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Edited by Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: the debate about pagan monotheism**Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen*

Within the largely stable social and political structures of the Roman Empire, the most far-reaching change was the religious revolution by which the polytheistic environment of the age of Augustus gave way to the overwhelming predominance of monotheism in the age of St Augustine. The study of monotheism is not easy for students of classical antiquity. This transformation in religious ideas and behaviour had profound consequences for individuals, for social organisation, for the exercise of political authority, and, above all, for the way in which men and women understood their place in the world. The prevalence of monotheism now marks one of the largest differences between the modern world and classical antiquity. Precisely for this reason the differences between Graeco-Roman polytheism and the Jewish, Christian or Islamic monotheisms, which have dominated our own religious and cultural experience since the end of antiquity, pose a serious challenge to our understanding of the past. We view ancient religion through a filter of assumptions, experiences and prejudice. Monotheism contains its own internalised value judgements about polytheistic paganism, and these have always influenced, and sometimes distorted, the academic study of ancient religion.

Monotheism today seems not only to have triumphed historically but also to be morally superior to polytheism. This is one of the reasons why the study of paganism is often segregated from historical work on early Christianity or Judaism.<sup>1</sup> Monotheism itself, in the strong and restrictive sense of believing in and worshipping only one god, is generally regarded as the defining element of post-classical religious systems. It is tempting therefore to treat the contrast between belief in one and belief in many gods as being the central issue at stake. However, the focus on the unity or singularity of the divinity has certainly diverted attention from other

<sup>1</sup> The most important modern exception to this rule is R. Lane Fox's magisterial historical study, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (Lane Fox (1986)).

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aspects of the transformation of ancient religion that have a fair claim to be more important than the bald fact of the triumph of monotheism. The emergence of post-classical religion in many forms brought with it changes in ritual, in social and political organisation, and in moral understanding, which require as much reflection and analysis as the fundamental shift in the perception that there was now only one god in place of many.

Monotheism has also become a central moral and political topic for the modern world.<sup>2</sup> The restrictions on belief and action demanded by strict monotheism entail a level of religious intolerance unknown in ancient paganism. Monotheism has thus become associated with religious fundamentalism. The political dangers of fundamentalism have accordingly led to serious theological reflection on the nature and effects of monotheism in contemporary societies. These preoccupations have encouraged a new attention to the phenomenon of belief in one god in its full historical context. Scholarly research has been concentrated on two periods in particular, the emergence of the worship of a single God in early Israel, set in its neighbouring Levantine and Egyptian environment,<sup>3</sup> and the growing prevalence of monotheism in later classical antiquity, which is the subject of this volume. The relationship between Jewish and early Christian monotheism and the paganism of the Graeco-Roman world of the Mediterranean and the Near East is of particular importance, because it was in this context that changes within religion and society won over most of the inhabitants of the ancient world to belief in a single God. We need to understand the essence of monotheism's appeal. We also, even more critically, need to define what monotheism is and was.

The papers in this volume derive from a conference held in July 2006 at the University of Exeter about pagan monotheism in the Roman Empire. This conference itself was part of a three-year research project concerned with pagan monotheism and its intellectual background, which ran from 2004 to 2007 under the direction of Stephen Mitchell and with funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. This project identified a series of research questions, which were also part of the explicit agenda of the conference. The first group of questions was conceptual. How should pagan monotheism be defined? In what ways should it be distinguished conceptually from other types of monotheism, in particular from

<sup>2</sup> The discussion has been particularly intense in Germany since the 1980s. The key work is Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Assmann (2003)), discussed below in Christoph Marksches' contribution to this volume. For a survey of the debate see Manemann (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Useful surveys are provided by Stolz (1996); Gnuse (1997) and (1999).

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Christianity and Judaism? Were these differences fundamental or should all forms of monotheism be treated as essentially similar in nature? The second group of questions was concerned with the religious and intellectual context of pagan monotheism, and formed a particular focus for the work of the post-doctoral researcher on the project, Peter Van Nuffelen. What features of the intellectual climate of the Roman imperial period favoured the development of monotheistic beliefs and practices? In particular how and why did monotheistic ideas, which had been commonplace in mainstream Greek philosophy since the classical period, at this period begin to exercise a substantial influence on religious beliefs and cult practices, so that by the mid and later third century AD monotheistic ideas also seemed to emerge as part of the religious mainstream? What common ground and reciprocal influences can be identified between Greek philosophy in this period and the emerging monotheism of Jews and Christians? How had pagan religion itself developed in this environment?

Pagan monotheism has enjoyed particular currency in discussions of ancient religion since the publication in 1999 of the volume *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*.<sup>4</sup> Together the six papers in that collection suggested that pagan monotheism developed independently within Graeco-Roman culture to become a major force in the religious environment of late antiquity. The argument gained plausibility from the undisputed fact that Greek philosophers from sixth century BC until the end of antiquity had argued, with varying degrees of emphasis, that a single divine power lay behind the existence of the universe and our understanding of it, and that conceptually these views appeared to cohere with and indeed strongly influenced the viewpoint of Christian monotheism. What was less obvious was that this intellectual and philosophical insight had any significant religious consequences. Pragmatically, pagan polytheism continued to provide the standard framework for religious behaviour under the Roman Empire until the third century AD, much as it had done in the age of classical Greece. Outside Judaism and Christianity, monotheistic cult proved to be a much more elusive quarry than monotheistic thought.

So, around the apparently simple issue of whether belief in a single god came to replace the belief in many gods within Greek religious traditions, it has become necessary to pose a further series of questions designed to clarify the nature of this complex historical enquiry. For what is at stake here is not a superficial development, the discarding of one style of religion for another, as one might exchange a suit of clothes, but something that affects

<sup>4</sup> Athanassiadi and Frede (1999).

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our understanding of society at large. It is necessary to define monotheism not simply as an intellectual construct but as a religious phenomenon. This in turn raises the question of defining what religion is, and assessing the role that it played in ancient society. There is, of course, no fixed answer to this question, as religion itself evolved and changed according to its social and historical context. Post-classical religion, in the form of the contemporary world's three great monotheisms, imposes significantly different forms of social and political organisation from those generated or shaped by pagan polytheism. This is particularly true when religion itself is linked to powerful secular political institutions.<sup>5</sup> Assmann has argued in numerous influential studies that monotheism introduced a basic moral transformation in social thinking. By introducing the distinction between true and false gods, it required men not only to choose truth, but also to reject falsehood. According to this analysis, the distinction provided a major spur to religious intolerance, something which is hardly perceptible within polytheism, and increased the potential for religiously inspired violence. This sweeping and generalised interpretation of the moral transformation which may supposedly be ascribed to monotheism is placed under direct and indirect scrutiny in this volume.

We need also to ask whether the religious transformation of later antiquity is due to the development of monotheism as such, or to the concomitant aspects of religious change which are subsumed within monotheism. These include the replacement of an indefinite mass of written and unwritten traditions by a fixed body of religious texts; the prevalence of exclusive belief in one God rather than the inclusive acceptance of the existence of many gods; the capacity of monotheism to be used as an instrument for social and political control at a supra-national level; and the emergence of religious identities as a key element in social organisation.<sup>6</sup> This book has taken shape as a series of essays that both pose and attempt to answer these questions. The problems that need to be addressed are closely related to wider religious, social and political issues, and the papers offer a variety of approaches to the phenomenon, and develop approaches to its many facets. In doing so they also put the spotlight on the effectiveness and functionality of the terms used to describe these religious changes. Is the term monotheism, or any of the other modern coinages that have been used to denote belief in one god, or at least belief in a supreme god, adequate to

<sup>5</sup> See Fowden (1993), an important and wide-ranging essay covering the period from Constantine to early Islam.

<sup>6</sup> Most of these issues are raised in John North's paper in this volume and the importance of the political context is stressed by Alfons Füst's contribution.

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describe not only the narrow phenomenon, but also the sum of the changes that it brought about? More specifically is pagan monotheism a concept that would have been intelligible to inhabitants of the ancient world, and one that they might have used to describe their own religious beliefs, or should it be seen rather as a heuristic tool, which may help to classify or categorise those beliefs from a modern viewpoint?

The 1999 papers edited by Athanassiadi and Frede were concerned with pagan monotheism in later antiquity, especially the period from the third to the sixth century AD, when Christianity had already become a major force. Thematically many of the contributions, led by the editors themselves, placed a strong emphasis on the philosophical background to monotheistic ideas, and on the contrasts and interplay between Christian and Platonic monotheism, which provide the backdrop for much high-level theological discussion in the later Roman world. Since the protagonists on both sides of this debate claimed to be monotheists, the term seemed to efface many important differences between Christians and Platonists and to create a homogeneous group of people who fundamentally had the same ideas about God but labelled themselves differently. This debate, especially among intellectuals, occupied a prominent place in the religious history of the fourth century and attracted considerable attention at the Exeter conference. Accordingly we have assembled a second collection of papers from the conference, entitled *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity*, which discusses these issues from various viewpoints and in relation to specific writers and their works.<sup>7</sup>

The contributors to *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* took over the framework of this ancient discussion, in particular by assuming the validity of the term 'monotheism' to describe the phenomena it discussed. Critics of this approach have questioned whether the single term can usefully be applied to the doctrinal forms of Christian monotheism and the much less specific and prescriptive forms of monotheistic belief to be found in the pagan philosophical tradition.<sup>8</sup> Thus various and different phenomena were subsumed under a single heading. Furthermore, only one of the papers in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Mitchell's study of the worship of Theos Hypsistos, dealt explicitly with the question of pagan monotheistic cult, and this too has invited radical criticism, that it represents a fundamentally polytheistic phenomenon in misleading monotheist terms.

The papers in the current collection differ in important respects from those of the 1999 volume. On the one hand they have deliberately shifted

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell and Van Nuffelen (2009).      <sup>8</sup> *In primis* Edwards (2004).

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the emphasis of the enquiry to the pre-Constantinian period of the Roman Empire, before Christianity became the prevailing religious norm, and before the later fourth-century debates between Platonists and Christians, although these cannot be left out of account as they colour much of our written source material. On the other they take a broader view of the documentary information, which provides the contextual framework for possible monotheistic cults. Pagan monotheism itself is not assumed to have objective status as a religious phenomenon, but is treated as a concept or a heuristic device to ask further questions about the development of religion in the Roman world, which between the first and fourth centuries evolved in other fundamental ways, not necessarily connected to monotheism. Thematically the papers fall into two groups. The first group deals with conceptual issues concerning the definition and evaluation of pagan monotheism, both as an object of study and as an analytical way of studying the religious culture of the Roman Empire. Less emphasis is placed on philosophy than in the 1999 volume, and more on the analysis of monotheism as a religious phenomenon in its social context. The second group of papers is largely concerned with documentary evidence for cults and ritual, which illustrate specific types of religious activity and illuminate the religious mentality of worshippers during this period. These papers highlight the particular difficulties of identifying and defining cultic forms of pagan monotheism.

The question of whether worship should be addressed to one or many gods is the most obvious way to frame an investigation of religious change between the first and fourth centuries. However, we are confronted at once by questions of definition. What constitutes monotheism? Many thinkers and writers of classical times, above all the Greek philosophers, could make statements about the unity of god, but only in a few cases, discussed in Frede's contribution to this volume, should they be defined in a rigorous sense as monotheists. Indeed, as John North's paper points out, for the most part writers about pagan religion simply did not make propositions about one or many gods that led to the creation of two opposed types of belief. From the pagan point of view monotheism, in a religious sense, was neither a meaningful category nor a contentious issue in the classical or Hellenistic Greek city states.

Forms of belief and practice, which at least bear some resemblance to monotheism, nevertheless began to emerge within pagan religious contexts from the late Hellenistic period. These owe their origin, in varying degrees and among other factors, to competition between cults, to intellectual speculation and the invention of new gods, to the fusion of smaller, localised

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cults into larger and more widespread patterns of worship, and to the influence of Jewish monotheism. However, it is open to debate how far the products of these developments can properly be called monotheistic. In most cases they did not require their followers to renounce other forms of religion. They were not exclusive and accordingly lacked many of the defining characteristics of the Christian and Islamic monotheisms of the post-classical world.

Alternative terms have been used to describe various forms of 'one god' belief, most notably henotheism, which enjoys wide currency in contemporary scholarship.<sup>9</sup> It nevertheless remains questionable whether the coining of henotheism as a new analytical category is a helpful tool in the debate, however practical it may be to differentiate between various styles of 'monotheism' in their historical contexts. Peter Van Nuffelen takes a critical look at the terminological issues, as well as suggesting that the most important methodological problem in current interpretations of ancient religion is the gap that has opened up between approaches that focus on ritual, and those that take philosophical conceptions as their starting point. He draws attention to a new approach to questions of religious truth which is evident in the work of philosophers and philosophically minded thinkers in the later Hellenistic world and in republican Rome, who attempted to reconcile religion and philosophy, and who also identified new ideas about religious truth.<sup>10</sup> Religious knowledge was thereafter integrated into philosophical argument. The claims about the unity of the divine, which had been commonplace in earlier philosophy, now acquire religious as well as intellectual significance, thus laying the foundations for pagan monotheism to become established as a meaningful concept within intellectual speculation and an active element in religious developments.

An alternative approach to religious change in this period is to move attention away from the question of monotheism to the nature of religion itself. If monotheism, at least in the form of pagan monotheism, was not recognised as a significant religious development by the inhabitants of the ancient world, but was never more than a subsidiary phenomenon identifiable in some of their cults, we need to pay attention to other changes in religious thought and behaviour and assess their role in the transformations between the first and fourth centuries. John North points to a variety of changes which affected beliefs, ritual and group dynamics, and presents important sociological arguments for shifting the terms of the debate in

<sup>9</sup> Especially since the appearance of Versnel (1990).

<sup>10</sup> See especially Van Nuffelen, forthcoming (a) and forthcoming (b).

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this way. Thus it was not monotheism as such, but the growing expectation that believers would commit themselves to membership of religious groups, by expressing their allegiance to an explicit set of propositions about the cult and its gods, that was the main impetus to new forms of religious behaviour and, above all, to the formation of new forms of religious identity in late antiquity.<sup>11</sup> When this was combined with renunciation of other deities, it propelled collective religious experience firmly in the direction of monotheism. It remains, of course, a matter of contention whether the expression of new religious identities in monotheistic guise was widespread outside the classic formats of Judaism and Christianity.

Michael Frede's philosophical discussion highlights the conceptual differences between polytheistic gods and a monotheistic god, and his conclusions imply that in general the two categories of polytheism and monotheism, when simply taken to mean the belief and worship of many gods or one god respectively, are too crude, and contain too many ambiguities, to serve as tools for classifying the full complexity and spectrum of belief to be found in ancient Greek religion. He argues, nevertheless, that some ancient thinkers – Antisthenes, Chrysippus and Galen – developed a conception of a single transcendent god, which at least approximates to the criteria for the belief in one god that was established by later doctrinal monotheisms. Alfons Fürst's paper draws attention to the fact that Augustine in the *City of God* made a similar distinction between the God of the Christians and the gods of the pagans, which was more concerned with the quality and concept of divinity than with the numerical question of whether divinity was singular or plural.

Focusing on two paradigmatic debates between Christian and pagan apologists – between Augustine and the Platonists, and between Origen and Celsus – Fürst argues that it is also necessary to examine the relationship of religion to society in a political perspective. The matter of contention between Augustine and the Platonists, which can be seen as a prime case of the debate between pagan and Christian monotheists of the fourth century explored at greater length in the companion volume to this one, was not whether there was one or many gods, but what should be the object of religious worship. For protagonists on both sides of the argument this was not the confrontation of polytheism and monotheism, for each could agree on the existence of a single supreme divine being, but the question of religious authority. In a polytheistic environment the divine world is generally seen as a source of support and legitimation for society at

<sup>11</sup> For an important discussion of these emerging new forms of religious identity see Lieu (2002).



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large, rather than as an independent source of absolute moral authority. In polytheism, if one god did not serve a society's purpose, another could be called upon to do so. The will of the gods for mankind, therefore, was not absolute but relative, and was adaptable to the needs and circumstances of a particular society. This was true even within the henotheistic but not exclusive religious systems favoured by later Platonists. Christian monotheism, in contrast, prescribed and required worship of one God. Other forms of religion were simply shams, and could not be called upon to justify any sort of political or social behaviour, according to the convenience of rulers or society's members. In the earlier debate between Celsus and Origen, Fürst argued that the debate between them essentially concerned the place of religion within a political environment. The pagan Celsus, although he accepted the current Platonic view that a single god should be regarded as the guiding force of the universe, and was thus in a philosophical sense a pagan monotheist, also took it to be axiomatic that the order of the world depended on a multiplicity of diverse cults, particular to each race and group. Origen insisted by contrast that God's moral law was a source of absolute divine authority, which overrode the relativism that characterised conventional religion.

Origen's theoretical statement of the Christian position anticipated the developments of the later Roman Empire, as Christian monotheism became coordinated, although never completely, with the secular authority of the Christian Roman state.<sup>12</sup> The alignment of secular and religious power, which was to a large extent made possible by the increasing dominance of monotheist religious notions, was a development of late antiquity which has foreshadowed many aspects of the modern world. The imposition of belief that is implicit in strict monotheism can readily be transformed into an instrument of coercion in a political sense. Monotheism restricted behavioural choice. Hence the dangers of monotheism have been identified at the sharp edge of the contemporary debate concerning fundamentalism, intolerance and extreme political behaviour, especially as these are harnessed to the coercive potential of modern states.

The political consequences of monotheism, and in particular its potential to underwrite and justify hate and violence based on religious intolerance, have been the most controversial features of Assmann's theological work on monotheism. Christoph Markschies calls the central premises of this argument into question on two grounds. First, he argues that the

<sup>12</sup> This alignment became much more prominent in Roman policy and propaganda in the time of Justinian; see Meier (2003) and especially Meier (2004).

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antinomy between polytheism and monotheism was by no means sharp and schematic, especially at the level of ordinary religious practice. Second, he draws attention to the theoretical nature of Assmann's work and the extent to which it can be contradicted by specific historical examples. To make the argument he provides an interpretation of the 'one god' inscriptions, which were a feature of all the major religious traditions in the Near East in later antiquity: pagan, Jewish, Samaritan and Christian.<sup>13</sup> The affirmation of the powers of one god in the superlative, not the exclusive sense, was not a statement of strict monotheism, but acknowledged, while it also devalued, those of other divinities. Contextually interpreted these 'one god' acclamations are neither a monotheistic credo, nor evidence for a fundamental moral revolution within religious thought, but one technique by which groups of different religious persuasions expressed their identities, and the superiority of their god, within a still largely tolerant social environment. Nicole Belayche's study of these acclamations in pagan cult provides the historical background of the wider phenomenon, thus giving further weight to the continuities between the polytheisms and monotheisms of the later Roman Empire.

The papers of Marksches and Belayche on *heis theos* provide a bridge between the conceptual approach to the study of ancient monotheism and the search for cultic activity that might be regarded as monotheist. Their discussions highlight the point that the documentation itself, primarily from inscriptions, far from being clear-cut has led to a wide divergence of views in modern scholarship about how the evidence for specific cults should be interpreted. Pagan monotheism, in so far as it was a meaningful category, developed in the transition from a world of fluid and diverse polytheistic cults to that of the more unified dogmas of Judaism and Christianity. Historians of religion have often noted the emergence of monotheistic features in cults under the Roman Empire, which in some cases may have been the result of direct influence from Judaism and Christianity.<sup>14</sup> However, there is much room for argument about how these developments should be interpreted. From the perspective of Graeco-Roman paganism, the emergence of major unitary cults, such as the worship of the Egyptian gods Sarapis and Isis, of 'oriental' divinities – notably Mithras, Iuppiter Dolichenus or the Dea Syria – or the worship of the Sun god, was perfectly compatible with traditional polytheism. The readiness to fuse these divine

<sup>13</sup> See Peterson (1926); a new, supplemented, edition is in preparation by C. Marksches.

<sup>14</sup> Notably Nilsson (1950), 569–78.