

### Polytheism - General Overview

Polytheism is the belief in and worship of many gods. Typically, these gods are distinguished by particular functions, and often take on human characteristics. This was particularly true in [ancient Greece](#) and [Rome](#). In other polytheistic cultures such as [ancient Egypt](#), gods take on the form and characteristics of objects found in nature, including trees, sacred herbs, cattle, animals and animal--human hybrids.

The belief in multiple gods is probably the result of an earlier belief in vaguely defined spirits, demons and other supernatural forces. These belief systems are similar to animism, ancestor worship and totemism. However, in polytheism, these supernatural forces are personified and organized into a cosmic family. This "family" becomes the nucleus of a particular culture's belief system. The family of gods was used to explain natural phenomena and to establish a culture's role in the universe. Typically, the number of gods would expand as the culture's belief system developed, eventually resulting in a hierarchical system of deities. Over time, the lesser gods would diminish in stature or vanish altogether.

### Polytheism - Ancient World

Polytheism was wide spread in the ancient world. The Egyptians had a highly developed belief system that was based on multiple gods. These gods were the cornerstone of Egyptian culture and still fascinate us today. The ancient Greeks also had an intricate system of myths based on multiple deities. The Greek gods often took on human forms and personalities, and in many cases, directly interfered with human activities. When the Roman Empire conquered the Greeks, the Romans assimilated much of the Greek polytheistic culture. Over time, as Rome's influence spread, it absorbed other gods from the other cultures that it conquered. In addition to Egypt, Greece and Rome, polytheism was widespread in ancient Asian, African, European and Native American cultures.

### Polytheism - Modern World

Polytheism still represents much of the world today. Except for the monotheistic (belief in one God) religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, most of the world's religions are overwhelmingly polytheistic. Polytheism characterizes the beliefs of Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism in the East, and also contemporary tribal religions in Africa and the Americas. These religions are widely practiced throughout the world and remain very popular in their ancestral areas.

Some polytheistic beliefs are also popular in today's Western Civilization. This appears to be a result of increased immigration of Eastern cultures and the mainstream popularity of New Age pluralism. Unlike Christian, Jewish and Islamic doctrine, there is rarely an absolute truth associated with polytheistic thinking. Ideas of morality (notions of right and wrong) are [relative to the individual or culture](#). Each believer is free to worship the god of his or her choice in the [manner of his or her liking](#). As a result, each person is free to behave as he or she sees fit. Although polytheistic systems provide flexibility and a relativistic lack of accountability, they often leave followers with no sense of ultimate purpose and no prospect for eternal hope. Monotheistic faiths such as Christianity teach that absolute truth is reality, mankind is on earth for a purpose, and eternal salvation is possible for those seeking a reconciled relationship with the one true God.

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