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Gods, Absolute, Non-theistic Divinity, and Monotheism in Indian Philosophy of Religion: A Genealogical Critique of Evolutionary Theogony

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Abstract

There are various permutations of theism: henotheism, pantheism, panentheism, a/theism, and nontheistic divinity. There is debate whether the idea of OmniGod was ever achieved in India. R. C. Zaehner argued that an evolutionary transition from pratenaturalism of the Vedas to Upaniṣad's monism, culminated in monotheism with Purāṇas and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. I argue differently, beginning with ancient ritualistic polytheism, followed by unifying One Brahman, toward monistic panentheism and later non-dualism of *advaita* Vedānta. Under the influence of Aśaṅga, Buddhism elevated the Buddha as the Great Divine Replacement. As a response or reaction, Brāhmaṇism forged Īśvara as God with the World as his Body. By 13th century, theistic dualism separated Īśvara from his *creatio*. Even Nyāya rational philosophy was persuaded by monotheism as demonstrated in their teleo-cosmological argument for the existence of Īśvara. I attribute all this to sectarian and doctrinal shifts rather than to any evolutionary teleology and/or predestined historicist movement.

Keywords Gods · Henotheism · Pantheism · Monism · Henotheism · Panentheism · Monotheism · Zaehner · Müller · Mīmāṃsā · Śaṅkara · Bhagavadgītā · Krishna · Puruṣottama · Brāhmaṇic-Hindu theogony

Introduction

Hindu traditions toyed with various permutations of theism (from German *Theismus*, and Greek *theos*): the idea of a divine being that transcends human frailty, exuding superhuman powers, and is possibly immanent in the manifest cosmos. Broadly, these would include henotheism, pantheism, panentheism, a/theism, and even the idea of nontheistic divinity. But as to the decisive conception of a monotheistic (one

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and only one Supremely Real) Omni-God, there is debate whether such was ever achieved, and if so what were the origins, contours in philosophical theology, and also its cultural success. R. C. Zaehner has argued for an *evolutionary* matrix which he sets out in three phases or typologies. The first of these is Vedic pratenaturalism (close to paganism), which is a belief in and supplication of myriad of gods and deities. The next is monism, which one finds elaborated in the Upaniṣads (although generally referred to as nondualism). Then comes the third and final phase with the emergence of monotheism, or the belief in one single Supreme Deity or Omni-God. The latter for Zaehner comes into maturity with the *Bhagavadgītā*; thus moving Hinduism toward becoming a close kindred of the Abrahamic traditions with their one Supreme Divine Being as Creator. I may be excused for using Zaehner as a ‘foil’ to question all pretensions to and projection of *monotheism* in Indian philosophical theology. The paper thus argues for a different genealogy of Indian monotheism, if *monotheism* it must be. It first traces the kind of theism that was prevalent in the Vedic age, and how henotheism (*à la* Max Müller 1891) with traces of polytheism marked the ritual necessity in the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas. The Upaniṣads with their proclivity towards discovering a unifying theory of everything or the One Principle that accounts for diversity in matters sacred and profane, moved closer to monistic pantheism, with only a smattering of divinity, which was later developed in the nondualist ontology in Vedānta. However, Buddhism came into prominence and threatened to undermine the vestiges of the multiplex of divinity and the very idea of a unifying Brahman; concomitantly, anxiety arose that the Buddha might be cast as the Great Divine Replacement. I argue that Buddhism provides the cornerstone for the shift from the variants of theism toward a more decisive monotheism in India. In other words, thereafter, Brāhmaṇic-Hinduism rallied to extract a monotheistic divinity from the bygone theosophies – even out of the indeterminate conception of Brahman in the Upaniṣads and its later permutations in Advaita – but more especially by way of the Viśiṣṭādvaita panentheism, aligned with the now popular cult of Vaiṣṇavism, that Rāmānuja (11th cent.) and his followers had embraced. This gave rise to the conceptually puzzling theogony of *Īśvara* as the World-Soul of Brahman, and the world as the Body of God – with disparate souls in-between. Madhva (13th cent.) of the Dvaita school completes the trajectory and heralds in a decisive dualist conception whereby there is total separation between Brahman as God and the manifest realm of the world and all-souls. Even Nyāya rational philosophy was persuaded by a monotheistic God as demonstrated in their teleo-cosmological argument for the existence of such.

While the main intent of the paper is to argue against R. C. Zaehner’s *evolutionary* thesis of the emergence of monotheism in India as if it was an outcome of a natural theological progress, I wish to begin the paper elsewhere and move through a series of observations in what will effectively be a conceptually-informed genealogical survey and critique of Zaehner’s position. I shall not be concerned with elements of theism, including monotheism, that may have come to prevail in popular cultural and sectarian practices, such as in the *Purāṇas* and Epics (barring the *Bhagavadgītā* for reasons I shall explain shortly), but with the philosophical-cum-theological development of the theistic concepts. Of course, it goes without saying that in the case of Indus Valley culture, since the inscriptional texts from that period remain

undeciphered, we only have speculative evidence from archeological findings and such artifacts as have been unearthed. So I begin with the Indus Civilization in the first section and then move to the Vedic (Indo-Āryan) age of the gods, and developments thereafter.

Indus Valley Culture and the Vedic Age

By all accounts, what we know as the Indus Valley Civilization is traced back to the representative cities in Mohenjo-daro, Harappā and Lothal, spanning a huge territory from what in present-day is Pakistan through to Gujarat; it was built mainly around a thickly-populated urban or city-based culture, and was sustained by surplus agricultural production, a centralized authority that managed social arrangements and its living provisions, such as flat-roofed houses, civic baths, sanitation, granary, irrigation, and viaducts delivering water (Madho, 1958: 128 with Plates 1-VII). The people were engaged in craftshood (making pottery, utensils, jewelry from precious stones) that enabled a thriving commerce and trade; their entrepreneurship likely extended via land and sea routes to Persia (Iran), Sumer in southern Mesopotamia, Hellās or Ancient Greece, and perhaps Egypt also. Archeological findings date the Indus (Valley) culture from around 4000–3000 BCE; while their unearthed inscriptions in Brāhmī script also have not been deciphered, it is believed that their speech was not Sanskrit but a form of Dravidian lingua (with closest semblances to south Indian languages, especially pre-modern Tamil). It lasted some 2000 years and then declined in stature (due it seems to changing climatic conditions whence their source-rivers dried up and land became inarable). There are suggestions also that the ferocious attacks led by the semi-nomadic Āryans from north-west (according to Max Müller's speculation, the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan in Central Asia), or (perhaps via) Iran (according to Max Müller's speculation, the Pamir mountains of Tajikistan in Central Asia) [Āryānām: land of Indo-Iranians] may have destroyed at least the Harappan Civilization (Ghosh, 1958: 128). Some of the religious proclivity and practices of the Indus people quite likely became absorbed into the Indo-Āryan society that developed pastoral care, animal herding and a ritual-based culture, circa 2400 up to 1500 BCE (Wilkins, 1900: 7). This occurred in their early habitat in the Sapta-Sindhu region – where the rivers Sindu and Sarasvatī flowed – that in time spread eastwards and came to dominate much of the subcontinent, barring pockets in central, south, very north and east Bhāratavarśa (early name for India). (*Indus* is a Latin version of 'Ἰνδός' (*Indós*) in Ionian Greek, from which came the name 'India', and eventually the epithet 'Hindu' which has its roots in Proto-Persian 'hiⁿdus') (Chatterji et al. 1958: xlvi). Their literary language was Āryan (or Indic-European), from which was developed an earlier form of Sanskrit – and also ancient or Proto-Iranian – as is evidenced in their paramount text, the Ṛg-Veda. They continued to compose other Vedas through to the Upaniṣads. Their religion revolved around sacrifice and *homa* or ritual fire-worship, that was also common in Iran of the *Avesta* period and in certain Indo-European regions to the northwest (Chatterji, 1958: 81). But what sort of ideas of the divine or divinity were present or influential in both

Civilizations? I will begin with the Indus Civilization and then in the next section move to Indo-Āryan Civilization.

The Indus people who may have come from the Mediterranean regions (possibly a racial mix of Mediterranean, Proto-Australoid, Alpinoid and Mongoloid) seemed to be nature-worshippers, as the unearthed seals appear to suggest; definite images of Mother-Goddess, but also of phallic-like emblem of a male god resembling Rūdra or Śiva in the subsequent Vedic pantheon, along with headgear adorning torso of animals, are widely depicted. They were largely matriarchically inclined and their religious practices appear to presage later Hindu practice of *pūjā*, as a form of ‘flower giving’ or ‘smearing paste’ (Madho, 1958, 122, 128; Chatterji, 1958: 82). But iconic worship was conspicuous by its absence, as were veneration of cow (except for horned bulls) and much less the use of horses in sacrifice (it is doubtful if they even knew of horses, cows, elephants, goats). However, remnants of the culture of nature-worship plus the Mother (likened to earth) as a major Spirit-Protector survived and were passed on to revivalist (hybrid) traditions in post-Vedic India (Chatterji, 1958: 82–83).

Beginnings of Brāhmaṇic Onto-Theology

The Vedas (from *vid* ‘to know’, ‘wisdom’) signifies knowledge or teachings that was “heard” (*śruti*) and transmitted at first orally by a number of seers (*ṛṣis*) or sages, and only later came to be written in an early form of Sanskrit, as mentioned earlier. The Vedas are four in number: the Ṛg-Veda, among the earliest, Yajur-Veda, Sāma-Veda, and Atharva-Veda. Each Veda is divided into four sections, the *mantra* or hymnal section, called the *Samhitās*; the elaborative portion with formulas for performing ritual and sacrifices, called the Brāhmaṇas; forest reflections called the Āraṇyakas; and philosophical-speculative portion called the Upaniṣads. Since the Upaniṣads are taken to be the concluding (‘end’ – ‘*anta*’) portion of the Vedas they are known as Vedānta, which also names a prominent system with numerous branches and sub-schools within Brāhmaṇic-Hindu philosophy (to which we shall come later). The Vedas, for all intents and purposes, provided the impetus and the framework for development of the more important ideas and doctrines of Hinduism.

Ṛg literally signifies ‘praise’. So the Ṛg-Veda is much ado about praise of *devas* or *devatās* (from ancient *deiwo*: ‘shinning’, ‘luminous’, ‘light’, hence ‘light-beings’, cognate with Greek *deus*, *deitas*, ‘deity’), and encompasses basically anthropomorphic depictions of forces of nature, but especially *Agni*, Fire (Ogień), *Vāyu*, Wind, and *Sūrya*, and Sun (the Vedic Triad). Their praiseworthiness is in proportion to their greatness and functionary place in the sustenance of the universe and all those who dwell in the vast cosmos, the celestial and terrestrial realms alike. All beings including ‘three hundred, three thousand and thirty-nine gods’ have been engaged in worshipful praise (Wilkins, 1900: 9). Although not self-existent, the gods themselves nevertheless through sacrifice obtained immortality – a boon they would likely lose if sacrifice to them in turn is not continued: hence the obligatory *mantras* ordained in the Ṛg-Veda and Sāma-Veda for each of the gods, along with the where-withal of the appropriate rituals in the Brāhmaṇas.

It is to be noted that while there is in the andromorphic vein an imaginative personification of the deities, the characteristic features are however not so well-defined (so the sun is not shown as having limbs, though the moon boasts a smile). Still they appear to share certain supplementary attributes belonging to things in the same domain that they oversee; thus, e.g., luminosity for Dawn with its hue-blazed skies; fire for Sun, as well as for lightening and in micro-forms on earth, such as heat, oven-fire, and bonfires of vanity. Alternatively, they assimilate attributes from each other, including moral ones – such as ferociousness or alternatively beneficence, say, between Agni and Rūdra, Varuṇa and Mitra. A deity could come to pervade all of nature, such as Aditi, being (literally) boundless, identified with air and heaven and all that is born (Chatterji, 1958:89). This configuration of nature-deity indeed speaks to a skewed form of pantheism, so it is hard to form a definitive image of such a deity that delineates the mental and moral characters in image-form – hence it remains aniconic and non-idolatrous (Wilkins 12).

How then should we account for the polyphony of barely iconized Vedic deities, in particular Indra, Vāyu, Varuṇa, Aditi, Sūrya, Agni, Prajāpati, Soma, Yama? The question arises as to how can any being be said to personify nature's forces and the elements? Early Orientalists (in the 19th century) pondering this question pointed to another aspect of the deistic orchestra being evolved that is important to rehearse before we move on. This is insightfully noted by Max F. Müller, who opined that each god could take turns at being pervasively superior in their own right, a plati-tudinal theogony that he names as *henotheism* and *kathenotheism*; the former was coined by Frederick Schelling, and the latter is an improvisation by Müller to signify the worship of one god after another (Müller, 1891; 1899: 40). According to the henotheistic typology, the seer holds 'the belief in the individual gods alternately regarded as the highest,' and for the moment treated the god being invoked in the *mantras* or incantations as though that alone was the absolutely independent and supremely real god in the presentification of the mind of the bard or engaged ritualist (Müller, 1894: 27–28; MacDonnell, 1897, 1900: 58; Wilkins, 1900:11; Oldenberg, 1897). Every divine member (whether of equal or unequal stature) of the pantheon in turn enjoys, at least in the ritual-sacrificial procedure, the premium divine status of being the supremely cherished transcendental deity (or as in cricket, each member gets a chance at the wicket, and all eyes are on his bat: he is the Śrīkant or king of the game, for that moment).

However, the same deity can also be untrumply demoted in due course, or may simply go out of popularity among the performers of the prescribed rituals, principally because the anticipated favours (*apūrvaphala*) were not forthcoming from the respective deity. Alternatively, the worshippers had moved on to another habitat where they may have discovered newer deities appropriate to their circumstance. Or, a not uncommon phenomenon, a deity, or large parts of the pantheon even, may find themselves supplanted by another more powerful and beneficent deity or two, such as in the rise and rise of Indra, the thunder-god, over several minor and popular deities. Among the latter would be Viṣṇu and even Rūdra (an earlier form of Śiva) – the two gods who later on become prominent and powerful with the transition to modern Hinduism (or one with a political slant where a preferred national god is promoted over all others). Müller elsewhere adjudged this cumbersome arrangement

and interchangeability, ascension and decline of gods to be a “chaotic theogony”, suggestive at best a form of “primitive monotheism” (Sugirtharajah, 2009: 167; Müller 1891).

I wish now to move to a small selection of hymns of cosmic proportions (meaning they engage in cosmological speculations) that appear to me to be of immense philosophical significance at the same time. One of the most telling hymns from the earliest Vedas, the Ṛg-Veda, is the following:

*In the beginning was neither Non-existence Nor Existence
Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with
no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life-force
that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through
the power of heat.
Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was
the first seed of time.
Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond
of existence in non-existence.
Who really knows. Who will here proclaim it? Whence
was it produced?
Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with
the creation of the universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?
Whence this creation has arisen — perhaps it formed
itself, or perhaps it did not — the one who looks down
on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows — or perhaps
he does not know.
Nāsadīya-sūkta [na-asat-na-sat] Ṛgveda X.129*

(Translated by Wendy Doniger, based on Renou’s French translation, 1981: 25–26.)

The seer is here wondering what it would have been like if there was really no existence (existent) of any kind at all to begin with (‘In the beginning’, *illo tempore*) and how out of non-existence anything could have arisen. And that even if there was some primordial existent, how this becomes fashioned into the world as we experience it? Is ‘creation’ due to the working of some mysterious hand? Who knows and who can tell? asks the seer, and he wonders if there is ever an answer possible to this question. The idea of non-existence (*asat*, literally non-existent), is taken up again and again in later literature, and is even made the impersonal ground of *sat* or the existent itself. Another hymn (X.72) very clearly speaks of there being *asat* or the non-existent from which the panorama of the existent (*sat*) is born. I have developed this line of paradoxical thinking further elsewhere (Bilimoria, 2019, 2020/2018, 2021a, 2024). What is important for our present purposes is to note that the Ṛgvedic seer has by no means committed himself to the facticity of existence or any existent for that matter; the gods even come after existence emerges – or as a consequence of the first sacrifice as the next hymn goes on to stipulate.

*The Puruṣa [masculine Man] has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes,
a thousand feet. He pervaded the earth on all sides and
extended beyond it as far as ten fingers.
With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice.
These were the first ritual laws. These very powers
reached the dome of the sky where dwell the
ancient gods.
Above this world is three quarters of Puruṣa
[transcending the world of manifestations],
But the quarter, which is in this world,
Appears again and again [regenerative],
And from that is born the beings that take food,
And those inanimate ones that don't take food...
whom gods worshipped with yajña (sacrifice)
The learned one who knows that Puruṣa
Whom the creator, considered as one before Him.*

This hymn in fact describes a well-orchestrated primeval sacrifice of the Cosmic Person by the gods that results in the formation of the various constituents of the celestial, natural and social orders. In other words, the dismembered parts of Puruṣa come to constitute the universe and its ‘furniture’. This includes the deities who nevertheless are said in the hymn to have performed the primeval sacrifice; but in effect it is *sacrifice that sacrifices to sacrifice*, and the gods only play a rhetorical role for poetical effect. The implication is that the role of the Puruṣa is then redundant, or that it is a figurative device to get things moving, and the gods who assume the role of the sacrificer are themselves the sacrifice (Doniger on X.30: 33). In this way the facticity of sacrifice and its sustaining power, even as the practice continues to the present day among devout Hindus in emulation (symbolically) of the first instance of sacrifice, is underscored. In the Brāhmaṇas (*Tattirīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.8.9.6), the gods are cast also as the efficient cause (*nimitta*) of creation, thereby opening up the suggestive postulation of a personal deity (or team of deities) as the efficient agency of the manifest world (Tull 2019). So Krishna in the *BhG* (*Bhagavadgītā*) is able to say “I myself am the sacrificial” (viii.2), though it is not clear if he is identifying himself with the Vedic emblem of sacrifice and so transpersonally one with sacrifice, or he is simply the recipient of sacrifice, an ambiguity that remains unclarified. One reading is that Krishna is identifying himself with Puruṣa of the Ṛg-Veda whose sacrificial dismemberment accounts for the creation of the world (as indeed Krishna calls himself in his transcendently higher form to be Puruṣottama – *Puruṣa-uttama*, highest among–, a point we shall return to in later section.)

Coming back to the Vedas, subsequent hymns attempt some different answers to the larger question, a prominent one of which relates the process of creation to the cosmogonic myth of the Golden Embryo or “Germ” (*Hiraṇyagarbha*) that rends apart the two outer crusts, one becoming the sky and the other earth, while the yolk is the sun, signifying the three worlds (Ṛg-Veda X.82. 5–6). Another tells

of the floating cosmic Egg giving birth to its own progenitor, Prajāpati, a supreme god and demiurge, who then sets about creating the worlds and the animate and inanimate creatures (X.121.I-10; Doniger 1981: 27–8). One interpretation of this symbolism is that it reflects an anthropomorphic extension of the normal human procreative or regenerative process from which the ideas of implanting the ‘seed’ in the ‘womb’ and birth are taken (Ibid 27). The human person, though, is still looked upon as no more than one of a number of the great and many marvels of creation. Much more importance is given to the cosmic order and to the gods, who appear to control the destiny of entitative nature and human beings alike. The social order that individuals collectively organize themselves into follows the ordering already established at the cosmic level. The blueprint, as it were, for the architectonics of human life is provided in the cosmic order along with a hierarchy, roughly along the lines of what was later to become the pervasive caste structure in the pan-Indic society.

Effervescent Devatās in Mantras: Mīmāṃsā Alternative

We should pause here to consider a variant reading of the deities (and the use of the supplicating *mantras*) in the procedural rite of sacrifice. This comes from the exegetical-scholastic school of Mīmāṃsā that developed an elaborate hermeneutics toward interpreting Vedic texts, more specifically the Brāhmaṇas. This was in respect of the ritual ramifications and the wherewithal (paraphernalia) as well as the outcome thereto of the successful enactment of sacrifice, *yajña*. Should the deities be pleased also, they will assist in the generation of *apūrva* as the ‘holding potency’ that in due course yields its *phala* or fruits – which could vary from a cow, son, to *svarga* or a blissfully sublime state. Without going too deeply into the technical details (which thankfully have been rehearsed elsewhere: Bilimoria, 2021b; Halbfass, 1980; Uebe, 2011; Yoshimizu, 2000), the assumption is that when a Vedic rite is performed in strict conformity with the ritual rules and injunctions laid down in the Brāhmaṇas, they will *eo ipso* produce the desired or decreed result, the desideratum via the tertium intermediary of the transcendently adduced *apūrva*.

Wilhelm Halbfass, on his part, calls this auto-generative causality “*apūrvic*,” which ‘seems to operate within a finite and well-defined set of conditions, a kind of closed system, in which it seems to be secure from outside interference; in bringing about its assigned result, the power of sacrifice, that is, *apūrva*, will prevail over other possible influences, including those which might arise from the general karmic status of the sacrifice’ (Halbfass 277, n32). The key term here is *apūrva*, literally, ‘the *no-ever* before’ efficacious potency that is causally generated and resides in the performer’s psyche (or in the *ātman self*) which in due course yields the outcome that is inscribed already in the prudential sacrificial or ritual calculus (‘If you desire *x*, then you should perform *y*). The doyen of the Mīmāṃsā, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa explains succinctly the thinking behind the trope of *apūrva*: ‘[W]hat produces *apūrva* is rather the impersonal power of the sacrifice itself, which is only unleashed, activated during the actual performance of the

sacrifice. The *apūrva* may be stored and coordinated by the soul [as food inside a camel]; yet it is not merely and not even primarily a quality or subordinate ingredient of the soul; it is and remains the effect and the stored power — *ālayaśakti* – of the sacrifice.’ (TV 369).

But what of the deities to whom the sacrifice is directed? What role do they play? Do they even exist?

The Pūrva Mīmāṃsā response can be stated briefly in these words (I am here drawing on my previous research chapter, Bilimoria, 2021b). The first point to note is that the words used to refer to the ‘*devatā*’ are usually in the dative case, being the recipient of sacrifice by the law of divine levity. I would call it the case of the elusive *dative* (the non-visible subject to whom something *x* is directed or given over: *agnaye, devāya, rūdrāya, gaṅgei*), for it is subsidiary to the substantive nominative and the connected, though, unmarked instrumental case, which is the *kārya* or *kāryeṇa* (by virtue of some act). That is all there is to the *devatā*, deity: an effervescently and effusively egregious, and only just efficacious, symbol that has no substantive being signified beyond its moment of iteration (Hiranmayananda 539). Hence, divinity, the gods, the idea of authorship or doer-ship in this ersatz process are simply *qualia* (*gauṇa*, substanceless radical properties) that are judged against another benchmark that has as its signified the sacrificial whole and *dharma*, the transcendental sum of all right rituals, ritual relations, and cosmic structuration and ordering of the universe as well as all right actions and practices. Even the gods have to conform to this “Law.”

There is an interesting narration in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, where the *yajña* as food fled from the gods; the gods panicked and said: “The *yajña* as food hath left us; this *yajña*, food, let us search for. [But] “How shall we search?” Answer: “By the *brahman* and meters or metrical form (*chandasa*). They consecrated the Brāhmaṇa with the meters; for him they performed the *yajña* up to the end; they also performed the joint offerings to the wives (of the gods).” It seems, the unity of Brāhmaṇa (as *mantra*) and the meters defines *yajña* and yield food as much for the gods, not otherwise, nor the converse (Bhattacharyya 1996: 119–120). The gods, knowing that they are not entitled or qualified to perform sacrifice, except perhaps the primordially primeval one, depend upon human performance and ‘gifting’ to their chosen deities.

The Prābhakāran commentator, Śalikanātha, categorically refutes the view that *yajña* is of the nature of worship of deities. He finds no authority for such claims. Further, he avers that the *devatās* have no form and therefore cannot comprehend worship offered to them. This rules out the possibility of their alleged grace. The *devatās* are *gauṇa* in the sacrifice (PPK, 2004: 413). To introduce notions of future life, or a divine being or beings who might influence this world (*lokasaṃsāra*) from an invisible world beyond, is mere speculation. And as the late and respected Nambudiri-induced *ācārya* Frits Staal adroitly noted, “the rendering of gods as ‘mental forces,’ which elsewhere smacks of excessive symbolism (as in the Alexandrian interpretation of the Homeric pantheon), is in Hinduism quite natural” (1975: 194) – or at least in the Mīmāṃsā and lately in the Ārya Sāmaj’s aniconic *homa* rites.

In short, the effervescent *devatās* only arise within sacrifice when invoked through the recanted *mantras* in which they reside and nowhere else. They vanish as soon as the work of sacrifice is completed and the desideratum of *apūrva* is

produced (Alper, 1989; Bilimoria, 2021b). A similar view is evidenced in Yajrayāna Buddhist's tantra or *bodhicitta*. The adept engages in concentrated visualization and repetition of *mantras*, which unleash vibrations that manifest themselves in the 'live' form of the deity being invoked – called the *mantrapuruṣa* – with whom a complete identity is experienced (Bhattacharyya, 1958: 521).

Zaehner's Praeternaturalist Reading of the Vedas

For R. C. Zaehner, there is in all of the Vedas a clear sign of what he calls 'preat-naturalism' (a suspension between the mundane and the mystical or miraculous) which is to be found among the Aboriginal people who allegedly follow a kind of primitive pantheism, that embraces a *pan-en-henic*, or an 'oceanic' vision of a nature; but the theogony also harks back to the pagan practices of pre-Christianity or in the Ancient Hellenic regions, and much of what is today Ireland and Europe (Zaehner, 1957: 28, 93, 118, 168).

So altogether the four trends that make up the divine typology are in a hierarchical order (from lowest to highest) that Zaehner stipulates:

- praeternatural (paganism, animism)
- dualist, typified in, Sāṃkhya-Yoga
- monistic, culminates in Non-dualist Vedānta
- monotheistic, characterized in Abrahamic religions (Zaehner, *ibid*)

Since Sāṃkhya-Yoga does not lend itself to theism (even though in the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali there is mention in passing of an *Īśvara*, Lord, but only as an exemplary model-Guru for the yogi to emulate, *YS* I.23), we shall direct our focus on the first and last two categories. From what we have discovered about the theogony of the Vedas – from Ṛg-Veda, the Mīmāṃsā, to Mahodaya Max Müller (despite his rhetoric of 'chaotic theogony'), this all seems to be a far-cry from the strand of *praeternaturalism* that Zaehner from his armchair in All-Souls College of the Faithful Departed in Oxford (ironically the immediate predecessor of Bimal Krishna Matilal to the Spalding Chair) projected on the early phases of Brāhmaṇic-Hinduism. Let us move to the next member of the typology.

The Vedānta Interface of Non-dualism or Monism

To be sure, in the Ṛg-Veda itself there are allusions to there being a (or some) 'One' divinity uniting the cacophony of gods (*mahat-devānām-ausratvam-ekam*. III. 55); or 'That One Truth, the sages call by different names' (*ekam-sad-viprābahudhā-vadanti*. Ṛg-Veda I.164.46). Is there some Principle, the learned sages of the Upaniṣads asked, by discovering which there could be unity and harmony of the variegated conceptions of the divine that have been doing the rounds since the

Indo-Āryans first began to practice sacrifice and offer oblations to the *devatās*? Aditi from the Ṛg-Veda (I.89.10) is presented as a likely candidate in whom is all that has been and all that shall be. T.M.P. Mahadevan (1958: 168) even reads “the essence of monism” couched in the *Nāsadīya-sūkta* we discussed earlier; he points to the term ‘*tad-ekam*’ that appears in verse 3 as referring in neuter gender to a non-anthropomorphic conception of the divine that is beyond the binary of existent and non-existent; it is not inert mass either, for it ‘breathed calmly.’ And as M. Hiriyanna put it: ‘We are here on the threshold of Upaniṣadic monism’ (1956: 43).

The Upaniṣads begin to use the term ‘Brahman’ widely to refer to the Ultimate Reality, the *sat* (being/real) extracted from the *Nāsadīya-sūkta*, whose connection with non-existent (*asat*) is never given up, if only subordinated to *sat* (being/real) as in the famous dialogue in Chāndogya Upaniṣad where the sage finds it contradictory to suggest (as in Ṛg-Veda X.72) that the universe had its beginning in the non-existent (*ChUp* VI, 1–7 see also III.19. 1–2). The cosmic view is that Reality is one substantial principle out of which have arisen the manifold constituents of the world. Brahman is at once the bearer of attributes (*saguṇa*), but is also without attributes (*nirguṇa*); the latter picks out in essence its undifferentiated and unconditional acosmic aspect. While the former description lends itself to a pantheistic vision (the view that world is fully God) (Drapkin, 1996), the latter negates that supposition, and veers more towards panentheism (the view that one part of divinity, Divine being, exceeds the divine *potentia et energiea* encompassed by the world) (Bilimoria and Stansell, 2010; Bilimoria & Lataster, 2020). Indeed, was it not said of the *Puruṣa* that three-quarters of his being remain in other possible worlds, or not as such confined to any worlds?

One can appreciate that Zaehner could not countenance the possibility of this conception being anything remotely like the Abrahamic conception of God with all His attributes (transcendence, omniscience, omnipotence, perfection), given that Brahman here is neither a demiurge (as in Plato’s *Timaeus*) nor a *deus ex machina*, situated apart from the world, while creating and sustaining it with his *Energiea*, Will and beneficent Grace. But such a matrix would also limit God; a limited or finite God is a contradiction in terms. Mahadevan goes on to present what could be regarded as the kernel of Upaniṣadic metaphysics recounted here:

[T]here is nothing other than Brahman; that Brahman is both material and the efficient cause of the world (*abhīnna-nimitta-upādāna-kāraṇa*). The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (III.1.1) defines Brahman as that from which beings are born, that by which when born they live, and that into which they enter on deceasing. In the same Upaniṣad (II.1), we are told that from Ātman (the Supreme Self) arose in succession ether, air, fire, water, earth, herbs, food and man [sic]. It also says Brahman desired. Having performed austerity, it created all this, whatever there is [is] here. Having created it, into it, indeed, it entered (II.6)... From these texts, it is clear that Brahman is the *sole* cause of the world, that it is the ultimate *intelligent* cause, and that all things, conscious and unconscious, are grounded in it (170).

The Advaita Nondualism or Radical Monism

Śaṅkara (8th cent.), regarded widely as the doyen of Advaitic nondualism, commenting on the passage in Chāndogya referred to above, takes an interesting route. He too resists implicating any predication of *asat* (non-being) to Brahman in any shape or form, and thus reads the passage as arguing that Brahman is the source-origin of the universe *sadaajāyata* (being is born), as such it has no dependency (*apekṣatā*) on anything else, external or otherwise. And while being the material as well as efficient cause of the manifold, Brahman does not undergo any transformation or modification (*vikāra*) (*BSB* II.1.30), i.e. it is *vivarta*, unconditional, ever-unchanging (*kūṭasthanitya*), formless, and imperishable (*avyakta*).

This view of Brahman's non-implicative origination of the mundane reality is known as *vivaraṇa* (to be contrasted with *pariṇāma*, transformative or emergentist origination, as modified by the later Bhāmatī school). As to *asataḥ* (non-existent), if at all it has any role to play, it is best left as a designation for the seemingly manifest world out of modification (*vikāra*), which at the end of day reeks of non-being, is redolent of self-arising illusions, along with our false sense of the body-mind complex as the ego-self (*jīva*, *ahaṃkāra*: self-maker), which in effect is non-self (*BSB* II. 2.10–40; III.2). In other words, nothingness is pushed over the border to align with the ontic constitution of world. The world of experience in the conventional status is non-being through and through; better described as a chimera of false projections, due to ineptitude of speech (*vācā*) in the theatre of the absurdly absurd (*ChUpBh* VI.1.4). This later position is set out more clearly in the Introduction to Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*.

The thesis that informs much of latter-day nondualist (Advaita) Vedānta is that there is only one reality, Brahman; the true Self (*ātman*) and Brahman are identical (i.e. metaphysically unified). There is here not a shred of *differenz* (*bheda*, *abhidā*) between these two designations for the self-same Absolute; all else, the world (*jagat*) included, are veritable products of false knowledge (*mithyā*, *avidyā*). The manifest manifold and the transcendental 'I' (*ātman* as Brahman) are as far apart as the moon is from the sun (Bilimoria 1995). One does not *become* Brahman; one (qua *ātman*) *is* already-ever Brahman. As for *Īśvara* or God he too is a false idea (*mithyā*) of the *jīva* (the embodied *ātman*, or 'soul'), a mere symbol adopted for the purposes of worship (*upāsana*) by the common folks. The Good Lord wields *māyā* (the world as appearance) and *śakti* (cosmic potency), and is thus immanent in the world; but He is also at the same time detached from it, transcendently, and merges back into Brahman, *deus absconditus* (K.C. Bhattacharyya, 1969, vol II: 249).

To the question, how does *mithyā* arise? The answer is simple as it is troubling also (for the non-initiated of course): simply by an act of superimposition (*adhāyasa*, *upādi*; *upādāna*: conditional origination) or better (as I prefer to call it) projective transference of ersatz concepts (of substantiality and properties) on the indeterminate and unconditional Brahman (No-thing-in-itself) as the substantial substrate, for all projections need a substrate to rest or fall on.

But where does Śaṅkara get this from? Not from his *metaontologos* or quasi-ontological argument he thought up himself, but from his reading of the Scriptures

(the Upaniṣads in particular, but also the *Bhagavadgītā*) and perhaps more consistently, from his predecessors, such as Gauḍapāda, a post-Nāgārjunian thinker (a potential crypto-Buddhist) (King 1989: 386). The latter was an arch illusionist-monist for whom there is no such thing or event as creation (*ajāti*), or arising, nothing else besides or other than the Absolute; *tathah na kutrāpi gacchan*: no one is born, no one dies, there is simply no world; they are all non-existent, despite the reasonable supposition of *māyā* (the world as appearance), about which too he had some grave doubts, for that (supposition) can be as much a conceptual trap; it is better to say there are no illusions either; there is just Brahman (full-stop) (Kaplan 1996: 140–1). Pressed further on the source of *mithyā*, Śāṅkara would say it is inexplicable or indeterminately ineffable (*anirvacanīya*, a trope used more widely by later Advaita proponents) (Bilimoria 2024).

The *Bhagavadgītā* a Monotheistic Text?

Now I come to Zaehner's main thesis which is that monotheism, which he sees as having a nascent stirring from the Vedas to the Upaniṣads and in popular culture onwards, culminates in the sermons of Krishna in the celebrated *Bhagavadgītā* (that many consider to be tantamount to the Hindu Bible) which he translates and adds copious annotations to each verse (Zaehner 1969). In this venture he has more sympathy with Rāmānuja's commentary – indeed with his philosophy of Qualified Non-dualism, *Viśiṣṭādvaita* – than with Śāṅkara's strident reading, for Śāṅkara is as Max Müller had earlier called him a 'decided monist' (1899: x). Zaehner bases his didactic argument basically on the emphasis (according to his reading) that Krishna places on *bhakti*, devotion, or what Zaehner also calls 'love towards'. *Bhakti* and *bhakti-yoga* are certainly significant themes in Krishna's sermon, for *bhakti* or 'loving devotion' is a recommended path (*mārga*) to attaining the *Nirvāṇa* of Brahman which is obtained through total detachment from physicality and all actions (iv.19). Does this not imply becoming 'one with Brahman', which is distinguished from 'union with [the Ultimate]' in a Personalist theology?

But a glaring question remains: how can there be love towards Brahman, let alone 'union with', when – going by the Vedānta teaching – Brahman is taken to be an impersonal absolute that transcends all substances, attributes and characteristics of a personal Godhead? Or if, as Max Müller ruefully noted, the rampant atheism of systems like the Sāṃkhya and Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā (he fails to mention Buddhism and Jainism in this context), 'often delayed the recognition of a Godhead... endowed with wisdom, power and will' in Indian philosophical systems: that is to say, 'they missed arriving at a concept of Godhead.' (1899: ix; Bilimoria, 2021c) Alternatively, could it mean that it is still possible to have love for an essentially impersonal, non-theistic idea of the Transcendent, possibly disguised as a personal God, or *Īśvara-Śakti* – the Conditioned Universal Powerhouse though abiding in Brahman, the True Unconditioned – as Śāṅkara was to aver in this commentary on the *BhG* xiv (p. 394)?

This indeed is also Arjuna's dilemma: which mode of devotional love is better: to the Imperishable and Unmanifest (*akṣara*) or to the Personal Manifest Lord? While Krishna goes on to extoll devotion to the Personal form, he does not by the same

token rule out the validity of devotion to the Imperishable Brahman; just that the latter is “hard for the embodied ones to reach.” (xii.5) But Zaehner is resistant; for his part he wishes to identify devotion to the highest, to Brahman the Imperishable, if at all that is possible, as nothing other than devotion to the Personal God, which in effect is to say that Brahman that is spoken of here is reductively none other than *Īśvara*. For, it appears to Zaehner that failing such an identification, the *BhG* would be reduced to upholding an impersonally-nuanced ‘monistic’ absolute as the highest principle for which, however, there could be no love (1957: 172). The argument here appears to be weak; so he sharpens his articulation in another work: *Introduction to Hindu Scriptures* (his translation of key canonical texts of Hinduism, 1984).

Here Zaehner revisits what it means for an integrated person ‘to see Brahman as It really is by means of the self as it really is as with a lamp...knowing Him, from all fetters he’ll be freed’ (1984: xiv), which appears in an aphorism in *Śvetāśvatara*, (II.15). He asks the reader to notice the following: ‘[T]hat even in this ‘fully theistic Upaniṣad’ (as are also in his view, *Kaṭha and Maitrī*; he could have added *Īśa* too), “liberation” is not interpreted as ‘union with God’; it is having access to Brahman (VI.10), being merged with Brahman (I.7), or it is to know God with ‘heart and mind as dwelling in the heart’ (IV.20). It is to experience God’s immanence in the human heart, but is not yet felt to be union with a *transcendent* God who is ‘beyond all essences as they really are’ (ibid xiv). The word that is being translated as “God” here is *Deva* (Olivelle renders it likewise, 1998: 419). But what is a “*transcendent* God”? Zaehner cuts short the discussion by surmising that the position taken at the end of the Upaniṣadic period is that ‘the immanent God is everything, the transcendent is largely irrelevant; and it is from here that the Bhagavad-Gītā takes on’ (perhaps he means, in glocal idiom, ‘takes-off’) (*BhG* xv-xvi; Zaehner 1969).

Gimme Shelter (in the Rolling Divine Kaleidoscope Stones)

Zaehner argues forcefully that there cannot be devotion to an imperishable, impersonal transcendental principle as represented by Brahman of the Upaniṣads, and it is for this reason that Krishna makes a distinction between himself and “Brahman-Nirvāṇa”. Hence, the ‘transition between the older [Upaniṣadic] idea of “becoming Brahman” and partaking in (for that is the root meaning of *bhakti*) the essence of the personal God has now been made. In chapter vi.15 we are shown that there is no contradiction between the two ideas. ‘ “Becoming Brahman” means the integration (*yuj-*, from the same root as *yoga*) of all man’s [read individual’s] faculties into the immortal “self”: this is Nirvāṇa and Nirvāṇa in the Gītā, so far from being a state independent of any personal God as it is with the Buddhists, in fact subsists in Him’ (xvii).

This God is even beyond the Imperishable: Beyond the Beyond. Brahman, one might be surprised to hear, is the eternal Being in God (as if to say Brahman is the substance without attributes in God’s all-pervasive presence). The fullness of this God can only be seen and experienced by one who is totally committed in devotion to Him, which can only happen when the devotee ‘has passed into eternity, only when he has “become Brahman”.’ And here Zaehner as he ends his prologue cites

the last few verses from chapter xviii (even if we accept the variant translation from that of van Buitenen, where ‘worship’ is elided in preference for ‘devotion’ and ‘shelter in me’ (ibid 143)).

By love and loyalty (devotion) he comes to know Me as I really am, How great I am and who; And once he knows me as I am, He enters [Me] forthwith (xviii.53–5)

Bear Me in mind, Love Me and worship Me, Sacrifice, prostrate thyself to Me: So shalt thou come to Me, I promise thee, For thou art dear to Me (xviii.64–5).

The final stage of deliverance then is “union with Krishna” and not with Brahman, ‘for Krishna who has supplanted the *brahman* both in theodicy and cosmology now surpasses it in eschatology too’ (1968:3). Zaehner has worked towards the conclusion that the *BhG* represents a form of “theistic mysticism” – by theistic of course he means *monotheistic* as in the Abrahamic traditions where God is heaved with abundant love, is Love Himself, and *God loves man* (1984: xix); or as Rudolf Otto would have it: this love finds its best expression in the complete divination and holiness in the figure of Jesus Christ (1923: 178). So is Brahman a passionate lover (*śṛṅgāri*) (of Rādhā of Vrindavan, having left behind his spouse-in-marriage Rukmiṇī), a blues flutist in *rāsālīlā* dalliance with a thousand *gopīs* (cowherds), Indian[a] Jones (partial to war), an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa (being God of gods, supplanting Vedic Indra), an earlier *Incarnatione* or *Imitatione Beatitudo* of Jesus. etc., – or none of the above (if monism were to carry away the day, or debate), or just *as though* he were? Krishna (albeit, his Perishable form) as with all Incarnations, dies: *deus absconditus* again, or as captured in Patrick Hutchings’ rhetorical adage: ‘Has God Been and Gone?’ (Sophia, 2021: 531–566).

Non-Theistic Perspective on *BhG*

However, there is another way of approaching the counterposition in Zaehner’s hermeneutics. First is that the premium prize that Zaehner places on *bhakti* and *bhakti-yoga* is unfounded, for the simple reason that Krishna virtually does the same for each of the *yogas* and aligned paradigms he sermons to Arjuna on. As he moves from one to next, it seems the preceding *yoga* is sublated by the subsequent one. Some scholars, such as Śāṅkara and, closer to our time, S. Radhakrishnan, are of the view that by the time we move from the theophanic chapter (xi) to the chapter of knowledge, *jñānayoga*; *buddhi-yoga* (xv-), Brahman as ‘The One’ above all else is reinstated as the highest goal of this quest; this is to be realized through intuition delivered by one’s own *buddhi*, or intelligence, which as *vijñānamaya*, intellectual consciousness, is the first uncovering of *ātman* in the *mayakośa* schema of the Upaniṣads; or in the words of *BhG*: *vyavasyātmika buddhirekā eva* (ii.41) – *buddhi* is the essence of the self (*ātman*). We may note a parallel here to the *Nous* in Plotinus, contemplating the ‘One’ scintillating its spark downwards as in a mirror or prism in the *psyche* (soul) (Aklan, 2018: 42).

Next, consider Krishna’s self-identification of himself with (or, better, as) *Puruṣottama* (the One beyond the Imperishable), a centrally important

ontotheological concept in *BhG*. Śāṅkara, while he accepts Krishna's claim to be *Puruṣottama*, is however reluctant to go the whole hog and identify Krishna with the impersonal Brahman as the Absolute, where the binaries of Perishable and Imperishable, the Created and the Creator, are equally products of false knowledge (Krishna is 'as though' *Puruṣottama*). It follows that if *Puruṣottama* is said to be beyond or higher than the perishable and imperishable then he is none other than Brahman Itself (xv.15). But Zaehner wishes to argue against the wholesale identification of *Puruṣottama* with the Brahman of monistic philosophy, insisting that the elusive *Puruṣottama* as the first god, God of gods, is as much Krishna's worshipful form (x.15). But this de-identification with Brahman, and re-identification with Krishna in his theistic-theophanic form which he discloses to Arjuna in a grandiosely numinous epiphany (xi), is not convincing, textually or philosophically.

Here is the counterargument toward the alternative interpretation. What I mean is that the exact nuance attached to *Puruṣottama* can be deciphered differently, and this will impact on the hermeneutics of text under question. To kick-off the case, we can consider first Eliot Deutsch's argument. He maintained that it would be a mistake to read some kind of ultimate dualism into the *BhG* simply on the basis of *Puruṣottama* being held up as the highest category. Deutsch avers: 'It is not so much that Brahman, the undifferentiated, distinction-less One is opposed to the *puruṣottama*; rather Brahman and *Īśvara* (the creative, destructive personal God) are each identified with It: each is a primary expression of spiritual being. While *puruṣottama* cannot be characterized totally as the Imperishable non-personal being, nor can It on the other hand be identified as *Īśvara* (or *Deva*, *Puruṣa*) without reference to Brahman as the "highest Spirit" ... [which is] at once Brahman and *Īśvara*, the first of the gods.' (Deutsch, 1968: 171–6). Deutsch's argument is that *Puruṣottama* should not be identified with *Īśvara* alone, for its valence embeds as much reference to the Imperishable non-personal being than to *Īśvara*, or the identification of *Īśvara* totally with Brahman (and vice versa).

Zaehner however in his retort will insist that the identity being forged here is primarily with *Īśvara* and only secondarily with Brahman, for *Brahman is the secondary aspect of the Personal God*. Zaehner has effectively turned Śāṅkara on his head (even though it is not known that he practiced physical yoga), for in his commentary on the same passages of the sermon in question, Śāṅkara would hold on to his reading of the other two quintessential canons of Vedānta (*BhG* being the third); although he follows more closely the teachings of the *Māndūkya* (there is only the One), *Chāndogya* Upaniṣads (the One Being as source of all) and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*'s teaching of the pointlessness of household-worldly existence – perhaps this is his bias.

Indeed, the 12th century aesthetician-cum-philosopher Abhinavagupta of the famed Kashmir Śaivism school (following his teacher Utpaladeva), retaining a strict monistic metaphysics, had identified Brahman with Śiva (read as *Puruṣottama*), the all-pervasive Absolute. While, on the one, he had personalized Brahman, the One supreme principle, on other hand, he advisedly does not introduce any kind of dualism between Brahman and Śiva and Śiva and the manifest world: they each have their being in Brahman in a non-differentiated or non-dual relation (Biernacki, 2019:

440). Abhinavagupta does not set aside or marginalize ‘liberation of the individual from the fetters of *karmic-saṃsāric* existence’ in deference to the call for ‘union with the divine’, as we saw Zaehner opting to do in place of the allegedly imperfect state of “unitary experience”: which gets the adept only as far as Brahman-*nirvāṇa* (the mystical merger with *Deitas*, Godhead, as echoed in Meister Eckhart also, which nonetheless is metaphysical and ontological and not temporal) (Dubey, 1969: 42).

A more charitable reading, that Rāmānuja favours, is that it is through the syncretic representation of *Puruṣottama*, that the seemingly contrary polarities of Brahman and *Īśvara*, the Unmanifest and the Perishable, the monistic and the dualistic Gods, are impeccably resolved and brought together. So there is an inherent *identity-in-difference* relation that imbues the apparent polarities of Brahman and *Īśvara*: they are not one, but not two either. Brahman assumes a corporeal body upon Itself, and that is World-Body and World-Soul in the form of *Īśvara*, the non-temporal World-God who is yet coeval with all moving time. Incidentally, Proclus does a similar revision of Plotinus’ the ‘One’ by attaching a corporeal ‘World-Body’, that is coeval with time and imitates the higher cause: the eternally existing god in Plato’s *Timaeus* (2007, III.91.17). If this ontological representation of Brahman in Rāmānuja’s theology turns out to be more *theistic* and even ‘a personalized divinity’ than some of the Upaniṣads – barring the later ones as Zaehner has rightly noted but overly reliant on them – might have felt emboldened to suggest, it still does not warrant interpreting the discursive ‘Song of the Bhagavat’, as vindicating a monotheistic *ontotheologos* doctrine (Bilimoria, 1983:14).

The Rise of Monotheism

The monotheistic strain where dualism of the Personal God and the world is indelibly marked, and Brahman is identified non-differentially with the Personal God, emerges in the theology of the thirteenth century founder of Dvaita (literally Dualist) Vedānta: Madhva (Madhvācārya). This strain is espoused, developed and propagated severally through latter-day schools of the *Acintya-bhedābheda* persuasion (different yet not-so-different in respect of the individual soul, *Īśvara* as the World-Soul and Brahman). With their Bhakti-Vedānta theology, and the sectarian orders of Vaiṣṇavism (worship of Brahman as Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa) that Rāmānuja as the first philosopher in the tradition came to embrace, Madhva was able to blaze a new trail in the cause of theistic development (of the monotheistic kind) in Indian philosophy. Following Madhva’s *differential* Vedānta, Krishna’s icon, decked on a large opulent chariot that is pulled by teeming throngs of devotees emersed in ‘love-devotion-and-surrender’ (*santāna prema-bhakti-prapattica*), is paraded through the streets on festive days, especially *Janmāṣṭamī* (celebrated birthday). Henceforth, Krishna is extolled as (the most favoured) Personal God Incarnate, by eminent Bhakti-Vedānta stalwarts and scholars, such as Nimbārkar, Vallabha, Bhāskara, Yādhav, through to Śrīnivāsa, Caitanya-Mahāprabhu, Baladeva and Rūpa Gosvāmī. And in recent times, only to be rivalled or replaced by the national God Rāma, after Avodhyā.

We may also note with a sense of irony, again, that the last of the post-Śaṅkara Advaita stalwarts Madhusūdana Sarasvatī in the same period (16th century), in his *Advaitasiddhi* (1937), modified Śaṅkara's strident non-dualism by finding a non-platitudinal niche for *bhakti* (loving devotion) toward Krishna as the rightful mode of worshipping Brahman – in Its Imperishable, *nirguṇa*, Unconditional form to boot. That is to say, minus the 'as if' simile that the Vivaraṇa as distinct from the Bhāmatī subschool was beholden to, which had come down from Śaṅkara's regular use of this figurative rhetoric. The final marriage of the transformative (*pariṇāma*) vis-à-vis the reflective-crystal representations (*pratibimbavivarta*) of Brahman marks perhaps the end of 'thick monism' (solidified earlier in Gauḍapāda-Śaṅkara Advaita) and the beginnings of the varieties of 'thin' to milder forms of non-dualism that in time became less and least distinguishable from dualism, especially in respect of the 'qualified dualist monotheism' kind (as in *Acintya Bhedābheda* Vedānta). Brahman knows no limits.

We do not have space here to go further into these strands of theism bordering on monotheism that was also adopted by the Nyāya (Rationalist) school. The Nyāya philosophers, schooled in sophisticated logic, proffered an argument proving the existence of God (Rostalska & Bilimoria, 2024), not dissimilar to the cosmo-teleological argument championed in medieval Christianity by Aquinas and Paley respectively (even earlier in its original *Kalām* form by the Arabic Mu'tazilite philosopher, al-Fārābī, 10th cent.). The argument had an important supplement that made room for a demiurge (or creator God) to be existentially independent of and theodically unimpacted by the dependent arising and falling of the cosmos. This came from their peculiar theory of causality according to which the effect does not exist (is not 'preloved' or pervasive) in the prior cause, but is rather an entirely new (non-transformative) product, and therefore the source of a cause, *x*, is independent of the effect, *y*.

However, the argument was shown to have several mitigating defeaters, along with its questionable theory of causality, and hence was summarily refuted – by Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, Śaṅkara (*BSB* II.ii.36–42), and Buddhist dialecticians (as was the fate of the Western *Kalām* counterparts in the pens of Hume, Kant, and Oppy; *ibid*). But there is another route through which monotheism arrives or at least provides a motivation for its adoption, quite apart from that of Vedānta scholastic orders, or (probably due to mixed motivations), in popular thought – albeit a millennium earlier.

Buddha as a Supremely Divine Being

As philosophical speculations move on, Buddha is raised to the status of Supremely Divine; Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara as Godless Divinity. By 'Godless Divinity' I mean what Paul J. Griffiths has elsewhere called 'non-theistic conceptions of the divine'. It does not as such mark the denial of the divine attributes that may well be shared by a God or gods, but is decidedly bereft of commitment to belief in the latter; or it may provide alternative views of the divine, as for example in forms

of pantheism (Drapkin, 1996), or the Aboriginal belief in ‘Rainbow-Serpent’ as the creator and sustainer via Dreamtime of the world (Charlesworth, 1998; Griffiths, 2005).

By the end-time of Asaṅga (5th cent. CE) Buddha is raised via his *Dharmakāya* body to being more or less panentheistically Divine; or the Buddha fully endowed with attributes of omniscience, wisdom (*prajñā*), and compassion (*karuṇā*) is the supreme and central figure of the divine hierarchy (Hiranmayananda, 1953: 536). This is depicted in the carved images of the Buddha in the Ajanta Caves (c.330–220 BCE). The argument being made here is strongly reinforced in Estlin Carpenter’s research (1977: 47–76) (as I will discuss below), which is that *theism* of the monotheistic kind (leaving aside for now all the earlier permutations and iterations of theism we have thus far encountered in earlier texts) in Indian philosophical theology, first takes root and arises with the gradual elevation of Buddha as the sole divinity (within the Buddhist *viḥāras* and *saṅghas*, and the divine hierarchy) enviously of or as a counter to the growing rivalry posed by the Hindu trinity of Brahmā, Śiva, Viṣṇu, and their respective female consorts. Devotion (*bhakti*) within the Bhāgavata or Viṣṇu-Krishna cults also reached something of a crescendo.

The argument goes along these lines. Siddhārtha Buddha was born a prince in his father’s opulent palace, and he was protected from seeing and experiencing the real world, so he would never encounter the existential challenges of living, suffering, and ultimately not-being. But his curiosity took him subreptively, with the help of his accompanying friend Ānanda, to wander outside the gates of their palace, where he witnessed for the first time ever what everyone else in the world lives through every day of their lives: old age, sickness, debilitation, and death (via the cremation of the body on the pyre).

How so? asks the innocuous Siddhārtha; and he receives an existentialist response from Ānanda to the effect that life is full of suffering and these are the conditions of living that perpetrate pain and sorrow over pleasure and peace. Siddhārtha decides there-and-then to explore the mystery of life and get to the bottom of the cause of suffering, even as he begins to interrogate sages and yogis as to whether there is any way out of the existential malaise. It is well-known that Siddhārtha explores the life of asceticism, rigorous yoga and renunciation, and various other *śrāmaṇic* (yogic-based) paths and practices that were abundantly prevalent in his days. The *paramadevatā* (the enlightened one in state of perfection, dwelling at the peak of the cosmos) that the Jainas believed in (much like the gods of Epicurus) serves as something of a model for the aspiring Siddhārtha. Through hard discipline he attains *nirvāṇa* and then towards the end (or willful ending) of his life *parinirvāṇa* (final enlightenment); he is thence declared a *Buddha*, ‘the awakened one’, and consistent with the Buddha’s teachings that all beings desire to cling to a permanent self (regardless of whether such a self exists or not), and also that the Buddhahood attained is also a non-personal state. Hence it would follow that neither the Buddha nor the Jina (Jaina’s enlightened one) who are looked upon for philosophical and spiritual guidance are considered to be a deity, a *deva*, or a god or God (not in a literal sense in any case).

And yet the irony is that in due course of time Buddhism does come to espouse *theism*, and the Buddha is considered to be Avalokiteśvara (*ava-lokita-īśvara*) – the

‘Supreme Lord Looking Down’ upon the mundane world. However, the transition or transfiguration did not happen overnight, but through stages of adaptation of the essence of the Tathāgata (One Gone Thus). First up, the Buddha is declared to be *cakkhuma* [Pāli], ‘Eye of the Truth’ (adverting to the Four Noble Truths); he is Dharma-born (rather than Brahmā-born); he has (or rather is) the Dharma-body (*Dharmakāya*) and he is the Absolute and Eternal Buddha, and is thus revered as the Maha-Puruṣa (Carpenter, 1977:40). Curiously enough, though not just incidentally, this resonates with *Uttama Puruṣa* or ‘Puruṣottama’ of the *Bhagavadgītā*, with whom Krishna identifies, and also with Brahman-*nirvāṇa*, the state one attains upon liberation from the ensnaring shackles of *māyā* (which effectively in Buddhist terms is the acosmic *kāya*, dependently-originated from within its own particulars). It is suggested by Carpenter (ibid) that the development of the ‘Three-Body’ (*trikāyas*) doctrine is itself both an answer to and an emulation of the Trimūrti (triune) doctrine of Brāhmaṇism. The following observation (paraphrased with quotes) by Carpenter which he penned back in 1920 in Oxford, is apt to cite here:

‘The Buddha is more than an *arhat* or a Bodhisattva (enlightened mendicant dedicated to the welfare of the people). A somewhat obscure Abhidharma text spoke of the Buddha as *lokuttara*, “above the world/supermundane”, transcending the needs and habits of ordinary life’ (Carpenter, 1977: 55–6); there then arises the doctrine of Buddha (as) Amitābha ‘of Infinite Light’. In the presence of this transcendent Reality, the *Dharmakāya* received a totally new interpretation. It ceased to be a religious tradition, it became a *metaphysical* entity. ‘He was [now] the ground of all existence, the ultimate source whence all phenomena proceed, the principle of identity beneath all diversity. To this principle scholastic philosophy gave the awkward name Tathatā, ‘trueness’, i.e. true nature (or *bhūta-tathatā*: trueness of being); the inner essence which was the foundation and support of the whole universe, with all its infinite variety of phases and conditions determining the *samsāra* under the Law of the Deed [*karma*].’ (ibid 98) Even the concept of *Dharmakāya* came to have a new significance, to wit: ‘It came to denote that which lay beneath all phenomena, but continually manifested through them. It was identical with Supreme Enlightenment, with Perfect Knowledge’ (98).

The Buddha now is perceived as having *svabhāva* (contrary to the denial of intrinsic nature in the canons developed mostly by the philosophers such as Nāgārjuna, but they wavered on this point); the *āmabhāvas* of being imperceptible, incorruptible, immutable, impassable, and transcending birth and death of temporal existence. Gradually, to the Mahapuruṣa, the power of creation expanded from the idea of “*Nirmāṇakāya*” – “emanation body”; “transformative body”, supplemented by *Samḃogakāya*: “body of divine enjoyment”. The Amitābha manifestation is elevated to the God of Boundless Light, Love and Compassion, and becomes very popular, not just in the subcontinent but in other regions of Asia where Buddhism takes firm roots by 500 CE. In Nālandā the images of Buddha were placed next to Viṣṇu and Śiva (loc cit).

Asaṅga’s conceptual acceptance of *Ālayavijñāna* as the subterranean enclave of consciousness, or as unconsciousness (resting underneath senses and the conscious mind) provided an impetus to consider the Buddha as the universal, albeit

imperceptible, ground of consciousness; the Perfect Illumination then illuminates all things cognizable. But there is only one Buddha: all the galaxies of the past Buddhas and the future Buddhas are transmutations, or transubstantiations and manifestations of the same one Tathatā. Hence is born in the subcontinent close to the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century (but, contra Zaehner, not with the *Bhagavadgītā* as argued earlier), the doctrine – albeit still somewhat raw – of *monotheism*. The point being made is that such a conceptualization was not evident nor prevalent until then, despite the various permutations of theism, at least not in quite this unitary form. Or to put it another way, it is born the idea that the Divine is one and therefore unitary; the Divine does not have multifarious forms, notwithstanding its own manifestation or *incarnatio* in the *lokas* (worlds) from time to time. Closer to our time, Babasaheb Ambedkar is conferred the status of Bodhicitta in Sri Lanka by Buddhist Sinhala monks.

However, this abstraction attributed to Buddhism resulting from polytheism to monotheism is also not a popular or favoured position among South Asian historians and intellectuals; but then they do not pay much attention to theological exigencies and are more disposed toward ignoring the questions that philosophers of religion ask: where did the idea of God as monotheistically-conceived ultimate personal being come from and how did it emerge in the subcontinent before the arrival of Christianity, the rise of people of Jewish faith, and the emergence of Islam and Sikh faith? The subcontinent had not witnessed anything even remotely close to this conception, for example, among its Aboriginal tribes, nor for that matter among the Dravidian people before the Indo-Āryans took over the reins of control (whose theism, as we have shown, took polyvalent forms – from polytheism to henotheism to mild-mannered pantheism). God remained an alien in Indian philosophical thought for a very long time (or, we have seen Max Müller lament, was missed by Indian philosophers, perhaps suffered *deus malus successus* at the hands of the erstwhile seers and sages), until closer to the late Medieval period (*sequi* European chronology).

During this period the popularity of the triune divinities of Brahmā, Śiva, Viṣṇu and their respective female consorts grew across the culture and in Purāṇic texts. So there occurred a proliferation of deities, angelic beings, gods in animal form (or at least half, such as the famed elephant-headed god, Gaṇeśa), and increasingly represented now in iconic form (i.e. with faces and real substantial bodies, colourfully so). And they were always in motion, or busily engaged in activities to sustain the world and help people flourish to their best capabilities in defined localities. Later on, of course, Hegel was to deride the polymorphic perfidiously voluptuous perverse deities of Brāhmanism lost in somnambulist wonder; Brahman for him is just Nature or an abstract Concept with no Substantiality and Concreteness to evolve toward *Geist's* self-actualization in historical reality. Hindus cannot *think* God; Hegel could not bring himself (rightly I'd say) to call Brahman *God*. This indeed is reflective of Hegel's own historicist bias, which he drew from the 12th century visionary Joachim of Fiore who had proposed that history moves through the linear Ages of the Father, the Son, the Spirit (Bilimoria, 2010); this epistemography left decisive watermark on 19th century Romantic idealism, rubbing off on Orientalists as well, and eventually to sediment in the textual oeuvre of R. C. Zaehner.

Conclusion

Philosophy of religion has seen various, indeed several, iterations and permutations of the Ultimate across its long and chequered history, not least in the Indian subcontinent. Whether the Ultimate is conceived as ‘That One’ (*Tad Ekam*) – as in the Vedas – or the Absolute as Brahman – as in the Upaniṣads and Vedānta – or as the Divine, variously in theistic, non-theistic, even atheistic (of which too there can be variations; see *Sophia* 60/3, 2021:503) or latter-day monotheistic theologies, the Ultimate does not lend itself easily to one single conception at the exclusion or even often enough in opposition to other possible conceptions.

Indeed, even the venerable Buddha came to be elevated as the Supreme Divine Being – following Asaṅga’s revisionist trajectory for the supposedly non-theistic Buddhist philosophy and culture in India at least. But I have resisted reading any sort of theological *evolutionism* as a natural progression that a fine scholar of Indo-Āryan-Iranian religions, R. C. Zaehner following Étienne Lamotte forcefully argued for. He seems to have based this on a rather questionable epistemology from the study of mystical states professed across religions for their onto-theological ramifications; he also experimented in the ’60’s-heydays of counterculture with the psychedelic hallucinogen mescaline which seems to have confirmed his conviction on the gradation of mystical experiences as per the typology he formulated: from nature mysticism, through monism to the intensionality of “union-in-love with the Almighty” While Frits Staal adverted to a variation of mystical experiences under similar hallucinogenic experiments, arguing that more often than not such induced mystical experiences tend to supervene on the individual’s originary faith commitment or prior belief structures than on some *a priori* condition (Staal 1975).

It is no coincidence that R.C. was baptized a Roman Catholic in 1946, and remained life-long friends with the famed Oxford philosopher, Michael Dummett (who incidentally found Zaehner slumped over the pavement in High Street, breathless). Dummett himself defended the ontic theory of anti-realism, but was otherwise a metaphysical theist-realist when it came to his Catholic predilection. Zaehner set out to demonstrate his theological conviction through the commentary he penned to his translation of the *Bhagavadgīta* – willfully ignoring, as he puts it, the “irrelevancies” of Upaniṣadic philosophy with its ‘pantheistic monism’ (1984: viii). That is how the Brāhmanic-Hindu tradition winds its way through the corridors of history on an interesting route to the end-game of the utopian theogony. It moves (most likely guided by a kind of inherent historicist blueprint or motion as in Hegel’s *Geist der Zeiten*) from the primitive beginnings in the Vedas of what he calls ‘praeternaturalism’ (worship of nature beholden to “nature mystics”). Then it muddles its way through monism in the Vedānta – anticipated in the Upaniṣads (echoing a distant Neo-Platonism), and most stridently etched in Śaṅkara’s Advaita, only to be checked by Rāmānuja’s more qualified version. And it finally reaches the pinnacle of *monotheism* through its proper deification or divination of the changeless Brahman as *Puruṣottama* (‘Higher than the Imperishable’), as in Krishna’s theophanic discloser (*alētheia*) or unconcealment (*Erfüllung*) to Arjuna.

However, the jury is still out on exactly how the underlying metaphysical theology of the ‘Song’ from the Epic *Mahābhārata* is to be read, since the Epic itself does not seem to have much of a track with monotheism, or even with much of any strand of theism. Instead, it ends in carnage after an unforgiveable and insufferable war among rival kindreds whom Krishna could not dissuade sufficiently to avert the impending war (In fact, in the *Bhagavadgītā* he sermons Arjuna, his warrior-friend, to take up arms: what God would beseech such a *dharma* on all-souls of the faithful undead and grateful dead?). The paper has argued against the position taken by Zaehner – *that the primitive cult of many gods gives way to monism, which in turn evolves into monotheism* – and by many scholars before and after him. One such was the great historian of traditional India, A. L. Basham (albeit, in an interview), fulfilling a wish that Max Müller had candidly harboured (a reason why the latter did not feel India was ready for his visit, as he told a fellow Hindu itinerant – the young Vivekananda – coincidentally on board a ship in Europe).

The contrary view might be more plausible: that the theogony of *multi-deos*, or ‘polytheism/henotheism’ (as Müller had it) is more advanced and therefore welcome than monotheism – which in-itself might be a more ‘primitive’ form of theism to boot (Anirvan, 1958:328; cf. Hiranmayananda, 1953: 535). The gradual move toward monotheism has been due largely to decisive undercurrents in sectarian and doctrinal developments than as an outcome of evolutionary movement or an inscribed historicist teleology.

As a part-time Australian, I venture to suggest that multiculturalism extends to matters theological as well. And as Ashis Nandy (2010), the renowned postcolonial Indian psychologist-philosopher notes, that after 1500 years of freedom in philosophical-theological thinking, India came under the sway since the 1820s of Orientalists and certain Hindu reformists (such as Keshab Chunder Sen and Ram Mohan Roy) who came to believe that the Protestant model of religious faith would be best for India heretofore (A similar trajectory was adopted by early 20th century Sinhala Buddhist reformists in Sri Lanka, which had dire consequences for Tamil Hindus in the island across the tip of southern India the latter call Eelam.). Hence it would follow that the quicker the Indian people (particularly the Hindus but also the tribal and hills-people) grew out of what Hegel had called the ‘perfidiously perverse polytheism’ and worship of pagan gods and goddesses, and heathen spirits, the earlier the nation-to-be would move towards enlightenment and be gifted a Vedāntic-European civilization. If not a fully-fledged libertarian civilization, then at least at least they will be endowed with a sky-high opulent temple to a single god in Ayodhyā, the like of which it never had in its ancient, or medieval, or later times when Europe was gracefully enjoying its Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment.

To a large gathering of bemused scholars at the American Academy of Religion, Nandy confidently reported from the plenary dais that the multifarious gods and goddesses of India are still to this day healthy, vibrant and alive; they are in no rush to desert their faithful devotees (and vice versa) for whatever other theological prize be in the offing (much heaved on sectarian and political daises); with a tinge of sarcasm Nandy adroitly notes – with which I will end my critique:

For even in some persons, communities, cults, sects and religions denying gods and goddesses, there persist relationships typical of religions with a surfeit of gods and goddesses. Gods and goddesses may survive as potentialities even in the most austere monotheistic, anti-idolatrous faiths. They are not permitted into the main hall, but they are there, just outside the door, constantly threatening to enter the main hall uninvited. As in some of the best-known Indonesian mosques where the entrance doors and boundary walls are guarded or manned by Hindu or Buddhist gods and goddesses (The reverse also holds true. Some gods and goddesses do have a special symbolic place for anti-polytheism. Lord Tirupati, the presiding deity nowadays of India's high politics and entertainment industry, reportedly has a Muslim son-in-law whose temple is right within the Lord's campus. And Sabarimala, one of the more potent deities in South India, is also known for his Muslim friend.)

Gods and goddesses are not unknown even in starkly monotheistic religions. They may not be there [on] centre-stage, but they are waiting just outside the doors of consciousness ... I am all too aware that the world of gods and goddesses with which we are acquainted will not die soon. For our gods and goddesses, like [Swami] Vivekananda's Kālī, can take care of themselves. However, there are other worlds of gods and goddesses that are facing extinction. These gods and goddesses are exiting the world stage silently, without any fanfare, lament or scholarly obituary.

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