

**Many divine beings, one God: a case-study identifying Roman megatheism in *I Corinthians* and *Ephesians* with discussion of how such historical research can benefit Interfaith Work.**

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In 2010, the Classicist Angelos Chaniotis coined the neologism “megatheism.” The term describes an expression which constructed one deity as superior whilst denigrating (an)other(s), in the context of the First Century A.D. Roman Empire. The term sits between monotheism and polytheism; as Chaniotis rightly recognises, the polarity between the terms absolute monotheism and polytheism does not reflect the reality of religious expression in the period.<sup>1</sup> Whilst henotheism also sits in this space, megatheism is not an equivalent term, but is necessary for its distinct socio-historical value: beyond simple election or “elevation” of a chosen god (henotheism), megatheism has a specific purpose, to exalt with a purposeful effect of establishing “conscious competition” between religious groups.<sup>2</sup> Chaniotis evidences this thesis through analysis of religious expression of First Century A.D. epigraphy, and concludes that megatheistic expressions most frequently used superlatives, so-called “μέγας acclamations,” and shared terminology to construct superiority and competition.<sup>3</sup>

However, megatheism seems to have entered Classical scholarship unnoticed. Indeed, whilst several scholars reviewed the volume of which Chaniotis’ thesis formed a part, none engaged with megatheism beyond a passive summation of Chaniotis’ argument.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, this essay provides an independent case-study of megatheism. In so doing, it both commends the usefulness of megatheism as a term and proposes that megatheism has a broader impact than Chaniotis recognised. The essay ends by inviting scholars to consider how research which identifies historic megatheism can benefit Interfaith Work.

First, let us critique. Chaniotis’ case for megatheism is persuasive in light of the evidence he has provided. However, as the thesis continues, Chaniotis’ focus on epigraphic evidence alone limits the impact of his work. Moreover, Chaniotis falsely assumes that Christianity in the Imperial period was “exclusively monotheistic.”<sup>5</sup> For this reason, he does not consider any Christian material in his argument and concludes that Early Christianity did not exhibit similar competitive characteristics to its “pagan” neighbours.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, through analysis of Paul’s letters, this essay will demonstrate that Early Christian letters were, in fact, equal participants in the First Century A.D. megatheistic religious environment.

For the purposes of this essay, Paul’s use of εἷς θεός will be analysed. This formula is considered by Chaniotis to be a prime example of megatheism in all religious sources apart from Christianity.<sup>7</sup> At first glance, Chaniotis may appear to be right; by using εἷς θεός, Paul could be commending “exclusive monotheism.” Indeed, in *I Corinthians*, Paul echoes the Shema in stating: “for us there is one God, the Father...one Lord, Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Whilst reforming this statement to a Christological viewpoint, the force of the Shema as the most powerful statement of exclusivity within Judeo-Christian scripture is retained.<sup>9</sup> The strong adversative ἀλλ’ ἡμῖν also seems to indicate “othering” of the religious environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaniotis 2010, 112.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, passim.

<sup>4</sup> Athanassiadi 2012; Bedard 2011; Bonnet 2012; Gordon 2012; Thorsteinsson 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Chaniotis 2010, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *I Cor.*8.5-6. Cf. Deut.6.4.

<sup>9</sup> Moberly 2013, 7-40.

However, further analysis reveals that, in practice, this phrase is reacting against engagement between contemporary “pagan” religions and Christianity. Just a few lines afterwards, Paul states that some Christians have remained “accustomed to idols,”<sup>10</sup> and are “weak” enough that they may still worship the “many gods and many lords” who existed in the Roman world.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, Paul’s use of εἷς θεός should be understood as megatheism, operating within the specific competitive religious environment of First Century Corinth.

This conclusion is confirmed by Paul’s chastising of those who continued to partake in feasts at “pagan” temples: they had become κοινωνοὺς τῶν δαιμονίων (partakers with “pagan” gods).<sup>12</sup> This passage is much debated, with scholars such as Willis arguing that the term κοινωνοὺς is purely social, referencing Christian dining within “secular” associations.<sup>13</sup> However, Willis’ argument can be disputed: the word κοινωνός demonstrates that the Corinthians were not passive or secular “partakers” with “pagan” gods but were actively brought into relation with them.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in verse 16, Paul describes the Christian as κοινωνός with the body and blood of Christ. The parallelism of the verses suggests that the Corinthians were mirroring the relationship they had with Christ with the relationship they had with “pagan” gods. Thus, they not only recognised, but participated in their competitive religious environment, and Paul’s attempt to differentiate the Christian God is megatheistic, rather than exclusivist.

A similar megatheistic character to εἷς θεός is found in *Ephesians*. Again, Paul purports to commend Christian monotheism. He writes: “you were called to the one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God...”<sup>15</sup> There is great emphasis on εἷς θεός here: the tetracolon doubles the force of the duplet of *I Corinthians*, and Paul’s placement of εἷς, μία and ἓν, the genders of which, whilst dictated by the nouns to which they are attributed, are presented in a systematic order to echo the strength of the monotheistic faith through syntax and build to the culminating colon: “one God.”<sup>16</sup> Consequently, one is drawn to agree with Best that “the repeated use and placement of “one” ... make[s] a strong monotheistic assertion.”<sup>17</sup>

However, Best does not interrogate the surrounding context, which, as with *I Corinthians*, reveals that Paul’s words operate within a specific and competitive historical religious context. Indeed, whilst Best explicitly states that “the use of ‘one’ ... does not contrast a Christian hope with a secular... and was designed for internal Christian usage rather than to help clarify the distinction between Christianity and other religions,”<sup>18</sup> he fails to observe that in the following verse, the oneness established is used competitively, to position Christianity “above all.”<sup>19</sup>

A megatheistic reading is supported by the work of Dibelius, who suggested that the “spirits” in *Ephesians* referred to competing local religious ideologies.<sup>20</sup> His argument is persuasive; Paul repeatedly refers to the evil spirits whom the Gentile Christians worshipped prior to their conversion, and who still threaten to “make room” within the Christian body.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, he continues: “let no one deceive you with empty words.”<sup>22</sup> This is arguably a direct allusion to the competitive religious ideologies of Ephesus. Paul also ends the letter with a call to arms: “take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the devilish ones.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *I Cor.* 8.7.

<sup>11</sup> *I Cor.* 8.5.

<sup>12</sup> *I Cor.* 10:20. Cf. Gooch (1993, 76) and Grant (2001, 64) on reading δαιμόνια as pagan gods.

<sup>13</sup> Willis 1985, 265-283.

<sup>14</sup> Witherington 1993, 245; Cheung 1999, 93; Murphy-O’Connor 2009, 104-7.

<sup>15</sup> *Eph.* 4.5.

<sup>16</sup> Best 1998, *ad loc.*

<sup>17</sup> Best 1998, *ad loc.*

<sup>18</sup> Best 1998, 359.

<sup>19</sup> *Eph.* 4.6.

<sup>20</sup> Dibelius 1927, 58.

<sup>21</sup> *Eph.* 4.25.

<sup>22</sup> *Eph.* 5.6.

<sup>23</sup> *Eph.* 6.10-20, here. v.16.

The martial imagery used emphatically highlights the strong competition that the Christians faced, and the influence of opposition groups.<sup>24</sup>

We can therefore assert that Paul's monotheistic principle is emphasised in *Ephesians*, as in *I Corinthians*, because of his recognition that the surrounding context was populated by tangible and competitive divine forces. Therefore, Paul must be said to deeply recognise, engage with, and acknowledge Christian participation in the competitive religious environment, and Chaniotis seems foolish to deny *I Corinthians* and *Ephesians* the attribute of being megatheistic. The letters' language both converges with and simultaneously differentiates itself from the contemporary Graeco-Roman religious environment, making Christian use of εἰς θεός no different from the examples Chaniotis himself identifies in "pagan" sources.

What are the lessons that can be learned from reading the Pauline letters through this lens? Well, firstly, the essay validates the usefulness of megatheism as a linguistic marker to identify competitive religious discourse. The fact that religious superiority and competition is constructed through shared terminology means understanding megatheism is important for Interfaith theologians, especially those who analyse how vocabulary and ideas integrate with and/or react against each other. Indeed, as the Western world begins to consciously recognise and challenge institutionalised Christianisation, we are beginning to see a return to a more de-regulated, diverse and, thus, competitive religious environment. Being a versatile analytical tool which recognises how religious hierarchies are constructed in dialogue, modern Interfaith Work could both adopt megatheism, and altogether challenge its original definition as a Roman Imperial concept.

On a more specific level, understanding that megatheism was not only a "pagan" phenomenon but is deeply integrated into Early Christian texts must be recognised as such texts continue to be used in contemporary society, and in spaces where they encounter individuals of other faiths. As just one example, consider the effect of social media posts quoting either of the passages analysed. Those with large followings quoting Paul's belief in "one God" without an appropriate recognition of the text's historical competitiveness risk damaging Interfaith space by introducing historical competition to modern diversity. Adoption of megatheism in reception studies should enable individuals to understand texts' contexts and rhetoric, and, consequently, to both critically assess the ideologies therein and to promote Interfaith dialogue which is conscious of the legacies of historic competition.

In our world, where Twitter has become the new epigraphy, and bursts of historic competitive religiosity abound, the ability of historical research to identify megatheism, and, in particular, to demonstrate that Early Christian texts exhibit megatheism, is necessary. Such studies can identify religious competitiveness; expose problematic methodologies and reception of Early Christianity; and, ultimately, re-educate. We must understand the diverse Roman religious environment and its megatheism if we are to understand our own.

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<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that there are other readings of the "spirits." For example, Carr (1981, 109) has proposed that the spirits of *Ephesians* are not evil, but angelic hosts.<sup>24</sup> However, like Best, his argument fails to consider the context, and the aggressive martial images used: it is counterintuitive to argue that Paul encouraged the Ephesians to fight the angelic host, amongst whom he says that Christians will be numbered following death. Other scholars (cf. Bultmann 1951, 259; Whitely 1957; Wilder 1964; Lincoln 1995) have taken the notion of spirits more conceptually, as referring to human structures and the conceptually demonic: human actions which incite chaos upon creation. These readings are inappropriate for a historical reading of the text; in Graeco-Roman society, beings which incited chaos were consistently presented as anthropomorphic divine beings. Thus, Dibelius' reading still appears the most cogent.

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