# Western Notion of Polytheism

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**Abstract:**

　　*Religion plays an important role in any society. In fact, it is a central force in imparting guidance and inspiration to human beings. The objective is the attainment of self-happiness. Today, there is a need for moral and spiritual regeneration of religion. Important is a country's cultural and social milieu which demands an inner transformation of consciousness, a quantitative improvement of mankind. The major concern of the western philosophers and theologicans are their commitment either to monotheism or polytheism. At times it appears the concept of monotheism is correct when one thinks of one god. But as soon as the concept of many gods emerge, polytheism appears to create a new world of religion. The article is written for the purpose of explaining the theory of polytheism and whether the world still believes in concept of many gods.*

**Key words**: Christianity, Hinduism, theology, Islam, Prohet Mohammed, Social Trinitarians, divinity, Godhood, doctrine of trinity, Egypt's New Kingdom, Amun – Re theology, syncretism Holy Spirit.

## INTRODUCTION:

Religion occupies a central positions in all speculations, whether it is, East or West. Religions, infact, is a great driving force in imparting guidance and inspiration to human beings.

The essence of all religions is the attainment of self-happiness. When the objective is fulfilled then it creates an atmosphere of human well-being and peace. The philosophy of all religion offers a clear and stable foundation for the harmonious existence of men, nations and civilizations. In the age of science and technology, today human society faces an alarming debasement of values. The modern age is marked by violence, injustice, wars and human cruelty. Today, the need is for moral and spiritual regeneration of religion apart from man's far-reaching material progression. To demonstrate it, one can firmly specify that our cultural and social milieu demands an inner transformation of consciousness, a quantitative improvement of mankind as a whole. That consciousness is the realization of the "Ultimate Reality". The essence of all religions is to distinguish between good and evil. All religions lead every man to attain happiness. The relationship between religion and ethics has occupied an important place in the discourses of philosophers. The logical position regarding the relationship of religion and ethics in general, has never been and never can be, denied.

Western philosophers and theologians have given due attention to the issues of reconciliation in their belief about three fully divine persons with their commitment to monotheism. The western philosophers have too much focused on the term divinity or godhead. This is the state of things that come from a supernatural power or deity, such as god, supreme being, creator-god or spirit and hence they are assumed to be sacred and holy. In the west, many conceptions of god prevail. The first philosopher Thales has said, "everything is full of god". This implies there are many facets of gods. Further, he believes that "the magnet has soul". At other times he said the only material things exist but also commented that "everything is from water." Thus, Thales tried to explain things in terms of natural forces alone. In ancient times, people thought that every object possess supernatural powers. Thus, no consensus was developed whether god were material or spiritual in nature

in ancient time. This leads to an interesting debate on the monotheistic or polytheism approach to religion.

## POLYTHEISM:

Generally speaking Christians are monotheists. But, at the same time they believe in three fully divine beings, i.e., three Persons of the Godhead : Father, son and Holy Spirit. Polytheism is a term which emphasises on more than one god. In the polytheistic religion of the ancient Greeks, a multitude of imperfect god is acknowledged. Each has certain limited specialised superman power. For example we often hear of a God of thunder, a God of Oceans, a God of sun , a God of the underworld, a God of love, a God of war and so on. These gods are not supernatural but they are natural deities. Thus, one can argue that orthodox Christian belief does not believe in monotheism but they lay stress on polytheism.

The major concerns of the christian philosophers and theologians were how to reconcile their belief in three divine Persons with their commitment to monotheism. One perception was the insistence on the fact that despite being three in certain sense the divine Persons are somehow also the same god.[1]

Christianity is one of the most popular and influential religions of the world, specially the western world. Christianity is a monotheistic religion. Some people originally believe the Christianity is a polytheistic religion, because it believes in Trinity. Though Christians believe in Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit the trinity represents three different forms of one and the same God, and not three different Gods. In Hinduism also, Brahma Vishnu and Siva are not three different persons but three different aspects of one God. So Christianity is a monotheistic religions, not polytheistic.[2]

The concept of God has an important place in the Christian philosophy and theology. In Christianity, Christians, regards him as "Son of God". Often Jesus is regarded as the

true image of God. He is often regarded as God and often as man. Christ teaches the fruit of charity, renunciation, control of passions, universal love and faith in God. The leading Christian thinkers believes in the notion of a God, the nature and future of man,, and the realization of God and man. The Christian ethics has close resemblance to the Christian faith. But, there are also corresponding differences in the approach to ethics. The Christian ethics is rooted in its theology and salvation. There is a deep relationship between the Christian ethics and the Christian theology.

Ethics in the Christianity is important for various reason. The first major discourage is the acknowledgement of divine forgiveness freely offered to man. The moral law can only condemn human  man's conscience but can not give him power to fulfill it. Hence, the law becomes an expression of the spiritual self alienation of man. Another issue related to christian ethics is the christian concept of love, which is the ultimate principle in the christian ethics.[3] One of the important aspects of the content of love is its universality. Love is the basic cause that Christianity teaches men. christian theologians have given recognition to the concept of free-will, which God has provided to them. Christian ethics also emphasizes on a new idea of the reality of brotherhood, introduced into society by the christian  faith. Situations ethical responses may very to obtain the ultimate goal.

Islam is a prophetic religion of comparatively late origin. Islam is its based on the teachings of Prophet Mohammad. His teachings are regarded as ultimate and they have to be followed strictly by all. Islam shows a common Semitic origin with Judaism and Christianity. All three have striking resemblance with regard to the conception of God. Quran, in Islam is regarded as eternal, the concreted eternal word of Allah. Islam believes in one and only one God called 'Allah". It is therefore, purely a monotheistic religion. It emphasises on the Reality and authenticity of prophets, who are the messenger of God to people. It believes in the existence of angels and spirits, both

good and evil dispositions. As distinct from other religion Islam has its own distinctive character, i.e., rigorous discipline of daily life that it prescribes for its followers. In this sense Islam may be regarded as purely legalistic religion. But such an observation may not and should not imply that it lead to inner spiritual piety.[4]

In case of Christianity, to deny the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the same god and then to argue that monotheism is managed by the special relationship that is found among the divine person. This view gives rise to the concept of 'Social Trinitarians' because they think of the divine Trinity on the analogy of a society of human persons.[5]

Social Trinitarians believe that the Christian commitment to monotheism is not committed to one divine being but rather it believes in all divine beings. The pertinent question is how Social Trinitarians conceive things? There are various views presented by the western philosophers. Cornelius Plantinga feels that Social Trinitarians could stick to respectability as monotheists by making reference to three perfect good senses in which there is only one God. It means that (a) there is only one form of divinity (the Father); (b) there is only one Godhood or Godhead or Godness; and (c) there is only one divine family i.e., the Holy Trinity itself.[6]

The above view seems that monotheism is true. It may take a variety of forms depending upon how God is conceived. In the first instance, God may be conceived of as either personal or impersonal. A personal God is a person, i.e, a thing which could be aware of itself and of other things and which can have a variety of mental states including conscious belief, desire and intentions. Traditionally, Judaism, Christianity and Islam conceive God as a personal being. On the other hand, Hinduism and Buddhism conceive God as an impersonal ultimate reality that transcends the illusion of plurality and change.

Richard Swinburne, on the other hand, focusses on the fact that Yahweh is a composite individual or society whose parts are bound together by perfect love, harmony of will and

essential mutual interdependence. In other words, no one can exist without the others or come into conflict with the others. He further states that Persons of the Trinity which stand in these relations are sufficient to secure monotheism.[7] J.P. Moreland and William Lane also agree with Swinburne when they argue that Yahweh is composed which might be thought in terms of three individual dogs. The view appears to be monotheism. It is secured by the mere fact that the Persons are parts of a single fully divine being.

## CRITICISM OF SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM:

Social Trinitarianism is often criticized by the fact that the re-characterizations of monotheism are implausible. There are some who tend to rule out polytheism also speak against social Trinitarianism. There are others like Leftow and Merricks who argue that social Trinitarianism is not plausible to conceive that Greek polytheism would become monotheistic if only one add that Zeus and the other Gods enjoyed perfect love, harmony and mutual interdependence with one another.[8] This criticism is important against the observation that the perfect love, harmony and mutual interdependence of the Persons is relevant to monotheism. On the other hand, it also has no growing impact on the suggestions that Christianity is monotheistic in nature. It is being argued that Persons are parts of the one, i.e. one fully divine being.

Michael C. Rea argues if the understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity of Social Trinitarian is right, then Christianity is not interestingly different from the polytheistic Amun – Re theology of Egypt's New Kingdom period.[9] He argues that (a) Christianity as understood by the Social Trinitarian resembles Amun – Re theology in the relations it takes to obtain among its gods; (b)Amun-Re theology was polytheistic and (c) in the eyes of Social Trinitarian-Christianity is, hence, polytheistic as well.[10]

Egyptian religion had evolved constantly. New gods were periodically added to the pantheon. The attributes of the gods and the relations among gods had been constantly changing Several conflicting creation myths were developed with different stories about the origins of the gods and the creation of the world. The present discussion will focus primarily on the Amun-Re theology that dominated Egypt's 18th -20th Dynasties (outside the Amarna period).[11] However, it will be useful first to say a few words about some of the Egyptian deities.

It would be interesting to comment on Egyptian deities. Egyptians worshipped at least four different sun gods: Khepri, god of the morning sun; Re, god of the noonday sun; Atum, god of the setting sun; and Aten, the solar disk. All of these gods were recognized at some point or other as self-creator deities. Ptah and Amun were also among the gods who were sometimes said to be self-created creators. ptah was primarily associated with arts and crafts and was the chief god of Memphis. Amun was known as the 'hidden god'. He began his career as a relatively minor deity – not even the chief deity of Thebes, the city in which he was primarily worshipped. As Thebes rose to power, however, so too did Amun's stature increased. During Egypt's 12th Dynasty, Amun replaced Montu (a minor sun god) as the chief deity of Thebes.[12]

As said above the god Amun's steture grew in significance as Thebes rose to power at the end of Egypt's 11th Dynasty. After sometime he was worshipped in conjunction with Re as Amun-Re. Amun-Re was eventually recognized king of the gods and worshipped as the chief national deity. So far Egypt's 18th Dynasty was concerned, we find a new creation story according to which it is Amun-Re who plays the role of uncreated creator and source of being for the world and all of the gods.[13] The following is a passage from the Khonsu Cosmogony. It expresses a Theban version of creation:

Words spoken by Amun-Re, King of the Gods, august being, chief of all the gods, the Great God, lord of the sky, earth, the other world, water ad mountains, the august soul of Kem-

atef serpent, father of the semen, mother of the egg, who engendered everything living, the hidden soul who made the gods, who formed the land with his semen, father of the fathers of the Ogdoad in the tomb chamber in the necropolis in the place Djeme, who created this place in Nun, overflowing seed the first time……Amun in that name of his called Ptah created the egg that came forth from Nun……..as Path of the Heh gods and the Nenu goddesses who cerated heaven and earth……….[14]

Thus, it is clear that according to the Amun-Re theology of the New Kingdom, one god (Amun-Re) is the creator, the king of heaven, and the font of divinity; there are multiple divine beings but a single divine family; and at least some of the members of the divine family stand in genuine part-whole relations to the creator and ultimate source of being.[15] As such the Amun-Re theology resemblance, the belief of ST-Christianity. It indicates  clear that the Amun-Re theology falls flat in the category of polytheism. Worshippers of Amun-Re cannot stick to respectability as 'monotheists' simply by affirming that there is one divine family, one 'Godhead' or 'Godness', one font of divinity. They would neither claim that various gods are parts of Amun-Re and that all others are manifestations either of Amun-Re or his parts  make the religion monotheistic. But, if that is the criteria then it appears that ST- Christianity could be regarded as polytheistic as well.

## MONOTHEISM OR POLYTHEISM:

There are still many other differences between the Amun-Re theology and ST- Christianity. There are three such differences (a) the Theban creation myth seems to recognize primordial divinities (like Nun) apart from Amun-Re; (b) the divine beings of St- Christianity, but not (obviously) of Amun-Re theology, stand in relations of necessary mutual interdependence; and (c) the pantheon apparently still includes various divinities (e.g. Osiris, Isis, etc) who seem not to be among the proper arts of Amun – Re.[16]

 In the early and modern age, christianity have faith in a wide array of superhuman and supernatural beings besides Persons of the Trinity, for example angels and demons. It is assumed that the recognition of such beings is not a threat to the monotheistic character of christianity. Simply, though the term 'god' in casual sense might be equated to such beings but none of them are taken to be gods on a par with God. The same is argument also applies to Amun-Re theology. Still, it is important to accept the fact that there is controversy about whether and to what extent ancient religion was polytheistic. For Bonnet, the 'dissolution of polytheism' consists  precisely in the growing view that the various gods and goddesses of the pantheon are all just manifestations of a single-divine reality The conception of god, which syncretism introduced into local cults....had everywhere the same basic tenor. Everywhere there prevailed the idea of the primeval deity and cosmic ruler who at the beginning created and who continues to influence and sustain everything. The pious encountered this One, in whom all divine efficacy ultimately resides and is based, in forms that varied from place to place. This experience left the way open for the insight that under all names and manifestations  only the one, intrinsically identical reality is apprehended and worshipped.[17]

But Erik Hornung does not agree with Bonnet's view that syncretism dissolves polytheism. He does not take issue with the suggestion that polytheism would dissolve if the various gods and goddesses of the pantheon came to be seen as manifestations of a single divine reality. Thus he argue:

It is clear that syncretism does not contain any 'monotheistic tendency' but rather forms a strong counter-current to monotheism – so long as it is kept within bounds. Syncretism softens henotheism, the concentration of worship on a single god, and stops it from turning into monotheism, for ultimately syncretism means that a single god is not isolated from the others : in Amun one apprehends and worships also Re, or in Harmachis other forms of the sun gods. In this way,

the awareness is sharpened that the divine partner of humanity is not one but many.[18]

The orthodox christianity believes in the existence of multiple divine beings. Thus, in simple term to polytheism can be defined as 'belief in multiple divine beings' as, Social Trinitarians rightly point out. Social Trinitarians belief that their reconstruals of polytheism have respectability. Social Trinitarians believes in the relationship between Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the Christian God. It could be well argued now that if there is anything like consensus on the nature of either monotheism or polytheism. Inspite of these differences there is a marked absence of support to prove that Social Trinitarians is monotheism. The similarity between ST- Christianity and Egypt's Amun-Re theology compel to such conclusion that ST-Christianity is not monotheistic but polytheism.

## CONCLUSION:

The examination of Egyptian syncretism is well observed by scholars like Hornug, Baines and others. They believe that Amun-Re theology is similar of ST- christianity . Since Amun-Re theology is polytheistic, the close similarity between them favours a view that ST- Christianity is also polytheistic . There has been controversy about nature of Egyptian religion in the New Kingdom and during other periods. This controversy supports the polytheistic nature of ST- Christianity. The question was whether Egyptian religion was polytheistic or the gods of Egypt were best regarded as manifestations of a single divine reality. On the interpretation of the Amun-Re theology the answer is in negative. Likewise, on the Social Trinitarian's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not manifestations of a single divine reality either. Thus, again, both theologies seem best understood as polytheistic. If the doctrine of the Trinity according to which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is supposed to be manifestations of a single divine reality, it could be concluded that Christianity

should be content to believe  polytheistic nature of religion. But the issue is never ending debate on Christian concept of monotheism and polytheism. Much more can be articulated and written on the subject  which can critically examines one or the other theory of religions.

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