

The Origin of Monism

by Sven Nilsen, 2024

In this essay, I argue that there is no particular trait of Monism in Theology that is more closely tied to Monotheism than to Polytheism. This is historical misconception that evolved in modern Western civilization from Leibniz, that attributed Monism as a special property of Monotheism, to distract people from the oppression of other religious beliefs, toward thinking there was something positive and distinguished about their own beliefs, that did not exist elsewhere. This is false. Monism is part of most belief systems in Polytheism. The kind of Monism that evolved in Early Christianity was practiced by mostly polytheists and has deeper roots in ancient Polytheism. Most Early Christians were not opposed to other people's beliefs in general, but were competing to gain followers with other sects from the same crowd. This explains their hostility toward neighboring sects. Arguably, with this insight in mind, one can hold a position that there is no such thing as Monotheism in practice and even a generous interpretation of statistical data does not lean toward Monotheism as having a beneficial trait when spreading freely as a Theology, but at the contrary, it spreads mostly due to violent war and oppression, since Monism already exists where it spreads.

In any civilization, there is a tendency that people do not know how different earlier generations were thinking about the world. When people read historical documents, they view them through a lens of a modern mindset. This leads to an echo-chamber effect, even in scholarly circles, where historical documents are seen as confirming people's own beliefs. By peer pressure, scholars who read the same documents in a different voice are discredited academically.

This is a huge problem, because some of the core beliefs that people maintain in modern history, which includes interpretation of history itself, are not actually historical factual. These people do not learn actual history, but make up their own fantasy version of it to feel more comfortable.

For example, in Early Christian writings, one can easily see hostility toward other people's beliefs. When reading these texts from the lens of modern history, one might misunderstand the very nature of this hostility. It later comes as surprise when people discover that Early Christians are proud of relating their own beliefs to ancient polytheistic roots. How can they be hostile toward other people's beliefs at the same time they claim the same cultural and literature tradition?

This is a puzzle that bamboozled scholars for centuries. The simple answer to this puzzle is that there is nothing wrong with how Early Christians perceive their cultural and literature context, but the problem is that the scholar's mind completely misunderstands the very basic nature of Polytheism. Scholars are often coming from a cultural background that sees Western religion as Monotheistic and hence special, relative to Polytheistic religions. This is a core belief that is never questioned. This means one has to ask this question explicitly for clarification: Are so-called Monotheistic religions truly Monotheistic, or are they just Polytheistic belief systems looking at other Polytheistic belief systems with a psychological "othering" of different cultures?

To answer this question, one might start with the very essential viewpoint of what makes people believe their Theology is Monotheistic in nature: Monism.

Monism in philosophy is an umbrella term, which includes philosophical positions about the mind-body problem, e.g. Neutral Monism (developed Bertrand Russell) or Relativistic Monism (developed by Sven Nilsen). Hence, Monism as a philosophical idea is not necessarily tied up to any particular religious belief system. Yet, in Western civilization Monism was motivated by religion, under the influence of Leibniz' philosophy, who was reading Spinoza.

Spinoza was frequently accused by other intellectuals of being an atheist. The Theology in Spinoza is fundamentally Deism, which grew popular in scholarly circles in a specific time period, among people who wanted more intellectual freedom in their thinking, but did not want to be labeled as atheists. Later, when Atheism became accepted socially, Deism fell in popularity, since among naturalists one might be perceived as childish by having beliefs in a creator deity that had no influence on any scientific evidence. Deism was unfalsifiable and hence became unpopular.

For example, Newton is perceived as Christian by most historians today. However, the kind of Christianity that Newton practiced, was inspired by Kepler, who thought the revelation of laws of nature and particularly the mathematical description of how the planets moved around the sun, was God's secret mission of granting humanity the gift of knowledge. In this secret mission, God created the world and set the particles into motion such that in Kepler's and Newton's time, humans would discover the mathematical description and hence revealing the nature of God's creation.

Kepler believed that his discovery of elliptical orbits was God's message to him personally. He saw it as a secret mission, a puzzle to be solved, given by God directly. Later, when Newton derived his law of gravity from observations and deduced Kepler's elliptical orbits, he started believing that God created the universe with this very time period and place in mind. That the entire history of the universe was planned in advance to produce the moments of Newton's discoveries. Newton did not believe that God intervened in nature, because it would disturb the "perfect" laws that were intended to be revealed by science.

Therefore, since God did not intervene in nature, in practice, Newton was a follower of Deism. Yet, because of his political and religious affiliations, he himself thought about his own beliefs as Christian and this is the reason that historians today also label him as a Christian.

The differences between how Newton practiced his religion, and how Spinoza practiced his religion, are superficial. Yet, Spinoza was frequently attacked by other intellectuals and accused of Atheism, while Newton was defended from any criticism. This is more of a social, political and cultural stance than grounded in religious beliefs.

In general, as a thumb rule, there is little evidence that scientific or religious positions play a great role in how people react to new discoveries or new ideas. The most significant fact is simply power. Who says what or does which actions, can be explained as a social game of power, while ignoring the scientific or religious arguments they make. This rule holds for every instance through the entire history of mankind. It is not particular to any cultural background or time period.

For example, when people accuse Spinoza of Atheism, it does not really matter the argument they make about Atheism and Spinoza's philosophy. You can just look at what stakes about power are in play and explain the accusations as completely subjective and arbitrary as a mean to gain more power and control. It is kind of amazing that this works as an explanation, because of how hard people insist they are acting out of their religious beliefs or scientific research, they are not concerned at all about the religious or scientific implications, but instead being scared of other people getting a larger piece of the cake than themselves. Almost as if the human brain is just like an animal's brain, without any authentic language bias when it comes to these matters.

This means, there is solid scientific evidence that suggests that formation of cultural identity in the species of homo sapiens, strongly correlates with how much power people gain from it. There is very little correlation with scientific research positions or religious beliefs in how they react toward other people's discoveries or new ideas. It is all about power.

With other words, how people form identity justifies taking a better look at the origin of Monism.

The term “Monism” is derived from “Monad”, which in turn came from Leibniz’ philosophy. Leibniz’ work “La Monadologie” (1714) was published after the death of Leibniz and is the most famous part of his writings. This text had an enormous impact on modern Theology.

Leibniz’ big project was to create peace between Protestant and Catholic churches, due to previous bloody wars that left people exhausted. This means that his philosophy was interpreted in the lens of Christianity, but from the perspective of finding common features of different versions.

You can see from this historical development that this particular piece of Theology develops from a historical coincidence, due to conditions that are very specific to some time period and place. All later Theology in modern history was more or less based on the assumptions that people in this time period and place made, shortly after Leibniz’ death. This is a colossal mistake that leads to all sorts of misconceptions people later have regarding the view of Western civilization about itself.

For example, this development in modern Theology has resulted in scholars being unable to figure out how Early Christians writings work and function at the most basic level of cultural context.

Simply put, this happens because people just make some assumptions in a specific time period and place and never question them ever since. Not until today.

In the Christian context of Leibniz’ influence, the hostility toward other religious beliefs was so extreme that there were no voices intellectually framing debate from other perspectives. This made it possible for this particular religion to evolve a self-image that it was special in a particular sense that dates back to Leibniz, without actually checking whether that view was held by any other religions. It is a such amazing distortion of history that it lacks parallels, yet it happened openly and in clear view, without any debate or resistance. People just started thinking their religious beliefs were special, because it made them feel more powerful.

From the general thumb rule of how people react to new discoveries and new ideas, this development only confirms the rule, instead of being an exceptional case. The development was momentous and hugely influential in how people thought about themselves, but in the end it is just the same rule, just applied on a larger scale, than isolated reactions to particular events.

When people make this assumption one of their core beliefs and part of their identity, without ever questioning, it becomes difficult for people to see how earlier accounts of religious beliefs are functioning in their historical context. This is a problem, because you can not reconstruct the historical reality of the cultural context that people write in, without at least start asking questions.

Why did Christians latch onto this idea of Monism being an essential feature of their religious belief system that made it different from other religions? The answer is the same as for other instances: Power. It was driven by the need to unite the political interests of Protestant and Catholic churches.

Prior to this development, it is possible that Monism was not seen as any particular feature that united different versions of Christianity. People who were Catholics just thought that Protestants were the enemy and vice versa. They did not need any deep theological construct to differentiate Christianity as a whole from the broader religious background in the world. To these people, Christianity was simply their world. They did not think much outside that box.

It is due to later discoveries and development of more knowledge of other religious beliefs besides Christianity, that people started to think about Monism as a distinguished feature of their common belief system. However, they did not look closely at other belief systems to check whether this was the actual case. They just assumed that this was how it was, because it made them feel special.

Fast forward, after centuries of violent wars and oppression, modern Theology still holds firmly the idea that there is something about Monism that is particular to Monotheism. It is a house of cards and today where is one card that starts falling: 2nd century Early Christianity.

The Early Christians during the 2nd century was long time believed by scholars to be monotheists. There are even mathematical models that people use to explain why Monotheism became dominant in a polytheistic cultural background. The basic idea is to use a Markov chain where people who convert to Monotheism, have less probability to convert back. Over centuries, most people become monotheists. Seem very clear, right?

Any problem with this idea? Oh, yeah, the fact that 2nd century Early Christians are polytheists.

All these models people made to explain how Monotheism became dominant, are debunked because people are not converting from a polytheistic belief system to Monotheism, but from one polytheistic belief system to another polytheistic belief system.

The data people actually need to explain, is not that people convert to Monotheism, but how a polytheistic belief system became gradually more monotheistic over time. This is an entirely different problem, which has little to do with a monotheistic/polytheistic religious boundary.

When people read history today, they read texts that argue for religious reasons why people go to war. Since one side of the war is e.g. Christianity or a version of it that became dominant later, people tend to view the arguments as an issue of a monotheistic/polytheistic religious boundary.

However, this way of reading history is based on the misconception that Monism is a particular feature of Monotheism. Monism has been around in polytheistic belief systems as long we can date back texts of any religious belief system. For example, in Hinduism, Brahman is the corresponding monistic idea. How is it possible to even make this conceptual mistake when reading history?

This error of reasoning happens, because people want to feel special about their own beliefs. It gives them more power. Monism is used by all extremist groups around the world to make people feel special, regardless of whether they think about their own religion as Monotheism or Polytheism. You can imagine an alternative history, where the other side in a war won, which we today see as polytheistic, would claim that when reading the same texts before the war, this was an issue of their own Monism versus the lack of Monism on the other side (in e.g. Christianity). This is possible, because Monism does not gain that large influence in Theology until a much later point. So, if Monism is not a particular feature special of Monotheism, then is there anything special about Monotheism at all?

If it possible for Early Christians during the 2nd century to regard a universal philosophical principle as their highest deity, then there is no reason to make up an argument about Monotheism to explain their beliefs. Monism already exists as part of the deeper polytheistic roots of Early Christianity. While people later claim that this is something making their own beliefs special, it is not actually special because if you take any religious person throughout history, they might make the same argument about their own belief system. It is simply the same argument made by everybody.

When Monism is not regarded as a special feature of Monotheism, the house of cards fall down. Like, when believing in angels, the devil and in demons in Christianity, these supernatural deities, (which they are since we are not talking about superior deities), function as lesser deities under Monism, a uniting philosophical principle or highest deity that is supreme to all the lesser deities.

With other words, Christianity is just another polytheistic belief system.

The argument about Monism as being special to Monotheism, has been used to explain the popularity of Abrahamic religions around the world. The problem with this position, is that when you sum up all the followers of monotheistic belief systems, it only has roughly half the population of the world as followers. This is after two thousand years of violent wars and oppression.

This is not really a very good argument for the Theology of Monotheism. If you apply the same label to numbers at the other side, then Polytheism is also roughly half the population of the world. Since Monism is not really special to Monotheism, people thinking about themselves as polytheists, while also being monists, might make the same claim, that their common monist idea is spreading over the entire world, just like the monotheistic monists.

However, can one argue the case that within Monotheism, there are people who are not monists?

Yes! This is not difficult! There are people who are more obsessed by angels or saints than the universal philosophical principle or the highest deity, just like in polytheistic practices where people worship lesser deities. While people in Western civilization tend to avoid calling what they are doing actual worship, there is very little cultural difference and context except people choose to call it worship or not. The avoidance of the worship label is mostly due to fear of social reactions.

There are cultural differences between monotheistic and polytheistic belief systems. For example, the number of deities is higher under polytheistic belief systems, while the denominations are higher under monotheistic belief systems. People under monotheistic belief systems tend to make different versions about the same characters that they prefer, instead of creating new stories about different characters within the same overall religious umbrella. These differences are cultural and the same goes for rituals, symbolism and Theology.

However, one can also make the argument that between any two polytheistic belief systems, there are cultural differences. So, it would not be strange that there are cultural differences between two arbitrary chosen sets with no common member. The particular way people today divide up the world into Monotheism and Polytheism, has more to do with how people perceive their historical roots. Yet, the actual historical roots are just polytheistic belief systems. People who believe in false history are not uncommon, nor special, to Monotheism.

The argument that Monism not being a particular idea of Monotheism, actually helps explaining why violent wars and oppression is needed to spread monotheistic beliefs around the world. People do not find it that appealing from a theological perspective. Modern Theology is more or less aimed at helping people to preserve their faith, instead of convincing new people to convert.

Secular thought is growing rapidly all around the world due to influence of science and greater economic and political stability. As secularism becomes more accepted socially, more and more people choose to openly label themselves as agnostics or atheists. There are likely very many people that had such thoughts in secrecy prior to the social acceptance, but did not want to make themselves more vulnerable by being open about their beliefs in public.

Overall, one can argue that people change how they identify regarding religious beliefs over time, but that the nature of religious thought in general, is more or less similar across the world. It is characterized by the belief in some supernatural beings or events. People will make up labels to make themselves feel more special if it gives them more power. However, in the big picture, these labels matters little when considering similar semantics, but across different labels. From this perspective, all religions are more or less the same phenomena which goes back to the same root in human evolution. I claim this root is polytheistic in nature and it is still more or less the same kind of Monism that we find in modern religions. It is just that people say their own beliefs are special.