

Outline your understanding of polytheism and explain in relation to 2 examples.

Polytheism is the beliefs that more than one transcendent being exists. The belief thus contradicts the monotheistic recognition of, one 'true' God only. In monotheism this one Divine being is worshipped, unlike polytheism in which there are multiple deities all worthy or worship, but not always worshipped equally. Today the three major world religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all monotheistic and account for over 55% of the world's population. However, polytheism remains dominant in the majority of today's world religions. One similarity between monotheism and polytheism is that they both refer to the transcendent within a religion. To transcend is to go beyond or extend the normal boundaries of existence. The transcendent refers to the existence of a divine being outside of the material world, usually referred to as God. Polytheism emerged long before monotheism and dates as far back as the Ancient Greeks in the 8th Century BCE whom believed that their Gods resembled humans in their physical form but that they were separated by their supernatural powers and immortality.

Hinduism is an example of a polytheistic religion. Hinduism originated in India around 2500 BCE, making it one of the oldest living religions. The religion started out as a collection of different religious beliefs and gradually developed over 4,500 years to become the religion as we know it today. However a huge diversity of cultural groups within the Hindu faith that still exist today. The religion is unique in that its origins cannot be traced back to a particular historical figure. This is unlike Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. It has no set structure or creeds either and focuses on an individual's way of living rather than way of thinking. Although there is no sacred text, there are multiple Holy Books written in the ancient language **Sanskrit**. **The Vedas** is one example of a Hindu sacred text. It is a collection of hymns and poems used in special ceremonies today. **The Puranas** and **The Bhagavad Gita** are two other

sacred Hindu texts. The former president of India reflected this in saying 'Hinduism is more a culture than a creed'. Emphasis on way of living is called **Dharma**. Hindus believe that each individual is born millions of times until they become perfect. Our soul known as **atman** takes a different form or incarnation each time a person is born. The process of rebirth is known as **reincarnation** and the continuous cycle of rebirth is called **samsara**. In order to achieve liberation from samsara, Hindus try to live good lives. By doing this they will become closer to **Moksha**. Moksha is freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth. By achieving Moksha the soul will become peaceful and unified with God.

Brahman is the God-head, the origin of all creation in Hinduism. He is the ultimate source of human existence and he can never be fully understood or known. There are four stages in achieving Moksha called **ashramas**. It begins with the student, who leads a disciplined life. Then the householder who follows a career and takes responsibility for home and family. The third is the retired man who detaches from family concerns, during which one can devote oneself to studying the sacred texts. There is a final optional stage where the man is ascetic, he renounces the pleasures of the world and becomes totally devoted to his religion. There 4 do ashramas do not apply to women. In following their Dharma (way of living), Hindus hope to achieve good **Karma**. Each good action takes an individual a step closer to a good rebirth. Ultimately Hindus wish to achieve unity with the Brahman.

Shinto is another example of a polytheistic religion and like Hinduism, has no known founder. It emerged from the life and culture of the ancient Japanese in pre-historic Japan in the 6th Century. Shinto also does not have sacred scriptures or a particular doctrine. It is practiced by many Japanese as a folk religion, often alongside another religion such as Buddhism. **State Shinto** emerged in the 19th and 20th Century in an attempt to rid the religion of its Buddhist influences. In 1945 Shinto lost its status as the religion of the Japanese state. The word Shinto comes from the Chinese words **shen** meaning divine being and **tao** meaning way. There Shinto means the way of the Gods. The Gods or the spirit of Shinto are referred to as **Kami**. Kami are myriad and can be found throughout all of Japan, especially in natural forms like mountains, waterfalls and rocks where they may reside as an invisible force. Some particularly powerful humans can become kami when they die. One Shinto legend claims that the gods

that controlled the cosmos came to earth and inhabited any special elements of landscape. **Amaterasu** is the sun goddess and supreme deity of Shinto who has the potential to manifest in a human-like form. Every Japanese person lives within walking distance of a Shinto shrine. Amaterasu is worshipped at **Ise**, one of Japan's major shrines. She is the daughter of the two creator gods **Izanagi** and **Izanami**, who were lovers as well as siblings. Ritual rather than belief is at the heart of Shinto, members worship their gods at shrines known as **jinja** by using very precise rituals. It is vital that the rituals follow strict conventions of protocol, order and control and should be carried out in a spirit of sincerity, cheerfulness and purity. Religious experts known as shamans ensure that the rituals are being carried out correctly. There are number of distinguishing features of a Shinto shrine.

There is a sacred archway or gate that marks the passage into the holy grounds which are protected from evil influence. Followers of Shinto may request kami for favours during worship or give their blessing. The purpose of Shinto is to discover the wishes of the kami and to carry out these wishes. Everything, including the spiritual is experienced as part of this world, no transcendent world exists in Shinto. Shinto is not a way of exploring the world but rather focuses on rituals that allow humans to communicate with the kami. As an appreciation of being treated properly kami will intervene in our lives to bring benefits such as health. A devout follower of Shinto sees everyday as an opportunity to be of service (**matsumi**) to the kami. Shinto sees human beings as being fundamentally good and has no concept of original sin. This positive view of the human person arises from the Shinto belief that humans and all of nature are children of the kami and as a result must be fundamentally good. Bad spirits cause the earth's evils and therefore many Shinto rituals are intended to cleanse the person so that their innate 'goodness' comes through.

Polytheistic religions tend to be more diverse and accepting of other world religions. Perhaps religions such as Hinduism and Shinto have survived through the centuries due to the follower's refusal to accept the restricted way of life offered by monotheism. Polytheistic religions usually don't have a sole founder or a divine text, this is reflected in the Hindu and Shinto faith which both have no known founder or set creed. Hinduism believes that their Gods are transcendent however In Shinto there is the belief that kami are present in the

material world and doesn't acknowledge the existence of another world that is divine. However both religions express the belief in one supreme deity i.e. Brahman in Hinduism and Amaterasu in Shinto.