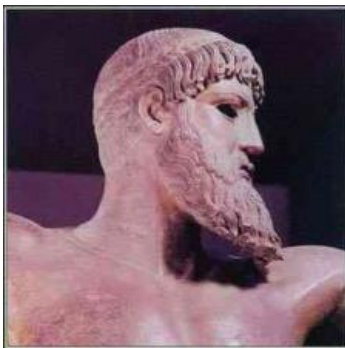


Back to Polytheism? — Some Moderns See Monotheism as Menace

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These strange times now witness encouragements to turn from monotheism back to ancient forms of polytheism. The argument is that monotheism — belief that there is only one God — inevitably leads to division, hatreds, and moral judgment.

This argument landed squarely on the pages of *The Los Angeles Times* in recent days through an [opinion article](#) written by Mary Lefkowitz, professor emerita at Wellesley College. She gets right to the point: “Prominent secular and atheist commentators have argued lately that religion “poisons” human life and causes endless violence and suffering. But the poison isn’t religion; it’s monotheism.”

So monotheism — a belief fundamental to Christianity — is a “poison.” Of course, what Lefkowitz has in mind is an argument that monotheistic religions will inevitably come into conflict due to the simple fact that each claims to know and to serve the only true God. As for Lefkowitz, she prefers the ancient Greeks and their polytheism:

The polytheistic Greeks didn’t advocate killing those who worshiped different gods, and they did not pretend that their religion provided the right answers. Their religion made the ancient Greeks aware of their ignorance and weakness, letting them recognize multiple points of view.

The ancient Greeks, we should note, did find plenty of reasons to kill each other. But Lefkowitz likes their low-intensity religion. It had no right answers, fumbling gods, and no clear doctrines. In other words, a religion perfectly suited for the postmodern age.

There is more, of course:

Openness to discussion and inquiry is a distinguishing feature of Greek theology. It suggests that collective decisions often lead to a better outcome. Respect for a diversity of viewpoints informs the cooperative system of government the Athenians called democracy. Unlike the monotheistic traditions, Greco-Roman polytheism was multicultural. The Greeks and Romans did not share the narrow view of the ancient Hebrews that a divinity could only be masculine. Like many other ancient peoples in the eastern Mediterranean, the Greeks recognized female divinities, and they attributed to goddesses almost all of the powers held by the male gods.

The Greek gods were dialogical deities, respecting diverse viewpoints, she argues. Of course, they were also often inebriated and caught in less than admirable situations and behaviors. This doesn’t bother Lefkowitz, since they were also feminists who “recognized female deities.” That evidently excuses otherwise distasteful behavior among the Greek gods.

In her essay, Lefkowitz offers other arguments for adopting a polytheistic set of beliefs, though she never actually confesses to believe in any God or gods. She does argue that ancient polytheism “gives an account of the world that in many respects is more plausible than that offered by the monotheistic traditions. Greek theology openly discourages blind confidence based on unrealistic hopes that everything will work out in the end. Such healthy skepticism about human

intelligence and achievements has never been needed more than it is today.”

So it appears that her agenda is more about skepticism than polytheism. In any event, she would commend skepticism toward any monotheistic claims.

Here we face one of the great challenges of the day. The idea that there is only one God runs counter to so many of the most cherished assumptions of the day. Monotheism runs right into conflict with modern ideas of truth, fairness, knowledge, and morality.

The important point here is that this is not a new development. It has always been so. Nevertheless, this is the very center of biblical Christianity. The Bible straightforwardly claims that there is only one God. This has never been popular or politically correct. Just ask Elijah.

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