Introduction to Divine Multiplicity

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Most "Westerners," when the topic of religion comes up, will probably think first of the big three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But these three religions do not by any means constitute the whole religious picture of the world. There are millions of people whose religious life is lived out in the thought and practice of revering multiple gods. In this section of the book we have included three papers that deal with religions that involve divine multiplicity. I also discuss a fourth paper on this topic which is included in the volume under the Process Theology section where it also belongs.

I have written a general paper on this topic called "Polytheism" which could not be republished here for a technical reason, but which is another resource on the topic of divine multiplicity for your reference.[1] It is an attempt to explore the concept of polytheism, and the ways in which polytheism might be related to its common contrasts, which are atheism and monotheism. I also try to explore and clarify the various ways in which a person might relate to one or another of these "isms." I suggest that there are several different senses in which a single person might plausibly be said to "be" a polytheist, or a monotheist, or, for that matter, an atheist. And so I say of myself that I am, in one sense, a monotheist, and in another sense I am a polytheist. As you read the other papers, you might ask yourself whether my analysis is helpful in your own thinking about the topic.

Two of the papers in this volume deal with two different African religions, each associated with a particular ethnic community. And each of these authors appeals to a different twentieth century philosopher or theologian to supply an illuminating model for understanding the African religion.

[1] In *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, edited by Thomas D. Senor, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

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Monica A. Coleman's paper, "From Models of God to a Model of Gods," the paper about divine multiplicity included in the Process Theology section, deals with traditional Yoruba religion which, she says, "can be described as the worship of a supreme deity … under various forces or deities…" There are many of the latter "sub-deities," with ten or so being of more importance than the others.

This might be thought of as a combination of monotheism (the supreme deity) and polytheism (the various sub-deities). But I think that Coleman thinks that is not a useful suggestion. She suggests "Communotheism" and a "divine communalism." Perhaps this is something like thinking that there are the sub-deities who "have genders, stories, geographical and natural associations … characteristics, herbs, personalities, and devotees." And then the supreme deity is constituted by this community of sub-deity. She cites several Yoruba writers who appeal to a model like this one, including one who suggests that it might be compared with the Christian idea of the Holy Trinity.

Coleman's own favorite model is one she gets from the work of a twentieth century western philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead was probably not thinking at all about Yoruba religion, but he suggested that God might be thought to have two distinct (but related) natures. Roughly, the primordial nature of God is what God is entirely independently of his interaction with the world. His consequent nature is what he becomes as he receives into himself whatever transpires in the world.

Jawanza Eric Clark's paper, "The Great Ancestor," treats the divine multiplicity of a different ethnic group, the Akan people of Ghana. But his description of Akan divine multiplicity makes it seem very much like that of the Yoruba described by Coleman. In fact, he cites the same African scholar, Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, to whom Coleman refers. And again there is a strong emphasis on the communitarian aspect of the religion. The living Akans, the ancestral Akans who have passed through death but who continue to live on as "the Ancestors," and the Great Ancestor constitute a single, interacting, community.

The Great Ancestor, however, plays a distinctive role. He seems not to be one of the ancestors, even the greatest one. He is, rather, the community. Or perhaps the relation that binds the community together.

Paul Tillich, a twentieth century philosophical theologian, famously said that God is not a being. He is, rather, Being itself, or the Ground of Being. And so Clark refers to "the Akan belief that God is not only relational, but is relation itself."

The second paper in this section is "Nature, Impersonality, and Absence in the Theology of Highest Clarity Daoism," by James Miller. Daoism is one of the major religious traditions of China. Highest Clarity Daoism is a version of Daoism that was prominent for about a 1,000 years of Chinese history, surviving until the fourteenth century. And Miller says that some elements of Highest Clarity Daoism survive in contemporary Chinese Daoism.

According to Miller, the religion involves a number of "perfected persons," human beings who have become celestial gods. So, a view involving divine multiplicity. But one with a strange feature. The transmutation of humans into gods is thought to be, not a supernatural affair, but a thoroughly natural process. And the

resulting gods are not supernatural beings. They are purely natural. There are no supernatural beings or events at all.

There seems to be here an idea that there is a single, comprehensive set of natural laws that govern everything that exists, everything that happens. Living human beings, perfected persons who have become gods, and everything else in the world exist and act in accordance with that set of laws. And so the gods do not act in what we might think of as "personal" ways. They have nothing spontaneous about them, nothing idiosyncratic, nothing unexpected, etc. So Miller suggests that the gods of Higher Clarity Daoism can best be understood as constituting a sort of celestial bureaucracy. Each one does his job strictly in accord with the standard regulations and protocols for that office, and any other god in that position would act in that same way. And so the proper way for living humans to interact with these gods is to approach them as bureaucrats, playing out a completely specified role in the specified way.

This is a surprising way, it seems to me, for a religion to function. But perhaps that is really the story of Highest Clarity Daoism. I wonder if there is any other view of divine multiplicity that has this feature.

In the section's last paper, "Toward a New Model of the Hindu Pantheon," Rita M. Gross directs our attention to a really major polytheistic religion, one with millions of adherents, mostly (but by no means entirely) in India. And in this essay she is concerned primarily with the topic of the gender of the divinities in the pantheon, particularly with the role of the feminine divinities, and the way in which that role has been widely misrepresented by western scholars (for more on gender in the Hindu pantheon, see also Ellen Goldberg's essay in the Ultimate Unity section of this volume).

She argues vigorously that the goddesses, the feminine divinities, are as prominent and important in the Hindu religion as are their masculine counterparts, and she explores the ways this has been obscured in many scholarly accounts of the religion, especially by westerners.

A version of this topic, the gender of divinities, has recently been cropping up in connection with monotheistic religion. The "big three" monotheistic religions I mentioned earlier—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all have a long tradition of thinking, and talking, about God in masculine terms. They commonly use the masculine form of personal pronouns, etc. And there have recently been some vigorous challenges to this practice, at least within Christianity. And so some Christian scholars now say that, of course, God really doesn't have any gender, masculine or feminine. God is a spirit, God has no body, etc. And so there are attempts (sometimes a little awkward) to find replacements for the pronouns, etc.

This problem would seem to be much more difficult to handle in Hinduism. At least if this scholar is correct, the genders really are important, probably irreplaceable, in the Hindu religion. But then there would seem to be a really serious problem about what it is about the divinities that gives them their different genders. To use a little of her own terminology, what makes the gals in the pantheon different from the guys?

Of course, if the divinities are not thought of as being pure spirits, if they are embodied in quasi-human bodies, then this problem might have a ready solution. But is that how we should think of the Hindu pantheon?

And now, two final observations for this introduction. I suggest them as things that might be useful to keep in mind as you read, and think about, the religions discussed here.

The first picks up something I mentioned earlier. And that is that the distinction between the monotheisms and beliefs in divine multiplicity may not be as sharp as it initially seems to be—simply the contrast between one and many. For there are monotheisms that seem to include an element of multiplicity—e.g., Christianity with its puzzling idea of the divine trinity—and views of divine multiplicity—such as the African religions included in this volume—that seem to posit some sort of unity composed of a large number of individual divine entities.

The other observation is that the study of religion involves an important distinction, a distinction between the view of the religion that one gets "from the inside," and the "outsider's view."

Religions characteristically involve some idea of what reality is like, what is the truth about the context in which human life is lived, etc. There are claims about the gods, about impersonal ultimates, about human destiny beyond death, etc.

Religions also characteristically call on people to "give their heart" to the religion, to orient their lives around the realities that the religion claims to recognize, etc. There is a call there, a challenge, a demand to live in a certain way. The people who respond to the call of a particular religion (even if imperfectly) are the insiders of that religion, its adherents and practitioners. But it is also possible to study that religion from the outside, without responding to that call, without making that commitment. And that study might indeed result in a valuable description of the religion.

One can learn a lot about a religion from the outside. But maybe not everything. Or at least not everything about some religions. If a religion really does embody and express some genuine truth, then it may be that such a truth is not readily available, or recognizable, apart from the commitment. Maybe, indeed, there are religions that represent a truth that is not accessible at all without committing one's heart. So the study of religion may be a project rife with surprises, and perhaps it is also not without some real dangers.