

# Today's Lecture

- First in-class quiz
- Concluding Vedic Hinduism
- Beginning the *Upanishads*

# First in-class quiz

# The Vedas

- Where we left off:
- There is little reason to view polytheism as somehow more culturally primitive than monotheism or monism. (i) Certainly some contemporary expressions of polytheism are no older than some contemporary expressions of monotheism or monism. (ii) There is also no qualitative philosophical difference between some expressions of polytheism (like some popular Hindu views of the divine) and some expressions of monotheism or monism (like popular Christian views of the divine).

# The Vedas

- A theme which can be seen in early Vedic Literature, and which remains a theme in much of the later Indian philosophies, is the pursuit of the betterment of the human condition (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.7).
- Life is characterized by dissatisfaction or suffering.
- (i) Arguably, this largely, though not exclusively, arises from the gap between what we have or enjoy and what we need, desire, or prefer.
- (ii) Also events in our lives can be extremely negative or harmful.

# The *Vedas*

- (iii) Perhaps more importantly, our quality of life is precariously dependent on certain things outside of our control (e.g. presence or absence of deadly or debilitating diseases, presence or absence of natural or ‘cosmic’ catastrophes, presence or absence of aggressive neighbors [be they individuals or nation states]) cooperating with our needs, desires or preferences. This ‘lottery’ of cooperative states of affairs can, in itself, give rise to significant stress and anxiety.

# The Vedas

- Depending on the period of Vedic Hinduism we are talking about, different understandings of what is wrong with, and what will improve, the human condition leads to different proffered solutions (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.7-8).
- In the early Vedic period, for instance, the primary emphasis is on bettering the human condition through more wealth, greater physical security, military success, better health, bigger families, and longer life.

## ‘The ‘early’ Vedic Worldview’

- The animating principle in humanity is identified as *Prana* or life breath (from the root words ‘to breath forth’). (This view of ‘spirit’ is paralleled in the *Tanakh*; see the Hebrew term *ruah*.)
- At death *Prana* leaves the body and rises (on the smoke of the funeral pyre) to a heavenly abode.
- You also find frequent discussion of *atman*, though in this period of reflection *atman* is “conceived as a subtle substance existing within the human body yet separable from it” (Hein, Norvin. 1993. “The Earliest Forms of Hinduism”. In *Religions of Asia*, Third Edition. Edited by John Fenton, *et al.* New York: St. Martin’s Press, p.29).

# ‘The ‘early’ Vedic Worldview’

- The universe can be split into three levels:
  - (1) The level on which we live and move,
  - (2) the atmosphere (or celestial realm), and
  - (3) the heavenly realm in which gods and the honored dead reside.
- Within the Vedic Religion there are gods or goddesses associated with each realm or sphere (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.16-17).



## ‘The ‘early’ Vedic Worldview’

- *Rita* (from the root word ‘to rise’) is taken to be the universal source of order and harmony, both in nature and human society (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.17).
- This principle, then, has both **descriptive** and **normative significance**.
- It has **descriptive significance** in that it orders the behavior of inanimate and certain animate objects in nature.
- Within human affairs it is that to which our actions *should accord* (even if they do not always or often do so). In this application it has **normative significance**.
- **Even the gods are subject to *rita*** (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.17).

# ‘The ‘early’ Vedic Worldview’

- The Vedic deities mentioned in the *Vedas* are often strongly associated with natural forces, objects or elements.
- Agni is the god of fire, Surya is associated with the sun, Usas is associated with the dawn, and Vayu is associated with the wind (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.16-17).

# 'The 'early' Vedic Worldview'

- Those that are not so associated with nature, like Varuna and Indra, are assigned roles directly related to human society.
- Varuna, for example, enforces *rita*, Indra is often associated with war, and Mitra is often associated with contracts and other social responsibilities (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.16-17).
- You will see this continued in Upanishadic philosophy, and even into the *Gita* and beyond.
- What will change is the move towards a unified view of the Divine.

# ‘The ‘early’ Vedic Worldview’

- In their speculations about the origin of the universe there are various at least seemingly incompatible suggestions.
- What *appears to be two common threads* in many of these stories are (i) the roles of the gods in creating the universe, and (ii) the existence of *pre-existing matter* out of which they accomplish this (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.17-19).
- Interestingly, you find parallels between such creation stories and what you will find in the early literature of the *Tanakh* (see chapter 1 of *Genesis*). For example, the term translated ‘God’ in the early creation stories of *Genesis* is *Elohim*. This is, ordinarily, a plural term for the Divine (*El* is the singular). You also find *Elohim* creating what we regard as the universe but only *after* first making mention of the existence of primordial water.

# 'The 'early' Vedic Worldview'

- “1: In the beginning God [i.e. *Elohim*] created the heavens and the earth.  
2: The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.  
3: And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.  
4: And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.  
5: God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day” (*Genesis* 1:1-5, NRSV).

# ‘The ‘early’ Vedic Worldview’

- Interestingly, you can find Vedic passages talking of the gods as Beings who appear *after the emergence, or creation, of the basic stuff that constitutes the universe.*
- Thus you can read the following passage from the *Rig Veda* on page 19 of your *Asian Philosophies*:
- “Who really knows? Who here can say? When it was born and from whence it came - this creation? *The Gods are later than this world’s creation; Therefore who knows from whence it came?*” (emphasis mine).

# ‘The ‘early’ Vedic Worldview’

- Even more interesting, the speculation doesn’t end there.
- As you can read in this same section of the *Rig Veda*,
- “1. In the beginning there was neither existence nor non-existence; Neither the world no[r] the sky beyond. What stirred? Where? Who protected it? Was there water, deep and unfathomable?
- 2. Then there was neither death nor immortality, Nor any sign of night or day. THAT ONE breathed, without breath, by its own impulse; Other than that, there was nothing at all” (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.17, 18).
- Four things to note: (i) THAT ONE is unlike any-thing we can properly conceive, (ii) ‘It’ is One, not many, (iii) every-thing arises from ‘It’, and (iv) ‘It’ is not a God.

# ‘The ‘early’ Vedic Worldview’

- Interestingly, there is an absence of rebirth and karma in the teachings of the early *Vedas*.
- This is not unlike the absence of teachings concerning the after-life in early Hebrew thought and scripture.
- In both early traditions the primary emphasis is on a better quality of life in a ‘worldly’ rather than ‘other-worldly’ context.