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TEXT AND TRADITION

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The Gods and Brahman

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The role of the concept of *bráhman* in Indian theology and philosophy is frequently adduced as a reason why Hinduism should not be regarded as polytheistic. The present essay attempts through an analysis of Vedic and Upaniṣadic texts to arrive at an understanding of the relationship, or, better, the diverse relational possibilities existing between the Gods (*Deva-s*) and *bráhman*. Crucial to understanding this relationship is grasping that polytheism is not reducible to a static division of a whole into parts, but rather exhibits a polycentric structure, in which the ultimacy of Gods, or even of a principle such as *bráhman*, is understood practically to be essentially reciprocal. In this light, discourse about *bráhman* is seen as part of an effort to articulate polytheism, not to transcend it. In particular, the essay argues that by appropriating for itself the functional or essentialist dimension of the Gods and the transactional dimension of the relationship between humans and the Gods, *bráhman* stimulates the recognition of the unique, existential personhood of the God as object of *bhakti*.

I have argued[1] that *polycentricity* is an essential feature of polytheism, in opposition to authors who, typically under the rubric of some term such as 'henotheism', seek to separate off from polytheism that property that Versnel, in his study of Hellenic religion, characterizes as a "situational, momentary, short-lived omnipotence," the potential for which means that "no god is restricted to only one particular service," for "every god can be hailed as omnipotent in a hymn devoted to his or her divinity."[2] The phenomenon has its roots, according to Versnel, in any prayer "of a high grade of intensity," in which "a Greek who is in dire trouble," praying "to a god of his or her preference," which "may just as well be a great *soter*-god as the unpretentious hero round the corner," by virtue of "the adorant's full attention [being] focused on this god … At this moment that god is the only one … while other gods temporarily disappear from sight."[3]

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[1] See, e.g., Butler (2008).

[2] Versnel (2011), p. 435.

[3] Ibid., p. 434.

Versnel, however, while as sensitive to the contours of these phenomena in Hellenic religion as any modern scholar, and indeed more sensitive than most, nevertheless chooses to characterize this form of devotion as "a henotheistic moment in a polytheistic religion," and hence treats the further development of this 'situational omnipotence' as a movement away from polytheism and toward so-called 'henotheism.' In this fashion, he manages to relegate 'polytheism' to describing only the situation in which neither the intensity of the worshiper nor the divinity of their God is an issue. Polytheism is thus reduced to a sort of warehouse of Gods not in use at the moment. Moreover, the structure of the divine multiplicity, on this view, will either be merely that of a contingent jumble of competing cults, or will be fixed in the stereotype of a division of labor, in which a God is precisely and by definition "restricted to only one particular service." Indeed, this 'service', this discrete cosmic function or power, will be taken as *what a God in the polytheistic sense just is*.

But what if a notion of ideal multiplicity were thinkable in which the manifold was constituted, not by *descriptions of functions* but rather by *proper-named, unique individuals*? And hence the fact that an individual worshiper appeals to this or that particular divinity is not a contingent matter, not because there is only one deity whose 'service' is required in the particular situation, but simply because *there really are many such individuals*. And these individuals are not such as to fuse into one if their activities should happen to overlap, like the identical twin in the Stoic paradox who will cease to exist if some accident should render him indiscernible from his brother. The worshiper has thus not *forgotten* about this multiplicity, nor dropped some *pretense* that there are a multiplicity of Gods, but is simply really engaging with one of those Gods.

This *polycentricity* of polytheism,[4] which is the term I have suggested that we adopt rather than terms like 'henotheism' that are designed to exclude, rather than to elucidate polytheism, is to be found in many places, and I would suggest that the burden of proof ought to lie with those who would claim its definitive absence from a given polytheistic tradition. The polycentricity of polytheism is particularly well-known from three sources: Platonic philosophy, which has provided what seems to be the most useful theoretical articulation of it through

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[4] It is a fitting irony with respect to the term 'polycentric polytheism' that the Indologist Max Müller, who first popularized the term 'henotheism' as a category of religion, in criticizing even speaking of 'Gods', states that "To use our own word for god in the plural, is itself a logical solecism, *as if we were to speak of two centres of a circle*," (Müller (1899), p. 206, my emphasis). Müller shows himself thus regrettably ignorant of the well-known maxim, first attested in a medieval Hermeticizing text, concerning divinity as 'a circle with its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere', which can in turn be seen as an explication of the ancient Greek maxim that 'All things are in all things, but in each appropriately', also strikingly represented in the Indian metaphor of 'Indra's Net', in which each jewel reflects all the others, and is itself reflected in them.

its doctrine of a manifold of supra-essential, absolutely unique 'henads', which have the property of all being in each one; Egyptian hymns, in which the God who is the subject of the hymn is not only accorded omnipotence, but takes on the characteristic traits of any number of other deities, while all the time the Egyptian theologian maintains the strictest respect for the 'uniqueness' (wꜥ) of each of the Gods as a prime value;[5] and Indian theology and philosophy. It is the latter with which the present essay is concerned. In a tradition so rich and varied, it is of course out of the question that any interpretation I offer should be regarded as final, and it should be understood, moreover, that texts could be adduced to support any number of different interpretations. Indeed, in dealing with polytheistic texts and traditions, we need to develop new models of scholarship which accommodate this more open style of hermeneutics. What I am offering here is merely one route through these texts.

Starting from the Ṛg Veda, India's earliest scriptures, we already find abundant evidence of polycentricity, virtually without exception treated by modern Western scholars as indicating a development away from polytheism. But even if this were not in itself a manifestation of prejudice, it is important to recognize the interpretative vacuum created by this assumption. For if we see the ultimacy accorded, now, e.g., to Agni, now to Vāk, now to Indra, now to Viśwákarma, now to Prajāpati, as simply one and the same ultimacy, then we are blinded to the unique *ways* there are for each of these Gods to be ultimate. Agni is ultimate because the sacrificial flame is a constant in the rites to diverse Gods; but Vāk's ultimacy derives rather from the constancy of the voice which chants the hymns, and hence is evidently of a different kind. Indra is ultimate as divine sovereign, and in particular as victor over the forces inimical to the Gods. Viśwákarma is ultimate as artisan of the cosmos, while Prajāpati, as master of living things, has an ultimacy equal in turn though clearly distinct, since even if the cosmos is the precondition for the existence of life, life is the precondition for the cosmos to be recognized as such.

Moreover, these diverse kinds of ultimacy can be applied to the Gods themselves, so that, for example, Prajāpati as master of procreation or progeny (*prajā-pati*) is said to have created the Gods, because insofar as they procreate

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[5] It should be noted that the modern term 'henotheism' takes its name from the practice in Greek of acclaiming a God as εἷς (accusative ἕν), 'one', i.e., 'unique', and that Versnel regards this acclamation as having "most likely … originated as a translation of the Egyptian word for 'one'," (Versnel (2011), p. 302) inasmuch as it is first attested in an Orphic papyrus from 3rd c. BCE Egypt, which features as a password *heis Dionysos*, 'Dionysos is One.' The entire question of 'henotheism', therefore, can be seen as devolving ultimately upon the status of such acclamations in the Egyptian theological context; and that the Egyptian use of wꜥ, 'one', in no way represents a movement away from polytheism, is made abundantly clear by Erik Hornung's analysis in *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*.

one another, they implicate through their activity the principle over which Prajāpati has charge. Or the Gods presiding over any of the elements necessary for invocation, such as the fire, the voice, the mind, et al., is posited as creator of the other Gods, insofar as the Gods are to be known through such ritual action bringing about theophany. And all of these relations may be ramified and treated from a host of different viewpoints, recognizing their reciprocity and interpenetration in manifold ways. An array of diverse conceptions of production, existence, action, and so forth thus emerge. In this fashion, a tremendous wealth of material for speculative, cosmological thought is stored up, so to speak, in the polycentric standpoint, awaiting explication. In this sense, the polycentricity of polytheism virtually calls forth philosophy as a vehicle to articulate these insights gained in the direct experience of the Gods.

In addition to the diverse Gods who can each appear in their own right as the center around which all things are disposed, however, we also find a term in the Ṛg Veda which, while not a God itself, but rather an abstract concept, will take the center in that speculative tradition which comes to be known as Vedānta, namely *bráhman*. The neuter noun *bráhman* is used very frequently in the Ṛg Veda, but it is easier to follow its usage than to define it. Its etymology is not settled, but the widest consensus of ancient and modern authorities seems to find it in the root *bṛh*, 'to grow, increase, strengthen.' Most of the time in the Veda, *bráhman* refers simply to the Vedic hymns themselves, or to prayer, often quite literally: "Agni, for you the prayer [*brahma*] has been composed" (RV 4.6.11);[6] "A new hymn [*brahma*] has been made [for Indra]" (4.16.21); "Sing along with me [for Indra] a new song [*brahma*], unceasing, surpassing heaven and earth" (10.89.03); "Arrow, whetted by charms [*brahmasaṃśíte*], fly" (6.75.16).[7] In other cases, *bráhman* refers to the entire realm of utterance directed toward the Gods as 'prayer' or 'praises', and in this fashion can refer by extension to piety in the broadest sense, hence we find it in compounds such as *brahmakṛta*, 'devout', *brahmākarma*, 'sacred rites/works', or their opposites, *abrahmā*, 'impious', *brahmadviṣe*, 'enemy of the Veda.'

There is also a tendency in the Veda to take *bráhman* as referring to the power of *understanding* the sacred speech and rites, however, which begins to lead in the direction of speculative inquiry, as when *bráhman* is said to be "the supreme heaven of speech" (1.164.35), or when four grades of speech are distinguished: "those *brahmaṇas* who are wise know them: three, deposited in

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[6] Quotes from the Ṛg Veda are from Wilson [1866] except where noted.

[7] A connection has been proposed by some scholars between *bráhman* and Irish *bricht*, 'spell, incantation', as well as Old Icelandic *bragr*, 'poetry', but has been contested by others (Jan Gonda, *Notes on Brahman* (Utrecht: Beyers, 1950), p. 4).

secret, indicate no meaning[8]: men speak the fourth grade of speech" (1.164.45); "as *bráhman* is variably developed, so is speech" (10.114.8). Sometimes *bráhman*, as a term for prayer to or praises of the Gods, incorporates into its sense the idea of the effectiveness of those prayers: Indra's steeds are "tractable to prayer [*brahmayujo*]" (1.177.2), "to be harnessed with prayer [*brahmayujā*]" (3.35.4); Indra himself is "attracted/spurred on by/whose vehicle is prayer [*brahmavāhase*]" (3.34.1; 6.45.4,7), or "propitiated by praise [*brahmajūtas*]"[9] (7.19.11). By the same token, "the effused juices [of the Soma] please not Maghavan [Indra], unaccompanied by prayer [*nābrahmaṇo*]" (7.26.1); "the sacrifice, unaccompanied by prayer … is not grateful to you [Indra]" (10.105.8).

Sometimes *bráhman* seems to refer to that power which allows a skilled ritualist to understand the significance of a rite, to perform it effectively, and to design new rites: "The bearer (of the oblation) utters the three praises, the thought of *bráhman* that sustains the sacrifice" (9.97.34).[10] And sometimes it refers to the rewards reaped from successful ritual, which are the precondition for further ritual action. In this fashion *bráhman* has even been interpreted as 'food' in numerous passages, the most concrete proof, as it were, of the effectiveness of the relationship between mortals and the Gods: e.g., 4.22.1, which refers to the "fourfold offering" of food (*brahman*), the hymn (*stoma*), the *soma* libation, and prayer (*uktha*);[11] in 2.41.18, Sarasvatī is "abounding in food [*bráhman*],"[12] though this Goddess is also increasingly identified over time with Vāk, Goddess of speech in the Veda, who abounds in *bráhman* in the other sense. Indra, in particular, is often said to be strengthened by *bráhman* as prayer/praise (2.12.14; 5.31.10; 8.98.8), e.g., "Since, Indra, you have made the (sacred) prayers [*brahmāṇi*] (the means of) your augmentation, we address such to you" (6.23.6). A term closely related to *bráhman*, formed from the same stem, but masculine rather than neuter, *brahmán*, refers to a particular class of ritual specialist,[13] and ultimately to the class of those qualified in general to perform

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[8] So Wilson; Jamison and Brereton (2017) translate this line, "They do not set in motion the three that are imprinted in secret," (I, p. 359).

[9] Jamison and Brereton, "aroused by sacred formulations," (II, p. 907).

[10] "The draft-horse rouses forth the three voices, the hymnic vision of truth, the inspired thought of the sacred formulation. The cows go asking for a cowherd; the thoughts go bellowing eagerly to Soma," (Jamison & Brereton, III, p. 1341).

[11] Jamison and Brereton (I, p. 593) read "sacred formulation" instead of "food" for *bráhman* in all such passages.

[12] Jamison and Brereton: "Enjoy these sacred formulations here, o Sarasvatī rich in prize-winning mares, the thoughts dear to the gods that the Gṛtsamadas [the clan of the seer Gṛtsamada] pour for you, truthful one," (I, p. 461).

[13] On the role of the *brahmán* priest, see Bodewitz (1983). Bodewitz particularly emphasizes the qualities of "totality and indistinctness" (49) as characteristic of this priestly office, who is "the generalist in the classical Vedic ritual in distinction to the

orthodox ritual, known in English as 'brahmins.' *Bráhman* is also particularly vested in the Gods Brahmaṇaspati, 'master of *bráhman*', i.e., of prayer and the divine hymns as such, and in a different respect, as will be discussed further below, Brahmā, whose name is drawn from the masculine rather than the neuter noun.

The subsequent development of the term *bráhman* as an ultimate principle is not difficult to grasp if we recognize that, just as in the case, e.g., of Agni, it is an indispensable and constant element in the rites of all the Gods. Indeed, it seems to be the element, out of these, which is most closely and specifically linked to the *human agent* in these rites. It is the understanding and competence, the effectiveness as such of the rite, insofar as this is not wholly dependent on the sovereign grace of the Gods Themselves, but depends specifically on human competence, insight, creativity and sincerity. As such, it naturally takes the center in those human theoretical speculations which form the specialized discipline we may, transculturally, term 'philosophy.'

Philosophy in Greece did not arise so directly as it did in India from the reflections of ritualists and their attempt to render intelligible for themselves their relationship to the Gods, though this element was not absent from it: Socrates, in Plato's *Meno* (81a), refers to "certain priests and priestesses who have studied so as to be able to give a reasoned account of their ministry" (trans. Lamb); and in Plato's *Symposium* (201d & sqq.), of course, we hear directly from one such priestess, Diotima of Mantinea. Nevertheless, in the birth of Greek philosophy such ritualists remain almost entirely in the background, even as, or perhaps to some extent because the earliest philosophers themselves step somewhat into their role, whether it is the miracles attributed to Empedokles, or Parmenides' vision of his tutelary Goddess, or the oracle of Apollōn that sets Socrates off on his philosophical quest. Greek philosophy is itself a movement within Hellenic religion, and never away from or beyond it. This is still different, however, from the dynamic role of ritualists in Indian philosophy, which builds upon the extraordinary status already accorded them in the scriptures themselves. It is not surprising, in this light, that a principle peculiarly associated with the human conduit of the relationship with the Gods should acquire such importance in the body of speculative thought that appends itself to the Veda.

Recognizing this background of the concept of *bráhman* ought to prevent the elementary mistake of seeing in it a theological revolution undermining the polytheism that has flourished in India from Vedic times through today. This polytheistic worship—these many relationships, embodied in cultus, between

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specialist" (ibid.), "the *manas* (mind) of the sacrifice," who "is supposed to pay attention to everything which takes place and … signalize mishaps and … take measures," (48). On the relationship of *manas* to *bráhman*, see below.

humans and Gods—is not some sort of adjunct to the generic experience of divinity embodied in *bráhman*, but the very ground of it. This remains the case even where *bráhman* is treated, rather, as the ground of the worship of the Gods or indeed of the Gods Themselves, for this is merely a further manifestation of the same polycentricity which made it possible to recognize from one perspective Indra, from another Agni, from another Prajāpati as supreme. Moreover, in the further development of Hinduism, this same polycentricity would feed the flourishing *bhakti*, or 'devotional' traditions which would place Gods such as Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, or Durgā at the center, and seek to fathom their limitless supremacy. In the *bhakti* traditions, *bráhman* is understood to be subordinate to the God as object of devotion, the *īśvara*, or 'lord', that is, to Kṛṣṇa, or Durgā, or Śiva. The Gods who are the objects of *bhakti* are supreme for their devotees, in the way that polytheism has always functioned. When one of these is at the center, the others are on the periphery: hence, within the tradition of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, Śiva subordinates himself, while in Śiva's own *bhakti* traditions, Viṣṇu, of whom Kṛṣṇa is the avatar or emanation, is seen as created by Śiva. This is not to be understood merely as cults in 'competition.' The multiplicity of *īśvaras*, of Gods who are the objects of singular devotion, is neither an accident, nor the mask of a simple underlying unity. For to conclude this is would be to *demote* the actual objects of this devotion, and therefore do the most basic violence to the experience we are purportedly trying to understand.

To return to the concept of *bráhman*, in order to understand what it is, and its relationship to the Gods, we need to recognize that the mere unity of this concept does not speak to its nature. Rather, for a concept to have *unity* is the necessary condition for it to *have* a nature. And the *open* or *indefinite* nature of *bráhman* seems to be in some way integral to it. Louis Renou, in a famous article,[14] finds the essence of *bráhman* to lie precisely in what we might term this *problematic* character: *bráhman* is "enigma," which has its proper expression in the riddling dialogues known as *brahmodya*. *Bráhman* on this view is not in the primary sense a particular being or a particular doctrine of Being, but an *inquiry* into Being. This sense of *bráhman* as that which, in order to fulfill its very cosmogonic role must be negative or problematic in its own nature, is indeed quite consistent with some of the earlier theoretical articulations of *bráhman*. Foundational, perhaps, in this respect, is an account of the generations of the Gods from the Ṛg Veda (10.72), in which a prominent role is assigned to the 'lord of *bráhman*', Brahmaṇaspati, who "filled these (generations of the Gods) with breath as a blacksmith (his bellows); *in the first age of the Gods the existent was*

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[14] Renou (1949).

born of the non-existent" (my emphasis).[15] *Bráhman* is thus non-existent in itself, but as thinkable in and through the Gods Themselves, is like their breath. It is that by virtue of which They are Gods, without being itself something above and beyond Them, very much as Plato says of 'real Being' (*to ontōs on*) (*Phaedrus* 249c).[16] In its non-existence as such, *bráhman* here also suggests the similarly negative status of the Platonic first principle, the One, which "neither is, nor is one" (Plato, *Parmenides* 141e).

The Upaniṣads build upon this basic Vedic understanding of the open or problematic nature of *bráhman*. Thus the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (3.18) advises that "One should meditate upon the Mind [*manas*] as *bráhman*; this is with reference to the Self [*ātman*]. With reference to the Gods, one should meditate upon *Ākaśa* [*aithēr*] as *bráhman*. In this way both become taught, that with reference to the Self and that with reference to the Gods," (trans. Jha, slightly mod.). Note here that the identification of *bráhman* with mind, which would tend to reify it more, that is, to make it more of a concrete, singular item, is linked to the subjective meditation—or, better, the 'personal' meditation, inasmuch as *ātman* does not stress corporeality as such. Insofar as *bráhman* is 'mind', the text seeks to limit the sense in which *bráhman* would be taken as *a mind*, a singular supreme thinker, to the identification of it with *one's own* mind. With respect to the Gods, that is, objectively rather than subjectively, *bráhman* is to be thought of as *aithēr*, as a connecting medium or a space of encounter between the Gods.[17] The Atharva Veda (11.5.24), similarly, says that "The Vedic student bears a shining *bráhman*; in that [are] woven all the Gods," (trans. Whitney and Lanman).

To establish certain parallels with Hellenic philosophy, we may compare *bráhman* as mind to Aristotle's prime unmoved mover, which is simply *thought thinking itself* (*noēsis noēseōs noēsis*), which moves things, not through any action of its own, but through the nature of things to desire *themselves* and their own good. As we shall see below, desire is also an important part of the theoretical articulation of *bráhman*. On the other hand, the objective meditation upon *bráhman* as a space of encounter between the Gods may be compared to the intelligible-intellective plane, which in Proclus is the space of *noēsis* itself, that is, the space in which mind or intellect (*noûs*) finds its object, the intelligible (*noēton*), which is the thinkable just insofar as it is thought, and which is

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[15] "The Lord of the Sacred Formulation [=Bṛhaspati] smelted these (births) [of the Gods] like a smith. In the ancient generation of the gods, what exists was born from what does not exist. In the first generation of the gods, what exists was born from what does not exist," (2-3; Jamison & Brereton, III, p. 1500).

[16] See Butler (2011), esp. pp. 78-9.

[17] Again, one might compare the supracelestial 'place' (*topos*) of Real Being, the site of the Gods' banquet in Plato's *Phaedrus*.

produced in and emerges through the Gods' primordial regard upon one another, insofar as They are the ultimate thinkers.[18]

An important text bearing on the relationship between the Gods and *bráhman* is the Kena Upaniṣad. Here we read that *bráhman* achieved victory for the Gods,[19] which the Gods identify as their own, but when *bráhman* appears to them as a *yakṣa*—a *daimōn*, a divinity, that is, in its own right—they have difficulty in grasping it. The significance of *bráhman* appearing as a *yakṣa* depends upon the complicated question of the connotations of this term in the time and context. Coomaraswamy, in his massive study of *yakṣas*, indicates a general sense of the term suggesting either something which appears momentarily or in a flash, an apparition, or that which in general receives honor or worship,[20] while the term as elaborated in cultic practice denotes a class of localized divinities loosely equivalent to Hellenic nymphs, dryads, or satyrs, associated with the fertility of wild nature, often protective in function, capable of granting wealth or healing, but also known as shapeshifters or tricksters. That *bráhman* should appear in this form would seem, at a minimum, to indicate that the text is noncommital as to its actual status *qua* divinity, or even to imply that *bráhman*'s character as a divinity in its own right—that is, rather than as a principle discernible purely in and through the actions of the Gods Themselves—is essentially liminal or marginal.

First Agni is sent to investigate it. *Bráhman*, in this *yakṣa* form, can ask questions for itself, and we are thus reminded of Renou's reading of the Vedic sense of *bráhman* as the problem or enigma itself, and its essential connection to the *brahmodya* dialogue. The *yakṣa* asks what power (*kim vīryam*) there is in Agni. Agni replies that he can burn up all that is on the earth; but when the *yakṣa* produces a piece of straw for Agni to burn, he cannot, and Agni returns to the Gods reporting that he could not ascertain what the *yakṣa* is (3.1-6). *Bráhman* thus shows its control over the values of 'what'-questions as such, which separates Agni's power, that is, his 'whatness', from his person, purely through the logical priority of *whatness*, that is, of the question 'What?' over any particular whatness in itself. Agni's exchange with *bráhman* therefore foreshadows that it is only the God as *īśvara*, 'lord', i.e., agent, or as *bhāgavata*, beloved, i.e., object of desire pure of any discrete end, that is, the object of *bhakti*, a divine *person*, and

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[18] I have discussed the intelligible-intellective plane in Butler (2010). Note that this plane is identified by Proclus with the supracelestial site of Real Being from Plato's *Phaedrus*, as discussed in Butler (2011).

[19] Compare RV 1.152.7: "Divine Mitra and Varuna, may I render the oblation acceptable to you with reverence and prayer; may the sacred rite [*bráhman*] enable us (to overcome) in battles, and may the heavenly rain be to us the means of satisfying our wants."

[20] Coomaraswamy (1993), p. 9.

not the God as this or that limited power or function, who will be superior to *bráhman*, as Kṛṣṇa affirms of himself in the Bhagavad Gītā (14.27): "I am the foundation of *bráhman*." Only the God in his pure selfhood or personhood, not as the operator of some specific potency, not, that is, as possessor of some essence or 'whatness', is ontologically prior to *bráhman*. (Sometimes it is as *ātman*, Self, sometimes as *puruṣa*, Person, that this priority to *bráhman* is expressed theoretically, and these lead in different directions for distinct trends of thought which do not need to concern us at the moment.)

The experiment made by Agni is repeated by Vāyu, who is unable, after answering *bráhman*'s 'what' question, to blow away a piece of straw with his power of wind. Indra, the divine sovereign, then proceeds to investigate, and the *yakṣa* disappears. This is a failure in one respect, but an accomplishment in a different regard; Indra is not asked a 'what' question or tested by the *yakṣa* of *bráhman*. Śaṅkara, in his commentary, treats the *yakṣa*'s disappearance as a humbling of Indra's pride: "Brahman did not so much as grant him an interview," (trans. Gambhirananda, p. 76). However, we should note that Indra's inquiry transforms the situation: where the *yakṣa* of *bráhman* had been, "In that very space [*ākāśe*] he approached the superbly charming woman Umā Haimavatī. To Her (he said), 'What is this *yakṣa*?'," (3.12). The reference to *ākāśa* here should evoke for us the passage from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad discussed above. Umā appears in the exact spatial 'footprint', so to speak, of the *yakṣa* of *bráhman*, which forms a kind of empty outline She fills without remainder. *Bráhman* is in the sense the *empty form* of each God as supreme being, just as it is the space of their encounter.

The commentator recognizes that Indra has persevered: "Understanding his devotion to *yakṣa*, knowledge (of *bráhman*) made Her appearance," as the Goddess Umā, who is identified in the later tradition with Pārvatī, the consort of Śiva and object of one of the preeminent *bhakti* cults. Umā explains to Indra that the *yakṣa* was *bráhman*, and that "In *bráhman*'s victory, indeed, you became elated thus," and "from that (utterance) alone, to be sure, did Indra learn that It was *bráhman*," (4.1). Thus Indra knows *bráhman* adequately solely from the person-to-person revelation by Umā. The text goes on to explain that "Therefore, indeed, these Gods, viz Agni, Vāyu, and Indra, did excel other Gods, for they touched It most proximately, and they knew It first as *bráhman*," (4.2). This proximate contact is, as the commentator remarks, "the process of conversation," not only Indra's with Umā, but also Agni's and Vāyu's conversations with the *yakṣa* of *bráhman* earlier in the text. But these only bore fruit through Indra's realization: "Therefore did Indra excel the other deities. For he touched It most proximately, inasmuch as he knew It first as *bráhman*," (4.3). This distinction between Indra and the other two Gods cannot be understood apart from the fact that Indra is not the recipient of a 'what'

question asking him to encapsulate or essentialize his power or function. Indra thus takes the first step from *what* to *who*, the first step toward the establishment of *bhakti*, or devotion to the Gods as persons, as 'who' and not merely as 'what', which is symbolized here by the appearance of Umā.

The text proceeds to deliver two expositions of the nature of *bráhman*, which just as in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, are distinguished as pertaining to the Gods, or to the subjective context. The illustrations "in a divine context [*adhidaivatam*]" compare *bráhman* to the flash of lightning, and to the blink of an eye (4.4), while in the context of the self (*adhyātmam*), *bráhman* is to be understood in virtue of "this known fact, that the mind seems to go to It, and the fact that It is repeatedly remembered through the mind," (4.5). This latter characterization is also implied in the next verse: "The *bráhman* is well known as the one adorable to all creatures"; this, the commentator explains, "is indicative of Its quality" (4.6, p. 83 G). *Bráhman*'s quality is simply that of being *the object of desire as such*. It is not a particular object of desire, but reflects the mind's activity. The mind seeks its own aim or goal, what Greeks call *telos*, in *bráhman*, which is in this way also *teleology*, the finding of reason or purpose in things generally. In this way, the mind finds itself reflected back to it in the world. This also illuminates the sense of *bráhman* emphasized by certain scholars, such as Gonda, who interprets *bráhman* as a force which strengthens things. Each thing is strengthened according to its nature, according to its innate perfection, or *entelecheia*, as Greek philosophy terms it. Taken in this sense, *bráhman* still entails a polycentric structure insofar as it is a force of individuation, albeit one the reflection upon which leads to considerations of *essence*, or 'whatness', rather than down the other fork in the road, through the consideration of personhood or 'whoness', which leads to the development of *bhakti* theory. Indeed, already in Ṛg Veda 10.121 there is an effort to make the 'who' (*ka*) thematic as such: each verse of this hymn except the last (which addresses Prajāpati) ends with the formula, "Let us offer worship with an oblation to the divine *Ka*."[21]

What is salient in the comparison of *bráhman* to *lightning* (*vidyutaḥ*) in the divine context is the indivisible character of the flash of lightning, which casts into an inseparable unity whatever it reveals. When Agni is questioned by the *yakṣa* about what power, attribute or virtue he contains, the very question separates Agni himself and his power. Having been *one*, Agni is now *two*: the person, *who* he is, and the potency, *what* he is. Any power conceived as a 'what', a discrete property in itself, is by virtue of that rendered impersonal. On the other hand, Agni's personhood is also thus revealed—Agni does not disappear though he is distinguished from his potency. This is the privilege the text accords to the particular deities who engaged in conversation with the *yakṣa*. As

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[21] Jamison and Brereton, III, p. 1593f, render these lines instead as straightforward questions: "Who is the god to whom we should do homage with our oblation?"

a result of the encounter with the *yakṣa*, Agni cannot be reduced to the mere power of fire, or Vāyu to the power of air. We may speculate that Agni and Vāyu in particular subject themselves to this process because of the value that fire and air as impersonal forces have for cosmological speculations, as they also did in Greece for Herakleitos and Anaximenes, respectively.

The Upaniṣad thus uses *bráhman* to separate the ontological registers of 'who' and 'what.' In the same fashion, henadological Platonism uses the criterion of unity to distinguish the Gods as unique henadic individuals—pure 'whos'—from beings, which are all composites of 'who' and 'what.' The 'lightning flash' of *bráhman* in the Kena Upaniṣad could be compared to the *sphoṭa* (from *sphuṭ*, 'to burst') in Bhartṛhari's linguistics, where it expresses the indivisible, unitary meaning present as a flash of intuition (*pratibha*) when we grasp a sentence as a whole. A linguistic doctrine found already in the Veda, however, at RV 10.71.1, differs from Bhartṛhari in treating the *name* as the unit of meaning rather than the sentence: "That, Bṛhaspati"—note the address to this figure, often virtually indistinguishable from Brahmaṇaspati—"is the best (part) of speech which those giving a name (to objects) first utter; that which was the best of those (words) and free from defect, (Sarasvatī) reveals it though secretly implanted, by means of affection."[22] Here *proper names*, or at least a subset of them, are affirmed to have the highest ontological value within speech, insofar as they express an acquaintance, a true relationship, with objects on the part of a primordial speaker, just as in Plato's *Cratylus*, the primordial 'lawgivers' of cultures express their relationship to the Gods appearing to them in theophany by giving to Them names. These names, though designating unitary individuals, can themselves, *qua* language, be inexhaustibly sifted for semantic value, just as the Vedic text goes on to speak of "the wise creat[ing] speech through wisdom, winnowing (it) as (men winnow) barley with a sieve" (10.71.2).

The lightning-flash of *bráhman* in the Upaniṣad should also be understood in relation to Vedic texts like RV 10.112.8, which states of Indra, "you did cleave the cloud, you made the cow easily discoverable for the Brāhmaṇa," that is, for the ritualist.[23] Here as elsewhere in the Veda, we must bear in mind the play on words in Sanskrit between *go* as 'cow' and as 'ray of light',[24] the cow

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[22] "O Bṛhaspati, (this was) the first beginning of Speech; when they [=the seers] came forth, giving names. What was their best, what was flawless—that (name), set down in secret, was revealed to them because of your affection (for them)," (Jamison and Brereton, III, p. 1497).

[23] Jamison and Brereton read *bráhman* here instead of brahmin: "You, of real battle fervor, made the stone give way; you made the cow easy to find, for the sacred formulation," (III, p. 1580).

[24] See Aurobindo (1916), pp. 43ff and *passim*.

thus embodying illumination, consciousness, which Indra, who is the lord of lightning, exposes in order that it may be thematized as an object of knowledge in its own right, which is precisely the inquiry that the Upaniṣads and the subsequent tradition of Vedānta proceed to develop. From this perspective we can recognize Indra's role in the Upaniṣad as much more substantial and dynamic than appears on a superficial reading.

A crucial Vedic text speaks in mythic terms of *bráhman*'s creation by the Gods. In 10.61, a hymn dedicated to Rudra (Śiva), reference is made to a father who unites sexually with his daughter, and some of his seed is cast upon the earth: "Then the thoughtful [*svādhyo*] Gods begot *bráhman*: they fabricated the lord of the sacrificial ground, the defender of sacred rites," (10.61.7).[25] These latter two epithets are taken to refer to Rudra, and the later tradition explicates this episode as an effort on the part of Prajāpati to have sex with Vāk, later yet identified as Brahmā and Saraswatī, the act being treated sometimes as successful, and sometimes as prevented, eliciting thereby diverse shades of meaning. Inasmuch as Prajāpati is the master of animal generation, we can see the frustration of his union with his daughter as introducing a separation between this nature and the power of the voice, of language. *Bráhman* is created by the Gods in their own intelligence as a power of insight emergent from this relationship between language and animal being, but not reducible to it. Rather, the intelligence of the Gods mediates, acting, so to speak, as its midwife.

Elsewhere, Prajāpati is said to "engender through speech";[26] "Speech was his second, He united with her, [and] she conceived … She emitted these creatures, [and] re-entered Prajāpati."[27] In this sense, Prajāpati's generation of creatures is already understood as ideal, that is, involving an intelligible component. That no living thing is without this aspect entails that no living thing may be regarded merely as a means, and not as an end (Greek *telos*) in itself, for it is a perfected being (Gk. *entelecheia*) in its very generation. The Vedic passage, however, for its own purposes, isolates the production of *bráhman* in this generative moment. Later, in the Matsya Purāṇa, Brahmā's intercourse with his daughter Saraswatī, whom he produced from out of his own body, results in the birth of Manu, the primal human (3:44cd). Moreover, the experience of this carnal desire humanizes Brahmā in this text: "the God, like an ordinary man, made love [to her] in a pavilion inside a lotus for as long as a hundred celestial years."[28] The Purāṇic version thus shows itself parallel to the Vedic, with the

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[25] "The gods, very concerned, begat the sacred formulation, and they fashioned out (of it?) the Lord of the Dwelling Place, protector of commandments," (Jamison and Brereton, III, p. 1476).

[26] Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa 7:6:2, quoted in Ludvik (2007), p. 61.

[27] Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā 27:1 [137, 8-10], quoted in Ludvik, p. 61.

[28] Matsya Purāṇa 3:44b, quoted in Ludvik, p. 121.

creation of *bráhman* in the Veda, a potency in which humans and Gods alike shall participate, a humanizing product of divine intelligence, being conveyed in the Purāṇa instead by the creation of the primordial human himself, through the God's participation in the human condition of overpowering desire.

Similarly, RV 10.109 speaks of "Brahmā's sin" on account of which his wife, Juhū (identified with Vāk), absents herself from him and must be induced to return. She is described as "the terrible wife of Brahmā" (10.109.4), who must be drawn back into association with him and her wrath appeased through ritual action. Brahmā thus engages in austerities and worship in the manner of a human: "He leads the life of a *brahmacārin*"—a human student of the scriptures, unmarried—"even adoring all the Gods," (10.109.5)—so that "Bṛhaspati [Brahmā] obtained his wife (formerly) brought to him by Soma, as the Gods receive an offering" (ibid.). And human, collective ritual action inserts itself into this divine process as well, at 6: "The Gods gave her back again, men also gave her back, and kings confirming (the gift) gave Brahmā's wife back again."[29]

The elevation of *bráhman* as a principle thus goes together with an elevation of the human, at least in the human's highest potentiality. Hence just as there are texts in which *bráhman* creates the Gods, there are texts in which brahmins, human ritual specialists, create the Gods. Indeed, in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, for example, where Prajāpati is said to create *bráhman* (6.1.8), this has as its precondition that the ṛṣis, the primordial seers, in turn create Prajāpati through a sevenfold schema of personhood (6.1.1-5); later, at 11.2.3.1 *bráhman* is simply said to have created the Gods. And it is not only the primordial ṛṣis who may be placed in this role. The Mahābhārata (13.33.15-17) describes the brahmins in general, as ritual specialists, as "elders" relative to the Gods, and that they are "competent to make him a deity that is not a deity" as well as "divest one that is a deity of his status as such," (trans. Ganguli). The Viṣṇu Smṛti similarly states (19.22) that it is "by favor of" the brahmins "that the Gods reside in heaven," (trans. Jolly). We may of course regard this as pertaining solely to the order of worldly time, of historical manifestation. But in order to exhibit their superiority to this maximalist conception of *bráhman*, it is this relationship of seer (and

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[29] Jamison and Brereton interpret the hymn as referring, not to Brahmā, but to the brahmin, the priest, and hence to "the much-debated issue in the late Ṛgveda about the introduction of the Sacrificer's Wife into ritual performance," of which "the poet both recognizes the perils … and reassures his audience that all will be well"; hence they read in 1 "the offense against the Brahmin," in 4 the "fearsome … wife of the Brahmin," it is the Brahmin in 5 who "becomes (just) one limb of the gods," and at 6 the Gods, humans, and kings "have given back the Brahmin's wife," (III, p. 1575). They state that "the currently prevailing opinion about the hymn … is that it represents an early version of the story in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa (IV.6.5) in which King Soma abducts the wife of Bṛhaspati, the guru of the gods, and ultimately is forced to return her," (ibid., p. 1574).

qualified ritualist as authorized inheritor of the seers or prophets) to divinity that the Gods must transcend. This transcendence comes about through the theorization of *bhakti* as a more profound relationship, radically individuating for God and worshiper alike. But this superiority, once articulated, is still subject to the reciprocal logic of polycentricity, so that in a key *bhakti* text such as the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (5.5.22), Kṛṣṇa can state that "I myself hold the *brāhmaṇas* to be My lords," (trans. Bryant). There is thus no simple trajectory or evolutionary progress from one conception to another that would supersede it, simply the exploration of all the different possibilities for agents according transcendence to one another and the transcendence in turn accorded to them.

This reciprocal positing of the Gods and the ritual agents by one another can be seen as well in two hymns of the Veda coming one after the other, RV 10.129 and 130. In 129, the first mover of all things is desire: "In the beginning there was desire, which was the first seed of mind; sages having meditated in their hearts have discovered by their wisdom the connection of the existent with [or 'in'] the non-existent," (4). We have seen previously in our discussion of the Kena Upaniṣad how *bráhman* can be characterized as the object of desire as such, and hence as any object of desire *qua* desired. The sages, in being able to recognize the power of the mind to render objects as valued, acquire the power over values and objects as such: "Their ray was stretched out, whether across, or below, or above; (some) were shedders of seed, (others) were mighty; food was inferior, the eater was superior," (5).[30] The basic worldly relationships, including the foundations of social power, are thus established in the mind's self-possession. In this light, the Gods Themselves appear as dependent phenomena—and, not coincidentally, a veil of skepticism falls over everything as well: "Who really knows? Who in this world may declare it, whence was this creation, whence was it engendered? The Gods (were) subsequent to[31] the (world's) creation; so who knows whence it arose?" (6). In RV 10.130, by contrast, the primordial ritual by which "the universal Gods [*viśve-devāḥ*, the totality of the Gods] offered worship to the Gods" (3)[32] is unambiguously stated to be that which has brought us forth: "When this ancient sacrifice was accomplished, by it *ṛṣis*, men, and our progenitors were created;[33] beholding them with the eye of the mind, I glorify those who of old celebrated this sacrifice," (6).

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[30] "Their cord was stretched across: Did something exist below it? Did something exist above? There existed placers of semen and there existed greatnesses. There was independent will below, offering above," (Jamison and Brereton, III, p. 1609).

[31] "are on this side of," (Ibid., p. 1609).

[32] Ibid., p. 1610: "when all the gods offered the god [the sacrifice]."

[33] Ibid., p. 1611, has instead "The seers, the sons of Manu, our fathers, arranged (the ritual) according to this, when the sacrifice was born in ancient times."

The distinction between 10.129 and 10.130 may lie in the universal quantifier by which the absolute totality of *all the Gods*, a necessarily extra-cosmic set, is expressed. This set can be compared to the quasi-class of all the Gods which I have argued constitutes the 'Intelligible Gods' in Proclus.[34] The Viśve-devas are also regarded at times as a particular group of Gods, but there is no need on account of this to lose sight of the straightforward significance of the reference to a 'universal' collective of Gods.[35] The universal reflexive worship of the Gods by the Gods is an activity transcending even the universal determination of desiring mind, which is itself constitutive for Intellect and hence for all things insofar as they are intellectively formed, that is, cognizable.

Beyond the Vedic framework, reflection developed a grounding function for the God as unique *Īśvara* through explicating what was implicit in the devotional relationship. Hence in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, we read of a triadic structure on the substrate of *bráhman* (1.7), this triad consisting of "the enjoyer, the enjoyed, and the ruler" (1.12), where we note that the God as 'ruler' (*preritāram*, mover, cp. Aristotle's 'unmoved mover(s)') has been separated from the objectification of the individual subject's desires. With respect to this triadic economy, the text states that "This whole world is the perishable and the imperishable, the manifest and the unmanifest joined together—and the Lord (*īśa*) bears it, while the self (*ātman*), not being a lord, remains bound, because he is the enjoyer. When he comes to know the God (*deva*), he is freed from all fetters," (1.8; trans. Olivelle, slightly mod.). The God is thus the support for the entire economy of ontic manifestation and production, and can impart their personhood transcending ontic determination to the worshiper.

This devotional economy is further developed in 1.9, which offers a modified triad, explaining that "There are two unborn [males]—the one knows and the other is ignorant; the one is Lord (*īśvara*) and the other is not the Lord. There is just one unborn [female], who is joined to the enjoyer and the objects of enjoyment. And then there is the self (*ātman*), limitless and displaying every form, not engaged in any activity. When someone finds these three, he finds this *bráhman*," (trans. Olivelle, slightly mod.). The third, female term in the relationship between the God and the worshiper here is now what has been referred to earlier (1.3) as the *Devātmaśakti*: "By practicing the yoga of meditation they [the sages] realized the power of the Deity Himself [*Devātmaśakti*], hidden by its own effects,—the Lord who, alone, rules all those sources associated with (i.e. including) Time and the individual soul," (trans. Gambhirananda). The powers of the God, personified in singular feminine form, now stand for all the relations between Gods, all the relations within the divine sphere, in which the powers of each God are in the first place expressed,

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[34] Butler (2008b).

[35] On the viśve-devāḥ-s generally, see Mukhopadhyay (2003), pp. 372-6.

and which are not reducible, for their own part, to the projections of the worshiper or their limitations—that is, it is no longer a question merely of what is experienced, of divine action as 'effects' upon the soul.

By opening the divine encounter up in this fashion to the indefinite multiplicity of Gods present in the God Himself—compare Arjuna's vision of all the Gods in Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad Gītā, chaps. 10 and 11—the God's individual unity is preserved, as opposed to the analysis of the experience of the God as a psychological event, in which diverse qualities are isolated as contents 'enjoyed.' The God's powers are preserved in the integral unity of personhood, and it is this preeminent unity that secures the God's causal priority, just as we read in 1.2 that the union or combination of the person (*puruṣa*) with the totality of circumstances—"time, nature, necessity, chance, the elements"—the case if we were speaking about merely human personhood—cannot be the ultimate agency "because that is not independent," (*anīśaḥ*, cp. *īśvara*), i.e., it is not one, and therefore not pure agency, but an agency determined by ontic coordinates. The infinite self referred to in 1.9, on the other hand, as appearing under all forms, is for its own part "inactive" (*akartā*) in a different sense, that is, negated as a discrete cause, which is confirmed by the fact that it does not form a fourth term. It does not act on its own part and is not itself an agency. Rather, it is the very economy of the terms already put into play—the God, his divine Other, and the worshiper—that constitutes *bráhman*. *Bráhman* appears thus as nothing other, we might say, than *polytheism in itself.*

As I stressed early on in this piece, my reading of *bráhman* here makes no pretense of finality or of exclusivity. It does not attempt to impose itself on the texts in such a manner as to silence other readings, or entire interpretative approaches that may oppose it. It offers, instead, a potential for how these texts can be read in a fashion that has as its primary goal conserving the integrity of the tradition as a whole. Indeed, I would not wish to rule out that the conciliatory power of this reading might not eventually be seen to embrace even those approaches that seem diametrically opposed to it, for example, that of Advaita Vedānta. It must never be forgotten that whatever conflicts existed in India among different intellectual traditions prior to Western intervention, this intervention has weaponized those conflicts through the application of Western philosophical concepts in a manner that has sought to complete in India and elsewhere among indigenous polytheisms of the 'Third World' the never-truly-completed conquest and subjugation of the West's own polytheisms and the appropriation for itself of their intellectual and cultural riches. I would argue, therefore, that we ought to presuppose as little as possible about how basic concepts in Indian philosophy and theology correspond to Western ideas, insofar as we polytheists in the West are engaged in the process of taking back

those ideas. Nothing, in short, may be taken as static in the relationship between these civilizations.

It goes without saying that out of the vast wealth of texts treating *bráhman* in one respect or another, I have been highly selective, treating solely those texts I have come across that seemed to bear in a particular degree upon the question of the relationship between *bráhman* and the Gods. This interest was motivated in part, of course, by the opportunity monotheizing modern scholars have seen in *bráhman* as something which can form a placeholder for monotheism, subordinating the Gods while not offering direct competition to the Christian God in the way that the bhakti cults would. I hope, however, that my reading has demonstrated that it is not merely reactive, but seeks to truly grasp what *bráhman* is, for those for whom the centrality of the Gods Themselves would not be in question.

According to this understanding, *bráhman* hypostatizes, renders substantial, the network or continuum of divine power in the specific form in which it circulates between humans and the Gods, a power of divinely inspired speech, successful ritual performance, insight into the meaning and significance of ritual and of the content of speech praising the Gods, and, emerging from this matrix, an open-ended and always-questioning insight into the nature of Being with soteriological value in its own right. Similarly to the question in the Hellenic context of the salvific value of philosophical illumination purely in its own right, the existence of such a soteriology does not necessarily immediately pose the problem of salvation by this means *alone*, but only in the first place of what *kind* of soteriology is thus proposed. There are, in polytheism, as many potential soteriologies as there are Gods, because in essence any action of a God upon a soul 'saves' it in some fashion.

When the authors of the Upaniṣads state that the ultimate salvation is through recognizing *bráhman*, they still operate within the polycentric logic of polytheism, in which ultimacy is the way of articulating what is distinctive about a deity or, in this case, a power. In the specific case of the doctrine of *bráhman*, it is a question of explaining how the salvation that occurs through divine action can be apprehended globally, through understanding this action in itself and as such. We are accustomed to think that such a leap of abstraction represents a fundamental advancement along a linear progression; but this is to fail to understand that, in the Indian context just as in the theoretical formulations of Platonic philosophy and theurgy, these feats of conceptualization feed back into the most basic acts of worship, illuminating them and being nourished by them in turn, displacing nothing but instead taking their own place in the divine economy of the production and maintenance of the cosmos.[36]

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[36] It does not even matter, from this point of view, if cosmogenesis is treated as 'illusion' (*māyā*), insofar as it still retains all of its causal power; and it is not difficult to

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contrast Vedāntic doctrines in this respect with Gnosticism, the anticosmism of which has formed a powerful nihilistic current in Western culture.

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