

What Did Indian Philosophers Believe?

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1. Did the Indians believe their myths?

1.1. Introduction

Popular writers about Christianity sometimes maintain that only modern fundamentalist Christians take the Biblical creation story literally; no one in pre-modern days, they say, ever thought of doing so. Karen ARMSTRONG represents this view in various publications, in one of which she states (2005b): ‘Until the advent of the modern period, nobody would have regarded the six-day creation story [of the Bible] as a literal, historical account.’¹ She is not the only one to maintain such a position. Some scholars of religion hold quite generally that myths were not taken literally in earlier days.² Ninian SMART (1996: 138), to mention but one example, has the following to say about myths in general and about the way they are understood at present and in the past:

‘[It] seems ... that we are moving out of the age of what may be called “fanciful” myth into that of “factual” myth. I do not mean by this that the more fanciful myths have not been believed in some sense to be factual: describing reality. But now there is a more earthbound understanding of what is factual. So Adam and Eve have to be real persons: or if they are not they have to be symbolic representations of a real human condition that can be described metaphysically or existentially.’

¹ She elaborates these ideas in ARMSTRONG (2005a).

² An example of a philosopher who holds similar views is Mary MIDGLEY (2006: 51): ‘For a long time this kind of language [i.e. mythical language—JB] was reasonably well understood. Since the mid-nineteenth century, however, there has been a disastrous attempt to get rid of it, keeping only literal statements of fact.’

And again (SMART (1996: 161)):

‘As we move towards another century and into it, the divergence, considered phenomenologically, between the old myth and the new history tends to fade away. Legends of Moses and Krishna and the Buddha and Confucius tend to solidify. Since historicity is regarded as a plus, there is a trend towards thinking of the legendary as historically real. In any case, it becomes a problem to distinguish between the two.’

These passages suggest that, at least according to Smart, there was a time when myths were not understood to be true in an earthbound factual manner, not historically real. Unfortunately he does not elaborate or clarify this suggestion, and nor does he give any specification as to the date or period during which the important transition toward the new understanding of myths took place. Why should such a change take place? And what is it that supposedly pushes ‘us’ to change our understanding of myths? Neither Smart nor Armstrong propose answers to these questions.

Some support for the position of Smart and Armstrong may be derived from a well-known article by Raffaele PETTAZZONI (1954/1984), whose original Italian version came out in 1948. It points out that many societies described by ethnographers distinguish between ‘true stories’ and ‘false stories’, with creation myths typically belonging to the ‘true stories’. However, as PETTAZZONI (1954/1984: 102) points out, ‘myth is true history because it is sacred history, not only by reason of its contents but also because of the concrete sacral forces which it sets going.’ The truth of myths ‘has no origin in logic, nor is it of a historical kind; it is above all of a religious and more especially a magical order’ (p. 103). These myths remain ‘true’ as long as the world they are part of remains by and large the same. However, PETTAZZONI (1954/1984: 108) observes, ‘a day will come when the myths of beginnings too will lose their “truth” and become “false stories” in their turn ... This will occur when their world, built up on the ruins of the first one, collapses in its turn to give place to a later and different structure.’

Pettazzoni’s remarks are interesting, but strictly speaking they only concern ‘truth’ in inverted commas. If I understand them correctly, ‘truth’ in inverted commas may be paraphrased with the help of some such word as ‘applicability’. Pettazzoni’s remarks leave open the question whether or not members of the societies involved literally believe even their ‘true’ stories (‘true’ in inverted commas). They suggest that these people may normally not bother about their ordinary truth, they may never think about it. The question whether they believe their stories may therefore be misplaced, inapplicable in the situation.

This reflection is related to a known difficulty in anthropology, whose description I borrow from the philosopher Daniel C. DENNETT's book *Breaking the Spell* (2006: 161):

'Many anthropologists have observed that when they ask their native informants about "theological" details—their gods' whereabouts, specific history, and methods of acting in the world—their informants find the whole inquiry puzzling. Why should they be expected to know or care anything about *that*? Given this widely reported reaction, we should not dismiss the corrosive hypothesis that many of the truly exotic and arguably incoherent doctrines that have been unearthed by anthropologists over the years are artefacts of inquiry, not pre-existing creeds. It is possible that persistent questioning by anthropologists has composed a sort of innocently collaborative fiction, newly minted and crystallised dogmas generated when questioner and informant talk past each other until a mutually agreed-upon story results. The informants deeply believe in their gods—"Everybody knows they exist!"—but they may never before have thought about these details (maybe nobody in the culture has!), which would explain why their convictions are vague and indeterminate. Obligated to elaborate, they elaborate, taking their cues from the questions posed.'

The suspicion that some myths may be artefacts of inquiry rather than pre-existing creeds gains in interest in the light of the recent and much discussed claim that the Pirahã, a people of Amazonian hunter-gatherers, have no creation myths at all.³

It may not be justified to extrapolate directly from anthropological literature to societies with sophisticated intellectual traditions, but it may make us aware of possible difficulties. These latter societies may preserve ancient myths by means of writing or refined mnemonic devices well beyond their sell-by date. How do educated readers or listeners consider them?

Scholars of classical Greece have repeatedly addressed the question whether the ancient Greeks believed their myths. The question is complicated and cannot, it turns out, be answered with a simple yes or no.⁴ It is yet justified to ask the question, if for no other reason than that classical Greece witnessed the coming into being of a tradition of critical reflection. It would certainly be interesting to know whether there were issues that were considered beyond questioning, and the realm of myths might conceivably be one of those.

³ See EVERETT (2005), DOUGLAS (2006).

⁴ See VEYNE (1983), LLOYD (1990: 44 f.).

This way of formulating the problem shows that the exact meaning of the word ‘myth’ is of little importance for its solution. It does not matter here whether myth is a meaningful or useful concept in and outside ancient Greece, nor whether the Greeks themselves had a concept corresponding to it. All that counts here is that critical reflection in ancient Greece was sooner or later confronted with traditional forms of knowledge, usually presented in narrative form. Was this confrontation experienced as one by the individuals involved? And what was its outcome? These questions are interesting, even if—as appears to be the case—their answers are multiple and complex.

Some thinkers point out that Judeo-Christian religion distinguished itself, already in Antiquity, from Greek and other religions in that reflexive thought about myth became an integral part of it. The requirement of truth in religion, it is claimed, pervades all of ancient Christian thought.⁵ This, if true, would distinguish the Judeo-Christian tradition from other religions.

I have already pointed out that it is not clear whether or to what extent myths—I use the word again in its broadest sense—are believed to be true in societies which have no strong tradition of critical reflection. One can easily imagine a society many of whose members, even though thoroughly familiar with its myths, have never asked themselves the question whether they are true or not. One thing seems however clear. In a society in which there *is* a tradition of critical reflection, at least some members will sometimes ask this question. Some of them will answer in the positive, and hence be conscious believers; others will decide that some of these myths, or all of them, are not, or probably not, literally true.

1.2. An Indian creation myth⁶

Classical India, like classical Greece, had many myths, and a tradition of critical reflection that expressed itself primarily in its philosophies. A number of thinkers, many of them belonging to different philosophical schools, were engaged in an on-going debate, in which each tried to improve his own system in the light of the criticism he received or might receive from others. The consequences of this debate were far-reaching, and various school doctrines appear to have been adopted, even invented, for no other reason than to improve the inner coherence and consistency of the different philosophies.

⁵ STROUMSA (2005: 34–36), with a reference to ASSMANN (1997: 1–8).

⁶ This section and the following one use material found also in BRONKHORST (2001); see further BRONKHORST (2007: 212 ff.).

What attitude did these philosophers have with regard to their myths?⁷ This question is important, for it may enable us to understand these thinkers better. For when classical Indian philosophers defend their positions against each other, they normally defend the philosophical aspects of their beliefs, leaving other aspects—such as the ‘mythical’ ones—out of the discussion. Yet there is at least one myth which is so often referred in the surviving literature that some conclusions can be drawn about it.

This myth is particularly important in the Brahmanical context. It is a creation myth which tells us not only about the creation of the world, but also about that of the different classes (*varṇa*) in human society.⁸ It is important for Brahmanism, for the division of society into these four classes is the cornerstone of their vision of society. No doubt for this reason it is told or referred to in many texts, not always in exactly the same form. The story finds its classic, and as far as we know earliest, exposition in the *Puruṣa-sūkta* of the *Ṛg-veda* (RV 10.90). This hymn recounts how the world and its inhabitants came about as a result of a sacrifice in which the primordial giant, Puruṣa, is dismembered. The hymn does however more: it also explains how the proper hierarchy of human beings came about.⁹ The for us most important parts read, in the (slightly adjusted) translation of Wendy DONIGER O’FLAHERTY (1983: 30–31):

‘[1] The Man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervaded the earth on all sides and extended beyond it as far as ten fingers. [2] It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food. ... [6] When the gods spread the sacrifice with the Man as the offering, spring was the clarified butter, summer the fuel, autumn the oblation. ... [11] When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet? [12] His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the Common man, and from his feet the Servant was born.’

⁷ The question what story is to be counted as myth, and which not, will not be addressed here. The Indian epics constitute a marginal case. Note here that the sixteenth-century commentator Maheśvaratīrtha states, with regard to Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* (ad 2.41.10 vulg.), that everything that happened in it was absolutely real; see POLLOCK (1993: 279).

⁸ Note that this is not the only creation myth that accounts for the origin of the classes; for other examples, see MUIR (1972).

⁹ OBERLIES (1998: 381–382): ‘In dem diese Opferung beschreibenden Sūkta ... wird nicht nur die Entstehung der Welt und der sie bevölkernden Wesen—im weitesten Sinne—erklärt, sondern auch die Ordnung der Gesellschaft.’

It is not obvious how exactly the composer and early listeners of this hymn believed this process to have taken place. It may not be all that difficult to imagine such a sacrifice, even though its size exceeds that of the world. However, some of the details pose serious challenges to our power of imagination. How, for example, does one use spring as clarified butter, summer as fuel, autumn as fuel in a sacrifice? And there are serious problems related to the division in which the primordial giant's mouth became the Brahmin, his arms the Warrior (*rājanya*), his thighs the Common man (*vaiśya*), and his feet the Servant (*śūdra*). These four classes of human beings—this seems to be the first mention of the four *varṇas* in Indian literature—are referred to in the singular. Do we have to conclude that just one Brahmin, one Rājanya, one Vaiśya and one Śūdra were created at that time? In that case one could wonder where they found partners so as to procreate. Should we perhaps understand the text differently, in the sense that all Brahmins were created out of the mouth of primordial Man, all Rājanyas from his arms, all Vaiśyas from his thighs, and all Śūdras from his feet?

It might be objected that myths should not be read like this. No cosmogonic myth, it could be maintained, was ever understood in such a literal fashion. It cannot be questioned or analysed in the way a modern scientific theory is subjected to questioning and analysis. Myths have to be interpreted and should not be taken at face value. When a Bororo individual says 'I am a parakeet' this must be understood to mean—according to some anthropologists—'As a man, I am to other men what a parakeet is to other birds.'¹⁰ With regard to the *Puruṣa-sūkta*, M. Sunder Raj points out that it 'is an allegory, a poetic vision, and is not to be taken in a literal sense.'¹¹

The hymn to Puruṣa is, in the words of Louis RENO (1965: 8), 'the major source of cosmogonic thought in ancient India'; elsewhere he says (1956: 12):

'Il n'y a guère de poème cosmologique de l'Atharvaveda où l'on ne retrouve quelque allusion voilée au mythe du Géant sacrifié et au schéma évolutif qui en résulte ... C'est encore le thème du Géant qui sous les traits de Prajâpati 'le seigneur des Créatures' ressurgit dans les Brāhmaṇa et en commande la plupart des avenues.'

Jan GONDA (1968: 101) calls it 'the foundation stone of Viṣṇuite philosophy'. Especially the part concerning the creation of the four main divisions of society, the four *varṇas*, has been taken over in numerous texts belonging both to the Vedic and to the classical period. We find it, for example, in the *Taittirīya-saṃhitā* (7.1.1.4–6), the *Mahā-bhārata* (3.187.13; 8.23.32; 12.73.4–5; 12.285.5–6), the *Rāmāyaṇa*

¹⁰ WEINER (1994: 573), who ascribes this recast to Lévi-Strauss.

¹¹ DANDEKAR (1993: 27).

(3.13.29–30), but also in the first chapter of the *Manu-smṛti*. The Lord, we there read, created, ‘so that the worlds and people would prosper and increase, from his mouth the Brahmin, from his arms the Kṣatriya, from his thighs the Vaiśya, and from his feet the Śūdra.’¹² Elsewhere the same text refers to this myth as common background knowledge, used as an alternative way of speaking about the four *varṇas*.¹³ The *Puruṣa-sūkta* remains important in later literature and practice.¹⁴

These and many other references to the myth of the *Puruṣa-sūkta* do not allow us to decide with certainty whether the authors concerned took this myth literally. They do however show that this myth remained ‘true’ in Pettazzoni’s sense in remaining relevant to a social situation that continued to prevail, or that should prevail according to those primarily concerned, the Brahmins. But did they think that the myth was true in the sense of corresponding to reality? The answer, it seems, was yes for at least some Brahmanical thinkers. There is indeed evidence that Indian thinkers, or at least some of them, did take the myth of the creation of the four *varṇas* out of the initial giant quite seriously, i.e. literally—as being literally true. Part of the story is retold in the *Padārtha-dharma-saṅgraha*, also known as *Praśastapāda-bhāṣya*, which is the classical surviving treatise of the Vaiśeṣika philosophy, written by Praśasta, alias Praśastapāda. The passage concerned reads:¹⁵

¹² MDhŚ 1.31:

*lokānām tu vivṛddhy-arthaṁ mukha-bāhūru-pādataḥ /
brāhmaṇaṁ kṣatriyaṁ vaiśyaṁ śūdraṁ ca niravartayat //*

The translation follows, with modifications, DONIGER–SMITH (1991). The *Bhaviṣya-purāṇa* has the same verse, see LÁSLÓ (1971: 117).

¹³ MDhŚ 10.45:

*mukha-bāhūru-pajjānām yā loke jātayo bahiḥ /
mleccha-vācaś cārya-vācaḥ sarve te dasyavaḥ smṛtvāḥ //*

Tr. DONIGER–SMITH (1991: 241):

‘All of those castes who are excluded from the world of those who were born from the mouth, arms, thighs, and feet (of the primordial Man) are traditionally regarded as aliens, whether they speak barbarian languages or Aryan languages.’

See also MDhŚ 1.87, 92–94; 8.270; 10.45.

¹⁴ See SHENDE (1965), GONDA (1977: 98–105 (390–397)).

¹⁵ PBh, p. 11: *evaṁ samutpanneṣu caturṣu mahā-bhūteṣu mahēśvarasyābhidhāna-mātrāt taijasebhyo ’nubhyaḥ pāṛthiva-paramāṇu-sahitebhyo* (variants: *pāṛthivādi-paramāṇu-sahitebhyo*, *pāṛthivāṇu-sahitebhyo*) *mahad aṅgam ārabhyate* (some editions read: *utpadyate*). *tasmiṁś caturvadana-kamalaṁ sarva-loka-pitāmahaṁ* (variant: *caturvadana-kamala-sakala-loka-pitāmahaṁ*) *brahmāṇaṁ sakala-bhuvana-sahitam utpādya prajāsarṅge viniyukte* (variant: *niyukte*). *sa ca mahēśvareṇa viniyukto* (variant: *niyukto*) *brahmā ’tiśaya-jñāna-vairāgyāśvarya-sampannaḥ prāṇinām* (variant: *sarva-prāṇinām*) *karma-vipākam viditvā karmānurūpa-jñāna-bhogāyuṣaḥ sutān prajāpatīn mānasān manu-deva-rṣi-pitr-gaṇān* (variant: *manūn deva-°*) ***mukha-bāhūru-***

‘When in this way the four composite elements have come into existence, a great egg is formed, caused solely by God’s meditation/volition, out of atoms of fire with an admixture of atoms of earth (i.e. gold). In it [God] creates Brahmā, with four faces like so many lotuses, the grandfather of all worlds, and all worlds; he then enjoins him with the duty of creating living things. That Brahmā, thus enjoined by God, and endowed with abundant knowledge, complete absence of passion and absolute power, knows the effects of the deeds of living beings; he creates the Prajāpatis, his mind-created sons, with knowledge, experience and span of life in accordance with their [past] deeds; [he also creates] the Manus, Devas, Ṛṣis and groups of Pitṛs, the **four varṇas out of his mouth, arms, thighs and feet [respectively]**, and the other living beings, high and low; he then connects them with *dharma*, knowledge, absence of passion and power in accordance with their residue of past deeds.’

In order to correctly evaluate this passage, it is important to realise that the *Padārtha-dharma-saṅgraha* is no book of stories and myths, and nor is it meant to be read as literature. Quite on the contrary, it is a very serious treatise about the constitution of reality, of which it presents a coherent and systematic explanation. It is hard to believe that any passage of this serious work, including the one just cited, was not meant to convey reality, not metaphorically, but in a most literal manner. It is true that the contents of this passage may not have been part of the Vaiśeṣika philosophy during the time preceding Praśasta. There are reasons to believe that the very notion of a creator God may have been introduced into the system by this author, and that he borrowed this notion from the religious current to which he may have belonged, that of the Pāśupatas. This does not, however, mean that this notion is to be taken less seriously than the remainder of the *Padārtha-dharma-saṅgraha*.¹⁶

The explicit mention of the creation of the four varṇas out of the mouth, arms, thighs and feet respectively of the creator in a work as serious and reality-oriented as Praśasta’s *Padārtha-dharma-saṅgraha* strongly suggests that at least one participant in the tradition of critical reflection accepted this myth as literally true. It seems likely that there were other Brahmanical intellectuals of that period who did the same.

As is well known, the Buddhists did not accept the Brahmanical division of human society into four classes, nor did they accept the myth that lent credence to it. A

pādātāś caturo varṇān anyāni cōccāvācāni bhūtāni (variants: *bhūtāni ca; anyāni cōccāvācāni ca sṛṣṭvā*) *sṛṣṭvā, āśayānurūpāiḥ dharma-jñāna-vairāgyāśvāryaiḥ saṁyojayatīti*.

¹⁶ On the philosophical reasons underlying the introduction of the notion of a creator God into Vaiśeṣika, see BRONKHORST (2000: § 7, esp. p. 37 f.); further BRONKHORST (1996).

number of Buddhist authors criticise the very same myth which Praśasta (and probably many others with him) explicitly accepted, the myth that the four *varṇas* were originally created out of the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of the original being. They do so by showing that it is incoherent, or that it has implications which even the Brahmins would not be willing to accept.¹⁷

We find such criticism already in the *Aggañña-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*. The Brahmin Vāseṭṭha here reports the position of his fellow-Brahmins, according to whom ‘only the Brahmins are the real sons of Brahmā, born from his mouth, born from Brahmā, produced by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’¹⁸ The Buddha responds that they maintain this position, ‘forgetting what is old’ (*porāṇam assarantā*). This expression has been variously interpreted by the commentators: some speak of an old tradition,¹⁹ others of ancient history.²⁰ The context however favours a third interpretation: these Brahmins forget the past, that is to say, the relatively recent past of their own birth. This is shown by what follows.²¹ According to the Buddha it is undeniable that the wives of Brahmins (*brāhmaṇānaṃ brāhmaṇiyo*) have their periods, become pregnant, give birth and feed; in spite of being thus born from a human womb, the Brahmins maintain that they are born from Brahmā.²² In doing so, these Brahmins insult (*abbhācikkhanti*) Brahmā.²³ This criticism is obviously based on the most literal interpretation of the Brahmanical myth. The claim of the Brahmins of being born from Brahmā is in conflict with their birth from a human mother. In other words, the Brahmins are credited with the belief of having been born, at the beginning of their present life, from the mouth of Brahmā.

A somewhat more recent text, the *Vajra-sūci*, proceeds in a similar manner. One finds here the following argument:

‘There is another defect [in your proposition]. If the Brahmin is born from the mouth, where is the Brahmin woman born from? Certainly

¹⁷ For the following paragraphs, see ELTSCHINGER (2000), RENOU (1960: 43).

¹⁸ DN III, p. 81: *brāhmaṇā va brahmuno puttā orasā mukhato jātā brahma-jā brahma-nimmitā brahma-dāyādā*. Cp. MEISIG (1988: 80 f.) for the Chinese parallels.

¹⁹ WALSHE (1987: 408): ‘ancient tradition’; RHYS DAVIDS (1921: 78): ‘ancient lore’.

²⁰ Sv III, p. 862: *porāṇan ti porāṇakam aggaññaṃ lok’uppattiṃ cariya-vaṃsam*; FRANKE (1913: 275) ‘es ist nicht uralte Erinnerung an eine wirkliche Tatsache.’

²¹ The following remarks also occur in the *Assalāyana-sutta* (MN II, p. 148).

²² DN III, pp. 81–82: *dissanti kho pana vāseṭṭha brāhmaṇānaṃ brāhmaṇiyo utuniyo pi gabbhiniyo pi vijāyamānā pi pāyamānā pi, te ca brāhmaṇa yonijā va samānā evam āhaṃsu: brāhmaṇā va ... brahmuno puttā orasā mukhato jātā brahma-jā brahma-nimmitā brahma-dāyādā*. Cp. MEISIG (1988: 86 f.).

²³ This last remark does not occur in the *Assalāyana-sutta*.

from the mouth. Alas! Then she is your sister! So, you do not regard the convention of licit and illicit sexual intercourse! But that is extremely repugnant to the people of this world.’²⁴

The *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* states essentially the same:

‘If this world has been created by Brahmā himself, the Brahmin woman is the sister of the Brahmin, the Kṣatriya woman the sister of the Kṣatriya, the Vaiśya woman [the sister] of the Vaiśya, or the Śūdra woman [the sister] of the Śūdra; in case she has been created by Brahmā, [a woman of the same class], being a sister [of her husband], will not be a suitable wife.’²⁵

This is not the place to investigate how the Vaiśeṣikas answered, or might have answered, the criticism of the Buddhists. It must here be sufficient to note that the three classical commentaries on Praśasta’s *Padārtha-dharma-saṅgraha*—the *Vyomavatī*, the *Nyāya-kandalī*, and the *Kiraṇāvalī*—dedicate in this connection long discussions to the question as to the existence of a creator God, but do not say a word about how this particular myth is to be interpreted so as to avoid contradictions. The discussion stays on a highly abstract, ‘philosophical’, level, where inferences and logical analyses have their place. The details of the myth, on the other hand, do not receive attention.

Note that a number of Jaina texts, too, criticise the myth of the primordial giant, along with other Brahmanical myths. These texts are part of what may have been a micro-genre of Jaina literature that uses satire to make fun of these stories. Jean-Pierre Osier has recently studied four of these texts that have survived: two versions of the ‘Ballad of the rogues’ (*Dhūrtākhyāna*, *Dhuttakkhāṇa*)—one in the Cūrṇi of the *Niśītha-sūtra*, the other one by Haribhadra—and two ‘Examinations of Dharma’ (*Dharma-parīkṣā*), by Hariṣeṇa and Amitagati respectively.²⁶

²⁴ VSūc₁, p. 225 l. 6–8, VSūc₂, p. 9 [JJ]: *anyac ca dūṣaṇam bhavati. yadi mukhato jāto brāhmaṇo brāhmaṇyāḥ kuta utpattiḥ. mukhād evēti cet hanta tarhi bhavatām bhaginī-prasaṅgaḥ syāt. tathā gamyāgamyam na sambhāvyaṭe. tac ca loke ’tyanta-viruddham.* Tr. MUKHOPADHYAYA (1960: 20).

²⁵ Divy(V) no. 33, verses 76–77, p. 332:

*yadi tāvad ayaṃ loko brahmaṇā janitaḥ svayam /
brāhmaṇī brāhmaṇa-svasā kṣatriyā kṣatriya-svasā //
atha vaiśyasya vaiśyā vai śūdrā śūdrasya vā punaḥ /
na bhāryā bhaginī yuktā brahmaṇā janitā yadi //*

²⁶ OSIER (2005: 45, 80 f.) for the myth of the primordial giant; see also OSIER (2000) and OSIER–BALBIR (2004: 76).

What can we conclude from the above? One gets the impression that those in the Brahmanical tradition were inclined to accept the creation story considered (and other myths) literally, in spite of the difficulties this entailed. One might be tempted to conclude, with Ninian Smart and Karen Armstrong, that perhaps in those pre-modern days no one would dream of understanding a myth literally. This position is however undermined by the fact that the Buddhists (and the Jainas) had no difficulty whatsoever to interpret the myth so literally that they could make fun of it. They had no difficulty imagining all Brahmins being born, literally, from the mouth of the primordial giant, and they drew absurd consequences from this. But if the Buddhists could interpret this myth literally, so could the Brahmins, or at least those Brahmins who had trained themselves as philosophers and debaters. Some of these Brahmins may have silently discarded a literal interpretation of the myth, but some, among them apparently Praśasta, did not, and included the myth, literally understood, in their analytical vision of the world.

1.3. Mīmāṃsā

The Mīmāṃsakas are probably the most orthodox upholders of the Vedic tradition. They present their school of thought as a school of hermeneutics, i.e. textual interpretation. These Mīmāṃsakas were therefore directly involved in the question we are studying: do we have to take everything in the *Veda* literally?

These Vedic hermeneuts are aware of the difficulties that may arise, and they discuss it in their classical text, the commentary by Śabara on the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra*. Śabara points out that certain Vedic statements are hard to accept if interpreted literally. Śabara gives the following examples: ‘The trees sat down for a sacrificial session’; ‘The snakes sat down for a sacrificial session’; ‘The old bull sings mad [songs].’²⁷ These statements are in conflict with our experience. Śabara does not ask us to accept them. On the contrary, he proposes a form of Vedic interpretation that allows us not to accept any descriptive statement at its face value.

The justification for this radical position lies in the Mīmāṃsā conception of what the *Veda* really is. It is a corpus of texts, to be sure. But it is a corpus of texts that has no beginning in time, and therefore no author. The reasoning is simple. An author, any author, composes his text at a specific moment of time. A text that was always there can have no author, because it has no beginning. Such a text cannot refer to any historical event either, for such a reference can only be made after the event. Śabara pronounces himself on this issue in connection with the Vedic state-

²⁷ ŚBh 1.1.32: *vanas-patayaḥ sattram āsata; sarpāḥ sattram āsata; jarad-gavo gāyati mattakāni*. None of these three citations seems traceable in the *Veda* as we know it.

ment which says that the god Prajāpati extracted his omentum.²⁸ Śabara discusses this statement and observes: ‘If a historical event were to be referred to, the *Veda* would be open to the charge of having a beginning.’²⁹ Similarly, the Vedic statement ‘We grasped your right hand, o Indra’³⁰, if taken literally, would be open to the same charge.³¹ Elsewhere (1.1.31) Śabara is obliged to give different interpretations to expressions such as *prāvāhaṇi* and *auddālaki*, which normally signify ‘son of Pravāhaṇa’ and ‘son of Uddālaka’;³² of course, the *Veda* cannot refer to historical personalities or their sons.

This procedure is radical, as I pointed out already. It does not permit a literal interpretation of large portions of the Vedic texts. The creation myth which we discussed above falls by the wayside, as do all other stories, whether mythical or historical. In the end Śabara and his co-Mīmāṃsakas decide that only injunctions are to be taken literally. Mīmāṃsakas like Śabara did not believe any of the Vedic myths. The criticisms uttered by the Buddhists against a Vedic creation myth was no threat to them.

One may wonder whether there were really many Brahmins in ancient India who spent their lives performing complex and demanding rituals that were not accompanied by myths, in whatever way understood. We will return to this question later on. Theoretically the classical Mīmāṃsā position is coherent: Yes, Vedic rituals have to be performed, but no, the myths and other stories that are told in those same *Vedas* should not be taken literally. One wonders how many people were satisfied with ritual obligations that would, so to say, be hanging in the air.

It is yet noteworthy that the custom to give metaphorical interpretations to myths continued undeterred in India, particularly so in connection with the stories told in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahā-bhārata*. Christopher MINKOWSKI (2005) draws attention to the seventeenth century commentator Nīlakaṇṭha, who interprets the whole *Mahā-bhārata* in a non-dualist manner. The story of Manu and the Flood, for example, is about the ontological possibility of *jīvan-mukti*, i.e. the possibility of continuing embodied life after spiritual enlightenment. Manu, seen this way, is the mistaken egoism (*ahamkāra*); the fish that saves him is the *jīva*; the boat that Manu builds is his last human embodiment etc. And Nīlakaṇṭha was not alone in providing such allegorical interpretations.

²⁸ TaitS 2.1.1.4: *sa ātmano vapām udakkhidat*.

²⁹ ŚBh 1.2.10: *vṛttāntānvākhyāne ’pi vidhīyamāne ādimattā-doṣo vedasya prasajyeta*.

³⁰ RV 10.47.1 etc.: *jaḡrbhmā te dakṣiṇam indra hastam*.

³¹ ŚBh 9.1.9: *athāivam ucyate, tasyāūtat vacanam yo gṛhītavāms tasya hastam iti. ucyate. nāūtat adhyavaseyam. ādimattā-doṣo vedasya prasajyate*.

³² POLLOCK (1989: 608) refers to this passage in an article that draws attention to the non-historical nature of much of Sanskrit literature, possibly in imitation of the *Veda*.

1.4. Purāṇic versus Siddhāntic astronomy

At the beginning of this lecture I talked about the Biblical creation myth that, if taken literally, is in conflict with the findings of science. The Vedic creation myth which we subsequently considered was not accused of being in conflict with science, and yet it was criticised for being in conflict with common sense, or with propriety. We do not normally associate difficulties that arise within Indian religions with a presumed conflict with science, but this is too simplistic a position, as the following example will show.

The Vedic corpus was not the only corpus which was invested with canonical status within the Brahmanical tradition. A subsequent stage of this tradition found expression in the *Purāṇas*, a large number of texts of great length, and contrary to the *Veda* the texts in this corpus were read by numerous Hindus.³³ These *Purāṇas* present a view of the universe that has been summarised as follows by Christopher MINKOWSKI (2001: 81):

‘The *Purāṇas* are consistent in presenting a model of the cosmos in which the earth is a flat horizontal disk in a vertical, egg-shaped universe, in which there are seven heavens above and seven underworlds below. Mount Meru stands at the centre of this disk, and above Meru are suspended a series of wheels, with the Sun, Moon, nakṣatras, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the Saptarṣi stars, in that order, riding on them. Above the Saptarṣi is the pole star. The rising and setting of the Sun, Moon, nakṣatras and planets is explained by the enormous height of Mt. Meru, behind which in their circular rotations above us the celestial bodies are blocked from our sight.

Viewed from above, the disk of the Earth is made up of seven concentric continents with seven intervening oceans. The central continent with Meru at its centre is called the Jambūdvīpa, which is surrounded by the salt ocean. The southernmost portion of Jambūdvīpa is the location for the land of Bhārata. As far as distances are concerned, Mt. Meru is 84,000 yojanas high, Jambūdvīpa is 100,000 yojanas in di-

³³ These texts contain contradictions, and some of them are aware of it. McComas Taylor (Indology discussion forum, 2 March 2007) draws attention to some relevant passages in the *Śivapurāṇa*: before this *Purāṇa* arises in the world, ‘all the śāstras will contradict one another’ (1.2.7), and ‘all [other] *Purāṇas* will clamour on the surface of the earth’ (1.2.10); there will be disputes among *tīrthas*, *mantras*, places of pilgrimage, *pīṭhas* (seat, throne, sacred place), donations, *devas* and doctrines (*siddhānta*) (1.2.11–17).

ameter, the Bhāratavarṣa is 9,000 yojanas in extent, while the disk of the earth as a whole, including all seven continents and seven oceans, and what lies outside them, is 50 crores or 500 million yojanas in diameter.

... this account of the cosmos is found in a number of Purāṇas and can be traced to a common source, which Pingree has argued was probably completed in the latter half of the 2nd century C.E. (Kirfel, 1954: 7–49; Pingree, 1990: 275).’

Besides this mythological model of the universe, there existed in India also a tradition of astronomy which had undergone strong Hellenistic influence. It found expression in a number of texts called *Siddhāntas*. MINKOWSKI (2001: 81) summarises the Siddhāntic view of the universe in the following words:

‘In the Siddhāntic model of the cosmos the earth is a fixed, non-rotating sphere at the centre of a series of interesting spheres on which the sun, moon, and the various planets and stars revolve around the earth. In this model the planets are ranged above the earth in this order: Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and all the Stars. In this model the diameter of the earth is calculated to be about 1600 yojanas, with a circumference of about 5000 yojanas. This is the model articulated already in the *Paitāmahasiddhānta* of the fifth century, and it is the model taken up in all other astronomical Siddhāntas in India, regardless of their other differences (Pingree, 1990: 276–78).’

It will be clear that these two models of the universe are very different from each other, and that one might say that here a religious point of view was in conflict with a scientific one. The inconsistencies between the Purāṇic and Siddhāntic cosmologies do indeed strike the eye: in the former the earth is flat, while in the latter it is a globe; in the first it has a huge size, in the second it has a manageably small size; etc.³⁴

What happened when the two met? MINKOWSKI (2001: 82) gives the following brief résumé:

‘As far as we know, [the] mutual inconsistency [between the Purāṇic and Siddhāntic cosmologies] passed largely undiscussed until the mid-ninth century, when the astronomer Lalla turned to a critique of the Purāṇic model in his Siddhānta, the *Śiṣyadhīvrddhidatantra*. Lalla did attempt to accommodate some elements of the Purāṇic model to the

³⁴ MINKOWSKI (2001: 82).

globular earth of the Siddhāntas: Mt. Meru is made the axis inside the earth on which the earth revolves; all the other oceans and continents of the Purāṇic model are assumed to be south of the equator; and the power that drives the interesting spheres is still the Pravaha wind, which is the force that makes the planets and stars revolve around Meru in the Purāṇic model.

Nevertheless Lalla explicitly rejected the improbable Purāṇic assertions that eclipses are caused by Rāhu; that night is caused by Meru blocking the Sun; that the Moon wanes because the gods are drinking the Soma in the moon; that the Moon is higher in the heavens than the Sun is; and that the earth is flat and rests on a support. These criticisms are repeated in later Siddhāntas, especially in Bhāskara II's very influential work, the *Siddhāntasīromani*, of the 12th century ...'

So far there is a rather clear parallel with the Christian scientist who reinterprets certain Biblical passages and rejects others so as to leave space for his scientific convictions. What happened next in India invites a comparison with the creationism of today. From the sixteenth century onward astronomers and some others started writing treatises to show that there is no contradiction between the Purāṇic and the Siddhāntic models, and that the *Purāṇas* are right. I cite once again MINKOWSKI (2001: 83–84):³⁵

'Since the Purāṇas must be true, therefore, it is in their proper interpretation, and in the proper construal of the Siddhāntas, that contradictions can be removed. Typically it is asserted that the Siddhāntas describe only some limited part of the real, Purāṇic world, or else that they describe some alternative, and less actual world, or that the Siddhāntic model is simply a convenient fiction, not literally believed even by the astronomers, but useful for making calendars and calculating the relative latitudes and longitudes of places in our local range of knowledge.'

Here, then, there can be no doubt that the authors concerned believed their myths, literally and not symbolically. It is remarkable that the two different models seem to have coexisted peacefully for a number of centuries. Following this, some professional astronomers made critical remarks with regard to Purāṇic cosmology. Only during the last few centuries did the upholders of tradition strike back with force. Do we have to conclude from this that people had started to attach more value to their traditions, that they had perhaps started to read their traditional texts ever more literally?

³⁵ See further MINKOWSKI (2000), (2002a), (2002b), (2004).

The disputes between the upholders of the Purāṇic and the Siddhāntic views of the universe were fierce, and became even more so when Lancelot Wilkinson, the British Political Agent to the court of Bhopal from 1829 to 1841, acted on the belief that the best way to introduce the modern Copernican system of astronomy to learned Indians was through the medium of Sanskrit, and in particular through the instrumentality of the Siddhāntic model of the cosmos. This led to a vivid exchange of pamphlets and treatises, surveyed by MINKOWSKI in a recent publication (2001). The details do not interest us at present. It is however clear that the literal interpretation of ancient religious teachings were at the heart of this debate.

2. Did the Indians believe their philosophies?

It might be argued that the myths we have considered so far—the myth of creation out of a primordial giant, the myth of singing bulls, the mythical concept of the universe—are not part of the core beliefs of Brahmanism, about which unshakeable faith should be expected. To make a comparison with Christianity once again, those who reject, or reinterpret, the creation myth of Genesis may yet remain good and convinced Christians. Their belief, these Christians may think, centres on more vital issues than some stone age myths. The same might be thought of Indian philosophers, who made great efforts to base their philosophical claims on sometimes elaborate arguments, but did not use their reasoning skills (at least not in the surviving philosophical literature) to prove the correctness of the myths of their religions.³⁶ What is more, these philosophers, while criticising each others' views, never attacked each others' myths. Yet these myths would have been easy targets, if they had been seriously believed in. This may be taken as an indication that, say, Buddhist philosophers did not think that their Brahmanical opponents took the Brahmanical myths seriously, and vice-versa.

Which are the vital issues of Brahmanism? Or rather: which knowledge did the Brahmins consider vital? It is possible to answer this question, for certain types of knowledge are for many Brahmins an essential precondition for reaching the highest religious goal: liberation from the cycle of rebirths. Philosophers have made efforts to formulate this liberating knowledge as clearly as possible. There are different schools of Brahmanical philosophy, to be sure. This is due to the fact that there were

³⁶ LO TURCO (2005) argues that stories, too, can be arguments, and cites a number of modern philosophers to support this claim. Unfortunately the Indian thinkers we are interested in had not read these philosophers. As a result they persisted in their (positivist?) ways and tried to prove their positions with arguments rather than stories. This is even true where this position is a subjective illusionism which denies the existence of the world; see BRONKHORST (1999).

differences of opinion as to what exactly constitutes this liberating knowledge. The Sāṃkhya philosophers, for example, claimed that knowledge of Sāṃkhya was a precondition for reaching the highest goal. The Vaiśeṣika philosophers had a rather different vision of the world, knowledge of which was essential *for them*. And so there were other schools of thought, with equally high claims.

Knowledge of the right philosophy, seen in this way, is extremely important in the Brahmanical tradition (similar applies to Buddhism). Reaching such knowledge was not just a matter of life and death, but far more important: a matter of being liberated from, or hopelessly enmeshed in, the endless cycle of rebirths. Here the certainty of the beliefs concerned could not be taken lightly. There would be no possibility to treat this kind of knowledge in the same way as mythological ‘knowledge’. This, at least, is what one would expect.

However, this expectation is confronted with some difficulties.³⁷ There is a long list of commentators who wrote on philosophies which were clearly not their own. The most famous example is Vācaspatimiśra I (tenth century), who wrote important works in the fields of Advaita Vedānta, Nyāya, Sāṃkhya, Mīmāṃsā and Yoga. Scholars may be tempted to think that Vācaspati changed his convictions several times over, i.e. experienced several conversions, but there is no indication in his works to suggest this (as far as I am aware). One rather has the impression that Vācaspati, by writing all those works, established himself as an authority in all those fields; what he privately believed was not part of this exercise.

Vācaspati does not stand alone.³⁸ Several Jainas wrote commentaries on Buddhist logical texts: Mallavādin and Durvekamiśra on Dharmottara’s *Nyāya-bindu-ṭīkā*, Haribhadra on Śāṅkarasvāmin’s *Nyāya-praveśa*. Another Jaina, Abhayatilaka, wrote a commentary on Nyāya, the *Nyāyālaṅkāra*. Various authors of Mīmāṃsā works quietly dissent from a number of key premises of the tradition, most notably its strict atheism. MacCrea mentions in particular Murāri Miśra, author of the *Aṅgatva-nirukti*, a Mīmāṃsā work, and Lakṣmaṇa, author of the *Tantra-vilāsa*, both in the eighteenth century CE. But already Kumārila-bhaṭṭa (seventh century CE) begins his *Śloka-vārttika* with a dedicatory stanza to Śiva,³⁹ a feature which his

³⁷ Eli Franco and Lawrence MacCrea alerted me to the phenomenon described in what follows. Franco also shared with me his impression that mostly Jainas and Vedantins wrote on other systems. See further below.

³⁸ It is quite unusual in the history of Indian thought to find members of one school writing commentaries on a text of another school with an eye to refuting its arguments, yet this happened in the case of Śrīharṣa’s *Khaṇḍana-khaṇḍa-khāḍya*, which was in this way attacked by Naiyāyikas and Navya-Naiyāyikas. See POTTER (1977: 15–16).

³⁹ MŚV, Pratijñādhikaraṇa, 1:

viśuddha-jñāna-dehāya tri-vedī-divya-caḥṣuṣe /

commentator Pārthasārathi Miśra makes an attempt to explain away.⁴⁰ Inscriptional evidence from the end of the first millennium CE, too, shows that there were Brahmins who claimed expertise in various incompatible schools of philosophy. The Malhar stone inscription of Jājalladeva, for example, speaks of a Brahmin who ‘had no rival in the doctrine of Kāśyapa and in the Sāṃkhya. He completely mastered the two Mīmāṃsās. He had for his eyes the teaching of Akṣapāda.’⁴¹

A quick glance at the bibliography of Karl Potter’s *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* (EIPh) creates the impression that the more we advance in time, the more scholars felt free to write commentaries on altogether different schools of philosophy; it contains numerous names of authors who appear to have commented on works belonging to different schools. A famous example is Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa, also known as Nāgoji Bhaṭṭa (around 1700), who made his reputation as a grammarian, but also wrote commentaries in the fields of Nyāya, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Advaita Vedānta. I myself have had the privilege of learning from a traditional teacher, Śrīnivāsa Śāstrī, who was a recognised expert in the field of Navya-nyāya, but personally committed to Advaita Vedānta. This double (or triple, or quadruple) allegiance of a large number of traditional scholars has never been made the object of a study, as far as I am aware. It seems however clear that for many of them philosophy did not exhaust their religious commitment. It is hard to obtain precise information, but there is reason to think that many Nyāya philosophers had links with Śaivism, the worship of the god Śiva. A number of thinkers of the ‘old’ Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika schools are known to have been Śaivas, or even more specifically Pāśupatas; this is true of Praśastapāda (probably), Uddyotakara, Bhāsarvajña, Vādi Vāgīśvara.⁴² Other philosophers may have had other religious convictions which however have left no traces in their works.

śreyaḥ-prāpti-nimittāya namaḥ somārtha-dhāriṇe //

There are further indications suggesting that Kumārila may have been concerned to integrate ‘Hinduistic’ elements, such as his acceptance of the idea of liberation (see MESQUITA (1994); there is no reason to think that earlier Mīmāṃsakas had accepted this idea, cp. BRONKHORST (2000: 100)). See further below.

⁴⁰ Cp. BIARDEAU (1964: 145): ‘Est-ce ... que la Mīmāṃsā épuise la croyance religieuse des brahmanes qui l’enseignent ou qu’elle l’ait jamais épuisée? Pour l’époque contemporaine, il est certain que non: les rares Mīmāṃsaka d’aujourd’hui se disent généralement *smārta* et se rattachent donc aux disciples de Śankara.’

⁴¹ GUPTA (1983: 30), with a reference to *Epigraphia Indica* I, p. 44.

⁴² On Praśastapāda, see BRONKHORST (1996); on Uddyotakara, see the final colophon of the *Nyāya-vārttika*; INGALLS (1962: 284); on Bhāsarvajña, see SARMA (1934); on Vādi Vāgīśvara, see RAGHAVAN (1942). See also GERSCHHEIMER (2007: 240): ‘l’on regroupe le Nyāya et le Vaiśeṣika sous une même étiquette—parfois *tarka*, ou *śaiva*.’

Most of the examples here talked about are relatively recent. But the knowledge that there were many recent authors who wrote about more than one system of thought raises questions about early authors who did the same. The most famous example is no doubt Vasubandhu, who is supposed to have converted to the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, having been a Sautrāntika before. Robert KRITZER (2005) has recently collected numerous passages that show that Vasubandhu's presumably early *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* was already strongly influenced by the *Yogācāra-bhūmi*, one of the most prominent early texts associated with the Yogācāra school. This suggests that the legend about Vasubandhu, too, may be in need of renewed reflection.

What, then, did Indian philosophers believe? It appears that, also in the Indian situation, it may not be possible to generalise. Some, it would seem, were willing to believe at least a number of their traditional myths quite literally, others would rather avoid being associated with these improbable tales. Some took the philosophies they wrote about quite literally, others took their distance with regard to at least some of them.

It is tempting, and I think illuminating, to recall in this connection what Wilhelm Halbfass had to say about the Sanskrit doxographies, texts which offer a survey of 'all' or 'six' systems or doctrines. The most well-known of these texts is the *Sarva-darśana-saṅgraha* of Mādhava-Vidyāraṇya (fourteenth century CE), the oldest known is the *Ṣaḍ-darśana-samuccaya* of Haribhadra (eighth century), but there are many others. HALBFASS (1988: 351 ff.) draws attention to the fact that the Indian doxographic literature is largely the work of two religio-philosophical groups—the Jainas and the Advaita Vedāntins. This may not be coincidence. The Jainas had developed a way of presenting non-Jaina points of view in such a way that they appear as partial truths within a context of comprehensive perspectivism. Advaita Vedānta viewed other doctrines as stages on the way to its absolute truth, which was tantamount to their subordination to Advaita Vedānta. To quote HALBFASS (p. 356):

'The two traditions (i.e. Jainism and Advaita Vedānta) claim to include and fulfil other doctrines—as a perspectivistic or a hierarchically subsuming inclusivism. They claim that in their ultimate and perhaps hidden meaning these doctrines converge in what is clearly and explicitly taught in Advaita Vedānta (or in Jainism according to the Jainas). This is expressly stated in the introductory verse of the *Sarvasiddhānta-saṅgraha* of Ps.-Śaṅkara: that which, in a variety of forms, all philosophical doctrines express, is the *one* Brahman which is taught by the Upaniṣadic Vedānta.'

But also Bhavya, a Buddhist author of the Madhyamaka school, has an inclusivist attitude with regard to the other schools of thought he describes. As he put it:⁴³

‘The Blessed One has taught the very existence (*astitva*) of the Self (*ātman*) in order to divert (i.e. to remonstrate) those who grasp non-existence and advocate non-existence, [and] those whose minds are impaired by the view (*dr̥ṣṭi*) which negates (*apavāda*) causality (*hetu-phala*). He attracts those and in order to stop attachment to the grasping of a Self (*ātmagraha*) among the adherents of a Self (*ātmavādin*), he teaches: “The Self does not exist” (*ātmā nāsti*). Conventionally (*saṃvṛtitaḥ*), he teaches the abandonment of the Self, and to those who are endowed with receptivity (*kṣānti*) for the vast and profound doctrine (*dharma*), he teaches that in ultimate reality (*paramārthataḥ*) there is neither Self (*ātman*) nor non-Self (*anātman*). Thus the very teachings in the many preachings (*pravacana*) of the Blessed One are taught in accordance with relative (*saṃvṛti*) and absolute (*paramārtha*) [truth (*satya*)], so there is no contradiction (*virodha*).’

It can easily be seen that several religio-philosophical groups allowed, even encouraged, their followers to study other systems of thought in detail. It would be worth a separate study to see whether and to what extent the history of Indian philosophy manifests a development from confrontation to subordination. Whatever the outcome of such a study, it seems clear that the answer to our riddle may have to be looked for in the peculiar nature of Jainism, Advaita Vedānta, Madhyamaka Buddhism, and perhaps other schools, which took a wider view of reality, in which there was also place for alternative philosophical positions.

⁴³ *Tarka-jvālā* on *Madhamaka-hṛdaya-kārikā* 8.88, as translated by QVARNSTRÖM (1989: 106–107); cited in KIBLINGER (2005: 51).

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