

Polytheism and Monotheism: Mutually Exclusive or Interdependent?

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Abstract

Although it is common to assume that monotheism grows naturally from polytheism, each of these religious systems presents, in fact, a distinct and sustainable product of spiritual evolution. The main question that arises in this respect is whether such distinctness and sustainability should result in mutual incompatibility and lack of common grounds or whether the two systems could remain dependent on each other both in substance and in form. In terms of substance, it may be more rewarding to approach the evolution of religion not as a headway progress from inferior to superior but as an evolving response to changes of the scope within which the numinous is perceived by human beings. The author believes that this scope is mostly determined by the predominant social unit within which a given religion is professed and practiced. Thus, animism operates chiefly within the context of extended family; mature polytheism corresponds to the level of clan/tribe, while monotheism proper belongs to the scale of nation/empire. As regards the corresponding evolution of the form, one can say that the above succession/expansion of scope results in a situation where newer religions tend to borrow and assimilate their signs and symbols from their predecessors. This creates a relationship of semiotic interdependence between different systems, which is, however, never perfectly symmetrical due to monotheism's more stronger propensity towards 'religiophagia'. Yet the latter's current tendency towards greater reflection and self-examination inspires cautious optimism with respect to an improved probability of eventual interreligious harmony.

Keywords: Polytheism, Monotheism, Scope, Perception, Substance, Form, Symbol, Interdependence, Religiophagia, Interreligious Harmony

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Introduction

While it is widely acknowledged that there is no strict border between polytheism and monotheism, with many transitional and mixed forms identifiable, it is just as true that in their extreme manifestations the two religious systems can look irreconcilable and hostile to each other. Thus, from the polytheistic point of view, monotheism misrepresents the observable universe where many of us discern an endless struggle between opposing forces rather than any effective rule of a single godhead. On the other hand, from the monotheistic perspective, polytheism violates common sense by assuming that the unity of our universe can be maintained in the absence of a single creator/ruler without facing imminent disintegration and demise.

This apparent irreconcilability cannot be alleviated by the fact that in the course of religious evolution monotheism seems to develop naturally from polytheism. Any evolution, e.g. the one of living organisms, can supply us with numerous examples where its different products, which share a common ancestor or even evolve one from another, can nevertheless become bitterly opposed to each other in their struggle for dominance or resources. To put it more concisely, sharing certain morphological features (even most of them) does not guarantee peaceful coexistence between two given biological species. Yet even the most irreconcilable competitors within the realm of living organisms in most cases eventually arrive at some sort of cooperative arrangement inside a given ecosystem. The simultaneous existence of herbivorous and carnivorous animals, for example, usually does not result in complete extermination of the former by the latter. When, in exceptional cases, an overwhelming dominance of one species over others does occur, the consequences can be as much detrimental to the ‘winner’ as they are to the ‘loser’. The ecological imbalance and lack of diversity which is currently caused by the unconditional supremacy of *Homo Sapiens* is perhaps the best-known example.

But is the same pattern followed in the realm of religion? Does shared morphology among different creeds act both as a source of conflict and a means of its eventual settlement or are the spiritual contradictions more fatally irreconcilable than biological ones? To answer this question we need first to agree as to what constitutes the basic morphological unit of religion. Indeed, what are those ‘elementary particles’ (to use an analogy from physics this time) or those ‘cells’ (to use a biological analogy once again) that constitute the ‘living tissue’ of things spiritual? The short answer is *symbolic forms*. Of course, religion is something infinitely more than a mere set of symbols. However, when it comes to investigating the derivation of one religion from another and their subsequent interaction, this sort of simplification (even reductionism) comes in handy without omitting anything critically important. If that concept is accepted, all we have to do is to find out what causes certain symbolic forms to mingle, interact and replace each other within a given environment.

However, the latter may be not so easy to find out. Of course, we can expect with a sufficient degree of confidence that any major change in the environment will trigger a respective change in morphology. However, while most changes in the biological environment are relatively easy to link to observable natural factors, the religious environment can present a more difficult case. Indeed, what is the main change driver in the spiritual realm? My answer to this question will inevitably look more like a working hypothesis than final pronouncement. I can formulate it the following way: *Most changes in symbolic systems are determined by changes of the scope within which human beings tend to perceive the numinous.*

The above statement can be expressed in more ‘orthodox’ terms by replacing ‘perception’ with ‘revelation’. But whether the numinous is regarded as something perceived by humans or revealed to them is a question which has no ultimate relevance for the subject of this paper. The actual choice will depend on the reader’s philosophical or theological convictions which I prefer not to mess within the severely limited space of this publication. I shall therefore proceed straightaway to a detailed account of those changes in the scope¹ of our relationship with the numinous which determine, in my opinion, the particular stages of spiritual evolution. Specifically, I believe that they ultimately depend on the *social unit* which plays the dominant role in a given religious community.

1. In the beginning

First comes the *primal* religion which is commonly known as traditional or indigenous and in the past also used to be called ‘primitive religion’ or ‘animism’. The social scope it operates in is predominantly that of *extended family*, a small and restricted community supervised by a *pater familias* but also (and even to a greater extent) by his dead ancestors and other tutelary spirits. The ancestor or deity in charge usually resides under the same roof with the living, often localized in the fireplace (hearth), sometimes even identical with it. The contact with that ancestor/deity is an easy and commonplace matter because the volume of information possessed by the household members, both dead and living, is more or less the same, considering the slow pace of change in traditional society. The institute of spirit possession (under which a dead family member can be summoned at short notice to provide advice to the living) therefore thrives, being quite straightforward to implement and practice.

The symbolic forms that arise at this stage of religious evolution are not hard to infer – they emerge naturally in accordance with the entities which they represent and from which they are almost indistinguishable. At this primordial state of human consciousness, the signifier is almost identical with the signified. The thing and the idea (daemon) of that thing only begin to be differentiated and can be easily mixed up, giving abundant scope for all sorts of magical substitutions and manipulations. Language (another prominent system of symbolic forms) mostly uses its operating units (words) in their plain and concrete meaning; there is neither room nor need for the figurative. Besides, language at this stage is nearly identical with religion: it is employed not so much for exchange of information between community members, as for targeted interventions in the routine course of things, whenever such a need arises. All sorts of spells and incantations cast (and later written) through its means are intended mostly to inflict harm on the enemy (i.e. used as a weapon) or to influence the tenor of daily affairs in one’s favour (i.e. used as a tool). Both goals are achieved by acting on the representations of things or persons targeted – their verbal or iconic images.

The specifically religious symbols common at this stage are, quite expectedly, linked to the locations and incarnations of their respective spirits, the fireplace figuring among them *par excellence*. This is perhaps the most ancient abode of deity that we can track down in human history – we simply do not know whether there was anything that preceded the hearth worship or whether it can be considered the very beginning of humanity itself. It is all those lares and penates (or whatever other names that may be known among other nations) who dwell in the hearth and assist humans in cooking their food. They often double as purveyors

¹ My general approach to the problem has been inspired by Giambattista Vico’s *New Science*, where the author outlines the scope ‘the children of the new-born human race’ as being ‘no higher than their mountain heights’ (Vico, p.44). I only believe that this field of vision should be narrowed and lowered down even more – to be no higher than their roofs.

of heat and light. At later stages of the evolution, these deities may either retain their original dwelling places or advance towards more elevated positions. Yet even the highest fliers among them can be often pinpointed to their humble beginnings as family gods.

The progress of the Jewish God (YHWH) serves in that respect perhaps one of the most vivid examples. Like many other ancient deities, he begins his career as a fireplace god. The conclusive evidence to that effect is supplied by Genesis 15 which describes the technical procedure performed in response to Abraham's request to formalise (solemnise) the covenant² with his divine patron. The patriarch receives the following instructions (I use the JSP Tanakh version on both occasions when I quote from the Bible):

‘Take Me a heifer of three years old, and a she-goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.’ And he took him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each half over against the other... (Gen 15:9-10)

Although the Bible does not explicitly mention it, Abraham was obviously supposed to walk between the divided halves of the animal carcasses in token of his sealing the covenant, and he certainly did so. It was then the other party's turn to make the move. One must say that Abraham was kept waiting for quite a while – long enough for him to fall asleep, see a prophetic dream, and then wake up to realise that the sun had set down and it had grown pitch dark. But here at last he sees his divine sponsor finally acting on his promise in a visible way: ‘...behold a *smoking furnace*, and a *flaming torch* that passed between these pieces’ (emphasis mine). The god of Abraham chooses his symbolic attributes in perfect correspondence with his current functions – he is responsible, as we have said, for cooking and lighting, and he solemnly displays the relevant utensils as symbols in officiating a transaction with his protégé.

2. First among the equals

The next stage of religious evolution is what is traditionally called polytheism proper. It arrives when the scope enlarges from family/clan to tribe which consists in a merger of several basic units. Each participating family/clan contributes its own patron deity to the tribal pool. Each of those deities initially enjoys equal rights with its peers. However, soon enough, one of the families grows more powerful than the rest and becomes the main supplier of ruling elite for the whole tribe. Quite naturally under such circumstances, the dominating family begins to promote its own patron deity to the rank of tribal god. The deities of other families are either suppressed or have to be content with the status of minor gods, thus forming a proto-pantheon. Direct contact with the elevated deity becomes increasingly harder, even for the dominant family, as this god has now assumed responsibility for households with whose ancestry or way of life he or she may not be perfectly familiar. Gradually, the institute of spirit possession declines in importance giving way to divination and prophecy. A prophet, of course, is someone who also claims to be possessed by divine spirit, but it becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain how genuine that claim is. One has simply to take it at face value and thus the word ‘faith’ makes its first humble appearance on

² The first author to draw our attention to this remarkable ceremony was, of course, James George Frazer in *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* (Frazer, part II, chapter I, The Covenant of Abraham). This book is now largely neglected, while quoting Frazer is generally considered to be hopelessly old-fashioned. Yet the only fault of that author consists in his reading religion as a fact of individual psychology – something that William James with his *Varieties* still gets away with, usually even with great approbation.

the religious stage. We have now come a long way from Genesis to Exodus, from Abraham to Moses. The completion of this transition corresponds to the eventual shift from polytheism to monolatry (i.e. worshipping a single deity while admitting the existence of others) followed by the start of the final move towards monotheism.

3. Between the hearth and Sinai

If we now turn to the corresponding symbols that spring up at this evolutionary stage, we shall soon notice that they do their best to migrate as intact as possible from the previous stage, yielding to change only under duress when their inadequacy to the new realities becomes too blatant to be ignored. Thus, the God of Moses is still occasionally characterised as ‘consuming fire’ (Exodus 24:17, Deuteronomy 4:24). He obviously retains the association with his original duty – to protect and maintain the fireplace as an essential source of food, heating, and lighting. Yet, having been elevated to the status of tribal god, he can no longer be represented or designated by such humble attributes. The torch turns into an elaborate lamp – the menorah; the furnace becomes an altar. Furthermore, it is no longer the creative but the destructive (‘consuming’) aspect of fire that now comes to the foreground. Instead of providing heat and light to a given family, the deity is now responsible for ‘concocting’ the welfare and warfare of an entire tribe in return for consuming his share in the tribe’s assets and spoils. Usually it is certain part of the carcass burnt specially for the deity on the altar and presenting him or her with a ‘sweet savour’ (the rest of it obviously being consumed by the human members of the tribe). This divine consumption is now purely symbolic, in the sense that it serves no practical (nutritional) purpose, apart from demonstrating the tribesmen’s willingness to destroy part of their possessions in token of gratitude to their divine patron. The utilitarian and symbolic uses, previously united within the same entity, have now drifted apart, never to converge again.

Yet the deity’s ‘family business’ is not completely forgotten, which is best evidenced by the way it makes contact with his human subordinates. Although now a tribal god, YHWH never reveals himself to the entire tribe, always mindful of the particular family from which he originally made his first advancement up the divine ladder – the one of Moses and his next of kin – his brother Aaron and his descendants. Although the whole tribe of Levi is technically granted the right of privileged access to YHWH, whenever families other than that of Moses attempt to claim it, they incur an utmost displeasure both from Moses himself and his divine protector. The punishment for that half-hearted mutiny is severe, as we know too well from Numbers 16:31-35:

And it came to pass, as he [Moses] made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground did cleave asunder that was under them [the rebels]. And the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods. So they, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit; and the earth closed upon them, and they perished from among the assembly. And all Israel that were round about them fled at the cry of them; for they said: ‘Lest the earth swallow us up.’ And fire came forth from the LORD, and devoured the two hundred and fifty men that offered the incense.

Having been promoted from family spirit to tribal deity, YHWH always remains a ‘jealous god’ not only in his intolerance of any divine competitors but also in respect of the long-favoured family to which he owes his initial promotion.

4. The poor of symbol

Yet the above spiritual monopoly, however long it may last, will be always challenged by the 'dispossessed' members of the tribe or perhaps even dispossessed tribes of the nation (whenever time comes, if it ever does, for it to succeed the tribe as the dominant social unit). One of the surest ways to undermine that monopoly would be to make the elevated deity as impersonal as possible, i.e. to divest it as much as possible from the symbols inherited by it from the age when it was still the modest head of a family business. This is the message of many prophets, Hebrew or not. By exhorting his fellow tribesmen, or later fellow citizens, to overthrow the idols or deface the images of their fathers' patron deities, the prophet actually invites his countrymen to erase the vestiges their original belongingness and adopt hardcore monotheism. Hence the emphasis on destruction, rather than creativity, that now becomes, compared with the previous stage, even more pronounced. Polytheism, wherever it still survives, thus falls victim to monotheism perhaps more on sociological than theological grounds.

The common result of this 'creative destruction' is the extreme impoverishment of the semiotic stock of the religion engaged in this exercise, which culminates in the preservation of only a couple of symbols which, albeit polytheistic in their origin, are now raised to the status of nearly exclusive signifiers of the divine. The remaining symbols are either buried in oblivion or declared to be diabolical. The visual forms are usually attacked and eliminated first. Although they can be occasionally tolerated, like the cross (crucifix) in Christianity, they can still be frowned upon (cf. the treatment of the crucifix by newer Protestant sects). Architectonic symbols may be allowed on a one-off basis (e.g. the Jerusalem Temple in Judaism or Kaaba in Islam) but once they are lost to external agencies (e.g. wars) they become virtually impossible to regain or restore (like the Third Temple which is most likely never to be built).

The above process, although inevitable, can never go to the very end, i.e. to the complete elimination of all symbols. No religion, even a most radical one (like Buddhism for example) can do without them. The fewer of them are preserved, the more valuable the remainder is perceived to be, the more important and complicated is the role assigned to each of them. If absolutely all symbols do get eliminated, religion stops being itself and is transformed into a quasi-religious philosophy of the kind we can observe in Spinoza. Yet even a system like that cannot satisfy those who view the symbol as an obstacle to the communication between the human being and the Other (in whatever sense the latter is taken), as any philosophical system (including atheism) still relies on verbal expressions whose plentiful residual meaning (originally closely linked to religion) can never be fully eradicated. Phenomenological reduction in the style of Husserl, despite all its claims to being free from the old inheritance, still relies on language as any other system of this kind. The only possible way to overcome this dependence on legacy symbols would be to convert all religious and philosophical prepositions into mathematical formulae. I said 'possible' but that possibility may be purely theoretical, and I strongly doubt the success of that exercise.

Conclusions

Coming back to our starting point and its key question – how interdependent, if at all, polytheism and monotheism are – we can state that although such interdependence does exist, it is far from being perfectly symmetrical. The main reason for that asymmetry is the

impossibility to overcome the ultimate irreconcilability of the theological and semiotic bases of the two religious systems.

This irreconcilability is only exacerbated by the fact that in the normal course of religious evolution its later products usually rely on importing their symbolic stock from their predecessors, rather than on generating their own. This is not surprising: the more abstract and generalised a religion is, the more it struggles to establish links with the concrete that would assure its practical relevance, not only its universal significance. Yet such importation / migration / inheritance (whatever name we choose to call it) can never consist in transferring the symbolic forms from an older into a newer religion in their entirety and with their original meanings fully preserved. A great number of them have to be eliminated, simply because no monotheism can stand even a remote suggestion of plurality. The symbols that are allowed to stay are subjected to all kinds of rethinking, reconsideration, and even reinvention, of which the most common result is that they become to be perceived as less motivated and more arbitrary than in the predecessor religion where they usually retain closer links to material objects.

Thus the asymmetry of the relation between polytheistic and monotheistic religions consists mostly in the latter's need to rely on the former as the main (if not exclusive) source of symbolic stock or, figuratively speaking, source of semiotic sustenance. In a way, such a relation resembles the one that exists between two biological species of which one is a step higher than the other along the food chain, similar to what exists between plants and animals, the herbivorous and the carnivorous, or host and parasite. Under such an arrangement, traditional (animistic) religions would be always placed below polytheistic ones which, in turn, would always take their place below their Abrahamic (monotheistic) counterparts. Moreover, the same kind of relationship can be identified even between religions that belong to the same class (i.e. both polytheistic albeit to varying degrees) as we can observe in the case of Catholicism vs Protestantism where the latter quite obviously relies on the former for the source of symbols which are later earmarked for reworking and elimination / consumption. From that point of view, the top 'predator' within the religious 'ecosystem' would be certainly atheism which, as we know, fares the best when it finds enough symbolic material to subvert and destroy, and which, on the contrary, feels rather starved and stunted when no material to expose and debunk (and occasionally to appropriate) is available in sufficient quantities. Wasn't that the main cause for the collapse of atheism in the now defunct Communist bloc?

However, being a stage higher up the food chain by no means implies being in any way 'superior' to the underlying species. This conclusion certainly comes in contradiction with the more traditional approach that regards evolution as a steady advancement along the Great Chain of Being, where any species that postdates another one in its origin is automatically assumed to be higher, more perfect, and closer to fulfilment of the divine design. The necessary reliance of a 'superior' creature on its 'inferior' predecessor to whom the former may actually owe its very origin and existence is perhaps the best proof of the fact that things are arranged in a slightly more complicated fashion along the evolutionary line. The Abrahamic 'super-religions' should be mindful of the potential situation when their overzealous campaign to exterminate their humble suppliers of symbolic forms may result in semiotic hunger and deterioration of religion's global habitat and wellbeing. The role of carnivorous animals is of course, well known to ecology – to cull the weakest individuals from lower levels of the chain and improve the survival skills of their stronger peers. The only cause for concern is that in today's religious environment, unlike what we can see

among living organisms, the ecological balance seems to have shifted towards the predators who appear to be actively engaged in destroying their last remaining sources of nutrition.

This potential threat may still look like a distant and therefore unlikely prospect in those parts of the world where the ‘predators’ can still enjoy abundant feeding grounds, as is certainly the case with the Global South, where some Pentecostal churches begin their daily service with listening to repentances of reformed traditionalists (some of whom may have experienced repeated relapses followed by reconversions). Yes this ‘religiophagia’ (i.e. the process of consuming other religions in order to sustain one’s own) cannot be indulged indefinitely and is bound to run out of steam at the very moment when its adherents deem their mission accomplished. They had better learn from what is going on in the Global West, especially in Europe, where the current deplorable state of organised religion is not in the least degree due to the obvious shortage of ‘pagan’ substratum, the much-needed semiotic ‘nourishment’ whose sources were largely destroyed by Abrahamic zeal a couple of centuries ago. (On the whole, one can also say that modern Catholicism, with its largely herbivorous nature, is probably better prepared for potential disruption of the semiotic food chain than its Protestant counterparts).

The current tendency in mainstream Christianity towards greater reflection and self-examination inspires cautious optimism with respect to the probability of achieving an eventual interreligious harmony. Whether or not we can hope for a better balance in the religious environment any soon is not, however, for me to answer in this paper. Those who find its conclusions too speculative and perhaps impractical are welcome to fill the gap from their richer knowledge of the current situation and perhaps their better ability to estimate the future.

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