‘The End of Sacrifice’ and the Absence of ‘Religion’: The Peculiar Case of India

Gerald James Larson
Professor Emeritus, University of California, Santa Barbara
and Indiana University, Bloomington, USA

Guy Stroumsa’s provocative monograph, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*, called to mind an earlier article of mine, entitled, “An Old Problem Revisited: The Relation between Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Buddhism.” It also called to mind an article by Frits Staal, entitled, “The Himalayas and the Fall of Religion.”[1] What led me to associate the two latter articles with Stroumsa’s monograph is the relationship in all three to the role of the notions of “Christian” and “religion” in Late Antiquity, the term “late antiquity” broadly understood by Stroumsa as stretching “from Jesus to Muhammad”.[2]

In the case of Stroumsa’s work, the notion of “religion” seems to correlate with the “end of sacrifice,” traceable to a significant extent to the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 CE and the resulting impossibility of

---

[1] Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*, trrans., Susan Emanuel (Chicago: The University of Chicago, Press, 2009), *passim*; Gerald J. Larson, “An Old Problem Revisited: The Relation between Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Buddhism,” in *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik*, Heft 15 (1989), 129-146; and J. F. (Frits) Staal, “The Himalayas and the Fall of Religion,” in D. E. Klimburg-Salter, ed., *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 38-51. Staal also develops the argument further in his book, *Rules without Meaning*. Toronto Studies in Religion, volume 4 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 387ff.

[2] Stroumsa, The End of Sacrifice, p. 34.

performing blood sacrifice thereafter. In the case of my article, I was examining the intellectual history of ancient India, arguing that the traditions of Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Buddhism are indeed related but not in their most important aspects in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, as was thought by many older Indologists, but, rather, in the first centuries of the Common Era, the period roughly coterminous with Late Antiquity in the Mediterranean world. In the case of Staal's work, he poses the interesting thesis that the very term "religion" itself is not a common noun but, rather, a naming or proper noun. In other words, Staal suggests that the term "religion" is a proper name, another name in an abbreviated form for the term "Christian."

Stroumsa comments towards the end of his monograph

> The world of Late Antiquity was therefore a new axial time, or *Achsenzeit*, no less crucial for the future than the one identified by Karl Jaspers around the middle of the first millennium before our era. It was a world of transformations....[3]
>
> ....
>
> Here I have sought to address a...series of transformations, religious in essence. In dealing respectively with what I have called a "new care of the self," the rise of religions of the Book, the end of

[3] *Ibid*., p. 108.

> sacrifices, and the shift from civic religion to communitarian religion, I have tried to show that some of the major anthropological, cultural and political transformations of Late Antiquity can only be understood as directly linked to certain far-reaching changes in the very concept of religion.[4]

"Christian" "religion" appears to have been the basic model, both for the Jewish people as well as the later Arab peoples. Daniel Boyarin refers to what he calls "heresiological terms of art" that were determinative for the formulation of the "religions" of "Judaism" and "Islam," that is, names, terms or concepts generated largely by Christian heresiologists by way of determining the uniqueness of an incipient "Christian" "religion."[5] Boyarin quotes the following argument of Steve Mason in this regard.

> By about 200 C.E. the Church was making headway as a popular movement, or a constellation of loosely related movements. In that atmosphere, in which internal and external self-definition remained a

---

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

[5] Daniel Boyarin, "Rethinking Jewish Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Volume 99, No. 1 (Winter 2009) 7-36. Boyarin argues that in Late Antiquity, Jewish literature nowhere refers to the Jewish people in terms of Jewish "religion" or "Judaism." It is only with the Christian writer Tertullian in the mid-third century (see p. 10) that one first finds the word "Judaism" as a "religion" in reference to the sacral traditions of the Jewish people.

> paramount concern, Tertullian and others felt strong enough to jettison earlier attempts to portray themselves as Judaeans, and to see commitment to Christ as *sui generis*. Rather than admitting the definitive status of the established forms and responding defensively, they began to project the hybrid form of *Christianismus* on the other groups to facilitate polemical contrast... The most important group for Christian self-definition had always been the *Ioudaioi*, and so they were the groups most conspicuously reduced to such a treatment, which generated a static and systemic abstraction called *Ioudaismos/Iudaismus*.[6]

Boyarin concludes: “The clear and critical conclusion to be drawn from this argument...is that “Judaism” as the name of a “religion” is a product of Christianity in its attempts to establish a separate identity from something else which they call “Judaism,” a project that begins no earlier than the mid-second century..., gathers strength in the third century, and comes to fruition in the

---

[6] Steve Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38.4-5 (2007): 457-512; p. 476. Cited in Boyarin, “Rethinking Jewish Christianity,” pp. 10-11.

processes before and following the Council of Nicaea."[7] *Mutatis mutandis*, similar processes are operating later in the designation of "Islam" as a "religion."[8]

In any case, the notions of an abstract belief system centering on one God (Yahweh, the Triune God, Allah), a master text (Torah, New Testament, Qur'an), a master historical narrative (*Heilsgeschichte* as Passover, Crucifixion/Resurrection, Hijra), a master community (Synagogue, Church, Mosque), and a specific sacred space (Jerusalem, Rome, Mecca) all largely emerged from Christian intellectual reflection in Late Antiquity and thereafter superimposed as a category upon other traditions. "Christian" "religion" then becomes the touchstone for testing the qualities of all other sacral traditions.

---

[7] Boyarin, "Rethining Jewish Christianity," p. 11.

[8] See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1978). This is the classical discussion of the history of the term "religion" [from Latin, *religio*, derived either from *relegere*, 'to be scrupulous,' or from *religare*, "to bind," p. 204] in the West in which Smith argues that by the time of Lactantius (ca. 325), early Western civilization was at the threshold of "... taking a decisive step in the formulation of an elaborate, comprehensive, philosophic concept of *religio*. However, it did not take it. The matter was virtually dropped, to lie dormant for a thousand years." (p. 28). Boyarin challenges this view of W. C. Smith and persuasively shows that the modern notion of "religion" was invented already in the fourth century and helped to make possible a "transethnic Christendom." (Boyarin, "Rethinking Jewish Christianity," p. 12, and see the subsequent discussion, pp. 12-27).

Even “Hellenism” becomes a “religion” in this sense of the Christian model in the fourth century in the writing of Julian “the Apostate.”[9]

Let me now turn to the title of my presentation, “‘The End of Sacrifice’ and the Absence of ‘Religion’: The Peculiar Case of India.” If Stroumsa’s and Staal’s arguments are worth pursuing [and perhaps obviously, I think that they are to a significant extent], there would appear to be some interesting questions to ask about the manner in which we identify and construct (or de-construct) our studies in South Asian “religion,” “philosophy,” and “theology.”

(1) First and most striking in this regard, if Stroumsa and Staal are correct, there is nothing remotely like “religion” in India in the sense that the notion came to be formulated in the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity. To be sure, the notion of “religion” (in the sense of Christian/Jewish/Islamic “religion”) is introduced in South Asia in the later centuries of the Common Era, but in many ways such a notion has little if anything to do with what had been going on culturally in the South Asian region. If such is the case, then how does one characterize cultural traditions that do arise after the ‘end of sacrifice’ in India? In other words, when the Vedic sacrificial system begins to lose its prominence and other kinds of cultural performance begin to emerge in South Asia, if the notion of “religion” is seriously misleading, what alternative conceptions might be formulated?

---

[9] *Ibid*., Boyarin, p. 13.

(2) Second, if the term “religion” is problematic in a South Asian environment, prior or apart from “religion” in the sense of Christian/Jewish/Islamic “religion,” what about terms such as “philosophy” and “theology” in the South Asian cultural environment? Could there be merit in likewise considering these terms also as ‘naming’ terms or proper nouns rather than as common nouns or generic categories? Is it plausible to argue, therefore, that there is an “absence” of “philosophy” and “theology” in South Asia on analogy with the absence of “religion”? If such is a plausible suggestion, then, how does one characterize the theoretical and/or speculative traditions that do arise in the South Asian region in the early centuries of the Common Era?

(3) Third, if Stroumsa is correct that the cultural transformations in the Mediterranean region in Late Antiquity represent what he calls a second *Achsenzeit* (Axial Age), is there a comparable second “Axial” period in the South Asian region? If so, how does it differ from the changes taking place in the Mediterranean region and how does it differ from the transformations that occur in the first *Achsenzeit*?

(4) Fourth, if the terms “religion,” “philosophy,” and “theology” must be re-configured or rectified in the light of evidence in a so-called second *Achsenzeit* in the South Asian region that run parallel with the transformations occurring in the Mediterranean region in Late Antiquity, is it necessary to re-think the meaning of

"religion," "philosophy," and "theology" in Late Antiquity as well, no longer now as generic, universal concepts but, rather, as historically derived "naming" terms or proper names? In other words, is there a dialectic operating here, or some sort of "blowback" effect, that can shed some new light on our own western intellectual history?[10]

(5) Finally, fifth, *pace* the neo-colonialist, post-modernist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist *aficianados* among us, is it possibly the case that our most difficult conceptual misunderstandings and conundrums arise not only long before the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity but as well before the medieval periods in Europe, the Mediterranean, the Near and Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere, namely, in a second *Achsenzeit*, that is to say, the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity and comparable developments in roughly the same period of the Common Era in South Asia?

In the sequel, I shall address each of these five questions, not by way of suggesting definitive answers to the questions, but, rather, by way of posing possible future research trajectories for our comparative studies. My intention, in other words, is to compare and contrast what is going on in the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity with what is happening in roughly the same period in the South Asian region. Put somewhat differently, what I am trying to do in this paper is

---

[10] Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback*: *The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt &Co., 2004), pp. 3-33.

something along the lines of what the ancient sage, Confucius, called “the rectification of names” *(cheng ming*).[11] Or perhaps, somewhat more bluntly: what in the world have we been talking about when we use the terms “religion,” “philosophy” and theology” in our studies?

(1) The term “religion” in the South Asian region.

Half a century ago, Louis Renou commented, “*Le dharma ou ‘loi’ hindoue—le Sanskrit n’a pas d’autre pour désigner approximativement la religion*.” [“dharma” or “law”—Sanskrit has no other term in order to designate approximately the notion of religion.][12] Daniel H. H. Ingalls put it even more bluntly: “Ancient India...has no word for ‘religion.’”[13] The distinguished Indian historian, Romila Thapar, extends the issue to cover the term “Hindu” as well. Says Thapar:

---

[11] Confucius, *The Analects*, 13.3, in W. T. de Bary, et al., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Volume One, second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 56. “The Master said: ‘What is necessary is the rectification of names (*cheng ming*).’ ...If names are not rectified , then language will not be appropriate, and if language is not appropriate, affairs will not be successfully carried out.... In regard to language, the noble person allows no carelessness, that is all.”

[12] Louis Renou, et al., *L’Inde classique*, Volume I (Paris: Payot, 1947), p. 480, cited
in W.C. Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion, p. 248.

[13] Daniel H. H. Ingalls, “Authority and Law in Ancient India,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Supplement No. 17, p. 34, also cited in W.C. Smith, pp. 248-249.

> The term Hindu was first used to mean all those who lived in al-Hind but were not Muslim. In terms of religious definition, reference is made in Persian sources to various Hindu religions....[as many as 42 in all] 'Hindu' became a term of administrative convenience when the rulers of Arab, Turkish, Afghan and Mughal origin—all Muslims—had to differentiate between 'believers' and the rest.
>
> The first step towards the crystalisation of what we today call Hinduism was born in the consciousness of being the amorphous, undefined, subordinate other.[14]

The modern historian of India, R. E. Frykenberg offers the following comment:

> The terms "Hindu" and "Hinduism" have always been used—and are still being used—to cover a wide-ranging multitude of meanings.
>
> ...during the late 18th century when the concept first began to be used, the term "Hindu" was applied to anything which was of India, anything "Native" or "Indian."
>
> ....
>
> "Hindu" was also a negative term. It was the term used, in negative ways, to characterize *all things in India* which were *not* Muslim, *not* Christian, *not* Jewish, or hence, *not* Western.

---

[14] Romila Thapar, "Syndicated Moksha?" in *Seminar*, 313 (1985), p. 17.

> In a still narrower sense...Hindu and "Hinduism" were the terms which were later applied to all high culture and religion in India, but especially that which was of Aryan, Brahmanical or Vedic origin.
>
> ....
>
> The result has been a jumbling and scrambling of signals. Vagueness of usage has led this concept into trackless deserts of nonsense.
>
> One can find no single, all-embracing religion which can be traced all the way back to the Vedas.[15]

Most recently, of course, is Wendy Doniger's massive volume, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, in which she largely avoids any attempt at definition and focuses instead on what she calls the "pluralism," "tolerance," "hybridity," and "multiplicity" of the "Hindus."[16]

Clearly there is a problem with the term "religion" as well as the terms "Hindu" and "Hinduism." Neither in what Jaspers calls the first Axial age (ca. 800 BCE to 200 BCE) nor in what Stroumsa is suggesting as a second Axial age (ca., 100 to

---

[15] R. E. Frykenberg, "The Emergence of Modern 'Hinduism' as a Concept and as an Institution: A Reappraisal with Special Reference to South India," in G. D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke, eds., *Hinduism Reconsidered* (Delhi: Manohar, 1991), pp. 31-33.

[16] Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), especially Chapter 1, pp. 17-49.

700 CE) is there anything like “religion” as formulated in the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity. Instead, as Renou notes, there is only the polymorphic, or, if you prefer, the polyvalent term, *dharma*, inclusive of such meanings as “law,” “duty,” “custom,” “obligation,” “virtue,” “righteousness,” and so forth. Moreover, the polymorphic or polyvalent term *dharma* is broadly used in Vedic-cum-Brahmanical contexts as well as in Śramanical contexts, that is to say, Buddhist, Jain and other (ascetic) traditions.

In the case of the Vedic-cum-Brahmanical context, *dharma*-traditions begin to become prominent as social reality expands from a largely rural, agricultural base in the northwest regions of the Indus Valley, the Punjab, and so forth, into the more complex Gangetic plain regions with the emergence of towns (sometimes referred to as the period of “second urbanization”), trade, a money economy, and the greater use of iron technology (ca., the sixth or fifth centuries BCE) [roughly contemporary with what Karl Jaspers identified as the Axial Age, a period between ca. 800 BCE and 200 BCE, with important comparable transformations in Greece, the Middle East and China]. The transformations that are occurring are reflected in some of the oldest Upaniṣads, for example, the *Aitareya, Taittirīya, Bṛhadāraṇyaka, Chāndogya*, and so forth. There are gods (*deva*) of one kind or another, of course, but speculations for the most part focus on cosmic abstractions and neuter absolutes. The older Vedic sacrificial system is

clearly still operative, and speculative reflections are emerging that go beyond simply textual exegesis and explanations of the sacrificial process. The external fire sacrifice is analogized symbolically with the interior heat of the breath and body that supports life, and correlations are drawn between the cosmic ultimate that supports the sun and fire (the *Brahman*) with the inner, subjective-cum-cosmic Self (the *Ātman*) that supports the life of the body, using what has been called a peculiar 'magical' "logic of identity". Early speculative traditions relating to "*sāṃkhya*" (or what Franklin Edgerton has called "reason-method") and "*yoga*" ("disciplined meditation" or "action-method") are also first appearing.[17] Comparable speculations carry over into the narrative texts of the epics (*Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*), as, for example, the *Bhagavad Gītā* the *Mokṣadharma*, and so forth, the middle verse-Upaniṣads, as well as in the law books (for example, the *Manusmṛti*) and the other Śāstras. These traditions eventually come to be referred to overall simply as *varṇāśrama-dharma*.

---

[17] Franklin Edgerton, *The Beginning of Indian Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), see pp. 26-27 for the 'magical' logic of identity, pp. 35ff. for the terms "*sāṃkhya*" and "*yoga*." See also in this regard Gerald J. Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya, eds., *Sāṃkhya: A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy*, Volume IV, Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, General Editor, Karl H. Potter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 4-9. (hereafter Larson-Bhattacharya 1987) See also Gerald J. Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya, eds., *Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation*, Volume XII, Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008), pp. 30-52. (hereafter Larson-Bhattacharya 2008)

These Vedic-Brahmanical *dharma*-traditions are strikingly different from the notion of "religion" in the Meditarranean of Late Antiquity. Instead of one transcendent deity, there is a polymorphic set of disparate deities. Instead of a single *Heilsgeschichte* or master narrative, there is a wide-ranging multi-narrativity. Instead of a single authoritative text, there is a pervasive multi-textuality. Instead of an abstract set of beliefs or credo (orthodoxy), there is the absence of any sort of cognitive regulation but various traditions, instead, of ortho-praxis that differ from one *varṇa/jāti* to another and from one stage of life to another. And in place of a cohesive believing community, there are pluralistic sets of mini-communities, to some degree normatively hierarchical in an official idiom of *varṇa* or "caste," but in reality a splintered texture of birth-groups (*jāti*-s) that vary from region to region on the subcontinent. To cite Frykenberg again, there is in such environments, "...no single, all-embracing religion which can be traced all the way back to the Vedas."

Even more puzzling are the *dharma*-traditions among the Non-Vedic *śramaṇa* and *yati* groups in the Gangetic plain regions. According to Buddhist textual evidence (to be found primarily in the Pali *Sāmañña-phala Sutta, Dīghanikāya* I, 47-86) there were many such groups of "wandering ascetics" (from which the terms *śramaṇa* and *yati* derive), two of which become especially prominent in the subsequent intellectual history of South Asia, namely the Buddhists and the

Jains. Both use the term *dharma*, the Buddhists as a proper name for their tradition (in the sense of "teaching," "righteousness," "truth"), and the Jainas as a unique technical term for motion or movement.[18] These *dharma*-traditions are non-theistic, reject the authority of the Vedic-Brahmanical sacrificial system, reject therefore as well the system of *varṇa*/*jāti,* consider personal awareness or even the notion of the "individual/person" as deeply flawed and afflicted with ignorance; accept a notion of beginningless sorrowful (*duḥkha*) and recurrent re-birth (*karman* and *saṃsāra*); reject embodiment as a painful bondage from which they seek radical release (*nirvāṇa, kaivalya, kevala, mokṣa,* and so forth) through the pursuit of strategies of meditation (*yoga*), either in monastic environments or in total isolation—almost what would have to be called "irreligion" when measured against the touchstone of what is emerging as "religion" in the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity. Put simply, there is very little even roughly comparable to Mediterranean-region notions of "religion" that develop following the "end of sacrifice" or among groups that reject the authority of the Brahmanical sacrificial system in the South Asian region.

---

[18] For a useful discussion of "*brāhmaṇas*" and "*śramaṇas*," see Hirakawa Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, trans., Paul Groner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), Asian Studies at Hawaii, No. 36, pp. 13-19. See also, Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979; Indian reprint Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), pp. 1-41, 99-101.

(2) The terms “philosophy” and “theology” in the South Asian region.

It has been frequently claimed that ‘philosophy’ as a discipline has been uniquely present only in western intellectual history, a point of view among many philosophers who argue that philosophy begins with the pre-Socratics and classical Greek traditions of reflection, and continues exclusively down to the present in European and American intellectual history, a point of view that is still often accepted among many continental philosophers (for example, Heidegger) as well as analytic philosophers (for example, A. J. Ayer, and more recently, Richard Rorty). Such a point of view comes close to suggesting that “philosophy” is also a proper noun or a naming term on analogy with “religion.” In this regard I recall the amusing story that my former colleague Ninian Smart tells about the great A. J. Ayer. In a lecture course Ayer was vigorously asserting that there is nothing like “philosophy” in India’s intellectual history at which point Ninian raised his hand and asked, “Professor Ayer, you must have read extensively in Indian literature to have reached that conclusion.” Ayer then sheepishly admitted that he had not read a single Indian text but that he had read about the claim in a number of western philosophical texts.

Be that as it may, it is the case that the terms “philosophy” and “theology” have tended to be used in discussions of South Asian intellectual contexts that

are, at best, highly confusing and, at worst, seriously misleading. It is important to be clear about what we mean when we use the western term “philosophy” in the South Asian context.[19] Many Indologists and Buddhologists become involved in both an anachronism and an equivocation with respect to the word “philosophy.” One reads, for example, about the “philosophy” of the Vedas and Upaniṣads, or the “philosophy” of the Bhagavadgītā, or the “philosophy” of the epics even in as sophisticated a work as Erich Frauwallner’s *Geschichte der indischen Philosophy*.[20] There is hardly any “philosophy” in any of these texts in the western classical sense or European sense, or even in the later Indic sense, beyond the most elementary speculative intuitions that hardly rise above a ‘magical’ logic of identity. Most serious researchers are fully aware, of course, of the fundamental difference between speculative intuitions in environments of received authority, on the one hand, and systematic reflection that seeks overall coherence and persuasive presentation, including the identification of the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*), precise definitions of terms, and vigorous polemic with other traditions, on the other. The former, that is, speculative intuitions in

---

[19] See Gerald J. Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1979; second edition), pp. 75-153; see also Larson-Bhattacharya 1987, pp. 3-41; and Larson-Bhattacharya 2008, pp. 30-52. Finally, see Gerald J. Larson, *India’s Agony Over Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 75-101.

[20] Erich Frauwallner, *Geschichte der indischen Philosophie*, two volumes (Salzburg: Otto Muller Verlag, 1953 and 1956), see chapter,”Die Philosophie des Veda,” p. 39, and “Die Philosophie des Epos,” p. 97.

environments of received authority are as old or older than the Vedic tradition itself, almost all of which are themes and variations on the notion of *dharma*. The latter, namely, systematic reflection [called in Sanskrit, *ānvīkṣikī*, from *anu + īkṣ,* meaning "to follow with one's look," or "reflection," and eventually coming to mean something like "logic" or "logical investigation"] that seeks overall coherence is much more recent, hardly to be dated earlier than the first centuries of the Common Era, or, in other words, roughly contemporary with developments in the Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity.[21]

Much the same can be said about the term "theology" as it is used in Late Antiquity in the Meditrranean region. There is no "theology" at all in India in this sense, primarily because systematic discussion about the existence and nature of God (*īśvara*) is almost completely absent in precisely the same manner as the notion of "religion" is absent. Devotional piety (*bhakti*), whether of the constrained type as found in Bhāgavata or early Vaiṣṇava piety (for example, as exhibited in the *Bhagavadgītā*), or the exuberant devotionalism of the later vernacular traditions, fail to develop "theologies" until many centuries later, and then for the most part probably due, in my view, to Christian and Islamic influence.

---

[21] This is the thrust of my article mentioned at the outset of this presentation, namely, Gerald J. Larson, "An Old Problem Revisited: The Relation between Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Buddhism," and see note 1.

It seems to be the case that the earliest embryonic or exploratory attempt to do something like a coherent discourse about God that is appropriate to the Indic intellectual environment is to be found, oddly enough, in the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali (see Yogasūtra, Pāda I, *sūtras* 23-29, Pāda II, *sūtras* 1 and 32, and Pāda III, *sūtra* 26) together with the *Bhāṣya* attributed to Vyāsa, from about the fourth century of the Common Era.[22] Pātañjala Yogic discourse about God (*īśvara*) appears to grow out of the confluence of two older non-theistic Indic worldviews (*bhuvana-jñāna* and/or *bhuvana-darśana*), namely, the old Sāṃkhya cosmology/cosmogony and the old Buddhist meditation traditions. Notice that I use the expression 'worldview' (from German *Weltanschauung*), since a general term such as 'worldview' comes closer, in my view, to identifying older Sāṃkhya traditions and older Buddhist traditions than do the terms "religion," "philosophy" or "theology," at least prior to about the fourth century of the Common Era. Even in the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era when they become coherent theoretical systems and become incorporated into Pātañjala Yoga [and later into the various Vedāntas], they are perhaps still better thought of in terms of worldviews rather than the conventional designations of "religions," "philosophies" or "theologies."

---

[22] See section entitled, "Theism of Yoga," in Larson-Bhattacharya 2008, pp. 91-100.

When I use the expression “appropriate to the Indic intellectual environment” and when I suggest that I prefer to use the general term “worldview” (*Weltanschauung*) instead of the conventional terms “religion,” “philosophy” and “theology,” I have in mind the common cosmology/cosmogony of karma (*karman*) and rebirth (*punarjanman*) that is presupposed among the various *dharma*-traditions (Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina) in South Asia, or what Gananath Obeyesekere has characterized as the “...karmic eschatologies...found only in Indic religions.”[23] Obeyesekere in his massive study entitled, *Imagining Karma*, documents a fundamental distinction between “rebirth eschatologies” and “karmic eschatologies.” The former, rebirth eschatologies, are found throughout the world, often in small-scale tribal contexts, or in more complex social contexts (for example, the Pythagoreans in Hellenic and Hellenistic traditions, and so forth), frequently linked with ancestor-rituals, and with or without “ethicization.” The latter, karmic eschatologies, are unique to Indic traditions and have highly ramified accounts of “ethicization” in terms of good and evil deeds, appropriate moral behavior, moral retribution, and so forth.[24]

---

[23] Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 17.
[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

Among the numerous texts that could be cited by way of documenting the overall "karmic eschatologies" of the Indic worldview, two that are both reasonably typical but also diagnostically interesting in terms of exhibiting the common cosmological framework of world-periods (*yugas*) and world geography (*loka, dvīpa*) are (a) the Viṣṇu-*purāṇa*, Book I, Chapter III and Book II, Chapter II; and (b) "knowledge about the world" (*bhuvana-jñāna*) as set forth in the commentary attributed to a certain Vyāsa on *Yogasūtra* III.26. [25] The account in the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* is largely a popular mythological characterization, whereas the account in the *Yogasūtra* represents a more systematic theoretical interpretation.[26] As I say, both accounts are typical, although not identical, to the sorts of discussions one finds in most of the other *Purāṇas*, the great epics, the Hindu law books, and in most Buddhist and Jaina accounts as well.[27]

---

[25] Horace Hayman Wilson, (1972), editor and translator, *The Vishnu Purana* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1972), pp. 19-24 and 134-141. And see also Larson-Bhattacharya 2008, pp. 91-99.

[26] I have written about both texts in some detail in my article, "Hindu Cosmology/Cosmogony" in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Science*, James Haag, Greg Peterson and Michael Spezio, eds., (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 113-123.

[27] Herman Jacobi, (1961) "Ages of the World (Indian)," Volume 1; and "Cosmogony and Cosmology (Indian)," Volume 4, in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics,* edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), pp. I: 200-202 and 4:129-138. See also Louis de La Vallee Poussin, "Ages of the World (Buddhist)," Volume 1; and "Cosmogony and Cosmology (Buddhist)," Volume 4, in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James

Details of the description of cosmological time in terms of *yugas* and the details of the description of cosmological geography in terms of the “world egg” *(brahmāṇḍa*) or “knowledge of cosmological space” (*bhuvana-jñāna*) need not detain us. Suffice it to say, that the former has to do with the well-known theory of declining *yugas* or “world periods” from the perfect *Kṛta* (abiding for 1,728,000 human years), through the *Tretā* (1,296,000 years), to the *Dvāpara* (864,000 years) and, finally, to the *Kali* (432,000 years), together with the various permutations of these numbers in a declining recursive progression through 72 Manvantaras that is without beginning (*an-ādi*). The latter, namely, the “world-egg” has to do with the tripartite division of the cosmos in terms of the seven heavenly *sattva*-worlds (*lokas*) of extraordinary sentient beings such as gods and yogins, the terrestrial *rajas*-worlds of our earth with its seven continents, the seven “nether” (*pātālas*) *tamas*-worlds together with the seven “hells” (*narakas*) or *tamas*-worlds ending with the lowest “hell” (Avīci).

Throughout these various worlds are all sorts of deities and creatures working out their karmic trajectories through on-going cycles of manifestation or coming forth and withdrawal (*pralaya* and *mahā-pralaya*). This is the case with Brahmā and the world-egg or universe as well. That is, the so-called "creative-force,"

Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), pp. 1: 187-190 and 4:129-138.

Brahmā, sometimes identified with Hiraṇyagarbha, the “golden germ or womb” and the world-egg itself both under-go periodic manifestation and withdrawal as well. Put somewhat differently, the worlds, whether in manifestation or in withdrawal, are subject to a beginningless process (*pariṇāma*) of time or becoming (*bhava*). Precisely how the cycles unfold is determined by the trajectories of the various species of beings that have been self-constructed by the afflictions (*kleśas*), actions (*karman*), ripenings (*vipāka*) and resulting residues (*vāsanās*, *āśayas*, *saṃskāras*) of their own behavior or functioning.

What is distinctive about God in the Yoga “theological” account of the Indic worldview is that God is none of these. God is neither any of the conventional “gods,” for example, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, et al., nor is God involved in the spatio-temporal content or functioning of the manifest universe. God is described, rather, as a particular pure, that is, contentless or non-thetic, consciousness, an “eternal excellence” (*śāśvatika utkarṣa*) untouched by afflictions, actions, the consequences of actions, or long-term karmic predispositions of any kind. Moreover, if God is not touched by afflictions, actions, the consequences of actions, and the resulting traces and/or predispositions, then obviously God cannot be a “creator” in any meaningful sense in a beginningless world, nor can God be “personal” in any intelligible sense, since the notion of “person,” whether analogical or literal, presupposes

precisely what is being denied of God. "What" or "who," then, is God? God as consciousness cannot be a thing or entity, and because consciousness is non-thetic or object-less, it can only appear or be described in terms of what it is **not**, an apophatic or negative theology with a vengeance, or, if you will, a negative theology that borders on an “a-theistic” “theism,” that is, the presence of a God, neither creator nor person, but, rather, a transcendent consciousness the witnessing presence of which “enables” all things to be, a divine beginning-less cosmic constant that witnesses the recursive pulsations of manifest being.

Apart from the mythological or archaic idiom in which these cosmological/cosmogonic notions of time, space and deity unfold, what is of greater interest are three salient axioms that appear to provide a basis for this common Indic worldview that is taking shape in the first centuries of the Common Era in many areas of South Asian cultural life, namely, what I would identify as an axiom of synchronic phylogeny (*varṇāśrama-dharma*), an axiom of diachronic ontogeny *(punarjanman*), and an axiom of precessional transformation (*saṃsāra*). By the term “phylogeny” I mean the Indic account of the development of the material world and its sentient species. By the term “ontogeny” I mean the Indic account of the development of the individual organism (whether human, animal, divine, and so forth). By the term “precessional” I mean the manner in which Indic transformation unfolds in keeping with the notion that the universe is

overall running down or declining. I am using the term “axiom” in the general sense of an established principle or presupposition accepted commonly in a cultural environment.[28]

THE AXIOM OF SYNCHRONIC PHYLOGENY

Our modern notions of history and conventional historical thinking, deriving largely from the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity, are for the most part absent in Indic thought. There is, of course, a notion of history that is operating. It is just not our western notion. What, then, is the Indic notion? What is striking about the Indic worldview (as exemplified in the *yuga* periods and the “world egg” geography) is that everything is perfect, properly formed and excellent at the outset of the world process with the accompanying paradoxical claim that the process is beginningless. In other words, nothing new can emerge that is not already presupposed and fully formed at the outset, but that which is fully formed was or is, as it were, without beginning! In an interesting essay, Madhav

---

[28] I have written about these matters in several other publications. See, for example, Gerald J. Larson, “Karma as a ‘Sociology of Knowledge’ or ‘Social Psychology’ of Process/Praxis,” in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed., Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 303-316; also, “The Structure of Ancient Wisdom, Part II,” *Journal of Social and Biological Structures*, Volume 6, 161-167; also, “The *Trimūrti* of *Smṛti* in Classical Indian Thought,” *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 43, No. 3, July 1993, 373-378; and most recently, Larson-Bhattacharya 2008, pp. 91-100.

Deshpande (1979: 9-10) points out that there is a deep conservatism or "preservationism" in classical Indic thought. He comments:[29]

> Thus there was no history in a real sense. All forms existed, and it is a matter of pure accident that certain forms are or are not found in a particular text, a particular time or a particular region. Thus, the problem of "existence" was separated from the problem of "attestation." Non-attestation did not imply non-existence. While eternal existence was the fact, the attestation and non-attestation of forms was a matter of historical accident.

Whatever changes occur either in language or in society are never dealt with historically, but are treated rather as "options," hence, the system of *varṇāśrama-dharma*. Language, society and cosmos were dealt with largely in a deductive fashion. The human community is not to be viewed as developing over time diachronically. It is to be viewed, rather, in terms of "synchronic phylogeny."

> While western science and civilization seem to be based on a continuously self-improving process of experimentation and induction of new general principles, classical Indian tradition

[29] Madhav Deshpande, "History, Change and Permanence: A Classical Indian Perspective," in *Contributions to South Asian Studies*, Volume I, edited by Gopal Krishna (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 9-10.

> "claims" to be authoritative by being a purely deductive tradition whose first principles have been unalterably established.... History as viewed from this deductive perspective is not a matter of new creation of events or new inventions, but simply an unfolding of implicit aspects and values of the eternally self-existing reality.[30]

It almost appears as if there were a deliberate embracing of "unhistoric history" by classical Indian thought, the embracing of a "synchronic phylogeny" whereby we are continuously looking back and remembering the eternal first principles that are truly authoritative and make possible the options with which we must continually live.

THE AXIOM OF DIACHRONIC ONTOGENY

Yet in a further paradoxical manner, the synchronic phylogeny wherein everything is fully formed at the outset carries with it a second axiom, which in a puzzling way appears to undercut the first axiom. The second axiom can be expressed in the following manner. If it is the case that everything is fully formed at the outset, beginninglessly, then so likewise are all sentient creatures throughout the extended universe. There never was a time, in other words, when I or any other sentient creature was not, since all were there at the outset. Hence, through all the unfolding periods of becoming, I, along with all other

---

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

sentient creatures, must also have been becoming, or, in other words, the axiom of karma and rebirth (*punarjanman*). My identity in this particular lifetime is shaped by a diachronic series of preceding lifetimes stretching back to a beginning-less beginning! In any particular lifetime of a sentient being, the creature is part of an unfolding synchronic whole, but the particular identity of a given lifetime has been shaped by an incredibly complex series of diachronic actions (*karman*) which have determined my synchronic place in this particular rebirth. Moreover, if it is the case that the process is beginningless and, hence, infinitely so, then my actions as a sentient being have undoubtedly brought me into almost every possible life-form that has been formed from the outset, beginninglessly! There appear to be, therefore, two continually intersecting processes. On the one hand, there is the synchronic phylogeny of everything having been fully and perfectly formed at the outset. On the other hand, there is a continuously operating diachronic ontogeny of individual sentient beings whose trajectories in lifetime after lifetime are determined both by the synchronic presuppositions coming from the past being projected into the future, and by my continuing actions as a "dividual" sentient being, to use Mckim Marriott's well-known neologism.[31] From one point of view, the system appears to be

---

[31] See McKim Marriott, "Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology," McKim Marriott, ed*., India through Hindu Categories*," in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Occasional Studies 5 (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), pp. 1-39.

completely determined (synchronically) along the lines of *varṇāśrama-dharma*. From another point of view, however, the system is completely open and free, in the sense that at any given point-instant, I, along with all sentient beings, must engage in action (*karman*) that will shape my future becoming (ontogenetically). There is a profound "fluidarity" or "plasticity" in the understanding of selfhood or identity, not only for human sentient beings, but for all forms of life, including animals, gods, demons, spirits, and so forth, in their respective levels (*lokas*) of becoming. Put somewhat differently, there is a simultaneous synchronic-cum-diachronic inter-subjectivity in all forms of sentient life whereby sentient beings are regressively and progressively "creating" a common life-world.

THE AXIOM OF PRECESSIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Oddly enough, however, there is still another axiom in Indic thinking that always accompanies the intersecting processes of synchronic phylogeny and diachronic ontogeny. Not only is everything present in its perfect and well-formed nature at the outset beginninglessly (synchronic phylogeny) (Kṛta Yuga, recursively replicated), and not only are all sentient beings nevertheless undergoing recurring diachronic identities based upon their karma in lifetime after lifetime (diachronic ontogeny among and between the various worlds from the *satya-loka* at the zenth to the lowest Avīci hell at the nadir), the entire cosmic drama is continually in decline. The world is continually running down, falling

backwards or regressing from a primordial excellence. The Indic worldview, of course, is not unique in this regard. The notion of the world running down is frequently accepted in the ancient world. It is widely accepted in the ancient Near East, in ancient Greece, and to some degree in ancient China as well. What makes the notion of decline especially poignant in the Indic worldview is the strong linkage of decline with karma and rebirth.

The reasons for decline are not always clear. To refer again to M. Deshpande,

> It is not very clear why such a doctrine of decline developed in ancient India. It is conceivable that the invasion of the Greeks and the emergence and dominant political and social position of the non-Vedic religions like Buddhism and Jainism were viewed to be "darker times" in comparison with previous ages, and this might have led to the theory of four ages.[32]

Such an explanation is an unwarranted move, however, since it is imposing a notion of historical thinking, characteristic of the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity (especially the biblical notion of history), that is simply absent in the Indic thought world. More likely, in my view, is that the notion of declining ages has a great

---

[32] Madhav Deshpande, p. 6.

deal to do with ancient traditions of “astronomy”/astrology that were widespread throughout the ancient world.

Because the plane of the earth’s equator is at a slight angle (twenty-three and one-half degrees) to the ecliptic, the vernal equinox of the beginning of spring “precesses” or moves backward through the ecliptic or the zodiac one degree of arc about every 72 years. It takes approximately 26,000 years (or more precisely just under 26,000 years) for this precession or falling backwards to make a full circle so that the vernal equinox can occur again at its starting-point. According to one calculation, the oldest zodiacs were constructed by using the fixed star Aldebaran in the exact middle of Taurus, thereby making the vernal equinox at one degree of Aries around 4139 BCE.[33] Other calculations have also been used, and various “Ages” of the world can be constructed depending upon how one calculates the various sequences. Quite apart from the precision of such “Ages” and the raging polemics among astrologers, the basic notion of “precession” or falling backwards along the ecliptic or zodiac in a time frame of roughly 26,000 years was widely recognized in the ancient world. It is known as the “Great Year”, and I would argue has its analogue in the Yuga theory. All of the numbers mentioned in the Yuga-theory discussed earlier, namely, 1,728,000,

---

[33] Rupert Gleadow, *The Origin of the Zodiac* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 55ff.

1,296,000, 864,000 and 432,000 years together with some 72 “human-intervals” (*manvantaras*), appear to reflect a comparable understanding of the “Great Year.” The basic number 432,000 is a multiple of both 60 (= 72) or 360 (=12), the latter providing a characterization of the year and the former (namely, 72 x 360 “days” in the life of Brahma, or 25,920 “years”) the “Great Year” or “Cosmic Year.”

The large numbers used are probably due to the desire to express mathematical ratios and relations in term of whole numbers. Since so much ancient knowledge relating to astronomy/astrology is traceable to the ancient Near Eastern cultures of Babylonia and Sumeria, it could well be the case that the Indic numbers also reflect the influence of the sexagesimal system of numbering (based on the number 60 in contrast to the later decimal system based on the number 10) from the ancient Near East. Clearly ancient India learned a great deal from the ancient Near Eastern cultures and the Greeks. A. L. Basham comments,

> Western [that is, Greek, Near Eastern and Mediterranean] astronomy brought to India the signs of the zodiac, the seven-day week, the hour, and several other ideas.... Like all ancient astronomy, that of India was restricted owing to ignorance of the telescope.... For purposes of calculation the planetary system was

> taken as geocentric, though Aryabhata in the 5th century suggested that the earth revolved round the sun and rotated on its axis.... The precession of the equinoxes was known...as were the lengths of the year, the lunar month, and other astronomical constants.[34]

In using the expression "precessional transformation," however, it is not my intention to enter into the problem of origin or diffusion or scientific explanation—I leave all of that to the appropriate experts in the history of ancient science and mathematics—but, rather, to point to a dominant mind-set regarding the unfolding of time. The mind-set is one of falling backwards, of "precessing," and, hence, at least in the classic Indic formulation, of the present and future always becoming the past (or, in other words, karma and rebirth). The present is the past, and the future will be the past. Even the beginning, since it is beginning-less, is only a modality of the past. What is and what will be has already been, and my "historical" task is to understand what I was, to lift the amnesia or remove the cobwebs so that I can remember and be mindful about the construct of what I am. The Indic view is akin to Faulkner's (1951) famous line from the play, *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."[35] Like the modern astronomer or cosmologist, who recognizes that when he or she looks

---

[34] A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (Calcutta: Rupa and Co. Reprint, 1981), pp. 492-493.

[35] William Faulkner, *Requium for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 92.

into the night sky, he or she is looking into the past, so the Indic traditions recognize that when one acts in the present for the future, one is re-living and re-enacting what has already been. It is not only the light from the night sky that comes to us from the distant past. Most of our emotions, our basic drives, and our physical bodies come to us from the past. To be sure, we are free to act in what appears to be the "present" moment, but we are not changing only the present. We are also re-arranging the past.

Given such a mind-set of "precessional transformation," there are only two possible options: either acquiescing or adjusting or harmonizing with what is (was), that is to say, the option of *varṇāśrama-dharma* (synchronic phylogeny), or somehow renouncing in terms of the quest for *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa* or some other renunciatory technique (diachronic ontogeny in an environment of precessional transformation). Clearly these axioms that are presupposed, *mutatis mutandis*, throughout the *dharma*-traditions (Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina) of the Indic worldview of karmic eschatologies can be described as "cyclical" so long as it is remembered that the critical intuition is a cycling neither into the present nor the future but, rather, a cycling into the past, a "falling backwards" or "precessing" for which my own karma is fully accountable.

(3) A Possible Second "Axial" Age (*Achsenzeit*) in the South Asian region

Having addressed the problematic notions of "religion," "philosophy," and "theology," and what I am suggesting might be a more appropriate set of notions for South Asia, let me turn now to some brief comparative reflections. Max Weber in an essay entitled, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," argues that there are only three consistent "theodices" [= cogent explanations for the suffering and injustice that one finds in the world]. Says Weber,

> The metaphysical conception of God and of the world, which the ineradicable demand for a theodicy called forth, could produce only a few systems of ideas on the whole—as we shall see, only three. These three gave rationally satisfactory answers to the questioning for the basis of the incongruity between destiny and merit: the Indian doctrine of Karma, Zoroastrian dualism, and the predestination decree of the *deus absconditus*. These solutions are rationally closed; in pure form, they are found only as exceptions.[36]

---

[36] H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., and trans., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p, 275, and pp. 276ff. See also pp. 358-359.

As I have suggested in this presentation, the notions of “religion,” “philosophy” and “theology,” deriving from the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity, appear to have no counterpart in the South Asian region until quite late, namely, in the first centuries CE from roughly the fourth through the eighth centuries. In South Asia there is nothing comparable to “religion” beyond the notion of *dharma* as “law,” “duty,” “righteousness,” and so forth, whether one is referring to the various *varṇāśrama-dharmas* that emerge out of the old Vedic-cum-Brahmanical traditions, or one is referring to the *dharma*-traditions of the Buddhists and Jainas, that is, the *śramaṇa* traditions of the so-called “second urbanization” in South Asia.

I have suggested further that in South Asia the term “worldview” is perhaps more appropriate for what is developing in the first centuries CE, involving the confluence of the two streams of what I have characterized as the two older non-theistic Indic worldviews, namely, the old Sāṃkhya cosmology/cosmogony and the old Buddhist meditation traditions. Polemical interaction between these traditions gives rise to what comes to be known as *“ānvīkṣikī”* (systematic logical investigation) or what is conventionally often referred to as the beginning of Indian “philosophy” proper. The *Yogasūtra* (called a “*sāṃkhya-pravacana*” or “an explanation of Sāṃkhya”) and its earliest commentaries (ca., 350 to 450) reflects the interactions between the old Sāṃkhya and the first systematic Buddhist

technical schools (Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, Mādhyamika and Yogācāra). The various other schools of Indian thought are also developing , including the schools of logic and epistemology, grammar, and, of course, eventually the later Vedāntas. Dating is difficult to determine for this earliest period in Indic systematic reflection, but a reasonable approximation would be anywhere between ca. 100 BCE and 100-200 CE and continuing up to the time of the great Śaṃkara (ca. 700).[37] This period of systematic Indian thought, including Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Buddhist, Jaina, hermeneutics, logic, grammar, as well as the later Vedāntic traditions, all without exception operate within a worldview that presupposes the karmic eschatologies described earlier with the axioms of synchronic phylogeny, diachronic ontogeny and precessional transformation.

This period, of course, is also roughly contemporary with the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity and its worldview of quite a different set of axioms, namely, as a "new care of the self," the notion of a religion of the book, the end of sacrifice, and the shift from civic to communitarian religion, as set forth in Stroumsa's *The End of Sacrifice*. It is also the case (and possibly not an accident) that this period is also the period in which the first documented encounters take place between

---

[37] I have discussed this early history of Indian systematic reflection in detail in the following: Gerald J. Larson, "An Old Problem Revisited: The Relation between Såµkhya, Yoga and Buddhism," see above note 1, and Larson-Bhattacharya 1987 and Larson-Bhattacharya 2008, see above note 16.

the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity and the South Asian region via the trade routes of the Near East, Middle East and Persia.

Clearly, I am inclined to argue that this is, indeed, a second Axial Age in which dramatic transformations are occurring on almost all levels of cultural development. Moreover, the changes occurring are reflective of the three great Weberian theodices: the *deus absconditus* (the "hidden God") or, if you will, the inscrutable will of God (as revealed in a single holy Book), on the one side, and the ethicized karmic eschatology of *varṇāśrama-dharma*, *punarjanman* and *saṃsāra* (as revealed in the *samādhis* and *anubhava* of Yogic meditation), on the other side, both extremes being mediated, conceptually and possibly historically as well (via the Near East and Persia) by the Zoroastrian dualism, the various Gnostic dualistic systems and the mystery cults of one kind or another.

(4) The possibility of a "blowback" effect

Here I can be brief, since I only want to call attention to a possible revisionist perspective in our own western historical understanding. If Stroumsa is correct that the very notion of "religion" is dramatically transformed in the Mediterranean region of Late Antiquity, and if what I have been arguing about the cultural development of the *dharma*-traditions in the South Asian region are in any sense correct, or at least plausible, could it be the case that Jaspers's notion of a first

"Axial" Age has been wrongly framed and is seriously anachronistic? Stroumsa describes Jaspers's "axial age" in the following manner:

> The German philosopher Karl Jaspers characterized the first half millennium before our common era as an *Achsenzeit* (axial age), when across different (often imperial) civilizations there developed a hierarchical differentiation between the visible and invisible, the material and spiritual, worlds. Confucius, Buddha, Zarathustra, the prophets of Israel, and the first Greek philosophers represented for Jaspers the types of this intellectual and religious transformation. It seems to me that the era and domain we are studying also has a claim to this title of "axial age," an epoch in which the very frameworks of a civilization are transformed in a radical way.[38]

A. L. Basham has commented, "Jaspers's theory is not universally accepted by scholars of religion. His identification of charismatic religious leaders who characterized a transformation in the way human beings perceived the world

---

[38] Stroumsa, The End of Sacrifice, p. 6. See also, of course, Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans., Michael Bullock. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953. The original edition is Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (München: Piper Verlag, 1949).

simply does not fit in every case. Where the identification does fit, no concrete causal connections can be found."[39]

The key phrase in Basham's comment is, "...no concrete causal connections can be found." What if, however, there are clear causal connections, not from an imagined "axial age" in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, but, rather, from an historically documented "axial age" in the Mediterranean region of Late Antiquity and the cultural developments in classical Indian thought in the first centuries of the Common Era of roughly the same period? In other words, what if, just as there has been a tendency to project the notion of "religion" in Late Antiquity on to other cultural contexts in terms of the future, so there has been a comparable projection on to the past? Put somewhat differently, could it be the case that a so-called second "axial age" is, in fact, the first "axial age" that has been anachronistically projected on to the past? The Indic evidence is important in this regard, it seems to me. Almost all of our evidence for the Buddhist and Jain traditions derives from texts hardly earlier than the first centuries of the Common Era. Moreover, the thought-world of the oldest Upaniṣads and the middle verse Upaniṣads together with the thought-worlds of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Mokṣadharma*, and the epics and law books generally, are hardly intellectually systematic apart from later ramified commentarial elaborations.

---

[39] A. L. Basham, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*, edited and annotated by Kenneth G. Zysk (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 126.

Even the Greek evidence strikes me as being problematic, at least in some instances. For example, I have been interested in looking at notions of karma and rebirth in Pythagorean traditions, but most of the evidence about early Pythagoreanism, other than inconclusive references in Plato and Aristotle, comes from sources that are clearly Neo-Pythagorean and closely linked to Neo-Platonism. In a similar fashion, most of what can be said about Pre-Socratic philosophy comes from highly ramified later accounts that are clearly reconstructions of what might have been the systematic significance of early Greek philosophizing.

(5) Contemporary conundrums and misunderstandings.

Finally, and again only briefly, I find myself thinking that some of our most important conceptual challenges in contemporary scholarship have hardly been satisfactorily addressed by the discourses of Enlightenment or Colonialism or Neo-Colonialism or Post-modernism or Post-structuralism or Deconstruction. As important and productive as these discourses have been, they are all themes and variations on the notions of “religion,” “philosophy,” and “theology” that were formed in the Mediterranean region of Late Antiquity (the period “from Jesus to Muhammad,” to use Stroumsa’s idiom) and thereafter projected forward and backward to encompass the entire range of world intellectual history from the

time of the Pre-Socratics to the most recent theorization of globalization or world-systems analysis.[40]

Peter Gordon in a fascinating recent book, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*, offers the following summary comment about Heidegger's philosophical program.

> The history of philosophy was therefore nothing less than a history of the forgetting of Being, or *Seinsvergessenheit.* To retrieve what had been forgotten, Heidegger promised a "destruction" of the history of ontology: a vigorous and even violent reinterpretation of the philosophical tradition that would demonstrate, in stepwise fashion through key moments in the canon, just how humankind had fallen into error.[41]

---

[40] The most recent documentation of what I am suggesting is the collection of articles given over to current theorizing on the nature of "religion" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 78, No. 4, December 2010. Among the ten articles in the collection, not a single one deviates from the notions of "religion," "philosophy" and "theology" as fashioned in the Mediterranean region of Late Antiquity. The same is true of the hundreds of scholarly notes that document the articles. Not a single theoretical reference can be found from non-western sources. The provincialism of the scholarly discourse is remarkable.

[41] Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 32.

It is generally recognized that Heidegger failed to accomplish his program. Let me conclude, then, by suggesting that that task remains to be accomplished, not only for “philosophy,” however, but for “religion” and “theology” as well!

Bibliography

Basham, A. L. 1981 *The Wonder That Was India*. Calcutta: Rupa and Co., Reprint.

_____ 1989 *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*. Ed. Kenneth G. Zysk. Boston: Beacon Press.

Boyarin, Daniel 2009 “Rethinking Jewish Christianity.” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. Volume 99. No. 1. Winter.

de Bary, William Theodore, et al., eds. 2009 *Sources of Chinese Tradition*.Volume One. Second Edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deshpande, Madhav 1979 “History, Chance and Permanence: A Classical Indian Perspective.” *Contributions to Asian Studies*. Volume I. Ed. Gopal Krishna. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Doniger, Wendy 2009 *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. New York: The Penguin Press.

Edgerton, Franklin 1965 *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy*. Cambridge:

Harvard University Press.

Faulkner, William 1981 *Requiem for a Nun*. New York: Random House.

Frauwallner, Erich 1953 and 1956 *Geshcichte der indischen Philosophie*. Two Volumes. Salzburg: Otto Muller Verlag

Frykenberg, Robert E. 1991 "The Emergence of Modern Hinduism as a Concept and as an Institution: A Reappraisal with Special Reference to South India." Eds. G. D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke. *Hinduism Reconsidered*. Delhi: Manohar.

Gerth, H. H. and C. Wright Mills, eds. 1946 *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gleadow, Rupert 1969 *The Origins of the Zodiac*. New York: Atheneum.

Hirakawa, Akira 1990 *A History of Indian Buddhism*. Trans. Paul Groner. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press.

Ingalls, Daniel H. H. 1954 "Authority and Law in Ancient India." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Supplement No. 17.

Jacobi, Hermann 1961 "Ages of the World (Indian)." Volume 1. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Ed. James Hasting. New York: Charles Scribners Sons.

_____ 1961 "Cosmogony and Cosmology (Indian)." Volume 4. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Ed. James Hastings. New York:

Charles Scribner's Sons.

Jaini, Padmanabh S. 1979 *The Jaina Path of Purification*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jaspers, Karl 1949 *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. Munchen: Piper Verlag.

Johnson, Chalmers 2004 *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

Larson, Gerald J. 1979 *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of Its History And Meaning*. Second Edition. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

_____ 1980 "Karma as a 'Sociology of Knowledge' and a 'Social Psychology' of Process/Praxis." Ed. Wendy Doniger. *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

_____ 1983 "McClain's mathematical acoustics and classical Sāṃkhya philosophy." *Journal of Social and Biological Structures*, 6.

_____ 1993 "The Trimūrti of Smṛti in Classical Indian Thought." *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 43. Number 3. July.

_____ 1995 *India's Agony over Religion*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Larson, Gerald J. and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya, eds. *Sāṃkhya: A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy*. Volume IV. Encyclopedia of Indian

Philosophies. General Editor: Karl H. Potter. Princeton: Princeton University Press; and Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Larson, Gerald J. and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya, eds. *Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation*. Volume XII. Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies. General Editor: Karl H. Potter. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

La Vallée Poussin, Louis de 1961 "Ages of the World (Buddhist)." Volume 1. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Ed. James Hastings. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

_____ 1961 "Cosmogony and Cosmology (Buddhist)." Volume 4. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Ed. James Hastings. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Marriott, McKim 1990 "Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. Occasional Studies 5. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Mason, Steve 2007 "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History." *Journal of the Study of Judaism*, 38.4-5.

Obeyesekere, Gananath 2006 *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformations in Amerindian, Buddhist and Greek Rebirth.* Berkeley: University of

California Press.

Renou, Louis 1947 *L'Inde classique*. Volume I. Paris: Payot.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell 1978 *The Meaning and End of Religion*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Staal, Frits 1982 "The Himalayas and the Fall of Religion." *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path*. Ed. D. E. Klimburg-Salter. Berkeley: University of California Press.

_____ 1989 *Rules without Meaning*. Toronto Studies in Religion. Volume 4. New York: Peter Lang.

Stroumsa, Guy J. 2009 *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*. Trans. Susan Emanuel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thapar, Romila 1985 "Syndicated Moksha." *Seminar*, 313.

Wilson, Horace Hayman, ed. and trans. 1972 *The Viṣṇnu Purāṇa*. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak.