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Course Guidebook

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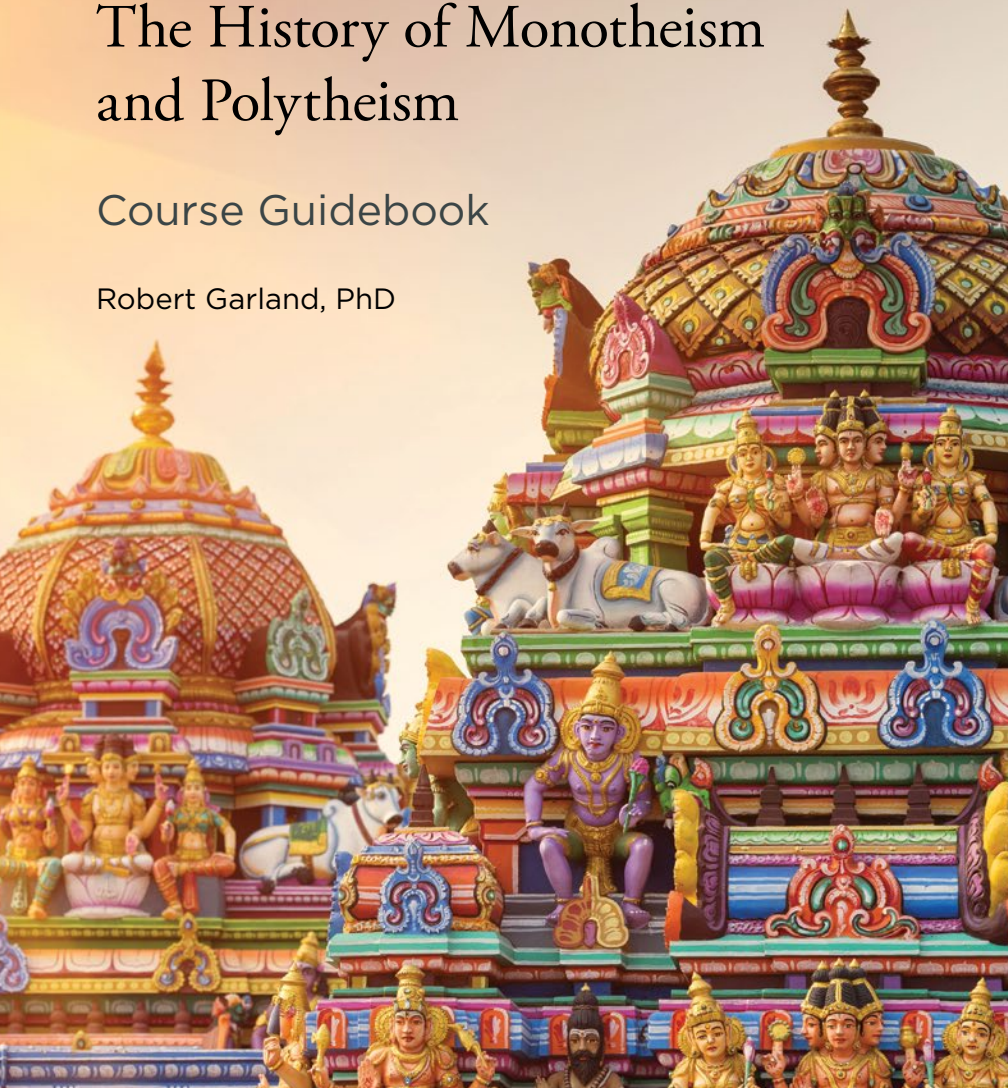

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A Human Instinct

In this course, you will explore how religion manifests itself in the lives and minds of a richly diverse humanity over time and space. In particular, you will explore the similarities and differences between monotheism and polytheism, how both have much to commend them—as well as much to deplore in how they have been interpreted by fanatics—and how they are intimately related, despite their apparent opposition. You will be investigating a subject that goes to the heart of human existence and our problematic relationship with something greater than ourselves. This is all part of the human search for meaning in a universe that provides no ready answers.

Where Does Religious Belief Come From?

You shouldn't think of polytheism as an outmoded belief system that has had its day. It's estimated that 80% of India's population of 1.4 billion people are Hindu and thus adhere to a polytheistic style of worship. And that's not counting other manifestations of polytheism that are alive and well in the world—neo-paganism, as it's called.

When you think about all the different religions out there—past and present, in every corner of the globe—it's reasonable to ask a very basic question: Where does the instinct to worship come from? Is it inspired by the desire to find answers or by the desire to believe in a power outside of and greater than oneself? Is it, at root, merely a coping mechanism? Is it an outmoded evolutionary development?

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim offered one hypothesis that still attracts considerable attention. He argued that what defines religious belief among all human communities is its ability to create a sense of group identity and cohesiveness. In other words, practicing religion is a way of marking

which "tribe," so to speak, you belong to. In fact, the Latin word *religio* means just that—the bond that exists between a particular group of people and their god or gods.

In a similar vein, Samuel Johnson, who compiled an influential, early dictionary of the English language, defined religion as "a system of divine faith and worship as opposite to others." And David Sloan Wilson, in *Darwin's Cathedral,* went so far as to suggest that religiosity was at the outset a useful genetic trait, which had the consequence of making social groups more united by enforcing a strict moral code—a binding facet of human behavior that has helped us survive.

One fundamental challenge that all religious thinkers face is how to imagine, how to conceive of, one's God or gods. The easiest way, of course, is to imagine her or him as a human being, which is what the author of the first chapter of Genesis seems to be doing in the following: "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" Similarly, the Olympian deities, so named because they live on Mount Olympus in northern Greece, were conceived of exactly like ourselves.

The 6th-century-BCE philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon saw the fallacy of picturing the gods as human beings. "If you asked a cow or a horse or a lion to draw a picture of his god," he observed, "each would make a shape similar to their bodies." This demonstrates the difficulty of thinking of God other than in human terms.

The Origins of Religious Practice

In addition to studying the many ways that worshippers have conceived of God across the millennia, scholars have also asked, What was the origin of religious practice? When did it first emerge? The fact is that they have no idea how or when humans first began worshipping a deity or deities. The origins of religion are, to coin a phrase, "shrouded in mystery."

Mircea Eliade, a pioneering scholar in the study of comparative religion, coined the term *homo religiosus* (religious humanity) to denote our species. One might even argue that the beginning of our evolutionary journey as

Homo sapiens dates back to the moment when our ancestors first began to ponder the nature of existence and decided that the visible world might not be all that exists.

The earliest traces of some kind of a religious belief system go back to the Neanderthal period. Paleoanthropologists have found a grave in Shanidar Cave in northern Iraq—dated to 70,000 years ago—containing sediment from ancient pollen, which indicates that the body had been covered with branches and flowers. This practice suggests a moment in human history when our ancestors were beginning to believe that something survives death, even if that something is neither palpable nor what one would call spiritual but just a memory of a personality to be honored.

The earliest possible pieces of evidence of a belief in a deity are Paleolithic images in terracotta and occasionally stone of a heavily pregnant woman with enlarged buttocks and breasts, often called Venus figurines. They've been found all over the then-inhabited world—in Asia, Africa, and Europe. In the past, scholars interpreted such figurines as representations of a mother goddess.

Although it's impossible to know for certain what any image from prehistory—before the time of writing—represents, the Venus figurines are the first in a long line of images that celebrate what one might blandly call the female principle and that invest such a principle with power.

VENUS OF WILLENDORF

The Beginnings of Belief

Probably by 10,000 BCE at the latest—the approximate date of the Neolithic Revolution—humans believed that the world was governed by forces that they needed to placate and get on their side. The Neolithic Revolution is a watershed in human history, when many people ceased to be nomads, started to live in settled communities, and began practicing agriculture.

Farming would have seemed a magical occupation back then. Living during that era, you would have sensed only very dimly the connection between cause and effect. The cycle of the seasons would have been a complete mystery. So, all the actions you performed would have been accompanied by ritual to secure the favor of the forces, whether gods or spirits, that influenced every natural event.

While it might be tempting—especially for Jews, Christians, and Muslims—to think of monotheism as a more advanced and evolved system than polytheism, no one is sure that the first worshippers were polytheists. In this regard, one should leave room for the possibility that monotheism arrived on the scene first and polytheism came later. It's conceivable, in other words, that humans first began worshipping, say, either a sky god or a mother goddess and that the pantheon of gods and goddesses who populate polytheistic belief systems represent a later stage of development. There is a sky god in many belief systems, for example, the Greek god Zeus and his Roman counterpart, Jupiter. Over the course of time, other gods and goddesses came to be worshipped, and the power of the original sky god contracted. This, at least, is a possible theory.

The other contender for first out of the gate is the so-called mother goddess who is the source of all fruitfulness and fertility and is endlessly creative. She enables human and animal life to continue through procreation. With the invention of agriculture, she came to oversee the growing season and the harvest. Along with the Venus figurines, other figurines from the Cycladic isles of Bronze Age Greece may also be fertility goddesses. They depict women with their arms placed over their stomachs. They were placed in graves, perhaps to signal that the dead have been returned to the womb of Earth or even to hint at rebirth in the afterlife.

Did monotheism precede polytheism, or vice versa? We'll never know. But perhaps that's the wrong question. Hinduism looks like a polytheistic system of belief to outsiders, but to Hindus, it has strong monotheistic tendencies. Perhaps monotheism and polytheism evolved in tandem.

Technical Terms and Course Perspective

In addition to the terms *polytheism* and *monotheism*, there's also *henotheism*—the belief in a plurality of gods, one of whom is ascendant and more powerful than the rest—and *monism*, the belief in one God who manifests herself or himself through other gods and goddesses. Then there's *theriomorphism*, aka *zoomorphism*, which ascribes divinity to animals. Some theriomorphic deities have human bodies but animal heads, while others are completely animal.

Another important word is *theism*, which is an umbrella term referring to belief in either God or gods. *Deism*, meanwhile, is the belief in a creator who is largely uninvolved in the universe he's created. He's missing in action, so to speak. Finally, there's *autotheism*—the belief system that says divinity exists in oneself, as Buddhists maintain. Religions don't have to be one thing or the other, of course, and you should be wary of pigeonholing. Hinduism, for instance, has elements of polytheism, monism, and theriomorphism.

The word s*yncretism* means the combination of elements from different religious systems, both beliefs and practices. Roman religion is an example of syncretism insofar as it borrowed heavily from Greek religion, identifying its major gods with the 12 Olympian deities. In addition, Christianity borrowed from Judaism and Islam from both Judaism and Christianity, so both are syncretistic.

Religion divides nations from nations, tribes from tribes, and countries from countries, not to mention the divisions within specific religions, including Sunnis from Shi'ites, Catholics from Protestants, Reform Jews from Orthodox Jews, and so on. However, this course is not going to debate whether religious behavior or the religious instinct in humans is intrinsically bad or backward. It's also not going to pontificate on the merits and/or defects of one religious system over another. Instead, it will approach the subject with respect for all belief systems—so long as they see it as their goal to promote goodness and tolerance and love and do not denigrate other belief systems.

In a similar vein, the course will not discuss the rights and wrongs of monotheistic systems versus those of polytheistic systems. It is about what attitudes, observances, and beliefs make them alike and what attitudes, observances, and beliefs distinguish them. There will be a focus on Hinduism instead of Jainism and Sikhism, on Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman religion instead of Aztec and Mayan religion, and on African and American folk religions at the expense of Polynesian, Amazonian, and Australian folk religions. Covering so much ground will bring into sharp focus the deep divisions between polytheism and monotheism, although you may be surprised to discover that they share more in common than you might think at first sight.

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2

The Many and the One

There is no neat divide between polytheistic and monotheistic systems. According to Jacob Olupona, “the complex interconnectivity between the Supreme God and the lesser divinities makes African religions difficult to classify as either monotheistic or polytheistic.” In this regard, this is not a zero-sum situation where polytheism and monotheism are mutually exclusive. In this lecture, you will begin your examination of what both connects and divides polytheism and monotheism and establish some general principles for both.

Features Common to Polytheistic and Monotheistic Religions

Religions the world over share many features in common, whether they are polytheistic or monotheistic. These are markers of identity that have characterized belief systems at all periods of recorded history and help define the religious community.

- God or the gods can be contacted by prayer.
- There is a belief in divine intervention, which manifests itself in a variety of occurrences, both good and bad for humans. These include the outcome of a battle, recovery from illness, the birth or death of a child, a bumper crop or a failed harvest, and so on.
- Divine beings or their messengers make occasional appearances on earth, especially to those who are devout.
- A god or the gods receive especial attention on recurring days throughout the year.
- A god or the gods are invoked in rites of passage connected with the life cycle, including birth, coming of age, marriage, and death.
- There are designated places of worship that are regarded as sacred.
- Dietary rules prohibit the eating of certain foods.
- Worshipers place a higher value on faith than they do on reason and logic.
- Worshipers adhere to a shared set of observances and consider certain actions and words in special contexts to be taboo.
- Worshipers adopt a specific dress code to self-identify and exhibit a vibrant sense of community.
- Worshipers attach a symbolic significance to fire and water and make pilgrimages to holy sites.

Differences between Polytheistic and Monotheistic Religions

There are also some essential differences between polytheism and monotheism. Although these points of difference aren't absolute, those outlined here generally apply.

- In polytheism, gods are immanent—they are part of creation and were themselves created—whereas in monotheism, God is transcendent and therefore outside creation.
- In polytheism, gods incorporate and are responsible for both good and evil. In monotheism, God tends to promote goodness.
- Polytheists don't get hot and bothered if you worship a deity whom they don't. However, monotheists maintain that their God is the only god, and if you don't worship that god, you'll end up in Hell or the equivalent. As a polytheist, you can't possibly worship all the gods that are out there, so you worship the ones that are most likely to be of help to you personally.
- Polytheists don't proselytize—don't seek out worshippers—whereas both Christianity and Islam are in competition with one another to gain converts.
- Polytheists prioritize observance and ritual over belief, whereas the opposite tends to be true among monotheists. In consequence, polytheists have little or no incentive to persecute those who hold eccentric viewpoints about the gods.
- Lacking any centralized authority, polytheism has no concept of heresy. Polytheists know what gives pleasure to the deity whose assistance they're invoking, and that's all that matters. Monotheists place great emphasis on doctrine and dogma, and any deviation from standard belief is deemed heretical.
- Polytheisms tend to be much more concerned with human well-being than with the hereafter—with getting on in life and having fun.
- Polytheists believe that their gods have knowledge of the future and send signs that diviners can interpret. For the average monotheist, there's no hotline to the future.

- Another key difference is that monotheistic systems resist change, and when it does take place, it is cataclysmic. In contrast, polytheists aren't invested in a fixed or agreed interpretation of the divine, which means they are very adaptable to change.
- Polytheistic gods have better things to do than concern themselves with the plight of humans, which means you have to give them an offering or make a sacrifice to get their attention. However, the Abrahamic God—the god of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is always available.
- Polytheistic systems are based on the principle of reciprocity, and what every god wants is something materialistic, like a nice big statue made of bronze, silver, or even gold. By contrast, the Abrahamic God is concerned with good behavior.
- Polytheists invest considerable power in ancestors and spirits, which are capable of using their powers for both good and evil. Monotheists consider such beings to be exclusively demonic.
- Polytheistic systems are inherently unstable since individual cults are in constant competition with one another both for limited resources and for worshippers.

Polytheism	Monotheism
Believe gods are immanent	Believe God is transcendent
Believe gods cause good and evil	Believe God is responsible for good
Allow worship to any deity	Accept worship of only God
Do not proselytize	Seek new converts
Prioritize ritual over belief	Prioritize belief over ritual
Lack a centralized authority	Place great emphasis on doctrine and dogma
Are concerned with human well-being during life	Are more concerned with the hereafter
Believe gods have knowledge of the future	Believe God does not send signs of the future
Have pantheons that are in constant flux	Resist change
Get gods' attention with offerings/sacrifice	Trust God is readily available
Value reciprocity	Value good behavior
Invest considerable power in ancestors and spirits	Believe spirits are demonic
Are relatively unstable	Are relatively stable

Sacred Literature

All three Abrahamic religions and some polytheistic systems promulgate worship through literature. Broadly speaking, this literature can be divided into two categories, as follows: literature of revelation, which claims to be dictated by God or gods; and literature that tells stories of gods and humans, which is a human artifact.

One of the earliest works in the latter category is the so-called Epic of Gilgamesh, whose earliest parts, written in a Semitic language known as Sumerian, can be dated to 2600 BCE. Sumeria lay in Mesopotamia, roughly modern-day Iraq, home to several cultures that shared a similar religious tradition and worshiped similar, if not identical, gods. The Epic of Gilgamesh highlights that, by around the middle of the 3rd millennium BCE at the latest, human beings were pondering in a highly sophisticated way their place in the order of existence, the meaning of life, their relationship with their gods, and their responsibility to others. However, the Epic of Gilgamesh makes no claim to being a sacred text. It's a human artifact.

Hindu "scriptures"—the word is in quotes—comprise both works that are believed to have been divinely revealed and works of human composition, and as with Greek religion, there's no single authoritative text. The oldest, the four Vedas, claim to be divinely revealed. They date to the 2nd millennium BCE. In contrast, the Upanishads, composed between 800 and 400 BCE, were dictated by sages to their disciples, so they obviously weren't divinely revealed. There are also epic poems that reached their final form much later, notably the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. These, too, are acknowledged human artifacts.

What about monotheism? The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, aka the Old Testament, are said to have been written by Moses. Moses wasn't God, but we're told that the Lord spoke to him "as a man speaks to his friend"—so evidently these five books were written with the approval of the Lord, if not at his prompting. Early Christianity is represented by the New Testament, comprising the four Canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This is followed by the Acts of the Apostles, several letters, mostly written by Saint Paul, and, finally, the Book of Revelation. It's a striking fact that there

are no surviving Christian writings contemporary with Jesus's lifetime. The earliest of the Canonical Gospels, Saint Mark's, was written around 60 to 80 CE, which is to say, two or even three generations after Jesus's death. The gospels don't claim to be divinely revealed. The only New Testament book that expressly makes that claim is Revelation.

A revolutionary step was taken in 1943 by Pope Pius XII, who promulgated an encyclical titled *Divino afflante spiritu*, which allowed Catholic scholars to study the Bible in alignment with what is called biblical science. This meant they were now at liberty to undertake textual criticism—to investigate how and at what times the Bible had been composed, though this has had little effect upon Catholic teaching.

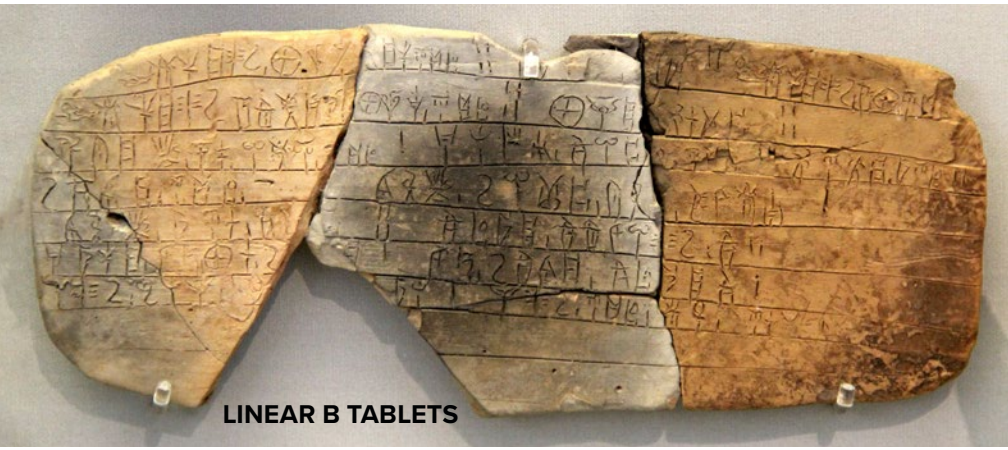
Muslim scholars, by contrast, are not permitted to engage in textual criticism since, according to Islam, the Quran was uncreated. *Quran* means "recitation." It's a recitation in the sense that it's a record of the divine utterances that the angel Gabriel recited to Prophet Muhammad. Muslims believe that the majority, if not all, of the verses were written down during the time of Muhammad's ministry, which began in 610 and continued until his death in 632. The authoritative text was established about 650.

The Quran makes reference to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joseph, and Jesus, along with some Arabian prophets, but there's no coherent narrative structure. And Jesus isn't especially important. He's certainly not the redeemer, nor is he a deity. In other words, Islam is a syncretistic religion, which has borrowed from Christianity and Judaism. Muhammad is the last of the prophets, though, in the Quran, he's conspicuous by his absence, being hardly ever mentioned.

The Quran is so holy that a Muslim isn't permitted to handle it unless they are ritually pure. It's also the primary source for Islamic law. It contains detailed ordinances regarding social life, such as marriage, inheritance, and, notably, punishment. Muslims also seek guidance from the hadiths, collections of sayings of the Prophet and accounts of his life, which were written down in the first 3 centuries after Muhammad's death.

The Genesis of Religions

All forms of religious expression have a genesis, some kind of beginning. Sometimes, the memory of that genesis is preserved, but often, it isn't. Scholars know nothing about the origins of Mesopotamian or Egyptian religions, which are all prehistoric.



LINEAR B TABLETS

The origins of Greek religion must predate the 14th century BCE, when a series of fires destroyed Minoan and Mycenaean palaces. That's because, among their charred remains, baked clay tablets were found in a script known as Linear B, making mention of Poseidon, Zeus, Hera, and other deities from the historical period. However, where they came from or how they originated as deities is a mystery.

Judaism doesn't have any defining point at which it started to be a religion, though the Hebrew Bible does provide a few hints, such as the Lord's covenant with Abraham, described in Genesis 17. And at what exact point did Christianity become a distinct religion from Judaism, out of which it grew? Jesus wasn't a Christian, after all. He was a practicing Jew—a point easily overlooked. When he began his mission in Galilee, perhaps around 26 CE, he was the leader of a Jewish reform movement.

At what moment in his short career did Jesus reach the conclusion that there was no point in trying to reform Judaism from within? When he entered Jerusalem with his supporters at Passover, he was issuing a bold challenge to the Jewish authorities, for which he paid with his life. It was, of course, the crucifixion that set Christianity on its course, though that doesn't mean that a new religion immediately took wing.

In the case of Islam, Muhammad saw his first vision of the angel Gabriel in a cave outside Mecca in 610. Three years later, he received the call to present himself as a teacher, and from then on, he began to attract converts in Mecca. In 622, he was forced to leave the area because of persecution, an event known as the Hegira, which marks the beginning of the Muslim era.

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3

A World Full of Defunct Gods

Ancient peoples were religious because their gods were powerful and because it was extremely dangerous to get on the wrong side of them. In this lecture, you will focus on polytheistic systems of belief whose origins go back at least 4,000, 5,000, or even 6,000 years BCE. In particular, you will explore the various types of polytheisms that existed in the ancient world and the ways in which worshippers sought to appropriate the assistance of their gods. By so doing, you will see how these defunct polytheisms offered little cheer, less comfort, and no consolation.

Early Polytheistic Worship and Theriomorphism

Indisputable evidence of a polytheistic system of belief derives from cuneiform tablets, or baked clay tablets inscribed with wedge-shaped symbols, dating from 3000 BCE onward. They indicate that peoples living in Mesopotamia—speakers of Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, and Hurrian—shared similar beliefs and observances: They believed in many gods; they performed the same set of rituals; and they had a uniform mythology.

One cuneiform tablet talks of a high priestess of Inanna—the goddess of war—who wrote a prayer known as "The Exaltation of Inanna," in which she seeks the goddess's help against a usurper who has taken over a nearby city. Elsewhere, Mesopotamian deities didn't seem to concern themselves much with the welfare of human beings. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, Inanna tries to seduce Gilgamesh, and when he rejects her—he knows that having a relationship with a goddess is a recipe for disaster—she curses him.

In Egypt, the earliest evidence for worship is even older. It comes from the Western Desert in Upper Egypt, where two tumuli, or artificial mounds, dated to about 4000 years BCE, were found to contain the bones of bulls and cows, which had been ceremonially buried. One of the most prominent Egyptian deities, at the latest from the 3rd millennium BCE onward, was Hathor, the goddess of motherhood and fertility. Hathor was depicted with either the head or ears of a cow—or, occasionally, even as a cow.

No religion came close to that of ancient Egypt in the prominence it accorded to theriomorphic deities—its belief in deities who have an animal aspect or manifestation. In addition to a cow deity, the Egyptians worshipped gods in the form of, for example, a bull, a falcon, an ibis, a jackal, a cat, and a lioness. The intriguing question is this: Did the Egyptians actually think of their gods in this form—as half-animal or half-human? Did they think of them in a more abstract way combining the qualities of animals and humans? Or did they actually worship these animals because of their belief in their special powers? Some scholars would argue that this last explanation is the origin of theriomorphism.

Greek religion also has a theriomorphic aspect. Athena was closely associated with the owl, Zeus with the eagle, and Hera with the peacock. But whereas the Greeks almost wholly dispensed with the belief that their gods could take on animal forms, the Egyptians never seem to have taken that step.

Anthropomorphism and Greek Mythology

Anthropomorphism is the belief that gods resemble humans in shape, and it is a feature of most, if not all, polytheistic systems. With regard to the Olympian gods of Greek mythology, the historian Herodotus believed that Homer and Hesiod, composing in the 7th century BCE, gave them their distinctive character, although the Greeks were probably thinking of their gods in human form much earlier.

With one exception, the gods are all physically perfect. They're all ageless and have human emotions. Most importantly, they're only marginally concerned with the welfare of human beings. They also like to do everything that people like to do—eat, drink, sleep, and have sex—and enjoy watching humans do things in their honor, like hold a festival.

They certainly aren't intellectual—their lives are given over to the pursuit of happiness—and they squabble among themselves like a highly dysfunctional human family. In short, the Greeks exploited the implications of anthropomorphism to promote a highly subversive view of their gods.

They're also everywhere and in everything: in your body, in your head, in the weather, in the crops, in the seasons, on the battlefield, in your home, and in what you eat and drink. The only human experience the gods steer clear of is death; the dying and the dead are a source of pollution, and the gods have to remain pure and uncorrupted. That means they have nothing to offer the dying by way of consolation.

Although the Olympians are immortal, they haven't existed from the beginning of time. They were born into this world and are a part of it. And they weren't the first dynasty of divine beings to rule the world, either. Zeus, "the father of gods and men," ousted his father Kronos, who had ousted his own father, Uranus. Whatever dynasty happens to be in power right now could at any moment be replaced by another. No wonder the gods feel a bit insecure.

The Olympians weren't the only gods you needed to placate and whose support you craved. You also needed to appease the chthonic deities. Chthonic comes from the Greek word *chthôn*, meaning "earth" because they lived underground. Chthonic deities comprise the gods of the underworld, the murdered dead, and the heroized dead. The Greeks also worshiped a multitude of unidentified divine spirits or half-deities known as daimones, whom they held responsible for much of the bad fortune that came their way, perhaps because they were fearful of attributing bad fortune to the gods.

Roman Religion

Roman religion was syncretistic, having much in common with Olympian religion, to which it owed a great deal. All its major deities had their Greek equivalent. Jupiter was equated with Zeus, Juno with Hera, Mars with Ares, Neptune with Poseidon, and so forth. As a Roman, you would invoke your gods primarily to improve the quality of your life. Roman religion also placed considerable emphasis on the *pax deorum*, the collective goodwill of the gods, achieved by correct observance punctiliously performed.

Scholars believe that Roman religion was in origin "animistic." This term derives from the Latin word *anima*, meaning "spirit," a spirit being something less clearly defined and less powerful than a god. In other words, early

Romans, before they encountered the Greeks and were influenced by their belief system, put their faith in vague powers they called numina, which had very precise functions but little, if any, physical identity. Even in later times, the Romans didn't invest their gods with the same palpability with which the Greeks endowed theirs.

Though the major Roman deities like Jupiter, Venus, and Neptune didn't expect their worshippers to display the qualities of obedience, love, and humility associated with most religious systems you're familiar with, a quintessential virtue they did expect from them was *pietas*, from which the somewhat watered-down word *piety* derives. *Pietas* relates to the duty and respect that one owes as a human embedded in a web of relationships. Romans exhibited *pietas*, due deference, to the gods, to their native country, to their parents, and to the dead. It was an attribute without any modern equivalent of equal force.

In addition to state religion—religious observance concerned with the good of the community as a whole—ancient peoples also worshiped in the home. The Romans paid special attention to what is collectively called their household gods. Especially important were the Penates, the spirits of the storeroom, whose job it was to ensure that the family had enough food in the larder. Also ranked among the household gods were the dead, who were extremely important to the Romans and took many forms. Collectively, they called them the *maiores*, the greater ones, because they deserved respect and veneration, not least because they guaranteed the welfare of their descendants. They also prayed to the *genius,* or protective spirit, of the head of the household known as the paterfamilias. The paterfamilias was the embodiment, so to speak, of the family.

Purity, Omens, and Spiritual Enlightenment

Polytheistic systems place a great deal of emphasis on the distinction between ritual purity and pollution. The Greeks believed that pollution, which they called miasma, was released into the atmosphere, rather like a virus, especially

by homicide and by corpses awaiting burial. Unless expiatory rites were conducted to eliminate the pollution, it was capable of blighting an entire community.

The Romans were equally concerned about the effects of pollution. One of the ways this concern expressed itself was in their belief that the city's sacred hearth must be tended by six Vestal Virgins. So extreme and so paranoid was this belief that if a Vestal Virgin was found to have broken her vow of chastity, she was buried alive. Even if only found guilty of an indiscretion, she would be beaten with rods.

Pollution also plays its part in monotheistic systems, as in the Jewish ban on having sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman. But in the case of the Greeks and Romans, it represented an almost existential threat to the community.

Alongside this preoccupation with pollution, polytheists took a keen interest in signs and omens—through which, they believed, gods communicate with humans. These signs include the flight of birds, especially that of eagles and vultures, the health or otherwise of the entrails of a sacrificial animal, meteorological phenomena, such as lightning, and the eating habits of chickens. It was therefore vital to take the auspices, as the procedure of interpreting signs is called, before going to war or when facing any other life-threatening crisis. Another way of discovering the future was consulting oracular utterances preserved in ancient writings, such as the Sibylline Books, which the Roman Senate consulted before taking a major decision. The foremost Greek god of prophecy was Apollo, and his most important shrine was located at Delphi in Central Greece. A visit to Delphi was another way to find out what the future held in store.

Polytheisms are by definition organic—they are living, constantly changing entities. In the Roman imperial period, two deities in particular made serious inroads into the religious landscape, both from abroad. One was Mithra, god of justice and oath-taking, whose cult originated in modern-day Iran and who became popular among the military in the 2nd century CE. On Roman monuments, Mithra is depicted killing a bull, perhaps to symbolize the yearly cycle from death to rebirth. Mithraism became connected with the Platonic

belief that the soul must liberate itself from the body. One hymn seems to suggest that Mithra concerned himself with the good of mankind, and his devotees underwent initiation and performed secret rites.

The other deity who came to prominence in this period was the Egyptian goddess Isis, who had features in common with Ceres, the Roman goddess of the harvest. The majority of Isis's adherents were women, who wore a distinctive dress, tied at the front in a knot shaped like the Egyptian hieroglyph for ankh, meaning "life."


ISIS

It's tempting to think that the cults of Mithra and Isis foreshadowed Christianity and, in some sense, contributed to it, as both offered salvation of sorts to their worshippers. This was widely touted in the first half of the 20th century, but it's no longer in favor today. However, one cannot discount the possibility that both polytheists and Christians were seeking what might be called spiritual enlightenment in the early centuries CE as opposed to a system that, at best, only promised reciprocity between humans and gods—the "I give so that you will give" mentality. There was, in other words, something in the air that transcended and linked both polytheism and Christianity.

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4

A World Full of Living Gods

In this lecture, you will explore polytheistic systems of belief that, far from being defunct, are very much alive and command huge numbers of worshippers in the contemporary world—primarily in India but also in sub-Saharan Africa and North America. You will begin by examining the beliefs and deities of Hinduism, even though it's debatable whether this is actually a polytheistic religion. Then, you will explore some features of folk religions as well as important commonalities between Native American and African religious practices and their connection to Christianity.

Hinduism

Like the word *Jewish*, *Hindu* is an ethnic term as well as signaling adherence to a particular belief system or systems. Its beginnings are obscure, though it probably originated among the peoples who lived in the Indus valley region around 3000 BCE. There isn't a founder figure whom Hindus revere, and the study of Hinduism is complicated by the fact that there's no particular doctrine that all Hindus would regard as central to their religion. A further complication is that there are hundreds of different sects distinguished by caste, language, economics, and geography. It's a very decentralized religion, one whose core beliefs are only loosely defined.

It's true that there are gods whom all Hindus revere, like Vishnu, Shiva, and Lakshmi. However, a deity who has a strictly regional aspect and does not occupy a prominent place in the Hindu pantheon may well be more significant to their worshippers than one of these principal gods. Another point to note is that some Hindu sects are identified by their single most favored deity, their *ishta devata*. Even the sound *om*, which announced the beginning of creation, has multiple meanings from one set of believers to the next.

Closely connected to Hinduism are the three heterodox religions (as Hindus see them): Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Buddhism, for instance, incorporates key Hindu concepts, like dharma, karma, and the cycle of rebirth, and Buddhists pray to Hindu gods.

Hinduism serves two basic and not necessarily complementary goals. One is to assist the worshipper in achieving moksha—liberation from the repeated cycle of life and death. The other is to assist the worshipper to enhance their quality of life on earth by achieving happiness and peace. The Hindu religion is therefore both deeply spiritual and deeply worldly, which distinguishes it from Christianity and Islam, both of which regard life on earth as a preparation for the life to come.

To achieve happiness on earth and liberation from the cycle of life and death, the Hindu must aspire to dharma—the cosmic law that underpins the social order on earth and is compounded of justice, righteousness, duty, and truth. Dharma is both universal and personal, so by contributing to the dharma of the cosmos, the devotee also achieves their own dharma. Another important

concept is karma, which defines the process by which one's deeds, both good and bad, determine not only the quality of life in this world but also the nature of one's future reincarnation.

How to achieve liberation from the cycle of repeated births is the subject of the *Bhagavadgita*, which constitutes a part of the epic tale known as the *Mahabharata*, the earliest part of which is thought to have been composed in the 14th century BCE. Due to the importance and influence of the *Bhagavadgita*, disciplined action became a way to achieve liberation because it gave spiritual value to actions undertaken for the good of others. It was a concept that informed Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance to British rule in India and his subsequent campaign for the subcontinent's independence, ultimately achieved in 1947.

The Upanishads, the Hindu Pantheon, and Religious Rigidity

Something of a revolution in Hindu thinking took place in the 6th century CE when the status of the Vedas—Hindu scriptures thought to have been divinely inspired—diminished. In their place, the Upanishads, which weren't divinely inspired, rose to prominence. A central tenet of the Upanishads is that the world humans inhabit is one of appearances only and that this is what causes all their suffering and pain. Only by striving to escape from illusion will the soul also escape from the cycle of repeated births and deaths and become one with ultimate reality, one with the universal spirit. Union with the divine is enabled by yoga, the set of disciplined practices that enables humans to escape from this world of appearances and ultimately realize their spiritual essence.

What do the Upanishads say about the Hindu pantheon? All Hindu deities are, on some level, manifestations, or avatars, of a single supreme creator god, which is one reason why Hinduism is both a polytheism and a monotheism. Three preeminent deities constitute the Hindu Trinity, or Trimurti: Brahma, who created the universe; Shiva, who destroyed it but stepped back to allow

creation to take place again; and Vishnu, who guards it. Also very popular is Ganesha, an elephant-headed god who has a rotund body, owing to a particular fondness for sweets.

KALI

All Hindu deities have their own *vahana*, their own animal or bird, which is their personal mode of transportation. For example, Varuna, the god of oceans, rides on a crocodile. There are several Hindu deities who are capable of inducing fear, although this doesn't mean they're evil. They're typically represented with big, circular eyes, are armed with weapons, and wear skull and bone ornamentation. One of the most prominent is Kali, the goddess of death, violence, sexuality, and, paradoxically it might seem, motherly love. She has become a feminist icon in recent years—a symbol of feminine empowerment.

When Christian missionaries first encountered Hindus in the 17th and 18th centuries, they were scandalized by what they took to be "idol worship." They could not comprehend that there was any spiritual aspect of Hinduism. To this day, many Westerners become fixated on Hinduism's many colorful gods and ignore the spiritual quest at its core.

Another aspect of Hinduism that is even more problematic to Westerners is India's caste system, which has been in place for at least 2,500 years. At the top are the Brahmans, the priestly caste, who are respected, venerated even, because of their greater ritual purity. Next come the Kshatriyas, comprising warriors and rulers. Third are the Vaishyas—the merchants, farmers, and traders. Fourth are the Sudras, the laborers. Outside of the caste system are the Dalit, once called the "untouchables," owing to the fact that they are

ritually impure. They are the street sweepers and latrine cleaners. The Dalit make up about one-fifth of India's population, and though they are protected by the law, they are frequent victims of violent crime and are still denied basic human rights, including access to education.

Change is slowly occurring, especially in the cities. People of different castes live side by side, and intercaste marriages—once unthinkable—are becoming more common. Even so, the caste system continues to divide Hindu society into a rigid hierarchy. India today is a secular democracy, which means that Hinduism is not a state religion. Though Hindus account for some 80% of the population, there are also a large number of Muslims and a smaller number of Christians and Jews.

The Folk Religions of Sub-Saharan Africa and North America

"Folk religions" are indigenous belief systems lacking an official doctrine or officially established observances but exhibiting an overarching similarity of belief and observance over an extensive region. No folk religion comes with an authoritative statement of belief or with prescriptions regarding worship, such as in the Quran. What folk religions often do possess are sacred myths, which are reinterpreted from one generation to the next as they are transmitted orally. There is therefore no commonly agreed version of any myth. Rather, there are as many variations as there are cultures.

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to nearly 1,000 different cultures and as many different languages, let alone dialects. This inevitably creates important divisions within the religious system called folk religion and baffles efforts to come to terms with it. In African folk religions, the relationship between the chief deity and lesser deities varies from community to community. In most practical matters, however, worshippers seek help from lesser deities or spirits. Only when their community as a whole is at risk do they invoke the supreme creator god. The lesser deities or spirits take a variety of forms—for example, animal spirits and spirits associated with thunder, wind, mountains, and waterfalls—and often appear to humans in dreams or in visions.

The deities or spirits can be contacted through prayers and sacrifices. Neither wholly good nor wholly malign, they are at the beck and call of their petitioners, who determine in what manner they want them to apply their powers. Medicine men and women use them to cure illnesses, and witches and sorcerers use them to do harm to one's enemies. When death occurs, relatives often suspect that witchcraft has been used against the deceased.

Medicine men and women also feature in North American folk religion. Rainmaking rituals, too, are common to many folk religions. Though it is the job of rainmakers to secure rain primarily by prayer and ritual, they're also trained in detecting weather conditions and animal habits that indicate that precipitation is imminent.

There's another point of similarity between Native American and sub-Saharan folk religions in that have both been heavily influenced by Christianity. Spanish and French missionaries began competing with one another to convert Native Americans from the middle of the 16th century onward, and this process continued well into the 20th century. Native Americans were banned from speaking their mother tongue, forced into boarding schools where they were subjected to indoctrination, and forbidden to practice their spiritual traditions. This remained official policy until 1978—nearly 200 years after the Constitution was signed—when Congress finally passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, which guaranteed the religious rights of Native Americans.

Native American Religious Practice

A characteristic feature of many Native American religions is the vision quest, in which, for example, young boys are sent out into the wild to seek assistance from a guardian spirit, who will help them surmount the many trials of existence. In the course of their search, they may experience severe privation, including cold and hunger, and be exposed to a variety of threats. These encounters may induce in them a trance state, which is the purpose of the quest.

A ceremony common to several Native American peoples is the Sun Dance, which requires fasting and abstinence from water. Celebrants dance for days until they collapse. The dance is intended to secure the goodwill of the gods

in the coming year for the entire community. In addition, Native Americans have a close kinship with animals. Horses, in particular, are invested with a spiritual quality. For this reason, they sometimes dress as animals, whose actions they imitate.

Though many observances are strictly localized, one Native American observance with a national following and centralized structure is peyotism. It takes its name from the peyote cactus, which acts as a hallucinogenic drug, enabling worshippers to communicate with the divine. The peyote cactus has probably been used for religious purposes for thousands of years. Its adherents traditionally gather on Saturdays, praying and singing all night to the accompaniment of tin drums and gourd rattles. Peyotism has absorbed certain features of Christianity, including readings from the Bible during services. It thus has monotheistic tendencies, even though its roots lie in polytheistic folk religion.

It's extremely difficult for an outsider to enter the mindset of people who practice folk religion, in large part due to the important role they assign to magic. In a religious context, *magic* is a highly contentious term, both because it so easily elides into "trickery" or "deception" and because it implies a naive belief system whose objective is the manipulation of hidden powers for personal profit or gain. Even so, there's no denying that the practitioners of folk religions do resort to spells and magic, sometimes with the purpose of causing injury.

The future of folk religions the world over is not particularly rosy. In sub-Saharan Africa, both Christianity and Islam are vying for converts. In the US, irreparable damage has been done to indigenous belief systems—possibly as many as 80% of Native Americans now identify as Christian.

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5

The Beginnings of Monotheism

In this lecture, you'll focus on the beginnings of monotheism—not the origins, which are obscure, but the first incontrovertible evidence for belief in a single deity. When Jewish monotheism was taking root and when Christianity began to replace polytheism, thousands upon thousands of people would have found themselves caught between monotheism and polytheism. In this context, you will explore traces of monotheism in ancient Egypt and ancient Greece and investigate how the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—came to dominate the religious landscape.

Egyptian Religion and the Pharaoh Akhenaten

You might think that Egyptian religion was unambiguously polytheistic. After all, the Egyptian pantheon is a riot of deities. Yet, some scholars believe that monotheism first took root in Egypt, specifically in the cult of the pharaoh. The pharaoh was the living embodiment of the falcon god Horus. His job was to maintain divine order and harmony on earth. He was the high priest of every temple, and his body was sacrosanct.

One particular pharaoh, Akhenaten, came to the throne in 1353 BCE and died in 1336 BCE. Amun, protector of the pharaoh, was the chief deity at the time, but for some reason, Akhenaten rejected this god, along with the entire Egyptian pantheon. The one god he did worship was Aten, the sun disk, to whom he attributed all life. Throughout Egyptian history, contemporary politics had always dictated which deity was supreme. But what Akhenaten did, promoting one god at the expense of all others, was little short of revolutionary.

AKHENATEN AND NEFERTITI

Although scholars know very little about the working of this new religion, Akhenaten was an innovator, and the religious system he established has been aptly styled "a new theology of royalty." Strictly speaking, however, it wasn't an absolute monotheistic system because Akhenaten and his beautiful wife Nefertiti were also considered to be divine.

In other words, Akhenaten promoted a trinity: himself, Nefertiti, and Aten. One cannot rule out the possibility that his motive, in part, was to elevate his status in the eyes of his subjects, as he and his wife now belonged to a very exclusive club—a club of just three, much more exclusive than the club to which their predecessors had belonged with its multiplicity of deities.

Destroying the Old Gods

Akhenaten declared that the old gods were false gods, and stone carvers armed with chisels were dispatched throughout the land to scratch out their names from all the temples. Words were magical in Egypt and had a force of their own, so by destroying their names, he was destroying the gods.

Scholars know little about what steps—if any—Akhenaten took to educate his subjects about his new belief system. He may simply have handed down a directive forbidding the worship of the traditional gods. He was only on the throne for about 17 years, and it's difficult to believe that his revolutionary religion had time to gain much popular support. It must have been a terrifying time for ordinary Egyptians. The old religion had brought security and prosperity for centuries, but now, everything that everyone had believed in was suddenly denounced. Would the gods be angry? Would the world come to an end?

Akhenaten died in 1336 BCE, to be succeeded by his son Tutankhamun, the famous King Tut, who became king at the age of 8 and died at 18. Tut, or more likely his handlers, initiated the return to polytheism. He set up what is called the Restoration Stela. It's a record of all the temples that were in disrepair, which he restored. The Egyptian priesthood breathed a collective sigh of relief. It wasn't until the rise of Christianity that another monotheism would wage war against the pantheon of Egyptian gods.

The Beginnings of Jewish and Greek Monotheism

The earliest evidence in Jewish writings for monotheism dates to around 950 BCE—in what is called the Yahwist tradition in Genesis and Exodus. It is a fact, therefore, that the Jewish people have been worshipping the one God for at least 3,000 years, though it's quite likely they were doing so long before Genesis and Exodus were written down.

It's clear that the Israelites were polytheists originally because the first commandment states, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," which indicates that they were indeed worshiping "other gods" at the time. That is, the Lord left them free to go on worshipping as many other gods as they liked, just so long as they always remembered to put him first.

From early on, however, monotheism was at war with polytheism, and that tolerant commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," got interpreted as, "Thou shalt have no other gods besides me." In fact, it's doubtful if Judaism ever welcomed polytheists among its ranks.

It takes a huge emotional and psychological effort to abandon the many gods in favor of the one. When Moses went up onto Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the Israelites worshiped the image of a gold calf. Many other examples of them reverting to polytheism are included in later books of the Hebrew Bible to shame the Jewish people and to warn them of the consequences of such abominable actions. In the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 20, the Lord orders the Israelites to commit genocide as soon as they arrive in the Promised Land:

> But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth. But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites … so that they don't teach you to copy all their abominations.

This is the authentic voice of monotheists railing against polytheists.

Something akin to monotheism was also in the air in Greece in the 4th century BCE. At the end of Plato's *Apology*, Socrates says to the jury that has just condemned him to death, "So we part, you to life, me to death, but who goes to the better fate is unknown to all, except the god." "The god," as if, just perhaps, there's only one. So, it's fair to state that by 399 BCE, some thoughtful Greeks were calling into question the assumptions of Olympian religion with its colorful cast of characters. However, the worship of the Olympians continued into the 6th century CE and perhaps beyond.

Another indication that the Greeks were moving toward a kind of monotheism was the emergence of the cult of the healing god Asclepius, who had compassion for the human race. The most eloquent witness to Asclepius's powers is a hypochondriac philosopher called Aelius Aristides. After experiencing an epiphany of the god, he journeyed to the Asclepieion, the healing sanctuary of Asclepius, at Pergamum in 145 CE, where he resided for 2 years. What's interesting here is that Aristides epitomized a new type of pagan that emerged in the 2nd century CE—one who placed his entire well-being in the care of a single deity and made it his goal, as he put it, to be "at one with the god."

The Beginnings of Christianity and Islam

Christianity could not have spread so effectively in the first centuries of its existence were it not for the breadth and structure of the Roman Empire. Thanks to Rome's organizational genius, it was now relatively safe to travel long distances. That's exactly what Saint Paul did to spread Christ's message, making three journeys on land and sea throughout the entire Eastern Mediterranean in the 40s and 50s CE.

What also helped the spread of Christianity was the broadly accepted idea that a human being could be a god. For example, when Julius Caesar died on the Ides of March in 44 BCE, by decree of the Senate, he became *divus* Caesar, the deified Caesar. Subsequently, about 60 emperors were deified on their deaths. So, when the early Christians declared that a man—Jesus—was also a god, it would not have struck Rome's subjects as utterly bizarre. What was bizarre was that the Christians regarded as a god a man who had no social standing whatsoever and one, moreover, who had been crucified for advocating sedition.

Islam had a very different start from that of Christianity. The monotheism that Islam promoted came to birth in an extremely hostile environment in the city of Mecca, in modern-day Saudi Arabia. After 13 years or so of persecution, Muhammad decided that the only way Islam would survive was if he used force to extirpate polytheism. If he hadn't taken this step, it's extremely doubtful whether Islam would have become a world religion. It might not even have survived.

Muhammad was forced to leave Mecca in 622, but in 629, he and his followers returned and captured the city. By the time of his death in 632, they had gained control of the entire Arabian Peninsula. It was a remarkable conquest, only made possible by the unswerving conviction that they were fighting a holy war.

Conflict in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, monotheistic religions first came into conflict with one another. Within a century of its foundation, Islam had acquired more land than the Roman Empire possessed at its height. It was poised to conquer most of Europe when Charles Martel, founder of the Carolingian Empire, defeated the Muslims at Tours, in France, in 732. Europe, apart from Spain and Portugal, remained Christian, but the Holy Land, the cradle of Christianity, had already fallen to the Muslims in 638, and to this day, Christianity is a minority religion throughout the Middle East.

The loss of Jerusalem to this upstart religion affected Christians deeply. In November 1095, Pope Urban II delivered a rousing call to arms to recover Jerusalem, claiming that this was a duty that God himself enjoined on all those capable of bearing arms. In reward for their devotion, their sins would be forgiven, and they would be guaranteed entry to heaven. Here begins the period of the Crusades, which lasted from 1095 to 1291, an armed pilgrimage that caused destruction and mayhem across Europe and the Middle East.

Muslims were the primary target of the crusading armies, but in the course of their march, the Crusaders also massacred Jews—some 10,000 in Rhineland, Germany, alone. In the Middle Ages, antisemitism was rife. Such actions were

"justified" by the belief that Jews abducted and murdered Christian children for their ritual practices and had been responsible for the death of Jesus. It was thus the duty of Christians to punish them for these crimes.

When Jerusalem fell to the Crusaders in 1099, a bloody massacre took place. It's estimated that 70,000 inhabitants, most of them Muslims, were slaughtered in cold blood. The Fourth Crusade, which led to the capture of Constantinople, was equally horrific, but in this case, the victims were Orthodox Christians. That's because the Crusaders, who took their orders from the Latin church headed by the pope, deemed Orthodox Christians to be heretics. There were eight crusades in total, and the cost in lives, human misery, and sheer wasted effort is incalculable. The last Christian stronghold in the East was Acre, in modern-day Israel, which fell in 1291.

The Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, remain to this day locked in a rivalrous relationship based on negative stereotypes and mutual antagonism, misunderstanding, and disdain. And yet, from a moral and psychological viewpoint, in their search for spiritual enlightenment and in the virtues they uphold, they share much in common. It's a tragedy with ancient roots that is still playing out on the world stage today.

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6

How to Contact Your God

How do we get in touch with our God or gods? How do we worship him, her, or them? How do we get them on our side? For monotheists, it's easy—because the one God is everywhere. However, polytheists have a much harder time contacting the deity of their choice because their gods are generally "otherwise engaged." In this lecture, you'll look at three tried and tested ways of communicating with the gods: prayer, sacrifice, both animal and human, and votive offerings.

Polytheist Prayer

Monotheists, of course, pray to the one God. He's always listening, and he's always available. You don't have to be in a temple, synagogue, or church, and your prayer won't be any more effective if you are. Nor does it matter whether you are a member of the royal family, a bishop, or just an average Joe. You have equal access to the divine.

For polytheists, it's much harder. First, there are many gods and goddesses, and getting in touch with the one you want may be difficult. Second, your status actually does make a difference; a deity is much more likely to heed your petition if you're wealthy because there's the expectation that you'll give them something back. Third, polytheistic deities aren't particularly concerned about mere mortals. And finally, it helps to be in close physical proximity to the deity.

If you were an ordinary Egyptian, for example, and you wanted to pray to a major deity, you had to go to the outer walls of a temple. There would be a sculptural representation of a pair of ears called a "chapel of the hearing ear," and you'd whisper your prayer into that pair of ears. You couldn't get any closer because you weren't allowed inside the temple. If contacting major Egyptian gods posed a challenge, you could, however, pray to a domestic deity. Such gods didn't reside in big temples—they were happy to visit your home and were therefore much more approachable.

There's a big difference between monotheisms and polytheisms in what you should and can pray for. If you're a polytheist, it's legitimate to pray for things like wealth. In contrast, Christians mainly pray for those they love or for strength in facing challenges. There's no evidence that polytheists ever prayed for anyone other than themselves—apart from praying for the welfare of their family and, at a state festival, for the community as a whole. One thing is certain: No polytheist ever prayed to be made good—as in "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" from the Lord's Prayer. Similarly, victory, not peace, was what a polytheist prayed for.

Animal Sacrifice

Animal sacrifice was the central ritual of all pre-Christian religion, including Judaism. It was a surefire way to gain divine favor and divine forgiveness. The word *sacrifice* comes from the Latin word *sacrificium*, which means "that which has been made sacred"—"sacred" in the sense that the victim has been dedicated to a god. Sheep, cattle, goats, and pigs were the usual victims, and they had to be in perfect condition—without any visible blemish or defect. Since the killing had to be instantaneous to be effective, it required a high degree of expertise from the officiant carrying it out.

Once a year, in ancient Greece, a state deity had a really big sacrifice, and many animals were slaughtered. An inscription states that in 333 BCE, for instance, no fewer than 240 bulls were sacrificed to Dionysus at the Great Dionysia held in Athens. The ancient Greeks also sacrificed at home. A bloodless sacrifice, some grain or fresh fruit, was perfectly acceptable to the gods if that was all you could afford, although if something important was happening, you'd want to offer an animal sacrifice.

Animal sacrifice was also central to communal life in the early period of Hindu worship, and it is still practiced by some Hindus today, although vegetarian offerings are far more common. Ferocious deities, such as Durga, who punishes the wicked, and Kali, the goddess of creation and destruction, are the principal recipients of blood sacrifices intended to neutralize their anger.

Human Sacrifice

Human sacrifice is regarded as the highest and most effective form of sacrifice. It has served two distinct purposes. One was to honor, appease, or win the favor of the gods, while the other was to provide a king or other highly placed individual with attendants or companions in the next world. Human sacrifice has, for the most part, been confined to polytheism, though it has a kind of counterpart in monotheism—think of Christian martyrs in the first centuries of Christianity and of suicide bombers today. Vastly different though these two groups are, they share one thing in common: They believe that God rejoices when believers sacrifice themselves as a sign of faith.

When the gods become angry, they need to be appeased, and the most effective way is by sacrificing a human victim. The story of Abraham being bidden by God to sacrifice his son Isaac and then, at the last moment, being ordered by an angel to hold back is pretty clear evidence that the ancient Israelites practiced human sacrifice early in their history, even though the story functions as a rejection of human sacrifice.

The Carthaginians performed child sacrifice on behalf of their god Baal Hammon. The Greek historian Plutarch, writing in the early 2nd century CE, speaks of children having their throats cut in front of their mothers. A burial site in Carthage, which has produced thousands of urns containing the cremated remains of children, neonates, stillborn infants, and fetuses, is often cited as evidence, though it's not entirely conclusive.

In late 2022, archaeologists in Denmark discovered a 5,200-year-old bog body, very likely a victim of ritual killing. The term *bog body* refers to the fact that the victim was buried in a raised bog, whose layers of sphagnum moss and peat act as a kind of refrigerator, which causes the body to be almost perfectly preserved. Over 1,000 bog bodies have been found in Northern Europe, in Ireland, England, Germany, and the Netherlands, but most plentifully in Denmark. Most date from 1000 BCE to 1500 CE. Danish archaeologist P. V. Glob believed that bog people were sacrificed to the Earth Mother to ensure a good crop.

The other reason for human sacrifice was so that the victims would accompany their masters and mistresses to the next world and tend them as they had done in this world. There's spectacular evidence of this practice from the so-called Royal Cemetery at the Sumerian city of Ur in Southern Iraq, dated to around 2500 BCE. In the part of the cemetery designated the "Great Death Pit" by the British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley, who excavated at Ur from 1922 to 1934, the bodies of 68 women and 6 guards were arranged neatly in rows beside the graves of those whom Wooley identified as "royal" owing to their profusion of grave goods.

The Continuation of Human Sacrifice

Human sacrifice has persisted through the centuries, notably by the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican and South American peoples. Both warriors and slaves were sacrificed, but the higher the rank, the better, since it made the sacrifice more honorable. The victim was dressed to resemble whichever deity was intended as the recipient, and the rite took place at the top of a pyramid.

The reason why the steps of Aztec pyramids were made so narrow may have been to ensure that the dead bodies would not get stuck halfway as they were pushed over the edge. The Aztecs and others also performed ritualized self-piercing, most commonly of the tongue and the penis. They believed that human blood derived from divine blood and was thus limited in supply. They therefore collected it in a bowl and returned it to the gods so that, in due course, they could recycle it.

In the 19th century, European explorers found evidence of human sacrifice in precolonial West Africa. They cited this practice as a justification both for the slave trade and for the conquest of Africa. Their insidious argument went as follows: Yes, slavery is evil, but at least it eliminates human sacrifice.

In an article published in 1985, Robin Law, who taught African History at Stirling University in Scotland, wrote that human sacrifice in African societies has been "both minimized and externalized, reducing the moral guilt and transferring it as much as possible onto non-African societies." Law argued that the incidence of human sacrifice in West Africa peaked in the 19th century due to the concentration of power among royalty, who used it

to demonstrate their authority and prestige. A well-documented case involves the oba, the hereditary monarch of Benin, a kingdom on the west coast of modern-day Nigeria. The oba performed human sacrifice on a grand scale in 1897 in a failed attempt to ward off the British when they attacked his capital. The British captured Benin and massacred its people. It was one of the bloodiest and most shameful episodes in British colonial history. So, who was more barbaric?

A very distant and sublimated memory of human sacrifice informs the Christian sacrament known as the Eucharist: the drinking of the blood of Christ, which is either transubstantiated or consubstantiated—depending on your belief—into wine, and the eating of his body, which is again either transubstantiated or consubstantiated into a wafer. The New Testament epistle to the Hebrews reads: "We are sanctified through the [sacrificial] offering of the body of Jesus Christ."

Votive Offerings

A votive offering is an offering made in fulfillment of a vow. In making your offering, you would pray to the god or goddess as follows: "If you restore my wife to health, then I will give you such-and-such gift." Alternatively, you might make a votive offering in expectation that the deity will answer your request. One such offering is in the form of a bronze figure from Thebes, Greece, in the 7th century BCE. On the thigh of the figure, there's an inscription that reads: "To Apollo, the Far-Shooter, from Mantiklos. Mantiklos offers me as a gift to Apollo. You give something nice in return, Apollo."

This expresses the relationship between a polytheist deity and a worshipper most succinctly and with perfect clarity. It was a relationship based not on love, nor on devotion or hierarchy, but on simple reciprocity. Mantiklos expected to get something in return for his investment, and he had no problem in reminding the god of this fact. It was a very open-ended prayer.

A votive offering might be inexpensive or costly. You give according to your means. If you present the god with a terracotta statue, however, don't expect to receive the same kind of return for your investment as someone who gives a gold statue. Votive offerings don't feature in the same way in monotheistic religions, though the devout are expected to contribute to the running of expenses of the church, synagogue, or temple where they worship on a regular basis. Polytheistic deities, by contrast, are material. They like stuff. They're exactly like us, in other words.

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7

Women, Sex, and Sexuality

The inclination to invest power in a deity may actually have originated with the worship of what is often referred to as a fertility goddess or mother goddess. Anxiety about the ability to produce viable offspring beset every ancient society because of the high level of sterility, which in turn was due largely to malnutrition and disease. So, worshiping a fertility goddess as your foremost deity makes perfect sense. Plus, a fertility goddess can guarantee there'll be enough to eat. She covers all the bases, so to speak. In this lecture, you'll investigate the role of women in religion and see how polytheism and monotheism differ radically in their approach to human sexuality.

Portrayals of Women in Religion

The first thing to note is that female deities in polytheistic systems are just as powerful, frightening, and warlike as male deities. The sculptural scene that filled the east pediment of the Parthenon in Athens depicted the goddess Athena emerging fully armed from the head of Zeus, brandishing her spear, looking for trouble. Traveling further East, there's the Levantine goddess Astarte and the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ishtar, who preside over both erotic passion and war. And you've already met the powerful Hindu goddess Kali, sometimes depicted as dancing on the dead body of Shiva, the god who protects the universe.

But there are also nurturing images of women in religion. In Hinduism, there's the goddess Lakshmi, the source of abundance and good fortune. And, of course, there's the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of God, as Orthodox Christians call her, or Maryam, as Muslims style her. The veneration of Mary by the Roman Catholic Church meant that this branch of Christianity has a feminine aspect that distinguishes it both from Orthodox Christianity and from other monotheistic religions.

While Mary was exceptional in being spotless and leading an exemplary life, women in general are seen as the root of all evil, which comes from the story of Eve tempting Adam with the apple in Genesis. The Greek myth about Pandora is equally hostile to women. Zeus gave her a sealed jar, and being a woman, as the Greeks saw it, she couldn't refrain from opening it, whereupon disease, old age, and all the other evils that beset humanity flew out into the world.

Women have, for millennia, been charged with being witches and sorceresses. Fear of witches became widespread in Europe and America from the 1500s to around 1800, and many were burned at the stake. A major reason for the prejudice against women in Christianity is that they are more susceptible to being seduced by the Devil.

The Status of Women in Monotheistic Religions

Many religions continue to deny women the rights and privileges they accord to men. This is largely due to the patriarchal nature of the societies that produced them. But it also has something to do with the belief that women are (1) impure because of menstruation and (2) more likely to yield to temptation because they are weaker vessels and therefore intrinsically inferior to men. In the book of Genesis, it is Eve who first yields to temptation and eats the forbidden fruit. In Milton's great poem *Paradise Lost*, Adam says of Eve:

> For well I understand in the prime end
> Of nature her the inferior, in the mind
> And inward faculties

And that was the viewpoint of a leading Christian thinker in the 17th century.

In the early church, women had some leadership roles in Christian communities. As the church became institutionalized, however, society's prevailing pattern of male dominance asserted itself, which meant that women weren't permitted to enter the ministry. The Protestant Reformation did little to change that, and it remains a divisive issue within the churches that comprise the Anglican Communion.

Orthodox Judaism still regards women as inferior to men. In their morning prayers, Orthodox Jewish men say: "Blessed are You, our Lord and God, ruler of the Universe who has not created me a woman."

As for the third Abrahamic religion, a much disputed verse in the Quran reads: "Men are the upholders and maintainers of women by virtue of that in which God has favored some of them above others." Then, it goes on, most problematically: "As for those women from whom you fear discord and animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them."

Even so, in the context of 7th-century Arabia, the Quran marked a considerable improvement over pre-Islamic attitudes toward women. For instance, it ordered that daughters should receive half as much inheritance as sons, the point being that in pre-Islamic society, they probably received next to nothing. The Quran also condemned female infanticide, a practice that is likely to have been common in pre-Islamic Arabia. And though the Quran repeats the story of Adam and Eve eating of the forbidden fruit, it departs strikingly from the account in Genesis by holding Adam and Eve jointly responsible because both participate in the transgression.

That said, by the standards of Western society, Muslim women continue to be oppressed. According to sharia, or Islamic law, a wife doesn't have the right to refuse her husband if he wants sexual intercourse, and her husband has the right to divorce her merely by pronouncing the formula "I divorce you" three times. Polygamy, too, remains common throughout the Islamic world. The Quran permits a man to have as many as four wives. Increasingly, in Muslim cities globally, women are held to a standardized dress code, including the wearing of the hijab. There's a great deal of debate as to whether this is a mark of women's subjection. However, there's no denying that many Muslim women do submit to it voluntarily.

The Status of Women in Polytheistic Religions

Do polytheistic systems seek to control women in the same way? Hindu girls and women are subject to the rules set forth in the Sanskrit *Manu-smriti*, the *Laws of Manu*, which are dated to about 100 CE. According to these laws, a girl is not considered capable of understanding the Vedas. She should remain under her parents' roof until her time of marriage, and her father may arrange a marriage for her soon after her birth. Child marriage is condoned. Women are to be honored and respected, but they're to be kept dependent on males—by their father in childhood, by their husband in youth, and by their sons in old age—because "a woman is never fit for independence" (*Laws of Manu* ch. 9 v. 3).

In theory, at least, equality for women is guaranteed by the Indian Constitution, as established in 1950. However, this document failed to legislate regarding many of the abuses to which women are still subject, including age of consent at marriage, the entitlement of women to sue for divorce, and restrictive practices relating to dowry and inheritance. Dowry, though prohibited, remains widespread, and dowry murder—murdering one's wife to secure a superior dowry—is not uncommon. Since the 1970s, women's groups have made a concerted effort to improve things. However, Indian society remains male dominated, and this state of affairs is enshrined in religion.

In ancient Greece and Rome, men served as priests of gods, and women served as priestesses of goddesses. It was an arrangement that gave women a limited sphere for leadership. Otherwise, women participated freely in all ritual observances, taking the lead in death rituals.

Religion and Sex

With regard to religious attitudes toward sex, there's a vast divide between polytheism and monotheism. Polytheisms demonstrate an almost complete absence of interest in monitoring sexual practice, and they certainly didn't—and, in the case of Hinduism, don't—think of sex as sinful. Hinduism is explicit, and riotous, in its religious imagery. Erotic sculptures adorn the outer walls of temples, celebrating carnal desire. Depictions of the Shiva linga, the god Shiva's erect phallus, set inside the vulva of his female counterpart Shakti appear. Phallic emblems are also found on a variety of Roman objects, such as lamps. They were intended to bring good luck and ward off evil spirits.

SHIVA LINGA

Chastity, too, never had much to recommend it as far as polytheists are concerned. In Rome, the six Vestal Virgins who guarded the sacred flame in the Temple of Vesta had to remain chaste, as the safety of the Roman state was thought to depend on their purity. But in general, polytheism never involved itself with the sexual mores of its devotees. None of the Greek or Roman gods or goddesses cared about what humans got up to.

Depictions of naked female goddesses are also common in polytheism. The first female nude recorded in Greek art was a statue of the goddess Aphrodite by the Athenian sculptor Praxiteles. Although it took the Greeks a while before they permitted sculptors to depict naked women, they never had any embarrassment when it came to male nudity. In fact, the very earliest Greek monumental statues depicted naked young men standing with the left leg advanced and arms at the side. They either served as grave markers to represent the dead or were set up in sanctuaries as images of the god Apollo.

For Christians, Catholics especially, the doctrine of *peccatum originale*, or original sin, underpins and justifies the church's attitude toward sexual intercourse. Human beings are fallen creatures because of original sin, which entered the world though Adam and Eve's discovery of their nakedness. Sexual intercourse is thus inherently transgressive unless it serves the purpose of reproduction within the institution of marriage. For Muslims, too, marriage is the foundation of family life. In fact, the Quran actively prescribes sexual intercourse, even during the month of Ramadan, which is marked by prayer and fasting.

Greek and Roman religions are silent on the matter of abortion, which was practiced frequently in the Roman Empire in the first 2 centuries CE for a variety of reasons—to limit family size, in the case of adultery, or to preserve a woman's beauty. Christianity changed all that, of course, declaring that once the fetus was fully formed at 40 days, abortion amounted to murder.

The Greco-Roman gods saw nothing wrong with adultery, either. It wasn't sinful; if it had been, the biggest offender would have been Zeus himself—he wasn't called the father of gods and men for nothing. With regard to adultery in monotheistic religions, it's strongly condemned by all three.

Religion and Homosexuality

Homosexuality is condemned by Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, rabbinic law, and Islam, and it is a controversial issue in the Anglican Church and many other Protestant denominations. In a 2010 interview, Pope Benedict pronounced, "Homosexuality remains contrary to the essence of what God originally willed." Three years later, however, his successor, Pope Francis, said of gay priests: "If they accept the Lord and have goodwill, who am I to judge them? They shouldn't be marginalised. The tendency [of same-sex attraction] is not the problem. … They're our brothers." And in January 2023, Francis criticized laws that criminalize homosexuals as unjust and called on the Church to welcome and respect LGBTQ+ people. Despite these hopeful signals, however, the Catholic Church's official position on homosexuality hasn't shifted, which is more in line with the comments of Francis's predecessor.

In stark contrast, the Greco-Roman world, especially the Greek part, not only permitted homosexual liaisons between consenting males but also elevated them to an almost spiritual level. In Plato's *Symposium,* homosexuality is placed above heterosexuality on the grounds that it has an educative value when conducted between an older and a younger male. Likewise, Hinduism portrays homosexuality as a natural impulse. Carvings on Hindu temples depict homosexual intercourse, and the *Kāmasūtra* also recognizes and accepts the tendency.

In practice, of course, there are plenty of gay Jews, Christians, and Muslims, although the overwhelming majority remain hard-pressed to have their union recognized and blessed by a church, synagogue, or mosque. The intransigence, or at least the fear, that the Abrahamic religions direct toward sex and sexuality originated in societies that—first—took a very patriarchal attitude toward women and—second—needed to do everything they could to maximize their reproductive capacity. To what extent will these religions be capable of accepting that society has changed, and how will it ultimately affect them if they don't?

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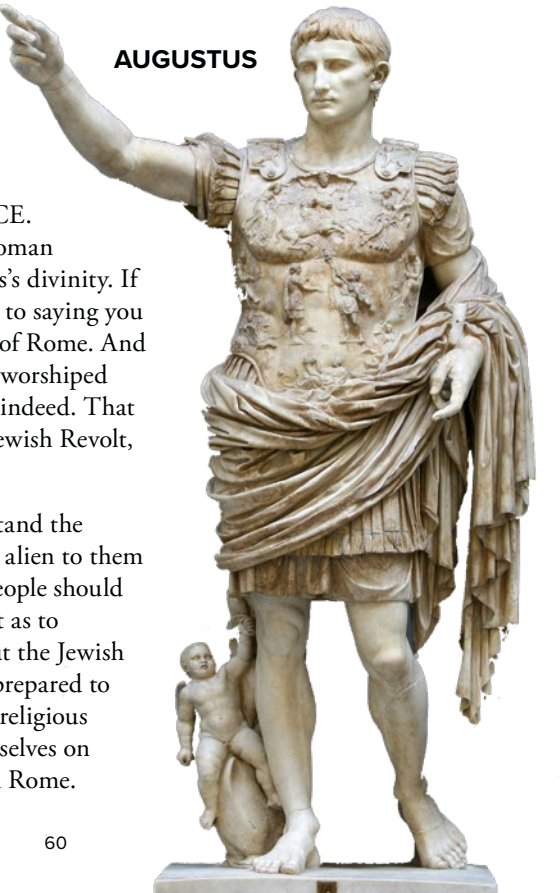
8

Intolerance and Persecution

The one god has, from the beginnings of monotheism, made it a central objective to overcome the many gods as well to achieve supremacy over any other god in competition with him, resulting in a great deal of intolerance and persecution from followers. The history that has pitted the faithful against so-called infidels, the orthodox against so-called heretics, Catholic against Protestant, Muslim against Hindu—that history is a long and bloody one. In this lecture, you will explore some of the darker things that have been done in the name of religion and examine the tensions inherent in exclusive monotheistic belief that have caused, and do cause, its worshippers to be both victims and oppressors.

Hostility toward Judaism in Antiquity

It's undeniably the case that intolerance and persecution were relatively infrequent in polytheistic societies. It was only when polytheism encountered monotheism that the problems really arose. The reason for this is, quite simply, that there was much less at stake. There were too many gods for one thing, and there was no commitment to a single set of gods for another. In addition, polytheistic religions were too chaotic, too fluid, to permit the emergence of an orthodoxy of the kind found, say, in Christianity. In fact, the word *orthodoxy* comes from two Greek words meaning "correct belief," and it has no equivalent in the ancient world or in African, Native American, or Hindu religions.



AUGUSTUS

By and large, the Romans were a tolerant lot when it came to other people's religions. However, their tolerance went out of the window once Augustus became emperor in the late 1st century BCE. Henceforth, those living under Roman rule had to acknowledge Augustus's divinity. If you refused, that was tantamount to saying you didn't acknowledge the authority of Rome. And if you happened to be Jewish and worshiped the one God, it was very difficult indeed. That was the background to the First Jewish Revolt, which broke out in 66 CE.

The Romans just couldn't understand the Jewish mentality. It was so utterly alien to them that an otherwise very civilized people should object to such an innocent request as to acknowledge Caesar's divinity. But the Jewish people did object, and they were prepared to die rather than compromise their religious beliefs. In so doing, they set themselves on an inevitable collision course with Rome.

The ensuing revolt led to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish diaspora, and the crucifixion of perhaps tens of thousands of Jewish prisoners—men, women, and children. The Jews just didn't stand a chance against the might of Rome. It wasn't really a war between polytheism and monotheism, however. The Romans didn't want the Jews to transfer their allegiance to their gods any more than the Jews wanted the Romans to convert to Judaism. It was a political disagreement that took on a religious dimension when it tragically erupted into a struggle for Jewish survival.

DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM

Hostility toward Christianity in Antiquity

The first recorded instance of persecution against those professing the Christian faith dates to 64 CE and was confined to the city of Rome. Previously, the Romans hadn't taken any action to suppress the new religion. But in 64 CE, Emperor Nero falsely accused Christians of setting fire to Rome. He did so to quell the widely believed rumor that he was actually responsible for it.

Between 64 and 250 CE, the persecution of Christians was merely sporadic, and it didn't reflect a general Roman policy to eliminate their religion. It wasn't until the reign of Emperor Decius, who ruled from 249 to 251 CE, that a dramatic change of policy was implemented. Decius ordered a *dies imperii*—a general supplication of the gods for the safety and victory of the emperor in the face of mounting insecurity. Most Christians complied, and the church very nearly perished from a loss of courage and morale. It was saved largely by the action of an unknown number of martyrs.

Half a century later, however, when Emperor Diocletian instituted a further round of persecution, his policies failed miserably. The edict he issued in 304 CE sanctioned the killing of all Christians who refused to sacrifice to the gods. But why did it fail? Because the climate of public opinion had changed. In 250 CE, Christianity was largely an urban movement. By the beginning of the 4th century, however, the gospels were being preached in every corner of the Roman Empire.

Diocletian's edict remained in force until 311 CE, when the dying Emperor Galerius issued an edict of toleration. Two years later, Constantine, the emperor in the West, and Licinius, the emperor in the East, agreed to the so-called Edict of Milan, which affirmed religious freedom throughout the empire.

There's a huge irony to these Roman persecutions, in that they ultimately helped galvanize and unify the Christian community. The Romans thought they were demonstrating their superiority by sending Christians to their deaths. Instead, they found themselves involved in a war of propaganda, which the Christians won. Martyrdom provided them with a stage on which to proclaim the indestructibility of their faith and act as an inducement to other Christians to follow suit.

But why did the Romans persecute the Christians? It certainly wasn't because of their monotheistic beliefs. And the Christians weren't seditious—they didn't have a political agenda. What made Christianity far more objectionable than Judaism to the Romans were two things: (1) It transcended ethnic and social borders, whereas Judaism was, so to speak, tribal and self-contained. And (2) while some Jews got around the demand to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor by sacrificing on behalf of him rather than to him, the Christians refused to participate in any sacrifice at all. Christianity, therefore, represented a much more radical, even existential, threat.

In fact, it was the crucifixion of Jesus and the martyrdom of his followers that chiefly differentiated the Jesus movement from a host of other competing messianic religious movements. One of the chief reasons why Christianity ultimately triumphed was because a majority, including Emperor Constantine I, came to believe that Christianity could save the empire from disintegration at a moment of crisis.

Once Christianity had gained imperial approval, it wasn't long before it went on the offensive, exploiting its newly won position to coerce pagans to conform. In 391 CE, Emperor Theodosius I issued an edict outlawing paganism and calling for the strict enforcement of Christianity as the official religion, thereby sounding the death knell to religious freedom throughout the Roman Empire. Temples were looted and destroyed, and pagans now became the victims of persecution.

Intolerance in Monotheism

Monotheistic religions have their own bitter history of intolerance both within their own ranks and toward other monotheisms. The Great Schism of 1054 is a case in point. It resulted in a division between the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, whose leaders, in a fiery exchange, excommunicated one another. The division between the two churches went so deep that in 1204, during the Fourth Crusade, Catholic armies slaughtered Orthodox Christians in Constantinople—one of the most brutal acts ever

committed in the name of Christianity. A rapprochement between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church didn't take place until 1965, when the mutual excommunications were finally lifted.

Because of their emphasis on doctrinal purity, monotheisms take a hard line on all deviants—on heretics, as they call them. The word *heretic* derives from the Greek verb *hairéō*, which means "I choose." Dogma doesn't tolerate choice.

It's estimated that during the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century, Grand Inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada burned 2,000 heretics at the stake. The procedure went as follows: If your inquisitor concluded that you held views that were at variance with official Catholic doctrine, you'd be forced to confess. If you didn't confess freely, you would be tortured until you did. You'd also be required to implicate others, both alive and dead. After hearing your confession, the inquisitor could impose either a penance or a punishment. A penance would include wearing a yellow cross. Punishment generally meant you'd be burned alive at the stake.

This terrible chapter in Christian history was based on the belief that anyone who deviated even slightly from the Catholic Church's official teaching had been corrupted by the Devil, who was working to undermine the entire body of believers. Heretics thus constituted a disease that had to be eradicated.

And then there's all the bloodiness that came about as a result of the split between Protestantism and Catholicism during the Reformation, which originated in Germany with Martin Luther publishing his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517. Luther was attacking the abuses of the Catholic Church, including the sale of indulgences—it got you to pay money, and in return, it promised that the time you had to spend in purgatory would be reduced. God would indulge you for your sins, in other words.

From Germany, the Reformation spread to other countries—and bloodshed was sure to follow. In Britain, for example, Mary Tudor, or "Bloody Mary" as her Protestant detractors called her, tried to reverse the Protestant Revolution through a series of high-profile executions. Among her victims were three Anglican bishops, Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley, who were burned at the stake for heresy in the mid-1550s.

Mutual suspicion between Catholics and Protestants continued to simmer in Britain for hundreds of years. It wasn't until 1829 that Catholics were permitted to sit as Members of Parliament. And, of course, there was also the tragedy that played out in the Troubles of Northern Ireland—where Protestant-Catholic hatred combined with rancorous politics to fuel decades of tit-for-tat violence.

The Indian Subcontinent and Islam

Another terrible chapter in the history of religion is the continuing animosity between the Muslims and Hindus who share the Indian subcontinent. The greatest sin for Muslims is idolatry, *shirk,* and in their eyes, Hindus worship idols. Much of the blame for Muslim-Hindu hostility, however, lies at the door of the British, who in 1947 partitioned the Indian subcontinent down religious lines and created two separate countries, India and Pakistan. The partition resulted in a forced migration, arguably the biggest in history, as Muslims scrambled to get out of India and Hindus scrambled to get out of Pakistan. A mutual massacre took place on both sides of the new borders. Estimates of the death toll vary between 200,000 and 2 million.

A major grievance in India today centers around sites that are sacred to both Muslims and Hindus. Hindus have attacked mosques that they believe to have been built over ancient temples dedicated to Rama, the divine figure who, Hindu nationalists believe, will one day rule a Hindu state. Meanwhile, Muslims react violently whenever they perceive an insult to Muhammad.

Looking beyond India, many acts of violence have been carried out in recent times in the name of Islam by extremist individuals and groups. One prominent group is the Taliban, the ultraconservative religious and political faction that runs Afghanistan. Another is ISIL, otherwise known as Islamic State, which perpetrated genocide against the Yazidis living in northern Iraq in 2014. The Yazidi belief system contains elements of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

That said, it cannot be stated too strongly that the overwhelming majority of Muslims reject violence. The Arabic word *Islam*, which means "self-surrender," is closely allied etymologically to *salaam*, meaning "peace," as in the greeting "*As-salaam alaikum*" (Peace be unto you). And Islamic extremism has to be weighed against Islamophobia, which exists almost everywhere. In China, for instance, more than a million Uyghurs, a Muslim ethnic group in the northwest province of Xinjiang, have been sent to "re-education camps," or prisons, in response to which the US has accused the Chinese government of genocide.

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9

Divine Intervention

How do divine beings intervene in human affairs? There's a sharp distinction here between polytheism and monotheism. Polytheists, ancient ones at least, hold the view that their gods are everywhere and in everything, whereas monotheists tend to believe that God's intervention in the world is—by choice—more limited. That's not to say they don't believe in the efficacy of prayer, but they obviously give more credit to what one might call natural law. Even so, as you'll see in this lecture, there's a great deal of overlap between polytheism and monotheism with regard to divine intervention because of the universal human tendency to seek help from something or someone greater than oneself at times of need.

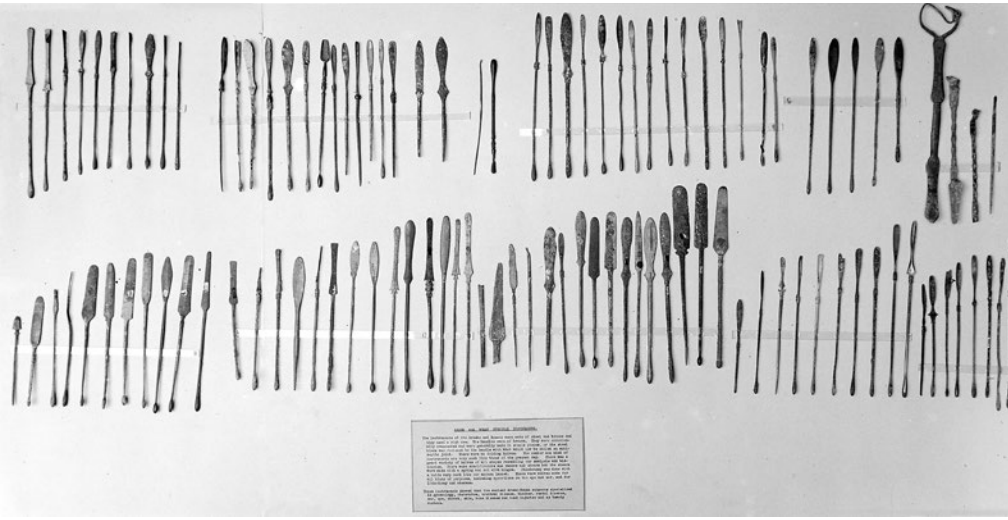
Divine Intervention

The belief that a divinely engineered flood resulted in catastrophic loss of life on a global scale is familiar from the book of Genesis, but it also turns up in Mesopotamian, Greek, and Roman mythology. In each tradition, the flood is engineered by a wrathful deity, who decides to annihilate the entire human race because of its wickedness, sparing only one individual or one family.

However, polytheistic gods have control of everything to do with the weather and the seasons. If a harvest failed because of a drought, you could bet that some god was offended. So, you'd better make sure that the gods are kept happy. Festival calendars were so arranged to ensure that the favor of the relevant god would be sought at the right time by means of sacrifices and ritual observances in the hope of securing a successful yield. There are vestiges of an agricultural festival in the Jewish festival of Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, which was originally a thanksgiving for the fruits of harvest. Pesach (Passover) and Shavuot (meaning "Weeks") also have vestiges of agricultural festivals. The Christian practice of giving thanks at harvest time is clearly pagan in origin.

And in a world that knows nothing of scientific medicine, recovery from sickness requires divine intervention. In the Greek world, the rise of scientific medicine in the middle of the 5th century BCE occurred concurrently with the rise to prominence of the healing god Asclepius. Sanctuaries of Asclepius, dotted throughout the Greek world, doubled as hospitals. Surgical instruments, including scalpels, forceps, tweezers, dilators, and trephines, have come to light in excavations in these sanctuaries, indicating that sophisticated operations were performed under the auspices of the healing god. Scientific medicine and religion weren't just intimately related—they were also complementary.

Like Asclepius, Jesus performs healing miracles in the New Testament Canonical Gospels. He cures leprosy, blindness, a crippled body, a hemorrhage, and paralysis and even raises the dead. And to this day, Christians place considerable emphasis on divine intervention to cure sickness. A notable healing center is Lourdes in southern France, where a



peasant girl called Bernadette claimed to have seen visions of the Blessed Virgin in 1858. Numerous sick who have drunk from or bathed in the water of the local spring claim to have been cured, even though the testing of the water has revealed no curative properties.

However, religion and modern medicine are not always complementary. In many Hindu villages, people refused to take the smallpox vaccination for fear of angering the local goddess who protects them against the disease. They regarded the vaccination as insulting to the deity.

Giving birth in preindustrial societies was extremely risky, both for the mother and for the newborn. Many women died in labor, and many children either did not survive the ordeal of birth or died in their first year. Polytheists had only one way of explaining this. There had to be an angry god or goddess out there who simply didn't like mothers and children, like the virgin goddess Artemis, who was extremely hostile to sexual intercourse.

A related problem that families faced was the failure to conceive, a condition invariably blamed on the woman. The good news was it could be resolved, or so the faithful believed, by divine intervention. The archetypal elderly, childless couple desperately seeking a son and heir are Abraham and Sarah, first encountered in Genesis. Sarah was 90 and Abraham 99, and yet, the Lord so managed things that Sarah became pregnant. The attention that childlessness receives in Genesis is proof of the anxiety it provoked. Among Hindus, the goddess Shashti is venerated by the childless in the hope that she will help them conceive.

Gods and Battle

It was commonplace to invoke your gods when going into battle. The Greeks sang a hymn to Apollo, and if they were victorious, they dedicated a tithe of their spoils to his temple. In the *Iliad*, the gods help their favorites by breathing *menos,* or strength, into their favorites. It's like a burst of adrenaline to help them in combat.

The same pattern exists in monotheistic faiths. The God of the Hebrew Bible is the Lord of hosts. Without his intervention, the Israelites would not have come through their ordeal in the wilderness. Christianity has a somewhat complex relationship with war, given the fact that theirs is a God of love. One can hardly turn the other cheek on the battlefield. When Pope Urban II summoned the faithful to undertake the First Crusade, he promised that the sins of those who died in battle would be forgiven. And one can also give God credit for wartime victories. "Praised be God, and not our strength, for it!" Henry V says in Shakespeare's play of that name when he learns that his army, against almost insurmountable odds, has won the Battle of Agincourt.

The moment when the Roman Empire tilted from paganism to Christianity almost overnight was also the result of a battle—the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, which was fought in 312 CE, just north of Rome. It pitted the emperor Constantine against his rival Maxentius and was a decisive victory that enabled Constantine to unite the empire under his banner. But it also had a decisive impact on Christianity. Before the battle, Constantine claimed to have seen the words *hoc signo victor eris* ("In this sign you will conquer") written in the sky and accompanied by a giant cross. At first, he didn't know what this meant, but the next night, he said, he had a dream in which Jesus told him to order his soldiers to daub a Christian symbol on their shields. Constantine obeyed, and he won a resounding victory.

All this is indicative of the fact that paganism and Christianity were very evenly balanced in the year 312. What would have been the fate of the Christian Church if Constantine had lost the Battle of the Milvian Bridge? In addition, paganism didn't disappear overnight. Coins issued by Constantine long after the battle continued to be minted with the head of pagan gods, including Mars.

If there's something of a conflict in attributing military victory to the God of love, no such conflict troubles Islam, which, early on in its history, depended for its survival on force of arms. According to the Quran, God and his angels assisted Muhammad at the Battle of Badr in 624 CE—the battle that initiated the war between Muslims and the idolatrous Quraysh for control of Mecca. And from that moment on, it was through warfare that Islam spread first throughout the Arabian Peninsula, then into Asia, then along the coast of North Africa, and finally into Europe.

Free Will

The idea of divine intervention raises an even deeper philosophical question: Are human beings free agents, or are their lives controlled by a superior force beyond their control, whether called fate, destiny, or providence? When Christians recite the Lord's Prayer, they say, "Thy will be done." Is that just a pious hope or a statement of fact? If it's a statement of fact, it implies at least some curtailment of free will. The French Protestant reformer John Calvin claimed that sin is so deeply ingrained in human beings that they are incapable of not sinning. From this, Calvin concluded that the salvation of sinners is up to God's will alone. And from that, he concluded that God has predestined some people to be saved and others to be damned.

Polytheistic gods can certainly get inside your head and make you do things you wouldn't choose to do if you were sane. Aphrodite, for instance, can make your desire for someone uncontrollable. Dionysus can make you take on a completely different personality. Does that mean that humans have no free will?

The Greeks certainly wrestled with the idea of free will but never went fully down that path. There's a passage in the *Odyssey* indicating that the gods were aware of the limitations of their involvement in human affairs—and wanted humans to know that, too. The very first words Zeus utters at the beginning of the poem are: "For crying out loud, how mortals accuse the gods and complain that evil comes to them from us, whereas in truth they suffer beyond what is fated because of their own reckless folly." What is fate if

something can be "beyond what is fated"? What Zeus could be saying is: "You can't let yourself off the hook by blaming the gods. Yes, evil things do happen to humans. That's inevitable. It's part of human destiny. But humans make things so much worse for themselves than they need be."

Rites of Passage

Certain milestones in the biological life cycle are marked by rites of passage. These are both universal and very ancient. In polytheistic religions, the onset of puberty is thought to be fraught with danger, so the goodwill of the gods is sought by rites of passage. These also initiate young people into the religious community, as in a Christian confirmation or a Jewish bar mitzvah. Lastly, rites of passage perform an important educational function by enabling children and adolescents to comprehend their religious obligations.

In Athens, on the fifth day after birth, a ceremony known as the Amphidromia was held for the newborn, marking its inclusion into the family. The infant was carried around the hearth at a trot to place it under the protection of Hestia, goddess of the hearth. Substitute water for fire, and you might compare this ceremony with a Christian baptism. In his third or fourth year of life, an Athenian boy was brought to a spring festival known as the Anthesteria, which was held in honor of Dionysus. He was crowned with a wreath, given a tiny pitcher known as a *chous*, and probably tasted his first drops of wine—the gift of Dionysus. Since this was his first introduction to his year-group, the ceremony laid the foundation stone for his civic, as opposed to merely familial, identity. There was no comparable ceremony for girls.

In the Roman world, the paterfamilias supervised the religious ceremony whereby his son transitioned from childhood to manhood at about age 14. This was indicated by the exchange of the *toga praetexta*, the toga with a broad purple border, which his son has been wearing up until now, for the *toga virilis*, a plain white toga. The youth had now attained adulthood and could participate in public life. Again, there was no comparable ceremony for girls.

Incorporation into the Jewish fold is marked by the brit, or circumcision, a practice that the Lord enjoined on Abraham and all the male members of his family and that the Lord required of all subsequent generations. Jewish boys celebrate their bar mitzvah at the age of 13, which takes place in a synagogue on the Sabbath. The boy is now counted as a full member of the Jewish community. Some Jewish girls, not all, celebrate a parallel ceremony known as bat mitzvah at the age of 12. Recently, Orthodox Jews have begun to incorporate bat mitzvah into their public rituals to indicate that girls are part of the community.

A wedding, too, is a rite of passage, divinely blessed. Whenever and wherever rites of passage are performed, individuals are in contact with the divine, which assists and protects them as they pass from one status in life to another.

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10

Death and the Afterlife

The belief that death doesn't mean extinction is one of the hallmarks of what broadly constitutes human identity, and passing from this world to the next is the most important rite of passage of them all. How do humans dispose of the body? What ideas do they have about the afterlife? Are the dead contactable? Do they continue to exert an influence over the living? These are questions that all religions deal with in various ways, and, as with so much of what you are investigating, there's considerable overlap between the beliefs and practices of polytheists and monotheists. In this lecture, you'll explore how both monotheistic and polytheistic systems have contemplated death and the afterlife.

Religion and the Newly Dead

What happens at the moment of death? If you're a Greek or a Roman, the gods will abandon you because a corpse was regarded as impure and the gods had to avoid becoming contaminated. The Greeks were unflinching in their belief that the Olympian deities ceased to have any interest in them at the moment of their passing. But there was another reason for their indifference. How can an immortal god comprehend mortality?

In Hindu religion, a corpse is also seen as polluting. Hindus recommend drinking water from the Ganges River just before you die because water is a purifier, and then your soul, having been purified, so to speak, will immediately undergo a new incarnation. If you're a Catholic, a priest will be at your side to give you the sacrament known as extreme unction, which will grant you remission from your sins.

Among the Greeks, the task of preparing the body for burial fell to relatives of the deceased, primarily female relatives. The deceased was laid out on a couch in the home, dressed in all their finery, sometimes with a wreath placed on the head. Friends and relatives came to the house to pay their respects. And both the Greeks and the Romans insisted on burial outside the city walls for fear that the dead, if buried inside, would pollute the city.

Inhumation and cremation have been the principal ways of disposing of a body since antiquity. The exception is ancient Egypt, where mummification—a complex and time-consuming process performed by experts—was the preferred form of burial for those who could afford it. However, in many other societies, both ancient and modern, the body has to be disposed of within 24 hours. For example, Muslims must bury their dead as soon as possible.

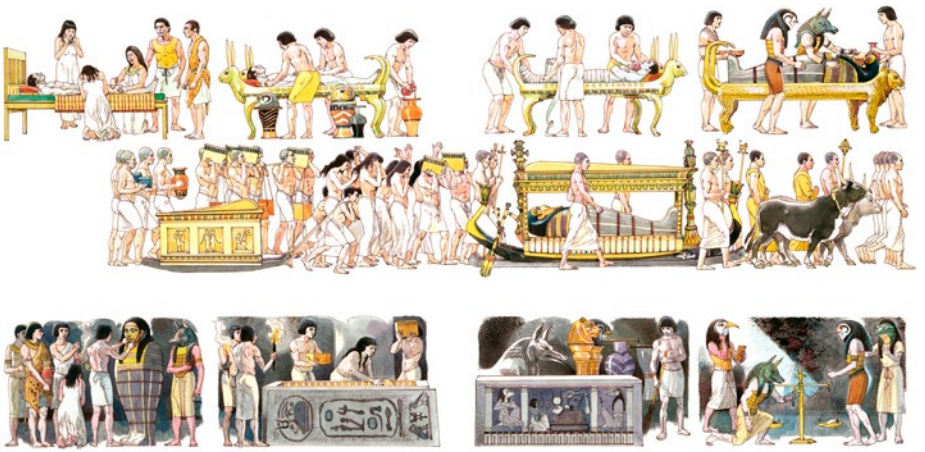
Hindus cremate their dead because they believe that's the quickest way to release the soul and help it in the process of reincarnation—the belief that when you die, you're born again in another form. A custom once practiced among upper-caste Hindu widows was ritual self-immolation on the funeral pyre of their dead husband. The practice is known as suttee or sati—meaning "chaste or virtuous one." Sati was outlawed by the British when they ruled India, but it has continued sporadically.

When is the deceased fully dead? In some belief systems, the period between death and interment is seen as one of danger for the deceased, and efforts must be made to ensure that they are granted entry to the next world.

Entering the Next World

The Egyptians provided, by far, the richest data about what you will encounter when entering the next world. Getting there is a very complicated procedure, and you'll need a lot of professional assistance. The Book of the Dead, whose earliest spells date to around 1650 BCE, is a handy guide for navigating the many risks and challenges you'll have to face in the next world, so have the text placed inside your coffin.

Shortly after arriving in the underworld, you'll have to undergo a postmortem trial presided over by Osiris, the god of the dead. He'll put you through a test that is designed to find out whether you were naughty or nice. It's called the "negative confession" because you will make a number of statements in which you deny any wrongdoing.



Nearby stands a hybrid monster called Ammit, who is ready to devour you if you fail the test. At the end of your statement, your heart will be placed in a balance and weighed against a feather that represents Maat, signifying truth and harmony. If you pass the test, you'll be inscribed among the *akhu*, the blessed dead, and you'll head to the Field of Reeds, an idealized reflection of the life you led on earth. If you don't pass the test, you'll simply cease to exist after being devoured by Ammit. You won't go to hell, in other words.

Living a perfect life in the Field of Reeds sounds like a pretty good deal. Elsewhere, the next life is anything but a piece of cake. If you're a Greek, death means flitting around in Hades, the place of darkness, uttering shrill, bat-like noises. The upside is that there's no postmortem judgement and no punishment, unless you've insulted the gods. You've probably heard of Sisyphus, who has to roll an immense stone uphill, which constantly rolls back, all for trying to cheat death. Did all Greeks believe in Hades? Socrates didn't. "Either death is nothingness and a state of unconsciousness," he says in Plato's *Apology,* "or it is a migration of the soul from one place to another."

The Roman poet Lucretius didn't believe in Hades, either. In his great poem *On the Nature of Things*, he sought to rid people of any and all anxiety about death. Everything is built of atoms, even one's soul, Lucretius argued, so nothing can possibly survive the dissolution that occurs at death. You certainly aren't going to be meeting hoary-headed Charon, who ferries the dead across the River Styx, or the many-headed canine Cerberus, who fawns when the dead enter Hades but snarls if they try to leave. They're just figments of the imagination.

Mystery Religion and the Afterlife

Over the course of time, the Greeks came up with the concept of mystery religion. The word *mystery* is related to the Greek word *mústēs*, meaning "initiate." The basic idea behind the various mystery religions is that you perform secret rituals and beliefs that aren't known to the outside world.

The most famous of these mystery rituals were the Eleusinian Mysteries, based at a town called Eleusis, just a few miles west of Athens. If you get initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries, you'll enjoy blessedness in the

hereafter, though what kind of blessedness isn't spelled out. You're not required to change your way of life or become kinder or more moral. All you have to do is undergo initiation, though, very occasionally, those undergoing initiation did have to confess their misdeeds.

Both women and men, slaves as well as free, and people of any ethnic background could undergo initiation into these mysteries. This was extremely unusual since polytheism in the ancient world, just like Hinduism to this day, privileged those who were wealthy and who belonged to a particular group.

What did the majority of Romans believe about the afterlife? It's not at all clear. Roman *sarcophagi* were used for inhumation for the wealthy from the 2nd to the 4th centuries. And they were carved with emblems of life and creation, such as garlands of fruit and leaves, and sometimes with erotic scenes. Are they showing us what to expect in the afterlife? It's hard to say. However, not all Romans believed in a hereafter, that's for sure.

The Christian and Islamic belief in a postmortem judgement has its roots in polytheism, particularly in Egyptian religion. But polytheism didn't have the appetite to consign the damned to eternal fire and wasn't invested in saving souls, so there wasn't any point in instilling fear in its worshippers.

For Muslims, Jannah, or Heaven, is a garden that is provided with constantly flowing water because it's specially designed for people who live in the Middle East, where water is in very short supply. The blessed have bodies, which means they can satisfy their senses, and they live in a palace made of gold, silver, and pearls. One of the hadiths tells us that everybody will be the same age, 33, which means they'll all be at the peak of their physical and mental powers. There will be beautiful female virgins for virtuous men, although it's less clear what the rewards will be for virtuous women.

Both Hindus and Buddhists agree that it is the objective of the soul or atman to become liberated from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth and to achieve a state of blessedness known as nirvana. However, they differ as to what happens when the atman has achieved that blessed state. Some Hindus believe that it enjoys a relationship with the Supreme Being, others that it becomes immersed in the Supreme Being. For Buddhists, nirvana is a state of nonself, or complete emptiness, which is the end of suffering and rebirth.

The notion of the soul's rebirth—the technical word for this is *metempsychosis*, the transmigration of the soul into a new body—also turns up in Plato. In his dialogue the *Phaedo*, Socrates advances the belief that human beings retain some knowledge of reality from their previous existence when their new existence begins.

The Dead's Power and Influence in This World

One way the Greeks connected with their dead was by making a blood sacrifice over their tomb. The victim's blood would seep through the ground, restore their vitality, and enable them to communicate with the living. You could also contact the dead by sending them a message written on a lead tablet, which you placed in their tomb. The dead were particularly useful if you wanted to curse someone.

Folk religions embrace what is generally called ancestor worship. By definition, ancestor worship is localized and lineal and has much to do with consolidating group identity. Some African religions accord as much, if not more, importance to their ancestors as they do to their gods. These ancestors are better, though not perfected, versions of humanity and are capable of both benefiting and harming their descendants. It's important to make offerings to them to secure their goodwill. They inhabit a world very much like yours, so they need stuff—your gifts, however modest, will ensure their welfare in the hereafter. Failing to give them gifts will arouse their anger and can result in illness, misfortune, or even death.

Elevation to the status of an ancestor isn't automatic, however. You have to have lived a long life and died peacefully. A touching belief among the Beng people, who live in the Ivory Coast in West Africa, is that babies are reincarnated ancestors. They're initially deeply attached to the world of the dead, but as they grow, they gradually lose their connection with it.

Australian aboriginals awaken the spirits of their dead with a ritual instrument known as a bull-roarer. This consists of a flat piece of wood attached to a long cord. The bull-roarer is swung in a circle on a horizontal plane to create an eerie whirring sound that suggests contact with the other world. Australian aboriginals believe that their ancestors crossed the continent of Australia, creating all its geographical features—its hills, waterholes, and so on—along with all living creatures, in a period of time they call the Dreaming. Some sites where their ancestors performed important actions hold deep spiritual significance for the aboriginals and are the focus of certain rituals.

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11

Good and Evil

Ritual practice in connection with the dead goes back at least 70,000 years, even though different religions address these issues in different ways. The spirits of the dead are capable of working both good and evil. This applies to many belief systems—not just folk religions. Indeed, the question of good and evil is one that every religion grapples with, monotheistic and polytheistic alike. In this lecture, you'll take that question up in more detail—examining what God and the gods have to say about the distinction between good and evil.

Polytheist Morality

What is good? What is evil? Do we always know the difference? Monotheistic religions are, for the most part, clear-cut about the distinction. Polytheisms, by contrast, although they also distinguish between good and evil, tend to be comfortable with moral ambiguity.

Take, for example, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the cycle of tragedies performed in Athens in 458 BCE. Orestes is required to kill his mother, Clytemnestra, to avenge the murder of his father, Agamemnon, perpetrated by Clytemnestra and her lover. That, in turn, put Orestes in a quandary. A son's most solemn obligation is to avenge the death of his father. But the worst crime he can commit is to kill a parent.

With support from Agamemnon's ghost, Orestes plucks up the courage to avenge his father. However, the moment after he has stabbed his mother and her lover to death, the Furies—monstrous women who exact vengeance for crimes committed in the family—start pursuing him, outraged by his crime.

Orestes moves on to Athens, where, under Athena's jurisdiction, the first homicide court is established to judge whether he's guilty or innocent. It's a hung jury, until the goddess Athena intervenes and casts her vote for his acquittal, thereby preventing a mistrial. What Aeschylus was saying in his version of this well-known story is what any intelligent Greek would have said: Not everything in this world is black or white in terms of morality. Some things are both good and evil.

Are the gods good? The question might seem presumptuous, but it's not. Just consider the 12 Olympians. Or think of Shiva, the destroyer, who beheaded his son Ganesha, and of Kali, the goddess of death with her necklace of decapitated heads. All of them are jealous, vengeful, unpredictable, selfish, tricky, egotistical, and cruel. You worship these gods because they're powerful, and it can be extremely dangerous not to do so.

Zeus was a serial adulterer. There are numerous women, both mortal and divine, whom he either inappropriately fondled, seduced, or raped. And the same detachment from morality is true of all the Olympian gods. It's been

aptly said of them that they are neither moral nor immoral but are amoral. Unsurprisingly, they aren't invested in promoting goodness. How could they be? They don't abide by any standard of morality themselves.

Eusebeia and *Asebeia*

It's true that the ancient Greek gods expected humans to practice *eusebeia*, a word conventionally translated as "piety." This meant praying to them, sacrificing to them, giving them gifts, and turning up at their festivals. It had nothing whatsoever to do with being a good person, in the modern sense of the word.

Asebeia, impiety, is the reverse of *eusebeia*. It covered a multitude of offences, including insulting the gods, violating their sanctuaries, damaging sacred property, swearing a false oath in their name, injuring persons who seek asylum in their sanctuary, and so on. Here, again, it's not goodness that is at stake. These acts are bad because they are demeaning to the prestige of the gods.

Another grievous offence in the gods' eyes is excessive arrogance. They don't like mere mortals to be too successful, too happy, or too prosperous. It makes them feel insecure. The Greeks had a word for the arrogance that accompanies excessive success. They called it hubris, which is the pride that people have when they believe everything they touch will turn to gold. The Greeks knew that this was a very dangerous, even lethal, state of mind.

The worst crime was to deny the gods' existence. Deniers paid a very heavy price. For example, in Euripides's *Bacchae*, the god Dionysus takes vengeance on Pentheus, the king of Thebes, in the most gruesome way imaginable for such a crime—having him torn apart by his followers, including Pentheus's mother and aunts. Euripides's point is that the Olympian gods aren't wiser than mortals, nor are they more virtuous, more ethical, more forgiving, more reasonable, more trustworthy, or more humane. Why should they be? How would it benefit them? What force is there to motivate them to be good?

Monotheistic Morality

What about the God of Hebrew scripture? He's certainly not very nice. The most common adjective he uses of himself is "jealous" because he doesn't tolerate any other gods. Jealousy is hardly a virtue, and part of the reason why he isn't exactly a model of virtuous behavior is because he's on a steep learning curve. He has a lot to learn about the humans he's created.

For starters, he realizes that Adam needs a partner—that wasn't something he had foreseen—so he creates one out of Adam's rib. Later, he regrets creating humans because of their wickedness and drowns the whole lot of them, apart from Noah and family.

In Exodus, the Lord is angry with the Israelites for worshiping the golden calf, which they manufacture out of their jewelry while Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments up on Mount Sinai. Just when the Lord is about to wipe the Israelites out, Moses urges him: "Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people"—which the Lord does. Note the word *evil*. The God of Hebrew scripture is a god who is capable of doing evil. But he repents because a human has given him a lecture on compassion.

In *The God Delusion,* Richard Dawkins says that the God of the Hebrew Bible is "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

There's plenty of evidence to indicate that the Hebrew God expects humans to behave ethically. The Hebrew Bible contains no fewer than 613 commands from God in total—both positive, to perform an act, and negative, to refrain from an act. However, there is some disagreement as to which of God's pronouncements are actually commands.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims all believe that God can get inside your head and know your innermost thoughts. Contrastingly, polytheistic gods aren't mind readers. They aren't interested in the slightest about what's going on inside your head. The only thing that matters to them is what you do on their behalf in terms of sacrifices and gifts.

Good Works

All three Abrahamic religions emphasize the virtue of what are called good works. They expect worshippers to act in accordance with the highest ethical standards and to care for those more vulnerable than themselves. In the ancient world, all three religions may therefore have made a big impact on the welfare of the downtrodden—the destitute, the homeless, the sick, the disabled, the widowed, and the orphaned. These groups constituted a very large percentage of any ancient population and hopefully gained some measure of protection as a result of the monotheistic impulse to act charitably.

It's not that there was no charitable impulse among pagans. Certainly, there were wealthy philanthropists who gave generously, but their objective was to beautify the city by sponsoring buildings that would have their name. Their charity was civic-oriented, in other words. They made little, if any, effort to alleviate the human misery found in every city of the ancient world—and none that was inspired by religion.

Especially despised were the deformed. The Greeks and the Romans thought of the deformed as *prodigia*, as portents. The birth of a deformed child signified some dire event in the future. They also believed that a congenitally deformed infant was inflicted on its parents as a punishment for their having broken an oath. If the infant survived, it would have lived under a perpetual cloud as a symbol of divine displeasure and would have been victimized.

For the Hindus, as for the Buddhists, "good works" include ahimsa, or non-harming, which extends to all living creatures. Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance to British rule in India, which was inspired by the doctrine of ahimsa, later influenced Martin Luther King's civil rights movement in the 1960s.

The Punishment of Wrongdoing

In polytheistic religions, punishment is often meted out in this life since the gods don't concern themselves with the afterlife. When a young man called Hippolytus devotes all his attention to the virgin goddess Artemis and completely ignores her counterpart, Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual

intercourse, Aphrodite sees that he comes to a very nasty end. For the most part, only mythological characters such as Tantalus and Sisyphus end up being punished in Hades.

The God of the Hebrew Bible also metes out punishment in this world, although it may come several generations after the event. So, if you do something wicked, you may get away with it scot-free, but the Lord will take vengeance on you by punishing, say, your great-great-grandchildren.

Muslims are required to adhere to sharia and are punished if they violate its injunctions. Sharia is based on the Quran and on the hadiths, the biographies of the Prophet, and it's therefore considered an immutable manifestation of God's will, true for all time. Some laws cover ritual observances, such as fasting and going on a pilgrimage, while others cover ethical norms. Sharia takes an extremely hard line on what it identifies as serious crimes, including adultery. In the Quran, Surah 24, it states:

> As for the adulterer and the adulteress, flog them each one hundred lashes, and let not pity for them overcome you concerning God's judgement, if you believe in God and the Last Day. And let their punishment be witnessed by a group of the believers.

There's an ongoing debate as to whether sharia is compatible with women's rights, LGBTQ rights, human rights, and freedom of worship, not to mention values such as diversity, equality, and inclusion. In Afghanistan, under the Taliban's strict interpretation of sharia, adulterers are stoned. The Taliban has also imposed flogging for drinking alcohol, amputation of a limb for theft, crucifixion for burglary, and execution for rebellion. Prior to 9/11, these punishments were sometimes carried out in stadiums so that they could be witnessed by a multitude of believers.

Particularly problematic in terms of East-West relations is the subject of blasphemy, which, in the Muslim sense of the term, refers to any insult to God, to Muhammad, or to divine revelation. It has come to prominence in recent years as the result of several high-profile cases. Best known of these is the fatwa, or decree, issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. Khomeini called on all "brave Muslims" to kill Salman Rushdie, the British-American

novelist who wrote *The Satanic Verses*, on the grounds that the work makes disparaging references to the Prophet. Bookshops that sold Rushdie's novel were bombed, and its Japanese translator was stabbed to death. In August 2022, Rushdie himself was stabbed 10 times by a Muslim extremist. He lost his sight in one eye and nearly died.

While evil is generally conceived of as something to be avoided at all costs, the devotees of some religions think it entirely acceptable to invoke gods, demons, or the dead to do harm to their enemies. The ancient Egyptians inscribed the names of their enemies on pottery and then smashed them, believing they were destroying their enemies.

There is no universal agreement as to which acts and attitudes should be considered "good" and which should be considered "evil." Religions can apply different moral standards to the behavior of their gods. Some of these differences can be seen even among the three Abrahamic religions, but they're especially conspicuous when comparing polytheistic and monotheistic systems.

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God and the Gods

As you've seen throughout this course, there's been as much antipathy among monotheistic religions as there has been between monotheism and polytheism. However, one of the reasons why religions are in conflict is precisely because they share a great deal in common. In this final lecture, you'll draw some conclusions about the state of polytheism and monotheism in the modern world. In so doing, you will explore what is universal in humanity's quest for meaning and how new manifestations of polytheism are emerging in the contemporary world.

The Intersection of Religion

Many churches were built over the remains of pagan temples. There was an obvious practical reason for this. The early Christians found it convenient to make use of architectural members from pagan temples—columns, architraves, pilasters, and other pieces of masonry known as *spolia*—so why not build a church exactly on the site of a pagan temple? No less important, however, is the fact that it's much easier for people to make the adjustment to a new religion if that new religion shares features in common with the old.

Some religious buildings were simply "repurposed" when another religion came along, with the introduction of only superficial alterations. The Parthenon, dedicated to Athena Parthenos, was repurposed first as a Christian church around 500 CE and then again as an Islamic mosque in 1458, when the Ottoman Turks took control of Athens. Neither of them thought it necessary to remove the famous sculptures adorning the pediments that celebrated the birth and triumph of Athena.

The practice of repurposing temples, synagogues, churches, and mosques is, of course, highly controversial. For example, Islam has a history of appropriating holy sites in India. A website called Kreately lists over 800 Hindu temples and religious structures that were allegedly converted into mosques in the medieval period.

What makes a piece of ground holy? The answer is simple: the presence of the numinous, an adjective that comes from the Latin word *numen*, which means something like "divine majesty." It's a place, in other words, that inspires a sense of reverential awe and wonder. Mountains often have that effect both because of their perceived proximity to heaven, which is universally thought to lie in the upper regions of air, and because they are wrapped in clouds, which adds to their mystery. The Lord descended to Mount Sinai to deliver the Ten Commandments to Moses. Mount Olympus is the dwelling place of the Greek gods. Hindus believe that the deities Shiva and Parvati dwell on Mount Kailash in Tibet.

The point is that religions intersect. For the Romans, December 25 just so happened to be the birthday of the god Sol Invictus, the "Unconquered Sun," whose cult had come to prominence a few decades before Constantine won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. The choice of a day that was significant in the pagan calendar to mark a Christian festival would have made it easier for you to transfer your allegiance to the Christian god, just as worshiping on the site where formerly a pagan temple stood would have eased it.

Interfaith Dialogue

At a deeper level, the only way that monotheisms and polytheisms can forge an alliance and a deeper understanding is through interfaith dialogue—respectful and constructive dialogue between people of different religious faiths. However, this is largely an intellectual movement with little or no grassroots support. The initiative is seen as having its beginnings at the so-called World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893.

Going back in time, to the first centuries of Christianity, there was only one pagan who seemed to be in dialogue with the new religion, and that was the Roman poet Vergil. That's because, in a poem known as *Eclogue* 4, Vergil anticipates the birth of a boy child who will usher in a new, golden age: "Whatever traces of our old wickedness remain will be swept away," Vergil writes, "and the earth will be released from never-ending fear."

From the Emperor Constantine onward, Christians have taken this to be a reference to the birth of Christ and granted the poet the status of a pre-Christian prophet in consequence. While the notion that *Eclogue* 4 contains a kind of messianic prophecy has lost favor today—there is no shortage of candidates as to who the Roman child might be—it's not impossible that Vergil, who lived in the 1st century BCE, was inspired by the Hebrew Bible. If that's the case, it's evidence that polytheism and monotheism were in fact in some kind of interfaith dialogue.

Modern Religion

In sheer numbers, at least, monotheism and polytheism more alive than ever. It's impossible to accurately determine how many adhere to any religious system, but according to a census by the World Populations Review published in 2020, there are approximately 2.38 billion Christians, 1.91 billion Muslims, and 14.6 million Jews, making a total of 4.29 billion monotheists. On the polytheistic side, there are 1.16 billion Hindus. That's out of an estimated world population of about 8 billion.

Who are the rest? There are 507 million Buddhists and 430 million people practicing indigenous religions. Though these figures are only approximate, they nonetheless indicate the central importance of religion in the 21st century.

Some countries are pluralistic, while others are monolithic—some have worshippers of different faiths, and others all practice the same religion. In monolithic countries, religion is a very strong marker of national identity. In Turkey, 99% of the population is registered as Muslim. In fact, nationalism and religion feed off each other, and there's little doubt that the secular state is under attack in various parts of the world.

The US, which is pluralistic, has a Christian majority—about 64%. Fifty years ago, however, it was at 90%, and it's projected to decline in numbers much further. But despite the decline, the separation between church and state is eroding, as Justice Sonia Sotomayor expressly noted in 2022 in her dissent from the court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

In India, which was established as a secular state, the separation between Hinduism and the state is also eroding due to the rise of the BJP party, which is Hindu based even though 14% of the population is Muslim. With the formation of Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government in 2022, Israel, too, took a step toward becoming a theocracy, with the so-called religious parties gaining political prominence although 15% of the country's population is Muslim.

One of the countries in which secularism is making progress is Britain. In a survey conducted in 2018, only 38% identified themselves as Christian, whereas 52% said they didn't follow any religion. Britain is now, almost officially, so to speak, a post-Christian society.

The Old Gods and Modern Polytheism

The old gods aren't dead yet, however, and the old religious systems emphatically endure. They are present in Britain, continental Europe, Australia, and North America. A prominent neo-pagan religion that originated in the 1950s is Wicca. *Wicca* is the Old English word for "witch." Wiccans worship a male horned god and a mother goddess and hold Witchfests, where witches of various types and persuasions gather as the Children of Artemis. Because women tend to predominate in Wicca, part of the incentive behind the movement seems to be to redress the hierarchical imbalance between male and female that prevails in conventional religious systems.

Much of the inspiration for neo-paganism derives from literature. A notable contributor to its rise was Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, published in 1948, which proposed the existence of a European "white goddess of birth, love and death." Graves was influenced by the Scottish anthropologist Sir James Frazer, whose work *The Golden Bough* was published in 1890. Graves argued that what Frazer was actually claiming was that so-called primitive religion was the inspiration for almost all the beliefs and ritual observances of Christianity. The only element that was truly unique to Christianity was the personality of Christ.

Frazer—or Graves—is certainly exaggerating, but there is indeed considerable overlap between Christianity and polytheism. Deicide, the killing of a god, isn't exclusive to Christianity. Nor is the idea of resurrection. Parallels are found in Aztec, Egyptian, Greek, Mesopotamian, and Norse mythology. In Greek mythology, for example, the myth of Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, who descends to the underworld when winter approaches and returns to earth in the spring, is also one of resurrection.

Although Christians did all they could to eradicate paganism in Europe, it probably survived into the Middle Ages in remote places. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, however, it experienced an intellectual revival. In 1821, the English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a letter claiming that the pagan gods were the true gods and that he had erected a turf altar to "mountain-walking Pan." His comment, in some sense, signaled the birth of the neo-pagan movement. Aside from the Wiccans, there are many other religious groups practicing various forms of neo-paganism.

In Greece and elsewhere, worship of the Olympian deities flourishes. According to a recent estimate, there are between 40,000 and 100,000 Ethnikoi Hellênes—people who are open to the idea that the ancient Olympian gods still exist. Though condemned as idolatrous by the Greek Orthodox Church, devout Olympians claim to be promoting the traditional Greek ideals of piety (*eusebeia)*, hospitality (*xenia)*, and virtue in general (*aretē*).

Yet another movement is modern-day Druidism, which began in the 1960s as a countercultural movement. Its adherents advocate respect for the natural world and are active in promoting concern for the environment. They gather each year at Stonehenge in Wiltshire to celebrate the summer solstice.

BAPHOMET

There's also the Satanic Temple, which has been recognized as a church by the US government and whose headquarters, appropriately, are in Salem, Massachusetts, home of the Salem witch trials. The Satanic Temple came to prominence in 2013 when it joined other groups opposing a monument to the Ten Commandments in the grounds of the Oklahoma State Capitol Building, claiming it was in violation of the separation of church and state. The Satanic Temple's website says that the purpose of Satanism is "to embrace rational inquiry removed from supernaturalism." In other words, it's not its intention to get people to bow down before Baphomet, a creature with the head, horns, and feet of a goat, but rather to push back against the religious right.

Closing Remarks

You don't have to subscribe to a canonical doctrine or dogma to be a decent human being. To be sure, it may help, but it doesn't guarantee it. Therefore, this course ends with a plea for tolerance and understanding. In an ideal world, theists and atheists alike would fast with Muslims during Ramadan, remember the Exodus event at the Jewish festival of Pesach, and celebrate the birth of the Savior at Christmas. Each of these festivals has something profound to say about the very human search for the meaning of existence and one's place within it, irrespective of which religion or no religion one subscribes to. It's a search that originated with our distant ancestors, tens of thousands of years ago.

However different the beliefs and rituals of the many religions encountered in this course, all are worthy of attention. All were, and in many cases still are, a product of their time and of the societies that brought them into being. They are all contingent on circumstance. What Allah said to Mohammad about disobedient wives in the 7th century, he would surely not have said today, and had Jesus begun his mission in the 21st century, he would surely have condemned slavery in all its forms.

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