YOGA'S ATHEISTIC-THEISM:
A UNIQUE ANSWER TO THE NEVER-ENDING PROBLEM OF GOD IN COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Gerald James Larson
Rabindranath Tagore Professor Emeritus of Indian Cultures and Civilization, Indiana University, Bloomington, USA, and Professor Emeritus, Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

Introduction

Let me begin my presentation with a simple thought experiment. John Cottingham in his book, *The Spiritual Dimension*, mentions what C. S. Pierce calls "abductive inference," or "inference to the best explanation."[1] He then comments, "A scientific hypothesis may reasonably be adopted if it provides the most comprehensive and plausible account available of a given range of observable data. Now religious claims have sometimes been interpreted as inferences to the best explanation in this sense.... Invoking God is, for example, taken to be the best way of explaining the order in the world, or the apparent emergence of the cosmos out of nothing at the big bang."[2] He then asks, "[But] Is the hypothesis of an all-powerful and surpassingly benevolent creator really the best explanation for the existence of the world as we find it—the world that contains so much terrible suffering?" He then quotes an intriguing thought experiment passage as set forth by the British analytic philosopher, Simon Blackburn, in his book, *Think*.[3] Says Blackburn,

> Suppose you found yourself at school or university in a dormitory. Things are not too good. The roof leaks, there are rats about, the food is almost inedible, some students in fact starve to death. There is a closed door, behind which is the management, but the management never comes out. You get to speculate what the management must be like. Can you infer from the dormitory as you find it

> that the management, first, knows exactly what conditions are like, second, cares intensely for your welfare, and third, possesses unlimited resources for fixing things? *The inference is crazy*. You would be almost certain to infer that either the management doesn't know, doesn't care, or cannot do anything about it. Nor does it make things any better if occasionally you come across a student who declaims that he has become privy to the mind of the management, and is assured that the management indeed knows, cares and has resources and ability to do what it wants. The overwhelming inference is not that the management is like that, but that this student is deluded."

Cottingham then concludes,

> Blackburn is arguing that if we start from the observed facts—the balance of evidence around us—then to draw the conclusion that it is created by an omniscient, supremely benevolent, and omnipotent God is a vastly implausible, indeed, a crazy, inference.[4]

Some Recent Attacks on God and Religion

As we are all aware, there have been several books of late that attack not only the notion of God but the very notion of religion itself. Moreover, many of these recent books attack not only Jewish, Muslim and Christian conceptions of God and religion—the so-called Abrahamic traditions—but notions about God and religion in South Asian and East Asian religious traditions as well. The first such frontal attack on God and religion was Sam Harris's *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004). Harris, however, is at least sympathetic to Buddhist

meditation. After Harris came Daniel C. Dennett's, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006). Shortly thereafter came Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), a sequel to an earlier series of essays of his entitled, *A Devil's Chaplain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003). Finally, there is the *coup de grace* in this recent sequence, namely, Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

The primary reason for this recent series of attack-books is not difficult to identify. The books taken together are responding to the perceived growing influence of strident exclusivist religious behavior among certain Christian evangelical proselytizing groups, Islamist extremists who traffic in suicide bombing, right-wing Zionist groups whose violent rhetoric denigrates Palestinian Arabs, extremist "Hindu-tva" groups who have encouraged on occasion violence against Muslims and Muslim monuments such as the Babri Masjid, and on and on and on. Strident exclusivist religiosity appears to be alive and well almost everywhere—the dark underside, as it were, of the process of globalization.

The books taken together criticize such mindless religiosity and argue, instead, for the life of reason in place of unquestioning faith, serious acceptance and continuing research into Darwinian evolution in place of simplistic notions of Intelligent Design, and the recovery, or renaissance, of the values of the Enlightenment. These books all put special emphasis on the Enlightenment's commitment to rationality and the crucial importance of adequate evidence in any serious research or theorizing.

While I am sympathetic to the work of Harris, Dennett, Dawkins and Hitchens in regard to their critiques of mindless religiosity, I am also deeply troubled by their own propensity to be more than a little strident, exclusivist and mindless in their own work. Their work often borders on an arrogant and narrow-minded "scientism" in many ways as unattractive as the traditions they are criticizing, and their knowledge of the history of religions appears to be confined to what they learned in some mandatory Sunday School from which they are still engaged in adolescent rebellion. Even the titles of their work are troubling, for example, "The God Delusion" or "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything." Dawkins and Hitchens are especially inclined towards a prose that combines half-truths with deeply insulting ridicule. To cite only one glaring example, this is how Dawkins opens the discussion of his second chapter regarding "The God Hypothesis."

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.[5]

Whatever else one might wish to say about such a passage, that it represents an open-minded invitation to discuss "the God hypothesis" is surely not one of the things. Clearly the author is signaling that "The God Hypothesis" will not fare very well in the sequel!

The Notion of "God" in Yoga

Be that as it may, the title for my presentation is “Yoga’s Atheistic-Theism: A Unique Answer to the Never-Ending Problem of God in Comparative Philosophy of Religion.” As most of you know, the systems of Classical Samkhya and Classical Yoga are usually taken together as a twin-pair or a "common tradition" (*samana-tantra*) in Indian philosophy. The two other orthodox or *astika* common pairs are Nyaya and Vaisesika, and Mimamsa and Vedanta. The pair Nyaya and Vaisesika have to do primarily with Logic and Physics or Atomism. Mimamsa and Vedanta have to do primarily with scriptural interpretation, either in terms of ritual meaning (the Mimamsa) or the knowledge portion of the Vedic scriptures (the Vedanta). The pair Samkhya and Yoga have to do primarily with meditation, with Samkhya said to be the theory of meditation, and Yoga usually described as the practical working out of the theory. The main difference between Samkhya and Yoga, according to almost all the books on Indian philosophy, is that Samkhya is atheistic, or perhaps better, non-theistic, whereas Yoga is theistic, or, in other words, accepts some sort of notion about God. No one says very much more about Yoga's accepting the notion of God, however, and most interpreters have assumed that Yoga's theism is typical of other types of theism in Indian religious thought.

In fact, however, the Yoga notion of God is peculiar, even eccentric, not only in terms of Indian thought but, rather, in terms of any of the standard conceptualizations regarding God. Moreover, I want to argue in this presentation that the manner in which classical Yoga philosophy deals with the notion of God may offer some new perspectives for thinking about the problem of God in contemporary discussions of the issue.

Patañjali's *Yogasutra*, Book One (The Samadhi Pada)

I shall proceed in the following manner. First, I want to summarize briefly what Patañjali's *Yogasutra* (hereafter YS) says about God.[6] Second, I want to discuss four sorts of "de-constructions" and/or "re-conceptualizations" that the notion of God in Yoga entails. Finally, I want to conclude by highlighting what we might learn from classical Yoga philosophy regarding a unique approach to the problem of theism.

First, then, what do we learn about the notion of God in Patañjali's YS? The issue is discussed primarily in the first book, or, in other words, the Samadhi Pada. The first six *sutras* set the stage for the discussion of Yoga overall, providing the definition of Yoga, the nature of ordinary awareness (that is, the *citta-vrttis*), and the ultimate goal of Yoga (that is, the attainment of pure consciousness or *purusa*).

Sutras 7 through 11 then define each of the five functions of ordinary awareness. Sutras 12 through 16 describe the principal means for attaining the cessation of the functioning of ordinary awareness, namely, Yogic praxis (*abhyasa*) and renunciation (*vairagya*). Sutras 17 through 22 then describe the four levels of "concentration" (*samadhi*) that have some sort of object (*samprajnata-samadhi*), namely, an empirical object (*vitarka*), a rational or intellectual object (*vicara*), an aesthetic object (*ananda*) and ordinary subjective or self-awareness (*asmita*).

Thereafter, from sutras 23 through 29, Patañjali introduces the discussion of God (*isvara*). Says Patañjali:

I.23. "Or, concentration having an object (*samprajnata-samadhi*) can also be attained through focusing on God (as the object of meditation).

(isvara-pranidhanad va)

I.24. God is a particular or unique consciousness (*purusa*) among consciousness-es (*purusa*-s), untouched by the afflictions, karmic tendencies, karmic fruits and long-term karmic predispositions (that are characteristic of all other sentient beings associated with *purusa*-s).

(klesa-karma-vipaka-asayair a-paramrstah purusa-visesah isvarah)

I.25. In God the pinnacle of omniscience has been attained.

(tatra nir-atisayam sarva-jña-bijam)

I.26. (God is) the teacher even of all preceding teachers inasmuch as God is not limited by time.

(purvesam api guruh kalena anavacchedat)

I.27. The verbal expression for God is the sacred syllable (*pranava)* (or, in other words, the syllable OM).

(tasya vacakah pranavah)

I.28. Repetition of it (the sacred syllable) (and) meditation on the object of the expression (namely, God) (should be practiced in order to achieve *samadhi*).

(taj-japas tad-artha-bhavanam)

I.29. Then, (when concentration has been properly cultivated) there is a going over into one's own pure consciousness and the disappearance of the obstacles as well.

(tatah pratyakcetanadhigamo 'py antarayabhavas ca)

The description of God in these sutras, in my judgment, is absolutely unique in the general history of religions, both in terms of the great Abrahamic religions (Judaism,

Christianity and Islam) as well as the notions of God in South Asian and East Asian traditions; and in order to understand this unique Yogic notion of God, one is required to re-think, or, to "re-construct, or, if you prefer, to "de-construct" one's usual ways of thinking about God. To grasp the unique Yogic view of God requires four kinds of "de-constructive" and/or "re-constructive" thinking, namely,

(I) An act of **de-personalization**;

(II) An act of **de-humanization**;

(III) An act of **de-mythologization**; and, finally

(IV) An act of **re-conceptualization**.

Alternatively, one might put the matter simply in the following way:

(I) For Yoga, the notion of God is never personal.

(II) For Yoga, there is no notion of God as creator.

(III) For Yoga, the notion of God cannot be reduced to any one of the conventional religions of the world.

(IV) Finally, the notion of God requires re-conceptualizing what is usually meant by the term "unity" and the usual way of construing the distinction between the One and the Many.

Let me comment on each one of these four.

(I) First, **An Act of De-personalization—or, for Yoga, the notion of God is never personal**.

The idea of the person or ego, called *asmita* in Yoga (or *ahamkara* in Samkhya), is a fundamental "affliction" (*klesa*) that must be overcome. Of course, each of us has our

personal identity, or even a variety of personal identities, that make possible our everyday functioning, or what C. G. Jung called our "ego-masks"—for example, our "mask" as parent, or our mask as spouse or lover, our mask as personal friend, or whatever. The concept of the person or ego is basically a flawed notion, however, and who and what we are—that is, our deeper selfhood—is much broader and complex than our everyday notion of "person" would allow. To then project the notion of "person" on to the notion of God is to compound our confusion, both in regard to our own authentic selfhood, as well as any understanding of the nature of God.

Since the beginning of the last century, in the work of Jung and, perhaps especially, Freud, it has become commonplace to recognize that the notion of "ego" or "person" is only a superficial characterization. There are vast depths of unconscious processes, both physical and psychological, that take place apart from our personal awareness. More recently in the fields of cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind, the notion of "person" or what philosophers of mind call "folk psychology," or, in other words, our ordinary self-awareness has been found to be seriously incorrect. Our traditional understanding of the "person" or the "self-conscious mind" as "having" certain sensations or being the subject of certain attitudes may be so fundamentally naive and simplistic as to be flat out wrong or false.

Paul Churchland, the well-known philosopher of science and philosopher of mind, has commented that the traditional notion of the "person" or "folk psychology" fails to give an adequate account of reasoning. It is inadequate in understanding learning theory. It is vague and superficial in its account of perception. It is murky and unsatisfactory in understanding the dynamics of emotion. It is inadequate in understanding language

acquisition. Perhaps most important, it is nearly useless in understanding the nature or adequate treatment of memory disorders, depression or the various types of mental illness.[7]

In this regard, I want to share a story told to me by Dr. P. N. Tandon, President of the National Brain Research Centre, based in Gurgaon, Haryana. Dr. Tandon is a brain surgeon (neurosurgeon). On a certain occasion, a woman was brought to his hospital suffering from a brain hemorrhage. Following surgery to stop the bleeding, the woman became comatose and was not expected to live. Dr. Tandon and another doctor were discussing her case while in the patient's room, but then they decided not to discuss anything further about her, since there was no way of knowing whether the woman was able to hear or understand their conversation. Shortly thereafter, another doctor was in the woman's room and started reciting a Bengali poem of Tagore to a nurse in the room. The doctor could not remember the final line in the poem, at which point the comatose woman then proceeded to recite the final line in clear and correct Bengali. The woman died some two days later, and when her brain was opened during the autopsy, Dr. Tandon described the woman's brain as being little more than "porridge," in other words, completely dysfunctional. Presumably there was some sort of memory residue deep in her awareness, possibly associated with some powerful emotional experience in her life, to which she was somehow able to respond even while in a deep coma. There is no satisfactory scientific explanation, although cases such as this suggest that cognitive and linguistic functioning operate within a larger brain system that transcends our conventional understanding of personal awareness.

In terms of the classical philosophy of Yoga, the point here is that to take our problematic and deeply flawed notion of the "person" and to project that flawed notion on to God is to miss the point of what God could possibly be. Surely our notion of the personal, or egoity, the notion of *asmita* or *ahamkara*, cannot be the case in terms of understanding the nature or essence of God. For Yoga, God is "untouched" by the "affliction" known as egoity—God, in other words, is never personal.

(II) Second, an **Act of De-humanization—or, for Yoga, there is no notion of God as creator.**

The world has no beginning in time. It is, according to Yoga, beginningless (*an-adi*), although there are periods of dissolution (*pralaya* and *mahapralaya*), when the world dissolves back into its primordial condition, after which other periods of manifestation will take place. This is a sort of theory, as it were, to use a contemporary idiom, of multiple universes in which a sequence of "big bangs" occur after periods of entropy burn-outs—endless in that sense!

The point, however, is that our human species is hardly central in the scheme of things, and it is certainly not the case, according to Yoga, that the universe was created for human beings to be sovereign. Any philosophy of humanism (that is, the centrality of the human) whether religious or secular, is like the notion of the "ego" or "person." The human species is only one rather minor species in the great hierarchies of sentient beings. More than that, because of the Yoga notion of Karma and rebirth that is beginningless, hence infinite, at one time or another, we have cycled into every conceivable form of sentient existence.

For Yoga, the human is hardly central and the notion of God as creator is as incoherent as the notion of God as person. Regarding the insignificance of the human in the larger framework of Nature, E. O. Wilson in his fascinating recent book, *Creation,* offers two contrasting comments about the vast expanse of nature. From one perspective we are becoming increasingly aware that there are vast numbers of species all around us.[8] Says Wilson, "In one gram of soil, less than a handful, live on the order of 10 billion bacteria belonging to as many as 6000 species." At the same time, however, Wilson also comments that in the context of Nature as a whole,

> ...our [human] biomass is almost invisibly small. It is mathematically possible to log-stack all the people on Earth into a single block of one cubic mile and lower them out of sight in a remote part of the Grand Canyon.
>
> ....
>
> ....[yet] The destructive power of Homo sapiens has no limit. ...humanity is already the first species in the history of life to become a geophysical force.[9]

Thus, there is the interesting paradox that an insignificant amount of biomass (that is, the human portion of the hierarchies of life) nevertheless by its destructive excesses and misuse of resources threatens the ecology of the entire planet. Ours is surely a predator species in this regard. Clearly it is becoming increasingly essential to see our human place within the hierarchies of life in a much more realistic and mature manner. The notion of a personal God, whether the Father God of the great Abrahamic religions or the bhakti-saviors of Hindu and Buddhist piety, who create the world for the sake of human well being and worldly order, is seriously in need of reformulation. According to the philosophy of Yoga, the very notion of God as creator is fundamentally incoherent and

remarkably naive. Gordon Kaufman makes a comparable point from his perspective as a contemporary theologian:

> What could we possibly be imagining when we attempt to think of God as an all-powerful personal creator existing somehow before and independent of what we today call the universe? As far as we know, personal (agent) beings did not exist, and could not have existed, before billions of years of cosmic evolution of a very specific sort and then further billions of years of biological evolution also of a very specific sort had transpired... What possible content can this more or less traditional idea of God have...?[10]

The answer, of course, is: not much!

(III) Third, **An Act of De-mythologization**—or, **for Yoga, the notion of God cannot be reduced to any one of the conventional religions of the world.**

In YS III.26, the detailed cosmology of Yoga is described, ranging from the seven cosmic regions (Satya-loka, and so forth) down through the lowest hells. The locations of the Videhas and Prakrtilayas and the released Yogins are described, and in YS I.26 (mainly in the commentaries) the various traditional religious traditions are discussed, including the Buddhist, Jaina, Shaiva, Vaishnava, and so forth. One could easily add the great Abrahamic religions, namely the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions as well. God or *Isvara*, however, according to Yoga, has nothing to do with any of these. He is totally outside all such networks, since God cannot be encompassed by any temporal framework. Again, as YS I.26 puts it, "(God is) the teacher even of all preceding teachers inasmuch as God is not limited by time."

Here, one thinks, of course, of the great Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), who in his Latin essays and German sermons, introduces the notion of "Gottheit" or "Godness" behind the God of the Christian Trinity—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Eckhart was accused and convicted of heresy, and specifically the heresy of atheism, since he suggested that the Christian doctrine of God must be subsumed under the greater notion of "Gottheit," or God-ness.

Or, again, one thinks of the 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, who likewise rejected the traditional Abrahamic notion of God, whether Jewish, Christian or Islamic. The notion of God, says Tillich, is only a symbolic formulation. What is more basic is what Tillich called, the "ground of Being," or "Being itself." Like Eckhart, Tillich also was often called an atheist.

And, of course, there is the great Shankara, who in the famous *Adhyasa-bhasya*, his brilliant introduction to the commentary on the *Brahmasutra*, argues that even the contents of the Vedic corpus, including all of the utterances in the Upanisads are, finally, only *avidya* and *Maya.* God is only *sa-guna*, a lower symbolic formulation. Only the attributeless or *nirguna* Absolute (Brahman) truly is! Like Eckhart in the medieval period and Tillich in the modern period, so the great Samkara in his time was attacked by non-Advaitins for his atheism.

Regarding this notion of de-mythologization, of course, Yoga would concur with Shankara and the Advaitins, and, for that matter, with Meister Eckhart and Paul Tillich as well. God, according to the philosophy of Yoga, transcends all cultural and religious traditions. He is outside or beyond the Cosmic Egg, as it were. It is almost as if one

must become an atheist in terms of conventional religion if one is properly to understand the notion of the divine.

(IV) Finally, fourth, **An Act of Re-conceptualization**, or, **for Yoga, the distinction between "unity" and "plurality" or the distinction between the "One and the Many" is re-configured.**

At this point, however, an interesting twist occurs in the Yoga analysis that takes a seemingly paradoxical conceptual turn that is oddly counterintuitive, whether in regard to Indian philosophy or European philosophy. For the sake of simplicity of exposition I shall confine myself to the Indian tradition, although what I am suggesting holds, likewise, in my view, for much of western thought as well.

Whereas Vedanta and Yoga appear initially to be moving in the same direction in their joint quest for a contentless, non-intentional consciousness, early along each takes an interestingly different turn in their structuring of the problem of the One and the Many. It is not simply a distinction between dualism versus monism, although to be sure that is a true enough distinction as far as it goes. What is more interesting by way of contrast, however, is what might be called the "double reflection" antithesis between Vedanta and Yoga regarding their interpretations of the One and the Many and the meaning of the term "unity."

Shankara's One and the Many is the exact antithesis, or perhaps better by way of using a "reflection" metaphor, the mirror reversal of Yoga's One and the Many. For Shankara and the Vedanta generally, contentless consciousness (*atman*) is always One, whereas the multiplicity of the phenomenal, empirical everyday world is a bewildering and, finally,

highly suspect and non-rational Many (*maya, avidya*). For Yoga, the exact opposite or the mirror reversal is the case. Contentless consciousness (*purusha*) reveals itself as Many, whereas the multiplicity of the phenomenal, empirical world is a completely intelligible, rational One (*prakriti* as *traigunya*). For Shankara, a single cosmic consciousness disperses itself into a random and finally unintelligible multiplicity. For Yoga, many consciousnesses reside in a single, rational world. For Shankara, contentless consciousness (*atman*) can never be particular or individual; it can only be general or universal. For Yoga, contentless consciousness (*purusha*) can never be general or universal; it can only be particular or individual. For Shankara, what truly is and what is truly intelligible and what is ultimately satisfying (that is, what is *sat, cit* and *ananda*) can only be the sheer transparency of contentless consciousness (*atman*); anything else is an unintelligible, mysterious otherness. For Yoga, the world is truly intelligible and rational; what is unintelligible and mysterious is my particular or individual presence in it.

In trying to explain why Vedanta and Yoga should have structured the problem of the One and the Many in the manner in which the traditions developed, it appears that it had to do largely with the way in which the notion of the "unity" of consciousness was construed. Milton Munitz, an ontologist and philosopher of science, in his interesting book, *Cosmic Understanding: Philosophy and Science of the Universe*, expresses the issue as follows:

> The notion of unity, in general, contains at least two separate meanings. According to one of these meanings, to speak of "unity" is another way of referring to identity. We express

> this notion of unity by saying that what we might otherwise think are two distinct entities are in fact identical: they are one and the same.... There is, however, another meaning of unity besides that of identity; "Unity" can also stand for uniqueness.[11]

The two separate meanings of "unity" are nicely portrayed in European thought in the dialectical theology of the great medieval theologian, Meister Eckhart. Bernard McGinn, one of the important interpreters of Eckhart, puts the matter as follows:

> The predicate *unum* ["unity" or "one"] has special advantages from a dialectical point of view. "We must understand [says Eckhart] that the term 'one' is the same as 'indistinct' [i.e., not-to-be-distinguished], for all distinct things are two or more., but all indistinct things are one." Since indistinction is the distinguishing mark of *unum*, what sets it off from everything else, to conceive of God as *unum*, or Absolute Unity, is to conceive of him as simultaneously distinct and indistinct, indeed, the more distinct insofar as he is indistinct.[12]

Shankara and the Vedantins in their attempt to fashion a notion of contentless consciousness obviously followed the path of identity. The followers of Yoga, perhaps not so obviously, appear to have followed the path of uniqueness, and then oddly enough, to have argued for a "plurality of *purusha*-s" (*purusha-bahutva*) or, in other words, for a "plurality of uniqueness-es." Remember, the notion of God in Yoga: “God is a particular or unique consciousness (*purusa*) among consciousness-es (*purusa*-s), untouched by the

afflictions, karmic tendencies, karmic fruits and long-term karmic predispositions (that are characteristic of all other sentient beings associated with *purusa*-s)." (YS I.24)

Clearly there is some sort of equivocation operating, since the notion of "plurality" among absolutely unique *purusha*-s cannot possibly mean "plurality" as it is meant within the realm of *prakriti*. In other words, just as there is more than one meaning of the notion of "unity," so there must surely be more than one meaning in the notion of "plurality" (*bahutva*). Plurality as a general notion (*samanya*) within the realm of *prakriti* would mean such common groupings as "cows" sharing in the qualities of "cowness," or the various *tattva*-s of Samkhya and Yoga making up the structure of the single *mulaprakrti*, and so forth. To say that the grouping (or "plurality") of "*purusha*-s" shares the quality of "*purusha*-ness" (*purusha-samanya*) is to reduce the notion of consciousness to the realm of *prakritic* entities. On the other hand, to say that the *purusha*-s are totally "distinct" in their "indistinctness," that is, in their contentlessness, is to move in the direction of Vedantic identity (or, if you prefer, Leibnitz's "identity of indiscernibles").

K. C. Bhattacharya, to my knowledge, is the only important modern philosopher in India to have tried seriously to think through this issue of a different meaning of the notion of "plurality." He argues that the general notion of *purusha*, or, if you will, the "universal" of *purusha* (*purusha-samanya*), such that there can be a "plurality" of *purusha*-s, must be construed in a most eccentric fashion. Says Bhattacharya:

> It is an abstraction in the sense that it cannot be represented
> like a universal or a substance as really or apparently comprising
> individuals (or modes) under it, being intelligible only as the *svarupa*
> (or character of being itself) of the individual. The subject is manifest

> as what has no character (*nirdharmaka*), but this characterlessness is itself taken as its character of self-manifestness....
>
> *Purusha-samanya* or selfhood is this necessary universality of a singular, being universal only if uniqueness or the unique-in-general is universal. Unique-in-general means **any** unique, not **all** unique-s. 'All A is B' indeed means 'any A is B' but 'any A is B' need not mean 'All A is B', for even the distributive all has an implied collective character. As applied to the object, any and all may be regarded as equivalents but not as applied to the subject.... In point of being, each subject is absolute.... In this sense we may say that the self is known in *buddhi* as having with it a community of selves.[13]

Purusha, in other words, is the singular universal or the universal singular in the sense that its very individuality requires "plurality" in this unusual sense of the "unique-in-general" that means "**any** unique, not **all** uniques." *Purusha-bahutva*, therefore, rather than begging the question, shows itself instead as the only intelligible way of formulating the question of contentless consciousness within *buddhi*-awareness. Instead, therefore, of Leibnitz's "identity of indiscernibles," Yoga's "plurality of purusas" becomes the paradoxical obverse, namely, the "discernibility of non-identicals." Consciousness, in other words, becomes the warrant for the absolute uniqueness or irreducible singularity of any sentient being.

In the history of western thought, it is, of course, Hegel who treats in depth the problem of the "concrete universal" or the "singular universal" in his discussion of the Notion (*der Begriff*) in *Wissenschaft der Logik*.[14] For Hegel, however, the singular

universal or the concrete universal is finally the most completely determinate. It is that which has the most content, the most character. It is the most completely intelligible, the fully rational and the fully real. Substance is finally Subject as Absolute *Geist*, and the rational is the real. Such, however, is hardly the "singular universal" of the Yoga or Samkhya *purusha-bahutva*. The Hegelian formulation of Absolute Geist is perhaps closer to the Vedanta notion of the Absolute Brahman, so long as one recognizes that Hegel's notion of the completely determinate is reduced in Vedanta to Maya and Avidya. Interestingly enough, the Hegelian formulation is the mirror reversal of the Yoga conceptualization of *prakriti*. In other words, for Yoga, Hegel's "Substance is finally Subject" is precisely reversed: Subject (*citta*, and so forth) is finally revealed as Substance!

A better locus for the Yoga equivalent to *purusha-bahutva* in the history of European thought would be Hegel's *Gegenspieler*, namely, the great Kierkegaard, who refused to be reduced to Hegel's system. I have in mind here the famous essay on Kierkegaard by Jean-Paul Sartre, first presented at the UNESCO Conference on Kierkegaard in April 1964, and later published in *Situations* with the title "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal."[15] Kierkegaard's "lived experience" in its sheer singularity becomes a "non-knowledge" in the very heart of knowledge, or put somewhat differently, Kierkegaard's simple presence "...constitutes itself within knowledge as irreducible non-knowledge."[16] Says Sartre about Kierkegaard: "...the anchorage of the individual made this universal into an irreducible singularity."[17] Or again: "Kierkegaard...wanted to designate himself as a transhistorical absolute.... The subjective has to be what it is—a singular realization of each singularity."[18] Hegelian "knowledge" knows everything that can possibly be known

about Kierkegaard but, finally, really knows nothing about Kierkegaard."[19] Sartre concludes: "Kierkegaard lives on because, by rejecting knowledge, he reveals the contemporaneity of the dead and the living." In other words, contra the absolute determinism of the Hegelian project, Kierkegaard shows us "...the inaccessible secret of interiority," "the human singularity of the concrete universal," and the remarkable revelation that "...each of us is an incomparable absolute."

I am inclined to think that the Yoga conceptualization of a non-intentional contentless consciousness that focuses on "unity" and "plurality" in the sense of the "**unique-in-general**" as "**any** unique, not **all** uniques," to use K. C. Bhattacharya's idiom, or in the sense of an "irreducible singularity," to use the idiom of a Kierkegaard or Sartre, could prove to be an innovative way of re-thinking the problem of theism. On one level, it preserves an irreducible formulation of the value and importance of the spiritual life of "any" sentient being without falling into the trap of a vacuous identity wherein all distinctions are obliterated and one is left with what Hegel called the "night in which all cows are black." On another level, it preserves the notion of an intelligible, rational world and the possibility of a rigorous scientific realism "from Brahma down to a blade of grass," that is, the realm of *prakriti* and *traigunya*.

Conclusion

Who or what, then, is this God of Yoga, this *purusa-visesa*, this "particular *purusa* among *purusa*-s"? And what sort of formulation of the problem of theism does classical Yoga present to us? ***(klesa-karma-vipaka-asayair a-paramrstah purusa-visesah isvarah)*** If, according to Yoga, God is not touched by afflictions, actions, the consequences of actions, and the resulting traces and/or predispositions, then obviously

God cannot be personal in any intelligible sense. God cannot be a creator in any meaningful sense. God as consciousness cannot be a thing or entity, and because consciousness (*purusa* and *isvara* as *purusa-visesa)* is contentless or object-less, it can only appear as what it is not. What distinguishes God can only be what consciousness, untouched by afflictions, actions, consequences and predispositions, appears not to be. What appears not to be in such an environment can only be "perfect *sattva*" (*prakrsta-sattva* or *prakrsta-cittasattva*) in which *rajas* and *tamas*, though present, are inoperative (and see Vyasa on YS I24). The environment of "perfect *citta-sattva*," in turn, which pure consciousness appears not to be, functions by way of making possible a non-intentional awareness (*nir-bija-samadhi*) of the presence of pure consciousness, as being distinct from itself. God, then, is the "eternal excellence" (*sasvatika-utkarsa*) of the presence of "perfect *sattva*" and contentless or object-less consciousness (*purusa*) .

God's "office" or "role" (*adhikara*) can only be to appear as what it is not. Or, to put the matter somewhat differently, the capacity of consciousness (*citi-sakti*) can only be to illumine what is distinct from itself. Thus, it is in this sense that the YS, the Vyasa *Bhasya* and the *Tattvavaisaradi* use the terms "profound longing" (*pranidhana*), "inclination" *(avarjita*), "unique sort of devotion" (*bhakti-visesa*) and a "moving towards" (*anugraha*). These terms are apparently "verbal constructions" (*vikalpas*) or symbolic portrayals for the purpose of highlighting the inherent tendency within each of the two ultimate *tattvas (purusa* and *prakrti)*. That is, it is the inherent tendency of *purusa* to appear as what it is not, thereby illuminating the presence of "perfect *sattva*," and it is the inherent tendency of "perfect *sattva*" to appear as what it is not, thereby illuminating the presence of pure consciousness. This "eternal excellence" of God, unlike

all other embodied forms of sentience, is beginningless and is always present throughout the on-going cycles of manifestation and dissolution (*pralaya* and *mahapralaya*). In each subsequent unfolding world period, God is present as the exemplum of permanent spiritual liberation (*kaivalya*), and there is always also the inherent longing (*pranidhana*, *abhidhyana*) within *citta-sattva* for complete freedom. In other words, there is always an inherent urge in *citta-sattva* to break free from the afflictions and Karmic bonds of "ordinary awareness" (*citta-vrttis*). God, thus, is never the creator. Only sentient beings through their Karma create the multi-verse. God, rather, is the enabler of the unfolding processes of creative becoming and dissolution by virtue of the non-intentional, pre-reflective presence that enables all manifest Being (satta-matra) to be reflexively aware.

The Vyasa *Bhasya* (YS I.24), then, poses the question as to whether there is some sort of proof or warrant for the "eternal excellence" of such a God. The answer is that the proof is to be found in the Sastra. According to Vacaspatimisra, Sastra means in Sruti, Smrti, Itihasa and Purana. But what, then, is the proof or warrant for the validity of the Sastra, asks the Vyasa Bhasya? The answer is that the warrant is in "perfect *sattva*" . The truth in Sastra, in other words, is the content illuminated by *citta-sattva* when *rajas* and *tamas* have become inoperative. God is the "eternal excellence" in which pure consciousness and "perfect *sattva*" are present to one another, a dyadic substantive transcendence in which the "pinnacle of omniscience" (*niratisayam sarva-jña-bijam*) has been attained (YS I.25).

God for Yoga, then, serves both as a regulative idea and as an interesting ontological argument. God is a regulative idea in the sense that even at the height or pinnacle of what can be known, God always has a body distinct from pure consciousness, namely,

perfect *sattva*. Even when the entire manifest world dissolves in the *mahapralaya*, God as the "seed of the omniscient" (*sarvajña-bija*) continues to abide inasmuch as God is the "eternal excellence" which must always be! God for Yoga is also an interesting ontological argument in the sense that that "than which nothing greater can be conceived," namely, pure, contentless consciousness, can only show itself, or, if you will, reveal itself, as the eternal presence in the reflective discernment (*adhyavasaya*) of "perfect *sattva*" (*prakrsta-citta-sattva*). In this sense, God for Yoga is a mediating position between the theology of Advaita Vedanta and the "theology" of Buddhist thought. In Vedanta, *citta-sattva* dissolves as an ontological principle in Maya, and there is, finally, only Brahman. In Buddhist thought, *citta* as temporal becoming is ultimate, and beyond *citta* there is no substantive transcendence.

It should stressed again, as discussed earlier, that God in Yoga, therefore, cannot be reduced to any identifiable personal deity or highly achieved Yogin, whether Siva, Visnu, the Buddhas, the Jinas or Tirthankaras, or figures such as Kapila, and so forth. To be sure, God as the "eternal excellence" or exemplum of the presence of *purusa* and *cittasattva* in any and all realms of becoming is the "teacher" of all of these (YS I.26), but God cannot be identified with any one of them without compromising God's transcendence of temporal becoming (*kalena anavacchedat*) (YS I.26). For followers of Samkhya and Yoga, of course, Kapila is the "primal knower" (*adi-vidvan*), but, says Vacaspatimisra (on YS I.25), the "primal knower" can never equal the "eternal excellence" of God. Likewise, the particular kind of *bhakti* (*bhakti-visesa*, the Vyssa *Bhasya* at I.23-24, II.1, II.32 and II.45), can only be a turning towards God by way of dedicating all one's actions towards the goal of the "eternal excellence" that God

embodies. That "eternal excellence," of course, is pure consciousness (*purusa*) and "perfect *sattva*" (*prakrti*) eternally present to one another, and, thus, God's token or representation can only be the sacred syllable (*pranava*), *OM* (YS I.27). Access to God can only occur through continuous meditation on the token symbol, which is God's intentional content (YS I.28). The notion of "worship" or "prayer" in classical Yoga, therefore, is an "*ekagra*" or one-pointed, intentional *samadhi*, a profound meditation and longing (*bhakti-visesa*) for the "eternal excellence" (*sasvatika-utkarsa*) of that "perfect embodiment" *(prakrsta-sattva*) of what truly is!

Finally, of course, as the Vyasa *Bhasya* has clearly indicated (see comment on YS I.2), our halting attempt at theological discourse reaches the point beyond which ordinary words cannot take us, and we can only say with Wittgenstein:

> **Die Grenzen der Sprache...die Grenzen meiner Welt bedeuten;**
>
> **Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, daruber muss man schweigen.**
>
> "The limits of language...inform the limits of my world;
>
> What we cannot speak of we must pass over in silence." [20]

Endnotes

[1] John Cottingham, The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 19.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] Simon Blackburn, *Think* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 20.

[4] Cottingham, p. 20.

[5] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p. 31.

[6] The version of the YS used for this essay is Gerald James Larson 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, 2008), pp. 161-183.

[7] Paul Churchland, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 114.

[8] E. O. Wilson, *Creation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 29.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] Gordon Kaufman, Presidential Address, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 72, No. 4, December 2004, p. 1004.

[11] Milton Munitz, *Cosmic Understanding: Philosophy and Science of the Universe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 207.

[12] Bernard McGinn, "Theological Summary," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defence*, E. Colledge and Bernard McGinn, eds. and trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 34.

[13] K. C. Bhattacharya, "Studies in Samkhya," in *Studies in Philosophy*, Volume I, ed., Gopinath Bhattacharya (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1956), pp. 195-96. See also Gerald J. Larson, "K. C. Bhattacharya and the Plurality of *Purusa*-s (*purusa-bahutva*) in Samkhya," in Journal of the Indian Council for Philosophical Research, Vol. X, No. 1, 1992, 93-104.

[14] G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, in A. V. Miller, trans., *Hegel's Science of Logic*, Foreword by J. N. Findlay (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989; translation based on George Allen and Unwin edition of 1969), pp. 600-622.

[15]Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans., John Mathews (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), pp. 141-169.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 147 and 152.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 156.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 147 and 145.

[19] *Ibid*., p. 157.

[20] Cited in Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension*, p. 120, from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1921], propositions 5.62 and 7.