

On Counting Gods

DALE TUGGY

State University of New York at Fredonia

tuggy@fredonia.edu

Abstract: Our standard scheme for describing and classifying different sorts of religious belief, the trichotomy *monotheism-polytheism-atheism*, is confused and confusing. In this paper I display some of the confusions and work out a better conceptual scheme, analyzing the concepts *deity*, *god*, and *ultimate*. I then suggest a conservatively revised terminology, discuss historical precedents for this, and show how my suggestions clarify various problems of classification.

Keywords: monotheism, atheism, polytheism, theism, deities, religions

I. The Confused and Confusing *Status quo*

Isn't god-terminology easy? Just look at the prefixes: *monotheism* is belief in exactly one god, *polytheism* is belief in more than one god, and *atheism* is belief that the number of gods is zero. This is how analytic philosophy has proceeded in recent times.¹ But things are not so simple. The prefixes are perfectly clear; the problem lies with the root word *theos* ("god"). Exactly what is a god supposed to be?

Atheistic philosophers interested in problems of evil will tell you: a perfect being. Contemporary Christian (and sometimes, Judaic and Islamic) philosophers who employ Anselmian, perfect being reasoning will tell you: a perfect being. But consider the gods and goddesses populating the lore of religious mythology, particularly in places with more or less established pantheons, like India, or ancient Egypt, Greece, or Rome. Are such beings all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good? Omnipresent? Are they timelessly eternal or everlasting? Are they provident over all times and places? Are they deserving of the worship of all people? Do they exist *a se* (solely because of themselves, and not because of any other)? Do they *necessarily* exist, so that it is absolutely impossible that they not exist?

In many cases, the answer to all of these questions is no. Sometimes in a traditional story, a god is killed. In other cases a god loses both his temper and his self-

¹ And recent philosophers often use "theism" as shorthand for "monotheism," although some scholars instead use "theism" to mean the claim that there is *at least* one god, so that it means the disjunction: monotheism or polytheism.

control. Gods have been said to commit rape and murder. Some get together and beget the next generation of gods. Some gods are supposed to be humans or former humans. Some have vast domains of control, but others seem to have little or none. Some, if real, would arguably deserve love. Others, only fear. Others, both. And yet others, neither. In sum, most of them don't much resemble the perfect being so much discussed by analytic philosophers.

If we listen to scholars outside of analytic philosophy, we will hear some strange sayings. A respected historian of religion has said that "In ancient times, all monotheists were polytheists." (Fredriksen 2003: 12) What? Aren't monotheism and polytheism contraries? Is she saying that there was a widespread plague of theological inconsistency in ancient times? Another respected historian and New Testament scholar has argued that first century Jewish monotheism was a distinctive version of high-god polytheism.³ Was this Jewish monotheism, unlike other sorts, patently incoherent, claiming that there is exactly one deity, and also that there are at least two deities? Or are these scholars confused? They sound confused sometimes, as when they insist that monotheism has nothing to do with the number of the gods, but only with their qualities.⁴

Again, we hear the occasional voice in the wilderness, wondering why polytheism is not considered a serious topic in recent philosophy (Greer 2005; Paper 2005). This is an excellent question. Since ancient times, polytheism has been viewed as backwards, superstitious, and intellectually disreputable. But why, exactly? And there is often, as with Hume, the assumption that polytheism was the natural religious stance of primitive humans, and that given the growth of human civilization, it has long ago been superseded by monotheism (Hume 1993). Some would add that this latter too has been superseded by atheism, because of the progress of science. And yet, polytheism shows little sign that it will soon die off and go away. On the other hand, many pre-modern scholars and a few present-day scholars urge that the earliest kind of human religion was monotheistic, and that it later devolved into the sorts of religion we typically call "polytheism" (Corduan 2013).⁵ But if such arguments are to be made, it seems important that we carefully define the terms "monotheism," "polytheism," and "atheism."

We're often told that Buddhism is an atheistic religion, yet scholars discuss "the Mahayana pantheon" (e.g. Harvey 1990: 129-33). What is this if not a roster of gods? Trinitarian Christians too add to the confusion. They confess belief in three, each of

³ "I propose that Jewish monotheism can be taken as constituting a distinctive version of the commonly-attested belief structure... involving a 'high god' who presides over other deities." (Hurtado 1993: Section V) See also Hurtado 2011.

⁴ "...counting gods cannot establish whether a theological tradition qualifies as atheistic, monotheistic, or polytheistic." (Mosser 2012)

⁵ This hypothesis of "original monotheism" was popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but has been generally out of favor since the latter part of the nineteenth century.

whom is “fully divine” - that is, is a god. Yet, they insist that there is only one god. This, they tell us, is monotheism, but it sounds at first hearing like polytheism.

Finally, some say “I don’t believe in a personal deity.” One hears this both from the occasional philosophy student, and from certain Indian philosophers.⁶ What to make of this? The perfect being is usually understood to have unlimited knowledge, maximal ability to act intentionally, and moral perfection. These features entail that the perfect being is a self, a being capable of consciousness, knowledge, and will. But these people profess belief in a “god” (or “God”) which is *not* a self. Are they atheists, monotheists, or what?

Some scholars are ready to discard terms like “monotheism,” “polytheism,” and “atheism.” When writing about some kind of religion, generally one to which they are sympathetic, some suggest that words fail, that this kind of religion is really *sui generis*. Implausibly, some urge that these words’ early modern origins disqualify them from being properly applied to views of earlier eras. Some are even allergic to the whole idea of classifying religions or religious beliefs, dismissing “labels” as of little or no use. But these protests are defeatist, indulgent, and ultimately disinterested in truth. If our existing categories are inadequate to sort the phenomena, we need to improve them, not give up on classification.

In this paper, I will show by conceptual analysis that the common terminology used in analytic philosophy of religion, given at the start of this paper, is confused and confusing, and I will provide a better set of terms with which to theorize about religious belief. This set of terms will be a good fit with common human conceptions, will preserve some common terminology, and will connect in an interesting way with the work of early modern English philosophers. But its main justification will be its usefulness in classifying different sorts of religious belief, and its applicability in numerous areas of scholarly interest and controversy, including philosophy of religion, religious studies, history, sociology of religion, anthropology, psychology of religion, theology, and apologetics.

II. What a Deity is Supposed to Be

The word “God” is nowadays often used as a title, almost a proper name - in any case, a singular referring term. As such, it arguably does not admit of conceptual analysis. But the concept expressed by the term “god” does; we can break down the component parts of the common concept *deity*, a concept which every mature and mentally functional human easily forms, and which for this reason is found in all human cultures.⁷ This is

⁶ For a recent Indian philosopher who reflects the widespread modern, Advaita-Vedanta-inspired hostility to belief in a personal, ultimate being see Puligandla 2008.

⁷ This concept is gender-neutral, like the concept *human*, expressed by “man” in a now disfavored usage.

the concept which is supposed to be satisfied by all the gods and goddesses of religious lore worldwide, as well as by similar beings going by many names, such as “demi-gods,” “heroes” (in the ancient sense), *devas*, *asuras*, *kami*, *theoi*, *kurioi*, buddhas, bodhisattvas, and so on.

In analyzing this concept, we must lay aside any connotations, positive or negative, which some of the above words may have for us. And we must also lay aside common assumptions about such beings. For example, in many contexts a deity is supposed to be immortal, yet in some stories deities are killed, even completely annihilated. Again, a common assumption is that a deity is limited in power. For example, some would assume that the deity of the sea is more powerful in the sea than he is elsewhere. But some of the deities, such as Vishnu in fully developed Vaishnavism, are thought to have maximal power. Again, one may suppose that a deity can't be human. But deities, in some cultures, may be humans who have been deified, though they are still humans. The qualities *deity* and *humanity* needn't be contraries. One might think that a deity is by definition worthy of worship;⁸ but in some cultures people believe in the existence of many deities whom they do not worship, or whom they honor in only perfunctory and formalized ways. Lastly, it is common to assume that any deity has some domain of control which humans care about, such as fertility, war, or learning. But there is no contradiction in the concept of a deity who loses his or her domain, or who never has one.

I propose that three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for being a deity (i.e. having the quality *divinity*). First, divinity requires being a self. A self is a being/entity who is in principle capable of having a first-person point of view and knowledge, and performing intentional actions. A self is a being which with whom one could, in principle, enjoy some measure of friendship.⁹ But a deity isn't just any self.

Secondly, a deity must be more powerful than any ordinary human being, when it comes to the sorts of actions humans care about.¹⁰ While they can do at least most of

In this section I use the pairs “god”/“deity” and “godhood”/“divinity” as synonyms, but in sections III and IV below I argue that these should be defined such that every god is a deity, but not every deity is a god.

⁸ And under the influence of monotheistic culture, one may think that a god by definition is *intrinsically* worthy of worship, so that all peoples owe him or her honor. But in many contexts, people assume that only the residents of a country, or only the people in a certain ethnic group, or only people interested in a certain result (e.g. victory in war, a good harvest, human reproduction) must honor the deity. So often, worship-worthiness is considered to be relative to cultures, ethnic groups, or interests.

⁹ We could just as well here say that a deity must be a person, but this would mislead some into thinking that the requirement is being a human. Typical adult humans are, of course, selves. But if there are very intelligent aliens or angels, they too are selves.

¹⁰ I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for helping me to see the necessity of this last clause. We would not count a being as a deity if it had a high degree of some power that normal humans lack, but which was unconnected with our interests. For example, a being might have the ability to whistle out the

the things we do, gods are supposed to be also capable of feats like knowing what's going on far away, raising the dead, knowing the distant future, creating something from nothing, instantaneous transportation, avoiding the ravages of aging, living for extremely long periods of time, or surviving any typical assault.¹¹ Will this then make the mask-and-cape crowd deities? After all, Superman can leap tall buildings in a single bound, and Wonder Woman can deflect bullets using her metal wristbands.

These "superhero" cases show the need for a third necessary condition for being a deity: possession of *supernatural* power, that is, the ability to intentionally act in ways not wholly constrained by the natural world's normal ways. Perhaps instantaneous transportation is impossible given the laws of physics. And perhaps raising the dead, after a certain length of time, is impossible, given all the laws of nature which govern biological organisms. But such facts, so long as they are contingent facts, may fail to limit the actions of a deity. Presumably, a superhero is some sort of mutant, alien, or unusual human who enjoys powers that no normal human does. But the idea is that such are acting with or within the bounds set by the laws of nature, perhaps manipulating laws we don't know about. The mighty deeds of superheroes are not supposed to be miracles. But the deeds of deities often are.

Would this make Harry Potter a deity?¹² No - Harry Potter is supposed to be a human with a natural talent for dealing with the occult, the hidden. His spells give him access to hidden powers, be they non-human selves or laws of nature. If he, for instance, says magic words and thereby causes a person to levitate, it appears that he's acted contrary to nature's normal ways. But the idea is that he's in fact manipulating deeper, hidden laws of nature and/or some unseen agent(s). He's supposed to be a better manipulator of nature than the rest of us non-wizards ("muggles"). In contrast, a deity has powers to act not wholly constrained by nature's normal ways, and he or she acts without making use of hidden natural laws.

It is true that in some myths, the deities too act by means of occult powers. Thus in some Indian lore, Shiva and other gods, like human yogis and wily demons (*asuras*, the natural enemies of the gods / *devas* in earlier Indian mythology), increase their powers by means of ascetic practices.¹³ Still, in such stories, it is unclear that all of the deity's special powers are gained or maintained in such ways. Plausibly, there is a

melodies to all popular 19th century nursery rhymes in five minutes, but in a pitch which is beyond our range of hearing and at a rate which is faster than we can discern. Again, we would not count a being as a deity if it had vast powers but which were all or mostly for actions which don't affect our interests.

¹¹ This second condition doesn't require that a deity is more powerful in every such respect than any non-deity. In some myths, for instance, a mere human outwits a deity, and so is shown to be, at least for a time, more clever or wily than that deity.

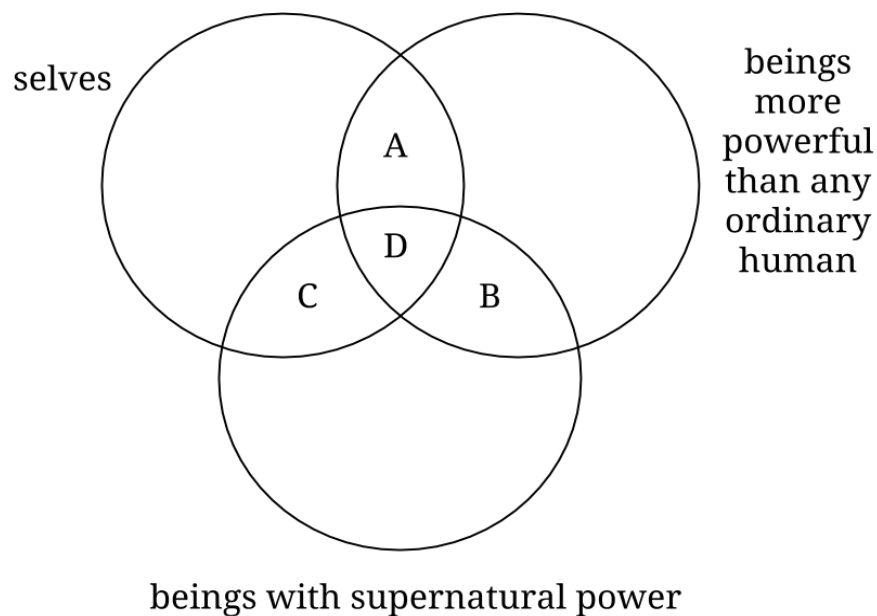
¹² I thank Andrew Cullison for raising this objection.

¹³ On *tapas* as ascetic practice or the energy resulting therefrom, see Klostermaier 2007: 36-38; Dimmitt and van Buitenen 1978: 158-64, 189-98.

vague boundary between the concept *deity*, and concepts like *wizard*, *warlock*, *witch*, *siddha*, and *yogi*. But a vague boundary can still be a useful and important boundary.

Another complication is that if one is manipulating hidden agents, do these agents have supernatural powers or not? If they do, then one is acting supernaturally but indirectly through them. Imagine that a warlock somehow manipulates a demon (an evil deity) into causing a person to levitate. It seems to me that this should not make the warlock a candidate for satisfying the concept *deity*. But if he could just by trying or just by willing levitate a person, then he may well satisfy the concept of a deity, if his overall power is great enough. I suggest that the actions in our second condition be understood as unilateral actions, things one does by one's own powers alone, not directly aided by any other self.

One may wish for more clarity, but the concepts we're analyzing are vague ones, though they are widespread and, as we'll see, important for classifying types of "religious" belief. Our work so far can be summed up in a Venn Diagram.



Mere superheroes (at least the 20th and 21st century comic book and movie types) fall into class A. Area B would include non-selves which nonetheless can intentionally act in supernatural ways, in ways that matter to us.¹⁴ ("The Force" of Star Wars fame?) Area C would include beings with supernatural power, but who are overall less powerful than

¹⁴ It is plausible that of necessity there is nothing in area B. Intentional action requires, arguably, a substantial being who has desires. One who acts intentionally always has a motive; he as it were says "yes" to one or more of his desires. Such an actor must be able to consider the future, and to understand possible outcomes, so as to want at least one of them. The ability to intentionally act, then, requires consciousness, substantial existence, intelligence, and desire. This ability, then, seems to require being a self.

humans. For example, conceivably, a little sprite, fairy, pixie, or leprechaun can produce sparks, flowers, bad luck, or gold-pieces from nothing, but isn't particularly strong or smart, and can be stepped on and killed by a small child, or outwitted by a drunken sailor. The deities inhabit area D. In sum, a deity (a divine being, a being satisfying the concept *divinity*) is supposed to be a supernaturally powerful self which is very powerful (relative to ordinary humans) when it comes to the sorts of actions which matter to us.

Is the property *deity* or *divinity* an essence? Is it a natural kind? It need not be either. *Deity* could be a status one can gain and lose, or could conceivably be had essentially. The concept is neutral. Does it imply *being non-physical* or *being physical*? Again, the concept is neutral. *Immortality*? *Supremacy*? *Worship-worthiness*? *Necessary existence*? No, none of those. The concept *deity* allows for both the possession of and for the lack of such qualities, and for them to be either essential or not.

Some will object that on this analysis of *deity*, on many accounts angels will be deities, and nothing should satisfy the concept *deity* unless it is in the very highest or most powerful class of beings (Oppy 2014: 1). But it is a virtue and not a vice of this account that angels may count as deities, for in the Jewish scriptures both the angels and God are *elohim* ("gods"), and in some Hindu mythology, the *asuras* ("demons," "demi-gods") seem to be peers of the *devas* ("gods"). The deities in many mythologies vary in power, and so can be ranked according to power. Some traditions and scholars distinguish "gods" from the lesser "lords," or "high gods" from mere "gods," yet beings in these latter categories are deities, even though considered a lesser sort of them.

What about God, the main character of the Bible? Is he a deity? Surely, Yahweh, if real, satisfies this concept. So would the Qur'an's Allah. But these alleged beings also satisfy a stricter concept. I will now argue that we should distinguish the looser concept of a deity from the stricter concept of a god. While *godhood* implies *deity*, *deity* doesn't imply *godhood*, though as we'll see, *deity* is compatible with *godhood*.

III. What a God is Supposed to Be

We could talk of "Gods," but given the common usage of "God" as a singular referring term, this would mislead. One would think that "Gods" are the beings who are *called* "God." (Compare: "Toms," "Jennifers.") But the concept of godhood employed in contemporary analytic philosophy by both friends and enemies of traditional religions, has nothing directly to do with what one is called, or how one is addressed. The term "god," as employed by them, is not a name or title, but a sortal or a kind term, referring to the sort of being that atheists believe there to be no example of. I suggest retaining the term "god" to express this concept. This concept is satisfied by the main object of worship in any religion which has been traditionally called "monotheistic."

It is presumed that there can be at most one such being; if there is any such being, it is of necessity unique.¹⁵ There is supposed to be a contradiction in the claim that there is more than one god (but not in the claim of more than one deity). Nor is a god supposed to be just any old deity. If there are other deities, none is the god's peer. A god is by definition incapable of having a true peer.

I know of three variations on this theme (I don't claim they are the only possible or the only actual ones). First, consider the object of perfect being theology: the greatest being there could be.¹⁶ This is generally understood to entail the impossibility of two gods, because a god must be one or more of: all-powerful, both *a se* and provident over all else, the creator *ex nihilo* of all else (if there is anything else).¹⁷

Second, consider the biblical and quranic idea of an uncreated creator of all else. There could not be two such beings, as each would be both uncreated, and created by the other one.

Third, consider the idea of the self of the cosmos. This mighty soul of the world, this divine self of all, is embodied in all the cosmos; it lives in the whole, and in each entity which is part of the whole. No other being, it is assumed, could also be so embodied. Part of being embodied is controlling the body, being able to act through it. Any other soul of the world would rival the first, interfering with its control. Also, the god whose body is the cosmos is in some sense the creator or source of the cosmos, whether or not it was created *ex nihilo*.

In any of these three cases, it seems to me, it is implied that the god is what I call an "ultimate." Let's define that term, then return to our three cases, to show how a god, however understood, must be an ultimate.

IV. What an Ultimate is Supposed to Be

An ultimate is a being/entity which is unique and unsurpassable in reality (degree and/or kind) and/or in explanatory priority. Roughly, an ultimate is supposed to be the highest, most basic, most real, or "farthest back" being.¹⁸ Some believe that reality comes

¹⁵ In the fashionable possible worlds lingo: there is no possible world which contains more than one god. Many a philosopher will inquire at this point whether or not a god must exist necessarily (i.e. "in all possible worlds"). I don't think that *necessary existence* is part of the concept *godhood*, although I do think that *ultimacy* is. (I discuss this in the next section.) But each type of monotheist I discuss just below will have at least one way to argue that God exists necessarily, given some other feature or features he should be believed to have. In other words, each will be able to argue that necessarily, if anything is a god then it exists necessarily.

¹⁶ This is widely considered to be the relevant idea of godhood in atheist-theist disputes in recent analytic theology. On the ancient roots of this approach, see Leftow 2011.

¹⁷ For more fully developed arguments that there can't be two gods, see Wainwright 2013.

¹⁸ Or non-being, or reality which is not a being - if such ideas are both intelligible and coherent. Some prefer to say that an ultimate is "beyond being," "Being Itself but not a being," or "beyond being and non-

in degrees, and that there is a being which has as much reality as anything could possibly have. Such would be an ultimate. Others hold instead, or in addition to the degrees of reality thesis, that there are kinds of reality, and that one kind is most fundamental, all others depending on or deriving from it. An ultimate, uniquely, would have that sort of reality. But others deny that reality comes in either degrees or kinds. In this case, there might still be an ultimate, a being such that if you start tracing back explanations, they all somehow trace back to this one being.

The concept *ultimate* neither requires nor excludes *selfhood*, and thus, it neither requires nor excludes the concepts *deity* and *godhood* (which include the concept *selfhood*). But before we get to ultimates which are not deities, let us notice that any god must be an ultimate. The concept *godhood* implies *ultimacy* (although *deity* does not). Let us run through our three variants of monotheism.

A perfect being exists *a se*; that is, it must exist without depending on any other, and without its existence being explained by anything else. It exists independently, through itself. And because perfection also includes the greatest sort of power and maximal knowledge, if there is anything else, it exists only because the perfect being causes or allows it to exist. Given that there are other things, the perfect being must be in some sense the ultimate source of them.

Again, consider the uncreated creator of all else, the unique god of Abrahamic monotheism. This being too is ultimate; all else comes from him, but he comes from nothing else. *If* anything explains his existence, it will only be himself.

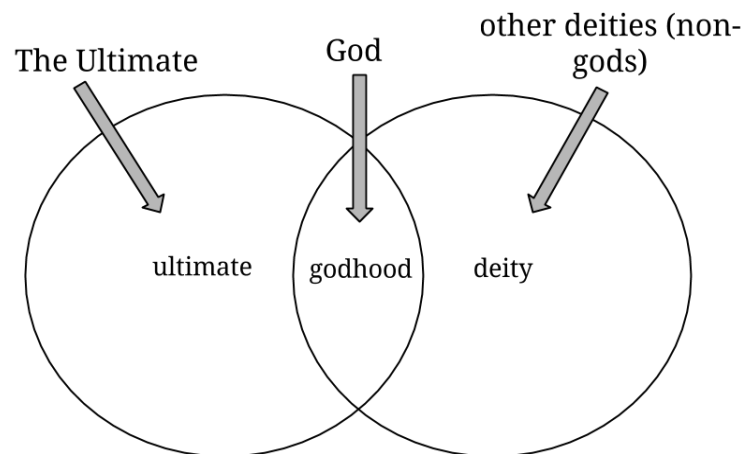
Finally, consider the idea of a unique soul of the cosmos. This being is in some sense prior to the cosmos, and is in some sense the source of it. He may be its creator, or it may be thought of as a transformation of himself, or even a guise he puts on, or an action of his, whether eternally or a long time ago. While the cosmos is real, it is not ultimate, but must be understood in relation to its other aspect or part or ground, the soul which is God. While God and the cosmos are thought to mutually affect one another, in some sense the first is the source of the second, but not vice-versa.

Thus, *godhood* (or we might call it *monotheistic deity*) implies *ultimacy*. But other concepts do too. This is where we make room in our conceptual scheme for people who say "I believe in God, but I don't believe in a *personal* God." Like believers in a god, they too believe in an ultimate; but their ultimate is neither a god nor a deity. I suggest that we call this "The Ultimate." The Dao is supposed to be The Ultimate. So is the Brahman of Advaita Vedanta Hindu philosophy. (In contrast, for Vaishnavite Hindus, Brahman is supposed to be a god, namely the deity Vishnu.) The Real so much discussed in work by and about the late John Hick is supposed to be The Ultimate. Being ineffable, it is not a self. But it is, somehow, ultimate. "The One" of Neoplatonism seems to be The Ultimate, as is the "Being Itself" of Thomistic philosophy and theology and the Absolute (Infinite,

“God”) of perennialism (Tuggy 2015: Sections 2b, 2d).

Because our concept of the sort of deity found in monotheistic religions includes the concept of ultimacy, it has been natural for people who believe in an ultimate which is *not* a deity (so, not a god) to use the word “God” for their ultimate reality. There’s nothing intrinsically objectionable in this usage, but for purposes of classification, I suggest it is less confusing to call this outlook “Ultimism,” which does not misleadingly suggest belief in a deity.¹⁹ (People generally assume that a being which is called “God” is a god, or at least a deity, just as they assume that a person addressed as “King” is a king.) As we’ll see, Ultimism is compatible with no deities or with many, but it is not compatible with belief in a god.

Here is a chart showing the relations between the concepts *deity*, *godhood*, *ultimate*, and *The Ultimate*.



The Ultimate is an ultimate which isn’t a deity, because it is not a self, and a god is an ultimate which is a deity. Because a god is thought to be necessarily unique, one may use the quasi-name “God” to refer to such a being. Of course, in various religious contexts, “God” may refer to a being in any of the three groups shown. I suggest that for scholarly purposes, it is least misleading to use “God” to refer to a god.

As we have seen, a deity might be a god or not. If it is convenient, we can use the word “deity” in the sense of a *mere* deity, that is, a deity which is not a god. In such

¹⁹ My usage of “Ultimism” is developed independently of the work of J.L. Schellenberg. But since his work is widely read, let me explain how my use of this term differs from his. On my usage, “Ultimism” is logically contrary to theism, and forms of Ultimism (belief in The Ultimate) are perennial competitors to theistic religions. In contrast, Schellenberg’s “ultimism” is a general type of view, one specific kind of which is theism, and another kind of which would be what I call belief in The Ultimate (i.e. in an impersonal, ultimate reality or “impersonal God”). Again, my use of “Ultimism” is metaphysical, whereas Schellenberg’s is metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological; he defines “ultimism” as belief in something which is “deepest in reality... unsurpassably great... and the source of our deepest good...” (Schellenberg 2013: 99).

contexts we can talk about “the deities” where these are assumed to not include God. But as concerns conceptual analysis, the important points are these: *godhood* implies *deity*, but *deity* does not imply *godhood*, although it is consistent with it. In other words, if there is a god, then there is also deity which is that god. And if there is a deity, it is a further question whether or not there is a god. And if all the deities are mere deities, there is no god.

To someone who says “I believe in an impersonal God,” I would say that I would describe their belief as in The Ultimate, that is, an ultimate which is not a self, and so neither a god nor a deity. In my terms, “impersonal God” and “impersonal god” are contradictions in terms. And it is less confusing if we use the title “God” for a being which is a god.

V. Possibilities and Ambiguities

An ultimate is defined as unique; it is a contradiction that there should be two or more ultimates. Thus, necessarily, if The Ultimate exists, there is no god. Conversely, necessarily, if there is a god, then there is no Ultimate. And of course, many believe that nothing is ultimate, so that there is neither a god nor an Ultimate. All three of these possibilities leave as an open question the number of deities. While in principle, there could be just one god, or just one Ultimate, or neither, in principle the number of deities could be zero, one, or more than one. Hence, there would appear to be nine possibilities.

	u=0 g=0	u = 1 (g=0)	g = 1 (u=0)
d = 0	1	2	X
d = 1	3	4	5
d > 1	6	7	8

But one of these, marked by an X, is not a real possibility. As a god must also be a deity, it is not possible that there is a god but the number of deities is zero. Thus, the upper right scenario is ruled out as incoherent; we’re considering *prima facie* coherent views. There are eight of those, which I’ve numbered for convenience.

The beauty of this chart is that it shows the ambiguity of common terms for religious beliefs. Suppose that one “believes in the divine.” This could mean any of 2-8. But lest one think that sort of ambiguity is confined to Religious Studies professors who

want to sound open-minded, consider talk of “theism,” or “belief in God.” This too could mean any of 2-8 (although it is often understood as requiring 5 or 8)! By “God,” some mean The Ultimate (which would require one of: 2, 4, 7). Others may mean a mere deity; but that would rule out only 1 and 2, leaving open 3-8.

Even in a recent philosophical context where it is clear that “God” is supposed to be a perfect self, it is a further question how many other deities there are, which leaves open 5 and 8. As commonly used, “Monotheism” is little better. Does it require exactly one deity? If so, it is ambiguous between 3, 4, and 5. Or does it require a god, in which case it requires either 5 or 8? Again, some people who fly the flag of “monotheism” believe the one “God” to be The Ultimate, which requires one of: 2, 4, 7.

Even “atheism” is ambiguous; if, as is standard in analytic philosophy of religion, this is denial of the existence of a god,²⁰ then the view rules out only 5 and 8, leaving open 1-4, 6 and 7. Granted, “atheism” is often used nowadays to mean *naturalistic* atheism (1).²¹ Yet those Buddhists who insist that they are atheists are correct; they deny 5 and 8, even if they believe in the whole pantheon of some Mahayana tradition (putting them in either 6 or 7).²² Suppose one “believes in the gods,” i.e. the traditional pantheon of some culture. This could mean any of 6-8. Among these deities is there a god (8) or not (6,7)? Or one may believe in “an ultimate.” This rules out 1, 3, and 6, but is ambiguous between the remaining views. (Is this ultimate a god (that is, God) or The Ultimate? And what of the deities?) Even the term “agnosticism” is vague. It is clear that such a stance is noncommittal as regards 1, 5 and 8. But is it also noncommittal regarding the others?

VI. Atheists and Monotheists Who Believe in Many Deities? An Historical Interlude

It will strike some readers as perverse that I’ve defined “atheism” as compatible with the existence of any number of deities. Again, some will take offense that my “monotheism” doesn’t rule out multiple deities. Am I pursuing some strange polytheistic agenda?

No, there is plenty of precedent for both uses. Socrates, when charged with “not

²⁰ “‘Atheism’ means the negation of theism, the denial of the existence of God. I shall here assume that the God in question is that of a sophisticated monotheism.” (Smart 2013)

²¹ Thus one influential author mentions “atheism... the view that there are no gods.” (Pojman 1999: 59) This (given that “gods” means deities) contradicts the definition of “atheism” given in the previous note.

²² Buddhists traditionally do not call the members of their pantheon “gods” or “deities” because they think that deities, like humans, are trapped in *samsara* (the realm of rebirth), in need of salvation (enlightenment or the attainment of *nirvana*). Nonetheless, some scholars refer to the Mahayana Buddhist “pantheon.” Such beings, insofar as they are real selves, meet our criteria for being deities. And on some understandings of Buddhism, these beings play roles similar to those played by the deities of other religions. Of course, there is no one Buddhist pantheon, and some interpretations of the *dharma* eschew any interactions with deities.

believing in the gods," demands to know whether the accusation is that he believes in some gods but not those of the city (in which case he would not be "altogether an atheist") or that he believes in no gods at all (Plato 1997a: 23, 23d). It would seem that Plato thought of atheism as existing in degrees.²³ But then, shy of its highest degree, "atheism" allowed the existence of deities.

Similarly, the second century Christian philosopher Justin Martyr answers the common pagan charge of "atheism" against Christians by saying that "we confess that we are atheists with reference to gods such as these [i.e. the deities of the Roman and Greek pantheons], but not with reference to the most true God, the Father..." (Justin 1997: 26). Often, then, ancient "atheists" didn't go all the way, denying all deities, instead allowing the existence of some but not others.

As to the *English* terms "monotheism" and "polytheism," there is some precedent for how I suggest we use them in the works of the two seventeenth century philosophers of religion who popularized those terms.²⁴ Henry More, commenting on a biblical text, says that

"The crime they [i.e. the Gentiles] are accused of here is polytheism, which necessarily includes in it atheism. For to say there are more gods than one, is to assert there is none at all; the notion of god, in the strictest sense thereof, being incompatible with any more than one. Wherefore the heathens, being polytheists in profession, by undeniable consequence are found atheists." (1708: 40, III.1, modernized)

In More's view, it is a contradiction that there should be more than one god, because this means more than one perfect being, and a perfect being must be the source of anything else that there happens to be (More 1969: 230, Section 8). Thus, polytheism is as contradictory a claim as that there is a square circle. Supposing two gods implies that neither is a god, and so polytheism (the supposition of more than one god) implies atheism, that there is no perfect being. There might, of course, consistent with "atheism" be a great many lesser spirits. But More is particularly concerned with naturalistic atheism, on which the material world is all there is, and so there are no deities of any sort.

Because polytheism is defined as incoherent, the "mono-" portion of "monotheism" is redundant.²⁶ In fact, More introduces the term into the English

²³ Plato didn't approve of the highest degree, on which there are no deities at all. See Plato 1997b: Book X, where his "Athenian" refutes this outrageous "absolute" atheism (885c-899d) and decides that the "complete atheist" who believes "that all things are 'empty of' gods" should be punished, depending on his moral character, either by admonition and incarceration, or by death (908b-e).

²⁴ For the earliest modern uses of "theism," "monotheism," and words in other European languages corresponding to the English "atheism," see MacDonald 2003: Chapter 1.

²⁶ Thus More's colleague Ralph Cudworth started the tradition of using "theism" as an abbreviation for "monotheism."

language by using it sarcastically. More concedes that many pagans acknowledge a highest deity, such as the sun or the whole material cosmos, but argues that such deities in principle could not have many of the attributes a perfect being (i.e. a god) must have, “such as... spirituality, immensity, omnipotence, omniscience and the like.” (More 1708: III.2, modernized) Thus, “...to make the world God, is to make no god at all, and therefore this kind of ‘monotheism’ of the heathens is as rank atheism, as their polytheism was proved to be before.” (More 1708: II.5, modernized)²⁷ He goes on to argue that the “best sort of apologizers for paganism are those who profess one eternal, spiritual, and intellectual being, the Governor and Moderator of all things.” (More 1708: III.3, modernized) These believe in a perfect being who is closely related to the material cosmos, so that “...there is nothing in the world but what is a manifestation of the presence and precious attributes of this one Deity.” (*Ibid.*) Consequently, they worship some of this god’s appearances in the beauties of nature, the passions of the human soul, his “heavenly emanations into our minds, such as... wisdom, justice, political order,” and various spirits and human heroes (*Ibid.*). The traditional deities, so the defense goes, are simply personifications of these, the one god’s manifestations.

“For in truth we do not so much worship them, as God shining through them; as he that bows to the sun or moon through a glass window, intends not his obeisance to the glass, but to those celestial luminaries; nor do we bow our body to those luminaries, but to God who to us appears through all things.” (*Ibid.*)

Such religion More acquits of charges of polytheism and atheism; without explicitly saying so, he grants that they are varieties of monotheism, though he objects to them that at the level of popular practice they are unspiritual, being wholly focused on mere this-worldly concerns.²⁸

More’s colleague Ralph Cudworth, in his mammoth *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, speaks of polytheists who are monotheists. It is those who believe that the ultimate is a perfect god, he says “who are strictly and properly called Theists.” (Cudworth 1845: 297, Section 4.4) Atheists are those who deny that there is such a being (296, Section 4.3).²⁹ Cudworth explicitly notes the ambiguity of the word “god.” It is a

²⁷ This sarcastic use of “monotheism” is its first known use (sarcastic or not) in any English book.

²⁸ He says even the best heathen religion reaches “no further than the objects of the animal life... viz., wrath, lust, and sensuality; or such things as are in subserviency to those, as corn, wine, and other requisites for the necessities or delights of man; as also those powers that have an influence upon these, as the sun, moon, and stars, fire, water, air, and the like.” (More 1708: III.7, modernized; cf. III.8-9 on Judaism)

²⁹ But following Plato, Cudworth sometimes uses “atheism” in the sense of absolute atheism, that is, belief that there are no deities or gods of any sort, what I below call “adeism.” The variety of atheism that Cudworth is most concerned with is what we can call “materialism,” a worldview akin to what is now called “naturalism.”

mistake, he argues, to think that most pagan polytheists believed in many gods in the sense of “many self-existent intellectual beings” (in my terminology, many gods). Rather, argues Cudworth, “...the Pagan polytheism must be understood according to another equivocation in the word “gods,” as used for created intellectual beings, superior to men, that ought to be religiously worshiped.”³⁰ In my terms, if Cudworth is correct, then this majority of intelligent pagans believed in many deities, not in many gods. “And thus the pagan theists were both polytheists and monotheists in different senses, they acknowledged both many gods and one God; that is, many inferior deities, subordinate to one supreme.” (374, 4.14, modernized) He admits that there have been a few ditheists, believers in exactly two self-existent gods, one good and the other evil. But any pagans “who admitted of many gods, but none at all unmade,” he calls “atheists.” (370, 4.13, modernized) In our terms, they believed in deities but not in God (not in any god). That is to say, they believed in deities, each of which was a mere deity and none of which was also a god.

Cudworth, like most Christians, believes not only in one god, but also in a great many other deities (angels and demons). But Cudworth doesn’t think of Christianity as implying “polytheism” because he usually uses this word to mean *worship of* many deities.³¹ And as a Protestant, Cudworth holds that rightly understood, Christian practice requires that “nothing ought to be religiously worshiped besides the supreme God, or whom he appoints to represent himself...”³² Cudworth also observes that some atheists use the word “God” to mean some impersonal thing which isn’t a deity, but which is ultimate, in other words, what I have above called “The Ultimate” (Cudworth 1845: 298, 4.5).

In what follows, I suggest a revision of our defective classificatory schemes relating to religious worldviews, as well as the terminology which goes with it. While some terms are new, the distinctions embodied in the scheme are not. In my view our over-simple “polytheism”-“monotheism”-“atheism” scheme ought to have been replaced long ago, but for various reasons scholars did not want to push their analyses to a point of greater clarity.

VII. A Better Set of Terms

In light of the above, both conceptual analysis and the history of philosophy of religion,

³⁰ Cudworth 1845: 286, Abstract of Chapter 4, Section 14, modernized. Cf. 373-74, Chapter 4, Section 4.

³¹ Thus at one point he says that “demons and angels, heroes and saints... are made gods by being worshiped.” (292, Abstract of Chapter 4, Section 76, modernized) To be truly called a “god,” to Cudworth, implies that a being should be worshiped. This, I argue in section VIII below, is a mistake. There is no contradiction in the concept of a deity which no one has any good reason to worship.

³² Cudworth 1845: 290, Abstract of Chapter 4, Section 62. The appointed representative he has in mind is Jesus, the Son of God.

I suggest these better, less ambiguous terms.

	u=0 g=0	u = 1 (g=0)	g = 1 (u=0)
d = 0	1 naturalistic adeism	2 adeistic ultimism	X
d = 1	3 monodeistic, non-ultimistic atheism	4 monodeistic ultimism	5 monodeistic monotheism
d > 1	6 polydeistic, non-ultimistic atheism	7 polydeistic ultimism	8 polydeistic monotheism

Let's review each of them in order.

1. "Naturalistic adeism" (which implies atheism, since a god is also a deity) is what is most often meant nowadays by "atheism," but the suggested term is clearer. Equally well, we can say "naturalistic atheism," and let the adjective "naturalistic" convey that there are no deities, not even mere deities. A naturalist is, roughly, one who thinks that all there is, is what a perfect science would describe or presuppose. This is currently a dominant view in many scholarly circles. Such a view is committed to the non-reality of anything with supernatural powers, and so to the non-reality of any deity. Naturalism is also committed to physicalism, the view that all concrete things are physical things, the sorts of things which would figure in the theories of a perfected physics.³³

It is plausible that an ultimate being (either The Ultimate or God) can't be a physical thing. Physical things typically exist because of other things, and require certain necessary conditions (not having solely to do with themselves) to exist. But an ultimate, by definition, can neither exist because of anything else, nor require conditions for its existence which involve other things. It is plausible that no physical thing is necessarily unique. But an ultimate being must be, by definition. Plausibly, no physical thing is both necessarily unique and unsurpassable in reality (degree and/or kind), or necessarily unsurpassable in explanatory priority. No consistent physicalist believes in

³³ Naturalists are divided on whether or not naturalism allows for non-physical abstracta such as properties, propositions, or states of affairs. Probably the majority view among current analytic philosophers who are naturalists is that it does allow them.

the Dao, or in the Brahman of Advaita Vedanta. To the contrary, as such, she disbelieves in any such thing.

2. "Adeistic ultimism" says there is an Ultimate, but there are not any deities. The existence of The Ultimate, as we've seen, implies no god; Ultimism implies atheism. But this atheism is also, like 1, adeistic.

3. "Monodeistic, non-ultimistic atheism" is belief in exactly one deity who is not also a god, together with denial of The Ultimate. This is a strange view, and I'm not aware of any major philosopher or religious thinker who endorses it. If the number of deities isn't zero, why would it be exactly one? The parallel question, about gods, is arguably answerable, but this one seems not to be. This view is inherently unsatisfying, and thus has not been popular with religious thinkers.

Still, perhaps some people do hold to this view. Consider a Christian who is bitter against God. Something terrible has happened to her, and she still believes in "God," but now takes "God" to be a deity and not a god, for she judges him to be morally imperfect because he caused or allowed the tragedy in question. (We suppose for the example that the perfect being tradition is the right way to understand monotheism.) If she doesn't believe in any other deities (e.g. angels), she may be in camp 3.

4. A believer in "monodeistic ultimism" is by definition an atheist. But she also believes in exactly one deity. Why just one? This view, like the third, seems to lack any intellectually respectable motivation. Still, perhaps some have held it. Perhaps some have believed that "God" (i.e. The Ultimate) is ineffable. But this Ultimate eternally emanates exactly one deity which, given the existence of The Ultimate, can't be a god.

5. This "monodeistic monotheism" - belief that the one god is the only deity - is also unpopular. The only significant intellectual or religious movement I'm aware of that has held such a view would be the early modern Deists.³⁴ Disbelieving lore about angels and demons (and presumably any other alleged deities), they nonetheless believed in a god. Similarly, some nineteenth century Christians may belong to this category, if they accepted a materialist approach to everything but God, and consigned demons, angels, and "pagan" deities to the realm of fiction.

6. "Polydeistic, non-ultimistic atheism" posits many deities but no god and no Ultimate. Perhaps this view is held by some in traditionally non-monotheistic, polydeistic cultures, particularly those without developed philosophical interests. Perhaps the deities and the other denizens of reality just are, and there is no belief in anything ultimate.

7. "Polydeistic ultimism" is a perennial favorite among human beings of many

³⁴ As this movement is long dead and buried, I'm suggesting a new use for the term "deism," namely, belief in one or more deities. The varieties of deism would be monodeism and polydeism. Some use "theism" as I propose using "deism" (see note 1 above), but given the distinction between deities and gods, and the fact that polytheism (many gods) is incoherent, I suggest keeping the current philosopher's habit of using "theism" as shorthand for "monotheism."

cultures, and so is a perennial competitor with monotheism (i.e. 8 below). On this outlook, The Ultimate is one, but the deities are many. The deities in some sense depend upon The Ultimate, and may be thought of as means by which we interact with it. And typically, but not necessarily, the means to access various deities are various idols, physical objects or other non-deities (such as humans) which are treated as one would treat a deity. Some consider the idol merely a symbol of the deity, but probably more consider it to be in some sense indwelt by the deity (Eck 1998).

People in this camp range from recent philosopher of religion John Hick (2011: 199-201) to philosophical Mahayana Buddhists, with their arrays of buddhas (etc.) which all derive somehow from one Buddha Nature or “thusness,” to Hindus, for whom The Ultimate is “Brahman” or “Nirguna Brahman” (Brahman-without-distinctions), but who worship multiple deities (*devas*), often with one as primary. Again, some modern westerners disaffected with naturalism sometimes hold a view of this sort, called “perennialism,” and some flying the banner of recent “process theology” hold such views as well (Tuggy 2015: Sections 2b, 2d).

This too is an atheistic position, indeed a version of atheism which has historically been far more popular than the naturalist sort (1 above). Talk of “God” in this some such traditions (e.g. Hick, Advaita Vedanta, but not Mahayana) tends to obscure this, and serves to create a social space where monotheists and Ultimists can ignore their differences of belief and practice similar religious lives together. But since this ultimate being is not a self, it is best described as “The Ultimate” and not as “a god” or “God.”

8. Finally, “Polydeistic monotheism” is the view of *most* traditional Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as monotheistic Hindus, e.g. Vaishnavas, for whom Vishnu (=Brahman) is the one god, the other *devas* (traditionally translated as “gods”) being his creations and servants, and so, mere deities, not additional gods. These are all monotheists, affirming the existence of exactly one god, and thus denying the existence of The Ultimate, and yet they are polydeists, with a plurality of deities, such as angels, demons, the divine council, sons of God, *jinn*, *devas*, or *asuras*.

In favor of this terminology, note that the most popular positions (1, 2, 6, 7, 8) are easily given uncontentious, descriptive, and historically grounded names. In general, existing terms are made more precise, and only one popular term (“polytheism”) is unused. But hardly anyone has wanted to claim that label anyway. (I briefly discuss why in section VIII below.) In contrast, the concept *polydeism* is uncontroversially coherent, and is satisfied by interestingly different outlooks (6, 7, 8).

Another virtue of this scheme is that it helps us to remember that various people within a single religious tradition may hold quite different beliefs about “the divine.” For example, some professing Christians undoubtedly hold to 1, others to 3, 5, or 7, even if the majority view has always been 8. And Buddhists, arguably, populate categories 1, 2, 6 and 7, with perhaps 7 being the most crowded. Sorting people by which religious

tradition they belong to is just a different game than sorting people by what sorts of transcendent realities they believe in. This scheme helps us to remember that we must let go of the old assumption that there is but one theology or but one religious outlook per religious tradition. Our classifications cut across the traditions in interesting ways.

Most importantly, this set of terms removes the ambiguities and confusions mentioned in section I above. Let us briefly review and resolve them in light of the proposed classification.

As to the ambiguity of “agnostic” (someone who neither believes nor disbelieves in some “God”), this is easily resolved. She merely needs to specify which of these she is undecided about: some deity or deities (e.g. Brahma), some Ultimate (e.g. the Dao), or some god (e.g. Yahweh).

“In ancient times, all monotheists were polytheists.” *Polydeists*, yes. Interestingly, this is still true.

Aren’t “monotheism” and “polytheism” contraries? No, because the “theism” is understood differently in each. Monodeism and polydeism are contraries, and each is contrary also to adeism. Monotheism and atheism are contradictories. And the term “polytheism” should be retired, except when we care to include patently incoherent outlooks.³⁵

Was first century Jewish monotheism a distinctive version high-god polytheism? *Polydeism*, to be sure, and *possibly* for time merely with a mere deity at its top (which would make it a version of atheism, view 6 above). But at least by the time the books of Deuteronomy and Isaiah were complete, the religion (or that branch of it reflected in those writings) was polydeistic monotheism.³⁶ And despite some loud voices to the contrary, *monotheism* is a useful and unobjectionable concept for understanding some pre-modern religious outlooks.³⁷ In classifying religious beliefs, a scholar needn’t use only terms the people in that time and place would use.

Despite what a few scholars have said, the terms “monotheism” and “atheism” do concern the number of gods (1 or 0), and not only with their qualities. And while atheism is silent regarding the number of deities, monotheism implies that this number is at least 1. And the group adeism-monodeism-polydeism does count deities: 0, 1, or more than 1.

³⁵ I would also urge that the term “henotheism” should be retired, as it has long lacked any clear and standard use (on which see Heiser 2008: Section 3). And it would be dreary to go through all the qualifiers “monotheism” has attracted in recent literature: “incipient,” “strict,” “inclusive,” “exclusive,” etc. Many such qualifiers are meant to deal with problems which I think are better solved by the terminology here espoused.

³⁶ For my own account of what Isaiah was asserting about Yahweh, see Tuggy 2014. For an account of the religion of the Hebrew Bible as monotheistic polydeism (though the author doesn’t use these terms), see Heiser 2008.

³⁷ *Pace*, most famously perhaps: Hayman 1991; MacDonald 2003.

Why is polydeism not a serious topic in philosophy? It probably should be. Perhaps one reason it hasn't been so far is that we've been unclear on the difference between the very popular and widespread *polydeism* and the incoherent *polytheism*. One doesn't explore incoherent views beyond noting their incoherence. But polydeism *is* coherent, and has long been near-ubiquitous in human religiosity. Was polydeism characteristic of the very earliest kind of human religious belief? Probably so, but then it is another question whether or not monotheism too was original. And it would seem that polydeism is here for the foreseeable future; there is little reason to think that humans have or soon will evolve beyond it. The question of polydeism should be distinguished from issues of polyolatry (worship of many deities) and idolatry (roughly, worship of or using images), which polydeism is often, but mistakenly, thought to imply. Analytic philosophers need to devote more attention to the varieties and epistemic status of different sorts of polydeistic belief. Beyond the modern, "Western" world, people have rarely confined their options to 1 and either 5 or 8, as some recent analytic philosophers, be they professing "atheists" or "theists" seem to assume.

Mahayana Buddhism too is coherent insofar as it is both atheistic and polydeistic. Its "pantheon" is more properly its "pandemon."

What of the Christian Trinity? This is understood in many ways. It would seem that various Christians have understood it to be The Ultimate, a god somehow containing three "Persons," a god and two closely associated mere deities, or (less likely) incoherent tritheism or (coherent) trideism.³⁸ But arguably its defining documents require monotheism; they require that "the Triune God," the Trinity, must be or compose (and not merely include) a god.

About belief in an "impersonal god" or an "impersonal deity," both are contradictions in terms, like "Jewish pope" or "married bachelor." A better way, at least for scholarly purposes, to describe such beliefs is belief in The Ultimate, that is, in an ultimate reality which is not a deity. This is historically the most popular general variety of atheism, although it very often goes together with polydeism.

VIII. Why so Late?

Why has no one proposed this type of classification and terminology before? I speculate that there are at least two reasons. First, religious polemics have interfered. To exaggerate a little, all the non-naturalists want to be "monotheists" who believe in "one God" (which sounds evolved, forward-thinking, philosophical, and intellectually respectable), and none want to be "polytheists" (which sounds primitive, backwards, rude, too disorganized and *ad hoc* to be plausible, or of dubious coherence). I suspect that these attitudes derive historically from the political and cultural triumph of catholic

³⁸ For some competing interpretations of traditional Trinity language see Tuggy 2016.

Christianity in the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century. Roman polydeists came to be viewed as “pagans.” This Latin term earlier meant a civilian or an inhabitant of the country (as opposed to a city), but by the fourth century, it came to be a derisive term for an adherent of traditional religion, as opposed to Christianity or Judaism (Anonymous 2015).³⁹

Second, scholars continually mix together classifications of belief and practice, supposing that a “polytheist” must be someone *who worships* many deities, while a “monotheist” worships exactly one, and an “atheist” worships none. But surely in cultures which presuppose the existence of a pantheon, some people believe in many deities, but worship only one, or nearly so. (That is, their worship of others may be very perfunctory and formal, while they engage in whole-hearted devotion to their chosen deity.) And some people in monotheistic cultures believe in, but do not worship the one god. Many an atheist, as here defined, worships deities. And even an atheist might worship (or “worship”) one or more deity, for instance, attending a ceremony or lighting incense at a shrine, in response to family pressure. It is better, I urge, to use “polyolater” for one who worships more than one deity, and reserve “polydeist” for who believes in the reality of more than one. As a matter of historical and present fact, some monotheists have worshiped both their god and some lesser deities, be they called deities, angels, saints, or whatnot. One who worships exactly one deity, the one god, may be called a “monolater,” as may one who worships what they hold to be the one (mere) deity (holding positions 3 or 4 above), or a polydeist (positions 6-8) who is devoted to just one deity. What about the stingy believer in one or more deities who nonetheless worships none? We have no word for this. I tentatively suggest “adolater;” presumably most atheists, but perhaps also a few monotheists and other polydeists are adolaterous, worshipping no deity. One may believe that one or more deities ought to be worshiped, while not, as a matter of habit, worshipping any.

IX. Objections and Replies

Philosopher Graham Oppy has given a rival account of what is for there to be a God, i.e. the sort of being traditional “monotheistic” religions have centered around. In his view,

“...to be God is just to be the one and only god, where to be a god is to be a superhuman being or entity who has and exercises power over the natural world [in circumstances in which one is not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings].” (Oppy 2014: 1, original brackets)⁴⁰

³⁹ This, it is conjectured, is because traditional religion held out the longest in remoter areas of the Roman Empire.

⁴⁰ In an earlier version he says “to be a God is just to be the one and only god, where to be a god is to be a supernatural being or force...” (Oppy 2010: 231).

The “or entity” clause is meant to include non-selves, such as The Ultimate. In my view, the definition is too wide, and Oppy has been misled by the multiple meanings of the English word “God.” Given how little Oppy means by “entity” and “exercises power” (for him this doesn’t entail performing an intentional action), this definition entails that Buddhists who think of Nirvana as an ineffable ultimate reality believe in God. But this is a mistaken classification; they explicitly deny the existence of God.⁴¹

Oppy also thinks it is clear that it is “not part of the concept of God that God is personal” (Oppy 2014: 10). Here, he is again misled by the multiple uses of “God.” It is misguided to try to analyze the concept *bat* as: something is a bat just in case it is either a wooden pole used in the game of baseball or it is a nocturnal, flying mammal. There is no one concept expressed by “bat”; rather, “bat” is used to express two very different concepts, each of which should be analyzed separately. Similarly, “God” is ambiguous. As explained above, it may refer to The Ultimate, or to a god. We already knew the word “God” was ambiguous, and that some users of it are atheists; some, such as the retired Episcopal bishop John Spong talk of “God” while explicitly denying “theism,” that is, monotheism, belief in a god (Spong 2000: 453).⁴² Similarly, religious anti-realists (or non-realists) such as theologian and former Anglican priest Don Cupitt deny theism while continuing “to speak of God” as “the mythical embodiment of all one is concerned with in the spiritual life” (1980: 166). Setting aside Cupitt’s less common use of “God,” the remaining two meanings of “God” are more closely related than the two meanings of “bat”; what they have in common is the idea of an ultimate reality or being. (A “God” is ultimate, as defined above, whether this be a God or The Ultimate.) But they do figure in logically contrary theses. If there is a god, there is no “God” (Ultimate); and if The Ultimate exists (i.e. an “impersonal god”), there is no god.

Spong and Cupitt are within the Christian tradition, but their uses of “God” differ radically both from one another and from that of more traditional Christians. Nor is their re-working of God-talk unique. Jainism is uncontroversially an atheistic religion, as like Buddhism it denies the existence of an ultimate Creator. But particularly in modern times, many Jains talk of the soul’s potential for liberation, a particular liberated soul, or the liberated souls collectively (the twenty-four *tirthankara*, “fordmakers”) as “God” (Dundas 2002: 110-11; Long 2009: 178; Jaini 1979: 162-63).⁴³

Given our postmodern mania for critiquing, I imagine that some scholars of religion will object that this scheme is too intellectual, too belief-focused, too recent, and

⁴¹ See, e.g. the widely read Rupala 1974. He clearly professes belief in Nirvana as The Ultimate (40) and yet denies that God exists (52).

⁴² Spong understands “God” to be Being Itself, i.e. The Ultimate (Spong 2002).

⁴³ In my view, the usual theological stance of Jains has been polydeistic atheism, the deities being the fordmakers and various gods and goddesses. There is also recently a minority of Jains who are monotheistic, holding the fordmakers to be forms of God (Long 2009: 7).

biased towards monotheism (because its author is a monotheist). In reply, this is a scheme for classifying different sorts of religious beliefs. The use of such a scheme doesn't imply or even suggest that belief (or philosophy, theology, or teaching) is foundational or even central to any religious tradition. Every claim in this paper is consistent with views to the effect that something other than belief, such as practice, experience, or social structure, is more important to understanding religions. As to its being recent, this is due to scholars' failure to resolve the problems noted in section I above, settling for paradoxical descriptions or a fashionable posture of pretending (temporarily) to be above classifying. When a problem persists up till the present, any solution can only be recent. About its being biased towards monotheism, I see no grounds for such a charge. The central term in the scheme is *deity*, which I have argued is natural to and nearly universal to the human race. It's hard to see how the terms could be thought unfair towards any of 1-8. But I can imagine three likely grounds for objecting.

First, perhaps some would dislike the order of the terms. But if anyone feels slighted by, e.g. the term "polydeistic monotheism," she is free to substitute "monotheistic polydeism," which means the same thing. However, people in such religions may prefer the first, on the grounds that belief in God is more central to their outlook than is belief in other deities.

Second, some who hold outlook 1 above may bristle at any substitute for the currently popular banner "atheism." But I would urge that for scholarly purposes "naturalistic adeism" or "naturalistic atheism" are clearer. After all, noted thinkers within the third and fourth biggest religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), have long claimed, correctly, to be atheists. But today's western "atheist" typically denies the existence of *devas* and buddhas and bodhisattvas (and any other alleged deities) as well. In a world which contains more than Christians and anti-Christians (or friends and enemies of Abrahamic Theism), we need a term which expresses the denial not only of God, but also of any lesser "god" or deity. I've suggested two such terms.

Third, perhaps some believers in what I call The Ultimate would object of being deprived of the term "god" or the name "God" for what they hold to be ultimate. I am aware that some would object to being called "atheists." Perhaps they would prefer to be the "monotheists," while those I've called "monotheists" would be "theistic personalists" (Hart 2013).

I think such preferences can be accommodated.⁴⁴ I prefer my scheme above, though, mainly on the grounds that *most* people understand "monotheism" or "belief in

⁴⁴ The revised terms would be (using the numbers in the chart in section VII above): 1. naturalistic adeism, 2. adeistic monotheism, 3. monodeistic, non-monotheistic atheism, 4. monodeistic monotheism, 5. monodeistic theistic personalism, 6. polydeistic, non-monotheistic atheism, 7. polydeistic monotheism, 8. polydeistic theistic personalism.

God” to be belief in a unique deity, and “atheism” to be the denial that there is such a being. (And many believers in The Ultimate, such as various Buddhist and Hindu philosophers, have already accepted the label “atheism.”) But these philosophers are correct that there has long been a minority elite within each big “monotheistic” tradition which has held “God” to be ineffable (such that no human concept literally applies to it), and so not a self.

There’s no pleasing everyone. But there are: confusing the fewest, and enlightening the most. I offer terms of section VII as the best way I know to accomplish these aims while classifying religious beliefs.⁴⁵

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