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The One and Many Gods of Hinduism

ABSTRACT

Hinduism is commonly thought to represent polytheism. This label reflects a superficial perception of how the gods were and are understood. This essay explores the idea that Hinduism, (itself a relatively modern, externally imposed label), has many understandings... that it is *polygnostic*. It takes a journey through the evolution of a range of Hindu conceptions of deity, from the philosophical and abstract through to the deeply personal. Although such modern commentators as Richard Dawkins claim that the possibility of Hinduism including a monotheistic stream is deceptive, this essay traces monotheistic stances through a range of India's rich theological and philosophical trends. Noting that individual Hindus are just as likely to think that: 'There are many gods'; 'only one god'; 'many gods in one'; or that 'god has two aspects'; 'god is a trinity'; 'The world is god'; 'I am god'; 'I am close, but different to god'; 'god is love'; 'god is beyond qualities', and even, 'there is no god', the essay supports the now famous quotation from Crooke, that "among all the great religions of the world, there is none more catholic than Hinduism".¹

¹ Klostermaier, K. 1994:1 quoting Crooke, W. *The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India*. Vol 1. Oxford University Press, 1896:1

BIOGRAPHY

Cathy Byrne, a Queensland University Masters student of Religion Studies, is currently researching the relationship between studying religion and the development of positive attitudes to cultural diversity. A mother of one, with an eclectic spiritual history, Cathy is interested in all aspects of religion as a powerful, (and under-studied) sociological, ethical, structuring presence.

THE ONE AND MANY GODS OF HINDUISM

In the late 1970s, the BBC (in association with Time-Life Television) produced a short documentary called *330 Million Gods*.ⁱ This video gives a limited view of Hindu belief and ceremony but raises legitimate questions regarding the Hindu concept of deity and the perception of Hinduism by Westerners. This article is not a critique of the video, but uses its lines of questioning to explore multiplicity in Hinduism and the evolution of the Hindu relationship with divinity in language, practice and theory. Despite proclamations to the contrary, this article draws on a long history of evidence to support the claim that Hinduism may be humanity's oldest living monotheistic religion. While the Hindu expression of the relationship between man and God has varied from ancient to modern times, the idea of divinity as a singular, honourable force has been ever-present.

GOD AS MANY - THE PROBLEM OF POLYTHEISM

Hinduism is commonly thought to have many gods. According to some, to qualify as a Hindu, a person 'must love at least one of the 330 million gods' of classic mythology.ⁱⁱ In ancient times, it is thought that 330 million approximated the world population,ⁱⁱⁱ giving rise to the notion that each man contains his own god. But the crowded pantheon also houses nonhuman gods – with elephant heads, many arms and terrifying female forms. There are different gods to protect against disease, bring good fortune and help with studies. Śiva has 1000 names^{iv} and might be referred to as 'the white one', 'the red one' or 'the blue-throated one', his consort is 'Parvati', but also 'Śakti' or 'Uma'. It can be confusing to the outsider. Understandably, early Western scholars perceived Hinduism as 'frankly polytheist'.^v

However, this label may reflect a superficial perception of how the gods were understood. It is more accurate to say that Hinduism is polygnostic, that its idea of god has many understandings. *Deva*, the word generally translated as 'god', is also used to describe sacred words, parts of the body and supernatural powers.^{vi} Consequently, the concept of god within Hinduism is difficult to encapsulate. Individual Hindus are just as likely to think that: 'There are many Gods', 'There is only one God', 'God is many in one', 'God has two aspects', 'God is a trinity', 'The world is God', 'I am God', 'I am close to God, but he is different to me', 'God is love', or 'God is beyond all qualities.' In addition, strong heterodox movements (such as Buddhism) and even some streams of yoga (such as Sāṃkhya) have influenced mainstream Hinduism with the idea that 'There is no God'. Even scepticism has a long tradition in India. This rich history of theistic and philosophical trends supports the idea that 'among all the great religions of the world, there is none more catholic (literally meaning "universal" or "eclectic") than Hinduism.'^{vii}

HINDUISM AS IDOLATRY - THE OUTSIDERS' VIEW

Image worship has a difficult history. The Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep IV (c. fourteenth century BCE), husband of Nefertiti, commanded worship of only one God. He chose a gold circle to symbolise the sun-god Aton and closed temples and destroyed statues to other deities, setting the stage for a long and acrimonious conflict over how human beings worshiped.^{viii} In contrast, Hinduism is a religion with a plethora of icons. It can be argued that these represent a single deity, but set against other world religions, the Hindu acceptance of multi-form symbolic representation and embodiment provokes a deep and difficult challenge for Westerners.

While the Hebrew bible contains the plural form of the word for 'god' and also names other than Yahweh (such as Baal), the primary Judaic concept is of the one, jealous father: God of the Old Testament. Judaism's monotheism is enshrined in the command: 'no graven image or any likeness of anything ... thou shalt not bow down thyself to them.'^{ix} Christians uphold this idea in general, but in theory discuss the godhead as a trinity and the embodiment of the 'Lord' in Jesus. In practice, Christians kneel before the crucifix, Pope and various saintly statues and some South American sects worship Mary as the divine feminine. However, early Christian analysis declared the gods of both Greeks and Brahmans to be unholy. This superficial view cast Hinduism as demonic, 'monstrous and extravagant'.^x

The antithesis of Hindu image worship is most strongly held by the iconoclastic, strictly monotheist Muslims who, following the edicts of Mohammad, declare Allah's sovereignty and that those 'who associate other beings with God ... are to be the inmates of Hell.'^{xi} Despite recognising ninety-nine names for God, Muslims generally view Hindus and their religion as 'totally differ(ent) from us'.^{xii} It is from within these external religious frameworks that the term 'polytheist' has generally been used to describe Hinduism, though criticism did not only come from outside. The Jabala Upaniṣad is adamant that Śiva must be seen in the soul alone: 'Images are meant for the imagination of the ignorant.'^{xiii}

HINDUISM AS PLURALISM

From a nation of more than a billion people, it is perhaps appropriate that there are as many religions as there are individuals.^{xiv} Indeed, a focus on individual exegesis is important in understanding Hinduism. Smith posits that the most contributory characteristic of the Hindu may turn out to be this personalising of the decisive locus of religious life.^{xv} This elevation of individual interpretation is not at odds with India's deep understanding of an ever-present unifying principle, expressed in modern Hinduism by the saying *Ishwar ek hai* (God is one).

It is important to note that the term 'Hinduism' is a relatively modern, externally imposed label describing various traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Originally 'Sindhu' was used only in a geographical sense describing the people of the Indus Valley. Westerners used 'Hindu' in a religious sense only in the seventeenth century.^{xvi} A uniquely universal religion, it accommodates many diverse ideas and recognises six different doctrines as orthodox. As a melding of religions and philosophies,^{xvii} it is difficult to categorise as a single faith.

This syncretic tradition has incorporated virtually everything it has met in its historical path. It includes tribal honouring of local deities which has its roots in a stone-age culture (that) has been traced back half a million years.^{xviii} It includes fertility worship (an influence from the Indus civilisation) which continues today in the phallic *linga* symbol of Śaivism. Alongside this, in scripture and daily practice, is the greater (pan-Indian) tradition of acknowledging the one God.^{xix} 'The foreigner is amazed at the almost unending variations in creed that are found in Hinduism,'^{xx} which 'cannot be exclusively derived from the attitudes, texts ... statements or members of one group.'^{xxi} It is a synthesis of the Aryan-Indo-European numinous religion of the sky, the father, and ritual magic, and the Asian-Aboriginal mystical religion of the earth, the mother, and devotional experience.^{xxii} Within this pluralistic environment the idea of 'God' has evolved through the ages.

THE MANY AND ONE EVOLVING GOD(S) OF THE ANCIENT SCRIPTURES

Some would claim Hinduism as 'the religion of those ... who create, perpetuate and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Veda.'^{xxiii} The Vedic hymns, (written around 1500BCE) are the oldest literature of the Indo-European world and are considered to be divine revelation. However, modern Śaivite Hinduism draws on powerful Pre-Vedic elements (dating back to around 3000BCE). The Indus Valley deity, represented by an ithyphallic yogi on the Harappan seals unearthed in the early 1900s, points to a Hinduism that does not have purely Vedic roots. Although little is known of the function, perception of, or rituals associated with this being, there is a clear continuation from this image to *Pasupati* – Lord of the beasts, to the Rudra of the Vedas, and into the paradoxical and fascinating figure of the later Śiva.^{xxiv} Even the gods themselves are an evolving conglomeration of powers, personalities and symbols, with some gods usurping the roles of others, or becoming later incarnations.

Some scholars argue that the re-emergence of the Śiva-Śakti sects in the Classical Period (and also in the Middle Ages after Buddhism's decline),^{xxv} was a reaction against the Brahmanic caste restrictions. A dynamic pendulum of thought and practice across centuries and cultures, at a time when the Middle East and the Mediterranean were undergoing heightened creative cultural dialogue with India and the Far East, makes the classification of ideas – ancient and not so ancient – somewhat difficult. Certainly some forms of modern Śaivism which acknowledge both a personal and an abstract divinity, appear to encapsulate many of the subtly different religious streams that have their genesis before recorded history.

The Persian Aryans established their thirty-three gods in the Indus Valley and Vedic perspectives reached across what is today known as India. Initially this Brahmanic religion knew neither temple nor image,^{xxvi} indicating a sophisticated understanding of the deity as an abstract, though manifestable force. The early Vedic God was sometimes referred to as *Rta*. While literally meaning 'truth' or 'cosmic law', Mahoney suggests the word is a relative of the English 'rite' and 'ritual',^{xxvii} indicating the primary means for aligning the divine and human realms. This was a period of *karma-yoga*. Worship took the form of public fire sacrifices, focused on results in this world, in this life. Precise rules regarding offerings, worship times and correct mantra were all intricately prescribed. The relationship was contractual, with the sacred powers obliged to respond to certain rituals.

Vedic name and form were symbolically linked with elements of nature assuming powerful personae. Conception of the godhead was complex and multiple mechanisms were deified: fire, water, rivers, lightning and intoxicants for example. *Agni*, both god of fire, and fire itself, was understood as a symbol of renewal and a means to direct life's outcomes. The exoteric ritual was understood to have an esoteric counterpart – in the mind of the presiding priest. The link between divinity and the human mind was established. In the early Vedic texts, a '*brahman*' was

the answer to an enigma or riddle. To ‘know’ *brahman* was to understand the secret of being itself.^{xxviii} Later Vedic texts personified ‘being’ as the God *Brahman*. Thus, ‘Brahman’ (understanding) replaced ‘Rta’ (ritual).

Only a simplistic reading would view this as a truly polytheist period. Some view it as pantheist: ‘he both is the universe and the life force that pervades it.’^{xxix} However, even the earliest Vedic text, the Rgveda speaks of ‘*Ekam sat vipraha bahuda vadanti*’ – The One Truth, wise men speak of in varied ways,^{xxx} and ‘Him with fair wings, though only one in nature, wise singers shape, with songs, in many figures.’^{xxxi} A polymorphous deity perhaps, but the Vedas do not indicate simple polytheism.

Vedic hymns are addressed to the ‘One Highest Lord’ named as Indra, Agni, Mitra, Soma, Viṣṇu, Savitr and Brahman, among others.^{xxxii} For this reason, Western philologist Max Muller coined the phrase ‘henotheism’ which describes the elevation to the supreme position of one particular god at a time, while recognising the plurality of gods.^{xxxiii} Among the sacred names recited ‘the overlap is considerable: each one would be named the creator, preserver, destroyer of the universe, each one would be called the Truth and Grace and Deliverance. Each one in the end is the same: One.’^{xxxiv} So, from the beginning, and quite clearly by the end of the Vedas, theology was sophisticated and tending towards monism. ‘There was that One and no other, the One breathed without breath, self-sustaining.’^{xxxv}

GOD AS THE ONE SELF IN CLASSICAL HINDUISM

Eventually, philosophical and financial objections to complex rituals created a move away from exoteric rites.^{xxxvi} Small groups and individuals began to practise isolated meditation. This resulted in a set of texts known as the ‘Forest Books’ – *The Āraṇyakas* which developed into the doctrines and esoteric practices of the Classical Period (c. 800BCE) of the Upaniṣads. This period is also called *Vedānta* – the end of the Vedas. An early Upaniṣad notes that ‘When people say, “Sacrifice to this god, sacrifice to that god” – one god after another, they mean this creation of his; for he himself is all the gods.’^{xxxvii} The Vedic understanding of a single source principle continues through the Classical Period and is expressed in Yajñavalkya’s famous answer to the question: ‘How many gods are there?’ Though he starts at ‘3306’, after repeated questioning, he continually reduces the number until his final answer is ‘one’.^{xxxviii}

The most significant contribution to philosophical thought from the Upaniṣads is the recognition of the latent potential in each individual to directly experience God. ‘The highest Brahman ... the Supreme reality ... which is eternal, is nothing but the Self. You are only that.’^{xxxix} This supreme partnership reversed the significance of the ritual from the outer to the inner. Once again, word meaning underwent a subtle change. *Brahman* came to mean the cosmic power that supports the worlds, a distinctly conscious principle, implying that ‘what underlies the external universe is one with what exists within one’s own self.’^{xl} *Brahman* now equated with *Atman* – a Universal Self that also dwells within the human heart. The sage had ‘no need for ritual baths, nor periodic rites, nor external deity, nor location, nor sacred space, nor outward worship.’^{xli} This period initiated *Jñāna* yoga – mental discipline, renouncing this world, and focusing on the escape from *samsāra* (the cycle of life and re-birth).

In the later Upaniṣads, the equivalence of Ātmā and Brahman is unmistakably proclaimed.^{xlii} ‘Your pearl is in your own body, there is no search needed.’^{xliii} The practitioner’s task was the ‘total isolation of the individual soul in its own eternal, timeless essence,’^{xliv} a dissolution of the ego-self and fusion with the godhead. The early Upaniṣadic concept is of merging into Brahman,^{xlv} and the principle practice, meditation. One scholar highlights four aspects of the Absolute Principle in the Upaniṣads: the transcendental Self, *Brahman*; the personal/immanent Self, *Īśvara*; the seed power of creative potentiality, *Hiranya*; and the manifestation of the universe, *Viraj*.^{xlvi} This period made the multi-aspect God a singular state of being, of pure mind, in which there’s no diversity at all.^{xlvii}

However, even in the early Vedānta, a variety of conceptions existed. Within the Upaniṣads, initially Brahman was described only negatively and without qualities: ‘impalpable, devoid of distinguishing mark, unthinkable, indescribable’,^{xlviii} but later came to be associated with the finer senses, the breath and the mind and endowed with such positive qualities as truthfulness, virtuousness and intelligence;^{xlix} the ‘convergence of the beautiful.’^l Although the creator makes and surveys the world, it is generally regarded in the early Upaniṣads that he also completely pervades it, signifying a pantheistic understanding (God is the universe). ‘Having entered into it, he became both ... the defined and the undefined ... He became whatever there is here.’^{li} He is the material world’s soul and it is his body.^{lii} It is also possible to incorporate panentheism (God is the universe and more): ‘Because it is also Brahman, something incalculable has been added to the Atman.’^{liii}

THE INDIVIDUAL SELF AS GOD-LIKE IN PATAÑJALI'S YOGA SUTRAS

Unlike Vedānta, which teaches that one Self is common to all, the third century CE philosopher Patañjali presented a new idea – that each being has its own Self, one who has not forgotten his perfection. He claims it is more real than anything found in ordinary existence and the most worthy object of human motivation. This is understood by Eliade as a 'metaphysical sympathy between the Lord and the inmost nucleus of man.'^{liv} This *Self* is referred to in the Bhagavad-Gītā as a primeval self that not slain with the body, an 'atomic fragmental part of the Supreme.'^{lv}

Yoga gave the mystics a system for exploring this inner divinity and established a dependent relationship between 'creator' and 'created'. Patañjali described God as the Infinite Self, whom desire, misery, actions and their results do not touch. Through detachment the individual soul becomes 'like God, in timeless unity.'^{lvi} In this understanding, God, the divine exemplar,^{lvii} is very 'other' worldly, the ideal object for contemplation since he is without qualities and thus not tainted by *prakṛti* (nature). However, revealing monotheism again in history, Patañjali recommends worship of God as the means by which such wisdom may be experienced.^{lviii}

THE TROUBLE WITH TALKING ABOUT GOD – DUALISM VS NON-DUALISM

The Middle Ages were a time of great debate and philosophical development. From the great yogis and scholars of the Upaniṣads, two divergent trends emerged: one towards an abstract, transcendent pure monism with a single impersonal god and an illusory world (as expounded by Śankara, c. eighth century CE), and the other towards a dualist monotheism in which a personal god is both transcendent *and* immanent in this world (as expounded by Rāmānujar c. eleventh century CE). Proponents of either theology acknowledged that Ātmā and Brahman were consciousness, but their conception of God and his relationship with humanity were markedly different.

Śankara's non-dual, non-theist *Advaita Vedānta* claims supremacy of spirit: 'Brahman is real: the world is illusory; the individual soul is Brahman alone, no other.'^{lix} Kashmir Śaivism reveals a similar monist creed in 'Nothing exists that is not Śiva.'^{lx} This position obliterates the individual and focuses on the renunciation of ego. In meditation, the seeker can know that truth is undifferentiated and can remember one-ness despite the appearance of separation. This type of Jñāna-yoga is 'more suited to those whose powerful and austere intellects mistrust the emotional fervour of worship. It is the yoga of pure discrimination and direct perception of the ātmā.'^{lxi} Here, the human mind is elevated to the supreme source and Hinduism embodies a mystical philosophical monism. Śankara focused on the process and discipline to obtain the *experience* that Ātmā is Brahman.

This was a philosophy which appealed to the intellectual elite and became a significant element in the Hinduism exported to the west. However, the devotional spirit of Hinduism and its deep theistic tendency meant that even these purist abstract ideas carried a monotheist flavour. Typifying the monist point of view, Kashmir Śaivism maintains that the human being is already liberated – already unified with the Brahma equivalent god/goddess Śiva/Śakti; the problem is that we have forgotten. God then, is subject to remembrance. Kashmir Śaivism offers this idea as a synthesis of the major streams of thought that preceded it, presenting a rich and dense formulation of the ancient traditions.^{lxii} A disciple of Śankara and described as the architect of this synthesis,^{lxiii} the tenth-century philosopher Abhinavagupta wrote that 'recognition of that supreme self is to be face to face with what was forgotten.' Practices such as uninterrupted absorption in mantra, develop the individual's capacity to see the heart's own, singular omniscience, 'before his very eyes, in identity with his own body, because its form has (once) been known.'^{lxiv} He describes the unity of this supreme Self as 'multiplied under the influence of time, space and real nature ... so that unity and plurality can be the attributes of one and the same (divinity).'^{lxv}

However, pure monism is difficult to maintain with a language that requires subject-object dualism. Pure monism has no room for god worship. Even in this monistic school, devotion (which demands two entities) is paramount. For the success of sacrifice, a devotee must attain a state of humble devotion and become immersed in the unbounded condition of Śiva.^{lxvi} While maintaining its monistic appeal to the mind, Kashmir Śaivism focused on the spontaneous arising of love within the human heart and can, in a sense, be considered a kind of monotheism.

THE SELF AS DIFFERENT TO GOD – THE RISE OF DEVOTIONAL, ETHICAL THEISM

In contrast, Rāmānujar's *Viśiṣṭadvaita Vedānta* (qualified non-dualism) focused on the later Upaniṣads which highlight distinctions between Brahman and the world. When imperfections, pain, death and saṃsāra are contemplated it is less possible to identify the finite Self with Brahman.^{lxvii} The doctrine of non-duality was

progressively modified; concluding that Brahman is not the self in the body, but resides within this self as an 'Other', unaffected by its imperfections and the deeds which bind it to earthly existence.^{lxviii} So Brahman, different to the universe, is essentially unknown; 'not above, not across nor in the middle has one grasped him.'^{lxix}

This differentiation created a space in which individual free will and ethical self effort became significant. While the Upaniṣads enumerate virtues – charity, hospitality, non-violence (among others) – and it was understood that a person cannot simply meditate themselves into enlightenment: 'Unless a man has ceased to commit sins, he cannot expect to realise the highest end.'^{lxx} Upaniṣadic mysticism was conceived by 'men who lived in cloisters far away from the bustle of humanity.'^{lxxi} Many practitioners enjoyed a protected life where values were rarely tested. During the Middle Ages, mysticism looked beyond its philosophical explanations and sought a moral awakening.^{lxxii} This need for an ethical focus brought forth from history and legend the Indian epics the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* (containing *The Bhagavad Gītā* – the Lord's Song).^{lxxiii}

It was the teachings of the Gītā (wherein Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu, gives guidance in an existential crisis) that incorporated both the philosophical foundations of the Upaniṣads and the devotional, ethical spirituality of the Middle Ages. This came about through a new concept in relation to divinity revealed as the 'all-highest Word' of the Gītā – the idea of the love of God for man.^{lxxiv} Unlike the introspective, ascetic self-effort required to know the One of the Upaniṣads, the Gītā called for simple loyalty. The soul, 'being but a mode of God, has nothing of itself to give and it must therefore remain completely passive in order to receive grace.'^{lxxv} Akin to the Christian mysticism of St Teresa and St John of the Cross, the power of grace was felt as an aspect of the divine, to be prized even more than the un-manifest Brahman.^{lxxvi}

This notion of God's participation in the human realm emphasised the *reality* of the world, and the requirement for devotion. 'Liberation was not enough: it must be consummated in a total ... self-surrender to a personal God.'^{lxxvii} 'Throughout endless ages, God is in loving pursuit of the soul and the soul must respond to the call of grace by entrusting itself wholly into the hands of god.'^{lxxviii} Rāmānujar elevated devotional worship of a personal God, conceived as Supreme Perfection, characterised by love.^{lxxix} Religious seekers now had a broader, populist base from which to experience and understand the singular ultimate reality.

The name 'Viṣṇu became the Supreme, and *bhakti* (devotional) Vaiṣṇa cults flourished. The rules of *bhakti* are simple and flexible: 'Be it a leaf or flower or fruit or water that a zealous soul may offer ... That do I willingly accept.'^{lxxx} Rāmānujar stressed the impossibility of spiritual progress without love.^{lxxxi} The Baptist embrace of a direct personal relationship with Jesus is not unlike the popular Hindu tradition of *bhakti*.^{lxxxii}

Zaehner claims that the Gītā is the 'watershed that separates the pantheistic monism of the Upaniṣads from the fervent theism of the later popular cults,^{lxxxiii} saying that from the time of the Gītā, Hinduism becomes increasingly monotheistic.^{lxxxiv} He argues that this is a swing back to the cult of *Pasupati*.^{lxxxv} Considering the connection of this cult to modern devotional Śaivism, it seems the Gītā reenergised and honoured a new name for God, but the seeds of monotheism had been planted long before.

The Gītā's critical contribution to modern Hinduism was that it legitimised the way of *bhakti* or loving devotion. Set at a critical moment on a battlefield, the Gītā allowed worldly works (as opposed to formulaic ritual) to be the sacrificial offering. It emphasised dispassionate action over passive renunciation. This idea broadened the pathways to God, giving direct access to the householder, to outcastes and women – all previously blocked by caste or lack of scriptural knowledge. Once again, ritual became important; not the business-like ritual of the Vedic hymns, but an offering to the mysterious power of a supreme principle, capable of bestowing grace and thus worthy of worship.

The Gītā corrects a limited understanding of God by disqualifying both pantheism and monism: 'In me subsists all beings, I do not subsist in them.'^{lxxxvi} 'Fools think I am the Unmanifest.' It is clear that the Gītā is a teaching of devotion: 'greater is the toil of those whose thinking clings to the unmanifest; for difficult indeed it is for embodied men to reach and tread the unmanifested way.'^{lxxxvii}

In the Gītā, deity was once again endowed with personality and became an ethical example and an object of love: he is the 'all-highest vessel of purity',^{lxxxviii} 'light of lights',^{lxxxix} the 'friend of every being'.^{xc} Confirming a transcendental *and* immanent monotheism, the Gītā's god is polymorphous. Arjuna addresses the personal manifest form of Kṛṣṇa as 'All Highest Brahman'^{xci} and Kṛṣṇa himself claims to be Viṣṇu, Indra, Śiva, the sacred syllable Om, the fig tree, the thunderbolt, time, trickery, and courage, among other things.^{xcii} Also when revealing his form, he tells Arjuna: 'behold my forms in their hundreds and their thousands ... how divine, how

many-hued and multiform.^{xciii} The whole wide universe in One converged there in the body of the God of gods, yet divided out in multiplicity.^{xciv}

But Kṛṣṇa expresses the importance of faith over form: ‘those who worship other gods, because of their love, they worship me;’^{xcv} ‘Whatever form, whatever god, a devotee with faith desires to honour, that very faith do I confirm in him.’^{xcvi} Ultimately, even worship and worshipper become one, not in the abstract monistic form of Advaitin unity, but as a reverential dualism: ‘the offering is Brahman ... offered by Brahman.’^{xcvii}

GOD AS TRINITY, DUALITY AND CONTINUUM

Within the many conceptions of godhead, Hinduism also has its trinity. This comprises ‘the unborn knowing one (Lord); the unborn unknowing (individual Self) and prakṛti (nature). In the Supreme Brahman ... there is a triad.’^{xcviii} The enjoyer, the object of enjoyment and the universal cause is known as the threefold Brahman. There is ‘the perishable, the imperishable ... But yet there is another Person, the All-Sublime *uttama* Surnamed All Highest Self.’^{xcix} This elemental soul, the avatar, is an embodiment of divinity. With the Gītā, the indifferent mind of the Upaniṣads was overwhelmed with the emotional heart, as the numinous took human form (as Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, and even Buddha). In Śaivism, while the term ‘avatar’ is rarely used, the *Sadguru* (enlightened one) is often described in a similar vein.

Avoiding numerical specifics, the thirteenth-century poet Jñānesvar described god as a pantheist ‘continuum or perfectly co-ordinated organism (wherein) ... each part is suffused with the full life of the whole ... to experience this connectedness means one’s own personality has been replaced by God.’^c However, others of the same era developed Rāmānujar’s ideas into a purely dualist view. Madhva’s *Dvaitin Vedānta* describes God as full of bliss and love, and purports that human effort is useless without grace, since the ātmā relies on Brahman absolutely for its existence. In this understanding, liberation is a complete turning to God, not a merging in or becoming like. Here, God remains ‘other’ to man.

The seventeenth-century poet Tukaram follows this vein, claiming that ‘devotion alone sanctifies’^{ci} and without love, which is *impossible without duality*, there can be no fruition of the soul. Supporting this idea, some in the devotional movement claimed monists were committing the ultimate blasphemy by equating themselves with the divine: ‘There is no fool on earth ... comparable to him who calls himself God.’^{cii} In a uniquely bhakti reversal of the escape from saṃsāra, Tukaram takes particular delight in the world and ‘prays to be incarnated ever again ... that he may continue to experience the love of God.’^{ciii}

GOD IN CLOSE PROXIMITY – SOMEWHERE BETWEEN ONE AND TWO

While much of modern popular Hinduism is expressed by the dualist Vaiṣṇa cults, Śaivism had its own bhakti avenue. In the Tamil South of the thirteenth century, Śaiva Siddhanta schools flourished. Here, the transcendent, aloof god of the Svetasvatara Upaniṣad united to the highly personal god Śiva (of ancient times) to claim man’s total devotion, service and love.^{civ} For the Śaivite, the aim of the ‘play’ of life (also referred to as the dance of Śiva) is the divinisation of man. While man does not become God, man’s soul is ‘fused into the likeness of God’.^{cv} As Śiva, God remains very non-human, yet somehow deeply akin. This is the concept of proximity, where God is ‘more intimate to the soul of man than the soul itself.’^{cvi}

Although more monistic in the north and dualist in the south, the Śaiva Siddhanta tradition predates both Śankara and Rāmānujar and represents a strand of Indian thought that did not exclusively adhere to the precepts of strict monism or dualism.^{cvi} The path described by these philosophically subtly nuanced schools is in mastering the mind and senses, through which the immanent God who indwells the soul may be known.^{cvi}

NAMA RUPA – GOD AS NAME AND FORM

In India, icons abound: on taxi dashboards, in fields where the labour of brick making continues under the constant smoke of kiln stacks, above doorways to the mechanic’s and the sweet shop, in public buildings, in cinemas and in every Hindu home; *pūjā* (worship) is a constant activity. There are two primary ways of understanding the relationship between the image and the divine – neither of which can be described as simple idolatry.

On the one hand, the statue is ‘a symbol only ... images are just educational toys.’^{cix} The image may serve simply as a point of concentration, nothing sacred – a functional ‘device for harnessing the eye’ and a means of drawing forth devotion or stillness of mind.^{cx} The term used for this understanding of imagery is *vigraha* which

means ‘to catch hold of’. Thus, the image is the form that enables the mind to ‘grasp’ the nature of God and a devotee looks beyond the symbol to invoke, address and communicate with what the symbol represents.^{cxix} Uncharacteristically prosaic, Eck notes that ‘the wise will meditate on some form, remembering that the form is a superimposition and not a reality.’^{cxii}

Another term used to describe temple images is *murti*, meaning ‘embodiment’. The process whereby a deity is ‘installed’ into an image often requires elaborate ceremonies, but the understanding is that the deity is enticed to take form and ‘reside temporarily’ in that material shape.^{cxiii} In the video *330 Million Gods*, an annual village ritual is shown in which the idol of Sarasvatī is thrown in the river once the deity has left. This does not imply the concept of disposable gods, since the deity herself has returned to her abode. While the substance of the idol itself changes annually, divinity is understood to be constant and able to manifest under certain conditions. Similarly, for the peasant, ‘any piece of stone on which he put the kumkum became god ... What mattered was his faith, not the stone.’^{cxiv} Infused with the presence of the deity, image is not merely a symbol, but ‘the charged, concrete and particular appearance of the divine in the material world.’^{cxv}

Devotion, as any practice in modern Hinduism, has a variety of expressions. Some bhaktas treat their embodied deities as if they were honoured guests, offering food, incense, clothing and prayers. Westernised Hindus might offer daily meditation and only visualised ‘gifts’. *Darśan*, a two-way act of ‘seeing’, where the individual comes face to face with divinity, is a central act of Hindu worship. It implies an exchange: an honest ‘standing (or bowing) before’, the bared soul of the individual, blessed by the deity. The deity may take any form, including human gurus, phallic linga or exotic and terrifying female statues. This moment of divine connection is an opportunity for insight, and has been described in highly mystical terms. The practice illustrates Hindu culture’s shared assumption that God has many forms, God can become form and thus form can become God.

Emphasising the importance of language once again in Hinduism, *nama* (name) is intricately associated with *rupa* (form), not only in material objects, but also in relation to intangible concepts and beliefs. In Vedic times, ritual objects functioned as containers for abstract and philosophical ideas, directing focus and attention toward spiritual endeavour.^{cxvi} The word *namah* extends ‘name’ to mean ‘bow or pay homage to’ and ‘to see’ also connotes ‘to understand’. *Rupam* also means beauty. In Sanskrit linguistics then, to name an object is to honour it as deity, and to see form is to see beauty, which somehow, is to know God.

The Māndūkya Upaniṣad describes the nature of the sacred syllable ‘Om’ as a universal name which refers to a universal form ‘in such a manner that the name and the form coalesce to constitute one Being.’^{cxvii} Since the idea of two Universals is impossible, *nama* and *rupa* become one experience. Without form, the mind cannot fix itself to meditate. In addition, Krisnananda points out that God is difficult to describe (to name) and thus cannot be said to have any particular form. Confirming the Gītā’s teaching, it is impossible for humans to envisage God’s transcendent nature. In an attempt to conceive of it in our minds, human history is strewn with a multiplicity of the names and forms of God.

Unlike the Western notion of idolatry (in which the image is the thief of rightful worship), Hindu icons make the divine immediately perceptible, enabling a closeness that encourages the deepest outpourings of love.^{cxviii} Eck notes that perceived polytheism is a result of the epic and romantic imagination and literary history of India. Images serve both theological and narrative functions, stretching the human imagination toward God. If all names and forms have evolved from the original seed of the universe, then all objects ‘have the potential for revealing the whole.’^{cxix} In this way, Hindu icons expand the opportunity for devotion rather than reduce it.

MODERN GOD – INDIA’S TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONCEPTS OF DIVINITY

Hinduism still mystifies and intrigues the outsider with its certainty in a divine-human relationship. Heeding of astrological alignments and seemingly superstitious propitiation of various deities forms a significant part of Hindu culture today.^{cxix} It would be difficult to argue the Gandhian line that such superstition was ‘fostered by missionaries.’^{cxxi} Gandhi’s declaration that: ‘There is no other God than Truth’^{cxixii} and that this God has an ‘indescribable lustre and mighty effulgence’ while clearly confirming a monotheistic appraisal, does not so clearly represent the understanding of the bulk of Hindus. Former State Government advisor, M. P. Bhattathiry proffers a more representative modern polytheistic belief – that the many Gods are living, thinking, dynamic beings who live in a kind of parallel universe, from which they guide human experience and evolution.^{cxixiii}

Vivekananda claimed that every idea of God, and hence every religion, is true, but each is a different stage in the journey.^{cxixiv} While intellectuals may claim that the perception of One is the higher, clearer vision, Hindu thought is most distinctive for its refusal to make the one and the many into opposites.^{cxixv} Most modern Hindus would claim belief in one Supreme Being, with an extensive hierarchy of devas as part of divine creation. A

twenty-first-century journalist and semi-insider (by marriage) claims that though they worship the world's largest pantheon, Hindus believe in a single creator.^{cxxvi}

CONCLUSIONS

Hinduism is indeed polygnostic. Its pluralist capacity has encouraged diversity. 'Pluralism, Monism, Realism, Idealism, Theism and Absolutism – various shades of these in different combinations are to be found.'^{cxxvii} Throughout its vast recording of man's interaction with divinity, it has focused on the yogas of action, contemplation and devotion and a variety of understandings of this relationship.

While it has incorporated polytheist and pantheist ideas and carried these into its modern culture, this multiplicity camouflages a deep and sophisticated monotheism. The undogmatic insistence on one praiseworthy god has carried Hinduism through the centuries, affirming with equal vehemence 'the multitude of ways in which human beings have seen that Oneness and expressed their vision.'^{cxxviii}

Concluding his review in the video *330 Million Gods*, the presenter notes that the common thread in Hinduism appears to be the will to get closer to God. Whether conceived as an infinitesimal singularity or a marvellous multiplicity, the idea that 'God can be realised' is distinctly Hindu. What does *not* matter is by which wisdom each of us arrives at truth.

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