

The Spiritual Scientist

An ezine for those who think!

User-friendly Spirituality



Question: In the Vedic tradition, why do people worship thousands of gods? Isn't it obvious that there is only one God?

Answer: Yes, it is.

That there is only one supreme God is so obvious a truth that if the profoundly wise Vedic texts seem to be teaching something else, then we should re-evaluate our understanding of those teachings before passing judgment on those teachings.

The oneness of the absolute truth is clearly stated in the famous Vedic aphorism: "There is only one Truth; the wise know that Truth by various names." (Rigveda 1:164:46)

The main cause of misunderstanding is the imposition of simplistic Western or Semitic notions on the complex Vedic theology. Those bound to Semitic notions of the divine think that monotheism and polytheism are the only possible options: if people don't worship the one Supreme God as taught in the Semitic tradition, then they must be like the primitive Greek and Roman polytheists, so the theologically naïve think.

But the Vedic teachings are much more subtle and profound, as is illustrated in a famous dialogue in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (III, IX). Therein, the great sage Yajnavalkya is asked the critical question: *Kati devaḥ*, how many devas are there? His answer progresses from three thousand and three, three hundred and three, thirty-three, six, three, two and finally One – and he answers as if there is no contradiction inherent in the various answers.

The Bhagavad-gita helps us unravel this mystery by identifying that one supreme God to be Krishna (Gita 7.7.). Gita wisdom also helps us understand that these "many gods" are simply various manifestations of Krishna's merciful descent: some manifestations exhibit his full power and identity, and, by way of multifarious gradations, others manifest his power partially. When these gods are empowered by Krishna to perform some extraordinary service for protecting the universal order, then they may be occasionally glorified as the Supreme. But what is supreme is not that particular personality, but the potency of the Supreme God manifesting through that personality.

The various gods are not competitors of the Supreme, but are his assistants, as the cabinet ministers are the assistants of the Prime Minister.



To help the uninitiated navigate the complex Vedic theology, Srila Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON, used precise terminology while translating the words *devas* (the many gods) and *bhagavan* (the Supreme God, Sri Krishna). As the *devas* partake of some of the attributes and powers of God, he used the word demigods to designate them. And as the supreme being is the head of all the "gods" and is personal, or supra-personal, to be more precise, he used the word "Supreme Personality of Godhead."

