Polytheism & Henotheism

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☰ WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson explains what polytheism and henotheism are. It will identify how they might be differentiated. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. **Polytheism**
2. **Henotheism**

1. Polytheism

Polytheism is the belief in more than one god or goddess. The word is formed from two Greek words: "poly," meaning "many," and "theoi," meaning "gods."

Most religions that are polytheistic, such as some branches of Hinduism, believe that each god or goddess has a particular domain of responsibility and influence within which to exercise their powers. Their powers are specifically tailored to that domain.

⑦ DID YOU KNOW

The Hindu goddess Lakshmi is the goddess of spiritual and material wealth and abundance. Polytheism is a type of theism that is contrasted with monotheism, the belief in one supreme deity or god. There are polytheistic religions that are practiced today, such as Hinduism. In history, there have been many. Some of the classical religions of Greece and the Norse religions of Scandinavia are examples of polytheistic traditions that are mostly not practiced anymore.

⑦ DID YOU KNOW

Hinduism, while ancient, is classified as a living religion. You can include the ancient indigenous religion of Japan, called Shinto, and Taoism in China in the living religion category. Together they have approximately 500 million adherents.

🗋 TERM TO KNOW

Polytheism

The belief that more than one god exists.

2. Henotheism

Henotheism, like the word polytheism, has a Greek origin. It also refers to the belief in one god. However, it admits the possible existence of other gods. It doesn't actively deny the presence of other divine forces and their possibility. It doesn't deny that they might deserve credit and recognition for the merit of worship.

In some cases with the derivative subcategory of henotheism known as kathenotheism, this heartily affirms more than one god but only one at a time, as the Greek terms "kath'" and "hena" suggest.

> ⊘ **DID YOU KNOW**
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> Both of these terms, henotheism, and kathenotheism, were coined by the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling in the late 18th century.

Many scholars have categorized and described Hinduism as an example of polytheism. However, given the many nuances and the subtleties of the tradition, the term henotheism has become an acceptable and accurate description. Schelling applied the term to Hinduism, finding that it addressed the nuance of the monotheistic tendencies of certain Hindu traditions.

Many branches of Hinduism honor one supreme deity or god while at the same time recognizing their avatars or manifestations by other names. In general, it is agreed that the term henotheism addresses religions in their early phases of monotheism. This is true with Vaishnavism. This branch of Hinduism is sometimes thought to be a more recent expression of Hinduism's underlying monotheistic orientation, in this case, with Vishnu as the supreme deity.

> 🗎 **TERM TO KNOW**
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> **Henotheism**
> The belief that one god exists as primary, but that other gods may exist who are worthy of worship—most notable in Hinduism.

> 📋 **SUMMARY**
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> **Polytheism** is the belief that there is more than one god or goddess. Hinduism is a living example of this. Some branches have monotheistic tendencies. **Henotheism** is the belief that there is one primary god that is venerated, and at the same time, there are other gods or manifestations also recognized. In a way, it's a form of polytheism.

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Polytheism

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