

A Response to Wendy Doniger

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Four things concerning the Hindu gods have happened to me in the past four weeks. One, I went back to the holy city of Benares, in Northern India, on the banks of the river Ganges, after a gap of about 15 years. Two, I met and interviewed Roberto Calasso, the author of, among other books, *Ka* and *Literature and the Gods* at the Jaipur Literary Festival (Jan 21-25, 2010). Three, I read and was asked to respond to Professor Doniger's piece, "The Uses and Misuses of Polytheism and Monotheism in Hinduism". And four, I was invited to write a piece about the body and death among Hindus for a German magazine, an assignment I am yet to complete. In my place, a believing Hindu would say that the gods are visiting me, and that all four events ought to be recognized for what they are: signs of the presence, the manifestation or the appearance of the gods in my everyday life. To invoke the doctrine of karma: I must have done something good at some point to earn their munificence this month.

I've spent most of my adult life studying, writing and teaching about Hindu religion, texts and traditions. A great deal of my education in these matters happened at the University of Chicago, in classrooms led by scholars like Wendy Doniger, Sheldon Pollock, Matthew Kapstein, Steve Collins, Paul Griffiths, Ronald Inden, D.R. Nagaraj and others. I was born to a Hindu father and Sikh mother, raised in India in an environment permeated by several religions – Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity – and am now professionally engaged with all scholarly matters to do with Hinduism. I studied at Oxford, which I experienced as a seriously Christian institution. My partner for the last several years is a Sufi Muslim; most of my closest friends on the East Coast are practicing Jews. I've visited many major Hindu temples and pilgrimage sites all over India, sometimes devoutly and sometimes academically. I could probably tell you something or other, or a great deal, in some cases, about a vast pantheon of gods and goddesses, and my homes in Delhi, India and Cambridge, MA are full of images of Hindu deities. At least three of my Indian mentors are deeply religious Hindus in their personal

practice, a fact not necessarily reflected in their academic work – one is a philosopher, another a political theorist, and the third a historian of religion.

But ask me if I am a Hindu, a monist, a dualist, a monotheist, a polytheist or an atheist, ask me if I am believing or agnostic, and I would be stumped. *That's not the way we think about it*, I would be tempted to say. And in this regard, the confusion of categories in my life is by no means unique or even unusual. I am pretty much like most Hindus: we take our gods seriously enough to not confuse them with humans. We classify humans with an egregious exactitude that produces the caste system. By contrast we allow our gods to be real and unreal, present and absconding, this-worldly and other-worldly, to-be-placated and to-be-ignored, interesting and uninteresting, beloved and neglected. We are by turns devoted, promiscuous, adulterous, or just plain lazy, when it comes to our relationship with them. We might have a preferred god – an *ishta* – but this by no means prevents us from worshipping any other god who might seem relevant on a given occasion (I use 'god' as others nowadays use 'actor', to signify both male and female deities). As Calasso reminded me recently, we seem to have permanently retired some gods, like Prajapati, Indra and Brahma, for a variety of historical, theological and / or unknown reasons – in fact, most of the Vedic deities have become archaic, if not completely forgotten in India today.

No one understands these facts better than Professor Doniger. Her massive new tome, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Penguin 2009) showcases her expertise on all matters Hindu built up over almost four decades of brilliant and untiring scholarly effort.¹ I would defer to her knowledge on every point, philological, textual, historical and philosophical. But I am not sure how to explain to her or share with her certain experiences I have had, even as a basically rational, modern, egalitarian, cosmopolitan, educated and secular individual. These include a physical sensation of the earth-shattering erotic force of Shiva, in Benares; a feeling of desolation and sadness in the ruined temples of Avantipora in South Kashmir; the certainty that there must be a heaven, in a view of the distant white peaks of the Himalaya from certain places in Himachal Pradesh; a visceral knowledge, in and through my own pain, of the trials of Sati and Sita; the palpable friendship of a musical but

¹ My review of *The Hindus* appeared in *The National*:
<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090731/REVIEW/707309982/1008>

wry presence I know to be Krishna; a recurrent desire to see Lake Mansarovar and Mt. Kailash in Tibet with my own eyes; a camaraderie with the unfamiliar (to me) aniconic gods and goddesses of Maharashtra, where I spent years doing research; a clear vision, as if on a screen, of the gay, inebriated and ragtag marriage party of Shiva as he goes to wed Parvati, in Pandit Chhannulal Mishra's rendition of Tulsidas's *Ramayana* ("Sunderkand"); a preternatural stillness inside the 700 year-old temple of the god Maruti at the home of my late friend Dr. Murari Ballal, in Ambalpady, Udupi, south-west Karnataka... In these moments, my awareness of the presence or absence of the gods exceeded my awareness of my own being. It didn't matter, really, whether I believed in them or not: the more important point was that *they were there*.

It may be that in stating this, *that the gods were there*, I give myself away as a Hindu. I think Professor Doniger would agree. The existence of the gods is proven by their existence, of which we may sometimes have a direct and unambiguous apprehension. At other times, we may infer them from the undeniable existence, in our world, of such things as beauty, love, truth and music. Sometimes they ask to be talked about, like right now. **ENDS**