

The Spiritual Scientist

An ezine for those who think!

Monotheistic but multi-level

Question: When God is one, why does the Vedic tradition teach polytheism – the worship of many gods?

Answer: The Vedic tradition is conclusively monotheistic. It seems polytheistic because it doesn't teach only exclusive monotheism as in the Abrahamic traditions, but also teaches progressive, multi-level monotheism.

The Biblical tradition tells the story of the Prodigal Son, wherein a rebellious prince leaves his father's home and kingdom, squanders away his inheritance, suffers ignominy and returns home to be welcomed with open arms by his royal father. This story, while illustrating how the soul, due to rebelliousness, leaves the Divine Father, suffers and eventually returns back, underscores God's immense love in readily re-accepting the soul.



The Vedic tradition carries this thread forward: God even arranges for the soul's care and gradual return during his self-imposed exile. Carrying the Prodigal Son analogy further, suppose the son is fed up with serving an exploitative boss outside his father's kingdom, but is not yet ready to return back to his father's palace. The father arranges for one of his ministers to offer him a job. When the son accepts this offer, he comes back to his father's kingdom and thus his father's indirect care. Eventually, when the son fully recovers his good sense, he returns to the eager, joyful embrace of his father.

The many gods of the Vedic tradition are like the minister of the above story. These gods (or demigods to be more precise) are administrative assistants of the Supreme God, who double as temporary, transitional surrogate objects of worship for the souls who have left God's loving service, but are not yet ready to return to that divine service. Lord Krishna describes this extraordinary system in the Bhagavad-gita (7.20-23): "Those whose intelligence has been stolen by material desires surrender unto demigods and follow the particular rules and regulations of worship according to their own natures. As soon as one desires to worship some demigod, I make his faith steady so that he can devote himself to that particular deity. Endowed with such a faith, he endeavors to worship a particular demigod and obtains his desires. But in actuality these benefits are bestowed by me alone."

In contrast to the Abrahamic tradition which depicts a "jealous" God who condemns the worship of other gods as infidelity, the Gita reveals God to be magnanimous, for he facilitates the worship of other gods as a transitional arrangement for the gradual elevation of estranged souls. Of course, for souls who are ready to rise from the transition to the summit, the Gita reveals the ultimate object of worship, the Supreme God, glorifying him with epithets strikingly similar to those used for Yahweh in the Bible and Allah in the Koran.



Thus the Vedic tradition teaches not naïve polytheism, but profound, multi-level monotheism. ☪