

MONISM IN THE VEDAS

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MONOTHEISM is the belief that there is but one God. It is different from Polytheism and Henotheism. Polytheism is the belief in many Gods. Henotheism is the faith in a single God; but in this faith the existence of other Gods is not denied. Monotheism is not necessarily different from Monism. Monism is the sense of one in many. It means any system of thought that sees in the universe the manifestation or working of a single principle. This principle being the source of the other reals is the Real of reals (*Satyasya Satyam*). It is the highest Reality (*Sarvottama*) and in this sense It is the sole Reality (*Svatantra*). The things other than This have only a dependent reality (*paratantra*) though they must not be considered to be unreal or illusory. With regard to the relation between Monotheism and Monism the following points may be noted. It is possible to consider the Monotheistic God as creating the world from outside, in which case Monotheism and Monism are not one. But it is also possible to consider the Monotheistic God to be the unity or the principle of the world. This is truly a philosophic conception and in this case Monotheism and Monism are one. "The doctrine that 'God is one' and the doctrine that 'God is the principle upon which all reality depends' may be but two ways of expressing the same centrally important fact." (*Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 8, p. 817.)

In the following pages I shall try to indicate briefly the monotheistic or monistic ideas found in the Hymns of the *R̥gveda*, examining at the same time the theories put forward by some modern scholars.

The teaching of the Hymns of the *R̥gveda* forms the basis of the whole of the later development of Indian thought, of which it contains a synoptic view. An appreciation of this fact may help us in determining the character of this teaching.

1

The Hymns of the R̥gveda

The first difficulty that confronts one who tries to get at something definite in the Hymns of the *R̥gveda* is the question of interpretation of the passages. Max Müller observes that the passages of the Hymns are remarkable for their general intelligibility to the modern student. Apart

from linguistic difficulties, which are by no means small, there are many textual difficulties. There is no philosophical arrangement of the conceptions. The terms used are misleading and the same term is often used in several senses. Different doctrines about the world-view seem to be heaped up in a confused manner. Many passages are "puerile in the extreme. They are tedious, low, and commonplace." The Gods are often invoked for nothing better than to protect their worshippers, to grant them food, flocks, families, etc.

In this state of affairs there are only two courses open to us. Either we must reject the whole Veda as unintelligible or we must search for gems hidden in what appears to be rubbish. The adoption of the first alternative is not right so long as we believe in the possibility of the growth of religious and philosophical ideas. The Hymns of the *Rgveda* are the earliest records of the Aryan civilization, and, whatever their views be, they contain almost the earliest imaginations, faiths and ideas—moral, religious and philosophical—of our forefathers. It is on the basis of these that the whole edifice of later Indian civilisation (at least in so far as its Aryan aspect is concerned) is constructed. If we do not have a clear notion of these basic ideas, we shall miss many important points in their later development. For this reason, if for no other, a careful study of the Hymns is indispensable.

2

This brings us to the question of the interpretation of the Hymns. Any searching for the truth is impossible unless we interpret the passages correctly. It is misleading to start with preconceived ideas about what is taught in the Hymns or about the method of interpretation. It is also wrong to start with the idea that the Hymns, as the earliest records of human thought, can only represent the primitive thoughts of our forefathers, or to presuppose that the interpretation of the Hymns should be naturalistic or spiritualistic. The character of the interpretation must be decided only by the disposition of the Hymns and not by our predispositions. So in the order of our treatment, the question of interpretation must be decided first, and then, with its help the ultimate position for which the Hymns stand.

Of the difficulties connected with the interpretation of the Hymns, the linguistic ones can be overcome with the help of a fair understanding of Sanskrit Grammar in its application to the Vedas. But the apparent unintelligibility and confusion remain even after we are able to get at the literal meaning of the passages. A note on the ultimate significance of the passages may remove this difficulty. The different senses in which the same words are

used may be fixed in accordance with the propriety of the senses. The ideas contained in the passages may be systematised in the light of the final view for which the passages stand. Having thus a principle that is consistent with the final view taught by the passages, it is possible to arrive at the conclusion that after all the passages in view teach the highest spiritualistic truth as the single principle of the universe, which is the basis of the Upanishadic conception of *Brahman* and the Vedanta conception of *Svatantra*.

3

To a superficial reader the Hymns seem to teach many contradictory doctrines, which may be summarised in the following manner :—

(1) *Some passages seem to identify different entities.*—In most of the Hymns prayers are offered to the entities signified by the names Agni, Varuna and so on. But the entities that are signified by each term are many, each being different from the others in its very nature. For instance, let us take the name Agni. It is said (11·6·2): “With this log, O Agni, may we worship thee.” In this passage the term *Agni* stands clearly for fire, physical fire, but not the Fire-God for the Fire-God by himself has nothing to do with a log. But in the continuation of the same passage, verse 5 says, “He gives us rain from heaven.” Verse 7 addresses him as ‘O Sage’, and in verse 8 he is termed wise. These epithets are inapplicable to physical fire; they can be applied only to an intelligent being which may be called a deity. There are still other passages which present Agni as the ruler of the universe, the lord of men, the wise king, the father, the brother, the son and the friend of man. Nay, all the powers and names of other gods are distinctly attributed to Agni. Here Agni who is so highly exalted can be neither *agni* in the physical sense, nor *agni* the finite deity. Similar instances may be multiplied by referring almost to every name.

(2) *Some passages differentiate between natural aspects and deities, called by the same name.*—1·125·56 says, “He who gives alms goes to the highest place in heaven, he goes to the Gods.” Going to the Gods would be impossible if natural elements themselves were Gods. In another passage the Gods are said to dwell in heaven. To say that natural elements dwell in heaven does not signify anything. Another passage says that Gods are immortal. The natural elements are neither immortal nor mortal.

(3) *The names of some Gods are clear in their meaning and others are mythical.*—The names Agni, Surya, Usas, Maruts, etc., are clear and intelligible. And the names Varuna, Mitra, Indra, etc., are proper names and dim in their application.

(4) *All gods are said to be equally important.*—In some passages the equal importance of all gods is expressed. One Hymn says, “Among you, O Gods, there is none that is small, none that is young. You are all great indeed.”

(5) *Every god is presented as if he is supreme.*—In some passages the God that is invoked is not conceived of as limited by the powers of other gods. At the time of the invocation, he is said to be the real God, supreme and absolute. The other Gods disappear for a moment from the vision of the poet and He only who is to fulfil their desires stands in full light before the eyes of the worshippers.

(6) *The gods are said to be different from the God Absolute.*—There are other passages that distinguish the gods, Agni and so on, from the one God who is the Lord of all. A Hymn refers to the unknown God and represents Him as the God above all other gods.

(7) *Some passages make no distinction between the God Absolute and the other gods.*—Some other passages tell us that God is one, but He is called by several names. In 1·164·46 the poet says, “They call Him Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa and Agni. That which is one the wise call It in divers manners. They call It Agni, Yama, Matarisvan. 1·114·5 says, “Wise poets make the beautifully winged, though He is one, manifold by words.”

(8) *Some passages make the gods omnipresent.*—In some passages the poet asks himself whether the God he invokes really exists. For example the poet questions the existence of Indra. His question is immediately succeeded by an answer, as though it is given to the poet by Indra himself. *R.V.* 8·89·3 says, “If you desire strength, offer to Indra a Hymn of praise; a true Hymn, if Indra truly exists. For some one says ‘Indra does not exist’. Who has seen him? Whom shall we praise? Now Indra answers from within the poet, “Here I am, O Worshipper, behold me here. In might I surpass all things.”

A similar vision occurs to another poet. This poet invites a God to a sacrifice and implores His pardon for his offences and suddenly exclaims that he has seen the God and that he feels that his prayer is granted. In invocation to Varuṇa *R.V.* 1·25·8 says, “He knows months, wind, the wide, the bright, the mighty, those who reside on high, the wise; He perceives all wondrous things, what has been done and what will be done.” Verse 18 of the same passage says, “Did I see the God who is to be seen by all? Did I see the chariot above the earth?” Next the exclamation occurs; “He must have accepted my prayers.”

(9) *The God Absolute is said to be unknown.*—R.V. 10·121·9 says, “In the beginning there arose the golden child. He was the one born Lord of all that is. . . . He whose commands all the bright gods revere. . . . One king of the breathing and awakening of the world. He who alone is God above all gods.”

(10) *One passage declares that all is God.*—R.V. 1·16·5·10 says “Aditi is heaven. Aditi is the firmament. Aditi is mother, father and son. Aditi is all the Gods. Aditi is the five classes of men. Aditi is generation and birth.” The Gods are said to be the sons of Aditi. Aditi here is the Goddess Absolute. In this passage nature and God appear to be equivalent. The *Puruṣa Sūkta* makes this God, who is all this, much more than the world.

To a person who reads the Hymns without any preconceived ideas as to the interpretation of the passages or the doctrine taught in them, it looks as though there are several doctrines contradicting each other. In some prayers the natural elements and the deities presiding over them and God the Absolute are all heaped one upon the other in a confused manner, so as to imply that all are one. In others the presiding deities are distinguished from the elements. Some assert the equality of all gods. Some ignore the existence of other gods in the interest of a particular God. In others the Absolute God is distinguished from the deities and the elements. Others again tell us that this God is unknown. Still others question the existence of this God and assert that He is actually realised by the poet within himself. Some others tell us that the Supreme Lord alone is the true God, while there are other prayers which make Him the origin of all.

These views are apparently conflicting with one another. The natural elements are inert, with nothing spiritual in them. Invocation to them makes higher religion impossible. Each of the deities is said to be free from the influence of other deities. Invocation to them presents only polytheism. This makes the idea of a Supreme Lord impossible. But this polytheism is denied in the conception of a single God. The assertion that God is one and is the origin of all is incompatible with reference to elements and deities.

Do the Hymns really teach contradictory doctrines? An affirmative answer does not take us very far. We have already noted that the teaching of the Hymns forms the very basis of later Indian thought. The teaching of the earlier Hymns culminates in explicit Absolutism in the conception of *Puruṣa* in the *Puruṣa Sūkta*. *Puruṣa* under the name of *Prajāpati* becomes the central Reality in the *Brahmaṇs*. *Brahman* or *Ātman* occupies the

place of Puruṣa or Prajāpati in the Upanishads. Brahman is presented as Īśvara in the *Bhagavadgīta*. And in the Darśana period several conceptions, *Svabhāva*, *Karma*, *Sūnya* and so on, prepare the ground for the reassertion of Brahman or Īśvara as the sole Reality. The process of this reassertion takes place in the Vedānta Systems, by Advaita Vedānta in its conception of Nirguṇa, by Visistādvaita Vedānta in its conception of Īśvara and by Dvaita Vedānta in its conception of *Svatantra*. This would be impossible if the earlier Hymns are supposed to stand for no doctrine prominently.

Nor is the idea that the Hymns teach contradictory doctrines consistent with the general spirit of the Vedic teaching, which gives us the impression that the Veda as a whole stands for a unity of thought. It is on the basis of this thought that the several divisions of the Vedas have been from the beginning considered to be the parts of an identical literature. Consistently with this circumstance the whole Veda from the very beginning is accepted by all the orthodox Indian thinkers as presenting a unity of thought. And it is for this reason that the whole Veda is taken to be the final authority (*Pramāṇa*) in matters of spiritual importance. This is the significance of the well-known expressions, “*Dharma* is that which is sanctioned by the Veda” (*Vedapraṇihito dharmah*), “The source of the knowledge of the Ultimate Reality is finally the Veda” (*Brahman Śāstrayoni*) and so on. These traditions would have been impossible if any portion of the Veda had taught something that definitely denied the truth of the Absolute. In spite of apparent contradictions, therefore, the teachings of the Hymns are capable of being reduced to a unity.

4

We may now hold tentatively that the purpose of all doctrines is finally the same. But what is this final purpose that every doctrine can possibly have in view? As an answer to this question, we may, for the present, refer to the efforts of modern scholars in this direction, because to a mind which wants a ready answer, they seem to offer a pleasing solution.

Among modern scholars who have rendered very great service to the cause of oriental learning Duessen and Max Müller stand out most prominently. They both tried to systematise the teaching of the Hymns without rejecting it on account of its seeming contradictions. They were fully convinced that the teaching stands for a unity of purpose. To illustrate this they traced the development of the teaching in a historical manner.

The following are briefly their views about the teaching:—

In his *Outlines of Philosophy*, Duessen says:—“In India alone we can trace back religion to its first origin. Man in passing from brute state to

human consciousness found himself surrounded by and dependent on various natural powers, and ascribed to them not only will but also human personality. These personified natural powers were further considered as the origin, the maintainers and controllers of what man found in himself as the moral law." He further observes that in course of time the Vedic religion decayed. Man began to doubt the existence of Gods and the time was ripe enough for a philosophy to bring out the conception of the unity of the world, and there appeared such a philosophy.

We have to note that this position requires a careful interpretation. Duessen starts with the conviction that the beginning of Vedic religion is nothing more than the worship of natural aspects. In order to maintain this position he ignores the special features of the Gods and says that they are only personified natural aspects. But his whole supposition is falsified by the expressions that are intelligible only on the basis of the poets' conception of intelligent deities behind the natural phenomena. He further says that at the next stage the nature-religion began to decay; now the time was ripe for philosophy and there appeared the conception of the unity of the world. As we shall see very shortly there is nothing in the Hymns to support the idea of the decay of nature-religion. Even granting that it decayed, he does not explain how there happened the miraculous appearance of philosophy. And his idea of the gradual growth of religion in the Hymns is not in keeping with the disposition of the Hymns.

Max Müller makes a definite improvement on Duessen's position. With Duessen he agrees that the Hymns contain no single doctrine but represent the religious views of the Vedic Āryas in their historical development. Then he takes into account the probable order of the historical development of religious views. He admits that nature-worship is the first stage of religious life. He supposes that from nature-worship evolves polytheism or the belief in the existence of several deities presiding over various natural elements. Next, he thinks, there evolves the belief in a supreme lord of the universe or Monotheism. He then holds that it is possible to apply the unity realised in the conception of God-head to the world with its origin. Monotheism presents the unity of God-head. If this unity is considered to be the self of the universe, then it is the conception of the unity of all, which is Monism. So his view is that monism results from Monotheism.

For Max Müller the order of the development of religion consists in the gradual transition of religious beliefs from nature-worship through polytheism and monotheism to monism. He next applies this order to the

Hymns, but soon finds that he cannot do justice to his own order as applied to them. With reference to monotheism and monism his work was quite easy. He collected passages under each head and traced the earlier and later ones according to the development of ideas. But his work was not easy with reference to the ideas of nature-worship and polytheism as leading to monotheism. He examined the passages that were akin to these conceptions, but soon realised that the implications of these passages were entirely different.

As we have already noted, in the praise offered to the entity signified by a term, there are passages referring to a natural element, passages referring to the deity presiding over it, and passages referring to the God Absolute. Max Müller observed a difficulty here and tried to surmount it in a peculiar manner. He saw the elements of nature-worship in them. But unlike Duessen, he could not stop there, because the worship of natural elements is not consistent with the thought of God-head with which the passages abound. He seemed to vacillate between the two, unable to decide whether the Vedic religion started from the worship of natural elements, or from that of the deities presiding over them. We find expressions relevant to both these ideas in his exposition of Vedic thought in the *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. On page 36, he says, "The process on which originally all Gods depended for their very existence, the personification of, or the activity attributed to, the great natural phenomena, while more or less obscured in all other religions, takes place in the Rig-Veda as it were in the full light of day." In this passage he implies that the nature-gods are other than the natural phenomena. He abandons this position in describing the conviction of the Vedic people "that the regularly recurring events of nature require certain agents". He further adds, "It seemed impossible to them that sun and moon should rise every day, should grow strong and weak again every month or every year, unless there was an agent behind who controlled them." He, however, decides the case finally in favour of the idea of the Gods as different from natural phenomena and makes nature-worship equivalent to the worship of the Gods that preside over natural elements. But the worship of these Gods is not the same as nature-worship. To hold that this was the religion of the Hymns is inconsistent with the passages that have only elements in view. So he had to interpret them so as to make them consistent with his theory. "With this log, O Agni! may we worship thee." Unless he took Agni to mean the deity presiding over the natural element, how could he derive from this passage the religion he had in view? This kind of interpretation was inevitable for him. For in his developed thought he held the natural elements and deities to be different

from each other. This is very well illustrated by another passage (in his *Chips from a German Workshop*) where he says, "The Gods of the Veda are conceived as immortal; passages in which the birth of a certain God is mentioned have a physical meaning. They refer to the birth of the day, the rising of the sun, the return of the year." So to preserve the distinction between Gods and elements and to support the idea that the passages teach only the worship of nature-deities, he had to reduce them to a unity of thought in favour of the deities. At this point he has implicitly abandoned the view that the growth of religion from almost its very beginning could be traced in the Veda. He is, however, so deeply convinced of the gradual growth of religion, that to make up the loss felt with reference to the Hymns, he postulates the idea that the religion of the Veda began even before the arrival of the Āryas in India.

So far we have seen how according to Max Müller the first stage of the Vedic religion in the Hymns is characterised by the belief in the Gods that preside over natural phenomena. But he is not prepared to regard polytheism as the religion of the early Hymns, because by this time he has realised that to regard it so is inconsistent with the attribution of absolute qualities made with reference to each God. He says on page 17 of the same work: "Each God is to the mind of the supplicant as good as all Gods. He is felt at the time as real divinity, as supreme and absolute, without suspicion of those limitations which to our mind a plurality of Gods must entail on every single God. All the rest disappear for a moment from the vision of the poet and he only who is to fulfil their desires stands in full light before the eyes of the worshippers." It is easy to find passages in which almost every important deity is represented as supreme and absolute. This surely is not what is commonly understood by polytheism. Thus he is averse to calling the religion of the Veda by the name of polytheism. "Yet it would be equally wrong to call it Monotheism." So he places the Vedic religion somewhere between polytheism and monotheism and says, "If we must have a name for it, I should call it Kathenotheism," *i.e.*, Henotheism.

At this point, it is necessary to interpret him carefully. The first thing we have to note is this. He has not followed a single principle in his interpretation of the passages in question. Consciously or unconsciously he has adopted one principle in interpreting the first half of his work and another with reference to the second half. The following considerations will make the point clear.

On the strength of expressions, Max Müller has distinguished between those passages that refer only to the physical aspects of nature and those

that deal with the deities presiding over them ; and as a result he has held that the deities are different from the natural aspects. Why did he do this ? Why did he not interpret the passages referring to deities in a physical sense and conclude that the Vedic Āryas were worshippers of nature ? He could not do it because he felt clearly that different expressions stand for different entities and observed the forces of certain expressions that could not be applied to the natural elements and that could be intelligible only with reference to the intelligent beings that control them, those whom we call Nature-Gods. The functioning of the natural elements is the work of these Gods, even as the functioning of the human body is the work of the indwelling intelligent principle, whatever be the name we give to it. If these ideas had not been felt by our author, he could not have had the satisfaction of having interpreted the passages referring indiscriminately to both elements and deities.

But his idea of Kathenotheism is highly inconsistent with the spirit of these considerations. He adopts this view to reconcile the God of limited divinity with the God Absolute. In the description of the entity signified by the same term, some passages refer to the God of limited divinity and others to the God Absolute. If he had followed the principle he adopted in his consideration of natural elements and their Gods, he would have concluded that the two types of passages refer to two different entities: (1) the God limited, (2) the God Absolute. He did not do it. Somehow he ignored the distinction between the two types and concluded that they refer to the same entities, the God limited. But his conclusion was not without difficulty inherent in it. The God Agni, for instance, is called the ruler of the world, the sole God, God of Gods, etc.; absolute qualities are attributed to Agni. If Agni is still a God of ordinary divinity, then to attribute absolute qualities to him becomes meaningless. To justify this attribution he had to interpret the passage suitably. But in interpreting it he had to minimise the meaning of the terms that represent Agni as the Absolute God. Without minimising it how could he apply them to a mere deity ? He had also, on the other hand, to raise the deity so as to make it appear to be the Absolute. Unless the deity appears to be the absolute, at least for the time being, how could he attribute the highest qualities to the deity ? But to do either is impossible for him. His supposition does not permit him to do it. His supposition from the beginning has been that the Vedic poets, at the first stage, were not conscious of the Absolute God reigning supreme in the Universe. This supposition is the key-note of Kathenotheism. But this supposition and his idea of Kathenotheism contradict each other. Granting for a while that they were not conscious of the God Supreme and were

concentrating only on some aspect of nature and the deity ruling over it, how could they think of the terms that could be applied in their full sense only to the supreme lord? Unless they thought that it was possible to have the ruler of the world, how could they have the expression of a universal ruler and the thought behind it? They thought that it was possible to have a deity who ruled over an aspect of nature and they had it. The fact that they had it is clear from expressions which would be meaningless if that deity is denied. So on the strength of these expressions we think that they believed in a deity. Similarly on the strength of expressions that can have justification only with the belief in the Absolute, should we not conclude that they believed in the Absolute also? So unless we hold that they were conscious of the Absolute how can we think of minimising the meaning of certain expressions? It is possible to have a secondary meaning of an expression because the expression already has a primary meaning. Let us take for example the expression "Richard, the Lion Heart". Unless the word Lion has a primary meaning how can it be applied metaphorically to the King of England? So the expressions that represent the Absolute can be applied metaphorically to the deities only if the Absolute is already known. To admit this is to admit the fact that the Vedic religion did not stop with the deities, but had the Absolute in view.

So also it is with regard to the raising of the deity to the level of the Absolute. If the poet is not at all conscious of the Absolute, how can he raise a particular deity to the level of the Absolute? Only that person who has an idea of God can apply the term "God" metaphorically to his master or King. So to raise a particular deity to the level of the Absolute, a belief in the Absolute is necessary. Further, in explaining the same idea Max Müller says in his *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (p. 40), "*Indra, Agni or Varuṇa* is, for the time being, the only God in existence." He means that the poet for the time being forgets the existence of other deities in extolling a particular deity. Here the idea of forgetfulness is not intelligible. Does this idea imply the denial of other gods? Or is it indifference to the idea of other gods? Or does it consciously thrust the other gods into the background? To be indifferent to the idea of other gods is not opposed to consciousness of them. Even thrusting them into the background does not deny this consciousness. So long as there is a consciousness of other gods, the idea of polytheism is not transcended and the way to monotheism or to monism is not open. If forgetting the other gods for the moment involves the denial of other gods, then we have to explain what the term "other gods" means. We cannot say that they are mere divinities, because the thought of ordinary divinities is not opposed to that of the Absolute. There may be

innumerable deities and yet at the same time there may be the God Absolute. So what is denied in the idea of forgetting the other gods must be their absolute character. The idea of several absolutes is a contradiction in terms. So in considering a particular god to be absolute the possibility of others being the absolute is denied. Whatever value may be attached to this conclusion in describing a god as god of gods the idea of other gods is certainly not forgotten. So is generally every god described in being extolled. Though there may not be the actual expression 'God of gods' in the case of a particular god there are expressions yielding the same idea. So a god is termed absolute even though the poet is conscious of other gods. Therefore the god so termed must be the Absolute.

6

So on Max Müller's own postulation that there are deities controlling Nature, his conception of Kathenotheism should give way. We have now to answer the question: What is then the meaning of the passages that represent the attributes of several entities? It is easy to find an answer to this if we start from the same postulation of our author. He holds that the deities are different from the natural aspects, because there are expressions relevant only to the deities. Similarly we may hold that the Absolute is different from the deities. So in an invocation to the entity signified by the same name, there are involved three factors:—(1) the physical aspect of nature, (2) the deity presiding over it, and (3) the God Absolute, the ruler or the principle of the whole universe including even deities. The fact that these three entities are signified by the same name shows that they are intimately connected with one another. The relation that holds good between a natural element and the corresponding deity holds good between the deity and the Absolute. Just as the deity controls the element, the Absolute controls the deity. Among these three entities the functions of the natural element are traced to the deity behind it. Among the two the deity takes the place of the soul in the human body. But the deity is imperfect. An imperfect god cannot be the controller of the cosmic order and therefore in the light of this order he cannot control the particular aspect of nature which belongs to him. If the activities of an aspect of nature do not go hand in hand with those of other aspects, then there would be chaos in the world. In fact there would be no world at all. But the conviction of the Vedic poets was entirely different. They did not believe that the world is chaos. From the very beginning they realised that the world is an orderly system. They called the world-order *Rta*. They made the god in question the custodian of this order. So they were quite certain that there is the full

reflection of the cosmic order even in an insignificant activity of an insignificant element. If we note the significance of this point, we can never reasonably believe that they could concentrate only on a particular aspect of nature and the deity presiding over it. If they were to pronounce a judgment on the action of any element or of a deity, in the light of the cosmic order, then they could not ignore the part played by the Absolute both in the element and in the deity in it. So the action of an element or of the corresponding deity must be finally traced to the Absolute in it. For the action of an element the deity is the immediate source. And for the action of the deity the source is the Absolute. If the deity is the soul of the element, the Absolute is the soul of the deity. The Absolute may be viewed as functioning in the element through the deity. Thus these three factors are related to one another by the relation of body and soul. This is why they are called by the same name. Thus the word *Agni* refers not only to the element of fire and to the deity in it, but also to the Absolute in it. The same is true with reference to all the invocations. The poet in a given circumstance has to invoke the Absolute in an element and he starts from the element, passes through the deity and stops with the Absolute. Or he may start with any one of these entities and stop with any one of them as the case may be. But it is never forgotten that an element is an element, a deity is a deity and the Absolute is Absolute.

So there is neither Nature-worship nor Polytheism nor Kathenotheism in the Hymns. From the very beginning there is what we call according to our convenience Monotheism or Monism. This is the difference between the view here propounded and the view of Max Müller. He takes finally the view that the Vedic religion begins with a stage of religious growth that may be called Kathenotheism. Our view is that it begins with Monotheism which is the same as Monism. He implies that the previous stages of the same religion are represented by Nature-worship and Polytheism. We have doubted the correctness of this order with reference to the Vedic thought. The desire to trace the historical order of religion in a definite manner might have been the cause of his view.

7

Our conclusion that Monotheism or Monism is found in the Vedas from the very beginning is further supported by the following considerations. It is in the first place consistent with the Vedic monotheistic and monistic conceptions recognised by all. In the second place, it is consistent with the development of the Upanishadic and the Vedāntic conceptions of God based upon it. In case there is no idea of a supreme god in the early Hymns, the

appearance of later monotheistic or monistic doctrines would have become impossible. There is no high road from polytheism to monotheism. If in the Hymns themselves there were a vacillation between Polytheism and Monotheism, then the future Upanishadic and Vedāntic Absolutisms would have had no chance at all. So we may hold that Monotheism is the religion of the Hymns and that it is not different from Monism in Vedic thought; both terms denote the same idea, namely, the idea of a single principle of the universe.

Let us now try to see what form it took in the later Hymns.

8

The highest divine qualities attributed to the various entities signified by names such as *Agni* are the qualities of the Absolute. Because the Absolute God is present in the minor gods such as *Agni*, He is called by various names. The names of all deities are but the different names of one and the same God. Many passages make this idea clear. *Rg.* 1·164·46 says, "They call Him *Indra*, *Mitra*, *Varuṇa*, *Agni*, etc." "That which is one the wise call It in diverse manners." "They call It *Agni*, *Yama*, *Mātarisvan*." "Wise poets make the beautifully winged, though He is one, manifold by words." *Rg.* 10·114·5. Nay, even the words that signify natural elements also stand for Him. The elements and deities are what they are, because He is in them. He is the maker of all. Therefore He is denoted by all words. All the words of the Hymns stand for Him. Having Him only in view as the principle of the reality of all, several passages say "All is He" and "He is all".

When once we have formed the idea of the Absolute God and His qualities, it is easy to interpret metaphorically the words that represent Him. Absolutistic expressions can be applied to the various deities because He is in them. But this application is only secondary. In the same manner the words that stand for Him and the deities can be applied to elements, because He and the deities are in them. So the expressions of the Hymns can be interpreted in three ways:—(1) as representing the natural elements, (2) as representing the deities, and (3) as representing the Absolute God. The ultimate object of this religion is to offer prayers to the Absolute manifesting itself in Nature. So there is every reason to hold that the Hymns stand primarily for the Absolute.

In the opinion of the Vedic Āryas a religion having the Absolute as its ultimate object was a necessity. From the beginning, yearning for *Mukti* (emancipation) has been peculiar to Indian thought, religious or philosophical. The main object of the prayer to a God is well expressed in the Hymns to

Soma 9·113·7. "Where there is freedom and delight, there make me immortal. Where there is happiness and delight, where joy and pleasure reside, where the desires of our desire are attained, there make me immortal." This yearning for immortality is what is called 'the desire for *Mukti*' (*Mumukṣa*) in the later thought. If the religion of the *Vedas* were confined to Nature-deities, then the desire for immortality would have no ground at all. A Nature God who has to deal with only an aspect of Nature cannot make a man's soul immortal. To make it immortal is rather the work of the God Absolute, who is immanent in all and therefore in the soul of man.

With the idea of the Absolute as the source of all and therefore of even insignificant activities of the world, the prayer for ordinary things, things like food, family, cattle, etc., is quite relevant. It is nothing but the expression of the complete dependence of man on the Absolute. Or consistently with the idea of *Mukti* the significance of the prayer may be the desire to have only that food, family or cattle which conduces to the spiritual good of the individual.

The fact that monotheism and monism are not different in the Vedic teaching is illustrated in the passages which represent the Absolute as the very principle of the soul of man. We may explain this by referring to the passages already quoted in another connection. A worshipper entertains a doubt with regard to the existence of *Indra*. Then *Indra* replies from within the soul of the poet himself by saying "Here I am, O worshipper! Behold me here. In might I surpass all things." Another worshipper doubts the existence of *Varuṇa*. He offers a prayer: "However we break the laws from day to day men as we are, O, God *Varuṇa*, do not deliver us unto death, nor to the blow of the furious, nor to the wrath of the spiteful." Next he asks: "Did I see the God who is to be seen by all?" Next the vision occurs and he says, "He must have accepted my prayers." In these passages the unity of all (monism) is given as *Indra* or *Varuṇa* which is the name of the God Supreme (monotheism). If *Indra* and *Varuṇa* stand for mere deities, then how can they remove the doubt of the worshippers from within the soul? To say that they are within the soul is to admit the immanence of the Absolute in the whole world including even the human soul. Here we see clearly how the God who is said to be the God of gods, maker of all (monotheism), is taken to be the indwelling force in all (monism). So God is the soul of the whole world. Monotheism and monism are one. This is the true religion of the early Hymns. Nature religion is quite opposed to the spirit of the Vedic religion. The Vedic religion is through and through spiritual and its essence is "God is the source and the indwelling principle of all."

The Hymns give this God some other names also, such as *Prajāpati*, *Bṛhaspati*, *Brahmaṇaspati*, etc. In the so-called monistic passage He is realised to be one, the real of the reals and the Absolute through and through. He is the unity of the universe and the universe is his expression. Without Him the universe does not exist. He transforms Himself with His various limbs into the various aspects of the universe. The *Viśvakarma Sūkta* shows how He is the origin of all that is. The *Nāsādiya Sūkta* makes Him the source of what is and what is not. The *Puruṣa Sūkta* explains how He is not only the one spiritual principle of all, but also much more than the universe. He is both immanent and transcendent. We are all in Him and of Him, and to realise Him in all is the aim of our life. And this is the central teaching of the Hymns.