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Philosophy

## Rejoice in Deities' Diversity

Hindus don't need to remold our theology to fit an Abrahamic monotheistic model. The concept of one God and many Gods are not mutually exclusive.

By Ramdas Lamb

Today, the most popular theological beliefs in the West are monotheism (the belief in a single all-powerful Divinity) and atheism (the belief that there is no divine entity). The Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam preach the former, while those who base their worldview exclusively on material or scientific rationality tend to adhere to the latter. Yet, in much of the rest of the world, polytheism, or a belief in multiple Divinities, has been a long held and popular conviction. Atheists and Western monotheists together denigrate polytheists and their beliefs as either ignorant or pagan. The more conservative monotheists even equate them with evil and demonism. Such narrow-minded views and biases have hampered many who adhere to Western thinking from understanding the value and validity of polytheistic beliefs for the people who hold them. Especially in contemporary times, religious narrow-mindedness is a prevalent and major cause of much of the violence and hatred in the world, and both Western monotheistic and atheistic thinking have been major contributors. The purpose here is to make the case for the inclusion of polytheism as a legitimate belief system, for it has animated people throughout the world since ancient times and has often provided an understanding of Divinity and reality that is more rational than Abrahamic monotheism and has been the cause of far less violence in the world. Hinduism will be used as a primary example, since it offers a model for blending polytheism with its special form of monotheism into a useful and practical theology.

No human has demonstrable or irrefutable proof of the existence in a Divinity or a lack thereof. All theories regarding the Divine are based on faith, supposition and individual experience. That being the case, we should focus instead on the ramifications and practical usefulness of the various theological conceptualizations

on the people who hold them as well as on the rest of the world. Among the most ancient of these concepts is polytheism.

Polytheism (from the Greek *polutheos*, "many Gods") denotes a theological system involving a belief in and worship of multiple Divinities. The term was first popularized in the writings of eighteenth century European ethnographers as they encountered, then sought to identify and label, the religious beliefs of "primitive" peoples they studied. Polytheism was used to contrast these beliefs with Judeo-Christian monotheism. Nowadays, the term is essentially used to refer to any belief system in which multiple spirit beings are worshiped. These may include Gods, Goddesses, semi-divine beings, good or evil spirits, or the spirits of departed ancestors. Depending upon the tradition, there may be an established and recognized hierarchy of worshiped beings, or they may be seen to act independently. They may work in conjunction with one another or at cross purposes.

There are several significant characteristics typically found in nearly all polytheistic traditions. Among these are a belief that each Divinity or spirit being has a specific function (such as healing, protection in travel, etc.), that it controls a particular realm (such as a spirit realm or a specific location in the physical world), or that it possesses a specific power or range of powers. The latter can include forces of nature, such as rain, thunder, a celestial body, the seasons, or may involve dominion over characteristics of human personality, like love, devotion, compassion, jealousy, revenge and so forth. Another common belief is that spirits possess or adopt a specific form, often human-like, and are endowed with human-like characteristics, such as love and compassion, but also jealousy and revenge. Other forms that spirits may embody include those of animals, of aspects of nature like a volcano, or a combination of several, thus making reverence toward and worship of both human-like and non-anthropomorphic forms commonplace. Finally, singular devotion to one specific Divinity is not necessary. Simultaneous propitiation of several Deities tends to be common and accepted. In some cases, this is seen as practical and necessary, since different spirits control different realms or powers.

Reflecting on how this approach can be understood on a human level, it parallels in many ways the functioning of democratic society, in which power exists in the hands of various individuals who can be approached in turn or simultaneously for assistance. In conceptualizing such a theology, then, the adherents obviously drew upon their own human experiences. In the Jewish creation story, the Gods (*elohim*) say, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." What may be more accurate

is that humans create the Gods in their image and likeness, believing that what happens on Earth must be a reflection of what happens in the heavens.

Polytheism, then, often mirrors the human experience of family, village and state. It is frequently found in cultures with a clearly stratified social and/or political hierarchy, where power is held in the hands of different individuals based on their position within the hierarchy, and that these powers are there to benefit those who approach the various Divinities seeking assistance. Different Divinities, like different bureaucrats, have different powers. One then approaches and propitiates the being with the requisite power to fulfill his or her needs or desires. Additionally, one can choose to focus exclusively on a Divinity who appeals to one's own personality. Alternatively, one can choose to ignore all Deities. While such individuals are then believed to not receive divine assistance, they are typically not understood to be punished for this choice. Thus, in many ways polytheism is a pragmatic theological view that, as mentioned above, reflects aspects of a democratic style system.

If, on the other hand, one looks at the monotheistic concept in which there is a solitary omnipotent Divinity, we find a very different approach to the Divine and also to the likely world experience of those who formulated it. In monotheism, especially as expressed in the Abrahamic religions, ultimate power is in the hands of a single male Divinity. He is all knowing, all powerful and ever present. As with the Gods in polytheistic traditions, he has human personality traits. Unlike what is found in most polytheistic traditions, he demands allegiance and punishes those who do not worship him exclusively. On the human level, one typically finds such a being in monarchies, dictatorships and societies run by a ruling tribal leader or warlord, like those currently found in many Middle Eastern countries. While such systems may be comforting to those who belong to the right tribe or belief system, a solitary all-powerful ruler is a threat to those who do not. The vast majority of individuals in such societies remain weak and powerless unless they observe strict adherence to the being in power and do whatever they are told. This is seen as the only means of survival.

In Hinduism, polytheism and monotheism coexist in a relationship much like the parts of a wheel. The many Deities are like the spokes, all of which emanate from the hub with each playing an important role. The more common of these Deities to be propitiated by rural agriculturalists Bhudevi (Mother Earth), Surya (the Sun God), Ganesh (Lord of Auspiciousness and Success), regional Deities, and various river Goddesses. Among the myriad of others who receive attention and reverence are Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth), Sarasvati (Goddess of Knowledge and Learning) and Hanuman (Devotion Incarnate), to name just a few. Countless Deities are regularly

propitiated, often together.

Then, there is the Hindu form of monotheism, in which the Divine is formally referred to as Brahman (not brahmin, the priestly caste). It is said to be the source, the hub, from which all Deities are manifest. It transcends all attempts at defining or qualifying it. It is not male or female, has no form or description. It takes on apparent form or characteristics solely to allow humans the ability to relate to it. In that state, it may be called Ram, Krishna, Shiva, Devi, etc. All these names thus refer to a Qualified Absolute that is simultaneously beyond qualifications. For Hindus, this makes total sense. With characteristics, the Divine can love, protect and show compassion; beyond qualifications, it is all-encompassing. It is not only the source and reality of all other Deities, but also of all creation, both animate and inanimate. Because of this all-encompassing nature, it is the One to whom all prayers are offered. This is why it is commonplace for Hindus to be seen in Buddhist or Jain temples, in Sikh gurudwaras, and in mosques and churches. The Deity worshiped in each is seen by Hindus to simply be a different manifestation of the Deity they already worship.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, an important Hindu sacred text, a man asks a great teacher, "How many Gods are there?" To this he is told, "Three thousand and three." When he questions this answer, he receives the reply, "There are thirty-three Gods." He asks again and is told, "There are six." Not satisfied, he continues to ask and gets the response, "There are only three Gods." Again he asks and is told, "One and a half Gods." After one final query, the teacher says to him, "There is one God." In the explanation that follows, the teacher tells him that the many are all ultimately manifestations of the one indwelling presence. In the process, he alludes to a concept found in various Upanishads that equates the unchanging reality that exists in each individual with the Supreme, Changeless Divinity. In Sanskrit, this concept is "Tat tvam asi," which can be translated as "You are that" or "That you are."

The merging of polytheistic and monotheistic concepts in this way is unique to Hinduism. It allows people to believe in and pray to their own conceptualizations of the Divine in whatever form they choose, while at the same time elevating all of them to their ultimate reality, which is the singular omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient Divinity, who demands no allegiance, punishes no one for lack of belief, yet provides wisdom, comfort, compassion and freedom to those who seek it. All they need to do is look within.

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