

CHAPTER 12

GOD: IS HINDUISM POLYTHEISTIC?

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Judaism, Christianity and Islam are often described as the world's three great monotheistic religions, implying that Hinduism is polytheistic. Attempting to label Hinduism as either 'monotheistic' or 'polytheistic' is being unaware of what Hinduism really is. Hindu scriptures speak of a single Supreme Being who is both transcendent and immanent, manifest in a multitude of forms. It is a mistake to seek in Hinduism an equivalent of the Creator God or Father figure who dwells in Heaven, presides over a Final Judgment and offers Salvation to those who believe in Him. To understand what 'God' means in Hinduism, we need to reflect more deeply on the various meanings attached to the word 'God.'

Many would agree that 'God' may be seen as the Supreme or Ultimate Reality. But, in practice, for most human beings, God is not an abstraction but a Person, with personal attributes. Hebrew scriptures, the Bible and the Quran have extensive descriptions of the attributes of God: compassion, love, forgiveness, justice and jealousy (*Exodus 34.6, 7, 14*); seven attributes including power, wisdom and glory (*Revelations 5.12*); the *Quran* refers to Allah as Most Gracious and Most Merciful; and, drawing on references in the Quran, Islamic tradition has compiled a list of 99 Most Beautiful Names that devout Muslims are asked to remember.

In Hinduism, 'God' is truly One but scriptures present various descriptions of 'God' to satisfy the spiritual needs of practitioners and devotees at different levels of spiritual development: the Ultimate Reality, the Inner Controller, and a devotional anchor. The very heart of Hindu spiritual practice is captured in the teaching: "*by any means whatever, rest your mind in God*"⁴⁴.

The Upanishads discuss the Ultimate Reality. "*In the beginning there was Existence alone... One alone, without a second*"⁴⁵. "*...that which is invisible, ungraspable, birthless...eternal, the source of all.*"⁴⁶ These statements relate to *Brahman*, Pure Consciousness, that has no name, no form, is indescribable and beyond the human mind. If God means Ultimate Reality, there can be no more monotheistic declarations than these. *Brahman* is free of all attributes since to think of *Brahman* as a Person is to impose limitations on that which is Infinite. The attribute of being tall excludes short; being bright excludes dark; and so on. Being free of all attributes, *Brahman* is said to be "indescribable."⁴⁷ The Upanishads declare that although beyond description, *Brahman*

⁴⁴ *Srimad Bhagavatam 7.1.31*

⁴⁵ *Chandogya Upanishad 6.6.1*

⁴⁶ *Mundaka Upanishad. 1.1.6*

⁴⁷ *Mandukya Upanishad 7*

can be experienced by negating all concepts that arise in the mind and by making the mind so still and pure that we become aware of the very source of our awareness.⁴⁸

Because it is extremely hard for the human mind to grapple with such an abstraction, Hindu scriptures offer another way of thinking about God: *Ishwara*. Unlike *Brahman*, *Ishwara* has attributes: all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal and ever-free of all human limitations.⁴⁹ *Ishwara* is the inner controller who dwells in the hearts of all living beings.⁵⁰ By deep devotion and surrender to *Ishwara* the spiritual seeker is able to realize the true Self and overcome sorrow. *Ishwara* is one.⁵¹ Although *Brahman* is the only true reality, *Ishwara* arises out of our projection of attributes to meet our own mental needs. In the language of Vedanta, *Ishwara* is a ‘superimposition’ on the One Reality that is *Brahman*, which means that *Ishwara* has no reality separate from Pure Consciousness. Such superimposition is encouraged by the Hindu scriptures as a practical aid to spiritual progress. Meditating on the attributes of *Ishwara* is a powerful spiritual practice.⁵²

For most, *Ishwara* is also too abstract. How are they to connect with God, develop deep devotion to God and ultimately rest their minds in God? Hinduism addresses this human need by presenting God in specific forms. Such forms are clearly recognizable and so lend themselves to deeper personal relationships. For example, Lord Ganesha, the God of Wisdom, is portrayed with the head of an elephant, which is known to be a highly intelligent animal; and there are numerous stories about Lord Ganesha that devotees can enjoy and relate to. Other names and forms in which God is portrayed include celestial, human and other beings; male and female; austere and opulent; fierce and serene; master and servant. These forms reflect the vision that God is not merely a remote ‘Creator’ of the universe; rather, the whole universe is a manifestation of God’s creative energy.⁵³ This is why Hindus regard the whole of nature as sacred. Mountains and rivers, trees, animals and all planets can be objects of worship as manifestations of the One Supreme Reality.

This proliferation of names and forms in which God might be worshipped by Hindus has two important benefits: first, persons of every temperament can find a form of God that appeals to their heart and to whom they can offer deep devotion; and second, seeing Divinity in so many different forms creates in Hindus a reverence for the Creator who has brought forth this wondrous diversity.

In referring to these forms of the Supreme Reality, another Sanskrit term that is used to denote ‘God’ is *Bhagavan* or *Bhagavati*. *Bhagavan* refers to male and *Bhagavati* to female forms of

⁴⁸ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

⁴⁹ Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* 1.24-26.

⁵⁰ *Bhagavad Gita* 18.61

⁵¹ Svetashvatara Upanishad 6.11

⁵² Patanjali: *Yoga Sutras* 1.27-29; 36.

⁵³ “Having created it, He entered into it...He Became the manifest and the unmanifest...and all this whatsoever that exists.” *Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.6

Divinity. Both terms signify one who possesses six special attributes known collectively as “*bhaga*”: Knowledge, Detachment, Sovereignty, Righteousness, Renown and Glory. There is of course no limit to the list of Divine attributes. For example, the Divine Mother is described as the source of 21 attributes in each living being;⁵⁴ and Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita: “there is no end to My Divine Glories...”⁵⁵ Reciting the thousand names of Vishnu or Lalita are popular prayers, for each of the names is associated with a Divine attribute and helps in fostering devotion to God.

Does the multiplicity of forms of God mean Hinduism is polytheistic? No, for all these different forms are merely various manifestations of the One Pure Consciousness. The scriptures never tire of pointing this out.⁵⁶ Even the Hindu who is not philosophically inclined and unaware of the scriptures relating to *Brahman* as the One Ultimate Reality does not regard the different forms of God as competing Divinities. The scriptures that present specific forms of God themselves proclaim that form to be the same as the One universal, infinite Reality.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the Upanishads caution against seeing the object of worship as being separate from *Brahman*.⁵⁸ When Hindus worship God in a specific form, they do so to connect with the all-powerful Higher Being that is the One Ultimate Reality.

Another Sanskrit term that is commonly translated as ‘God’ is *deva* or *devata*. *Devas* and *devatas* are divine beings that are manifestations of the One Supreme Being in all aspects of creation. *Deva* literally means ‘shining being’ and is seen as the divine force presiding over each field of activity, whose blessings we invoke for success in what we do in that field. Each *deva* is merely one aspect of the Supreme Being who, being transcendent and immanent, is to be seen in all forms. *Devas* exist as cosmic forces as well as forces within us. They are invoked through prayer and worship as well as through a variety of yogic and tantric practices. Translating *deva* or *devata* as ‘God’ or ‘gods’ invites conflict with the idea that there is only One Supreme Being that some other religions call God. From this misinterpretation comes the incorrect inference that Hinduism is polytheistic. If there has to be a label for Hinduism, a better one might be ‘pluriform monotheism.’⁵⁹

Hindu scriptures offer many manifestations of the One Reality -- from *Brahman* as the most abstract to *Ishwara*, *Bhagavan*, Personal manifestations such as Vishnu, Shiva, Durga or Lakshmi and Divine incarnations on earth such as Rama and Krishna. The goal of each spiritual seeker is to connect with the infinite Divinity that is both transcendent and immanent, that can

⁵⁴ *Sri Durga Saptashati* 5.16-75

⁵⁵ Bhagavad Gita 10.40

⁵⁶ See for example, *Rg Veda* 6.47.18; *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.5.7; *Katha Upanishad* 2.2.9, 10; *Srimad Bhagavatam* 4.7.54

⁵⁷ See for example the *Ganapati-atharvashirsha-upanishad mantras 1 and 5* on *Ganesha* as the Ultimate Reality; *Bhagavad Gita* 7.19 on Krishna; *Yajur Veda* 16.1-66 on *Rudra*; *Mahanarayana Upanishad* 11.6, 13, also known as *Narayana Sukta* which describes *Narayana* as being *Brahma*, *Siva*, *Vishnu*, *Indra*, the Imperishable Supreme.

⁵⁸ *Kena Upanishad* 1.5-9.

⁵⁹ See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1770452/pluriform-monotheism>

appear in any form even while being essentially beyond all forms. The scriptures encourage all seekers by leaving open all possibilities, allowing the seeker to choose a spiritual practice according to his or her own level of understanding. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the question is posed: “how many Gods exactly are there?” The first answer is “three hundred and three”. The question is repeated many times, eliciting a series of answers: “thirty-three”; “six”; “three”; “two”; “one-and-a-half”; “One”. This discussion ends with the question: “Which is the One God?” to which the answer is “it is *Brahman...*”⁶⁰ All the forms in which Hindus worship ‘God’ are various manifestations of the One.

⁶⁰ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 3.9.1, 9.