

God Against the Gods: The History of the War Between Monotheism and Polytheism, tackles the big challenge of looking at how the transition from many gods to one god has not only influenced religions but also political power and social conduct across the centuries.

Beginning with ancient Egypt, the book points to Pharaoh Akhenaten's ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful effort in the 14th century BCE to substitute Egypt's established pantheon with the cult of Aton, the sun-disc deity. Though it failed, this experiment is regarded as an early indication of monotheistic thought that subsequently found echoes in Jewish practices, particularly with figures such as King Josiah who advocated for worship of a single supreme deity. Kirsch is explicit that these shifts weren't simply about religion—they were strongly intertwined with politics and how societies operated.

Much of the book centers on the Roman Empire—a major front where polytheism and monotheism evidently battled it out. Emperor Constantine's famous conversion to Christianity is not depicted as a religious epiphany but as a calculated political maneuver. The well-known vision he supposedly experienced at the Milvian Bridge, as Kirsch describes it, wasn't so much a matter of individual faith, but a turning point that enabled him to harness the burgeoning strength of Christianity as a political unifier, an action that ultimately caused the empire to unify into one religious identity.

By contrast, Emperor Julian, usually referred to as "the Apostate," is a tragic figure. Julian's attempts to restore the ancient polytheistic practices and restore the pluralistic, tolerant atmosphere of classical paganism are revealed as a response to what he perceived as the narrowness and moral self-righteousness of the new Christian orthodoxy. His tale raises "what if" questions regarding history, revealing a more tolerant and open side of the past.

One of the most important concepts Kirsch contends is that although monotheism united people under a single divine flag, it also set the stage for intolerance and persecution. This cycle of exclusion—where a single "true" god takes center stage as the source of authority—has been employed throughout history, from the early Christian era of martyrdom to cases of contemporary religious violence.

Although the book is informative, it is not perfect. Kirsch sometimes oversimplifies the multifaceted motivations of historical leaders such as Akhenaten and King Josiah, and his use of some older secondary sources may come across as one-sided, particularly to readers more inclined towards monotheistic viewpoints.

All in all, for religious students, history buffs, or anyone interested in understanding how belief systems work and engage with power, *God Against the Gods* is a thought-provoking read. It encourages us to view things from the past not only as the march of religion, but as complex political and social shifts that have left deep marks on our cultural legacy.