

Polytheism as Methodology in the Study of Religions

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Abstract: Contingent historical factors have resulted in a peculiar disciplinary organization of the Western academy such that ‘Theology’, which on the analogy of other similarly-named disciplines such as ‘Biology’ one might expect to study the diverse manifestations of divinity in general, instead practices what the article terms a *methodological monotheism*, presupposing that *theos* is necessarily extensionally singular. The study *qua* Gods of the Gods of traditions with many Gods, or of any God not conceived as identical with the singular supreme being methodologically posited as the one God of all peoples, having been excluded thus from Theology, the study of these objects has been instead relegated to the field of Religious Studies, which, as an anthropological discipline, is assumed to practice *methodological atheism* and to study religions purely as forms of historical human behavior. The article proposes a resolution of this dilemma through the adoption of a methodology based on the characteristic polycentricity of polytheism in a comprehensively reconceived and non-reductionist discipline of Theology.

Keywords: polytheism; polycentricity; theology; religious studies

The historical circumstances through which the scientific study of religion has emerged in the West have perhaps resulted in a greater degree of disciplinary and institutional confusion and instability than in any other social or natural scientific field. There is a discipline, Theology, which on the model of every other discipline similarly named, should have for its domain of objects a *class* of entities, namely Gods. The *theos* in ‘Theology’ has no more *a priori* claim to singularity than the *bios* in ‘Biology’ asserts that all life is a single organism. And yet ‘Theology’ as it exists in the contemporary academy is essentially dedicated to the proposition that there is only one God. Whatever methodological distinctions exist within it have never touched this fundamental disciplinary organization. Even those efforts toward so-called “comparative theology” as practiced by Francis Clooney, Perry Schmidt-Leukel and others, which are for the most part explicitly oriented to helping Christians to cope with the existence of non-Christian religions, with the admittedly salutary aim of convincing more Christians to abandon the goal of annihilating other religions by searching in other religions for propositions consistent with Christianity, have ultimately as their goal discerning a singular ‘God’ who would be the common object of all religions. As such, we may say without much danger of contradiction that *methodological monotheism* is the organizing principle of ‘Theology’ as we know it in the modern Western academy. (Were I to be proven wrong by a theologian forswearing the establishment of global monotheism as a goal, none should be happier than myself.)

It should not be said, however, that Theology has created and maintained this state of affairs on its own and in a vacuum. The social sciences have by no means offered, for their part, a methodology that could take up without loss or distortion the study of the domain of objects naturally denoted by the term ‘Gods’. As the result of an historical development which has rendered them predominantly positivistic, historicist and materialist, the social sciences as presently constituted offer only an engagement with religious phenomena as actions and attitudes of historical human subjects. They are the ‘human sciences’, having been granted in their charter no privileges that might infringe upon the territory accorded already and in perpetuity to Theology as it has been known since the consolidation of Christian hegemony. These human sciences must look for their positive ground in the natural sciences, maintaining scrupulously a distance from

Theology such that whether Theology should continue on as it has been, or simply disappear, leaving behind in its place nothing but a pious void, these human and social sciences, in their humility, should be unaffected.

Under the purview of the all-too-human sciences, therefore, a place has been made in the form of 'Religious Studies' for the study of all those religious traditions which, by their very inclusion *exclusively* under this rubric, are pre-designated as subaltern, because the *objects* of these faiths are accorded no intelligibility save as modifications of the *subjects* participating in these traditions. One might look, at least, to phenomenology to affirm the minimal significance of these objects in their intentionality, but would do so in vain. The so-called 'theological turn' in phenomenology has shown no interest in transgressing the disciplinary boundaries of Theology as received by it. On the contrary, the 'theological turn' has betrayed phenomenology insofar as it has shown no openness to theological phenomena simply and as such, having instead sought rather a fresh appropriation of philosophy on behalf of Christian theology, phenomenology having been chosen for this task, it would seem, purely for its intellectual currency and its plasticity.¹ The philosophical question of whether the fundamental structures of phenomenology would have proven problematic as a method applied to those other traditions, a question not without intrinsic interest, has therefore had no occasion even to arise as a practical matter.

Left therefore under the supervision of the human sciences, whose *methodological atheism* has for the most part functioned as the most loyal opposition to the methodological monotheism of modern academic Theology, how have the traditions by their nature furthest from the present normative structure of academic Theology fared? The two examples I wish to discuss are the so-called 'modern Pagan' or 'Neopagan' traditions as studied for some forty years under the Religious Studies category of 'Pagan Studies', itself a branch of the study of 'New Religious Movements', a small and quite new body of traditions, on the one hand, and a tradition, on the other, that is both massive and paradigmatically ancient, namely Hinduism.

Pagan Studies came under a withering disciplinary critique from within the field of Religious Studies in 2012, with the publication of Markus

¹ See the incisive critique in Dominique Janicaud's introductory essay to Janicaud (2000).

Davidsen's "What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?". Pagan Studies features in Davidsen's article as an exemplar of every unfortunate tendency in Religious Studies which can be attributed to the so-called 'religionist' position in the academic study of religion. 'Religionism' is used to denote a solicitous 'caretaker' or 'curatorial' attitude toward a religious tradition by scholars failing to assume the properly scientific attitude by virtue of their tainted status as 'insiders', or participants in the religious traditions they are tasked with studying. Accordingly, those with the best intentions within Pagan Studies have dutifully put forward recommendations for preserving its institutional viability,² through measures that would purge it of 'insider' viewpoints and attempt to place the domain of its objects of study upon a less 'religionist' footing. 'Insiders' would not be problematic in such a science as long as they conceived the objects of its regard in the manner of 'outsiders'. And by the same token, were there a place to study these objects according to any other mode of regard, then there would be little room to argue over the right of the human sciences to exclude from their consideration any entities except insofar as they are given in the strictly 'human' manner.

Of course, one might ask, if one were to practice religion in the academy, how will the academy differ from the temple? This is the essence of the charge of 'religionism', inasmuch as 'religionism' is in fact simply *theism*, that is, the positing of divinity, of deities, as such. But this positing need not be done in the same fashion as the active worshiper. Indeed, it is inherent in *polytheism* that one recognizes other Gods than the one whom one worships at this or any given moment, even if the God in the devotional moment is all-sufficient and all-sufficing. For the polytheist it is a question, not of a multiplicity born of lack and limitation, but of a superabundant existential positivity.

Accordingly, the God as posited in the polytheist's *peripheral regard*, as opposed to the God posited at the center of the devotional act, is not posited in the 'secular' regard of the anthropologist. Rather, the very possibility of this intelligible positing of the God distinct either from the devotional regard, or from the anthropological gaze, provides, as it did already for the Platonists of late antiquity, the ontological ground for a theology which is scientific without being either atheistic or monotheistic.³

² See, most recently, White (2016).

³ See, e.g., Butler (2005) and (2008).

The *peripheral regard* makes it possible to distinguish by internal rather than external contrast the *devotional regard* within polytheism. The devotional regard of the polytheist, in which the God of the moment can loom so large as to efface all others, at least temporarily, has been confusingly labeled by scholars of religion by a welter of terms such as ‘henotheism’, ‘monolatry’, ‘kathenotheism’, usually within an implicit context of religious evolutionism in which they would offer an intuition of monotheism, if not a transition to it. At the same time, the peripheral regard is *internal* to the polytheistic devotional regard, through the implied presence of the other Gods, in whatever kinds of relationship are articulated with the God who is the focal point, but also in their unthematized presence within a shared pantheon, as well as in the silent Gods of other peoples who may, nevertheless, be received in some fashion or other.

These layers of peripheral regard implicit in polytheisms also provide the platform for the immanent emergence of autonomous intelligible causes within the devotional moment, thus overcoming the duality of sacred and secular in a fashion that grounds rationalities that can, when needed, be critical of theism itself. That is to say, ideas as well as other Gods lie in the peripheral regard of polytheistic devotion.

The notion of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’ deployed here derives from the theory of *polycentric polytheism*. It has been argued⁴ that polycentricity is an essential feature of polytheism as such, in opposition to authors who seek to separate the phenomena comprising it from polytheism, typically under the rubric of some term such as ‘henotheism’. Max Müller’s conception of henotheism, for example, explicitly posits itself as representing the “monotheism that precedes polytheism ... a primitive intuition of God, an implicit form of monotheism, ‘which formed the birthright of every human being’ ... it supplied ‘the subject or the predicate in all religions of the world’ ... ‘the consciousness that all deities are but different names of one and the same godhead’.”⁵

The stance typical of polycentricity is that of a “situational, momentary, short-lived omnipotence” of the God in the moment of worship. This quality of the God qua God entails that “no god is restricted to only one particular service,” but rather that “every god can be hailed as omnipotent in a hymn devoted to his or her divinity,”

4 Butler (2008), (2016).

5 van den Bosch (2002), pp. 347-9.

whether this God be “a great *soter*-god” or “the unpretentious hero round the corner.”⁶ Similarly, Erik Hornung, describing ancient Egyptian devotional *praxis*, explains that “[i]n the act of worship, whether it be in prayer, hymn of praise, or ethical attachment and obligation, the Egyptians single out one god, who for them at that moment signifies everything.”⁷

A developmentalist prejudice common in modern scholarship treats such phenomena as transitional to monotheism, or at any rate as somehow essentially distinct from polytheism as such. But to separate off from polytheism precisely that moment in which an individual deity is the center of devotion effectively determines polytheism as a warehouse of Gods not in use at the moment, that is, in the language of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’, polytheism would thus be tacitly defined as that worship in which all Gods are peripheral. The burden, so to speak, of having many Gods is in this fashion shifted from the theological and onto the sociopolitical plane, to mere competition between cults and communities.

The modern scholar’s gaze thus sunders the phenomenon of polytheistic religion into a merely empirical, contingent, historical multiplicity that expresses one true God. The multiplicity of Gods, if it cannot be conceived as an *ideal* multiplicity, can only be an *accidental* one. And implicit in the scholar’s conceptual moves here is the notion that any *ideal multiplicity* of Gods would have to be precisely the stereotype of a polytheism in which a God is by definition restricted to only one particular service, and this ‘service’ be taken as what a God in the polytheistic sense just *is*.⁸ This is the approach taken by structuralists such as Vernant, criticized by Versnel, among others, for just this distortion inherent in their approach to Hellenic religion.⁹ But it is also seen as the essence of polytheism by Egyptologist Jan Assmann, who coins the term ‘cosmotheism’ to refer to the division of labor within a cosmic system that he thinks to be the virtue of polytheism, once it is recognized for what it is and the contingent multiplicity of pantheons “translated” away.¹⁰ The residuum of the intellectualizing ‘translation’ process is about a baker’s dozen of

6 Versnel (2011), pp. 434-5.

7 Hornung (1982), p. 236.

8 On the limitations of this ‘division of labor’ model of polytheism, see further Butler (2019).

9 Versnel (2011), pp. 26-36, and similarly Pirenne-Delforge & Pironti (2015).

10 See, e.g., Assmann (2008).

idealized cosmic functions or potencies, while all else—the multiplicity of pantheons, and the lifeworlds forming around them—is treated as merely phenomenal, contingent multiplicity. ‘Cosmotheism’, while its reduction is not to a single God, but rather to the eidetic unity of the formalized cosmos, functions similarly enough to monotheism to be regarded ultimately as a trivial variant.

But what if a notion of ideal multiplicity were thinkable in which the manifold was constituted, not by descriptions of functions but rather by *proper-named, unique individuals*? What if this is indeed the natural attitude of the polytheist, namely that the Gods are superlative individuals? Indeed, it would seem difficult to argue that something like this is not essential to polytheism. What if the fact that an individual worshiper appeals to this or that particular divinity is not a contingent matter, not because there is only one deity whose particular ‘function’ is required in the particular situation, but because *there really are many such divine individuals*? What if these individuals are not such as to vanish into one if their activities should happen to overlap? What if the worshiper in the devotional moment centered upon this peculiar God, has not inexplicably forgotten about this multiplicity, nor dropped some mere pretense that there are a multiplicity of Gods, but is simply engaging with one of those Gods in just the fashion that one, as it so happens, does, namely as one unique individual to another?

In the two models of polytheism that we see here, then, the one polycentric, and the other operating according to a division of labor—such as we see primarily expressed in the poets, and which is overvalued by modern scholars excessively dependent upon literary sources—we see also two models for the intellectual inquiry into any religion as such. In the former, where every God is understood as the potential devotional center and adequate in principle to all things and all relations, we see the model of a universalized discipline of Theology which would be faithful, without loss or subordination, to the radical positing of each divinity by ‘insiders’, including those of the monotheistic faiths. In the latter, by contrast, where every God is posited at the periphery, according to a function more or less closely defined, we see the model of the positivistic investigation of religions as in the modern discipline of Religious Studies. And, as we have seen, the scholarly fiction of a polytheism consisting solely of peripheral regard leads by an immanent logic to the reduction of the multiplicity of Gods to an historical accident, or at any rate, to the sum of a great

number of historical accidents. As such, we may say that polytheism, conceived in this fashion, is already the paradigm of the methodology applied in the study of religions by the academic disciplines of theology and of religious studies as they are presently constituted in their methodological monotheism and atheism respectively; but that recognizing the inherent *polycentricity* of polytheism promises, by contrast, the possibility of a wholly different basis on which this study might proceed.

With this glimpse of the interdisciplinary potential embodied by methodological polytheism, we may shed further light on the dilemma of 'Pagan Studies', and its significance for considerations far broader than the study of religion *per se*. The case of Pagan Studies is diagnostic of the condition of Religious Studies relative to Theology because the question of theism is posed *directly* by traditions that have been historically sundered. For this is the essential problem of Pagan Studies, as recognized by its critics and its defenders alike. A faith that has been exterminated in historical time and then revived has only the intentions of its devotees to link it to its past; and this is a decidedly one-sided relation if it can only be conceived in a historicist manner. Only if the reality of the objects posited in devotion is methodologically granted can such a tradition be constituted as a unity. Otherwise, it is a question either of two traditions, between which only similarity and never identity can be posited, or of a tradition and an interpretation or appropriation of it, categorically distinct from it and something less than a tradition in its own right.

This issue has been posed acutely in the field of Pagan Studies due to the increasing profile within the 'Pagan' community of theocentric polytheisms focused on the revival of the cult of Gods of antiquity, as opposed to more obviously modern and synthetic forms of 'Neopaganism' with roots primarily in the Romantic movement of the 19th century. Such tendencies within modern Paganism were for a time distinguished as 'reconstructionist', but this term has largely given way to the simple designation 'polytheist', in recognition of the eclectic diversity of methodologies within these cults, which are by no means engaged in a meticulous 'reconstruction' of ancient practices, but rather seem akin to an assortment of *bhakti* or devotional cults to diverse ancient deities and pantheons. The explicitly theistic designation serves as well to distinguish these cults from Neopagan 'nature religions' which increasingly self-consciously adopt either a

Romantic pantheistic posture, or a psychologistic orientation articulated through Jungian concepts, both of which distance themselves from ontological commitment to Gods as such. The theocentric tendencies within Paganism hence break the frame of the modern Pagan movement which arguably provided the social conditions for their historical emergence, in order to posit themselves as being in continuity with ancient religions simply through the identity of their objects of devotion, modern 'Kemetics' worshipping the Gods of the ancient Egyptians, modern 'Hellenics' the Gods of the ancient Greeks, modern 'Heathens' the Gods of the ancient Norse, and so forth.¹¹ Nor do the contours of national pantheons provide an absolute orientation for polytheistic devotion, because eclectic, syncretic and idiosyncratic forms of worship are common in this community. Rather, the pantheon structures implicitly receive value from being the vessels of the historical agency of living, individual Gods.

The opposite in certain respects of Pagan Studies, which studies through the anthropological method a small, recent and disparate collection of faiths generally sundered from their ancient antecedents, is Dharma Studies, which has rejected positivist methods in the study of a massive tradition of unbroken antiquity. The sectarian strength of Hinduism is sufficient in the modern world to have provided the opportunity for the novel discipline of 'Dharma Studies' to directly challenge the institutional dichotomy between Theology's methodological monotheism and Religious Studies' methodological atheism. Dharma Studies is, in effect, in relation to Hinduism, what academic Theology is in relation to Christianity, that is, an academic discipline taking as its objects of study the objects of worship in a religious tradition, in just the way They are posited within that tradition, insofar as They impart unity to that tradition, rather than reducing the tradition to material traces receiving whatever integrity they have from historical subjects. It is a question, in other words, of according an objective, as opposed to a merely subjective and historical unity to the tradition.

The question at stake, I would argue, is what sort of universalization is to be demanded of traditions in order that they be articulated in the

¹¹ On the history of the Pagan movement as such, the standard work is Adler (2006); further useful intellectual background is provided by Clifton (2006). Recent theocentric developments have been treated in particular by Wilkerson (2014).

universal and cosmopolitan medium of academic discourse. Does such a discourse, by its very nature, demand that traditions have, as their *telos*, the formation as it were of a *single substance* in order to participate? Here a recent philosophical debate is instructive. The issue concerns whether philosophy can or should become ‘multicultural’, and encompass at a minimum the traditions of academic philosophy that have existed in India and China at least as long as academic philosophy in the West, and perhaps more broadly conceived wisdom traditions from around the world. Critics have charged that even the stricter standard construes philosophy too broadly.¹² It is not difficult to see how the degree of homogeneity posited as essential for philosophy by the critics of a multicultural approach exerts a pressure, not only to exclude non-Western thought from being considered philosophy, but to exclude even deviant readings of canonical Western philosophers that do not uphold the integrity of the ‘tradition’ as historically given. The result of this pressure is not to forge a universal philosophy, but to historicize Western philosophy, depriving it of its own universal potential such that, as was sardonically suggested in the essay which started the debate, philosophy departments would rename themselves “Department of European and American Philosophy”.

The false universality of a reified philosophical consensus thus has as its obverse the historicizing reduction of Philosophy and philosophical traditions to their empirical traces, just as the methodological monotheism of Theology as presently construed has as its obverse the positivistic science of Religious Studies. Theology can remain vital through a methodological polytheism grounded in the reciprocity of central and peripheral religious regard inherent to polytheism, which is distinct from the reduction to a common substance in the translational ‘cosmotheism’ identified by Assmann as polytheism’s pantheistic *telos*. The peripheral regard of the polytheist conserves the potential for Gods not at the center in the devotional moment to be themselves the center at another time, while not constraining the infinitude of the God as worshiped. Thus it does not force all the Gods to the periphery, nor insist upon one center.

For there are two ways of insisting upon a single center: either dogmatically, from within a tradition, or as an ideal center imposed

¹² The debate was occasioned by Garfield and Van Norden (2016); particularly critical was Tampio (2016). Further response to Tampio has appeared on the Indian Philosophy Blog, e.g., Mills (2016), Lele (2016).

from above, as we find in academic treatments. The very existence of polytheistic cultural fields, however, indicates that the former, when it occurs, is not the last word, unless the existence of polytheism, again, be regarded as essentially contingent. But indeed, we see that *bhakti* cults, for example, maintain the peripheral regard for many other Gods than the *īśvara*, the God they have chosen, or, better, who has chosen them, and not merely as a concession to popular practice.¹³ It seems rather to be the academic gaze upon such cults which presumes that a single divinity is differentiated into this or that devotional object, either as a matter of merely human difference, or as ‘aspects’ of some higher being.

Polytheism properly understood is not about a multiplicity of finite gods, but about a multiplicity of *infinite Gods*. If this way does not lie open for Theology, then only the proliferation of ‘regional’ disciplines on the model of Dharma Studies will restore intellectual equilibrium, just as in the absence of a multicultural Philosophy the study of Chinese philosophy, for example, might be left to the ‘Confucius Institutes’ funded by the Chinese government; but this will not solve the problem of mediation among these traditions and discourses. The possibility of a mediation neither reductive nor totalizing will continue to pose itself within and between these religious and philosophical traditions, for whomever have the ears to hear it.

In conclusion, the institutional dilemma posed by the methodological atheism of Religious Studies and the methodological monotheism of Theology in the contemporary academy demands a bold rethinking of the very significance of the study of religions if the discipline is not to stagnate irreversibly. The standpoint of *methodological polytheism* alone, I have argued, is in a position to establish the intelligibility of the objects of religious regard in a manner that neither annexes scientific inquiry to any particular apologetic mission, nor reduces the objects of this regard to mere patterns of human behavior. In this fashion may be restored one side of the classical vision of metaphysics, namely that of a science of plural divine objects (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 983a8) *qua* divine.¹⁴

13 See, e.g., the way that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, devoted to Viṣṇu, extols Śiva (IV.6.42-43) and other praises of Śiva in Vaiṣṇava contexts cited by Bryant (2017), pp. 157-8, while on the other hand, the account of Śiva’s creation of Viṣṇu in the *Śiva Purāṇa* (6.33-43), and other texts cited by Bryant, *op cit*, n. 127, pp. 590-1, though Bryant dismisses the multiplicity of *īśvaras* as mere “accidents of familial or regional culture” (ibid, p. 149).

14 Affirming the reality of the objects of religious regard, just as They are affirmed in the

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traditions themselves, should by no means be understood to liquidate the category of 'religions' as such as objects of study, whether in the manner that they posit themselves and are posited by their Gods as vessels of theophany, or as historical objects, in the different disciplines for which these perspectives are constitutive.

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