

MAJOR POLYTHEISTIC FAITHS: AN ANALYSIS OF SIMILARITIES IN PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Polytheistic religions in the world have a deep history and have their roots as early as the paleolithic era. While diverse, the majority of these faiths have a massive overlap with each other in its principles, beliefs in practices. In this study, we have done a concise analysis of the major polytheistic faiths of the world, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism and Taoism. In doing so, we have found interesting patterns and similarities across these faiths. It's our understanding that recognizing these patterns will greatly benefit the readers in getting a broader understanding of polytheism and how the human psyche in a general sense, played a major role in the formation of these religions.

Keywords – Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Taoism

The major religions of the world can be broadly classified into two categories, namely, polytheistic and monotheistic. Polytheistic religions are proponents of a single source of creation; but also exert the existence of innumerable intermediary divine Gods.

Idolatry is a common theme in polytheistic faiths, i.e., the worship of figurines and sculptures as the manifestation of the divine. Some other common themes include incarnation, rebirth of divine entities in human form and the worship of spirits. Some of the major polytheistic faiths of the world with a substantial number of followers are Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Taoism. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism have their roots in the Indian Subcontinent whereas Taoism began in China.

As per 2018-19 statistics, the demographics of followers of the polytheistic religions are given as

(i) Hinduism 1.1 billion

(ii) Buddhism 500 million

(iii) Sikhism 25 million

(iv) Taoism 12 million

(v) Zoroastrianism 0.25 million

In addition, there are many smaller numbers of followers of other polytheistic faiths that accounts to nearly 2 billion followers, i.e., 25.6% of world population.

Polytheism throughout history

Polytheism has been a prevalent part of the Human civilization with evidence of its existence spanning all the way back to the upper paleolithic era. The believe in a common source of creation and intermediary divine gods (each serving their own particular purpose in the functioning of the universe) has been the hall mark of polytheists from antiquity.

(i) Sumerian Civilization (4000 – 1800 BC)

During the Sumerian civilization, people worshipped many deities like (a) Anu (King of Gods), (b) Enlil (the God of Air), (c) Enki (God of wisdom), (d) Utu (God of sun), (e) Inanna (Goddess of love and war), (f) Nanna (God of Moon).

(ii) Babylonian empire (2000-1600 BC)

During Babylonian empire, people worshiped deities like (a) Marduk (Supreme god), (b) Nergal (Underworld God), (c) Tiamat (Goddess of Sea), (d) Shamash (God of Sun), (e) Ea (God of Wisdom).

(iii) Assyrian empire (2500-609 BC)

During Assyrian empire (2500-609 BC) people worshipped deities like (a) Ashur (Supreme God) who was married to Ishtar who was Goddess of love and war. (b) Shamash (God of Sun), (c) Elil (God of Air), (d) Ea (God of Wisdom), etc.

(iv) Indus valley civilization (2600 - 1900 BC)

During the Indus valley (Mohenjodaro and Harappa) civilizations, many idol gods were worshipped. Some of these idols have been discovered during excavation. Among these, the mother goddess (female dancing god) and the priest king are famous.

(v) Greek civilization (1000-100 BC)

During Greek civilization (1000-100 BC) many gods were worshipped. These include (a) Zeus (God of sky), (b) Hera (Goddess of Marriage and mothers), (c) Poseidon (God of Sea), (d) Demeter (Goddess of agriculture), (e) Ares (God of War), (f) Athena (Goddess of Wisdom), (g) Apollo (God of sun, prophesy and medicine), (h) Artemis (Goddess of the moon), (i) Hephaestus (God of fire and blacksmiths), (j) Aphrodite (Goddess of Love and beauty), (k) Hermes (God of roadways, travelers), (l) Dionysus (God of wine), (m) Hades (God of underworld), (n) Hypnos (God of Sleep), (o) Nike (Goddess of victory), (p) Janus (God of beginnings and doorways), (q) Nemesis (Goddess of Revenge), (r) Iris (Goddess of rainbow and messengers of gods), (s) Hecate (Goddess of magic and ghosts) (t) Tyche (Goddess of good luck and fortune).

(vi) The Vedic period (1500 – 500 BC)

During the Vedic period many Gods were worshipped whose names are mentioned in detail in the *Hinduism* section of this article.

(vii) The Roman empire 26 BC – 476 AD)

During Roman empire, many idol gods were worshipped. These include, (a) Jupiter, (b) Juno, (c) Neptune, (d) Minerva, (e) Mars and (f) Venus, (g) Apollo, (h) Vulcan, (i) Vesta, (j) Mercury, (k)

Ceres, etc., who were responsible for various works.

(viii) Pre-Islamic Arabia (100-600 CE)

The dominant religion in pre-Islamic Arabia, was based on worship of gods and spirits, including Hubal (male god), Goddesses, Al-Lat, Al-Uzza, and Manat. It is reported that there were approximately 360 idols kept in and around the Ka'ba. Makkan pagans used to believe in Allah as the source of creation, however, they believed and worshipped hundreds of intermediary gods.

(ix) Modern Day Hinduism

From the end of Vedic period till today, for over 2000 years, Hindus have come to worship innumerable deities, many of which have been added for worship all along this period.

Hinduism

(i) The Aryan heritage

Aryans were the settlers of ancient Iran who migrated to ancient northern India. Their literature, religion and modes of social organization subsequently shaped the course of the Indian culture. The Vedic religion of the Aryans later evolved into modern day *Hinduism*.

(ii) God and divinity

In Hinduism, the one omnipotent God is referred to as Brahma. He is treated as the 'demiurge', a fashioner, who is responsible for the creation of the world and all things in it. However, Brahma is not the creator in the monotheistic sense. He is the creative aspect of Vishnu whose wife is Goddess Saraswati, and whose children are Kumaras, Narada, Daksha, Marichi and many more.

Vishnu was the sun God of the Vedas. He has been mentioned in the Vedic texts many times alongside other Vedic gods like, Agni, Indra and Nara (water god).

In later Vedic texts (800 – 500 BC), Vishnu was believed to be Brahma. Other Hindu gods like Rama, Krishna, Narayana, Kalki, Hari, Vithoba, Kesava, Madhava, Govinda, Srinath, Jagannath

etc., were believed to be the incarnations of Vishnu. There are other goddesses like Kali, Durga, etc.

In the early Vedic texts, the word Shiva meant auspicious or sacred. It did not relate to any god. However, in later texts, Shiva became a god. He was also referred to as Brahman, the supreme universal consciousness.

Hindus believe that God also manifests as incarnation in human form, like Krishna, Rama, etc. Animals like cows and snakes are also revered and worshiped by the Hindus. The name of the divinity or divine essence within human beings is known as Atmaa.

(ii) Religious texts

The Vedas were originally written in ancient Sanskrit, the language of the Aryans. Later Hindu books were also written in Sanskrit which is distinct from the ancient Aryan Sanskrit. Vedas consist of (a) Rig-Veda (b) Sama-Veda (c) Yajur-Veda, and (d) Atharva-Veda. Among them Rig-Veda was written much earlier than the remaining three which were written around 2 BC. The Vedas are collections of hymns and magic spells. *Upanishads* are the stories told by Gurus to their students over a period of centuries. *Mahabharata* written by Vyasa is about a war between two groups of cousins. *Bhagavad Gita* consists of parts 23-40 of Mahabharata which were added to Mahabharata during 1st century CE, and *Ramayana* is the story of the God Rama and his wife Sita.

Hinduism has no ecclesiastical order such as a supreme religious authority, governing body, prophet(s) or any binding holy book. One need not be religious in the minimal sense to be accepted as Hindu. One may be polytheistic, monistic, pantheistic, agnostic, atheist, or none of these, but still be considered a Hindu. The only requirement is that he/she should declare themselves as Hindu.

Buddhism

(i) Brief history

Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha, who lived in ancient India between (563-483 BC).

He was born in a rich family of rice farming tribes in a place called Lumbini in the present Indian-Nepal border town. Buddha's father was Suddhodana and he was the chief of the Shakya clan. His mother Maya died in his infancy. He was raised by his stepmother Mahapajapati Gotami. Gautama Buddha was born during the reign of Bimbisara (558-491 BC) whose capital was Kapilavastu.

(ii) The awakening

It is a common contention among scholars that Gautama practiced yogic meditation under two teachers. However, he felt unsatisfied and moved to another teacher named Udraka Ramaputra. Later, he started to meditate on his own. He started spending his time in remote forests during his *spiritual striving*. He would take minimal food, practice different forms of breath and mind control which made him very lean as his bones became visible through the skin. During this time, he realized that the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification was not a noble path. Thus, he chose to be moderate. Following this realization, he sat down to meditate with the determination not to get up until the full awakening (*Samma-Sambodhi*) is achieved. And he achieved it under a *Ficus religiosa* (*Peepal*) tree (now known as the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, Bihar). Upon attaining the awakening, he started travelling and spreading his message among the people. The following 45 years he spent in spreading his message among people. During this time, he received the patronage of the kings of Kosala and Magadha where he spent a lot of time in their respective capitals, Savatthi and Rajagaha.

(iii) Teachings on God and divinity

Buddha explicitly rejected the concept of a Creator (Almighty God) and denied endorsing any views on creation of this Cosmos. He taught that the Devas (Super Beings in Higher Realms) do exist in the heavens but they, like humans may also suffer in samsara. Buddha is often portrayed as a teacher of gods and superior to them. As per

Buddhist pantheon, Buddhist gods are Brahma, Indra, Aapo, Vayo (Vayu), Tejo, Surya, Pajapati, Soma, Yasa, Venhu, Mahadeva, Goddess Vijja, Usha, Pathavi, Sri, Yama, Kala, Kuvera and Garuda.

These gods are not created by a supreme God. They are self-made. Their divinity is the consequences of their good karma and their personal choice. Beings evolve through self-effort and good karma. They earn the right to enter the world of gods. In other words, anyone can be reborn in the worlds of gods through righteous self-effort and become a divinity. Buddhists believe that it is possible that humans can take birth in the world of gods and gods can take birth among humans if they lose their virtue due to bad karma.

The gods of Buddhism have greater powers than humans and can impact human lives and destinies. Buddhists also believe in celestial beings such as yakkhas, gandhabbas, Nāgas, and demons such as Bali and his sons, Veroca, etc. Brahma is the leader of the heaven. However, he is not a creator god.

The Buddhists gods are of various types like, (a) Devas / Brahmas (b) Nagas, (c) Yakshas, (d), Gandharvas, (e) Asuras, (f) Garudas, (g) Kinnaras, (h) Mahoragas, (i) Apsaras, (j) Kumbhandas, etc.

The primordial Buddhas such as Samantabhadra, Vajradhara, Vairochana, and Adi-Buddha among others are personalized embodiments of different aspects of the nature of Buddha. They are pure beings who possess dharmakayas (bodies of truth).

Apart from them, Mahayana Buddhism refers to the Bodhisattvas or compassionate beings and primordial Buddhas who inhabit the higher heavens and act as the guardians of the world.

Some scholars of Indology have written that Buddha's teachings on Karma and Rebirth are a development of pre-Buddhist themes that can be

found in Jain and Brahmanical sources, like the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Likewise, samsara, the idea that we are trapped in cycle of rebirth and that we should seek liberation from this through nonviolence (ahimsa) and spiritual practices, pre-dates the Buddha and was taught in early Jainism as well.

(iv) Schools of thought

There are many schools of thought in Buddhism, but the sole aim of spiritual practice of all is, the complete alleviation of stress in samsara (life), called *nirvana* (the state of bliss free from all worldly binds).

Mahayana Buddhists consider Buddha an embodiment of the cosmic Dharmakaya, (embodiment of God) born for the benefit of others.

Theravada Buddhists view Buddha as a human being who attained nirvana or Buddhahood (the state of bliss free from all worldly binds).

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is ancient religions of Iran reported to be founded in 1700-1800 BC. This religion is reported to be based on the teachings of the an Iranian-speaking spiritual leader Zoroaster (also known as Zarathushtra). It is a polytheistic religion. Zoroastrians worship Ahura Mazda as the highest and supreme God, but they also believe in the existence of several divinities who represent His good qualities and who assist Him in containing the evil in the world. Highest among them are the six Immortal Beings known as 'Amesha Spentas' followed by angels, lords or Ahuras (particular class of divinities) and other divinities.

The works of Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism had a significant influence on Greek philosophy and Roman philosophy. Several ancient Greek writers like Eudoxus of Cnidus and Latin writers like Pliny the Elder praised Zoroastrian philosophy as 'useful'. It is reported that Plato

learned Zoroastrian philosophy through Eudoxus and incorporated it into his own Platonic realism.

Sikhism

(i) The overlap with Hinduism

Sikhism is a monistic, panentheistic and pantheistic religion. Hinduism and Taoism are also Monistic, Panentheistic, and Pantheistic religions.

(i) *Monism* is a believe that there is only one thing. All things are not separate but work together as 'one'.

(ii) *Panentheism* is a believe that everything that exists is part of God or that God is a part of everything that exists.

(iii) *Pantheism* is a believe that reality is identical with divinity, or that all-things compose an all-encompassing, transcendent god.

Indian constitution describes *Sikhs*, *Jains* and *Buddhists* as *Hindu* because they follow Hindu law and customs. Sikhs marry Hindu women and vice versa as there are no restrictions on these marriages among Sikh community. The gods in Hinduism are referred as Dev, Devi, Ishvara, Ishvari, Bhagavan and Bhagavati, etc., and Sikhs call their founder as Guru Nanak Dev. However, there are differences of opinion among Sikhs in this context as some consider themselves as part of Hinduism while others resist it.

(ii) Brief history

Sikhism began as a movement of 'Sant tradition' within Hindus. The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539) was born in a Hindu family. Later he joined the Sant tradition. There are differences of opinion among scholars whether Sant Kabirdas, who lived in 15th century in India, influenced Guru Nanak Dev or not because there are many commonalities in their teachings.

(iii) Teachings

Guru Nanak Dev taught that all people are subject to the transmigration of souls.

Transmigration of souls is a Hindu belief in which the soul passes from one body to another, human or animal, depending upon the karma (deeds) of a person. The cycle of rebirth is eternal, unless the soul is released by human effort. Guru Nanak Dev taught that the only means of liberation from the cycle of rebirth is meditation of the name of *Wahe Guru* (God). Through meditation, a person gradually perceives the means of liberation of his soul and achieves the union with God.

Taoism

(i) Brief history

Taoism or Daoism is a philosophical religion with originated in China about two thousand years ago. It is associated with beliefs in the metaphysical, occult, supernatural, magical powers and practices. The majority of the Taoist followers are from China, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam.

Laozi (meaning old Master) was the founder of philosophical Taoism. He was an ancient Chinese philosopher and writer who wrote 'Tao Te Ching', a textbook central to Taoism. He is believed to be the deity (god) in religious Taoism among traditional Chinese religions.

The 1st century BC records about Laozi described him to be the contemporary of Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC). His surname was Li and his personal name was Er or Dan. He was an official in the imperial archives and wrote a book in two parts. The oldest text of the Tao Te Ching so far recovered was written on bamboo slips and dates that belongs to the late 4th century BC.

According to some traditional accounts, Laozi was a scholar who worked as the Keeper of the Archives for the royal court of Zhou. This reportedly allowed him access to the works of the Yellow Emperor and other classics of the time. The stories assert that Laozi never opened a formal school but nonetheless attracted a large number of students and loyal disciples.

(ii) Belief in God and the divine

The story of Laozi has taken on a strong religious cult since the Han dynasty. As Taoism took root, Laozi was worshipped as a god. Belief in the revelation of the Tao from the divine Laozi resulted in the formation of *the Way of the Celestial Masters*, the first organized religious Taoist sect. In later Taoist tradition, Laozi came to be regarded as a personification of the *Tao*. He is said to have undergone numerous "transformations" and taken on various guises in various incarnations throughout history to initiate the faithful in the Way.

In his book, Laozi explains that the '*Tao*' or '*Dao*' is not a name of a thing but the underlying natural order of the Universe whose ultimate essence is non-conceptual yet evident. Taoism teaches that the man should place his will in harmony with the natural universe. The return to '*Tao*', means, the return to the interconnected whole and unity which can only be achieved if dualistic thoughts are abolished and people act in accordance with nature. Every act should be in accordance with the surroundings, circumstances and means. In Taoism, practices like fasting and abstaining from animal meat and its products are encouraged.

Conclusion

Polytheistic religions throughout history share interesting patterns. Though most polytheistic religions believe in the concept of one God, the concept of intermediary gods or divine figures, each assigned a task to fulfill, is a common principle among polytheistic faiths. A tendency to declare as '*God*', that in nature beyond the control of humanity can be noticed. A good example is the god of fire in Hinduism and Zoroastrianism and the planetary gods of the Greek polytheists.

While thought provoking and imaginative, these beliefs' rationality and logic is beyond comprehension. It shows how faith supersedes logical reasoning.

The recent rise in Atheism in the world point to the fact that, with the advances in science, more and more people among the adherents of the polytheistic faiths are preferring to abide by the

laws of nature and turning towards Atheism, rather than believing in a mythical deity to explain the causality of things.

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