

Pagan Cultural Element #1: Pagan Monotheism

Man's First Religion

In the beginning, everybody in heaven and earth was a monotheist because everyone knew there is but one Creator. Adam and Eve never even dreamed of worshipping anyone but their Creator, and while in heaven that never changed, on earth, over time, the worship of others besides the Creator became the norm. In the opening lines of his *Treatise on Relics*, John Calvin (1509–1564) proposed a likely source of the rise of polytheism:

Hero-worship is innate to human nature, and it is founded on some of our noblest feelings – gratitude, love, and admiration – but which, like all other feelings, when uncontrolled by principle and reason, may easily degenerate into the wildest exaggerations and lead to most dangerous consequences. It was by such an exaggeration of those noble feelings that paganism filled the Olympus with gods and demigods.¹

It may well be true that polytheism began with an excessive glorification of men and women who contributed greatly to society, or with glorification of the exceptionally large and powerful humans born after some of God's angels forsook their heavenly bodies to possess men so that they could mate with beautiful women:

Genesis 6

1. It came to pass when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them,
2. that the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were beautiful to look at, and they took wives for themselves, whoever they chose.

Jude compared these perverse angels with the Sodomites, who also surrendered themselves to unnatural lusts. But for the angels to satisfy their unnatural lust, they had to forsake their heavenly bodies and possess human bodies instead. Jude spoke of their wickedness:

Jude 1

6. The angels who did not keep to their own domain [the spiritual realm], but left their proper abode [their bodies], He has reserved in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the Judgment of the Great Day,
7. just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, in a manner similar to these *angels*, giving themselves over to immorality and going after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the punishment of eternal fire.

The union of demon-possessed men² with earthly women (and I suppose it could have been the other way around) produced unusually large humans with extraordinary strength:

¹ John Calvin, *A Treatise on Relics*, 6.

² The angels who forsook their bodies to possess humans became the spirits we now call demons.

Genesis 6

4. There were giants on earth in those days, and even after that, when the sons of God went in to the daughters of man, and they bore them children. They were mighty men, men of renown from long ago.

Among the earliest men who performed extraordinary deeds and were later deified were the Greek Herakles (Hercules) and Romulus, the founder of Rome. This assumes, of course, that the fanciful stories of Herakles and Romulus were based upon the exploits of real men, but even if not, others who were certainly real humans were elevated to godhood, such as Julius Caesar and a number of Roman Emperors. So, it is altogether plausible that polytheism arose as a human response to the exploits of exceptional men and women, esteeming them to have possessed supernatural qualities and were, therefore, worthy of worship.

In whatever way polytheism began, however, the larger point is that polytheism was not man's first religion, but his second. Monotheism came first, as Paul said:

Romans 1

21. Although they³ knew about God, they did not honor Him as God, nor were they thankful, but they were made vain in their thinking, and their senseless heart was darkened.
22. Claiming to be wise, they were turned over to foolishness,
23. and they traded the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the likeness of corruptible man, and birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.

Abraham and Moses

The Bible makes no mention of the worship of any but the Creator before the Flood. In fact, neither idols nor gods are mentioned until the story of Jacob (Gen. 31 and 35), and only briefly then. Nevertheless, polytheism must have come into existence shortly after the Flood, if not before, because when Abraham left his homeland of Ur, about 500 years after the Flood, he left behind his ancestors' polytheism (Josh. 24:2–3). Then, approximately 700 years after Abraham, worship of the Creator as the only God had become so foreign to mankind that to do so had to be commanded. It was the first of the Ten Commandments which God gave Israel:

Exodus 20

2. I am Jehovah your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves.
3. You shall have no other god besides me.

Abraham and Moses long pre-dated the Classical cultures of Greece and Rome, and although their influence in the Classical world existed, it was not great, and by the time those cultures blossomed, the once universally known truth about a single God was buried beneath a mountain of superstition, and forgotten.

Nevertheless, the ancient truth about God would not die; it relentlessly pricked at man's conscience, as Moses knew it would. He told Israel that when the heathen saw Israel keeping the law of God and honoring God as unique, "They will say, 'Surely, this great nation is a wise and understanding people!'" (Dt. 4:6). Moreover, the reputation of Israel's prophets spread beyond Israel's borders (cf. 2Chron. 22:10–11), and their connection with God was often acknowledged and respected by Gentiles (e.g.

³ Paul is talking about unrighteous people here (cf. Rom. 1:18–20).

2Kgs. 6:11–12; Jer. 39:11–12); still, few of them ever dared to confess faith in the uniqueness of Israel's God.⁴

Philosophers

In spite of the spiritual darkness which covered Gentile cultures, the truth proclaimed by Israel's prophets stubbornly throbbed within pagan hearts, summoning from the depths the long-buried memory of the Creator. That ghost of truth, that vague awareness of the one true God (or at least of a single, supreme Something) never ceased to haunt humans. That nagging truth moved a number of Gentile philosophers to propose various versions of monotheism, almost all of them polluted with polytheistic sympathies. These philosophical attempts to invent a Supreme God within a pagan framework is what we call "pagan monotheism". Pagan monotheism was always thoroughly pagan; at the same time, it emphasized the power of a single, Supreme Being, and sometimes to such an extent that if one chose to worship only one god, it could be intellectually justified.

To devise a monotheism which excluded Israel's God proved to be a bottomless quandary for heathen philosophers; nevertheless, many dove headlong into the abyss. Thinkers searched tirelessly for a way to express the truth which haunted their souls, but without believing in the God which Israel's law and prophets proclaimed, the answer eluded them. They spent their lives devising confused expressions of nebulous feelings about the Creator, tormented by indistinct echos of forgotten truth which they could hear but could not understand. Lost in the maze of their intellect, they were unable to make any real sense of the invisible universe, though they certainly tried.

Israeli medievalist and philosopher Yuval Harari (1976–) is right to reject the typical Western view of ancient polytheism as "ignorant and childish idolatry":

This is an unjust stereotype. . . . Polytheism does not necessarily dispute the existence of a single power or law governing the entire universe. In fact, most polytheist and even animist religions recognized such a supreme power that stands behind all the different gods, demons and holy rocks. In Classical Greek polytheism, Zeus, Hera, Apollo, and their colleagues were subject to an omnipotent and all-encompassing power – Fate.⁵

Harari then shows the same sort of belief system existed in the Nordic, West African, and Hindu religions: "All these groups accepted that there was at the apex of the hierarchy of divine forces one higher being, even if the form of this being was conceptualized in different ways and addressed by different names in different cultures."⁶

A Sophisticated Understanding

The form of polytheism which viewed lower gods operating somewhat independently from the Supreme Being, as in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, did not satisfy thinking souls, and so, more nuanced ways of understanding the gods were proposed by Greek philosophers. For them, the Supreme Being (1) had to be greater than he was popularly imagined, and (2) the other gods had to be more subservient to him than was popularly believed.

⁴ An exception to the rule was the Syrian general Naaman, who became a worshipper of Jehovah alone (2Kgs. 5:17)

⁵ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, 213–214.

⁶ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, 214.

Virtually all the proponents of pagan monotheism agreed that there were secondary deities, but they differed widely as to the relationship of those lower gods with the highest god. Were the lower gods just expressions of the Supreme God's character, mere emanations of his attributes? Or were they gods in their own right, with their own characteristics and responsibilities? And to what degree were they subservient to the Supreme God? Teachings ran the gamut, but the most accomplished pagan monotheists "used the doctrine of 'secondary divinities' as a means of preserving their own monotheism without altogether breaking away from the popular mythology. According to them, the one Supreme God worked through many ministers, to whom worship could rightly be offered."⁷ According to Constantine's Christian advisor, Lactantius (250?–325?), the first-century Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–AD 17) "admits that the universe was arranged by God, whom [Ovid] calls the Framer of the world, the Artificer of all things."⁸ Still, such confessions of belief in a Supreme Power did not exclude belief in and worship of other gods. The acceptability of worshipping the lower gods in addition to the Supreme God was generally agreed upon by pagan monotheists, but in all their systems, the importance of doing so was at least a little diminished.

Philosophers avoided provoking the public's wrath by dismissing their revered polytheistic traditions as worthless; instead, they presented their doctrines as a more sophisticated understanding of the invisible gods of the universe. They could do this sincerely, for pagan monotheists were never pure monotheists as Moses was, and the public, perhaps not even realizing it, were steadily, though slowly, drawn toward what the philosophers said. In a speech before the citizens of Rhodes, who believed that at least some of the gods were in reality one god called by different names, the orator and Cynic philosopher Dio Chrysostom (c. 40–c. 115) declared, "Some maintain that that Apollo, Helios, and Dionysus are one and the same, and this is your view, and many people even go so far as to combine all the gods and make of them one single force and power, so that it makes no difference at all whether you are honoring this one or that one."⁹ The fact that he felt at liberty to make such a statement in a public address speaks volumes about the public's frame of mind in the late first century AD.

By One or Many Names

Words from around the late second century, as having been inspired by an unnamed deity, have been found which declare the existence of a supreme being called by many names:

Self-born, untaught, motherless, unshakeable,
Giving place to no name, many-named, dwelling in fire,
Such is God: we are a portion of God, his angels.¹⁰

Also in the second century, there was a growing chorus of voices declaring that "God, being one, yet has many names."¹¹ According to historian A. D. Nock (1902-1963), the philosopher Cornelius Labeo

⁷ LCL #92, Clement of Alexander, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, III., fn. 90.

⁸ Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, I.v.

⁹ Dio Chrysostom, "The Thirty-first Discourse: The Rhodian Oration", 11.

¹⁰ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 169.

¹¹ Cf. Pseudo-Aristotle, *On the Cosmos*, 401a. It is believed that this document was written in the first or second century AD. <https://topostext.org/work/807#:~:text=The%20position%20nearest%20to%20this,which%20borders%20on%20the%20Earth>. Accessed 9–11–2025

(early third century?) quoted an ancient oracle equating the supreme being with Jehovah, Hades, Zeus, and Helios, all at once.¹²

What such pagan monotheists were searching for was a way to retain the many traditional gods while making the whole system less chaotic and more believable. This could be done only by blending all the gods into One, but their efforts were clumsy and theologically unconvincing. Still, the effort was continually being made in every culture of the ancient world:

“Zeus Helios the Great All-God Sarapis.” This on an altar from second-century Carthage. Zeus is worshiped as Papa and Attis, all at the same time, in Bithynia; he is “Zeus Greatest Helios Olympian, the Savior,” in an inscription from Pergamon; “Zeus Sarapis” often on gems and amulets; “Zeus Dionysus” in Phrygia or Rome.¹³

The first-century Stoic philosopher Cornutus, proposed the idea that the names of the gods were mere figures of speech, referring to natural phenomena, each god being a different aspect of the physical world.¹⁴ He even reduced Zeus, chief of the gods, to an idea: “Just as we are governed by a soul, so the cosmos has a soul that holds it together, and this is called ‘Zeus’ – who lives preeminently and in everything and is the cause of life in those things that live. Because of this, Zeus is said to reign over the universe – just as our soul and nature might be said to reign over us.”¹⁵

The Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180), himself a philosopher, proposed a similar theory. He considered human intelligence to be an emanation of God: “This intelligence in every man is a god, and is an efflux of the deity.”¹⁶ According to him, protection of that inner divinity was a philosopher’s paramount concern: “Philosophy . . . consists of keeping the daemon within a man free from violence and unharmed.”¹⁷ Whether one called that inner spark of divinity “god” or “gods” did not matter to Marcus.¹⁸ Yet, for political reasons, “Marcus was a pious worshipper of the Roman gods, for such ritual was necessary for the survival of the state and cohesion of its people. But he saw these divine powers as aspects of a universal deity.”¹⁹ In the final analysis, the emperor’s belief that every person’s intelligence is an emanation of God solved nothing for him or for anyone else, for it required as many gods as there are people, since every person has his own idea about everything.

People with this kind of worldview could worship any of the gods, or all of them, without viewing it as an affront to the Supreme Being. After all, if worship of many gods was, in reality, the worship of a single, supreme One, how could there be an affront to his dignity?

Very Ancient Testimonies

¹² A.D. Nock, *Conversion*, 111.

¹³ Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 83–84.

¹⁴ *Medieval Popular Religion 1000-1500*, 157, John Shinnars, ed.

¹⁵ L. Annaeus Cornutus: *Greek Theology*, 55. Trans., George Boys-Stone.

¹⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, XII.26.

¹⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, II.17.

¹⁸ Michael Grant, *The Climax of Rome*, 134.

¹⁹ Michael Grant, *The Climax of Rome*, 134.

Lactantius strove to show his pagan listeners that monotheism was not a novel idea, but an ancient one. “It would be a long task”, he said, “to recount the statements which have been made [by ancient philosophers and poets] respecting the Supreme God.”²⁰ In his lengthy list of pagan monotheists, Lactantius mentioned a most ancient Greek prophet, Orpheus, as evidence that the Gentiles had long expressed belief in one Divine Being, influenced as they were by the irrepressible “force of the truth”:

. . . not that they had ascertained the truth, but the force of the truth itself is so great that no one can be so blind as not to see the divine brightness presenting itself to his eyes. The poets, therefore, however much they adorned the gods in their poems and amplified their exploits with the highest praises, yet very frequently confess that all things are held together and governed by one spirit or mind. Orpheus, who is the most ancient of the poets, . . . speaks of the true and great God, [saying that] when as yet there was nothing, He first appeared and came forth from the infinite.²¹

Of course, the Creator didn’t “come forth” from anywhere; everything that exists came forth from Him. But Orpheus was trying.

Of Virgil, the greatest Roman poet, Lactantius wrote,

He was the first of our [Roman] poets to approach the truth, who thus speaks respecting the highest God, whom he calls Mind and Spirit:

“Know first, the heaven, the earth, the main,
The moon’s pale orb, the starry train,
Are nourished by a Soul,
A Spirit, whose celestial flame glows in each
member of the frame,
And stirs the mighty whole.”²²

Two centuries before Lactantius, Justin Martyr offered the words of a Greek prophetess who predated Orpheus by hundreds of years to prove to his pagan audience that monotheism was not a new idea:

We must also mention what the ancient and exceedingly remote Sibyl . . . taught you in her oracular verses concerning one only God. And she speaks thus:

“There is one only unbegotten God,
Omnipotent, invisible, most high,
All-seeing, but Himself seen by no flesh.”
Then elsewhere thus:
“But we have strayed from the Immortal’s ways,
And worship with a dull and senseless mind
Idols, the workmanship of our own hands,
And images and figures of dead men.”²³

²⁰ Lactantius, *The Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, IV.

²¹ Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, V. Although Orpheus honored Apollo the sun-god above all, he did not deny the existence of other gods.

²² Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, I.v., quoting Virgil, *The Aeneid*, VI.724.

²³ Justin Martyr, *Address to the Greeks*, XVI.

The Greek philosopher Xenophanes (c. 570–c. 478 BC) taught that “there is one god, among gods and men the greatest, not at all like mortals in body or in mind.”²⁴ Since that statement mentions “gods and men”, some argue that he was not a monotheist; however, overall, his works imply that he was. His version of monotheism presented the Supreme Being as never moving, and probably never even speaking, for, according to Xenophanes, he directs all things merely “by the thought of his mind.”²⁵ In a world where polytheism was the norm, his oneness doctrine was, as an ancient critic of his, Sextus Empiricus, put it, “against the conceptions of all other humans.”²⁶ And so, his form of monotheism never caught on.

At about the same time, the philosopher Heraclitus (c. 535–c. 475 BC) proposed a Supreme Divinity so unlike humans that Heraclitus referred to that god as a thing: “That which alone is wise is One,” he said, “It is willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus.”²⁷ For Heraclitus, this supreme One both did and did not care what men called It. One is left to wonder if this divine “It” cared about anything at all. Heraclitus no doubt would answer, “Yes and/or no.”

The genius mathematician Pythagoras (c. 570–c. 495 BC) imagined a Supreme Something called the “Monad” that ruled the universe alone, without subservient divine beings such as angels.²⁸ The god of Pythagoras was “the One that is Everything. He described God as the Supreme Mind distributed throughout all parts of the universe – the Cause of all things, the Intelligence of all things, and the Power within all things.”²⁹

Justin Martyr quoted Sophocles (c. 497–406 BC), the famed Greek playwright, boldly declaring a single god to his polytheistic audience, even mocking the rituals which they, and he, performed in honor of the gods. The truth which Sophocles spoke must have forced itself up from a subconscious awareness of the unique God of creation, for Sophocles himself was known to be very reverential toward the gods:

There is one God, in truth there is but one,
Who made the heavens and the broad earth beneath,
The glancing waves of ocean and the winds.
But many of us mortals err in heart,
And set up for a solace in our woes
Images of the gods in stone and wood,
Or figures carved in brass or ivory,
And, furnishing for these our handiworks,
Both sacrifice and rite magnificent,
We think that thus we do a pious work.³⁰

²⁴ Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla To the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 23.

²⁵ Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla To the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 23.

²⁶ LCL 526: *Early Greek Philosophy III*, 103. “Xenophanes” R21a.

²⁷ Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla To the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 27.

²⁸ Robert Payne, *Ancient Rome*, 59.

²⁹ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/eso/sta/sta15.htm>. “The Life and Philosophy of Pythagoras” Accessed 4-17-16.

³⁰ Justin Martyr, *Address to the Greeks*, XVI.

Plato (c. 425–348 BC) famously called the ruling Force of the universe, “the Form of the Good”. He taught that “the Highest ruled by some figure, . . . a figure without corporeal qualities, needs, or susceptibilities, perfect in every respect: One God, maker of heaven and earth. All other beings could be seen as mere expressions of his will: in short, monotheism.”³¹ But as with the pagan monotheists before and after him, Plato was speculating about Divinity without revelation from the true and living God. As much as Plato and other philosophers believed in one supreme being, none of them knew Him, nor could they ever know Him without first believing in His Son and receiving His Spirit.

MacMullen was correct to say that wisdom was “passed down from the philosophers [that] many gods were really aspects of a single god.”³² But that wisdom did not originate with philosophers; it originated with God’s revelation of Himself to the first inhabitants of earth; they all knew their Creator was the only God. Nevertheless, one can sympathize with the ancient philosophers for their earnest, yet vain efforts to recover that lost truth.

Making Its Way

In the late-second century, a Greek philosopher named Maximus extolled the benefits of believing in one Supreme Being, making the astonishing – and questionable – claim that monotheism was everywhere believed:

In the midst of [earth’s universal] conflict, strife, and discord, there is the one belief, the one account on which every nation agrees: that there is one God who is father and king of all, and with him many other gods, his children, who share in his sovereign power. This is what Greek and barbarian alike, inlander and coast-dweller, wise man and fool all say.³³

If that was true at all, it was true on a philosophical level, to which most people did not have leisure to enjoy. The evidence is abundant that in Maximus’ time, the majority people were still polytheists, and some of them adamantly so. Maximus himself was a devout polytheist. He wrote, “The gods are helpers to mankind. In fact, all the gods provide help to all men.”³⁴ And he exhorted his Readers to worship the gods.³⁵ For Maximus, a Supreme Deity existed, but he was so foreign to our existence, so completely unknowable, that the best we humans can do is to worship by resorting to idolatry and declaring certain animals and places in nature to be holy:

God, the father and creator of all that exists, is more ancient than the sun, more ancient than the heavens, mightier than time, eternity, and all the flux of nature. Legislators cannot name him, voices cannot speak of him, eyes cannot see him. Since we are unable to grasp his essential being, we must resort to word, names, and living c features; to depictions in gold, ivory, and silver; to plants, rivers, mountain peaks, and streams. We desire to know him, but because of our human weakness we denominate his nature by the beautiful things around us.³⁶

³¹ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 12.

³² Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 87.

³³ Maximus of Tyre, *The Philosophical Orations*, 11.5. See also Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 18.

³⁴ Maximus of Tyre, *The Philosophical Orations*, 2.1.

³⁵ Maximus of Tyre, *The Philosophical Orations*, 10.9.

³⁶ Cf. Maximus of Tyre, *The Philosophical Orations*, 2.10.

Theological Chaos

To some pagan monotheists, the belief in many gods was laughable, and they scorned men's reverence for them. When the philosopher Plotinus, a third-century pagan monotheist, was invited to a ritual in honor of the gods, he contemptuously replied, "It is for those Beings to come to me, not me to them."³⁷ According to Michael Grant, Plotinus was

the pioneer of psychedelic experience for the west, but he achieved his end by purely cerebral, intellectual discipline – not by schizophrenia, and not by drugs, and not by religion. . . . Plotinus' world was no ivory tower but reality at its highest level, raised to its most exalted plane by the intensest concentration on what seemed to him the most real. . . . Union with the One is to tackle life with a daring and dedicated brand of realism. . . . The One, as he conceived it, is beyond thought or definition of language: it inhabits summits where reason, bewildered as in a storm, forsakes even thought.³⁸

Unlike Maximus, who entertained no hope of ever communing with the Supreme Being, Plotinus felt certain that "the search for truth . . . would lead, step by step, toward a recognition of a spiritual 'One' beyond all physical things, and to communion with that supreme force."³⁹ Being in some way connected with that Supreme Force was the earnest desire of other Pagans as well, and though we pity them for their ignorance of the truth (they were trying to do the impossible, being without having revelation knowledge), we can empathize with their longing for a connection with the supreme being.

Thus, pagan culture, as it had been doing for centuries, made its bumbling way toward the Synthesis and its version of pagan monotheism. As Catholic theologian William Barry (1849–1930) taught, at the time when the gospel of Christ began to be preached, "the polytheism of the nations was rapidly merging into a Divine Monarchy, of which [the Roman emperor] appeared to be the visible image, the Vicar on Earth."⁴⁰ It remained only for the pope to replace Caesar as Vicar of Christ, ruling over the new empire, Christianity.

Of course, some philosophers were so devoted to their polytheistic traditions that they scoffed at the notion that there was but one God. In the late-second century AD, the pagan philosopher Celsus criticized Moses, insisting that polytheism was the natural state of mankind, that people had always and rightly believed in many gods: "Without rational cause," he said, "the goatherds and shepherds followed Moses, who taught them that there was but one God – deluded, apparently, by his rather naïve beliefs – and caused them to forsake their natural inclinations to credit the existence of the gods. For our part, we acknowledge the many."⁴¹ The fact that Celsus so confidently viewed polytheism as the natural inclination of mankind indicates that by his day, polytheism had been the norm for so long that, for him, life without it was unimaginable.

Centuries of polytheism and fruitless speculations about God led Classical culture into theological chaos for which no one could find a remedy. The brightest minds sensed that it was less chaotic to define "god" as One, but how was that One to be defined? None of the proposed answers were

³⁷ Porphyry, *The Life of Plotinus*, 10. Author's translation.

³⁸ Michael Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery of the Roman Empire*, 59.

³⁹ Robert Payne, *Ancient Rome*, 234.

⁴⁰ William Barry, *The Papal Monarchy*, 17.

⁴¹ R. Joseph Hoffmann, trans., *Celsus On the True Doctrine*, 56.

universally accepted, and so, the polytheistic system devolved into a confused mass of major and minor gods until the whole system became absurd and indefensible, and in the end, it began to collapse under its own weight.

A major problem for the philosophers is that they could not agree on the terms they used, and that is still an insurmountable problem for philosophers and theologians. MacMullen wrote, “We must first confront the very term ‘monotheism’. Like most big words, and ‘-isms’ worst of all, it is no friend to clear thought. It indicates acknowledgment of one god only. Very good. But it suggests no definition of ‘god.’”⁴² However, MacMullen’s statement itself is problematic because it assumes that humans *can* define God. Clever people can, of course, make up definitions for the gods they imagine, as ancient philosophers did, but they can never define the true and living God. His thoughts and ways are absolutely foreign to all human thought (cf. Isa. 55:8–9). There simply is no way for any man to attain to a true knowledge of God except for God to reveal the truth to him.

Every attempt of humans to define the true God is doomed to failure from the start. As one of Job’s wise friends said to him, “Can you by searching find out God? Or can you find the limit of the Almighty? It is beyond the heights of heaven. What can you do? It is deeper than Sheol. What can you know?” (Job 11:7–8). The answer is that we can know nothing about God unless He, by some means, grants it to us. The *only* way for anyone to know God and escape the suffocating human confusion about Him is for God to reveal Himself, and He chose to do that through His Son.

Philo and Numenius

The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–AD 50), following Plato’s model, made what was perhaps the earliest attempt to blend Israel’s true monotheism with pagan monotheism. He believed that “Moses had been a Platonic philosopher who had understood the Forms in the way Plato had hoped his followers would.”⁴³ Philo thought that “Moses’ Old Testament God was none other than ‘the Good’ of Plato.”⁴⁴ The apostle John taught that Christ is the Word (*logos*) of God, dwelling with God from the beginning (Jn. 1:1), and Philo would have agreed that the Word (*logos*) was there in the beginning, but not that it was Christ. Philo spoke of the *logos* the same way the apostles spoke of Christ, calling the *logos* “the firstborn of God”⁴⁵ and “the intermediary between God and the cosmos, being both the agent of creation and the agent through which the human mind can apprehend and comprehend God.”⁴⁶ But Philo did not believe that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14). Jesus humbly said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6), and that was the reality which Philo refused to face. What Philo said about the Word applied to the Son of God who was sent to earth by the Father, but refusing to believe it, Philo joined the long list of philosophers who remained in bondage to their own imaginations.

A century after Philo, a Greek philosopher named Numenius agreed with Philo’s opinion of Moses. “Who is Plato,” he asked, “if not Moses speaking Greek?”⁴⁷ But Plato was unworthy to so much as

⁴² Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 88.

⁴³ Charles Freeman, *The Closing of the Western Mind*, 73.

⁴⁴ Charles Freeman, *The Closing of the Western Mind*, 73.

⁴⁵ Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues*, XXVIII.146. By “firstborn”, Philo meant the eldest of God’s angels.

⁴⁶ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “logos”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 Jun. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/logos>. Accessed 31 December, 2023.

⁴⁷ Charles Freeman, *The Closing of the Western Mind*, 73.

wash Moses' feet; he was no more a Moses than Caiaphas was a Jesus. According to a modern scholar, Numenius' purpose was "to show that the Jewish nation must be counted among the ancient ones that have a share in *logos*⁴⁸ and also that Moses had a conception of the first principle similar to that of Plato."⁴⁹ In other words, Numenius believed that instead of being spoken to by God, Moses devised his doctrine about God with his intellect. But without a personal experience with the Spirit of God, that is what carnally minded men have always thought about God's messengers, whether in the Old Testament or the New.

Porphyry

When he was young, the philosopher Porphyry (c. 234–c. 305) wrote a book titled, *Philosophy from Oracles*, "giving oracles from Apollo of Claros and shrines of Hecate which not merely prescribed cultus, but also defined the nature of god and asserted the existence of one Supreme Being who is Eternity (*Aion*), the ordinary gods of paganism being his 'angels.'"⁵⁰ Plotinus was not ignored. He "gathered many followers about him as he set forth his doctrine."⁵¹ Few philosophers touched on the spiritual nerve within men concerning the Creator as did Porphyry, and his logic and erudition attracted many.

The Christians' insistence upon a single Supreme Being presented no difficulty for an ever-increasing number of intellectuals in Greco-Roman culture, such as Porphyry, for as we have shown, "something close to monotheism, by one approach or another, had long been talked about and attracted adherents among Greeks and Romans alike."⁵² And though Porphyry contemptuously rejected the gospel of Christ, he was willing to include believers among the enlightened of the earth because they worshipped a Supreme God:

Porphyry presents an elaborate discussion of the theology of the various ancient peoples – Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Chaldeans, even the Hebrews – to show that these ancient beliefs were similar to the philosophical religion accepted by many educated people in the third century.... His strategy was to provide a way to incorporate *the Christian faith*^a, which also claimed to believe in the one high God, into the religious framework of the Roman world.⁵³

"To summarize Porphyry's argument: There is one God whom all men worship, and Jesus, like other pious men, worshipped this God and taught others to venerate him. By his teaching, Jesus directed men's attention to the one God, but his disciples fell into error [according to Porphyry] and taught men to worship Jesus."⁵⁴

⁴⁸ That is, in the philosophical sense of universal, divine reason.

⁴⁹ Karamanolis, George, "Numenius", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/numenius/>>.

⁵⁰ A.D. Nock, *Conversion*, 111.

⁵¹ Robert Payne, *Ancient Rome*, 234

⁵² Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 17.

⁵³ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, 136.

⁵⁴ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, 153.

Porphry's discussion of the *faith of believers*^a in the *Philosophy from Oracles* included the following: (1) praise for Jesus as a good and pious man who ranks among the other sages or divine men, for example, Pythagoras or Hercules, venerated by the Greeks and Romans; (2) criticism of the disciples, and of those who follow their teaching, because they misrepresented Jesus and inaugurated a new form of worship; (3) defense of the worship of the one high God; (4) praise of the Jews for worshipping this one God.⁵⁵

It would be stretching the point to say that some of the Christian bishops would have agreed with Porphyry's view of Christ. But many of them, among whom was Eusebius of Caesarea, were very reluctant to consider Jesus as divine in the same sense that God the Creator was divine. Indeed, the controversy, which was to divide the Christian world for several generations, centered precisely on that issue: Was Jesus to be thought of as fully God, equal to one high God? Or was he a lesser deity, who, though sharing an intimate relation to God the Father, was nevertheless in the second rank?⁵⁶

In his *Philosophy from Oracles*, "Porphyry provided a sympathetic account and a defense of the traditional religions of the Greco-Roman world, and he sought to make a place within this scheme for the new religion founded by Jesus of Nazareth."⁵⁷ Believers did not know how to respond to a Pagan who held Jesus in high esteem within a polytheistic framework, and unable to respond adequately to his doctrine, they feared him.⁵⁸ and as late as 448, Church leaders condemned his books to the flames.⁵⁹

As with most other pagan monotheists, Porphyry's conception of a supreme God did not outright condemn belief in lesser gods. In pagan belief, the term "divine" might be applied to an array of beings, "stretching from the one high God down through the Olympian gods, the visible gods (e.g., the stars), the daimones, and finally to heroes or deified men. The supreme God presided over a company of gods."⁶⁰ For sophisticated souls in the Greco-Roman world, that or something similar was the only reasonable way to imagine God.

At least by the end of the third century, "the paganism of educated men was largely philosophical and monotheistical in character," and even for many Pagans who resisted the gospel of Jesus, "the deities of paganism had ceased to matter as individual and personal figures."⁶¹ "Any literal belief in the old gods had died . . . , certainly among the educated classes. The language of religion was retained, of course, . . . but Apollo and Venus and all the rest had long since been reinterpreted as allegories or metaphysical abstractions."⁶² "It appears thus to be a part of the intellectual heritage of the times", said MacMullen, "that god might be one; all 'gods,' simply his will at work in various spheres of action; and the interpretive structure, as accommodating of Zeus at its center as of Sol or of any other traditional

⁵⁵ Robert Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, 154.

⁵⁶ Robert Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, 160.

⁵⁷ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, 148.

⁵⁸ Robert Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, 160.

⁵⁹ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, 148.

⁶⁰ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*, 148.

⁶¹ A.D. Nock, *Conversion*, 12.

⁶² Rod Bennett, *The Apostasy That Wasn't*, 50.

deity, no matter which.”⁶³ And “when Constantine was growing up, there was a powerful, widespread movement in the same direction.”⁶⁴ For Constantine, Rome’s sun-god, Sol, was the chief object of devotion.

A Middle Path

Confused as it was, the monotheistic impulse within human hearts was crucial to the success of the fourth-century Synthesis. A critical ingredient of the Synthesis which purported to resolve the polytheistic enigma was a new doctrine, that of a Holy Trinity. That doctrine couched the concept of monotheism in such nebulous theological terms that it could be accepted by both Christians and Pagans; by Pagans because it accommodated their polytheistic leanings, and by Christians because it accommodated monotheism. It provided a middle path, that is, a definition of the Supreme God as both a plural and a single Being. By reducing the number of gods to three, the Trinity relieved Pagans of some of the confusion of traditional polytheism, while proclaiming that those three persons were actually just One, satisfying Christians.

Nobody then (or even now) was able either to explain the Holy Trinity or to understand it; nevertheless, for those of the time who were not convinced, the Christianized Roman Empire demanded they receive it as God’s final answer in the matter. And with Rome’s might enforcing acquiescence to it, the doctrine of the Trinity became foundational to the culture of the new Christian Empire.

Near the end of the fourth century, the pagan scholar Maximus wrote a letter to Augustine, the Church’s leading theologian, saying, “Which of us is so mad or mentally blind as to deny that it is most sure that there is one Supreme God without beginning or physical offspring, a great and magnificent Father? We invoke by many titles his virtues,⁶⁵ which are spread throughout the universe, because we do not know his own name. For ‘God’ is a name which all religions share.”⁶⁶ “O man of great wisdom,” he pleaded with Augustine,

I beseech you, lay aside and reject for a little while the vigor of your eloquence, which has made you everywhere renowned; . . . leave for a brief season your logic, which aims in the forth putting of its energies to leave nothing certain to any one; and show me plainly and actually who is that God whom you Christians claim as belonging specially to you.⁶⁷

Throughout Maximus blunt but respectful letter to Augustine, one may sense in him the same mental gymnastics which had been performed by philosophers for centuries in their attempt to justify belief in one god, and at the same time, belief in many of them, either as manifestations of that one Supreme Being, or as lesser, individual deities.

For intelligent polytheists like Maximus who refused to become Christian, the ancient gods had long been reduced to mere expressions of the one god of the universe. But also by Maximus’ time, the doctrine of the Trinity had been establish by Imperial decree, and dissidents were ridiculed and sometimes punished by the government. In the late fourth century, then, many people declared belief in

⁶³ Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 87.

⁶⁴ Michael Grant, *Constantine the Great*, 125.

⁶⁵ He means by the names of gods lower than the Supreme One, inasmuch as they are only expressions of his being.

⁶⁶ Augustine, Letter XVI.1.

⁶⁷ Augustine, Letter XVI.3.

Christianity's three-in-one God, if for no other reason, for safety's sake. However, much of the population were still polytheists at heart, and non-Christian philosophers still searched for a way to make belief in many gods acceptable. It was a vain exercise; Roman law made it a crime to believe in either more or less than three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost); yet, at the same time, it criminalized the denial of God as being just one. In truth, the Trinity doctrine was just a continuation of the ancient philosophical chaos; the difference was that Rome now demanded acceptance of its latest version of pagan monotheism.

Augustine, confident of the empire's backing, dismissed Maximus' letter as unworthy of serious consideration:

Are we engaged in serious debate with each other, or is it your desire that we merely amuse ourselves? For, from the language of your letter, I am at a loss to know whether it is due to the weakness of your cause, or through the courteousness of your manners, that you have preferred to show yourself more witty than weighty in argument. . . . These things shall be more fully treated of, with the help of the one true God, whenever I learn that you are disposed to discuss them seriously.⁶⁸

The Missing Ingredient

American author Rod Bennett (1960–), a staunch defender of the Roman Church, wrote, “What the Romans needed, and in the worst way, was a religion worthy of them – something they had always had to do without.”⁶⁹ And as with other defenders of the Roman Church, he holds that “though the Romans often end up wearing the black hats in dramas about the early Church, the empire itself was not an evil institution. It was simply inadequate, running, for lack of God's revelation, on a tank half empty.”⁷⁰ That is nonsense. The Roman Empire was altogether an evil institution, being an institution of this world, which John said “lies in wickedness” (1Jn. 5:19). The kingdom of God alone is a holy kingdom, and Jesus said God's kingdom is not of this world (Jn. 18:36).

On another point, however Bennett is correct, for to continue as an empire, and expand, Rome did need a religion worthy of its greatness. The half-empty tank Bennet mentioned was filled up when Christians blended with Rome, for it provided Rome with its missing ingredient: a rationalization for world domination using the name of the Savior of the world, Jesus.

Revealed by the Spirit

Jesus said that the Spirit would guide us into all truth (Jn. 16:13), but in order for the Spirit to do that, we must humble ourselves to receive what the Spirit says. The world at large cannot receive the Spirit (Jn. 14:17) because it does not believe in Jesus, in whose name alone the Spirit comes (Jn. 14:26). Consequently, the world cannot know God. That is “the simplicity that is in Christ” (2Cor. 11:3), essential to saving faith, but it is too simple a truth for this proud world to believe, and they reject as foolishness the wisdom of God (1Cor. 2:14). Men prefer profound, sophisticated theologies which can showcase their mental prowess. Ancient philosophers were of that cloth, and so, God hid the truth from them. It was, and still is as the apostle Paul said: “When, in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom

⁶⁸ Augustine, Letter XVII, “To Maximus of Madaura”, 1.

⁶⁹ Rod Bennett, *The Apostasy That Wasn't*, 50.

⁷⁰ Rod Bennett, *The Apostasy That Wasn't*, 49.

did not know God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe” (1Cor, 1:21). Jesus likewise honored God for reserving His knowledge for the humble:

Luke 10

21. Jesus rejoiced in spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the learned and intelligent, and revealed them to babes. Yes, Father! For such was pleasing in your sight.”

Jesus told his disciples, “No one really knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone really know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son may choose to reveal Him” (Mt. 11:27b). So, if Jesus does not choose to reveal God to a man, that poor soul will spend his life in spiritual blindness, for God cannot be figured out by even the wisest of men. Paul gloried in the mighty wisdom of God:

Romans 11

33. Oh, the depth of the riches of both the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and inscrutable His ways!
34. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counsellor?
35. Or who has first given to Him, so that it will be repaid to him?
36. For all things are of Him, and through Him, and for Him. To Him be glory forever! Amen!

The law and the prophets were given to Israel to prepare them to receive the knowledge of God, and after Jesus came and paid the price for it, God sent the Spirit to reveal Him to man. When Jesus said that the Spirit would reveal all truth when it came (Jn. 16:13), the corollary to that is that no truth can be known without it. Paul explained this to the Corinthian saints:

1Corinthians 2

9. As it is written, “No eye has seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered the heart of man the things God has prepared for those who love Him.”
10. But God has revealed them to us by His Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.
11. For who among men knows the things of man except the spirit of man that is in him? Likewise, no one knows the things of God, except the Spirit of God.
12. Now, we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we might know the things freely given to us by God.
13. These things we also speak, not with words taught by human wisdom, but with those taught by the holy Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people.
14. A natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot comprehend them because they are spiritually discerned.

Pagan monotheism is the first of the three major elements of Greco-Roman culture which led Rome to the Synthesis, but as I said in the beginning, those cultural elements were intertwined. So intertwined were they that we cannot discuss one without mentioning the others, as the reader has no doubt noticed. Acknowledging that, we move on now to the second major element of pagan culture: Blending the Gods.