

Polytheism as Methodology in the Study of Religions*

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ABSTRACT: Historical contingencies 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 a methodological monotheism, presupposing not only that ‘theos’ is necessarily existentially singular, but also that it denotes primarily if not exclusively the Christian’s God. The study of the Gods of other faiths qua Gods is taxonomically excluded, and the study of these religions instead is 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. Two recent developments shed new light on this problematic. One is the emergence under the rubric of Religious Studies of the field of ‘Pagan Studies’, which has been criticized for insufficient fidelity to the ideals of anthropology by virtue of positing a trans-historical integrity of historically sundered and revived faiths directed at the same deities, and thus implicitly positing the existence of those deities. Another is the emergence of Dharma Studies, dedicated to the study of Indian religious traditions beyond the historicizing reductions of anthropological methodology, which has been criticized for its ‘insider’ perspective, or as embodying a proselytizing methodology, albeit these criticisms may not even be mutually consistent. Both of these new academic disciplines are born out of the dilemma in the Western academy between the methodological monotheism of Theology and the methodological atheism of Religious Studies. The paper proposes resolving this dilemma through a turn toward methodological polytheism, either through a comprehensively reconceived Theology, or through a proliferation of object-oriented regional studies on the model of Dharma 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

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dedicated not only to the proposition that there is only one God, but in practice dedicates itself almost wholly to the exegesis of the texts of a single dominant creed. Whatever methodological distinctions exist within it have never touched this fundamental disciplinary organization. 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.

It should not be said, however, that Theology has created and maintained this state of affairs on its own and in a vacuum. Rather, it has arisen in the context of a wider state of affairs in the social sciences more broadly. For 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 one would look in vain. For 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, but instead has sought merely 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 imaginable to the methodological monotheism of modern academic Theology, how have the traditions by their nature furthest from accommodating the present regime in 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 has come under a withering disciplinary critique from within the field of Religious Studies since 2012, with the publication of Markus Davidsen’s ‘What is Wrong

¹ See Dominique Janicaud’s incisive critique in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*: *The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

with Pagan Studies?” (*Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24 (2012), 183-199), in which Pagan Studies features 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, namely 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’, participants of 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. One could imagine the discipline of mathematics laboring under a similar prohibition upon the mathematical object as a thing-in-itself, such that its scientific legitimacy lay in treating it as a psychological modification of mathematizing subjects, or as a historical practice of certain mathematizing sects.

Of course, one might say that if one were to practice religion in the academy as one practices mathematics, then 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

² See, most recently, Ethan Doyle White’s “Theoretical, Terminological, and Taxonomic Trouble in the Academic Study of Contemporary Paganism: A Case for Reform,” *The Pomegranate* 18.1 (2016), 31-59.

fashion as the active worshiper. Indeed, it is inherent in *polytheism* that one recognizes other Gods than the one whom worships at this or any given moment, even if the God in the devotional moment is all-sufficient and all-sufficing. It is a matter, for the polytheist, 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. The peripheral regard makes it possible to distinguish, by internal rather than external contrast, the devotional regard, which 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, insofar as it is internal to the devotional regard, provides 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.

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 within the arrow of historical time, a relation of the contemporary to the past which exists purely in and for the present day. Only if the reality of the objects of 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 psychologic 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, to posit themselves as being in continuity with ancient religions 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.³ 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 an opportunity in the case of Dharma Studies to directly challenge the institutional dichotomy between Theology’s methodological monotheism and Religious Studies’ methodological atheism. A philanthropic organization’s first attempt to endow posts in Dharma Studies at the University of California, Irvine, was rebuffed,⁴ but it ultimately succeeded in seeing such a program established at the Graduate Theological Union. In addition, the *International Journal of Dharma Studies* has existed since 2013 as a venue for publication within this theoretical focus. Dharma Studies is, in effect, in relation to Hinduism, exactly what academic Theology is, in relation to Christianity,

³ On the history of the Pagan movement as such, the standard work is Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, 4th revised edition (New York: Penguin, 2006); further useful intellectual background is provided by Chas S. Clifton, *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2006). Recent theocentric developments have been treated in particular by W. D. Wilkerson, *Walking With the Gods: Modern People Talk About Deities, Faith, and Recreating Ancient Traditions* (Tulsa: Connaissance Sankofa Media, 2014).

⁴ Teri Sforza, “OC Watchdog: UCI students, faculty object to Hindu foundation’s donation,” *Orange County Register*, 12/16/15 (<http://www.ocregister.com/articles/foundation-696413-uci-dharma.html>, accessed 9/28/16).

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 universal and cosmopolitan medium of academic discourse? Does such a discourse, by its very nature, demand of such traditions that they have, as their *telos*, the formation 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.⁵ 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

⁵ The debate was occasioned by Jay L. Garfield and Bryan W. Van Norden, “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is,” *New York Times*, 5/11/16; particularly critical was Nicholas Tampio, “Not All Things Wise and Good are Philosophy,” *Aeon* 9/13/16 (<https://aeon.co/ideas/not-all-things-wise-and-good-are-philosophy>, accessed 9/28/16). The relevant texts, including further exchanges with Tampio, has been captured by Van Norden in a Storify page (<https://storify.com/BryanVanNorden/getting-started>, accessed 9/28/16). Further response to Tampio has appeared on the Indian Philosophy Blog: Ethan Mills, “Where is Philosophy?: A Response to Nicholas Tampio,” 9/20/16 (<http://indianphilosophyblog.org/2016/09/20/where-is-philosophy-a-response-to-nicholas-tampio/>, accessed 9/29/16); Amod Lele, “On al-Ghazālī and the cultural specificity of philosophy,” 9/25/16 (<http://indianphilosophyblog.org/2016/09/25/on-al-ghazali-and-the-cultural-specificity-of-philosophy/>, accessed 9/29/16).

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”. This outcome, if it came to pass, would in fact be the result, not of a vicious ethnocentrism of philosophers, but rather of their inability to confront the methodological reduction of philosophy to philology.

The false universality of a reified philosophical consensus 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 disposition of peripheral religious regard inherent to polytheism, which is distinct from the reduction to a common substance in the translational ‘cosmotheism’ identified by Jan Assmann as the pantheistic *telos* of polytheism.⁶ 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. 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

⁶ See, e.g., “Cosmotheism as a Form of Knowledge,” chap. 15 in *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, trans. Andrew Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Chinese-government-funded 'Confucius Institutes'; 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.