

Christian Polytheism? On the Politics of Language

Professor Paul Hedges (Nanyang Technological University)

Date & Time: 5 March 2025, Wednesday | 2pm-3:30pm (SGT)

Venue: AS7 06-42, FASS Research Division Seminar Room | The Shaw Foundation Building, Block AS7, #06-42, 5 Arts Link, Singapore 117570

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ABSTRACT

We typically understand monotheism and polytheism to be relatively straightforward terms to denote, respectively, a belief in one deity or many deities. We may even see them as ancient terms with, perhaps, biblical origins. However, in their modern English usage these terms develop only in the seventeenth century. The first English writer known to use them, the Protestant Samuel Purchas, did not make a distinction between Christian monotheists and, for example, Hindu polytheists, but attacked Catholics as Polytheists. This set a pattern amongst both theological writers and later secular scholars to attach value to these terms, with monotheism nearly always valorised above polytheism. Early sociologists envisaged human society developing from animism through polytheism into monotheism and finally into a secular atheism. Moreover, we cannot clearly delineate traditions as one or the other. Many Hindus will assert that behind an appearance of many deities lays only one divine source; is this therefore monotheism rather than polytheism? Likewise, Christianity's origins are in texts and traditions that speak of multiple deities and divine powers as existing, even being worthy of veneration. We must recognise therefore that these two terms rather than being descriptive and analytical are inherently bound into political and rhetorical power plays. This paper will discuss some of the background to this and also suggest that we may be better off thinking of multi-devotionalism and mono-devotionalism as tendencies found across all religions, and even beyond religion as we normally envisage it.



Professor Paul Hedges is a Life Member at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, and both Professor of Interreligious Studies and Associate Dean (Scholarly Ecosystems) at RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has taught in Asia, Europe, and North America, and researches, teaches, and publishes in interreligious studies, theory and method in the study of religion, contemporary global Christian theologies, prejudice studies, and decolonising academia.

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POLYDOX THEOLOGIES OF MULTI-DEVOTIONAL AND
DECOLONIAL PRAXIS

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