

## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION



*Who are these creatures called the gods? They are dismissed as idle fictions by atheists and monotheists, capitalists and clergymen alike. But gods, in the plural, are found wherever human beings are found—unless the human beings claim exclusive rights, power and privilege, dispossessing the gods of their homes. Those who ask what a god is, like those who have to ask what a mountain or an eagle or a forest is, will not learn the answer from a book.*

—Robert Bringhurst, *A Story As Sharp As a Knife*

### **Why a Polytheistic Theology?**

There are innumerable recordings of myths and stories about the deities, a vast literature of teachings from the goddesses and gods, many works on the rituals and other religious behaviors that relate ourselves to the polytheistic numinous realm, a few philosophical treatises on the logical implications of deities, but no written works that seek systematically to explain the hermeneutics of polytheism in general, rather than within specific cultural traditions. Brief relevant works oriented toward normative Christian culture are beginning to come out of the

interrelated African Brazilian and African Caribbean traditions. And there are numerous works on Central African traditions by sympathetic Christians arguing that these traditions are actually monotheistic, a phenomenon to which we shall return later in this book. To the contrary, the monotheistic traditions—the three Religions of the Book (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and their offshoots—are replete with many works that explain the nature of deity and the impact of this deity on humans.

A recent work (2003) that promises a polytheistic theology, Michael York's *Pagan Theology*, unfortunately does not fulfill its title and exemplifies the problems most Western scholars have in coming to terms with the topic. Divided into three parts, the first part introduces the non-monotheistic traditions of the world under the rubric of "paganism." But it presents these traditions, not from an internal perspective, but from the purview of Western scholars, in the main, presenting these traditions from a Eurocentric perspective, illustrating many of the misunderstandings discussed in chapter 7 of this book. The second part, by far the largest, concerns the religious practices of "paganism" and thus does not directly discuss theology. The third section, "Paganism as Theology," is but a dozen pages in length. Intending to discuss the theology of contemporary Western Neo-paganism it barely touches on the subject, focusing its few pages instead on historical antecedents. Polytheistic theology thus remains an uncharted void in comparative religion.

Given the history of homo sapiens, it may be that polytheism is inherent in human nature, not so much in the sense that it is part of our DNA structure but that it arises from the human experience in conjunction with our nature. For unless we accept the arguments of the ur-monotheists (see chapter 7) that is contrary to the above, monotheism is extremely recent, given the sweep of human history; arose in a tiny part of the planet; and is constantly breaking down.

Monotheism was promulgated by a small number of persons in the eastern Mediterranean region less than three millennia in the past. We know of them because their understanding was privileged in the received version of the Hebrew Bible, but the tone is most often of a single person railing against a polytheistic population. Although the date for the acceptance of

monotheism by a substantial part of this population is controversial, archaeology indicates that it could not have been more than a few centuries before the end of Israelite religion with the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, if then. And it never was complete. In traditional Judaism, alongside, or within, God, exists Satan, Lilith, the Shekhina or Matronit, and angels.

Christianity, a development of Hellenized Judaism, understood a single deity in three parts or aspects, developed the notion of saints as quasi deities, and continued the understanding of angels and Satan. Only certain of the Protestant versions maintain a relatively strict monotheism. Indeed, until sufficient Chinese had lived in Christian cultures and gained a better understanding of Christianity, it was commonly understood in China that Catholicism and Protestantism were two unrelated Western religions: the former polytheistic, the primary deity being the female Mary, and only the latter monotheistic. Similarly, Islam continued the understanding of angels, and in some Islamic areas, the understanding of saints is important to religious practices. I have recently visited the Hact Bectash shrine in the town of the same name and the Mevlevi shrine in Konya, both in central Turkey, and the throngs of pilgrims I encountered clearly beheld the coffin-enclosed corpses of these revered Sufi founders as sacred. Similarly, at the old Jewish cemetery in Prague, I found, based on the fresh pebbles placed upon the gravestones, that the graves of famous medieval kabbalists are still visited for their sacred power.

In other words, the monotheistic traditions have constantly to argue their monotheisms against the human tendency to relate functionally to multiple numinous entities. Moreover, Christianity, which constantly divided over, to a non-Christian, minute differences in theological understandings, developed ever more complicated creeds that had to be argued. Theology, along with church politics, was central to these schisms and became a major feature of the Christian tradition.

So central was theology to Christianity that it is assumed to be normal to religion. Hence, when Jesuit missionaries entered China in the late sixteenth century, with a positive attitude toward Chinese culture and an orientation toward the educated elite, the lack of theological treatises allowed them to argue that

the educated Chinese were unconscious protomonotheists. Other Christian missionaries working among the majority of the population understood the Chinese to be polytheists and, therefore, idolaters and devil worshippers. Yet there was no essential difference between the religious practices of the elite and ordinary people at that time. In the early twentieth century, sinologists oriented toward Humanism approvingly took the lack of theological treatises to mean that the educated Chinese had always been atheists or, at least, agnostics. They understood that for well over two thousand years the elite Chinese spent considerable time carrying out sacrificial rituals purely for the sake of the rituals, with no understanding of recipients of these offerings. In retrospect, this was a rather bizarre interpretation of Chinese religion.

Similar to the monotheistic traditions, Buddhism, theoretically a nontheistic religion, is also functionally polytheistic. While the monks and nuns in southern Buddhism may focus on transcendence through meditation, laypeople seek help from the Buddha, Arhats, and so on. Northern Buddhism is fully polytheistic, as Buddhas and bodhisattvas are related to as deities. In any case, Buddhism in Central and East Asia exists within rather than outside of a larger polytheistic milieu.

What few Westerners seem to realize is the possibility that polytheism fits the human mind and experience so comfortably that there is no need for confessional theology per se in polytheistic traditions, especially before they were relatively recently challenged by the Christian West. Of course, there have been many thousands of polytheistic cultures, so it is possible that polytheistic theologies have long been around, and we are simply unaware of them. Or perhaps it requires someone coming from a monotheistic background, interested in comparatively analyzing religion, and slowly imbued with polytheistic understandings and practices, to conceive of doing such a theology. In other words, there is no need of it in polytheistic cultures, but there is a great misunderstanding of these cultures in monotheistic ones, for Western religions are based on the premise that polytheists are either inferior human beings or the most despicable of enemies. Monotheists historically have defined themselves not positively but negatively, as not being polythe-

ists. Hence, a sympathetic rendering of the hermeneutics of polytheism may be of some value to a hopefully more tolerant contemporary Western civilization in gaining a nonpejorative understanding of non-Western traditions.

A further usefulness of this work may be to assist comparative religionists in understanding polytheistic traditions. Due to the mind-set of singularity normative to monotheistic thinking, it is difficult for beginning Western researchers of polytheistic traditions to understand that in these traditions the numinous are actually multiple. For example, a few years ago I was at an international religious studies conference in South Africa. Several graduate students studying African religions approached me regarding their problems in comprehending the fullness of these traditions. If the rituals are oriented toward the ancestors, then how can Earth, and so on, also be numinous? And what about the deities (who are dead human beings in these traditions)? What needed to be understood is that all of these can be numinous simultaneously, without contradiction and without conflict; this is the essence of polytheism.

### **Whose Theology?**

A confessional theology does not exist in a vacuum. It is a reflection or an argument arising from a person's experience and understanding. Without that link to an individual, it has no meaning; it would be formulaic but not affirmational. If we read Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, we are reading the understanding of a known person, with a known background in a specific time and culture. Without that knowledge, the work would lose a fair amount of relevance. Moreover, as polytheism covers all the cultures of the world, save the Religions of the Book, it would be ludicrous to think that any single individual could possibly write a coherent theology that would accurately cover them all, let alone a sufficient number to be properly representative. So I assume that to understand the theology presented here, the reader would need to know enough about the person presenting it to understand the why and how of it, in order to evaluate it.

To put it another way, as my relatives might have said of me as a child, "What is a good Jewish boy doing writing a polytheistic theology?" But I am no longer a boy as I am reaching old age and preparing for retirement and can hardly be said to be religiously Jewish in confessing to being a polytheist, the utter opposite of the simple Jewish creedal statement: "Hear, oh Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one!" So how can this be?

The Judaism of my childhood in Baltimore, the period of and just after the Holocaust, was not normative to Judaism as a whole. From my childish perception of the yeshiva and synagogue, it was a Judaism of ritual for its own sake—I perceived no joy, no pleasure in the rituals by the adults around me. But failure to perform the rituals was presented as leading to dire punishment. The God disclosed to me was one who looked for any excuse to punish, but there was no corollary reward. Every year, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, we prayed that our sins were not so great that God would have one run over by a streetcar or be given cancer during the coming year. Thus, I could live in fear of God or ignore Him. I chose the latter.

I was already a nontheist before, in my mid-teens, coming across a slim anthology of Buddhist sutra excerpts. The anthology immediately captivated me. It did not simply fill a spiritual void; the early sutras made absolute sense to me, as they seemed to analyze my own experiences. I spent every free moment sitting under an old tree in a quiet part of a large park contemplating the texts. A year later, I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago and partially neglected the courses in which I was enrolled in order to read each and every book on South Asian religions and other non-Western traditions housed in the University's Divinity School library. I became so thoroughly imbued with the theoretical aspect of Buddhism that its essential epistemology and metaphysics to date remains my own. At that time, the mid-1950s, there were as yet no Buddhist monasteries or meditation centers in North America, quite different from the present-day situation. I considered traveling to Thailand to become a monk but chose mundane life. A Trappist monastery in Iowa, Our Lady of New Mellory, repeatedly allowed me to use its guest quarters for meditation retreats, and

I am still moved by the monks' kindness to an eccentric non-Christian youth.

As an undergraduate, I changed my major yearly, from the premedical course expected of me by my cultural background through biopsychology to psychology (in which I received my degree) to philosophy. In my last year, as a social-science major, I was required to take a year-long course on a non-Western civilization, and by happenstance I ended up taking the course on China rather than India. I was instantly hooked.

My long association with the Divinity School library, where I had been granted the unusual favor of a desk throughout my undergraduate years, led me to enroll in the Divinity School when I graduated. There I was fascinated by Church history; did well in Old Testament studies; poorly in New Testament studies, as I was deemed to have the wrong theological orientation; and, being a nontheist, was utterly bored by theology (entrance examinations exempted me from courses on non-Western religions). Besides, I had entered the Divinity School through the (Unitarian-Universalist) Meadville Theological School (part of the then Federated Theological Faculties) and was, in effect, by the end of my first year kicked out of Meadville for heresy. It was then no place for a non-Christian, and I transferred to the Far Eastern Studies Program of the Oriental Institute, where I was already studying literary Chinese.

Classical Chinese was then taught at Chicago by what was called the "inductive method." This pedagogical theory assumes that language is intimately related to thought processes. One best learned language, not through the study of formal grammar, but by learning to think in the language. It worked for me: not just my thought processes, but my whole perception of reality was transformed. After a couple of years, certain South Asian religious ontological assumptions, such as *samsāra*, no longer made any personal sense to me; I was thoroughly imbued with Chinese concrete pragmatism. My worldview shifted to a Buddho-Daoist one, which was more of a subtle than a major change. On completing the language and cultural training of the program, I accepted a fellowship to the new Buddhist Studies program at the University of Wisconsin.

A year of intense Sanskrit and other language studies, along with the opportunity to study the complex *mādhyanika* philosophy with Edward Conze, left me with the same feeling I had for Christian theology, and I transferred to the department of Chinese Language and Literature just being formed. That provided a means for me to begin the first of my residences in Taiwan, where I had the good fortune to meet and discover a rapport with some of the last generation to receive a traditional Chinese education. I became a member, a literally outlandish one, of a circle of older artists, poets, and connoisseurs. I was culturally, but not geographically, at home. Chinese identify by culture, not by race or other criteria, and, given my cultural empathy and knowledge, I was accepted as Chinese. Over the decades, further stays in Taiwan and the Mainland brought me into contact and created close relationships with diverse Chinese subcultures, including Chinese Buddhist scholar-monks and Daoist monk-artists. The last set of relationships I developed was with the leading members of a new society of spirit-possession mediums. Over a quarter century ago, I married a colleague at a university in Taiwan where I was a visiting professor, and have since been a member of a large extended Chinese family and a participant in its family rituals.

At this point, it is necessary to backtrack a bit to explain an entirely different religious orientation from the above. As a young child, I lived on the edge of a large park and spent most of my time there. After World War II, we moved to a new housing development at the then edge of the city, which still had abandoned rural land on its periphery. Again, I spent much of my time in this tiny semiwilderness. My parents, to get away from my rambunctiousness, from the age of eleven sent me to a distant Boy Scout camp in swampy woods for entire summers. I remember going to the outdoor chapel the first *shabbas* morning after I arrived for Jewish services and noticed that my troop leader, on whom I had developed a crush, was looking up at the trees and sky during prayers. I asked him about it, and while I do not remember his words, I recall, in effect, that it was nature he was worshipping. He had a convert. Not being of the camp's locale, I was a stranger placed in quarters where everyone else was from the same troop throughout the year. I spent much of



my time, for three summers, save for the plants and animals, alone in the woods.

In my late teens, for reasons that remain logically inexplicable, I felt compelled to go back to wilderness, alone. Since I was at the University of Chicago, the closest mountains seemed to be the Great Smokies. This was before they became overcrowded. Rather apprehensively I travelled by several buses the longest distance I had ever gone to a place I simply located on a map and, naively, began to hike straight up (there was an easier way elsewhere) the Appalachian Trail to attain the ridge of the Smokies. I ran out of water; I was exhausted (carrying an absurdly heavy and uncomfortable pack based on my late-1940s Boy Scout training and equipment); I was not sure if I was still on the then-faint trail; and I momentarily panicked. After a night's sleep, I recovered, found myself on the mountain's bald top and had a revelation. That mountain was named Mount Thunderhead, surely no accident as I much later learned, and I soon took the name for my first Chinese *hao* (artistic name). From that time, until I moved to a one-room cabin on a small island in central Ontario when I accepted my present position at York University in 1972, I backpacked in various North American wildernesses at least twice a year, never feeling at home until I was over a day's hike from the nearest road.

On the last night of the above-described hike, at a lean-to but a few miles from the road where I would end the trip, another seemingly inconsequential event took place that would prove to have momentous consequences in my life. At that shelter several physically mature local men (I was still a youth) were partying with steaks and beer. They began to entertain themselves by throwing rocks at a bear, perhaps attracted by the smell of their cooking. I still wonder at my untypical courage in stopping them and my success at doing so. The next year I returned to the Smokies to hike the second part of that section of the Appalachian Trail bisected by the highway. A bear walked the trail before me and slept where I did. Within two days, I had extraordinary strength and stamina. I subsequently hiked in a single day what I had planned to take a number of days to do, eating all the food that did not require cooking as I went on, finishing in the early afternoon. Another relationship had been formed that I then also did not understand.

During my first residence in Chinese culture, much as I enjoyed and admired most facets of it, I came to realize that I had a home. Being a nonpracticing Jew, I had felt I had no roots. Repeated experiences of anti-Semitism in the United States, no spiritual attachment to Israel, and not speaking Yiddish or having a nostalgic bond to Eastern Europe, from where my family on both sides had fled from pogroms, left me feeling the "Wandering Jew." But living in China changed that, for I came to realize I had a home to which I was emotionally bonded: North America—not the culture but the land, "Turtle Island." When I returned, I not only completed my formal Chinese studies, but began to investigate North America's indigenous religions. It seemed to me that the peoples whose homeland was the land, I now realized, of my own origins and identity would best know how to relate to it.

As with Chinese culture, my first entry into Native American religious traditions was through the literature (and, as I was later to realize, this literature was at least, in the main, as grossly misleading as the literature on Chinese religion). When, after five years teaching at Indiana State University, I took a position at York University in Toronto, the situation changed. While teaching a course that included study of shamanism, a young Anishnabe, an apprentice shaman, finally could not stand the nonsensical discussion any longer and broke her silence. We became each other's mentors and initiated a friendship which still continues. Years later, I had another long-term Anishnabe student, also eventually both a friend and mentor, who was then an apprentice healer. Both profoundly influenced my understanding, introduced me to mature healers, and featured in my published studies.

Again, as with Chinese culture, I knew that real understanding came from cultural participation rather than books. With my student and friend, the first mentioned above, I came into contact with a leader of the revitalization of the Midéwewin just taking place in central Ontario who was willing to serve as my spiritual guide. I was able to participate in a number of different rituals over the years, including a series of traditional vision-seeking fasts within a community returning to its spiritual roots that cemented and enhanced the relationships unwittingly

gained many years before: I was given understandings and shown how to heal for specific needs. I had also begun to assist at a Native way school in Toronto, gaining further traditionalist Native friends and learning by teaching and doing. The school was, for a long time, the center for an urban revitalization and a focus for Native religious leaders passing through. At the urging of my Native friends, eventually I became, in retrospect, too involved, uncomfortably finding myself in the midst of various social, political, and other schisms. Being one of a very few non-Natives at ceremonial gatherings throughout the Great Lakes region, I also found myself perceived by many as a representative of those responsible for all the atrocities done to Native people over the centuries by Euroamericans. It was an identification I could not accept, and after sixteen years of intense participation, increasing racism—a gift of the dominant culture—made me a negative presence at the ceremonies, and I ceased my social but not personal involvement.

After beginning to take part in Native rituals, writing for the first time on the then newly developed personal computer two decades ago, I found myself typing a second conclusion to an article I thought I had finished (on the influences of Christianity on the theology of Native religions). I was not conscious of the words I was typing and eagerly read them as they appeared on the screen. A recent vision-questing fast had led me to the realization of the sex of the spirits that had come to me. One was female, and, to a male brought up in a patriarchal, misogynist religious atmosphere, this had been an epiphany. Now my fingers were adding words beyond the conclusion of what I had thought was a finished article; they were giving reasons for the transition, what I termed the “suppression of female spirituality.” This was my first experience of deities overtly directing my actions. Later, this led to a book on comparative female spirituality.

A heightened awareness of practical shamanism, a variety of Native rituals, and the importance of female ritual functions and female spirits led to new perceptions of Chinese religion in these regards on subsequent trips to Taiwan and Mainland China. These interests resulted in my contacting Chinese religious functionaries, including mediums. It also fostered my interest in African Brazilian and African Caribbean forms of mediumism,

which in turn led to an interest in Central-West African religions, which I found to have interesting parallels with early Chinese concepts of kingship and attendant rituals, and so forth. The involvement with rituals eventually led to my perception of the power and effects of deities through mediumship, much as I had earlier encountered it via shamanism. The completion of my book on female spirituality, the last half finished in two months when I had expected it to take several more years, I attribute to a deity who became involved through this mode of relationship (detailed in chapter 5).

When I first came to Toronto in 1972, where there were a number of different Buddhist centers, I was invited to meet a Tibetan lama passing through. At the interview, he immediately perceived that I was lacking in compassion. He was absolutely correct. My being imbued with Theravadin and Tantric Buddhist teachings without direction, even experiencing various modes of union, including the mystic experience, only reinforced my understanding of the essential emptiness of everything. As nothing existed, who was there to help and who was there to do the helping? Native American understandings and practices provided another way, for I learned that one should never do anything for oneself, and the only purpose in life is to help others. It is, of course, also a Buddhist understanding, but not one I had imbibed through that tradition, for I had learned without a spiritual mentor. It is the willingness of the deities to assist that allows me to act in these regards.

These experiences led to a kind of nonpathological schizophrenia. Years ago, when I was leading an advanced class through a three-hour discussion, a student pointed out to me that I had just responded oppositely to a query first proposed to me much earlier in the session. I realized that I had to point out to the students that they had to let me know from which of my orientations they wished a response. For my metaphysics remains Buddho-Daoist, but my functioning may involve my awareness of spirits, which is predominantly northern Native North American, while my scholarship is predominantly Western, with an overlay of Chinese pragmatism. These streams of understanding are not melded into a mishmash but are more in parallel within my thinking.

Nearly two decades ago, I completed a book on the Native American sacred pipe, which included a brief analysis of its theology. Some reviewers excoriated me for this, basing their criticism on their assumption that Christianity had a monopoly on the use of the term "theology." More recently, I completed a book on comparative female spirituality and realized that the concluding section included a theology of female spirits and a brief theology of polytheism. Increasingly, I came to feel that I should expand this into a more holistic work—hence this study.

All of the above in this section is merely meant to indicate the sources of my understanding. Although my studies have been important, and the experiences of others even more so, I attribute my primary understanding of the deities and spirits, far more than I have indirectly referred to in the preceding, from what they have, both directly and indirectly, imparted to me. For those who will consider this fantasy, the following chapters should be blamed solely on me, not on those with whom I have come into contact.

### **The Varieties of Polytheism: The Structure of This Book**

Given that all but a few of the vast array of religious traditions are polytheistic, albeit the monotheistic ones presently involve a sizable portion of the human population, we would expect to find few if any commonalities. Polytheistic religions do seem to share certain features, however, that contrast them with the monotheistic traditions.

First, the polytheistic traditions are invariably experiential, although this is also true for aspects of each of the Religions of the Book: for example, Hasidism, Pentacostalism, and Sufism. People come to know the deities in polytheistic traditions directly, via such modes as mediumism and shamanism, modes to which we shall return in succeeding chapters. This is one of the reasons for a multiplicity of deities. People with differing personalities and experiences meet differing deities. Without an enforced monotheistic creed, people are open to an abundance of numinous possibilities. Faith is both meaningless and irrelevant. We know what we experience; it takes no leap of faith to assume the reality of deities we have directly encountered. As

well, belief is meaningful only in creedal traditions. Without creeds, let alone doctrines, there is nothing requiring explicit belief. Arising from encounters in rituals, visions, and so forth, our acceptance of the validity of the experienced deities is absolutely no different, except more certain, than knowledge gained from sensory experiences.

Second, the relationships with the deities are reciprocal. There are no *prima facie* obligations on either side of the relationships. A deity may come to a person, but usually it is because it was requested. If not, the human need not accept the relationship. If one makes a request of a deity, and especially, if one receives benefits from a deity, it would be gross ingratitude not to make a gesture of appreciation. A deity need not honor a request, in which case the human owes the deity nothing. Indeed, one may then turn to a different deity, who may be more helpful. The current effectiveness of a deity in China can be measured by the condition of the temple in which the deity is the primary focus. The temples are supported by voluntary contributions. If a number of people understand that they have received benefits from the deity, the temple will be in splendid condition due to the many contributions; if people no longer feel these benefits, the temple will be decaying, perhaps collapsing. There are other deities to whom people can turn.

On the other hand, if one creates or accepts a relationship with a deity that has integral obligations, particularly if one makes promises to a deity, then it would be the height of folly to ignore these obligations. We call on deities because they are far more powerful than we are; to deliberately not meet obligations we have made or accepted could be life threatening. This is not because of vengeance but simply due to failure to abide by our promises.

Other than these two important qualities of relationship, the varieties of polytheism are immense. They can, however, be categorized in general from the standpoint of religioecology. That is, the nature of the deities, as well as their functions, tends to reflect the gestalt of a culture's ecological situation with regard to its economy, society, government, terrain, climate, and so on.

All polytheistic traditions recognize in varying ways the various aspects of the cosmos—sun, moon, planets, stars,

weather, directions—as deities. For example, many scholars acknowledge that YHWH was a storm deity in incipient Israelite religion. These understandings will be the focus of chapter 2.

For most of human history, we humans lived intimately with nature. Whether gathering, gardening, hunting, or fishing, we knew we were dependant on animals and plants to give their lives to us so that we could live. Chapter 3 will be concerned with animal, plant, and mineral (stones and metals) spirits and their relationship with humans. In these traditions, shamanism was often the means of interacting with the spirit realm for the benefit of one's family and community.

As gardening became important, we began to be more sedentary, living for extended periods of time in a single locale. Our family dead remained with us and became a source of spiritual power. We communicated with them by allowing our bodies to be their temporary abodes while they directly communicated with the living. Ancestral and related spirits are the focus of chapter 4.

On the model of the family dead being spirits essential to the well-being of the living, the dead of nonfamily slowly became important: ghosts may become deities and, in turn, the deities become anthropomorphic. Mediumism remains the most common mode of interaction. Chapter 5 is concerned with these types of deities and means of communication with them.

There are other deities or semideities (the offspring of deities and humans) who are important to human cultures both by their talents or gifts to us and by the example of their lives. In the literature, they are often termed "culture heroes" or "tricksters." Rarely are rituals directed toward them, but they are most important in myths, particularly those concerned with the recreation of the world (as compared with the monotheistic focus on original creation). Chapter 6 will discuss these types of deities.

The monotheistic traditions are poorly prepared to understand polytheistic ones. Not only are the understandings of the Religions of the Book utterly at variance with the actualities of polytheism, but those of Western traditions trying to understand it are often wide of the mark due to their ethnocentrism. Typical monotheistic misperceptions of polytheism are the subject of chapter 7, as well as the effects on polytheistic

religious traditions of domination by monotheistic ones consequent to colonialism.

What then are the hermeneutics of polytheism in general? What does it mean to be human with these understandings? The last chapter will explore meanings from the standpoint of selected lifestyles and rituals.

### **A Few Caveats**

In this work, I am using the term “theology” in its literal sense: “to speak of the deities.” Technically, I should use the split term “thea/theology,” since, of course, I am discussing both female and male divinities. Such a term is most awkward. So I hope I will be forgiven for using “theology” in a more inclusive sense than the Greek origin would imply.

There are many types of theological discourses. Chapters 2–6 encompass a form of systematic theology in that they systematically delineate many of the different types of deities found in polytheistic religions. Chapters 7–8 involve a mode of comparative theology, but not in the sense of comparing different polytheistic theologies. Rather the comparison is solely between monotheism and polytheism in general. In this work, the term “confessional theology” is used. Most often the term refers to the theology of a particular Christian confession, in the sense of a creedal formulation. Here, the term is being used in another sense, as the “confession” of an individual’s—my own—system of theological understanding

When appropriate, as this is a confessional theology, I will relate pertinent experiences and understandings to help elucidate the points being made. Both Native American and Chinese teachings emphasize reticence in these regards. From the former perspective, one may not reveal the contents of one’s visions or name those numinous beings to whom one is connected, save to the elder guiding one if young or a neophyte, unless the vision is for a group. To do so violates one’s relationship, leading to loss of the power inherent in the vision. It is not that one keeps one’s relationships secret, but they are revealed indirectly through symbols, songs given by the spirits, stories, and so on. Those who understand and need to know will know. It is only



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when one reaches my present age that it is considered proper for one who has some understanding to speak of these matters. Perhaps this is because with age and, hopefully, a modicum of wisdom, one has learned just what to reveal and the right reasons for revealing it. Chinese teachings emphasize that those who are aware of these matters normally keep silent; those who are voluble in these regards are not to be trusted to know anything. Hence, I will ask you, the reader, to bear with me when I am oblique and limit what I reveal to the bare essential minimum.

Finally, it is crucial that the reader understand the point made about voice. One meaning of “theology” is to theorize from within a particular tradition, but the opposite is being done here. In any case, polytheism is not a specific tradition; the term merely labels what it is not. That is, polytheism is not monotheism. The understandings expressed here represent the thinking of only a single individual, and an anomalous one at that. Humans are social beings and normally function within specific communities. My community, for nearly a half century, has been that of modern international Western scholarship. I speak from that tradition, as critical as I am of it, and none other; no other tradition, no other community is represented here. While there will be many references to Native American and Chinese traditions, some reference to African, African Brazilian, circumpolar, and Polynesian cultures, as well as mention of the Religions of the Book and Buddhism, no statement here should be understood as representing these traditions. Only persons from within these traditions can speak for them theologically. In summary, I am but professing my own individual perceptions and interpretations, based on my experiences within certain polytheistic traditions, for whatever use that may be to others.