

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

By Martin E. Marty

In the mid-1980s, when non-Muslim Americans were beginning to get curious about Islam, after the wake-up call from Ayatolla Khomeini, the American Historical Association scheduled a plenary session at its annual meeting. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, scholar Yvonne Haddad, and I did the ritual dance of Jew-Muslim-Christian relations that was just coming into currency. The topic was "Fundamentalisms." An imaginative host committee, not wanting to see inter-religious affairs frozen in a troika, asked Wendy Doniger to respond "from the Hindu point of view." She told us that she had that thought it would be difficult for Hinduism to be Fundamentalist. For one thing, while Muslims, Christians, and Jews were firing their canons at each other, Hinduism did not have a clearly defined canon; there seemed to be a vast array of available scriptures and other texts for them. Which could they use for purposes of firing at others, and at what could the others point in return, given Hinduism's moving target.

So, Hinduism was not supposed to have Fundamentalists, but there they were, whether in piety or politics. Adding to the confusion was the notion that faiths had to be monotheistic in order to produce aggressive fundamentalism. Yet, while "there they were," "they" being putative monotheists, there were plenty of poly- believers in their company. As monotheists have since been ever more dismissed or attacked for their tendency to move toward fundamentalist-style aggressiveness, some Hindus could stress their "open" canon and their polytheism as a way to duck in the cross-fire. Let the

fashionable New Atheists and some styles of monotheists concentrate on the mono folk, Hindus seemed removed.

Not so easy, one has to say, as Doniger did that night at the A.H.A. The vast array of texts which non-Hindus call “Hindu” and the similar array of interest groups—sects? cults? Schools?—include emphases which to others look at the same time monotheist and polytheist. Whose side is Hinduism on? As Professor Doniger surveys it, she can only and, I think, accurately, answer “Yes, they are polytheist and/or monotheist.” A natural question that comes to mind from scholars of or partisans with monotheism is “Why don’t they make up their minds?”

A service of the Doniger essay is in the fact that, without saying so, she is holding up a mirror to non-Hindus, and to those who want to be or be called monotheist. I won’t buy trouble by exploring Islam on this front, but I think her descriptions of how the various texts help people negotiate the “one-” and the “many-” complex can illumine the negotiations observable within Judaism and Christianity, the other fierce monotheistic tribes. An illuminating story I heard at a Muslim-Christian forum related the efforts of a Christian missionary to the Japanese, who got tangled in efforts to outline witness to the divine Trinity. The courteous, patient, and inquiring Japanese scholar asked how the Christian could be so intense about the faith being monotheistic—and then quickly expound teachings about the full divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “That is three, then, isn’t it?” Missionary: “No, it’s one.” To which the Japanese responded with a glow of recognition in his eyes: “Ah, I see that you Christians are ruled by a committee!

Without getting into the intricacies of modalistic monarchianism and other complex ancient ways of dealing with three-and-one we can step back and merely

observe that “the more than one,” if not “the many,” coexists in the minds and practices of many (most?) Christians. At Doshisha University in Tokyo, I watched two members of the Christian panel go at each other after one said that, while his family was Christian, they were always the first to light the joss sticks at New Year’s. “You shouldn’t do that! That is syncretism!” was the blast he had to hear. So he played a game, asking: how many of you Christians, east and west, had a Christmas tree in their churches, or held Easter egg hunts for the Easter festival. Almost all had these, and took them for granted. Did they not know, they were asked, that these were phallic or fertility symbols imported or left over from the religions Christians were dismissing as pagan and wanting to leave behind in a polemical shroud?

When Doniger mentioned henotheism I thought back to the unforgettable definitions my generation learned back in 1960 in H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. Niebuhr could spot compromises of radical monotheism at fifty paces, but he did not have to look that far to find them in the United States. They took the form less frequently of polytheism than of henotheism, which, he wrote, “evidently pervades the modern world in the form of nationalism. There were also non-nationalist versions, as in “class ethics” and “class art” or in the effort to “make civilization” into nationalism’s Alpha and Omega.

Try this: listen to arguments over patriotic symbols, the flag, or super-patriotic symbols like guns, and hear people of other half-faiths go at each other fang and tooth. Count the television cameras on hand to witness; look at the rage in the eyes of those on both sides. Now picture getting an audience or even a hearing for debates on classic doctrines which fortify monotheism. You’d need a stadium to house the gapers for issues

of henotheism, while when it comes to debate over themes considered essential to faith, you could hold the contest in a space as small as a phone booth—if you can find one. “The great alternative to henotheism with its relative unification of life is pluralism in faith and polytheism among the gods,” wrote Niebuhr. “When the half-gods go the minimal gods arrive.”

The domestic henotheisms seem closest to the Vedic religion as Max Müller defined it, “the worship of a number of gods, one at a time, regarding each as the supreme, or even the only, god while you are talking to him.” I picture many reading this in Super Bowl season, when one can take note of millions who at worship on a Friday or a Saturday or a Sunday talk “mildly” to one God and then talk “wildly” to another at game time. Niebuhr was judgmental, and I may be sounding so, but my role is not to scold but to try to understand. Professor Doniger, handing us the mirror of Hinduism, can be of considerable help in the effort.

Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at The University of Chicago and author each Monday of a “Sightings” column for the Martin Marty Center.