

ARE THERE AS MANY GODS AS RELIGIONS?

Rémi Brague

The title of this lecture is not mine. But I wanted to meet the challenge and answer the question to the best of my abilities. It can't be answered simply. We can vote either Yea or Nay. If we vote Yea, each religion will have its own god. No bridge will lead from religion A and god A to religion B and god B. We will have to launch into a lengthy description of those religions and those gods, which is stuff for scholars of religions, not for a philosopher.

Let me now ponder a while on the more exciting possibility of our voting Nay. The number of gods and the number of religions don't match each other.

If we do, two main possibilities obtain that branch into two subpossibilities. First, that there are more gods than religions, which may mean either (a) that some religions have several gods. Polytheism exists, or (b) that there are gods that are not the object of a religion and simply left out.

The second possibility is that there are more religions than gods, which may mean either (a) that some gods are shared by several religions. Some religions have the same god, or (b) that some religions can do without the idea of a deity.

All this enables us to broaden our ken and loosen the link between the notion of religion and the representation of one or several divine beings. Not any god is the object of a religion; not any religion has a god or gods.

I will first examine each of those four possibilities, more or less briefly according to my competence, and according to the interest of each for our present problems. Finally, I will consider one last possibility, that the number of both gods and religions is the same, namely zero. Therefore, I will have to ask whether the idea of the disappearance of religions together with their gods really holds water.

We expect a religion to have at least one

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god. Can it have several? We have the habit of classifying religions on the basis of the number of gods they admit: one, several, in some exceptional cases “two powers in heaven,” to quote the traditional Jewish characterization of Manichean dualism. In fact, one can wonder if a veritable polytheism has ever existed outside the polemics of those who attack it.

In order better to ask the question, let us spend some time with Aristotle, which is quite good company, all the more that we will let him teach us something most elementary in nature. The Philosopher distinguishes different sorts or levels of unity or, more concretely, different cases in which one says “it is the same thing”: unity by number (the same thing, which “does not constitute number”; you can’t count me, me, and me), by species (you and I are members of the human race), by genus (my dog and I are living beings), and by analogy (scales and feathers are the same thing because scales are to fish what feathers are to birds: they have the same function, covering their body).¹

Now, one can say that every religion attributes to the divine one or another of these different levels of unity. The divine can present itself as an individual, a family, a teeming race, a level of being. In each case, though, it is distinguished from what it is not (that is, the “profane”) by characteristics that constitute it as a unity. As a consequence, the proper question to ask is what monotheism makes of plurality, and what polytheism makes of unity. Ancient paganism knew the idea of a “world” of the divine, a pantheon that made all the gods members of a single, and unique, collectivity. This is what Homer said so magnificently: “The gods are not unknown to one another, even if they live in separate dwellings.”² And above the twelve Olympians hovered Destiny (*Moirā*), which regulated the succession of the genera-

tions constituting the divine family. Destiny wanted a son to emasculate his father; this son, to become himself a father and to eat up his children; and finally, one of his sons to dethrone and exile his father. Perhaps it was this impersonal power that was the real divine thing behind the colorful curtain of the Greek gods.

There are gods without religions. This is the case in Aristotle. In order to crown his description of the physical universe, he had to demonstrate in the last book of the *Physics* that each and every motion in it has its origin in a first motionless mover. In his *Metaphysics*, he proceeds a step further and calls this being by the name of *theos*, god. But this is a god who (or which) doesn’t even know what is not him/itself, hence below his/its own highest rung on the ladder of being.³ Such a god can’t hear our prayers. He/It is above religion.

Plato distinguished three kinds of atheism: atheists are, first, those who flatly deny the existence of gods; second, those who admit that there are gods but deny that they are interested in our doings; third, those who accept the first two tenets, but imagine that gods can be bribed by our prayers or sacrifices so that they won’t punish our trespasses.⁴

Epicurus is a good example of the second stance; that is, of a theology that does away with the belief in the action of godly beings on our world. Epicurus did not deny the existence of the gods, but he gave them an abode in the *intermundia*, the spaces that separate the infinitely many worlds that his cosmology admitted.⁵ By this token, the gods don’t bother about our doings and lead a peaceful life of contemplation, thereby providing the philosopher with a model of the rules of life that he has to abide by.

Three religions are commonly brought together under the heading of “monotheism”: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The phrase

“the three monotheisms” has become common parlance, not to say hackneyed. This requires some nerve, for several reasons. First, monotheism is not the privilege of religions. There are nonreligious monotheisms. Aristotle, to whom I have just alluded, demonstrated the existence of only one principle of the world. The god of the Enlightenment deists was scarcely a religious figure, either, but he was the ultimate warrant of coherence in the universe and of morality in mankind, hence he had to be one.

Second, among religions, there are more monotheisms than those three. There is the earlier monotheism of Pharaoh Amenophis IV, who took the name of Akhenaton, and launched an exclusive cult of the solar disk, several centuries before the commonly accepted date of Moses. Second, after the most recent of the three, Islam, there are many new religions that are for the most part monotheistic, some of them arising from one of the earlier three, and more or less successful. Even Hindu intellectuals claim more and more frequently that their religion is in fact monotheistic.

Third, we more often than not conflate two ideas that we should keep apart from one another: the objective existence of one and only one God, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the nearness of religions that acknowledge His existence. Now, religions can share the monotheistic faith and have different ideas about what kind of person this God is, because they tell different stories about Him. Such stories are told in Holy Books. Two religions that share the same Book or part of it have the same god, or partly the same, like Judaism and Christianity. Islam, which doesn't acknowledge the Bible as genuine, has not the same god because it doesn't tell the same stories about Him.

Finally, what is, in my opinion, more important still is that the very way in which

God is supposed to be one is far from being the same according to all monotheistic religions. The meaning of *mono-* is not identical in all mono-theisms. There are, so to speak, several “ones.”

By this token, we might give assent to the first possible answer to my original question, namely, “Yea,” but a limited assent only. To some extent, each religion has its own personal god.

But what about our last possibility, that religion stretches more broadly than gods?

There are religions without gods. It appears that primitive Buddhism had no need for gods, that it looked for a salvation that was not wrought by other beings, superior to humankind, but by the exertions of the ascetic himself. Later on, Buddhism, I have been told, watered down its original atheism and conceived of gods who helped mankind towards salvation.

Epicurus, whom I mentioned above, condoned the civic cults of his city. He worshipped gods that are not the true ones but that are socially useful. Hence, his religion can do without a belief in its own objects. This stance toward religion as a useful illusion can be found among many other schools of thought.

In more recent times, the idea has taken a new form. Let us mention Jean-Jacques Rousseau's project of a civic religion, one of the main dogmas of which would be the sanctity of the social contract.⁶ At the horizon looms the rather anemic figure of a Being who loves virtue and hates vice. Several people tried to build this kind of religion, especially in the wake of the French Revolution.

Let me spend some time with an extremely interesting example of a religion without God. As is well known, the French philosopher Auguste Comte, in the first half of the nineteenth century, wanted

to round off his system by inventing a new religion, the religion of Humanity, in the double meaning of the genitive. It was not only supposed to hold good for the whole of civilized mankind, but it had mankind as its object of worship. Hence, Comte did not hesitate in calling mankind by the names that designated first the God of the Christians, then the rather pale First Principle of the deist philosophers of the eighteenth century: "Great Being," "Supreme Being." In this context, Comte has an amazing but revealing sentence: "Whereas Protestants and deists always attacked religion in the name of God, we should, on the contrary, definitely put aside God in the name of religion."⁷ God is no longer equal to the task; he is not the adequate object of religion.

For us, the divine has a broader extent than personal gods. We have, in effect, broken up Comte's religion of humanity into smaller pieces that can be put on a pedestal so high that they function as gods, like what we call "values." An easy criterion is whether one is allowed to poke fun at something. Religious matters are fundamentally *serious*. We can bash and lampoon almost everything, but certainly not, for instance, human rights.

Let me now consider the possibility of there being as few religions as gods, as a matter of fact none at all. Exclusive humanism, atheism, denies the existence of every species of divine beings, and still more of gods. Hence, religion has no object whatsoever and must be unmasked as illusion or alienation.

We have no reason to suspect the sincerity of people who profess it. I have a quarrel against those who contend that, in fact, some alleged atheisms are religions. Thus, we sometimes call by the name of religion stances that don't consider themselves as such, by and large with a polemical undertone. Some people wanted to debunk National Socialism or Marxism as being, in fact, contrary

to their claims of atheism, a kind of religion. One mentioned the existence of a hierarchy, of ceremonies, of a credo of sorts, etc. But aping religion is not being a religion, and we have to take the professed atheism of those regimes seriously. To take up a paradox formulated by Alain Besançon, atheism may even be what is best in Marxism-Leninism, because it is at least what is most sincere, the only point on which it doesn't lie.⁸

The idea of a disappearance of the gods might be too sweeping a statement. What is true, what sociological polls bear witness of, is the dwindling of traditional Christianity in some Western countries. Many people complain about a return *to* paganism or a return *of* paganism. They are wrong. Getting back to paganism would not be that awful. There are worse things than the pagan gods.

What is true is that the divine in "pagan" style was robbed of its plausibility by modern science. Biblical prophets didn't *allow* us to worship natural forces. Our predicament is a worse one: we simply *can't* see naiads in springs, dryads in trees, a Zeus wielding the thunderbolt any longer. Or if we do, this happens as a literary game for aesthetes or as a dream for children. A beautiful example is the famous book by Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*. It succeeds in making credible for some instants the figure of the Greek god Pan.⁹ But looking seriously, among grown-up people, for an experience of a "pagan" divine supposes that one deliberately blinds oneself to scientific knowledge and pretends to forget what it has taught us about nature.

One knows the narrative of Plutarch about the sailor who heard in the dead of night a wailing voice shouting: "The Great Pan is dead!"¹⁰ The German romantic poet Heinrich Heine interpreted it as meaning the demise of the pagan worldview, of the Greek statues sprinkled by the blood of the

Cross.¹¹ If the Great Pan is dead, what is left to us is only deadpan humor. . . .

On the other hand, once the bolt that had been shot by biblical religions is bust, other figures of the divine spring forth like mushrooms. Thanks to some sort of “cunning of unreason,” if I may parody Hegel’s idea of a “cunning of reason,” the Divine that was supposedly done away with enjoys a powerful comeback. Speaking of the “return of the gods” is already a trite theme. Nietzsche hailed such possibility by the name of Dionysus. He once exclaimed: “Almost two thousand years already, and not a single new god!”¹² One may ask whether he ever read a newspaper. . . . His century, the nineteenth, was an extremely fruitful one for new gods. It witnessed the birth of Baha’ism and Mormonism, not to mention once again Comte’s Humanity. Earlier than him, and still more ever since, we have observed the rise of far more disquieting deities, all the more that they seldom present themselves as such: Nation, Progress, History, Class, or Race.

The religion that corresponds to those godheads is quite a primitive one; it even resembles the earliest form of so-called animism. I mentioned Auguste Comte as the inventor of the “Religion of Humanity.” At the end of his life, the French philosopher introduced, besides Mankind as the Supreme Being, Earth as the “Great Fetish,” and he pleaded for a “just adoration” of this idol.¹³ To be sure, he does that in a work that even his disciples leave under the bushel, since it betrays the growing insanity of the Master. Be that as it may, the use of the word *Fetish* remains highly interesting for, according to Comte’s own theory, fetishism was the most primitive stage in the development of religious ideas.

The deity that comes back is a perverse one; that is, the one that wants human sacrifices. It was believed to be buried in

oblivion since the angel of the Lord stopped Abraham’s hand (Genesis 22:12). The name of this god in the Old Testament is Moloch. Now the very name comes back to designate the idols of Modern Times. The first who identified the danger as being the rise of new idols and who called one of those, namely Progress, a “Moloch” may have been the Russian writer Alexander Herzen, in a piece that he wrote at the end of 1847, from his exile in Rome.¹⁴ And the German expressionist poet Ernst Toller writes right after the First World War: “Who asks for human blood for his own sake / Is Moloch: / God was Moloch. / The State was Moloch. / The masses were Moloch” (*Wer Menschenblut um seinerwillen fordert, / Ist Moloch: / Gott war Moloch. / Staat war Moloch. / Masse war Moloch*).¹⁵

In spite of their great diversity, those new deities have a common point. It is contained in one sentence, the one by which the French journalist Camille Desmoulins ended the last article of his newspaper *Le Vieux Cordelier*, before he was beheaded: “The gods are athirst.”¹⁶ The sentence was quoted from some report on the Aztec priests who wanted the blood of human sacrifices.

The French novelist Anatole France chose this formula for the title of a novel, published in 1912, the plot of which takes place during the French Revolution. There the phrase is to be read only once, where it expresses the view of the author.¹⁷ But the decisive formula is ascribed to a character who obviously is the mouthpiece of the author. He utters a prophecy, clearly made *post eventum*, in which he foresees Napoleon: “Wait till some day one of these warriors you make gods of | swallows you all up like the stork in the fable who gobbles up the frogs. Ah! Then he would be really and truly a God! For you can always tell the gods by their appetite.”¹⁸

Two years after the novel, the First World War was to break out. The huge bloodshed could show that the Nation had pride of place among those thirsty deities. Anatole France most probably could sniff what was coming. An interesting feature of his novel is that its main character is a painter without real talent who becomes a member at the revolutionary court of justice and sends his neighbors to the scaffold in the name of Freedom, Equality, and Happiness. Later on, another failed artist was to have millions of human beings killed in the name of race, and a moderately gifted calligrapher was to compare China with a sheet of paper on which he would write the most marvelous social poem, on the condition that it should first be erased with the utmost care. . . .

When Late Modernity sets on the stage a higher divinity than Man, it is the Earth. For some years supporters of the so-called deep ecology have been speaking of Earth as being a goddess. For this purpose, they have recycled the old Greek name Gaia. The name was borrowed from mythology and introduced in 1970 by the British chemist James Lovelock. This happened originally in the framework of a scientific theory that can have its value as a hypothesis. But it was later taken over by the New Age movement that added a mystic tinge to it. In paganism, the Divine is that to which sacrifices must be offered. This is almost a definition. In this recent movement, Man is something that should be sacrificed on behalf of the Earth.

The divinization of the Earth is an extremely consequential move, since it is supposed to be higher than Man. But this

godhead is paradoxical in nature: on the one hand, it is supposed to be more worthy than Man. But on the other hand, it is somehow stupid, for it made a huge howler when it let Man evolve out of more harmless forms of life. What justifies the greater dignity of Earth if she is blind?

Let me conclude by proposing a criterion that could enable us to tell a genuine deity from those new idols, be they hard, as in the examples that I have just mentioned, or soft, when well-meaning authors today define the sacred as being “that for the sake of which one can die.” There is some truth in that. Yet let me remind those people that what is at stake here, what Christians believe in, is not the *sacred*, but the *holy*. Immanuel Kant reminded us that only a will can be holy, whereas it can’t possibly be sacred.¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas emphasized again the distinction. Both of them did hardly more than refresh our memories.²⁰ For this distinction is as old as the Bible. The Prophets of Israel criticized sacred places, sacred trees, sacred springs, sacred heavenly bodies, etc., on behalf of the holy God. And the New Testament opposed the sacredness of political power by claiming *kyrios Christos*, that the Lord was not Caesar but the crucified Jesus.

If one wants a definition of holiness, I should say that it is the sacredness of what can’t ever possibly be sacred, as such, to wit, the will. And I consider the holy as being not that for which one must and can die, but first and foremost, what makes life possible and good. †