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# Polytheism: Establishment or Liberation Religion?

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# Polytheism: Establishment or Liberation Religion?

ROBERT S. ELLWOOD, JR.

A book has just been given us which proclaims that the gods and goddesses are returning to modern America. It is David L. Miller's *The New Polytheism: Rebirth of the Gods and Goddesses* (Harper & Row, 1974). Some of the basic ideas of this book were earlier set forth in the author's "Polytheism and Archetypal Theology: A Discussion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40 (December 1972).

The New Polytheism is the next step beyond the Death of God; the exiles from Olympus are rushing back to fill the void left by that psychic implosion. They animate the polycentric life that then becomes available, teaching us in the process that a pluralism of values, without a fixed center, is a delightful thing — though they also seem to impose a rather strenuous task of identification: we are to see eschatology as the domain of Hermes, the military-industrial complex as Hera-Heracles-Hephaestus, as well as divine the obvious sways of Pan and Aphrodite.

Ontological questions are not faced; the whole business seems intrapsychic. Miller is much influenced by the resolutely undogmatic psychotherapeutic theories of James Hillman and Ronald Laing. But the real fountainhead of the New Polytheism, like the Death of God, is clearly Friedrich Nietzsche — in this case, *The Joyful Wisdom*. Here is posed one problem: whether the New Polytheism, or the Death of God theology, will ever be more than curiosities depends partly on whether Nietzsche really speaks the vocabulary and experience of twentieth-century America. We may have our hang-ups, but they are not exactly the same as those of Wilhelmine Germany.

As I read this provocative book, a series of memories a little more contemporary and concrete than Nietzsche's breathless blasphemies wove back and forth through my mind. I thought of the year I spent in Japan studying Shinto, the only thorough-going polytheism today associated with a major advanced

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