

# The Bible

Monotheism  
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SCM

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If you don't buy into fundamentalism, what's so special about the Bible? After all it's a diverse collection of ancient texts, many of which are incomprehensible, irrelevant, factually wrong or morally repugnant. So what does the Bible say which (a) is different, and (b) matters so much as to be the basis for a religious tradition?

Here's my answer. For the people who wrote the Bible, what distinguished their tradition from other ancient Near Eastern traditions was their monotheism. Only one God. Polytheism - lots of gods quarrelling with each other - is good at explaining why the world is a mess, and why there is so much illness, natural calamity and tragedy. If life is miserable, that's just the way it is and there's nothing you can do about it. Monotheism, on the other hand, begins with a God who doesn't have rivals, and therefore created the world just as intended. Such a God cannot have any personal needs, so must have created the world for its own sake, as an act of goodness. So declares Genesis 1. Therefore monotheism means the universe operates in regular, ordered ways. It is this presupposition of regularity which made modern science possible. Monotheism also means we have been created for a purpose, our lives have value, and it is possible for all of us to live together in harmony - because that's how we've been designed.

Today it looks different. Polytheism has been almost forgotten. Ordered society has been secularised, so the Bible no longer seems distinctive on this count. The greatest threat to Christianity comes from a science which proclaims a regular, ordered universe with no gods at all. Desperate to reaffirm the spiritual realm, Christians re-read their Bibles. Threatened by godlessness, to establish one god would be good, to establish more seems better. And, since some biblical authors weren't entirely consistent with their monotheism, it's possible to discover texts with realist pictures of the Devil and evil spirits. Paul becomes the hero of the century, with all his passing references to 'powers and principalities', 'elements of the universe', etc. As a result, what Christians now reaffirm, over against secular godlessness, is all too often precisely the pagan polytheism which the biblical authors rejected.

I'll stick to the old religion. I don't believe every sentence in the

Bible is true, but I do believe that it was absolutely right about its main preoccupation, so I proudly stand in the biblical tradition.

It's the Bible's monotheism which makes sense of believing that it is possible for the people of the world to live together in peace and harmony. And that therefore it's worth working for.

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