

Response to Wendy Doniger's "The Uses and Misuses of Polytheism and Monotheism in Hinduism"

Katherine Ulrich  
independent scholar, Brooklyn, NY  
January 19, 2010

Many in this postmodern world rightly reject the bugbear of essentialism: predicating a particular characteristic as inherent to something or someone, it is widely accepted, sets you on a slippery slope leading to racial profiling or religious stereotyping. Identifying and rejecting such bias (hopefully) comes easy when speaking of groups of people, whether on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or whatever. More difficult is resisting the urge to define and thus reify religions. In a tidy universe, each religion would fit neatly in a pigeonhole: Islam is monotheistic, Shinto polytheistic, and so on. The universe is not tidy, however, and labeling religions is anything but a neat process.

Indeed, merely defining religion is a type of academic parlor game, played over and over in countless conferences, classrooms, and articles. Reasonable enough to expect that people should be able to identify what it is that they study. Yet nailing down a definition that is broad enough to include the list of -isms—e.g., Confucianism, Judaism, Buddhism—yet narrow enough to exclude political and social movements such as communism or vegetarianism is a tricky walk along a narrow tightrope. (Assuming, that is, one has an interest in including the one and excluding the other, but that is another issue.)

This fact is brought home with great verve by Wendy Doniger's essay on Hinduism. She demonstrates that over the long history of the religion, people have taken different positions on questions about supernatural beings. The answer to whether Hinduism is polytheistic, monotheistic, monistic, or pantheistic is "all of the above." That is to say, you will find Hindus who assert (or imply) each of these views; you will also find individuals who shift between these depending on context.

One might take Doniger's argument a step further, and find a range of monotheisms, of polytheisms, and the like. In other words, there are a number of different ways in which Hindus can be polytheists. The pantheon is by no means fixed, and the gods and goddesses who populate the polytheistic cast of characters in India's south are rather different than those worshipped in the north. This is by no means merely an issue of language; calling a goddess Minatci rather than Parvati, even if the former is said to be an incarnation of the latter, evokes a certain history, biography, a set of stories and associations. Thus polytheism in Chennai (Madras) differs from polytheism in Delhi. Similarly the figures venerated three thousand years ago—Indra, Agni, and Soma, the main Vedic deities—are rarely, if ever, worshipped by contemporary Hindus. Nor are the relationships between deities fixed; the goddesses of wisdom and wealth are the daughters of the warrior goddess Durga in Bengal, for instance, but not elsewhere. Ask a dozen people about the responsibilities and relative power of the major pan-Indian figures of the contemporary pantheon, and you will almost certainly receive a dozen different answers.

Consider the variety of monotheisms present in Hinduism, too. As Doniger notes, the "theological parallel to serial monogamy" has been and continues to be a common strategy, so that worshipper A can praise god X as the be-all and end-all of existence one day—then lavish the same praise on god Y the following. At the same time, worshipper B extols god Z, and so on. The monotheism of A and the monotheism of B are not identical even when it comes to the

identity of the object of worship, much less when it comes to more esoteric issues like Y and Z's relationship to the physical universe and human beings.

The immense variety of viewpoints about deities in India is paralleled by a similarly broad span of views about interactions with them. Monists, who regard the individual soul (*atman*) as identical with Ultimate Reality (Brahman), tend to value image worship less than the Tamil poet-saint who asked "Of what use is the body / that never walked around the temple of Śiva, / offering him flowers in the worship rite?"<sup>1</sup> If the divine is within one, image worship is at best a stage for the practitioner who has yet to experience the oneness of soul and Brahman. But if the divine is distinguished from the worshipper—and devotees commonly declare that they want to taste sugar rather than become it<sup>2</sup>—then worship receives a more positive spin. Yet even here there are variants; a poet-saint from the region that is now Andhra Pradesh rejects the worship of gods embodied in bronze statues: "How can I feel right / about a god who eats up lacquer and melts, / who wilts when he sees fire?"<sup>3</sup> Both this and the previously quoted Tamil saint might be considered, like others involved in or influenced by the *bhakti* (devotional) movement, to be practical monotheists: single-mindedly devoted to a particular deity (Shiva in both cases), to the point that that deity is identified as *the* ultimate source of creation, bondage, and salvation; other deities are delegated tasks or exist as aspects of the central deity. Yet though both poet-saints would agree on the primacy of Śiva, they represent opposite views of image worship.

Thus Doniger's apt description of Hinduism as polytheistic, monotheistic, monistic, pan(en)theistic can be extended indefinitely. Not only are there multiple types of polytheism, etc. within Hinduism, but variation in beliefs goes hand-in-hand (or even, since we're talking about Hindu gods, hand-in-hand-in-hand . . . ) with variations in practice.

---

1. Appar IV.9.8, translated in Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 256.

2. The statement has been credited to a variety of saints; the earliest I am aware of is the Bengali saint Ramprasad Sen, on which see Malcolm McLean, *Devoted to the Goddess: The Life and Work of Ramprasad* (Albany: SUNY, 1998), 88.

3. Basavanna 558, translated in A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 28.