

POLYTHEISTIC PLURALISM AND SACRED COWS

ON IDEOLOGICAL ABANDONMENT,
AND A DEFENCE OF DR. EDWARD BUTLER



BY RHYD WILDERMUTH

Years ago I spoke at several esoteric conferences focused on the revival and continuance of polytheism. I even co-organized one just such conference, the second ever to occur in the United States.

I'm a polytheist, which means I recognise the existence of multiple gods rather than just one or none. That sounds like an unusual or ridiculous thing to believe perhaps, but I'm

hardly alone. About 1.35 billion people are at least nominal adherents to Hinduism, a figure which alone should point to the less-than-unusual nature of my belief.

Whether one agrees with my position or not is no matter of concern for me. Most people I encounter don't, and that's perfectly fine. As a matter of fact, a core feature of polytheism is its complete lack of interest in proselytizing or gatekeeping. Unlike monotheistic religions which have initiatory rituals (circumcision, baptism) to help decide who is 'in' and who is 'out,' what makes you an adherent to a polytheist religion is the simple fact of your acceptance of that particular cosmology.

This core difference derives from a more profound difference in the ways that polytheists and monotheists see the world and divinity. For a polytheist, the world is inhabited by many centres of meaning and value, none of which truly supplant or undermine the other. Order therefore arises from difference and chaos organically, the way that people with completely different backgrounds and histories and ideas can find themselves all becoming friends. For a polytheist, the world is a lot more like a forest and a lot less like a garden.

“POLYTHEISTIC” PLURALISM

Polytheism thus results in a kind of pluralism that can be a bit maddening for some, and potentially even seem post-modern or agnostic because of its willingness to accept the “truths” of others without necessarily their universals.

Consider, for example, what is probably the primary reaction most people of good will have when someone else tells them they have seen a ghost. For most of us, such an account is something of interest but not of judgment. We're willing to accept fully that the other person experienced something they call a ghost without necessarily then deciding that ghosts must therefore exist. Something was experienced, and the person who experienced it called it a ghost, and that's all the account usually matters.

In fact, I suspect this kind of pluralism is a bit of the default state for most people who are not otherwise captured by ideology. Consider the most common reaction I've heard from people in person regarding the matter of trans identity. Most are happy to accept that someone considers themselves a different gender from their biological sex, and are even willing to make efforts to use the pronouns a person requests.

In this kind of pluralism, what doesn't necessarily follow from such interactions is a simultaneous change in the personal beliefs about what is a man or what is a woman—*because it doesn't need to*. It doesn't need to for the exact same reason that we don't need to change our own cosmology just because someone we know says they saw a ghost. We can accept their account of things and also our own without conflict, and then go about the business of actually living life alongside each other.

The monotheistic framework—and its modern offshoots, including secular liberalism and even atheism—deals in universals. Universals are not necessarily a bad thing, we should note, because ideas like “universal human rights” are products of this way of thinking. So too, unfortunately, are a lot of our ideas about identity, government, and the nation-state.

To understand how this works in personal relations, consider again the matter of ghosts. If a person claims they saw a ghost, the monotheist framework then poses a binary question: “*are there ghosts, or are their not?*” If the listener doesn't believe in ghosts, then they are likely to dismiss the claim of the speaker. If they do, they're likely to accept it. But if the speaker insists and is persuasive, or if the listener has a lot of reason to otherwise trust the speaker, then a crisis of belief will arise.

Or consider again the matter of trans identity. While a pluralistic/polytheist framework is content to accept someone's professed identity without necessarily changing their own conceptions, the monotheist framework asks, “is this person *really* a woman (or man)?”

A lot of the conflict—both from sides—around trans identity comes down to the need for *universality* within a monotheist framework. So, people who would insist “no matter how you feel, you are *actually this* instead” are approaching the question from a monotheist framework. But also, those who insist it isn't enough merely to accept someone's preferred identity—but rather one must also change beliefs about what constitutes a man or a woman—is likewise using the monotheist framework.¹

To put this in simpler terms, polytheistic pluralism allows for multiple realities that don't necessarily cancel out each other, even if they are in conflict. I might believe something completely different from someone else about a thing, but that's what makes life more

1 Both of these reactions are really derived from Protestant thinking, especially in its focus on belief over action. It is not enough to do the right thing, but you must first *believe* the right thing in order for the action to actually be righteous.

interesting and rich. It's only when we insist there is only one true belief about a thing that we come into conflict.

By now you've probably noticed that "polytheist" and "monotheist" don't precisely map to particular religious affiliations. There are plenty of Christians and Muslims who approach the world from a much more pluralistic framework than the doctrines of their religions would like them to.²

This is because this kind of pluralism is really the human default when ideology doesn't take hold of us. Most of us are usually pretty happy to just get along with people regardless of their opinions of the world. The reason for this is that opinions don't really constitute the majority of our in-person social interactions. You're not usually verifying your bus driver's opinions about capitalism or Black Lives Matter before taking her bus, or checking to make sure your grocery clerk has the same ideas about abortion or Brexit as you do before you let him ring up your order.³

We generally prefer to just live alongside each other without ideological conflict, unless there is some external pressure exacerbating those ideological differences.

EITHER-OR? OR AND-ALSO?

All of this, by the way, was the subject of my first presentation at a polytheist conference earlier last decade. I'm sure I wrote it less succinctly than I've written all this, and I know my hands were shaking fiercely as I read from a print-out of my speech, but regardless it went very well.

The next year I volunteered to co-organize a conference outside of Seattle where I then lived. That was a lot of work, but the result was even better than I had hoped. We had several hundred people attend, and there are still presentations from that conference that I find shaping the way I think now.

2 The conservative Christian writer G.K. Chesterton is probably the best example of a Christian with a polytheistic pluralist framework.

3 Of course, social media completely changes this dynamic, but I am again only speaking to in-person interactions. There's nothing in-person about communicating through a screen in your hands.

I should probably disclose something else at this point: I was a bit of a hotheaded American leftist back then. I'm still a leftist and still a polytheist, but fortunately a lot less hotheaded.

The publisher I run and co-founded—Gods&Radicals Press—started around the time of that second conference. As the name implies, it was about polytheism and leftism, though of course we were also okay with people who weren't deeply identified with more than one of those threads. We also happily also published writing from Christians, Sikhs, Jews, Atheists, and Muslims.

All this was happening right about the time political stuff in the United States was heating up. The 'alt-right' had also recently become a media trend⁴ that everyone was worried about, and at the same time Antifa actions started against specific figures in that movement. I got caught up in all that, as did other polytheists and I think every other sub-cultural movement in the United States.

I was on the "good" side, meaning Antifa. That's not how I look at it now, but at the time I was pretty damn certain one side was completely right and one side was completely wrong and I wasn't going to be on the wrong side. That's where I fucked up really badly. Looking back, I realise there wasn't actually a right side and a wrong side at all, just two opposing ideological positions rising out of the same monotheistic universalism I'd been arguing against at conferences and in speeches.

If I had to make a decision between only those two positions again, of course I'd probably take the same choice again. As much as that early opposition to the alt-right has now morphed into a woke neoliberal juggernaut pushing people into *ressentiment* and totalitarian thinking, the other side was just plain idiotic and mean.

That being said, *those weren't the only possible choices*, and it's taken me years to understand the damage I caused and what I became by refusing to look for those other options. I accumulated lots of social capital, sure, but the polytheist movement I had been so eager to build still hasn't recovered from what I did.

What I did, by the way, was basically repeat the same formula from George W. Bush that the woke in the United States also repeat: "you're either with us, or you're with the terrorists." You can replace any word you like for "terrorist" in that equation. No matter

4 Proving later to have been mostly a media-driven creation itself, but that's for another essay.

what, it always ends up in the same monotheist insistence on universalism. There are ghosts or there aren't, and there's absolutely no possible other way of approaching the matter.

DR. EDWARD BUTLER AND THE MATTER OF *INDICA*

I write this all as background for something else, which is what has happened to a man I met at that first conference. He was a goofy looking man, a professor with obvious professor glasses, and he asked me a question that was the absolute best compliment I'd ever received.

"Where did you go to grad school?" he asked.

I sheepishly admitted never even finishing college because of poverty, and rather than walking away in disgust, he smiled and said "that's a shame. You write better than most academics I know."

That guy? His name is Dr. Edward Butler. And he recently got in lots of trouble from some in the woke crowds. This isn't the first time for him, by the way, as he was previously doxxed by an anonymous account with a cryptic suggestion of violence.⁵ What he did this time (I might as well be answering "but what was she wearing?") was start a polytheist initiative with an organization known as Indica.

Indica is an academic and cultural organization promoting "global study of indigenous knowledge, seeking to bring about a renaissance of indigenous wisdom," and as its name implies, it's based in India.

The problem to Edward Butler's accusers is that some writers and academics with Indica lean heavily towards the Hindu identity movement known as *hinduvta*. It's a national identity movement, often seen also as nationalist, and has been primarily championed by the conservative ruling party in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

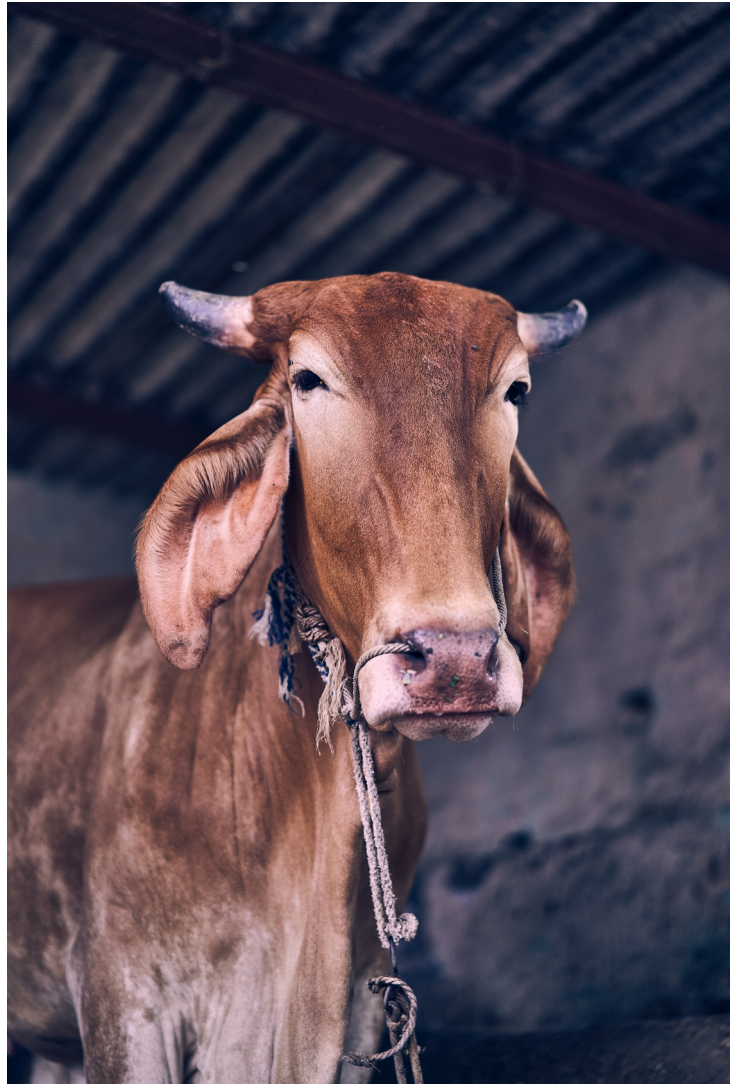
To get into all the nuances of this problem would take another full essay, but a few things can be cleared up quickly. Firstly, Indica isn't part of the BJP nor the nationalist youth

5 Fortunately, they'd gotten the wrong address and the blog host took down the doxxing attempt for harassment.

movement, the RSS. Secondly, their usage of the term *hinduvta* is much broader and less political than the way the BJP uses it, approximating the way “blackness” is used in the United States as a cultural identity formation. And third, their general focus on “dialogue across civilizations” and focus on Indic religions (including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) rather than just Hinduism easily make false the accusations that Indica is really a Hindu-superiority outfit.

That being said, there’s certainly good reason to be a little worried about such things given the current situation in India. There are indeed many violent attacks against Muslims by Hindu nationalists, just as there have been many violent attacks on Hindus by Muslim extremists. Also, there have been very violent attacks on both groups by the secular Maoist Naxalites, much of whose funding comes from extortion and opiate production and trade.

Likewise, India is still severely suffering from its history as a British colony and the centrist Indian National Congress party’s disastrous neoliberal policies. Just as in Brazil and in the United States, the legacy of this kind of globalized capital has been community



destruction and labor crises, creating fertile ground for right wing populism. Though Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, and Donald Trump are hardly the same people, they are quite similar in their positions as figureheads of populist movements.

What distinguishes Modi and the BJP from the others, however, is the particular colonial history of India. Again, India has only been independent from the British for about 70 years, and with British rule came a kind of enforced identity. Under colonial

administration, religious affiliation became an identity category, something to be marked on official documents rather than profession or tribal affiliation. Thus, for the first time in their several thousand year old civilization's history, the people who lived in those lands suddenly had to define themselves by what they believed.

As I mentioned, polytheistic religions don't really do this. There is no initiatory or cultural gatekeeping of who is in or who is out, nor even a sense of either/or when it came to religions, yet on account of their colonial masters they suddenly had to define who they were *in opposition* to who others were.

Here's a good description of the problem the British caused:

The need to distinguish the Indic religions from other religions in India lies in the impact made by the introduction of the Western term *religion* in the census operations carried out by the British in India, especially from 1871 onward. In these decennial or decadal censuses, the participants were asked to indicate their religious affiliation largely on the British assumption that one could only belong to one religion at a time. Some Indians began to feel over the years that this was having the effect of compartmentalizing what we might call the Indic religious tradition into four separate "religions." The key fact to keep in mind here is that the Indian followers of these four members of the Indic religious tradition did not treat their own relationship to these traditions necessarily in exclusive terms prior to the British intervention. In the Western conception of religion, a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim had to be considered members of different religions (despite the fact that they worship one and the same God), whereas *in the Indian conception of religious life, one could be a member of more than one tradition at the same time*. Modern Nepalese, for instance, freely describe themselves as both Hindu and Buddhist, as they lay outside British jurisdiction.⁶

So, it was the Christian British who imposed a kind of monotheist thinking about religion onto the population of India. Monotheism tends towards exclusion, because it posits there is only one god. On the other hand, polytheism has a peculiar and sometimes amusingly additive feature, seen easily in the frustration of Christian missionaries when the

6 Emphasis mine. From a think tank that is highly critical of *hinduvta* and participated in an anti-*hinduvta* conference ("Dismantling Hinduvta"), yet otherwise has a very fair assessment of the historical forces that created it: <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/on-the-difference-between-hinduism-and-hindutva/>

indigenous peoples they tried to convert merely just *added* Jesus to their pantheon of gods and spirits.⁷

From this colonial mess then arose the problem of identity in India, a problem that *hinduvta* attempts to resolve. *Hinduvta* poses the question, “what does it mean to be a Hindu?” in order to answer a question imposed upon them by the British: “are you a Hindu?”

The answers to those questions have been often quite catastrophic and full of dead ends, especially in the hands of nationalist political movements. Here, though, any American reading this needs to be aware that what seems like an obvious political parallel to the situation in the United States isn't a parallel at all. Though adherents to Indic religions (Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Sikhism) have been the majority in the territory of India, they were also until 70 years ago the oppressed colonized peoples, ruled over by British authority.

Also, the early nationalist movements in India were formed under colonial rule. That is, they were *national independence* movements, and there were many of them. Some (including the movements that eventually gained acknowledgment from the British) were liberal secularist movements, while others articulated their anti-colonialism based on cultural and religious identity (drawing a distinction between their colonial masters and the people who were being oppressed by them).

Thus, the inclination of many to compare *hinduvta* to American white nationalism is completely wrong. Instead, imagine if the First Nations in North America had managed to throw off colonial rule and then had to wrestle with the question, “what makes us native?” while trying to also figure out what to do with all the descendants of African slaves who were neither native nor part of the colonial regime but nevertheless wanted the same rights to land as indigenous people.

Though I'd love to imagine such a thing would all go quite smoothly and everyone would live happily ever after, we can look to the former Palestinian Protectorate (now Israel/Palestine), or the Congo, or South Africa, or even Venezuela to see how post-colonial states don't have an easy road to peace and national integration.

⁷ Santeria and Voudou are both excellent examples of this syncretic or additive polytheist tendency.

SACRED COWS



India is in the same position, and *hinduvta* is one of those proposed answers. On the one hand it's caused quite a bloody mess, but on the other hand organizations like Indica have attempted to make it more pluralistic. The problem is that the political situation there is really awful, and Indian politics is suffering from the same sort of ideological abandonment that we see in the United States left as well.

Take, for example, the issue of cows. Everyone knows cows are sacred to Hindus, right? Yet India also happens to be *one of the largest exporters of beef in the world*.⁸

How did that happen? Capitalism, of course.

But it's even more complicated than this. See, leftists in India (including Marxists) and more mainstream liberals fiercely oppose any bans on the slaughter of cows. Their reasons are varied: some think it's necessary to keep the poor alive (despite so much of the beef being exported rather than eaten domestically), while others argue that sacred prohibitions on cow slaughter are reactionary and even fascist. In all cases though, they articulate their

⁸ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/917207/top-exporters-of-beef-global/>

opposition to bans on cattle slaughter as a secularist issue, as a matter of “separation of church and state.”

Remember again, *the cow is a sacred animal to Hindus*. So here we come to the really complicated problem: the only major political party to argue that cows are sacred and campaign on a promise to end cattle slaughter was the right-wing/conservative BJP. And they did so through evoking *hinduvta*.

Now, the BJP aren't the only ones who actually believe the slaughter should be stopped, but they are the only major political party who has made this part of their platform. There is also leftist support for such a ban, but many such leftists have been smeared as reactionary or fascist because of their positions. One such person is probably the most renowned intellectual of the anti-globalisation movement, [Vandana Shiva](#), whose work with peasant *Dalit* (the “untouchable” caste) women protecting traditional seed knowledge has made her an enemy of many multinational corporations.⁹

Shiva herself does not appear to ascribe to *hinduvta* and has repeatedly written against identity-based violence (both by Muslims and by Hindus) many times, but none of that matters to her critics who now see anything associated with traditional Indic knowledge, medicine, and belief as essentially fascist.

This is the exact same problem we see in the United States now, where even people with clearly professed leftist beliefs and antifascist stances are seen as fascist when any of their ideas intersect with anything the “bad people” also believe.

This is what's happened also to Dr. Edward Butler. By working with an organization that stands for things which overlap with right wing iterations of *hinduvta* and iterates a de-politicized *hinduvta*, suddenly Edward Butler, in the words of one critic, “might prove to be a danger to the Pagan community, and since Hindutva is a form of fascism, that can't be tolerated.”

Other critics have been even more alarmist in their assessments, suggesting completely without evidence that Butler is himself a fascist. However, in one of the most telling attacks, a writer compares all attempts that the accused made to explain himself as the

⁹ It's also led to her being smeared as a reactionary and potentially fascist by American Antifa-aligned people as well, since her anti-GMO stance and focus on traditional beliefs fits into their manufactured fear about “eco-fascism.” As is so often the case, such tendencies [often take the side of American capitalism](#).

equivalent of a conservative explaining that “not everyone who voted for Trump was a racist.”

Therein we see the crux of the matter: the particular brand of American ideological certainty that we variously call “woke” or “social justice,” which is ultimately a continuation of George W. Bush’s infamous equation, is being applied internationally.

Edward Butler is no fascist, and Indica is not a fascist project. I personally suspect *hinduvta* will lead to the same ideological dead-end that every other identity politics (blackness, whiteness, etc) leads to, but there is nothing inherently fascistic about it. In the hands of right wing political parties, it can do an immense amount of damage, but if enough people attempt to steer it away from an imposed monotheist framework (“who is Hindu and who is not”) into a pluralistic framework (which appears to have been the mission of Indica, especially in their focus on Indic religions, rather than just Hinduism) than it has the potential to be quite liberating.

LEFTIST IDEOLOGICAL ABANDONMENT

A more global issue to all this is the question of religious belief and cultural identity and how that plays out within neoliberalism. In India, religious belief is an obstacle to the expansion of capitalist markets, at least as far as Hindus are concerned. On the other hand, since the Muslim and Christian minorities have no religious problems with cattle slaughter and beef consumption, neoliberal politicians and capitalist interests manipulate them against the Hindu majority.

An interesting parallel to this situation has occurred in Europe, where some nations have tried to institute (or succeeded in) bans on *kosher* and *halal* butchery of cattle in the name of “animal welfare.” Of course, if such governments were actually interested in animal welfare, they would instead ban cattle slaughter itself, or at least massively reform the industrial mass production of beef.

But that’s not the point at all: instead, *kosher* and *halal* butchery strictures (which are both religious and cultural) are a barrier to capitalist expansion of beef production, and thus must be undermined. This is why Muslims and Jews who protested these moves were then

smear as “religious extremists” in Europe, just as Hindus protesting cattle slaughter in India earned the same title.

This point is crucial for our longer conversation on the current state of the left and the problem with “woke” ideological formations, because in Europe the left parties are generally in support of these government policies, just as in India. Thus, populist movements with “right wing” features arise as the only political forces which speak to these interests.

The problem is made worse by the reactive nature of leftists once these populist movements arise. In the United States, there was a genuine opportunity for populist opposition to neoliberal policies to become a broad based leftist movement. Both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders spoke strongly against the neoliberal policies that had led to stagnant wages, massive job losses, and increasing debt—all of which were populist concerns. Unfortunately, by painting the concerns of such people as deplorable, reactionary, or racist, those concerns were ceded to the right and Trump won in 2016.¹⁰

I have long argued—as have many other leftists who have rejected the identity politics of the “woke” ideological framework—that the only way to stop right wing populist movements is to stop abandoning ideological territory to them. As Marx and Engels noted, the primary result of capitalist expansion is the destabilization of cultural traditions and societal relations.

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is

¹⁰ Of course, Trump actually did nothing about those populist concerns, just as the BJP—which made much of their opposition to neoliberalism in their campaigning—implemented many of the same pro-capitalist policies advocated for by the previously dominant neoliberal party.

sacred is profaned,¹¹ and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Populist movements are reactions to this destabilization, and right wing political parties are quite adept at steering these reactions towards their own ends. Leftists, on the other hand, became even more reactive and make no distinction between the rightist political manipulation of the concerns of the people and the concerns themselves.

Again, though I think *hinduvta* is probably a dead-end, what Indica has been attempting to do with it has potential beyond India. Dr. Edward Butler's work with them to expand dialogue about polytheism across the world likewise has great potential, or did before he was accused of being fascist for that work.

Years ago, I made the very same mistake as his accusers. I failed to notice I was trapped in a monotheist framework, forced myself to answer a question whose only answers were binary. I was an idiot back then. I caused some harm and derailed something that is only now getting back on its tracks. Unfortunately, it looks like it's pretty eager to go off the rails again, and I'm not very hopeful they won't make the same mistakes I did.

We need to stop doing this. We need to stop giving ground to right wing movements and abandoning sites of potential transformation. The world cannot be neatly divided between "fascist" and "antifascist" or even "right" and "left" anymore than it can be neatly divided between "Western" and "Eastern," "Christian" and "Hindu," and "white" and "black." These are all rigid and fragile categories that we've created through a monotheist framework of thinking, forcing universals where they cannot be applied.

The alternative to this is pluralism. I call this polytheistic, but it isn't exclusive to polytheist religions. And I deeply believe it's our default state, the organic and natural way we tend to relate to each other without external ideologies setting the co-ordinates of meaning for us.

Many gods, one god, and no god—these are only oppositional categories if we insist they must be. As Vandana Shiva noted in one her essays, Muslims and Hindus resisted colonial rule together because of their shared desire to be free from authoritarian rule. That rule was capitalist and modernising, and it has reproduced itself in neoliberal policies from both the Congress party and the BJP ever since independence. That older kind of solidarity

¹¹ Cows in India are literally the "sacred" becoming profaned through capitalism.

is closer to the older solidarity in the early American colonies: African slaves, poor European workers, and colonized indigenous peoples intermixing and fighting together against colonial rule.

We need that kind of pluralistic solidarity again, and the only way to get there is to stop responding to Empire's demands that we define ourselves—and each other—through either/or categories.

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