

The monotheism of the earliest periods was far from ideal: even when we disregard the fact that Abram's parents were worshippers of idols (Jos 24, 2; Jdg 5, 6-9), we still have Jacob asking his household to put away all their strange gods (Gen 35, 2; also 31, 19. 30. 35). Moses, some centuries later, was brought up at the pagan court of Egypt (Ex 2, 10) and married the daughter of a Midianite priest (2, 21), while Joshua, again, at the assembly of Sechem had to warn the people not to invoke the Canaanite gods or swear by them or serve them or worship them (Jos 23, 7b; also 24, 2. 14-16). No wonder that pagan elements were constantly mixed with true Jahwism, and that it took centuries and all the efforts of the prophets, from Elijah (cf 1 Kg 17) to the so-called Deuteronomistic school (Dt 6, 14) - before one eventually reaches the lofty ideas of Deutero-Isaiah.²

Deutero-Isaiah's pure and explicit monotheism and his belief in an almighty and transcendent creator-god is not a starting point but an end product.³ In addition, it took further centuries before Jesus and Paul and John gave us their understanding of God, and it took, once more, several centuries before the Church had sorted out some basic christological and trinitarian problems. Even today experiments are being made to update the Western understanding of the Christian God.

Facing the facts squarely, one must admit that there were various stages in the biblical understanding of monotheism, ranging from the friendly family god of the patriarchs to the fierce warrior in the time of the Judges, from the great king in the time of the monarchy to the creator of the universe after the exile, and eventually - in the New Testament era - to the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Elements of all these successive stages of revelation make up the multi-faceted picture of the Biblical God.

We cannot always keep this historical differentiation before us, so that - consequently - it must be sufficient to settle for a simple name definition of "God". At this most basic level it would seem that God is just a *being* (common element) *which is completely independent* (differentiating element), and who may or may not be worshipped. With such a minimum description the many avenues which we want to consider remain open, well beyond a pure and simple, biblical monotheism.

2. The world of idols

Already and even according to the Scriptures, the historical counterpart of monotheism was an "assembly of gods" (cf Is 44, 13) or a world with "many gods and many lords" (1 Cor 8, 5) conveniently defined as polytheism and idolatry. In this configuration, the gods were personal beings (!) who, received a cultic veneration, and who were able to influence matters of interest for their respective worshippers. Such "gods" were not and never had been "humans"; their existence, in the minds of their religious subjects, did not depend on any human activity while their influence had no spatial, temporal or functional limits (Brellich 1960: 126). Says Étienne Gilson, specifically about the gods of the Greeks: they were "*living powers or forces, endowed with a will of their own, operating in human lives and swaying human destinies from above*".

It was because historically, both in the Semitic and Hellenistic worlds, native monotheism and foreign polytheism spoke somewhat the same language, that the two systems could come to terms. The knowledge of this confrontation provided scholars with a framework in which to understand all religions, and this happened not only among religious thinkers, but in the human sciences as well. Let us mention here two opposing schools of evolutionistic scholars.

The early cultural anthropologists, as A. Comte and E. B. Tylor, believed that polytheism and monotheism were successive stages of one great evolutionary process, mutually linked in a straight line, while all religious expressions which did not meet this first mark - either because their object was not personal or because it was limited in its activities - were relegated to the realm of fetishism (i. e. the worshipping of man-made things) or also that of animism (i. e. the veneration of some kind of spirit).

In time, other students of religion of this school developed further distinctions known as dynamism (for the worship of powers of nature which were not, or not yet personified)⁴ or as henotheism. The latter form of worship (i. e. one-god-worship) indicated the stage of evolution just below monotheism (i.e. unique-god-worship). As a matter of fact, in the case of henotheism, people still admitted many gods, but cared only about one of them.⁵