

# A WORLD FULL OF GODS



AN INQUIRY INTO POLYTHEISM

JOHN MICHAEL GREER

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*John Michael Greer*

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## INTRODUCTION

This book emerged out of my participation in modern polytheist spirituality. More precisely, it took place out of a confrontation between that lively realm of nascent religious thought and practice, on the one hand, and the almost total dismissal of polytheism as a valid possibility in the academic culture of our time. As I noted in the first chapter, you can read any number of books on the philosophy of religion in public or university libraries without encountering any discussion of polytheism as a live religious option. At a time when polytheist religions are in the ascendant across the Western world, and continue to thrive in a good many non-Western societies, this is an odd lapse.

When I began work on *A World Full of Gods* in 2002, I was active in two modern Druid organizations, the Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids (OBOD) and Ar nDraiocht Fein: A Druid Fellowship (ADF). Both these organizations included reverence for many deities in their traditions and teachings, and the intriguing implications of that reverence sent me first on a fruitless quest for thoughtful discussions of polytheism in scholarly literature, and then to an ADF internet forum where the ideas behind polytheist religious practice were a central theme of discussion. It was on that forum that I first proposed the parable about cats that



forms the core of Chapter Six and, in a very real sense, of this book as a whole. From the parable, the rest unfolded, and the original edition of *A World Full of Gods* was published by ADF's publishing arm in 2005.

The reception it received was mixed, as I expected. I was delighted to discover that a great many people in the polytheist community were interested in the same questions that had stirred my curiosity and shared my frustration at the exclusion of polytheism from the field of philosophy of religion. Within weeks of the original publication I began to field letters and emails from enthusiastic readers of a wide range of polytheist faiths who had found the book helpful in developing their own understanding of the traditions they followed. That has continued ever since, and played a large role in convincing me to prepare this new edition.

Reactions from philosophers, even those with connections to the polytheist community, were on the other hand few and far between. The few responses from the philosophically literate that came my way either dismissed *A World Full of Gods* out of hand because its author was not a professional academic, or criticized it because it didn't focus on current trends in philosophy of religion or draw on any of the latest theories in that field. I plead guilty to both charges, of course, but note that each of them misses a crucial point. The first point thus missed is that I wrote this book because professional philosophers, the people our society pays to do such work, somehow never found the time to do the job themselves; the second is that *A World Full of Gods* is not addressed to professional philosophers.

Every great tradition of philosophy, like most other products of the human mind, has a life cycle that resembles the exploration of a newly discovered continent. After the first tentative journeys into the unknown come the great pioneering ventures that reveal the shape of the land and work out the methods of travel best suited to it; after these come further expeditions to answer questions raised by the successes and failures of the pioneers; finally, teams in widely scattered areas find and map the last unexplored regions, after which the age of exploration is over and the tradition settles down to scholasticism. Classical, Indian, and Chinese philosophy completed that process long ago. Western philosophy, the youngest of the great philosophical traditions, is completing it now.

The work of the professional philosopher today thus focuses on sharply defined subspecialties of philosophy, rather than the great

systems and syntheses of an earlier era. That's essential work for professionals in the field, but it has little relevance to ordinary literate people who want to know what the philosophical enterprise as a whole has to say about some subject of interest: for example, the relevance of polytheism as a live religious option. What these readers are looking for is what has sometimes been dismissively labeled "textbook philosophy"—that is, a survey of the concepts and arguments that, over the years, have become standard launching-points for personal reflection on some aspect of human life. It was precisely because textbooks and other introductory works on the philosophy of religion either dismissed polytheism as irrelevant or ignored it completely that *A World Full of Gods* was written in the first place.

In the course of preparing this new edition, I have expanded and developed some of the arguments and corrected deficiencies that have been noted by readers. Large parts of the book, however, have been left as they were.

Much of this book took shape in a dialogue with existing ideas in theology, philosophy, and comparative religion. Readers unfamiliar with these fields may wonder now and again why I have strayed from the main thrust of the book to discuss what seem to be irrelevancies, while specialists in the fields just named may wince at seeing complex arguments summed up too briefly and with too little sensitivity, perhaps, to their nuances and depths. I have tried to find a middle ground between too much and too little reference to the work of other scholars, but inevitably such decisions cannot please every reader.

Still, each book of this sort is part of a conversation, stretching out over the centuries. Voices of polytheist spirituality have had little place in that conversation for many years, but much of value has been said in their absence. The rebirth of polytheism as a living religious tradition in the Western world will inevitably force a reassessment of much of that heritage, and pose challenges to some of its most cherished assumptions. Yet reassessment is not necessarily rejection, and the traditions of modern polytheism are deeply enough indebted to legacies from the past that an attentive ear to earlier phases of the conversation is not out of place.

Finally, a few acknowledgments are in order. I am indebted to the late Corby Ingold, Mark Kelly, and the other members of Clann na Mara Intire Seed Group, OBOD, and to Philip Carr-Gomm, then Chosen Chief of that order, for my introduction to modern Druidry; to Robert Barton,

Todd Covert, Erik Dutton, Jenni Hunt, David Kling, Jeremy Mallory, and Ceisiwr Serith for their contributions to the discussions out of which this book emerged; to my wife Sara Greer for conversations in which many of the themes of the book developed; to her, Richard Brzustowicz Jr., and Doug Helling for reading and commenting extensively on the original manuscript; and to all the many readers of the first edition who have contacted me over the years with praise, criticism, and suggestions for improvement. My thanks go with all.

## CHAPTER ONE

# The one and the many

**F**or quite a few centuries now, a particular set of ideas has dominated talk about gods in the Western world. In that branch of philosophy known as philosophy of religion, these ideas have been gathered up under the label of “classical theism,” which may be defined as a belief in one and only one god, the unique, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent creator of the universe.<sup>1</sup> On a less academic level, this same idea of the divine underlies Judaism and the major branches of Christianity, as well as Islam and an assortment of minority religions such as the Baha’i faith.

This term “classical theism” misleads, since other theisms—beliefs in one or more gods—have at least as good a claim to classical status. A better term might be “classical monotheism,” and this latter phrase will be used here. Still, the habit of using the word “theism” as though it inevitably implies monotheism points up a very widely held and rarely questioned frame of mind.

A broader and more complete understanding of theism must get outside this frame, because the various forms of monotheism—classical and otherwise—are by no means the only possible or reasonable ways of believing in gods, nor the only one believed in by people today, even in Western industrial societies. Nor is it the only view with something



to contribute to conversations about religion and spirituality. In particular, the idea that there may be more than one god has much to offer today's discussions of religion, religious diversity, and the nature of sacred realities. Yet until quite recently among theologians and philosophers, precisely those people who might be expected to find other options worth discussing, the grip of monotheism has been all but total.

"All but total," because polytheism as a living religious possibility was never quite excluded from scholarly discussion. The archetypal theories first proposed by Carl Jung have more than once strayed close to polytheism, and provided one of the few avenues through which modern scholars have been able to approach the old gods as living presences and powers. Within theology itself, the middle decades of the twentieth century saw a celebrated debate between H. Richard Niebuhr and Eric Voegelin over whether or not polytheism and monotheism were mutually exclusive, a debate that at one time occupied the attention of many of the best minds in the American theological scene.<sup>2</sup> The Seventies, the period of the much-publicized "Death of God," also saw an intriguing if brief work by David Miller provocatively titled *The New Polytheism*,<sup>3</sup> which proclaimed the return of a polytheistic consciousness and argued for the use of Greek Pagan gods and myths as a resource for Christian theologians. The Eighties and early Nineties in their turn saw extensive discussions of Walter Wink's "Powers" trilogy, which by turns accepted the real existence of other gods, redefined them as psychological phenomena, and demonized them as powers responsible for violence and oppression among human beings.<sup>4</sup>

Later still George I. Mavrodes tackled the subject head-on in a valuable 1995 essay, "Polytheism," though he used his insights primarily to discuss the pluralist theology of John Hicks.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Michael York's *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (2003) has touched on a few of the implications of divine multiplicity, though his focus on common factors among Pagan traditions, not all of them polytheist, did not permit much development in this direction.<sup>6</sup> Jordan Paper's *The Deities Are Many*, which appeared in 2005, the same year *A World Full of Gods* first saw print, explored polytheism in more detail. Finally, in the years since then, several other books have been published exploring some of the possibilities of polytheist religion along the lines sketched out here, notably Christine Hoff Kraemer's *Seeking the Mystery* (2013).

Mavrodes ended his essay by suggesting that there was "much more that could be said about [polytheism]"<sup>7</sup>; indeed there is, and this book

has attempted to say some of it. The fact remains, though, that despite the efforts of the writers just mentioned, very little has been said about it in the Western world during the last sixteen centuries or so. Even today, textbooks and reference works on philosophy of religion and theology are still written as though atheism, on the one hand, and monotheism on the other, are the only conceivable options.

This may have been reasonable, and was at least excusable, in an age when few scholars and fewer laypersons in the Western world had any real contact with living religions that understood divinity in other ways. That age, it bears remembering, ended not so long ago. Still, it did end, and those who seek to approach religion nowadays do so under very different conditions. It's not just that cultural and linguistic barriers around the world have frayed to the breaking point, so that Buddhist monasteries, Taoist temples, African and Afro-Caribbean shrines, and the like thrive in most large American cities—though of course this is true and important. It's also relevant that a substantial number of people from wholly orthodox Christian and Jewish backgrounds have broken decisively with the god of classical monotheism and embraced the complex, poorly defined, but vigorous collection of new religious movements that is included under the label of Paganism.

The intricate history of the modern Pagan revival has finally begun to receive the attention of serious scholars.<sup>8</sup> While its origins reach back to the late eighteenth century, when Thomas Taylor revived the worship of the Greek deities in Britain, its presence in the public arena dates only to 1951, when Britain's Witchcraft Act was repealed. In that year Wicca, the first modern Pagan religion to win a widespread following, began its rise to prominence. While Wicca remains the largest of the modern Pagan movements, other polytheist traditions such as Asatru and Druidry have also found a niche throughout the developed world. Figures vary widely, but a mid-range estimate suggests that there are between one and two million followers of modern polytheist religions in America as of this writing.

Thus there's a good deal of irony in the sparseness of scholarly discussions of polytheism during the last century or so. Absent from these occasional debates was any sense that a straightforward religious polytheism might be what William James called a "live option"<sup>9</sup>—that is, a way of relating to religious life that could make authentic sense to modern people in the industrial Western world. When Reinhold Niebuhr discussed polytheism in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, he

used the term as a convenient label for a “social faith” oriented toward an assortment of culturally defined values; he was not discussing belief in the real existence of many divine beings.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, David Miller’s exuberant prose stopped well short of proposing that the Greek gods and goddesses ought to take the place of the Christian god as potential objects of religious belief.<sup>11</sup>

Even those modern works that have treated the Western world’s polytheist traditions in a respectful manner have too often been quick to fall back on the misinformed insistence that, after all, nobody believes in those traditions any more. One example among many is Keith Ward’s otherwise thoughtful *The Case for Religion* (2004). In the midst of an otherwise sympathetic discussion of ancient Greek religion, Ward inserts the obligatory disclaimer: “The Greek gods no longer exist, as real objects of devotion and worship.”<sup>12</sup> He is of course quite wrong; as already noted, the worship of the Greek gods and goddesses was revived in Britain in the 1790s by Thomas Taylor, and there has been a small but significant Greek Pagan presence in the English-speaking world ever since. Nor has that presence been a purely hole-and-corner affair. Quite the contrary, it has included among its members such figures of cultural significance as Kenneth Grahame,<sup>13</sup> the author of the children’s classic *The Wind in the Willows*—which features, as many of my readers doubtless remember, a vivid theophany of the Greek god Pan.<sup>14</sup>

The gap between religious scholarship and religious experience, between the notions of acceptable faith within the academy and the ebullient reality of popular belief and practice, is an enduring fact in the history of religions. Thus it should come as no surprise that scholars have by and large chosen to approach the gods and goddesses of polytheist faith as figures of purely historical interest. Yet outside the walls of the academy, while these very discussions went on, people across the Western world were turning to religions that proclaimed the multiplicity of the divine, and finding them “live options” in every Jamesian sense.

\* \* \*

Any understanding of religion that seeks to be relevant to today’s world, in other words, must refuse to limit discussion to those religions which insist on the existence of one and only one god. From the wider perspective of a global view of human religion, the monotheist

# An investigation into the underpinnings and superstructures of the Pagan world view

Pagan religions have tended to be more concerned with practice than with theory, and in a system that has no dogma, that is as it should be. Yet as the movement grows and matures, it is inevitable that we begin to think in a more abstract way about our models and systems. John Michael Greer provides a primer on the ideas and themes essential to any discussion of neo-pagan religions, through a dialogue with existing ideas in theology, philosophy, and comparative religion.

This revised and updated edition of *A World Full of Gods* is part of a conversation that stretches out over the centuries. The rebirth of polytheism as a living religious tradition in the Western world will inevitably force a reassessment of much of that heritage and pose challenges to some of its most cherished assumptions.

“Some twelve years ago, when I first became (as a fellow druid put it) ‘gods-bothered’, there were very few people to ask who the gods were, let alone question what it meant that they actually existed. Fortunately, I came across John Michael Greer’s *A World Full of Gods* and finally understood where to begin. Especially in this delightful update, Greer expands and moves beyond a compelling defence of polytheism, to an explanation of the rich and dazzling moral, cultural, and even political consequences of a world full of many truths, many desires, many forces, and many, many gods.”

**Rhyd Wildermuth**, author of *Being Pagan: A Guide to Re-Enchant Your Life*

**John Michael Greer** is the award-winning author of more than fifty books, including *The Druidry Handbook*, *The Druid Path*, *The Mysteries of Merlin* and *Circles of Power*. Greer is also the author of eleven fantasy and science fiction novels and ten non-fiction books on peak oil and the future of industrial society; he blogs weekly on politics, magic, and the future at [www.ecosophia.net](http://www.ecosophia.net). He is an initiate in Freemasonry, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. Greer served as the Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA) for twelve years. He lives in Rhode Island with his wife Sara.

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