

Religion by the Numbers: 1
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Readings

1. From an essay entitled "[*Monotheism and its Discontents*](#),"(1992) by novelist Gore Vidal, an outspoken critic of monotheistic religions:

The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved --Judaism, Christianity, Islam. These are sky-god religions. They are, literally, patriarchal --God is the omnipotent father-- hence the loathing of women for 2,000 years in those countries afflicted by the sky-god and his earthly male delegates. The sky-god is a jealous god, of course. He requires total obedience from everyone on earth, as he is in place not for just one tribe but for all creation. Those who would reject him must be converted or killed for their own good. Ultimately, totalitarianism is the only sort of politics that can truly serve the sky-god's purpose. Any movement of a liberal nature endangers his authority and that of his delegates on earth. One God, one King, one Pope, one master in the factory, one father-leader in the family home.

2. From "[*Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*](#),"(1992, pgs 13-14) by religious historian, Karen Armstrong, who dubs herself "a freelance monotheist" :

The Judaeo-Christian tradition does not have the monopoly on either monotheism or concern for justice, decency, compassion and respect for humanity. Indeed, the Muslim interpretation of the monotheistic faith has its own special genius and has important things to teach us...In 1984 I had to make a television programme about Sufism, the mysticism of Islam, and was particularly impressed by the Sufi appreciation of other religions—a quality I had certainly not encountered in Christianity! This challenged everything I had taken for granted about 'Islam' and I wanted to learn more...In all the great religions, seers and prophets have conceived strikingly similar visions of a transcendent and ultimate reality. However we choose to interpret it, this human experience has been a fact of life. Indeed, Buddhists deny that there is anything supernatural about it: it is a state of mind that is natural to humanity. The monotheistic faiths, however, call this transcendence 'God'. I believe that Muhammad had such an experience and made a distinctive and valuable contribution to the spiritual experience of humanity. If we are to do justice to our Muslim neighbors, we must appreciate this essential fact...

Sermon

There is no God but God and Muhammad is His Prophet.

This is one translation of the Shahada, the first of the Five Pillars of Islam, the cornerstone of Muslim belief and practice. The public recitation of this statement ushers new converts into Islam.

There is no God but God.

Sounds a little strange to our ears. If one believes in God, then certainly the God one believes in would be God and there wouldn't be any God but God, right?

Sometimes we hear it as “There is no God but Allah,” which suggests that the God who is affirmed here is a particular deity of Islam, but *Allah* is simply an Arabic word for *God*, and Muhammad—whose birthday is celebrated tomorrow—Muhammad was very clear that this was the same God as the one that spoke to Christians and Jews, those whom he called The People of the Book (the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament). Allah was generally understood by Arabs to be that same God that Jews and Christians worshipped even before Muhammad came along...so how is it that Muhammad changed things so drastically? If Allah was already recognized, how is it that Islam begins with Muhammad?

There are probably quite a few reasons, but here are a couple of the most prominent:

First, some 1400 years ago in 610 C.E., Muhammad received a revelation from God, through the angel Gabriel, to and for the Arabs. No longer did they have to translate the workings and wonders of this God from the culture and language of others; this message was revealed to one of their own, spoken by one of their own and was meant for them. Indeed, it is said that the recitation of the Q’uran in Arabic holds a power for those who know the language that is untranslatable. It is not only the meaning of the words, but the very sound of the words.

Second, Muhammad was told in no uncertain terms that Allah was *the only* God. There is no God but God; there is no God but Allah.

This was new. Arabs had recognized Allah before, but in the context of a number of tribal deities, as a member of a divine family. In that context, “there is no God but God” carries a radical challenge. Muhammad was saying, in effect, “Contrary to what we have believed for centuries, there are not many deities competing for our allegiance and attention, there is only Allah to whom we are called to surrender our lives utterly and completely.” (*Islam means surrender*). “This is the same God that spoke through Abraham and through Moses and through Jesus and now through me. God is not many; God is One. There is no God but God.”

So what makes this call to monotheism important?

First, we need to put it in context. One, it has been said by that wonderful group of musicians Three Dog Night, is the loneliest number, but it is also, from a certain perspective, the holiest number. *One* and *one-ness* are features of probably every faith tradition, not to mention many scientific and secular schools of thought. Whether we are searching for the One True God or the Theory of Everything, we are fascinated with finding the source of life, where all the many and varied streams of existence originate, because that will help to tell us something about the nature of the world as a whole and help us to understand ourselves more clearly.

In that sense, the move from polytheism (many Gods) to monotheism (one God) has sometimes been seen as part of a natural progression or evolution, if you will; of a widening understanding of the inter-relatedness of all.

The Hebrew people, who are often credited with being the earliest monotheists, did not begin that way. The Ten Commandments, you will remember, say, “You shall have no other gods before me,” with the implication that there are many other gods that you could choose from, and I’m telling you, for your own good, you’d better stick with me. It is thought that, for many centuries, the Hebrews practiced something known as *henotheism*, which is the *worship* of one God (or a particular pantheon of Gods),

even though there is the recognition that other gods exist. In other words, my god is better than your god (or at least that's what I'm banking on).

There was also the concept that gods were tied to particular locales and groups of people. "Where does your god live?" was not an inappropriate or naïve question; gods lived in certain lands or temples or nations, thus it was common to adopt the gods of the place where you found yourself living. Maybe you had traveled to a new land in search of a better life; maybe you had been forcibly moved to a new place, defeated in battle and/or enslaved. Regardless of the reason, the rule for which god to worship seemed to be: love the one you're with. This was especially logical in that, if one had been defeated in battle, one's god had been defeated, too. Wouldn't it make sense to switch allegiance to the stronger god; the victorious deity?

Interestingly enough, scholarly speculation has it that it was amidst the agony of the Babylonian exile, when the Jewish people had been soundly defeated and many were taken captive, ripped from their homeland, that Judaism developed into a full-blown monotheistic religion. When it looked like, indeed, their God had been defeated, they found that the spirit of Yahweh remained with them, even in exile. Remembering their covenant to have no other gods before God, they dared to imagine that their *were* no other gods to *have*, in reality. They suddenly saw that the divine plan was deeper and wider than they had ever guessed. They dared to claim that their God was *not only* their God, but was the creator of all life; the God not only of the Hebrew people, but of the Babylonians and the Persians and the Egyptians. We are not all servants of different gods, fated to brutalize one another forever in a competition for power, but we are all children of *one* God if we would but see. Why, then, do we persist in spreading violence and brutality and injustice? How can we justify the savage treatment of some of God's children, that are as worthy and as loved by that God as we are?

Monotheism held the *potential* for a new kind of ethic and Muhammad saw that his people were desperately in need of understanding that they were all one family. The Arab peoples were experiencing the rise of a merchant class; cities were blossoming; trade was increasing. The old tribal identities were fast giving way to new individual identities fueled by the power and opportunity that money could bring. The old tribal ethic, of taking care of and sacrificing for one another within the clan underlined by the precarious nature of daily existence, gave way to a simple and familiar bottom line that all too often comes with greater comfort and security: me first.

Muhammad spoke directly to the injustice that he saw growing unchecked. He spoke to challenge what he saw as the worship of money. He said, in effect; do not kid yourselves that because you have left your tribe for the city that you are no longer responsible for one another. The truth is that we are all one tribe under one God and our only proper posture is not the swaggering arrogance of affluence but the humble submission to the one true reality that underlies all that is. In reclaiming what he saw as the pure roots of monotheism from the confusing twist of abstract theological arguments that had plagued Christianity, he sought also to revive the ethical responsibility that submission to the one true God would necessarily entail, the one described so beautifully by the Hebrew prophet, Micah, when he described what God required as doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. To worship God is nothing other than to serve the people.

Amazing potential there. Call it the Power of One...and we should be somewhat conversant with the power of one, as we are *Unitarian Universalists* after all. Uni—one.

Unitarians, historically, stood for the unity of God over against the attempts to dilute or fracture that all-embracing concept. Famous Unitarian Frances David proudly proclaimed *Egy Az Isten* (God is One) in 1568 Transylvania (SLT 566).

Universalism proclaimed the all-embracing love of the one God over against the attempts by some to decide who was worthy and who was not. Famous Universalist Hosea Ballou said, “Let us endeavor to keep the *unity* of the spirit in the bonds of peace” (SLT 705).

And the words of our ancestors have echoed down through the ages, finding expression in the words of our present President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Bill Sinkford, [who described his own view of Unitarian Universalism](#) as “One God, no one left behind.”

But that’s not the whole story, is it? We can feel the *potential*, the partial reality of monotheism; but we have also experienced its pitfalls. I included both Karen Armstrong, who associates monotheism with “justice, decency, compassion and respect for humanity,” and Gore Vidal, who sees monotheism as “the great unmentionable evil,” because I think that we need to hear and acknowledge the truth expressed by both of them.

Monotheism seems to have the potential to bind us together in unity, but it has all too often driven us ever further from one another as each religion, and even each sect within a single religion, lays claim to the *one true faith* about the *one true God*. In other words, yes we are all God’s children...but he always liked me best. My God is your God, too, so if you disagree with me about who this God is or how this God acts or what this God requires, *you must be wrong*.

Further, the postulation of a single all-powerful, all-loving God creates unavoidable questions when we are faced with the horrible brutality and suffering that is experienced by all too many people. For lack of satisfactory answers, some people are left justifying the unjustifiable and proposing to speak for God: the perceived sins of gays and feminists brought on the attack of 9/11; God used Hitler to secure a homeland for the Jews; Hurricane Katrina was God’s judgment on abortion, or gay rights, or the war in Iraq. These are admittedly extreme examples from a handful of popular personalities that certainly don’t speak for monotheism in general, but the tension of the question persists and cannot be ignored, especially on behalf of those who are suffering. How could a loving God, who *could* change things, who *could* intervene, choose not to? How can we, in the name of God, choose not to?

We can each name off a string of atrocities during our lifetimes that never should have been allowed to happen, and those are only the ones that receive some kind of global attention. Those who are suffering cannot wait for justifications of God’s actions. We cannot expect them to be comforted by offhand assurances of God’s love. They need the mobilizations of human efforts, regardless of religious orientation, to work for rescue, relief and restoration.

We here today do not all believe in one God. Someone described modern Unitarian Universalists as believing in “one God, at most.” We do have theists with a variety of perspectives, and we have agnostics and atheists and humanists and those who practice non-theistic religions, and we have a whole variety of ways of describing our various spiritual and ethical orientations. That is as it should be. “One God, no one left behind,” is a welcome perspective on this tradition that we share, but it is only one perspective in the mix. Bill Sinkford hastened to add in that same article that this was only *his* present

definition of Unitarian Universalism, and he urged each one of us to “[p]ut a name to what calls you, and to what you find yourself called to do in response.”

Put a name to what calls you and to what you are called to do. See, what we need are not just definitions but *working* definitions of our faith, whatever it may be; definitions that inspire and enable us to engage the important work of justice and equity and compassion across the world. Religions need to reclaim the vital calls to compassionate action from which they first grew and set aside the bitter divisions that add to and inflame the misery of the world.

And what we need is a concept of one-ness that does not rely on our thinking alike or acting alike; a one-ness that is not enforced with the sword or manipulated by the threat of terror in this life or the next. We need to cultivate a one-ness that binds us together in common purpose, healing the world of its savagery and greed and violence, lifting hearts and opening minds. Many windows, one light...many waters, one sea.

Diversity of perspective and opinion and practice need not be a hindrance to unity. The Q’uran reads, “We have called you into tribes and nations so that you can know one another.” Imagine, all of the different cultures and traditions and beliefs and insights, all allowing us to *know* and *understand* one another, pulling us outside of ourselves, offering new perspectives that change us and further strengthen us for the work that we share.

Then we may fully appreciate the gifts that each tradition brings to the world. Then we may, indeed, experience the unity of spirit in the bonds of peace. Then we may truly come together as one.