

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION 40

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The Hindus as a Textual Community The Role of the Vedas

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The Occasional Publication series is published for the India International Centre by Cmde. (Retd.) R. Datta.

Designed and produced by FACET Design. Tel.: 91-11-24616720, 24624336.

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The Role of the Vedas

Introduction

This paper is an exploration of a theme which has evolved from the pedagogical dualism of my academic situation—namely, that I teach courses in both world religions as well as Hinduism. The term world religions—or more comprehensively, world’s religions—there is a lot riding here on an apostrophe—of course includes the various religions of the world, Hinduism being one among them. World’s religions is obviously a broad category, often disaggregated in various ways, and classified accordingly, as into dead or living religions, or Eastern and Western religions, or missionary and non-missionary religions, and so on.

I find one classification of particular interest, which emanates from the sociology of religion. In the words of D.H.J. Morgan, Georg Simmel argues that ‘the sociology of religion must make a distinction between two types of religious organization. In the first case (he instances many primitive religions), a common god grows out of the togetherness of a unified group. In the second case, and here he suggests Christian sects provide good examples, it is the concept of god itself which unites members who may have little else in common. It is perhaps useful, as a first approximation, to suggest that Durkheim attended primarily to the first kind of religious organization,

Lecture delivered at the India International Centre on 1 January 2012 by Arvind Sharma as part of the Vāk lecture series initiated in memory of Professor (Dr.) Govind Chandra Pande (July 1923 - May 2011)

Let me call the first type of religion *communitarian*, in the sense that in it the community comes first and the religious life is an expression of this togetherness, and the second type *creedal*, in which the creed—the beliefs and practices—comes first and the community coalesces around these

while Weber was chiefly concerned with [the] second.¹ It is interesting from our point of view that this distinction surfaces again in his review of the sociology of religion when he is addressing the work of G. Lenski, who adopts Weber's approach in analyzing the impact of religious attitudes on family, education, economic life and politics. But from the point of view of our present undertaking, 'one of Lenski's important theoretical contributions is in making [a] distinction between the "communal" and the "association" aspects of religion, the former focusing on networks of relationships and the latter involving the degree of involvement in the church as a specific institution of worship. In the first we are looking at [the] extent to which believers choose their spouses or friends from among members of the same socio-religious community; in the second we are looking at the indices such as frequency of worship. Jews, e.g. are seen as having a high communal involvement but low associational involvement. In making this distinction, Lenski has provided a useful tool for developing our examination of [the] relationship between religion and society.'²

I hope you agree with me that there is a convergence between the distinction drawn by Simmel, between religious organizations in which God grows out of the togetherness of the people, as distinguished from one in which the God comes first, who brings the followers together, and the distinction drawn by Lenski between the communal and associational aspects of religion. When, as a comparative religionist, I apply this broad approach to world's religions, it seems possible to distinguish between those religions in which the people come first, and their beliefs and practices are an expression of this togetherness, and those religions in which the beliefs and practices come first and the religious community coalesces around these.

The reader is perhaps wondering why, in a discussion on Hinduism and the Vedas, I am drawing attention to some obscure aspects of the sociology of religion. I had to provide this background because the point I would like to examine is the implication this distinction among two types of religions may have for the way religions view scripture. Let me call the first type of religion *communitarian*, in the sense that in it the community comes first and the religious life is an expression of this togetherness, and the second

type *creedal*, in which the creed—the beliefs and practices—comes first and the community coalesces around these. And let me make the further statement, on the basis of hints already dropped earlier, that the primal religions, Shinto, Judaism and Hinduism, might serve as prime examples of the kind of religions I have called communitarian, and Christianity and Islam as primary examples of the type of religions I have called creedal. The question I wish to explore in the rest of this paper is: How does the nature of a religion, in terms of this classification, affect the attitudes in these two types of religions towards scripture and scriptural developments? It is with this in mind that I now commence my interrogation of the Vedas as a scripture of the Hindus. I shall carry out this interrogation by directing such questions towards the Vedas as: Are they, in the Hindu understanding of them, finite or infinite? Is their referent transcendental or secular, that is, other-worldly or this-worldly, or, both? Are the statements found in the Vedas supposed to possess one meaning or many meanings at the same time? In other words, are they univalent or polyvalent? And are the Vedas meant to be read by only some people—an elite, or by all in general? And finally, what is the nature of Vedic authority? How and why and when is it authoritative and when does it cease to be so? And so on. Space does not permit an exploration of all these questions, but I hope to be able to examine enough of them to be able to indicate the role the Vedas play for the Hindus as a textual community, whose sacred texts *par excellence* they are said to be.

I: Vedas: Finite or Infinite?

What does this textual community think is the size of the Vedas? There is a passage in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (10.4.2) which records the precise number of syllables in each *Veda*. 'According to this observation in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the ṚgVeda consists of 432,000 syllables, and the YajurVeda and the Sāma Veda jointly consist of 432,000 syllables. Thus the three Vedas jointly consist of 864,000 syllables.'³ In other words, there is a tendency to be quite precise in determining the size of the corpus.

On the other hand, we need to take into account the view that 'according to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, the original Veda, first revealed by God to the *ṛṣis*, consisted of one hundred thousand verses, and had four divisions. With the efflux of

What we have are the remains of a shipwreck, the ship is gone, but some of the boards which survived can be measured quite precisely—although the ship is gone

time these divisions got mixed up and many portions of the Vedas fell into obscurity. So in the beginning of [Kali Age], Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana resuscitated the Vedic study and classified the work according to the four ancient divisions of *Ṛc*, *Yajus*, *Sāman*, and *Atharvan*. In order to perpetuate the study of the Vedas in a proper form, he taught them to his four principal disciples. He gave the ṚgVeda to Paila, YajurVeda to Vaiśampāyana, Sāma-Veda to Jaimini, and Atharva-Veda to Sumanta. As he reclassified the Vedas, he became renowned by the name of the Veda-Vyāsa, i.e. classifier of the Vedas. This tradition is so strong among the Hindu scholars that it cannot but be accepted as having some historical basis.⁴

One might wish to contrast the precision, in terms of the *Saṁhitā* portion of the three Vedic texts as mentioned in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, with the more contingent view of the Purāṇic account, that only a part of the original text has survived, although the two views could be reconciled by arguing that the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* was being precise about what *has* survived. What we have are the remains of a shipwreck, the ship is gone, but some of the boards which survived can be measured quite precisely—although the ship is gone.

This view was not inconsequential for the Hindu community. For instance, we know in the context of Hindu rituals that 'Vedic rites include *śrauta* and *smārta karma*. *Śrauta karmas* are those rites which are ordained in the *śruti*. *Smārta karmas* are those which are learned from the *smṛtis* but which are supposed to have been enjoined by *śruti* text lost to us.⁵ Before we consider the significance of this move, it is worth noting that this is not a new-fangled idea, that the *Āpastamba Dharma Sutra* (c. third-century B.C.E.)⁶ already alludes to this view when it says (I.4.12.10) that 'rites were promulgated in the Brāhmaṇa texts, but the exact words (of the Brāhmaṇa texts) are lost and have to be inferred from the performance of the rites (or from procedure prescribed in the *smṛtis*).'⁷

Please note that the *Brāhmaṇas* began by being precise about the *Saṁhitā* portion of at least three of the four Vedas, but this precision was lost in a sense when we took the tradition associated with Veda-Vyāsa, as an ancient editor of the Vedas,

into account; now the precision of the *Brāhmaṇa* texts is beginning to undergo a similar blurring, with the admission of lost *Brāhmaṇa* texts.

How this doctrine of the 'lost texts' is appropriated within the tradition again reflects the tradition's dual tendency to be conservative at one time and liberal at other times. The liberal potential is obvious—that any practice one wants to preserve or include as part of the tradition, but is not found in the Vedas could be ascribed to the 'lost Vedas'. The famous Nyāya scholar, Jayanta (tenth century), is willing to accept Buddhist texts as authoritative and invokes the 'lost Veda' argument in support.⁸ But Kumāṛila (c. seventh century) argues in a different way, to deal with *smṛti* provisions for which it is impossible to suggest Vedic indications. He says (firstly) that *smṛti* prescriptions may be based on lost Vedic *śākhās*, or (2) they may be based on texts contained in the very parts of the Vedas that are available at present. If any one asks: "How is it that they are not found," Kumāṛila gives the reply: The several branches of the Veda are scattered about (in many distant territories), men are negligent, and the texts are contained in different sections of the Veda; on account of these one cannot point out the texts that are the basis of the *smṛtis*.⁹ So, according to Kumāṛila, the texts are not lost, we are at a loss! Kumāṛila here wanted to avoid the 'danger in relying on the theory that *smṛtis* were based on Vedic texts that are lost (or disappeared[sic]), because that very argument might be urged by heterodox schools like the Bauddhas'.¹⁰

Quite apart from whether existing views or practices may be accommodated on account of the lost portions of the *Samhitās* or *Brāhmaṇas*, it is a statement found in the *Brāhmaṇas* itself which must claim our attention now. We saw how the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* calculated the number of syllables in the *Samhitā* portion of the three Vedas, establishing them as finite texts, but the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa Kāṭhaka* (I.11.4) states quite explicitly, by way of contrast: *anantā vai vedāḥ*: the 'Vedas are many, unending' or even infinite. Modern Hindus have not been slow to use the opportunity afforded by such a generous economy and in fact one is impressed by their moderation, as in the following passage:

[W]e have to-day a mass of philosophical and religious literature in each of the popular languages. To instance but a few, the *Tēvāram* and the *Tiruvācakam* are well-known among the hymns of the Śaiva saints of South India; the

Vaiṣṇavas have correspondingly the *Divya-prabandham* and other devotional songs; the Caitanya movement and the songs of Tagore are responsible for the enrichment of Bengali devotional literature; the songs of Kabīr, the *Abhaṅgas* of the Mahārāṣṭra saints, the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Tulasi Dās are all outpourings of God-intoxicated souls. If the essentials of Hinduism have found a place, difficult to dislodge, in the homes of even the lowliest and the last in this vast country, it is not a little due to these devotional poems in the languages of the people. To all of them the name 'Veda' may be given, for has not the Veda itself declared that the Vedas are many, unending (*anantā vai vedāḥ*)?¹¹

This take is not entirely modern; its modern touch perhaps consists in regarding the other sacred texts themselves as Veda. The earlier approach was to confer on any inspired sacred literature the status of a fifth Veda, with the *Mahābhārata* being perhaps the most prominent example of this tendency.¹² Nor was this always only a literary trope as it were. Rāmānuja (1017–1137) is well known for developing the doctrine of *Ubhaya-Vedānta* or the doctrine of the dual Vedānta. The Upaniṣads constitute the last section of the Vedas and are therefore referred to as *Vedānta*. 'Rāmānuja followed a long line of Vaiṣṇava thinkers. A number of poet-saints poured out their devotion in the form of songs in Tamil. These were collected later into what is called the *Nālāyira-Prabandham*. Since these songs constitute the basis of Viśiṣṭādvaita, equally with the *Upaniṣads*, Rāmānuja's system is known as *Ubhaya-Vedānta*.'¹³ This equation produced an interesting consequence when the Śrī Nammālvār Sabhā, a congregation of Śrīvaiṣṇavas, was founded in 1881, which religiously recited portions from the Tiruvāymoḷi of Nammālvār. As this text was put on par with the Veda by Rāmānuja, 'some Brahmin Śrīvaiṣṇavas believe that young boys should undergo the ritual of upanayana, of being invested with the sacred thread, in order to have the authority to study the Tiruvāymoḷi,'¹⁴ without the implication that the boys must be Brahmins or even of the higher castes. If only those who are invested with the sacred thread can study the Vedas, then those who study a text on par with the Vedas must also be invested with the sacred thread, notwithstanding their caste.¹⁵ This seems to be the logic underlying this position.

When the word Veda is used in these contexts, then it is as much a text as a symbol and sometimes gets loosened from the text altogether and begins to stand for religious authority. Thus Swami Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa (1836–1886), a religious genius according to some but an illiterate priest in real life, would often use the

phrase 'as it is said in the Vedas' in his sermons, without quoting chapter or verse, by way of imparting authority to the statement.¹⁶ Symbols are polyvalent and evocative rather than definitive, so it should not surprise if in this incarnation the word takes on wings, but even as a text the Vedas continue to be increasingly difficult to define definitively. This difficulty can be traced back to the *Upaniṣads* themselves. A famous passage in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* runs as follows:

As from a lighted fire laid with damp fuel, various (clouds of) smoke issue forth, even so, my dear, the *R̥gVeda*, the *YajurVeda*, the *SāmaVeda*, *Ātharvaṅgīrasa*, history, ancient lore, sciences, *Upaniṣads*, verses, explanations and commentaries from this, indeed, are all these breathed forth.¹⁷

This passage describes the scriptures as the breath of the Supreme Being, 'as a man [or human being] breathes without effort, so do all these come out of the Supreme without effort.'¹⁸ But what all has been exhaled? We are not surprised that the four Vedas are breathed forth but look at what follows: history, ancient lore, sciences, *Upaniṣads*, verses, aphorisms, explanations and commentaries. Again *Upaniṣads* need not surprise but the rest of the list consists of items one does not usually associate with scriptures as such. Once again we stand at a fork in the hermeneutical road: those who wish to take a *conservative* view of the passage will claim that all the other items pertain to the material found *within* the Vedas as classically defined; those disposed to a liberal view would argue that the limits of the canonical literature are themselves being reset here, just as in its symbolic meaning no doubt 'many fields of learning carry the name of Veda. One talks of the literature of *Nava or Abhinava Vedas*, of the Tamil Veda, of the Veda of the Sikhs, etc. Keshab Chandra Sen gives to his message the name of Jivan Veda.'¹⁹

The prototypical use of the Vedas as a whole remains intriguing. Professor K.N. Jayatilleke refers to a passage in the *Sutta Nipāta* (529) as alluding to 'the Vedas of the Samanas as much to the Vedas of the Brāhmaṇas',²⁰ while some have suggested the opening formula of many a Buddhist Sūtra: *Evam me śrutam*, harks to the authority of the Vedas, of the Veda as *śruti*.²¹ We also hear of a *Buddha Veda* from Bali.²² The Jainas call their scriptures 'Ārya Vedas, the "true" Vedas founded by Bharata, transmitted by the *Tīrthaṅkaras*, as opposed to the *Anārya Vedas* of the Brahmanic tradition'²³ and it is said of the Guru Granth Sahib 'that the internal arrangement of the *Ādigrantha* approaches that of the *R̥gVeda*.'²⁴

Some of the studies associated with Vedic learning already begin to verge on the academic such as (1) phonetics or pronunciation (*śikṣā*); (2) meter (*chandas*); (3) grammar (*vyākaraṇa*); (4) etymology (*nirukta*); (5) ritual (*kalpa*); and (6) astronomy (*jyotiṣa*). The point is that some of the Upavedas, or secondary Vedas, definitely involve the secular realm such as (1) medicine (*ĀyurVeda*); (2) military science (*Dhanur Veda*); (3) music (*Gandharva Veda*); and (4) architecture and art (*Śilpaśāstra*), which is also called Sthāpatya-Veda.²⁵ According to the *Mānasāra* (41, 2) even the knowledge of the architect is based on the Veda.²⁶ The issue has resurfaced in modern time in the light of Swami Dayānanda Sarasvatī's claim that findings of modern science could be found in the Vedas, and the support his views have received from Śrī Aurobindo.

II: Vedas: Transcendental or Secular?

Our regnant present day understanding of the nature of the Veda may be described as transcendental, in the sense that they are considered by the Hindu community, by and large, certainly by its philosophically inclined members, as sources of knowledge about ultimate reality. The issue here concerns the epistemological domain of the Veda—what does it provide us information about—historical matters? scientific matters? geographical matters? or spiritual matters? The point can be honed further—does it provide information about all of these, depending upon the topic under discussion, or only about spiritual matters?

The proponents of *Vedānta* within Hinduism express themselves very clearly on this point. They take the position that while the Vedas may contain a discussion of many other matters as obiter dicta, they are to be considered valid *only* in spiritual matters. Śaṅkara has famously remarked that even if a thousand scriptures were to tell us that fire is cold, they would have to be disregarded because they are speaking outside their jurisdiction. Whether fire is hot or cold is to be determined by recourse to perception, its proper domain, and not scripture, which counts only in matters which transcend perception and inference. As Professor K. Satchidananda Murty explains:

In this context the principle accepted by the Mīmāṃsā and the Vedānta schools, namely, that a religious scripture is not meant for giving us knowledge of perceptible, or inferable things, is to be borne in the mind. This would mean that in a religious scripture it is vain to seek science or history, and that (as Śaṅkara says clearly) where scriptural passage contradicts an evident truth

of perception, or inference, it is not really a scriptural passage but an *arthavāda* to be discarded. Had European theologians followed this principle, much of the conflict between science and religion could have been avoided. Centuries ago Pseudo-Dionysius said that scriptures are intelligible only to those who can free themselves from 'puerile myths', Kumārila and Śaṅkara recognized this, and put it into practice. This, again, does not mean there can be no history, or science at all in a scripture; but that it is not what is *important* in a scripture; though, it may, for instance, tell how at a particular time in the past certain people reacted to certain historical events, and saw in them a more direct disclosure of God's activity than in other events; or, in other words, a scripture may provide us with an evaluation of history, based on faith (*Heilsgeschichte*), but not objective history (for that cannot be *saving* history).

It is a great tribute to the ancient Hindu thinkers that principles of scriptural exegesis somewhat similar to theirs are now being advocated by some of the foremost Christian theologians.²⁷

Is then the scope of the Vedas limited to spiritual or transcendental knowledge? It would be useful to recognize that however inspired or modern this take may be, it presents only one of the attitudes towards the Vedas in the tradition. One only has to think of the term *ĀyurVeda* to recognize that the word Veda was also applied to the empirical sciences within the tradition. As Louis Renou asks rhetorically: 'is Medicine not called "Veda of the duration of life?"'²⁸ Xuanzang, the Chinese traveller, actually confuses the *RgVeda* with *ĀyurVeda*.²⁹

III: The Vedas: Univalent or Polyvalent?

One must begin by asking whether the Vedas are even meaningful. There seems to have been an ancient view, associated with the name of Kautsa, who is mentioned by Yāska and therefore must be assigned to a period earlier than the fifth century B.C.E., that the Vedas were meaningless. This is known as the doctrine of the *anāṛthakya* of the *mantras*. This need not necessarily imply that they were purposeless. Baby-talk for instance, or some conversations between romantic lovers could be meaningless without being

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purposeless. Some utterances in magic are meaningless but serve a magical purpose. The recitation of the *mantras* could be considered purely elocutionary or a performance-act; but the charge that they are meaningless is combated by Yāska with the oft-cited comment: 'It is not the fault of a post if a blind man does not see it' (II.4).³⁰ The regnant view within the tradition however seems to be, if we restrict ourselves to the view that the Vedas are meant to be our guide not in mundane but in transcendental matters, such as those of *dharmā* and mokṣa, that the Vedas have a single message, that it has one meaning rather than many. No matter how vigorously we contest *what* that one meaning is, the Veda has one meaning. We may thus debate whether that one meaning is to be found in the former part of the Vedas, as the *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā* argued, or in the latter part, as *Uttara-Mīmāṃsā* argued. Alternatively, one could argue whether the main message of the Veda is that we perform the right ritual, or seek liberation, or combine the search for the right and the true, or even if we agree that that one message is to pursue liberation directly, we could still furiously debate the right way to attain it according to the Vedas. In this sense, the tradition of *śāstrārtha* in India could be understood as an effort to find out, through thorough and persistent debate, what that one meaning of the Vedas is.

If, however, we look upon the tradition as a whole, then the evidence points in another direction—that the Vedas could be delivering several messages or at least that they could be interpreted in several ways, without having to insist that only one of these could be right. The earliest exegete of the Vedas within the tradition in a sense is Yāska (fifth century B.C.E.), whose work *Nirukta* is an exposition of the *Nighaṇṭu*. As Yāska explains: '[F]ormer ṛṣis had direct intuitive insight into *dharmā*, and *Brahma* (Veda) made itself manifest to them. They handed down by oral instruction (*upadeśa*) the hymns to later generations who were destitute of direct intuitive insight. The later generations, declining in powers of *upadeśa*, compiled this work (ie. the *Nighaṇṭu*) in order to comprehend the meaning.'³¹

It is important to realize for our purpose that:

From what has been said, it follows that it is wrong to take Yāska, Sāyaṇa, or anyone modern as omniscient and infallible. Yāska was not the first to interpret Vedic words as he did. He referred to a *Nighaṇṭu* with *Samāmnāya* which he cited and explained. He had predecessors like Śākapūṇi, Audumbarāyaṇa,

Aupamanyava and others. He referred to alternate ways of understanding Vedic words and passages. While his was the Nairuktika (etymological-definitional) tradition, he was aware of other traditions of Vedic interpretation such as the Aithāsika (historical, e.g., those who take Indra-Vṛtra battles as real incidents) and the Yājñika (sacrificial).³²

Yāska also admitted that 'Vedic mantras contained both higher and lower (*uccāvaca*) ideas.'³³ And subsequently, 'Śaunaka's *Bṛhaddevatā* pointed out what it considered as shortcomings or errors in Yāska. Yāska, for example, interpreted the phrase "Pañcajanāḥ" as the four varṇas (castes) and the Niṣādas. The *Bṛhaddevatā* informs us that it is possible to understand it in other ways also, e.g.: (1) the five fires, (2) the four chief priests and the yajamāna (sacrificer), and (3) the eye, ear, mind, speech and breath.'³⁴

The point then is that the tradition, as a whole, implicitly regarded the Vedas as polyvalent and explicitly so by the time of the *Purāṇas*, for a 'Purāṇic text says that there are three meanings in all the Vedas (*trayorthāḥ sarvavedeṣu*) (the well-known Agni, fire, etc., the one God within them and the spiritual)'.³⁵

It is worth noting that the discussion here has focused on the 'interpretation of the Samhitas and the *Brāhmaṇas*. All are unanimous that the *Upaniṣads* are predominantly metaphysical and mystical',³⁶ but here again we will discover that they may be interpreted in many ways. The three schools of Vedic interpretation alluded to above may be described as *ādhiyājñika*, *ādhideivika*, and *ādhyātmika*. (1) The *ādhiyājñika* or the ritualist school held that Vedas are 'source book which informs how to perform rituals for obtaining this-worldly and other-worldly good'.³⁷ Whatever else is found in the Vedas is by way of *arthavāda*. Much of the *bhāṣya* or commentary of Sāyaṇa (fourteenth century), and of Skandaswāmī is to be placed here. (2) The *ādhideivika* or 'polytheistical' school held that the main goal of the Vedas was the propitiation of the deities. The *bhāṣya* of Veṅkaṭa-Mādhava, who hailed from Coladeśa and is placed in the ninth/tenth century, belongs here. (3) The *ādhyātmika* or monotheistic interpretation of the Vedas can be traced to Yāska (VII.4.8.9.), and Śaunaka (*Bṛhaddevatā* I. 61-65) and was carried forward by Madhvācārya (thirteenth century) in his commentary on the first forty hymns of the RgVeda, which 'is perhaps the earliest surviving book which gives monotheistical

interpretation of so many hymns.^[38] Later Jayatārtha wrote a commentary on this, and based on these Rāghavendra composed a monotheistic exposition of these hymns. Ātmānanda has written an excellent *ādhyātmika* (spiritual) bhāṣya on sūkta 164 of the ṚgVeda I maṇḍala. In modern times Swami Dayananda Saraswati revived this tradition through his great commentary on the ṚgVeda.³⁹

The term *ādhyātmika* can also be taken to mean spiritual or mystical. Śrī Aurobindo is credited with interpreting Vedic hymns along these lines and T.V. Kapali Sastry carried this line of interpretation further in his *Rgbhāṣyabhūmikā*.

Some commentators on the Vedas even go beyond this triple grid and opt for multiple interpretations of the *ṚgVeda*. Thus Durgācārya, who is usually placed somewhere between the eleventh and the fourteenth century, remarks in his *Rjvarthavyākhyā* on Nirukta II.8, after mentioning that mantras can be interpreted ritualistically (*ādhiyāñjika*), 'polytheistically' (*ādhidāivika*) or monotheistically or spiritually (*ādhyātmika*): 'Therefore from these mantras as many meanings as possible, all of

them indeed, may be derived; there is nothing wrong in this.⁴⁰ On the basis of this, Skanda-Maheśvara (c. eighth century), on their comment on Nirukta VII.5 remark: 'In all viewpoints all mantras may be applied' (*sarvadarśanesu sarve mantra yojanīyāḥ*).⁴¹ K. Satchidananda Murty is therefore led to say: 'It is extraordinary that unlike the followers of almost all other scriptures and some other Vedic interpreters, these people declared, "our Scripture has many meanings, i.e., many interpretations of it are possible. Let them all be brought forth and used by different people." And the qualified and the competent, they said, are free to interpret in original ways, and such interpretations would be as good as those of ancient sages.'⁴²

From this point of view, the attempt to find Vedic roots for doctrines from even the non-orthodox or *nāstika* schools of Indian thought in the Vedas does not seem that far-fetched or contrived. Thus it has been argued that the statement in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (II.4.12): *na pretya samjñāsti* 'when he has departed there is no more knowledge',⁴³ provides the prooftext for the school of Indian materialism, known as the Cārvāka or Lokāyatika; that *Maitrī Upaniṣad* (VII 8) alludes to *nairātmya* and thus (negatively) prooftexts Buddhism.⁴⁴ Nor is it a case

The *ādhyātmika* or monotheistic interpretation of the Vedas can be traced to Yāska (VII.4.8.9.), and Śaunaka (Bṛhaddevatā 1. 61-65) and was carried forward by Madhvācārya (thirteenth century) in his commentary on the first forty hymns of the *ṚgVeda*

of just Hindus trying to rope others in. Śabara (second century) in his *bhāṣya* on *Purvamīmāṃsāsūtra* 1.1.5 'states that Vijñānavādi Baudhhas put forward Br.Up. IV. 5.15.: Vijñāghana evaitebhyo bhūtebhyaḥ samutthāya tānyevānuvinaśyati na pretya sañjāsti as supporting their position.'⁴⁵

In Jainism, as mentioned earlier, the 'sermons of the Jina take the form known as divyadhvani, the divine sound', and the 'Digambaras imagine the divyadhvani as a monotone—like the sound of OM—which only the gaṇadharas are able to comprehend...'⁴⁶ Moreover, 'Jainas sometimes venerate the holy syllable OM as well, though their analysis of this utterance differs from that of the Brahmanical tradition. Whereas Vedic scriptures suggest that the A, U, and M of which OM is composed represent earth, the atmosphere, and heaven respectively, Jaina texts (probably postcanonical) derive the same sound by connecting the initial syllables of the epithets for each being addressed in the *namaskāra-mantra*: Hence *a* (*arhat*), *a* (*aśārīra [the siddha]*), *ā* (*ācārya*), *u* (*upādhyāya*), *m* (*muni[sādhu]*). Repetition of OM thus becomes a legitimate practice for the Jaina, serving to remind him of the five holy beings of his creed.'⁴⁷

Even members of *āstika* schools, such as Sāṃkhya, who rely on their own philosophical texts, while accepting Vedic authority, at least pro forma, yield to the temptation of adducing Vedic texts in support, as referred to by Śaṅkara in his *bhāṣya* on *Vedāntasūtra*: I.1.5 and II.2.1.⁴⁸

IV: Vedas: For Some or All?

This is obviously a question of great significance for the Hindu community, given the fact that a major strand in classical and medieval Hinduism restricts the accessibility of the Vedas to the male members of the first three *varṇas*: *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya* and *Vaiśya*. To this principle, a fact must also be added: that in practice it was restricted usually to the Brahmins, during the classical and medieval period, from c. fourth century B.C.E. to c.1800. A religion, which claims to be based on the Vedas, excluded *Śūdras* and women from studying those very texts on which it is supposed to be based. The only parallel I am aware of is the exclusion of women from the study of the Torah for a considerable period in the history of Judaism.

One wonders how Hinduism survived this paradox of denying access to its foundational scriptures to its own followers! Several aspects need to be considered.

(1) The sacred literature of Hinduism is classified into *śruti* and *smṛti*, or what one

might call Revelation and Tradition. This distinction, by the way, is drawn by Tradition, not Revelation. And it is the *smṛti* literature which lays down this rule, rather than *śruti* literature.⁴⁹ And according to *smṛti* literature itself, in case of conflict of *śruti* or Revelation and *smṛti* or Tradition, *śruti* or Revelation prevails. So the rule rests on somewhat weak foundations but nevertheless was widely accepted and respected, although the fact that its foundations were questionable did render it vulnerable when it was questioned, as in the post-1800 period. (2) Much of Hinduism was actually based on *smṛti* or Tradition as it was practiced after c. 400 B.C.E. so this exclusion might not have seemed as onerous or discriminatory as it appears. Moreover, the Vedas in that sense were not in the language of the people, the way the *smṛti* literature was. They were in archaic Sanskrit, had to be learnt by rote and their study was accompanied by much ritual circumstance. In fact, in parts of *smṛti* literature what we view as *exclusion* of the *Śūdras* and women is often depicted as their *exemption*, from having to be burdened with the paraphernalia of Vedic study. (3) Distinction between Vedic and Sanskrit learning must be clearly recognized. Vedic learning involved learning Sanskrit, and Vedic Sanskrit at that, but Sanskrit learning is not confined to Vedic learning, and in fact includes a vast body of sacred and secular literature, which far exceeds the Vedas. Women and *Śūdras* were never excluded from studying Sanskrit, the barrier was against their studying the Vedas. There is a traditional account that the great epic *Mahābhārata* was written by Vyāsa to compensate the *Śūdras* and women as it were, from this debarment.⁵⁰ But the epic itself, meant for them, is in Sanskrit, which would make no sense if they did not know Sanskrit. (4) One must distinguish clearly between scriptural exclusion and soteriological exclusion and the distinction is of great significance. If you deny a Muslim access to the Qur'ān, you could be accused of thereby denying the Muslim access to heaven. And if you denied a Christian access to the Bible, you *could* be accused of denying the Christian access to heaven, although we know that, until the Reformation, the Church controlled access to the Bible. Even in these cases scriptural exclusion may not coincide with soteriological exclusion. In Hinduism it did not coincide at all, because Vedic texts were salvifically appropriate for those who were eligible to study them, while other texts were salvifically appropriate for those who were eligible for these other texts. It is like saying that maybe the mayor of the city alone can use the official limousine to go to the airport, but anyone in the city can hail a cab to do so. (5) The rule was not water-tight, and there were exceptions.

A person by the name of *Śūdraka* is mentioned as proficient in the Vedas. The *Manusmṛti* (III.156) speaks of *Śūdra* gurus disapprovingly. A woman by the name of Tirukkoneri Dāsyai (fourteenth or fifteenth centuries) wrote a commentary on the ninth-century poem, the *Tiruvāymoḷi* of Nammālvār, which betrays knowledge of the *Upaniṣads*.⁵¹ Even more startlingly, Patañjali (second century B.C.) explains the word *kāśakṛtsnā* as a lady who specializes in a *Mīmāṃsā* text called *Kāśakṛtsnī*, whose author was *Kāśakṛtsnī*! This is as Vedicly unorthodox as one can get. (6) The Hindu tradition gradually came to be increasingly associated philosophically with what is known as *Vedānta*, beginning from around the eighth century. The *Vedānta* schools of Hindu thought evolved their own canon known as the *prasthāna-traya*, consisting of (1) the *Upaniṣads*; (2) the *Brahmasūtra* and (3) the *Bhagavadgītā*. Out of these, the first falls in the category of *śruti* or Revelation but the last two fall in the category of *smṛti* or Tradition. The *Bhagavadgītā* has been an immensely popular text within Hinduism and in fact comes closest to being a universal scripture within it, which is actually read. Vedas then become symbolic of the scripture and the *Bhagavadgītā* served as the actual scripture, or the corresponding text in one's own *sampradāya* (or denomination). This paradox counters the other paradox, of the prime scripture of a tradition being denied to a majority of its followers. It helped that the *Bhagavadgītā* is understood as distilling the essence of the *Upaniṣads*, if not the Vedas.

This difference of opinion about whether access to Vedic study is restricted or open, reflects a debate within the tradition which may be framed in a modern idiom as follows: Who determines what is Hinduism: Do only the male members of the first three *varṇas*, or castes if you will, do so, or do all Hindus irrespective of caste and gender? It surfaces towards the end of the *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (third century B.C.E.) when the question is raised as to how should one settle remaining matters pertaining to *dharma*. One answer given is that one should turn to the *Āryas* or esteemed male members of the first three *varṇas* but the last aphorism adds:

According to some, one should learn the remaining laws from women and people of all classes.⁵²

V: Authoritative or Not: Nature of Vedic Authority

The Vedas are the foundational scriptures of Hinduism and therefore considered

authoritative by the religious tradition based on them, now known as the Hindu religious tradition. What then is the nature of this authority?

The area where the issue of their authority arises most explicitly is in that of Indian philosophy, in which schools of philosophy which don't accept their authority are designated *nāstika*, and those which do so are designated *āstika*, and the matter comes across, in black and white, as rather clear-cut. Even if one takes the matter on the face of it, however, this authority does not involve authoritarianism, as will be obvious from the following consideration. The school of Hindu philosophy considered the most 'orthodox,' and therefore setting the greatest store by Vedic authority, is that of *Mīmāṃsā*, when we use the term to refer to *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā* as well as *Uttara-Mīmāṃsā* (or *Vedānta*). This may be so,

[B]ut, at the same time, they do not signify a blind reliance on untested and unsupported authority. They may consequently be taken as rationalistic in practice, though not in theory. Dr. Randle ascribes this feature of the orthodox schools of thought to the circumstance that they had to face in Buddhism 'a vigorous opposition which pressed free enquiry to the extreme limits of skepticism' and that it had to be met with its own weapons, which were perception and inference. 'The fortunate result of this,' he adds, was that 'the trammels of authority did not prevent the orthodox thinker from following where the argument leads.'⁵³

In the case of the four other 'orthodox' schools of Hindu philosophy: Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya and Yoga, the degree and extent of commitment to Vedic authority varies considerably.⁵⁴ As T.M.P. Mahadevan notes, these systems 'accept the authority of the Veda and are therefore called *āstika*, [but] do not depend for their doctrines on the teaching of the Veda'.⁵⁵ So Vedic authority is less binding in their case, and when it comes to *nāstika* schools of Indian materialism, Jainism and Buddhism, even the formal acknowledgement of the Vedic authority is lacking. In other words, it is not a case of black and white but rather shades of grey. We note how even the two schools which take their stand on the Vedas—those of *Pūrva*- and *Uttara-Mīmāṃsā*—were unable to crack the Vedic whip, because obviously those non-orthodox schools which did not accept Vedic authority could not be philosophically disenfranchised just because they didn't accept Vedic authority. Then we also noticed the tendency that sometimes even *nāstika* schools produced

evidence in support of their position from the Vedas. Now if *all* schools of philosophy could thus claim Vedic authority, how much *actual* authority could it amount to? What authority is one left with if everyone can invoke that authority? Thus Hindu philosophy is to be considered rationalistic in practice, though not in theory, for two opposite reasons. If the non-orthodox schools *reject* Vedic authority, then they must be engaged through universal reason. And if all of them *accept* Vedic authority, then once again they and other systems must be engaged through universal reason. And some schools of *Vedānta* actually even went beyond the Vedas. In fact 'the *Upaniṣads* themselves declare that when a person has seen this [Advaitic] truth for himself, he outgrows the need for the scriptures. "There a father becomes no father; a mother no mother; the world, no world; the gods, no gods; the Vedas no Vedas"'.⁵⁶ This last passage is drawn from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (IV.iii.22) where it refers to deep sleep, but M. Hiriyanna notes '*mokṣa* in this respect, is only a replica of deep sleep.'⁵⁷ In fact Advaita Vedānta is even tougher on the Vedas, because it considers them as part of *māyā*, and therefore ultimately unreal, making its own ontology undermine its epistemology,⁵⁸ a shock from which some students of Advaita Vedānta never recover. Other schools of *Vedānta* are severely critical of Advaita Vedānta for thus undermining the Vedas. Vedic authority thus represents a spectrum ranging from schools which do not subscribe to it, through schools which nominally accept it, to schools which substantially accept, to schools which transcend it.

We have discussed Vedic authority so far in the context of philosophy which tries to zero in on the ultimate reality, realization of which leads to liberation or *mokṣa*. The Vedas, according to the classical tradition, were considered authoritative not only in terms of *mokṣa* but also *dharma*, that is to say, in matters of conduct and ritual. This point is important because sometimes even the philosophical schools, which do not philosophically accept Vedic authority, seem to be saying that we really accept Vedic authority in this second sense, when we accept it, as we do not wish to go beyond the pale of the Vedic community, as we do our philosophy. Thus the Vaiśeṣika school, while doing its own thing, 'nevertheless [accepts] it as authoritative, because it deals with *dharma*.'⁵⁹

Dharma can stand for both morality and the sacramental system, and this all religions and philosophies of Indian origin (with the possible exception of some form of Indian

materialism and Tantricism) tended to share. B.K. Matilal has argued that the point on which religions of Indian origin—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—converge is not their philosophy or soteriology but rather in the inculcation of a common morality. In the case of *dharma* as a sacramental system the case is even stronger. Udayana (c. 1000 C.E.) in his *Ātmatattvaviveka* makes the point that ‘the sacramental system from *garbhādhana* to *antyeṣṭi* remained acceptable even to the unorthodox.’⁶⁰ ‘This system of *samskāras* or sacraments punctuated the personal life of the individual,’⁶¹ irrespective of his (or her) philosophical and moral position.

Conclusion

It should be clear from this discussion of the Vedas in Hinduism that the Hindus are not quite definite about the role Vedas have, or should, or can play in Hinduism. Although Hindu identity is closely tied to the Vedas, the ties are in a state of constant negotiation, the ties are thus negotiable, flexible, dynamic or in one word *debatable*. Perhaps the role of scripture in the credal religions is also a matter of debate at times, but the debate presupposes a prior commitment to the scripture. In the case of the communitarian religions, this commitment is itself debatable because the scripture belongs to the community, which brings the scripture into being, while, in the case of the credal religions, the community is brought into being *by* it, so to say. This is clear from the fact that the attempt to frame a credal definition of communitarian religions often runs into heavy weather. Some of the communitarian religions may not have a scripture, this may not be the way they choose to express their togetherness. And even those that do go that route, such as Hinduism, are hard to define that way, for the Veda belongs to the Hindu, and because it belongs to him rather than him belonging to it, he or she can question it and have various views about it, as we saw earlier. So if Hinduism has to be defined, it must be defined in terms of the Hindus, because it is a communitarian and not a credal religion and not in terms of scripture, and if the community has to be defined in terms of the Vedas then it has to be defined as a community which debates the Vedas and debates *in* and around the Vedas.

This conclusion is vindicated startlingly, I would like to claim, by a text called *Dabistān-i- Mazāhib*, from India of Moghul times, placed in the seventeenth century and written by a Zoroastrian, Mobid by name, who set out in search for truth (*ḥaqq*) and in the course of this research surveyed the various religions then current in

India for the light they might shed on his quest for the ultimate reality. Hinduism was one such religion. Let me share with you the conclusion he reaches about the nature of Hinduism as stated by Professor Irfan Habib, the well-known historian. I quote him now.

The author of *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib* is hard put to describe what the beliefs of a Hindu are and ultimately he takes shelter in a very convenient position—Hindus are those who have been arguing with each other within the same framework of argument over the centuries. If they recognize each other as persons whom we can either support or oppose in a religious argument, then both parties are Hindus. The Jains, although they rejected Brahmanism, are still Hindus because they were arguing and polemicizing with Brahmins. Such arguments were not taking place between Hindus and Muslims. The Muslims did not share any basic terminology with the others. Muslims had their own framework, an ideological framework, the semitic framework...

The role of the Vedas for the Hindus as a textual community consists in the Vedas being a part of the framework of argument in which Hindus have been engaged for centuries, as often providing the material for the debate and at times itself becoming the material for this debate.

End Notes:

1. D.H.J. Morgan, 'Sociology of Religion', in S.G.F. Brandon, general editor, *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970, p. 583.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 585.
3. Jogiraj Basu, *India of the Age of the Brāhmaṇas*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1969, p. 276.
4. Swami Sharvananda, 'The Vedas and Their Religious Teachings', in Haridas Bhattacharyya, ed., *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1958, pp. 182–183. However, although 'the epic and Purānas say that the one eternal Veda was arranged into four parts by Vyāsa, they do not say they were distributed into the maṇḍalas or kāṇḍas

by Vyāsa' (P.V. Kane., *History of Dharmasāstra* [Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1977], Vol. V. Part II (second edition) Index, p. 238). Curiously Ye-ching mentions 'a Veda of a hundred thousand verses, a Veda not consigned to writing, but known entirely by heart by the Brahmins, of whom the Chinese historian affirms to have met many'. Louis Renou, *The Destiny of the Veda in India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974, p. 29.

5. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism*, Bombay: Chetana Limited, 1971, p. 40 note 1.
6. Patrick Olivelle, ed., *Dharmasūtra: The Law Codes of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vasiṣṭha*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. xxxiv.
7. P.V. Kane, *op.cit.*, Vol. V Part II. Also see note 2048.
8. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1974 [1959], p. 234.
9. P.V. Kane, *op.cit.*, p.1259.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.1259–1260.
11. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op.cit.*, p. 39.
12. 'The Mahābhārata calls itself and a number of purānas like the *Brahmāṇḍa*, the *Skānda*, and the *Śrīmadbhāgavata* also call it the fifth Veda' (K. Satchidananda Murty, *Vedic Hermeneutics*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993, p. 40). 'On the basis of the Purāṇic statements Madhva asserted that the *Mahābhārata* is not only the fifth Veda, it is also superior to the other four Vedas' (*ibid.*, p. 46).
13. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op.cit.*, p.150.
14. See Vasudha Narayanan, *The Vernacular Veda: Revelation, Recitation and Ritual*, Columbia, S.C.: The University of South Carolina Press, 1994, p. 72.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
16. Swami Nikhilananda, tr., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1952, pp. 398, 490, 635.

17. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996 [1953], p. 199.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Louis Renou, *op. cit.*, p.14.
20. K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963, p.195.
21. Louis Renou, *op. cit.*, p.59 note 5.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 87 note 13.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 26–27.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 61 note 5.
25. Percival Spear, ed., *The Oxford History of India* (fourth edition), New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 54.
26. L. Renou, *op.cit.*, p. 73 note 3.
27. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, pp. 311–312. Parentheses eliminated. Elsewhere also he remarks that ‘to have so conceived a holy scripture is one of the greatest achievements of Indian epistemology’. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Vedic Hermeneutics*, p. 80.
28. Louis Renou, *op. cit.*, p.14. ‘The connection between medicine and the Veda has been definitely established (after many earlier attempts) by J. Filliozat,’ as also ‘an eventual link between Caraka and the Vedic school of the same name’ (*ibid.*, p.74 note 10).
29. *Ibid.*, p. 86 note 6. This is not entirely without some basis. ‘The ṚgVidhāna, V,2,4 calls the *ṚgVeda* the receptacle of Āyurveda, having regard to the links between magic and medicine; here is proclaimed in an unexpected manner, the orthodoxy of medicine’ (*ibid.*, p. 72 note 8).
30. Vasudeva Sharana Agrawala, ‘Yāska and Paṇini’, in Haridas Bhattacharyya, ed., *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 293.

31. I.20. See Vasudeva Sharana Agrawala, *op. cit.*, pp. 294–295.
32. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Vedic Hermeneutics*, pp. 12–13.
33. *Ibid.*, p.12.
34. *Ibid.*, p.13.
35. *Ibid.*, p.12.
36. *Ibid.*, p.9, note.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 9–10.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 11–12.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, p. 29; for Sanskrit text see p. 67 note 30: *tasmādetēṣu yāvanto'arthā upapadyeran...sarva eva te yojyāh; nātraparādho'sti.*
41. *Ibid.*, p. 67 note 30.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.
43. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, p. 200.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 854.
45. P.V. Kane, *op.cit.*, Vol.V, Part II (second edition) p. 1218.
46. Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, p. 42, emphasis added.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 163–164.
48. P.V. Kane, *op.cit.*, Vol. V Part II (second edition) p. 1218 note 1977.
49. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Vedic Hermeneutics*, pp. 12-18.
50. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* I.4.25.
51. See Vasudha Narayanan, 'The Hindu Tradition', in Willard G. Oxtoby, ed., *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 114.

52. Patrick Olivelle, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 73.
53. M. Hiriyanna, *Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949, p. 129.
54. K. Satchidananda Murty, *op.cit.*, pp. 37–38.
55. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op.cit.*, p. 130.
56. M. Hirayanna, *op.cit.*, p. 173.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 209 note 15; see Śaṅkara on *Vedāntasūtra* IV.i.3.
58. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, pp. 99-102.
59. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Vedic Hermeneutics*, p.38. Elsewhere he writes: 'But all these [schools] accepted the Veda as the source of dharma' (*ibid.*, p. 59).
60. G.C. Pande, *Dimensions of Ancient Indian Social History*, New Delhi: Books & Books, 1984, p. 170 note 6. The Nyāya thinker Vācaspati (ninth century) says of the scriptures of Buddhists and Jainas that 'these scriptures are not able to provide for the regulation of life according to the four castes and stages, nor are they able to enjoin any sacraments to be followed from birth to death. In short they do not give us a way of life or worship. That is why even the Buddhists are compelled to follow the Vedic way of life'. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, p. 230.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

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