

## **Polytheism: The Inevitable Choice for a Sustainable Future**

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Polytheisms may well be the world's most undervalued cultural resource. My life's work is the study of polytheism and of polytheistic traditions, whether those existing in the world today in unbroken continuity, or those being revived today, after interruptions of centuries. I am also an advocate for polytheism and for these traditions, and on behalf of the human rights issues implicated in the status of polytheist traditions in the world. Today I would like to speak to you about why I believe that recognizing, appreciating, preserving, and even reviving and promoting polytheism and polytheist traditions is the key to sustaining everything else that we value.

It is evidently a trait of humans everywhere and at every time in history to come into contact with beings who live on a scale far wider than ourselves, and who can be contacted again and again over the course of generations without end. The common trait of polytheist traditions is to sustain and preserve the relationship with such beings, and to accumulate them, so that as we encounter these traditions, we find that they hold religious regard for many such beings, and not just one. They may have ideas about an ultimate reality, or regarding some hierarchy among these beings, but whatever these ideas may be, they have

not prevented these traditions from accumulating a rich body of relationships with a number of Gods and spirits, a number, moreover, which typically grows over time, even as some divinities may become the focus of more intense regard and others become more peripheral.

Polytheisms are, I would argue, the most effective means of cultural preservation known to us. We can take linguistic diversity as an index. If we look at a map of linguistic diversity, we shall see that the places with the highest linguistic diversity either are still majority polytheist, or were majority polytheist as recently as a century or so ago. This is true, moreover, regardless of their political organization, whether stateless or highly centralized. Even the existence of a *lingua franca*, a common language of cultural exchange in a region, does not exert the same pressure upon linguistic diversity in a polytheist context.

Historically, the introduction of Greek throughout the Middle East in the wake of Alexander's conquests, for example, did not reduce linguistic diversity, and hence we find that, for example, there were those who could still read cuneiform in Late Antiquity, and it was only when the region fell under monotheist hegemony that this diversity began to succumb. The preservation of linguistic diversity alongside common languages of exchange can also be observed in India and throughout its historic sphere of influence, in China and in Nigeria, polytheist civilizations either now or historically.

The reason for this correlation between polytheism and linguistic diversity is simple: for every indigenous polytheist tradition, its language, like the names of its Gods, is sacred. Thus, for example, the effort to eradicate Native American religions in the United States was directly tied to eradicating Native American languages, knowing that the one would follow from the other, despite the fact that missionaries had been industriously translating Christian scriptures into Native languages for centuries. Something is always lost in translation, which is why languages under pressure will be retained in ritual or liturgical use long after they have ceased to be spoken in mundane settings. One might think that the general sacredness of a language, without recognition of the concrete, living agencies of Gods and spirits, would be sufficient to preserve a language, but I would wager that the existence of such transcendent speakers turns out to be crucial. Where Gods and spirits of the indigenous tradition are still invoked, fresh sacred utterances and fresh interpretations of prior ones allow the tradition and the language itself to adapt while maintaining continuity with the past. Polytheisms are not static, each one is a living spiritual ecosystem with their Gods at its core. They do not just preserve what was accumulated in the past. Their Gods are present and speaking to them every day. If we remove the Gods, only a husk is left, and no amount of effort will preserve cultural diversity in the face of the homogenizing pressures of modern life and global capitalism.

According to every reasonable historical account, polytheism was the default religious orientation of the entire world until the spread of Christianity less than two millennia ago. (Judaism not having been a proselytizing religion, its significance to the spread of monotheism is predominantly in its appropriation by Christianity.) For more than 1,500 years, however, monotheist traditions explicitly seeking the elimination of polytheism and polytheist traditions have held sway over much of the world, more all the time, and now exert a hegemonic cultural influence even in those few places where indigenous polytheist traditions are numerically dominant. Colonialism had at its core the goal of delivering the world into the worship of a single God, which was its spiritual motivation and provided the moral justification for its crimes. Both Christianity and Islam explicitly and vigorously denounce polytheism in their sacred texts, and have sought to eradicate existing polytheisms wherever they have encountered them, purely because they worshiped many Gods, and different Gods than their own. Moreover, we see that there are powerful forces at work in both religions to eliminate any vestiges of polytheism within them, as in the pressure exerted by evangelical Christianity against the older Catholic and Anglican churches which were the first wave of the elimination of indigenous polytheisms in the lands conquered by Europeans. As a result, many traditions which are objectively polytheist are understandably deeply reluctant to identify themselves as such. I seek to remove the

stigma attached to the very notion of polytheism, and the pressure that stigma exerts on living indigenous traditions, as well as those traditions being revived after centuries of disruption, to describe themselves in monotheizing terms in order to avoid being judged as primitive or superseded. It is my hope, moreover, that seeing the common threats and distorted representations from which they all suffer will help to inspire these traditions to form effective alliances among one another.

The concept of polytheism, I believe, is crucial to any effort at solidarity among the traditions which have been targeted by the globally hegemonic monotheisms, not only because it recognizes the ground of their common oppression, rather than obscuring the power relations existing among different kinds of religions through the idea that they are all 'paths to the same summit', but also because it does not presuppose that all traditions worship the same God, which privileges those very religions that launched the long historical struggle to enforce the idea that there is only one God, and will retrospectively justify them. Polytheism, moreover, leaves aside questions of internal theological self-definition, while honoring the *prima facie* distinction of names and identities of the divinities that these traditions have maintained, in many cases, since before the dawn of recorded history, which should be sufficient to indicate their importance, without any further theological argumentation.

Polytheistic civilizations have, of course, come into conflict with one another, and their religions have been drawn into those conflicts to some degree, but few would dispute that polytheistic civilizations have not, generally speaking, come into conflict with one another *because of religion*. Why is this? What is it about having many Gods that also makes a tradition more tolerant of others having different Gods than themselves? First, such civilizations have obviously dealt with internal differences and tensions within their own religious field already. In a living polytheism, we often find people with diametrically opposed attitudes towards certain deities, and radically divergent notions about their roles in the cosmos. Even where certain Gods are sites of social tension, there is an underlying recognition that nevertheless They belong in the picture, as long as they uphold the system itself, which They do, simply inasmuch as They recognize the existence of the other Gods. In this way, polytheism embodies the basic principle that a society can only expect as much integrity as the divergent perspectives that its worldview can integrate, and there is no worldview which does this more effectively than polytheism. Polytheism is essentially maximal diversity in maximal solidarity. Living polytheist traditions host countless Gods, to each of whom belongs, not merely some narrow role in a rigid division of labor, but an entire cosmology. Indeed, there is no worse distortion of polytheism than to see it as a multiplicity of Gods limited in power and scope, when in fact in living polytheisms every

God is infinite. We are often misled about this by shallow, literal readings of myths and the relationships portrayed in them between deities because we are not privy to their esoteric or symbolic interpretations. When we consult polytheist practice instead, we see something quite different. As the scholar H. J. Versnel said, speaking of the ancient Greeks, “[I]f the Greeks should be ‘desperately alien’, they are not so in that having so many gods they must do without the notion of theological omnipotence, but in that *they have so many omnipotent gods*,” (Versnel, *Coping with the Gods*, p. 436). Every polytheism is a multiverse, and the world’s many polytheist traditions together are a multiverse of multiverses. A fundamental characteristic of polytheism is that it is *polycentric*, meaning that any God is at the center of the cosmos for those most devoted to Them, or even simply in the moment of Their worship, and is adequate, in principle, to anything asked of Them, while at other times, or for other worshipers, They are at the periphery, with a much narrower scope. It is only by generalizing this peripheral perspective on a polytheist field that we arrive at the illusion that each God has some narrowly defined ‘function’, as though polytheism is all periphery and no center, when instead it has its center at each point, like Indra’s Net, in which each gem reflects every other. This insight was expressed by the ancient Platonic philosopher Proclus through the formula that *all the Gods are in each one*.

A further aspect of the 'tolerance' observed in polytheistic civilizations is that they deal with the Gods of foreigners either by ignoring them, or by adopting them, or by syncretizing or identifying them with their own. Moderns often dwell upon this last tactic, syncretism, as though it is the only way in which polytheisms relate to one another. But this is a mistake, and can be an attempt at erasure, because it privileges reducing the number of Gods, as though it is somehow more 'rational' to have fewer. There is nothing rational, however, in failing to conserve such relationships, once established. At least as common, if not more so, is that polytheist cultures have come into contact and their Gods remain distinct, or some do while others do not. Often, a new God comes to be worshiped alongside the ones already established in a community. Indeed, this has provided opportunities for monotheist religions to gain a foothold in polytheist societies, because for polytheists there is no exclusivity in worship. We may compare this to the way in which colonialists engaged in transactions with indigenous peoples that the colonialists saw as exclusive land transfers, whereas the indigenous people had no similar concept of land ownership. Indeed, the two phenomena are probably not unrelated, since for polytheists everything in the world is at the crossroads of many divine relationships. It has also always been common for members of one polytheist tradition to honor other people's Gods while visiting their lands, or even in an effort to influence relations between their nations, as the Romans often did, through the practice known as *evocatio*. Encounters between polytheisms, rather than being



determined by theological dogma, generally reflect the power relations and social ties between the cultures in question, and involve a multiplicity of relational strategies. Sometimes, of course, people just ignore one another's Gods. We should not underestimate the significance of this simply because it is less interesting than the alternatives. Actually, the assumption that other people have other Gods, and that this is not a problem requiring a solution, is itself deeply significant. Polytheistic religions treat *having Gods* as natural.

We can put this observation into connection with certain other things that have often been observed about these religions, namely that they tend to have a profound reverence for 'nature', and that in them religion is organically united with every other aspect of their society and culture. These factors, in turn, lead to certain characterizations of polytheisms which are not always helpful. One is that they just are so-called 'nature religions', or that they 'worship nature'. It's true that these religions find nature to be infused with divinity. And just as linguistic diversity is correlated with polytheism either presently or in recent history, so too is biodiversity. The relationship between monotheism and environmental exploitation and degradation would require a separate talk. But it is important to understand that polytheisms see nature as infused with divinity because for them *everything* is. As the early Greek philosopher Thales said, "All things are full of Gods". So while it's correct to say that for these religions the Gods are present to nature, it would be a mistake

to say that their Gods don't also, in various ways and to various degrees, transcend nature as well. It certainly would not be correct to say that the Gods of polytheistic religions are just personifications of natural forces, or that these religions have not been equally at home in urban as in rural settings. Indeed, urbanism was invented by polytheists, and the more that we learn about the earliest human settlements, the more likely it seems that they formed around sacred space of some kind. Therefore, we should understand the relationship of polytheistic religions to nature as expressing their basic assumption that in the natural order of things Gods make Themselves known to humans, and establish relationships with them. These religions accumulate Gods, and tend to add more with time, because this is in accord with nature. When people experience Gods—what we call theophany, literally, the showing-forth of a God—the names and images accompanying that experience are carefully preserved, with new attributes and epithets added as new experiences of the same God occur, without canceling out the previous ones. New Gods, and new attributes of known Gods, are integrated into the existing fabric. It's basic to these traditions to be at once open to discovery as well as dedicated to maintaining the existing relationships.

Part of what helps these traditions to sustain this openness to experience is the attitude they have toward texts. These traditions are sometimes contrasted to the Abrahamic 'religions of the book', but it would be a mistake to think that they do not have sacred texts of their own

in direct proportion to the role that literacy has for them—and these traditions include the most highly literate civilizations in history. (Oral traditions, moreover, are texts as well.)

Polytheist religions, therefore, are not merely religions of the book, but of whole libraries.

Textuality, the production and interpretation of texts, is for them part of the natural order of things, and hence there is for them no opposition between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’.

Furthermore, these traditions do not typically use texts to limit the range of experience of

the Gods, for example, to separate acceptable experience from heresy, but to build upon

experience and to provide new possibilities for encountering their Gods and spirits,

illuminating experience and illuminated by it in turn. Accordingly, polytheist traditions

usually generate more text than the monotheisms, adding layers of commentary upon older

texts and incorporating whole new genres of religious texts over time. This means, also, that

there is never just one way in which to read a sacred text, that no interpretation of such a

text is ever the final one, and that literal interpretations are never the only readings

available, and rarely assigned the highest value. Typically, the highest value is assigned to

those interpretations which play the most direct and important role in constituting and

preserving the relationship between a community and their Gods. This can mean using

divergent interpretations, or interpretations that are in some fashion not straightforward, as

a way to preserve harmony among diverse participants.

The organic and adaptable nature of these traditions also often leads to the idea that they aren't 'religions' at all. And I suppose that this would be true, if the only meaning of 'religion' was that of the dogmatic monotheisms, with their strict notions of ideological purity, of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', of other religions as ignorant or evil, and of the necessity of conversion or damnation. But the term 'religion' predates Christianity, and in Latin, *religio* embodies ideas far more common to the polytheistic and indigenous traditions of the world. It refers to the ties which bind together a community of mortals and their Gods, forming thus a mixed mortal and divine, human and inhuman community. The social bonds among the mortals participating in a space infused with the divine are in this fashion rendered sacred as well. These bonds are so ubiquitous in polytheist and indigenous traditions that it can be easy to think that the actual religious sphere in these societies is very small. Hence it is often said that these traditions are indifferent to what one believes, and are instead only oriented toward action, toward practices. This is expressed by saying that they are 'orthopraxies' instead of 'orthodoxies', that is, that they only care about 'right practice' instead of 'right belief'. There is some truth to this, of course. Few, if any, of them impose rigid controls upon what their members think, and what they think about the Gods. It's not uncommon to encounter occasional expressions of disbelief, or at least agnosticism, in these traditions. But that doesn't mean that people just perform ritual with no notion that there is something, indeed, *someone* on the other side. To say otherwise

makes it sound all too much as though people in these traditions are just going through the motions. This attitude has a lot to do with the strong emphasis that Christianity and Islam place on belief, and on probing the beliefs held by individuals and communities. Since monotheistic religions are constantly trying to win space wherever polytheist and indigenous traditions are holding on, and it is hard to displace rituals which have been part of the rhythms of life for millennia, the path of least resistance is to treat those rituals as mere customs or lifestyles, leaving room for the new dogmas to establish themselves. So when trying to understand what makes polytheist traditions different from the Christian-dominated modern conception of 'religion', we shouldn't be too hasty to say that these traditions aren't themselves also religions.

Similarly, the term 'polytheism', or the term 'Gods', can be controversial. As I said, different traditions have many different doctrines concerning the ultimate nature of reality, or an ultimate source of divinity, and the term 'polytheism' doesn't interfere with them. It's a descriptive term, whether in its original use by Greeks simply to characterize a shrine as being 'of many Gods', *polytheos*, or in its first recorded polemical usage by Philo of Alexandria in the 1st c. CE to refer to his ideological opponents, those who worshiped many Gods and Gods other than his, the God of Abraham. The term 'polytheism', therefore, has never been intended to impose any kind of doctrinal uniformity upon these many diverse

traditions, and my own use of the term is intended to provide a basis for mutual understanding and alliance, the kind of alliance which is only possible for traditions that are able to recognize each other's Gods as, in some sense, really existing and really worthy of veneration. Of course, every language has its own term that we are translating as 'Gods'.

What matters is that such entities are the objects of religious regard, and are in some sense the ultimate beings, even if there is something beyond Them in some sense. The term 'God', like the term 'religion', predates Christianity, and refers simply to one who is invoked. This term, therefore, taken in its original sense, would not be inappropriate to most traditions, not by any means as a substitute for their own words, in the sacred tongues taught to them by the very beings upon Whom they call. Rather, the term 'Gods' is merely an additional term permitting these traditions, in mundane contexts, to be spoken of in relation to others like them. We should always prefer to use the terms native to a tradition. Were this all there was to it, there would be no conceivable objection. But when, in a multicultural discourse about world religions, a discourse which is a long way from embodying genuine pluralism, it is dismissed that there are 'Gods' in a given tradition, it is understood as a practical and political matter that the objects of religious regard in that tradition have an ontological status inferior to the Supreme Being of monotheism. Some practitioners may even say that the multiplicity of divinities in their tradition just do have such an inferior status. Perhaps this is true in certain respects. In particular, there may be some entity internal in that

tradition with a status clearly defined as superior to the other divinities. But practitioners should reflect very carefully before downgrading in this way the multiplicity of divinities in their tradition when participating in the cross-cultural discourse, where it's no longer a question of the terminology internal to one's tradition, but of a discourse conducted in hegemonic Western languages and hence unavoidably concerned with social power. Many find the term 'polytheism' undesirable, of course, simply because having many Gods has a stigma attached to it in the modern world. However, until this stigma is somehow lifted, then no tradition presenting even this appearance will be safe from prejudice and violence of diverse kinds. Many will hope to win respect for their tradition by affirming, in effect, that it is already monotheistic, or at least has 'transcended' polytheism, viewed as a primitive position on an evolutionary ladder of spiritual achievement. The motives for doing so are obvious, given the history of violence against these traditions, and the pervasive disrespect they still confront. But the notion of such a developmental classification of religions into more 'primitive' and more 'advanced' was created to subordinate the very traditions they are trying to defend, to facilitate their destruction, and it is difficult to imagine that such a conception can be reformed, or should be.

Furthermore, it's important to recognize that cross-cultural discourse about religions did not originate in the West, though it is the Western, Christian and post-Christian discourse about religions which is hegemonic today. Hence, for example, the Japanese term *kami* is one which we are often urged should not be translated as 'Gods'. But the Chinese term *shen* and the Japanese term *kami* have a long history of translating one another, and hence what is said about one will implicate the other. Whenever neighboring peoples have a long history of interaction with one another, there are generic terms for divinity that they apply to one another's objects of worship. The notion of 'polytheism' is thus simply a way of expressing the underlying attitude that makes this sort of mutual recognition possible—not identification, necessarily, by any means, but recognition.

I want to conclude with the issue of polytheist revival. In many parts of the world, people are again worshipping Gods whose cults were sundered centuries ago. These movements are not important for their size, but because of the message they convey, that conversion is not the end of the story, that no matter what has happened to the human side of the conversation, the Gods are still there. While polytheist revival is a phenomenon largely associated with the West, whose polytheist traditions were suppressed long ago, this message needs to be heard by those whose traditions suffered this fate much more recently, or who find themselves in a different religion due to the individual choice of an ancestor.



Polytheist religions suffer in academic discourses from *historicism*, the doctrine that reduces them to their material traces and concrete practices, and which encourages the idea that whereas monotheism is eternal, and may be chosen freely at any time, polytheisms are bound to these traces and practices such that once the thread has been broken, the connection is lost, and any attempt at revival rendered inauthentic. This is an attempt to turn the very strength of polytheist traditions, their concrete relationships with Gods and spirits, into a weakness. We must resist historicist reductionism, even when it comes bearing gifts, affirming the unbroken antiquity, and hence legitimacy, of some traditions while at the same time undermining others. Any traditionalism which does not affirm, at the same time, the autonomy of the Gods Themselves, and hence the possibility for contact with Them by anyone, at any time, is taking away more than it ever had to give. We need the Gods, perhaps more urgently now than ever before, Their guidance and counsel, and any doctrine that stands in the way of our access to Them must be held to the highest standard of scrutiny. While particular practices may be controlled as to who may participate in them and on what terms, the Gods Themselves, of every tradition, are the inalienable, irrevocable heritage of all humankind, and while any tradition has a right to enforce its rules upon its members, no tradition has the sole access to any God, insofar as we accept that the Gods are real, and have agency beyond any limits that we may know.

In this talk, I have tried to show that polytheism is the inevitable choice for cultural preservation, for social and global justice, and for the flourishing ecology of nature and of mind. I hope that you will take from it a fresh appreciation for the priceless gift handed down from time immemorial and renewed every day, the knowledge of the living Gods.