

The Uses and Misuses of Polytheism and Monotheism in Hinduism by Wendy Doniger

Respondent Willemien Otten

In her usual lighthearted but perceptive way Wendy Doniger opens her piece “The Uses and Misuses of Polytheism and Monotheism in Hinduism” by explaining to us how Hinduism is both monotheistic and polytheistic, as “yes” seems the best way to answer most either/or question about Hinduism. This is a refreshing and practical way of dealing with what can otherwise quickly devolve into a heavily doctrinal problem, leading towards a clash of civilizations in which Hinduism as pagan polytheism is seen as inevitably inferior to Christianity (and Judaism and Islam) as an elevated but oppressive monotheism. After the relaxed opening of her piece, Doniger describes in a more normative way later on how elite Hindus suffered from the religious equivalent of the Stockholm syndrome as they began to emphasize certain aspects of their religion, invariably monotheistic ones, at the expense of its polytheistic dimensions to accommodate the tastes of their colonizers. Her piece ends with more of an edge when she states: “The genius of Hinduism, its malleability and diversity, continues to give it its terrific edge over those branches of the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) that are strait-jacketed by a single canon (Bible or Qur’an), and/or a single governing body (Pope or Ulama), and, above all, a single god.” The “yes” of Hinduism as both monotheistic and polytheistic seems here to have changed into a resounding “no” to monotheism *tout court*.

“Strait-jacketed by a single canon, a single governing body, and a single god,” that is the downward path which Doniger counsels her readers against. But is this a fair rebuke of monotheism? For one like myself who has been raised in the perspective of the Christian tradition, it may not seem too difficult to neutralize the first two of her monotheistic reproaches. Thus I am not convinced that the canon is a problem. Of course there are beautiful stories outside the canon, but the Christian canon itself is so rich that the Bible is more properly considered a library than a book. Moreover, following W.C. Smith’s *What is Scripture*, one can argue that in

Christianity the centrality of the Qur'an is better compared to the role of Christ than to that of the Bible. After all, there is always the need to connect Old and New Testament, with Christ as the hermeneutical key, and hence there is always some act of interpretation that needs to be performed, giving rise to infinite layers of interpretation on the part of the exegete, the preacher, and even the plain reader. Reflecting a similar hermeneutical breadth is the amazing fact that Christianity never had a problem with the reading of its sacred texts in translation, as it took until the Reformation before reading Scripture in the original languages became a hot issue. About the Pope, I would simply say that there is not such a centralized authority in Protestantism. And while much can be said against the fragmenting tendencies inherent in that confession, the active involvement it requires of its members in the absence of a pope or of other religious authorities/oracles, may not be a bad thing for believers living in modern democracies, as it requires one to formulate one's personal convictions. More directly to the point, Protestantism is no less monotheistic for lacking a pope.

But all of this is to some extent beating around the bush of Doniger's real worries about monotheism. For I well recognize the problems that are wrapped up in the acceptance of a single god, how they lead to the experience of monotheism as a straitjacket. In his recent *The Price of Monotheism* Jan Assmann calls attention to what he terms 'the Mosaic distinction,' by which he indicates the fact that inherent in biblical monotheism is a distinction between a single god versus a pantheon of gods, with exclusive monotheism instilling in its believers a further distinction then between true and false religion, inasmuch as subscribing to a single god entails the disqualification and prohibition of other gods as pagan. Here we tread on normative territory, and it seems that one cannot subscribe to biblical monotheism without it. Having just come away from Assman's book, I agree that the critical potential of the Mosaic distinction is indeed strong and has a clear political edge. Therefore, one has not picked up much of the power of this Mosaic distinction, I would say, if one deems it a viable project to think that one can merely counter monotheism by emasculating religion, that is, by giving a definition of religion that abstains from any moral claims, or conversely, by trying to formulate an autonomous, universal

ethics that precludes and excludes any religious inspiration. And yet, this is the current aim of the Dutch legal philosopher Paul Cliteur (Leiden University), as he struggles with the aftershock of the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist in Amsterdam in 2004. Whereas for Assmann the Mosaic distinction defines biblical monotheism, for Cliteur it seems the Mohammedan distinction has pushed monotheism forever outside enlightened democratic bounds. This leads him to try and redefine religion in such a way that direct divine commands to citizens will forever be ruled out; that religion, in other words, will no longer be religious.

Even if we dismiss Cliteur's reaction as a reaction to Islamic monotheism that is as extreme as it is eclectic, and above all fueled by what could be called Enlightenment fundamentalism —the idolatry of Reason—, Doniger is right on the mark in alerting us to the intrinsic danger of monotheism. Hence the importance of creating religious awareness in contemporary politics and of cultivating civic virtues among religious groups. Accepting Assmann's view as a plausible rationale for that danger, I still wonder if there is not room for a more capacious understanding of monotheism. My current project analyzes alternative views of nature and creation in the Christian tradition, as I try to move away from the stewardship model that is so aligned with ecological apocalypticism by tapping into pantheistic resources as diverse as the medieval John the Scot Eriugena and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Involved in this for a while, I found it interesting to read that, for Assmann, this so-called called cosmotheism —and not polytheism— is what he considers the opposite of monotheism. Still, it is my claim that this tradition has deep roots inside Christianity, and need not be seen as a foreign, countervailing trend. In trying to defend the Christian-ness of cosmotheism against Assmann and others, I am not quite ready to become a polytheist but I may come out an ally of Doniger after all.