The Question of Henotheism
(A contribution to the study of the problem of the origin of all religions)

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" To; lakwnivzein ejsti; filosofei`n ".
"Brevity is the soul of wit".
(Hellenic proverb).

" Antiquitas sine veritate vetustas erroris est ".
(St Cyprien, *Epistula* 74).

The existence of henotheism in ancient religion is a historical fact, the detailed study of which contradicts the accepted scientific position on the question of the origin of religion. Furthermore, it puts the problem into a new perspective and casts doubt upon the "monism of dilemma": polytheism or monotheism? (1) What, then, is henotheism? (2) Where can it be found? (3) What does it consist of? The three parts of this study are concerned with the examination of these questions.

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1. Henotheism is a neologism, yet it may be defined and described as a form of religion which was ignored until a century ago. For the majority of scientists, henotheism is identified with polytheism. However, it is different from polytheism, though in fact it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them.

Henotheism was a form of worship of a Supreme God, unique among and above a number of other gods. Superlative adjectives were used to characterize the highest god, such as "Supreme", " jAnwvtato»", " {Uyisto»", "Super-God" (hochgott), and "Summus". This Supreme God is a universal principle, and together with the other inferior Gods can be understood as a whole in the form of the henotheistic religions.

The phenomenon of henotheism can be observed in the Indo-European pantheons; nonetheless, is this phenomenon a "post-polytheistic" or "post-monotheistic" one? In other words, since there are three forms — monotheism, polytheism and henotheism — could we consider the problem of the origin of primitive religion as being actually a trilemma : monotheism (the Bible), polytheism (the majority of scientists of religion) or henotheism (Max Müller) ?

In 1870, Max Müller said that the primitive form of Vedic religion (Hinduism) was henotheism. While the country in which it was born was India, one may find traces in Greece, Italy and Germany. The importance of Müller's discovery is not fully appreciated today, and has been disregarded for the last century. Only general discussion concerning this subject characterize the critical works devoted to it. L. Philippidis agrees with him about the form of henotheism, but says only that it was a "transitional stage".

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2. In the history of religion, events show a progressive emergence of "*elementa numina*". Henotheism originated in this context. A comparative analysis of the religions in Asia (the cradle of religion), Africa, and Europe points out that henotheism was a common religious characteristic for a prolonged historical period.

It was Max Müller, in his "Origin and development of Religion" (London 1870), who discovered for the first time the existence of henotheism in Hinduism in Asia (Rig Veda). This discovery helps us to identify the same structures which can be traced in other religions. In Mesopotamia, for example, different peoples have religions with a supreme god, who represents the most important henotheistic characteristic. In Africa, especially in Egypt, the same basic henotheistic form can be found, yet bearing another typical characteristic: the political element. In other words, there is a monarchical structure in political life paralleled by henotheism in religion. When the Pharaoh or his capital city changed, the supreme god also changed. However, the basic form of religion remained the same. In certain religions in other parts of Africa, henotheism

can be traced (among the Pygmies, Boschimans, Bantous, etc.) because of the easily identifiable concept of a supreme god.

In Europe, henotheism is easier to recognize. It would be a mistake to say that Hellenic religion was polytheistic: it was henotheistic from beginning to end. The most important supreme god is Zeus, who created the other gods of the Hellenic pantheon. Besides the twelve main gods, there are inferior gods and demi-gods. Their chronological existence automatically gives rise to the temporal henotheistic pyramid. Similarly, the Roman religion has the same structure, with a supreme god ("*Summus Deus Superus Juppiter*"). Henotheism was also characteristic of the Roman religion in the beginning; then, during the era of Augustus, a rapid religious evolution took place throughout the Roman empire, the form of which was kathenotheism, which later became a polytheistic religion.

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3. This short comparative study of Religion has one purpose : to underline in practice the most important elements which can be identified in henotheism, which is itself an historical event. This being so, the question is posed again: what was the primitive form of Religion? Obviously, the old question "polytheism or monotheism?" provoked a polarization within the science of religion, and therefore independent studies on this subject were undertaken. However, they are not independent or antithetical positions — there is rather an evolutionary relation between them, and the "vital link" is henotheism. This is why L. Philippidis said that henotheism is a "transitional stage". Yet, from which form to which? Is it from Pplytheism to monotheism or from monotheism to polytheism ?

Polytheism is not a creation "ex nihilo"; it is the consequence of an evolution — following human inclination — and a "cancer" in primitive religion. Polytheism is a "non-formal multiplication of cells"! Polytheism came into existence when other gods appeared around the unique God of monotheism, and this "single god" became a "Supreme God". It was at that moment henotheism was born. It was characterized by a hierarchy of gods, at the top of which was the "Supreme God" ("*Primus inter inferiores*"-one among inferiors). Henotheism was followed by another, limited in time, religious form: kathenotheism. In this form, the "Supreme God" of henotheism is supressed, because every god is "unus inter pares" (one among equals). This identification of all gods with the "Supreme God" prepared the way for the wider adoration of the equal gods of polytheism. In kathenotheism, there are many "unique gods" — many personal gods; it is a "monotheism in plural". This form is clearly found in both the Vedic religion and the Roman one. Then, after kathenotheism came polytheism, where all Gods became equals. Therefore, the progression "monotheism-henotheism-kathenotheism-polytheism" is the correct order and expresses the correlation between them.

Polytheism signifies "a plurality of gods," and henotheism also means "a plurality of gods" but in a different way: it deals with a monotheism which was enriched by the progressive addition of new gods. It betrays and attests an increase in and a multiplication of gods. This increase developed from an arithmetical progression to a geometrical one. In the long run, henotheism is a syncretism.

All the Indo-European religions were more or less characterized by henotheism in a particular period of their history. The archetype of henotheism was found in a human conceptualization which was reflected by the human reality and inclination: there is an alternation between religious and political life.

Henotheism was a "monotheism in principle and a polytheism in fact", a human inclination, a religious form, a religion, a monarchical polytheism, a "presidential republic" (Max Müller), a "transitional stage" (L. Philippidis), an inferior form of monotheism and the "dawn" of polytheism.

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The aim of this brief essay on religion is that of discovering the direction (fora;-*phora*) of the historical evolution of religion. The dominant, yet problematic orientation in the science of religion today is based on a false foundation, because in fact we are dealing with a historical evolution, and henotheism is an interval or a transitional stage between monotheism and polytheism. The science of religion officially ignores this historical religious phase and continues to neglect its existence. However, henotheism contains the key, the "Ariadne's thread", regarding the problem of the origin of religion.

It can be said, therefore, that Henotheism brings out the direction (*phora*) of religious evolution. Monotheism was the first form of religion, followed by the human addition of inferior gods and demi-gods, which led to the emrgence of henotheism. Then the equalization of gods (kathenotheism) came, and at that moment polytheism — in its particular sense — was born. Of course, this description could be considered a simplistic over-generalization, but it is a genuine conclusion of the foregoing study. This direction (*phora*) of evolution is logical because it is historical.

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But henotheism is not only concerned with the origin of religion. In fact, it is a human tendency. That is why within the church, we also have henotheism, which the Quinisextus Ecumenical Council *in Trullo* (691) called "heterotheism" (Canon A) and other ecumenical councils sometimes called "heresy" (cf. Arianism). But this is a topic for another study...

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