreme.

At first, Uranus was the supreme deity, until he became tyrannical and was usurped by his son Cronus. Cronus ruled during the mythological Golden Age, but became tyrannical himself, unwilling to give up his own position of supremacy to potential heirs. According to legend, Cronus swallowed each of his children when they were born but Rhea, Uranus, and Gaia devised a plan to save Zeus. According to legend, Rhea gave birth to Zeus in Crete, and handed Cronus a rock wrapped in swaddling clothes, which Cronus promptly swallowed. In this manner, Zeus was spared. After reaching manhood, Zeus forced Cronus to disgorge the other children and overthrew Cronus thereby ascending to the throne as the supreme god.

When the Roman state assumed control of Greece in 146 B.C.E., it assimilated many of the local Greek gods into the Roman pantheon. Roman religion was similar to Greek religion in regards to its henotheistic framework. Early Roman divinities included a host of specialized gods whose names were called upon in the performance of various practical duties of daily Roman life. For example, Janus and Vesta watched over the door and hearth, Saturn (Greek God) the sowing, Lares the field and house, Pales the pasture, Ceres the growth of the grain, Pomon the fruit, and Consus and Ops the harvest. Certain gods came to primacy over the others, though. At the head of the earliest pantheon was the triad of Mars (Greek God), Quirinus, and Jupiter (Greek God), whose three priests, or flamens, were of the highest order. Mars was a god of youthful men and their activities, especially war, while Quirinus is thought to have been the patron of the armed contingent in times of peace. Jupiter, however, was clearly given primacy over all the others as ruler of the gods. Like Zeus, he wielded a weapon of lightning and was considered the director of human activity. By way of his widespread domain, Jupiter was the protector of the Romans in
their military activities beyond the borders of their own community. Upon Roman entry into the neighboring Greek territory, the Romans promptly identified their important deities with the Greek pantheon, and borrowed heavily from the myths and characteristics of the Greek gods and goddesses in order to enrich their own religion. These henotheistic beliefs were upheld until Christianity superseded the native religions of the Roman Empire.

**Israelite and Judaic Beliefs**

It is generally accepted that many of the Iron Age religions found in Israel were henotheistic in practice. For example, the Moabites worshipped the god Chemosh, and the Edomites, Qaus, both of whom were part of the greater Canaanite pantheon, headed by the chief gods, El and Asherah. They had 70 sons between them who were said to rule over each of the nations of the earth, and became national gods worshipped in each region. More recently, M.S. Smith’s synthesis of the Hebrew culture in the Iron Age has put forth the thesis that Hebrew religion, like those around it, was henotheistic. The discovery of artifacts at Kuntillet ʿAjrud and Khirbet El-Qom suggest that in at least some sections of Israelite society, Yahweh and Asherah were believed to coexist as a divine couple. Further evidence of an understanding of Yahweh existing within the Canaanite pantheon derives from syncretistic myths found within the Hebrew Bible itself. Various battles between Yahweh and Leviathan, Mot, the Tanninim, and Yamm are already presented in the
fourteenth-century B.C.E. texts found at Ugarit (ancient Ras-Shamra). In some cases, Yahweh had replaced Baal, and in others, he had assumed El’s roles.

According to the Book of Genesis, the prophet Abraham is revered as the individual who overcame the idol worship of his family and surrounding peoples by recognizing the Hebrew God and establishing a covenant with Him. In addition, he laid the foundations for what has been called by scholars “Ethical Monotheism.” The first of the Ten Commandments is commonly interpreted to forbid the Israelites from worshiping any god other than the one true God who had given them the Torah. However, this commandment has also been interpreted as a evidence of henotheism, since the Hebrew God states that the Israelites should have “no other gods before me” and thus insinuates the existence of other gods. Against the Torah’s teachings, the patron god YHWH was frequently worshipped in conjunction with other gods such as Baal, Asherah, and El. Over time, this tribal god may have assumed all the appellations of the other gods in the eyes of the people. The destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon was considered a divine reprimand and punishment for the mistaken worship of other deities. Thus, by the end of the Babylonian captivity of Judah in the Tanakh, Judaism is strictly monotheistic.

**Christianity**

![Diagram of the Holy Trinity](image)

Christians consider themselves to be monotheists, but some observers have argued that Christianity may plausibly be described as an example of henotheism for several reasons. First, the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity has been seen as a type of polytheism or henotheism. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity claims that God consists of three equal “persons” (Greek *Hypostasis*) having a single “substance” (Greek *Ousia*), thus counting as one God; yet, some
early Christian groups, such as the Ebionites or Docities, were eventually labeled as heretical because they worshipped the Father as the supreme God, and saw Jesus as merely an apparition or a perfect man. Traditional Christian doctrine rejects the view that the “three persons” of the Trinity are distinct gods.

Nevertheless, several non-Trinitarian Christian denominations are more overtly henotheistic. For example, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormonism, or the LDS Church) views the members of the Christian Godhead as three distinct beings, where God the Father is supreme. Though not explicitly mentioned in canonical LDS scripture, some Latter Day Saints also infer the existence of numerous other gods and goddesses who have no direct relevance to humanity on Earth. Some Latter Day Saints also acknowledge a Heavenly Mother in addition to God the Father. However, Mormons worship one God; this view is most easily described as worshipping God the Father through the conduit of the Son, Jesus Christ. Whereas other Christians speak of “One God in Three Persons,” the LDS scripture speaks instead of three persons in one God.

Finally, some Christians revere a “pantheon” of angels and saints that are inferior to the Trinity. For example, Mother Mary is widely revered as an intercessor between God and humanity in the Roman Catholic Church. Christians do not label these beings as “gods,” although they are attributed with supernatural powers and occasionally serve as the objects of prayer. Thus some non-Christians think Christianity is henotheistic.

**Hinduism**

Early Vedic Hinduism is considered to be one of the best examples of henotheism in the world’s religions. Although Hinduism contains many different kinds of beliefs including monism, polytheism, and atheism, the earliest Hindu scriptures, known as the Vedas, worship many gods but hail one as supreme. Usually, this supreme God was called Indra but various cosmic forces such as Agni, god of fire, Varuna, keeper of the celestial waters, and Vac, speech, were also revered. Each of these gods was hailed as supreme in different sections of the Vedas, and paralleling the mythology of the Greeks, the Vedic gods also underwent their own battles for
supremacy. In pre-Vedic times, Varuna was the supreme lord of the cosmos; however, in the Vedas, he is supplanted by Indra as king of the gods. Over time, however, Hinduism changed and the powers of Indra were usurped by other deities, such as Vishnu and Shiva, who in turn were absorbed into a larger philosophical framework of monism in later Hinduism. Hindu phrases such as *Ekam Sat, Vipraha Bahudha Vadanti* (Truth is One, though the sages know it as many) provides additional evidence that the Vedic people identified a fundamental oneness beyond the personalities of their many gods. Based on this mixture of monism, monotheism, and polytheism, Max Müller decided that henotheism was the most suitable classification for Vedic Hinduism. Whether the term of henotheism adequately addresses these complexities still remains a matter of contention. The term may underestimate the idea of pure monism which can be identified even in the early Rig Veda Samhita, notwithstanding clearly monist and monotheistic movements of Hinduism that developed with the advent of the Upanishads.

While the Vedic period of Hinduism most closely corresponds to henotheism as Müller understood it, more subtle manifestations of henotheism can be discerned within the later traditions. Medieval Hinduism saw the emergence of devotional sects with the onset of the essentially monotheistic bhakti (loving devotion) movement. The rise of scriptures called the Puranas, focused on particular gods such as Shiva and Vishnu. These scriptures, while admitting the existence of other deities, saw the particular deity of their choice as often superior, yet derivative from one principal source. As a result, different devotional traditions have disputed the relative importance of various gods, some insisting on the primacy of Shiva over Vishnu and vice-versa, for example. Extreme monists within the Advaita Vedanta movement, Yoga philosophy, and certain non-dual Tantra schools of Hinduism seem to preclude the categorization of Hinduism as henotheistic. Yet, popular Hinduism is widely centered on worship of the Hindu trinity, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, gods which respectively represent creation, preservation, and destruction in one cycle of being. Today, Goddess worship (*shakti*) has replaced worship of Brahma. Again, “henotheism” proves to be a pliable term which can serve to clarify such ambiguities in vast, multifarious religious systems such as Hinduism.

**Significance of Henotheism**

Henotheism is an important classification in religious scholarship, since it nuances forms of worship which might otherwise be labeled under the general headings of monotheism or polytheism. It provides a classification for those religious communities who worship many gods but elevate one god as supreme. The term “henotheism” is particularly helpful in understanding ancient religious and mythological systems based on narratives that bring one god into primacy among others. The term possesses historical significance, as numerous major religious systems of contemporary times passed through phases of henotheistic thought. Although Tylor’s theory purporting a progression of religion from “simple” polytheism to more developed monotheism, with henotheism serving as the middle stage, has generally been rejected, it remains a valued category in religious discourse.

**References**

Henotheism

Henotheism (from Greek ἑνός θεοῦ (henos theou) 'of one god') is the worship of a single, overarching god while not denying the existence or possible existence of other lower deities.[1][2] Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) coined the word, and Friedrich Welcker (1784–1868) used it to depict primitive monotheism among ancient Greeks.[3]

Max Müller (1823–1900), a German philologist and orientalist, brought the term into wider usage in his scholarship on the Indian religions,[4][5] particularly Hinduism whose scriptures mention and praise numerous deities as if they are one ultimate unitary divine essence.[2] Müller made the term central to his criticism of Western theological and religious exceptionalism (relative to Eastern religions), focusing on a cultural dogma which held "monotheism" to be both fundamentally well-defined and inherently superior to differing conceptions of God.

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Definition and terminology

Friedrich Schelling coined the term henotheism, from the Greek heis or heno which literally means "single, one".[1][2][6] The term refers to a form of theism focused on a single god. Related terms are monolatrism and kathenotheism.[1] The latter term is an extension of "henotheism", from καθ’ ἑνα θεόν (kath’ hena theon) 'one god at a time'.[7] Henotheism refers to a pluralistic theology wherein different deities are viewed to be of a unitary, equivalent divine essence.[2] Another term related to henotheism is "equitheism", referring to the belief that all gods are equal.[8] Further, the term henotheism does not exclude monism, nondualism or dualism.[5]

Various scholars prefer the term monolatrism to henotheism, to discuss religions where a single god is central, but the existence or the position of other gods is not denied.[1][6] According to Christoph Elsas, henotheism in modern usage connotes a syncretic stage in the development of religions in late antiquity. A henotheist may worship a single god from a pantheon of deities at a given time, depending on his or her choice, while accepting other deities and concepts of god.[5][2] Henotheism and inclusive monotheism are terms that refer to a middle position between unlimited polytheism and exclusive monotheism.[1]
Zoroastrianism

Ahura Mazda is the supreme god, but Zoroastrianism does not deny other deities. Ahura Mazda has yazatas ("good agents") some of which include Anahita, Sraosha, Mitra, Rashnu, and Tishtrya. Richard Foltz has put forth evidence that Iranians of Pre-Islamic era worshiped all these figures, especially Mithra and Anahita.\[9\]

Prods Oktor Skjærvø states Zoroastrianism is henotheistic, and "a dualistic and polytheistic religion, but with one supreme god, who is the father of the ordered cosmos".\[10\] Other scholars state that this is unclear, because historic texts present a conflicting picture, ranging from Zoroastrianism's belief in "one god, two gods, or a best god henotheism".\[11\]

Hinduism

Henotheism was the term used by scholars such as Max Müller to describe the theology of Vedic religion.\[14\][2] Müller noted that the hymns of the Rigveda, the oldest scripture of Hinduism, mention many deities, but praises them successively as the "one ultimate, supreme God", alternatively as "one supreme Goddess";\[15\] thereby asserting that the essence of the deities was unitary (ekam), and the deities were nothing but pluralistic manifestations of the same concept of the divine (God).\[2][5][6]

The Vedic era conceptualization of the divine or the One, states Jeananne Fowler, is more abstract than a monotheistic God, it is the Reality behind and of the phenomenal universe.\[16\] The Vedic hymns treat it as "limitless, indescribable, absolute principle", thus the Vedic divine is something of a panentheism rather than simple henotheism.\[16\] In late Vedic era, around the start of Upanishadic age (~800 BCE), theosophical speculations emerge that develop concepts which scholars variously call nondualism or monism, as well as forms of non-theism and pantheism.\[16\][17][18] An example of the questioning of the concept of God, in addition to henotheistic hymns found therein, are in later portions of the Rigveda, such as the Nasadiya Sukta.\[19\] Hinduism calls the metaphysical absolute concept as Brahman, incorporating within it the transcendent and immanent reality.\[20][21][22] Different schools of thought interpret Brahman as either personal, impersonal or transpersonal. Ishwar Chandra Sharma describes it as "Absolute Reality, beyond all dualities of existence and non-existence, light and darkness, and of time, space and cause."\[23\]

Hellenistic religion

While Greek and Roman religion began as polytheism, during the Classical period, under the influence of philosophy, differing conceptions emerged. Often Zeus (or Jupiter) was considered the supreme, all-powerful and all-knowing, king and father of the Olympian gods. According to Maijastina Kahlos "monotheism was pervasive in the educated circles in Late Antiquity" and "all deities were interpreted as aspects, particles or epithets of one supreme God".\[24\] Maximus Tyrius (2nd century C.E.) stated: "In such a mighty contest, sedition and discord, you will see one according law and assertion in all the earth, that there is one god, the king and father of all things, and many gods, sons of god, ruling together with him."\[25\]

The Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus taught that above the gods of traditional belief was "The One",\[24\] and polytheist grammarian Maximus of Madauros even stated that only a madman would deny the existence of the supreme God.\[24\]
Canaanite religion and early Judaism

Rabbinical Judaism as it developed in Late Antiquity is emphatically monotheistic. However, its predecessor—the various schools of Hellenistic Judaism and Second Temple Judaism, and especially the cult of Yahweh as it was practiced in ancient Israel and Judah during the 8th and 7th centuries BCE—have been described as henotheistic.

For example, the Moabites worshipped the god Chemosh, the Edomites, Qaus, both of whom were part of the greater Canaanite pantheon, headed by the chief god, El. The Canaanite pantheon consisted of El and Asherah as the chief deities, with 70 sons who were said to rule over each of the nations of the earth. These sons were each worshiped within a specific region. Kurt Noll states that “the Bible preserves a tradition that Yahweh used to ‘live’ in the south, in the land of Edom” and that the original god of Israel was El Shaddai.\[27\]

Several Biblical stories allude to the belief that the Canaanite gods all existed and were thought to possess the most power in the lands by the people who worshiped them and their sacred objects; their power was believed to be real and could be invoked by the people who patronized them. There are numerous accounts of surrounding nations of Israel showing fear or reverence for the Israelite God despite their continued polytheistic practices.\[28\] For instance, in 1 Samuel 4, the Philistines fret before the second battle of Aphek when they learn that the Israelites are bearing the Ark of the Covenant, and therefore Yahweh, into battle. The Israelites were forbidden\[29\] to worship other deities, but according to some interpretations of the Bible, they were not fully monotheistic before the Babylonian captivity. Mark S. Smith refers to this stage as a form of monolatry.\[30\] Smith argues that Yahweh underwent a process of merging with El and that acceptance of cults of Asherah was common in the period of the Judges.\[30\] 2 Kings 3:27 has been interpreted as describing a human sacrifice in Moab that led the invading Israelite army to fear the power of Chemosh.\[31\]

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Some scholars have written that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) can be characterized as henotheistic, but others have rejected this stance.

Eugene England, a professor at Brigham Young University, asserted that LDS Presidents Brigham Young and Joseph Fielding Smith along with LDS scholar B. H. Roberts used the LDS interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8:5–6 as “a brief explanation of how it is possible to be both a Christian polytheist (technically a henotheist) and a monotheist”.\[32\] BYU Professor Roger R. Keller rejected descriptions of the LDS Church as polytheistic by countering, as summarized by a reviewer, “Mormons are fundamentally monotheistic because they deal with only one god out of the many which exist.”\[33\]

In their book, Mormon America: The Power and the Promise, Richard and Joan Ostling, wrote that some Mormons are comfortable describing themselves as henotheists.\[34\]

Kurt Widmer, professor at the University of Lethbridge, described LDS beliefs as a “cosmic henotheism”.\[35\] A review of Widmer’s book by Bruening and Paulsen in the FARMS Review of Books countered that Widmer’s hypothesis was “strongly disconfirmed in light of the total evidence”.\[36\]

Van Hale has written, "Mormonism teaches the existence of gods who are not the Father, Son, or Holy Ghost" and "the existence of more than one god [is] clearly a Mormon doctrine", but he also said that defining this belief system in theological terms was troublesome. Henotheism might appear to be "promising" in describing LDS beliefs, Hale wrote, but it is ultimately not accurate because henotheism was intended to describe the worship of a god that was restricted to a specific geographical area.\[37\]

See also
Comparative religion

Henosis, mystical "oneness", "union", or "unity" in classical Greek

King of the gods, a tendency for one divinity, usually male, to achieve preeminence

References


13. See also, Griffith's Rigveda translation: Wikisource (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Rig_Veda/Mandala_1/Hymn_164)


**External links**

- What are Henotheism and Monolatry? (http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/religion/blrel_theism_heno.htm) in About Religion
- On Henotheism (http://www.sofiatopia.org/equiaeon/henotheism.htm) in Sofiatopia