

Being and Nothingness in Indian thinking since RgVeda to Nagarjuna

Purushottama Bilimoria

Department of Philosophy, Sanfrancisco State University, US

Abstract

The paper is an inquiry on the concept of non-being and its permutations of nothing in the Indian intellectual tradition. It begins by asking whether there is anything close to the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* in the R̥gveda down to the later Brahmānic protagonists vis-à-vis the Śramanic antagonists, in particular in the Jain and Buddhist darśanas. Here Nāgārjuna's nuanced dialectic of emptiness is prevailed to problematize and complicate further the already troubled status of *being/Being* in the Indic tradition and erosion made by the rise of *non-being/nothingness*, and of course the doctrine of *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness). The paper ends with some consideration of the responses to the afore-mentioned challenges from the doyens of Vedānta, namely, Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja.

Keywords: Being, Non-Being, Nothingness, Emptiness, Indian philosophy.

This paper is by way of a tribute to Prof Antonio de Nicolas for his deep impact on my thinking in Indian and World Philosophy., particularly as I move to ponder on the 'Ultimate Questions': *What there is; what there is not?* While I do not cite him directly in this paper it should be obvious to anyone who knows of de Nicolas' work that my reading of the *Sat/Asat* wonderment in the RgVeda draws heavily from his own earlier writings, especially on the Vedas. I do however take the disquisition elsewhere, into the greatest Buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna's alchemical lab, so to speak.

There are three flow-on moves tracing the history of the development of Buddhist ideas and their impact in turn on Hindu-Brahmanic philosophy that I wish to sketch here.

1. Revisiting the all-too-familiar account of how Prince Siddharta-Gotama one fine-day encountered worldly sufferings that made him question the meaning of existence, only to find that there is no substantial existence and that everything is

in a constant state of flux. Even though he is said to have attained enlightenment, some believe that he was overwhelmed with skepticism, pessimism and died of eating rancid pork. This is of no philosophical consequence, and is typically a disjunct. The alternative account, promoted by recent anthropological-historiographical studies, suggests that the Buddha became a champion of a rising middle-class mercantile caste that perforce was pitted against and thus had to challenge the excessive ritual-obsessed, authoritarian, and priest-caste controlled epistemés of the times. How does one get to the theory of ascetic-voidness from this? This is not an important philosophical question, but it serves as an instructive background towards the next move.

2. In the Vedas (especially the earliest Rig-Veda, the Indo-European originated hymnal texts), where there is some suggestion of a growing schism between realists and anti-realists (understood very broadly), over the question of the preeminence in metaphysical terms of *sat* over *asat* (variously rendered as) being/non-being, existence/non-existence. I have argued in the precursor to the present disquisition ('Why is there Nothing Rather than Something?', *Sophia* 51.4, 2012) that the ascetic-shramanic tradition disconnected with Vedic-Brahmanic proclivities continued to develop non-substantialist ontologies (the Jainas with their Seven-pronged logic, Ajivakas with their non-eist minimalism, Carvakas with their materialism) in which there would be no room for any supremely divine being or beings, nor any objectively-given presence of 'radical evil' other than the follies and karma of individual agents, who are bereft of substantial self in any case; further, no notion of immortality is entertained since time is finite and freedom entails 'extinguishing' the continuing cycle of birth and re-death. Into this fray walks the Buddha, who veers towards the perspectivism of anti-essentialism and non-existence, and propagates the applied ethical praxis of dharma balanced on the sea-saw of karma for curing the deeply-ingrained mental attachments to pleasure and pain alike.
3. Some 550 years later, (circa 200 CE) an alchemist from a remote southern priestcraft class (hence a Brahmin), Nagarjuna turns against Brahmanical absolutism, and refines the developing sutra-exegesis on the apparent teachings of the Buddha (2 above), into a tersely-expounded philosophical argument, drawing on shramanic parsimony, the Jain absorption of contradiction into negative disjunction, refined into a sophisticated form of *reductio ad absurdum* (prasanga) and tetralemma, basically of Shunyata, Emptiness, and the sort of radical noeism developed by the exegetical Mimamsa (much misunderstood and maligned by other Brahmanic philosophy systems, but partners-in-dialogue and crime among Buddhist thinkers in Nalanda and Varanasi, right down to Dignana and especially Dharmakirti and Ratnakirti).

However, and this is my argument, most modern-day students of and commentators on Nagarjuna pay scant attention to the background scenario (personal, theoretical,

even ideographical or political) that made possible a Nagarjuna. He did not emerge as it were from nowhere, in a sudden burst as that of the Enlightenment philosophers (notably, Kant, or so it is believed) with a completely new, rational, universal and unique philosophy of the Middle-Way. I wish to demonstrate that Sanskrit-trained Nagarjuna reformulated and in part repackaged into a rationally compelling formulaic ontology the neglected or discarded (by Brahmins) metaphysical insights embedded in the Rig-Vedic discourses of *Asat*, the thinking on Nothingness and its permutations, which continued to be developed in response to mild-mannered Jaina and other shramanic-yogic criticisms, in certain strands within Brahmanical scholastic thought as well, particularly, the Mimamsa theories of Negation and Negative Absence (*abhava*), non-perception (*anupalabdhi*), *shunya* (Upanishadic *maya*), the linguistic negative copula *nañ* ('non-'), the digital zero ('0') in mathematics, the dark spaces in astronomy, the (dis)appearances in alchemy, and other nullities. Indeed, Nagarjuna distanced himself from metaphysical nihilism that also, on the other extreme to absolutism, threatened to engulf Indian philosophy towards its ruin. Somethings are real, consensually or conventionally, but not indefeasibly. And so a savior is born, and gone. (No wonder that Nietzsche, centuries later, would model himself after a philosopher resembling some [albeit distorted] form of a Buddhist philosopher [not Zarathustra, nor Schopenhauer], proclaiming himself to be 'Europe's Buddha'.)

So now let me develop the premises for my argument by going through the 3 moves and the fourth substantive premise.

The standard story we hear of the origins of Buddhism is that some 2500 years ago a prince was born to a well-heeled king in present-day Nepal where he was kept sequestered amidst all the richness, beauty, youthful longevity, harem of young damsels so as to shelter the young prince from the reality of the ordinary world outside; the king being a Brahmin had performed sophisticated Brahmanic rituals and sacrificial rites to be gifted the boon of this prodigal son, and he continued to perform many a ritual for the health and capabilities of the chosen heir to his grand kingdom. However, one day the young Siddharta overheard music, clamor and certain noises ascending from beneath the fortified walls of the palace. He became curious wondering if there is a world – another world – outside of the palace precincts. To his chagrin no-one would disclose any information to him about the going-ons outside the fortress. That evening he connived with his closet aid, Ananda, to storm the iron gates of the palace while the guards were snoozing and enter the unseen world outside. And so the story goes, no sooner had their chariot made the escape and they found themselves in a township, the like of which Gotama could have ever imagined there no movies, internet or social media then), he noticed various events of inexplicable measure, such as a toothless man being carried on a hammock, another writhing in agony, a body being burnt by the river, and so on. Upon being asked, Ananda described them respectively as signs of affliction, illness, old age and death. He had not encountered any such signs before this moment and inquired why such

maladies were being meted upon these people, who seemed so frail and helpless. Thereupon Ananda is said to have explained that all life is riddled with suffering and such episodes as they are witnessing is inevitable. Hearing this Gotama became more determined to investigate and get to the roots of these malaise or rather the universal condition of suffering. Some months later he walked out of his home from the southern door, leaving behind his wife and son, and wandered into a forest-settings at the outskirts of the town where he chanced upon a group of yogis, ascetic mendicants deeply immersed in some sort of introspective withdrawal. From them he sought answers to his questions. Partially satisfied, but was instructed to meditate in order to gain certain further insights; so he joined them in the practice of contemplation, yogic feats, and a life of frugal subsistence; he resisted temptations of food, drinks and pleasures offered by an enchanting seamstress. He had many insights, the basic one being of some philosophical interest, that there is no substantial existence (or intrinsic nature, *svabhava*), to anything, the self included, and that everything is in a constant state of flux; and its axiomatic corollary of *pratitya-samutpada*, interdependent origination, according to which things arise in dependence upon each other (IM, PEW.) Soon, however, he felt that what the yogis were practicing - with their contorted bodies and deprivations of basic human needs - was pitted on the other extreme to the richly wastefully opulent and sacrificial-ritual life he was spoilt with in his father's palace. Cutting a long story short, Sakyamuni, as he was known by now, became enlightened achieving nirvana-lite under a Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, India, and in his teachings veered towards a mean of vices (of the former, palace life) and the virtues (of the ascetics), and articulated his moral insights with a set of accompanying normative praxis, into what have come to be know as the Four Noble Truths: the existential pervasiveness of suffering (*duhkha*); this has a cause; there must be some way out'a here and there is (*upaya*); and when properly effected the path leads to nirvana extinction of conditioned existence. Everyone is endowed with the same Buddha-nature that he has come to realize, and there are no class or racial barriers (barring perhaps the gender one) where compassion prevails. On the question of whether God exists, he is supposed to have maintained rigid silence; and to the question whether my dog has Buddha-nature, the Buddha is said to have responded with a 'wwooooofff, wwooooofff'. Take it as you like it. On his second, final, mahaparinirvana or nirvana-premium (*vodka-strength*), he could not shake off his mortal coil and hence is said to have consumed poisoned-pork to euthanize his body (which is not one of the 3 Buddha-bodies in realms beyond the mundane).

This is probably apocryphal, and philosophically unenlightening or rather depressing, as the arch-pessimist Schopenhauer found it to be centuries later but welcomed such an end – well almost - for himself. There are various different stories and indeed interpretations of the standard and the other stories, that are often sources of further confusion and edification. But one such is significant and I wish to touch on that briefly now.

The alternative account, promoted by recent anthropological-historiographical

studies, suggests that the Buddha became a champion of a rising middle-class mercantile caste that perforce was pitted against and thus had to challenge the excessive ritual-obsessed, other-worldly, authoritarian, and priest-caste controlled epistemés of the times.

Take a pause and consider what brought about the huge shift in the Gupta period in India (320 to 550 CE), propelling an unintended new religious ideology that almost overturned the Brāhmanic hegemony. Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbett in a recent study have argued that the rapid urbanization and state-formation that were under way destabilized the society, such that the middle – merchant and agricultural – classes looked to reconciling the Brāhmanic-quasi-materialistic pressures against the inwardly unsustainable sense of deeper ‘lack’, the ascetic-other-worldly calling from across the forest of Jain and śrāmanic (yoga-steeped) monks: both held out their temptations. There emerged not just a Buddha but a new hermeneutic of *dharma/dhamma* that no longer required meticulous dedication to sacrifices, rituals, and offerings to the gods or their earthly patrons, the Brahmins; but rather a set of moral conduct and code of business-mercantile ethic that straddled a mean between the two tempting and tempestuous world possibilities. The economy of the late Gupta period thrived in ways it never had before. By the time of Emperor Aśoka, formerly a Gupta warring sovereign turned benevolent, the spiritual edge of the dharma teachings was lost sight of in the end-game of the hugely urbanized economy, as he set about fixing that lag by re-injecting spiritual vision – albeit a secular or naturalised spirituality of the kind Bob Solomon in recent times has championed – into the larger structural re-organization of the society, paying keen attention to the fairness, equal entitlements, welfare for all citizens. And with a burgeoning middle-class patronage they could afford these social measures, as well as let us concede pork and other delicacies. They had their own pleasurable addictions.

The Jains, at the time of the advent of the Buddha, constituted the leading community among the non-Brāhmanic forest-dwelling ascetic or śrāmanic tradition, who were theologically basically atheists or at least non-theists ('ana-theists' as Ninian Smart dubbed them); their chief protagonist, Mahavira is believed to have been a contemporary of Gotama (a probable direct influence cannot be ruled out); the lay Jains for their part were also successful businessmen or commercial entrepreneurs, while dispensing immense service to the depraved and marginalized folks amidst them. In recent times the Jains have built and ran enviably large numbers of subsidized hospitals and colleges all across India; surely, this altruism does not stem from an ascetic disposition but from an attitude of being a community of fellow sufferers and seekers. The Buddha succeeded in shifting the perception from one of the islands or ‘deities’ made out of fearful warring nature-forces withholding agri-and-urban growth to the elegance of rolling mountains, streams, loving animals, and benign disposition of nature as it is. The Buddha, it could be argued, followed on the coattails of the exemplary successes both in spiritual and this-worldly pursuits of the Jains. (By the way, there other groups as well, Ajivakas, Materialists and so on, that

made a career out of rejecting Brahmanical proclivities). But what is philosophically of interest is to ask:

How does one get to the theory of ascetic-voidness out of this middle-class revolt and social-political shifts and production of social goods? A recent anecdote that might appear to register a direct relationship between social goods and void. Mabbett reports in another article of his, how the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party discarded its former icons of Marx and Lenin and installed Nagarjuna in their place, but was left with a question how the doctrine of void (or Shunyata rendered Emptiness after Nagarjuna) can be applied to falling production and soaring prices. Well perhaps in the same way that the Buddha did in his times, when the Brahmins hoarded wealth and knowledge (which lent them immense power), while the masses virtually starved.

Wilhelm Halbfass (German-American philologist who taught in the US until his premature death in 1999) remarks that 'Ṛgveda X.72/[to 129] and a variety of other sources up to and beyond *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (ChUp III, 19) teach that nonbeing, *asat*, "was" in the beginning, and that *sat* (being) arose from nonbeing. The reference to *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is apposite here as the verse in question that Halbfass (1992) invokes a little earlier reads as follows:

In the beginning, my dear, this world as just Being (*sat*), one only, without a second. To be sure, some people say, "In the beginning this world was just Nonbeing (*a-sat*), one only, without a second from that Nonbeing Being was produced". But verily, my dear, whence could this be? ... How from Nonbeing could Being be produced. On the contrary, my dear, in the beginning this world was just Being, one only, without a second.

This is not representative of Vedic [and Brāhmaṇa] thought; yet it acknowledges there were prior views according to which nonbeing was the origin of "this world". This theory not only precedes the Upaniṣadic doctrine, 'but constitutes its indispensable background and counterpart'. As Halbfass goes on to note, 'this elusive and discarded cosmogony from nonbeing is of great significance for the beginnings of Indian thought about being. In a sense, it is more fundamental than the "theory of being"...' (ibid: 26). Moving on, coupling the Vedic insight with the peculiar theory of causality adopted in Indian philosophy, *satkaryavāda*, according to which the effect pre-exists in the cause, then in a sense the *Chāndogya* suspicion is right; how can being come out of nonbeing if it is not already in its cause? On a slight divergence elsewhere in cosmological thinking, on the loci of nothingness in the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*, wherein God is assumed to have created 'light out of nothing', some such as William Lane Craig have argued that 'production of light ... could only be possible if there were a pre-existent possibility or potentiality for light to be produced'. The contention here is that *potentiality* is what constitutes the essence of the pre-existential void. But that contention is false: since nothing has no properties, and potentiality presumes at least some properties – minimally of becoming an effect of such and such a kind, at least in Aristotelean

causality – it cannot be said to have any potentiality either. Even if we grant some self-efficiency to nothing (i.e. act as an efficient cause, and so generating parallel nothingnesses) it is difficult to conceive it being a material cause, i.e. providing the material for the production of the universe. So in the absence of any causal capabilities, in nothing, either the '*creatio*', *creation*, never happens, the universe does not exist; why should it? (The minute I find a love I know it will be gone – so with the universe, real and possible ones too, they all vanish.) Rather, what came out of nothing, and this is not entirely implausible to think, even the staunchly theist Craig grants this, and radical Big Bang singularity theorists such as Quinten-Smith– is a non-existent universe whose ontological status is no more existentially real than of abstract ideas, mathematical notations and symbols of logic, and well-fed unicorns, hare's horn, and didn't Koji eat the hole in the donut with the donut on Telegraph Ave? So *creation ex nihilo* can be made consistent with *ex nihilo nihil fit*. This mystery is incomprehensible by its very nature, it has yet to be expressed or realized or disclosed, according to Martin Heidegger. But for Craig and others, qualifiedly John Bishop, the problem has a solution; they argue instead that the field of unlimited potentiality is not to be located in the trope of '*ex nihilo*' but *efficiently* in God's will and *materially* within the divine substance of God's body. 'The potentiality of the universe lay in the power of God – or a Supremely Divine Power – to create' God provides both the efficient and material cause (at the risk of reformulating the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*).

If this argument, despite its unparsimonious extension, has any merits then indeed the Chāndogya rejection of Vedic cosmogony from “nonbeing” (*asat*, *non-existent*) would also go through, or alternatively the *satkaryavāda*, like Aristotelean causal theory, itself would have to be rejected (becomes a law of casualty, constant conjunction as in Hume, or infinitesimal chancy probabilities), as it was in some later schools, whereafter the debate was reduced to disagreement concerning the semantics of *sat* and *asat*. But what is missing even in the Chandogya account (as in the entire Vedic corpus) is the clear presence of a creator God as a metaphysical necessity rather than as a part of some mythological trope and place-holder in a story. 'Too early for God' while the gods/deities maintained a monopoly in the vertical-pantheon. An illusionary-contingent universe can of course be fabricated out of a prior condition of nothing. And so Abstractional Nihilism is entirely consistent a reading of the RgVedic hymn in question.

Whereforth, however, this fear or anxiety of being becoming non-being, rather than being endlessly, timelessly around or at least moving into becoming (x,y,z..the contingent/transient/ chancy world)? (cf. Kakol 2009). Alternatively, why not combine the triadic trinity of being/nothing/becoming in the *highest concept*, arguably as in Śaṅkara's Brahman? Precisely because the spectre of *asat*, non-being as non-existence (Nothingness), loomed rather large on the Indic horizon. While moved by 'The Intimate Strangeness of Being', 'the idiocy of non-being to an existential excess', the estranged intelligibility, and agapeic perplexity (Desmond in Auweele, Sophia),

there is at the same time resistance to absolute univocity, to the 'ontological surplus', the singularity of transcendence (WDibid),; and so note, logically, the hymnal verse risk beginning with a double-marked 'N-factor (bi-negation)': Neither/nor (not, as in Kierkegaard, Either/or)? I wish to argue that this is precisely the logical equivocation or quiver that the Jain and other shramanic thinkers pre-Gotama developed with great skill into reasoning (*naya*) based on sevenfold-aspects predication (*saptabhangi*) along with *syādvāda* (fuzzily 'maybe-maybe-not-ism'), and non-one-sidedness (*anekantavada*). Following them another non-theist and noneists (Ajivakas), though decidedly Brahmanic (or Hindu as we might say today) Mimamsa philosophers developed a form of bi-negation dialectics, to help the grammarians deal with negations in subjunctive prohibitions oftines marked by double negation, in the form of "You shall do neither this nor that". But for the Mimamsa this formulaic negation was more, indeed a sort of radical negative metaphysics, or radical noneism, where one could speak of the realness of absolute negation or non-existence, *atyantābhāva*, such as of God ($Gx = Fx(G)$), and other abstractions, on a par with the numeral 'zero' for mathematicians like Aryabhata. So he averred:

Negation is cognized (*gamyate*) as an entity such as a cow, etc. For it is the object of inclusive and exclusive conceptions and is an object of cognition. It is not merely fortuitous, that it is an (incorrect) imposition or an erroneous notion. Therefore, the fact that (negation defined in terms of) the Universal and the concrete particular is not false'. (SV, Abhāva 9-10).

Kumārila seems to need to ground this perception of absence and postulate negative entity called *abhāva*. He clarifies to his Buddhist critic that he should not be misunderstood as arguing for the existence of *abhāva* in the absence of positive reality (that would be a sort of metaphysical nihilism). His point is that when he says 'x is its own absence' he means just that, x has both a presence –in regard to its own form, (*svarūpa*), at t1, and an absence – in regard to the form of another object (*pararūpa*) - in all possible worlds: (*nityam sad-asadātmake vastuni*); the two are logically related; but they are also independent, inasmuch as they form the objects of two different cognitions, people sometimes cognize one, sometimes the other (*jñāyate kaścīd rūpam kiṃcit kadācana*); sometimes they cognise simultaneously, as when one's beloved stops breathing in his/her own lap; or think of Schrödinger's cat. Truth can cut both ways.

In short, from Kumārila's standpoint, negation is not merely 'the absence of knowledge' (*ajñāna*) but rather 'the knowledge of absence' (*abhāvajñāna*), or that 'negation is a cognition of *real* absence in the same way in which affirmation is (a) cognition of real presence'. In Stcherbatsky's words: 'The Mīmāṃsakas viewed non-existence as a reality *sui generis* (*vastuvantaram*)' (DS p 35-36). And so the spectre of nonbeing continues to inform Indian epistemology as much as its logic, to boot.

Cryptically in Vedanta this seminal insight especially into double negation becomes the key *modus operandi* in contemplation: *neti neti*, 'not this-nor that', a bit like *via*

negative, with a transcendental end, Brahman, - which to the Mimamsa would amount to the residual erased signifier without a signified in the sacrificial mantras or rite thereof: hence, absolute negation without a remainder, noneistly.

So even Śāṅkara, stirred by the Nāgārjunian question of why the process of 'superimposition' (*adhyāsa*) of the imaginary (the illusions, *mithyā*, our world is made of) could not occur on an 'empty' (*śūnya*, non-abiding, universally self-negating) substrate? Entertained the possibility of illusion (*māyā*) being projected onto "nonbeing" (*śūnyatā*). But he then quickly recoils from this spectre of nihilism (as he calls it) arguing that it is improbable that such a process of superimposition could go through in the absence of a concrete substrate; and this process of the universe manifesting even as an illusion, he calls 'inexplicable' (*anirvacanīya*), some mystery, magic, self-initiated alchemy, not an Absolute primordial condition given as such. His Brahman stands at some distance from any involvement with the existential contingencies of the world; but it too has no ontological status (unlike its namesake in the later Upanishads): it is for him the 'highest Concept' than of which no greater or smaller could thought. Is Shankara, as Hegel suspected rightly I think, covertly appealing to radical noneism, for Brahman is admittedly nothing more than an abstraction (*tatasthā*, a prime definition), and has no existential objective realness attached to it: it is like Heidegger's existentiell (again a mere abstraction to be disclosed, not perceived, when Dasein surrenders fully to its own death and nothingness, *Heidegger on Death* bk). The mystery qua *anirvacaniya* aligned as it is to "Non-being" is perhaps an imponderable on a par with Kant's "God", "Freedom", and "Immortality". Thus, I have not been able to make much of Shankara's curious retreat into *anirvacaniya*, that mystery, save to suggest that perhaps there is an acknowledgement of the continuity of nonbeing – in the Chāndogya sense of unevolved, undifferentiated non-being – within the process and the illusion itself: the illusion of the world. In that sense he remains a noneist transcendentalist. And that is what lead our own Jack Smart to dub Sankara an 'illusionist idealist' (a notch higher than Bradleyian idealism; Jack didn't buy into his neighbour Routley's noneism, much less into ontological nihilism, which to him as to many smacked of metaphysical nihilism, like Nietzsche's nihilistic finitism or Heidegger's absurd-Being). Even a personal creator God (Ishvara, unlike in Ramanuj'a amended-advaita Vedanta-theology 2 centuries later) does not survive the metaphysical reductionism of Sankara. Why would Brahman compromise itself by getting involved in causation, creation, chasing after miscreants, dispensing grace, and fixing falling faculties – like our own Arts?

One is reminded here of Borges' ingenious character, tormented by his own emptiness and lack of soul-identity,... finally hears God's answer to his puzzlement, thus : 'Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one.'¹

I say, too late for God, too early for the full concept of the Noneist Absolute.

Conclusion

Hindu philosophy and theology toyed with every permutation of theism – including agnosticism, atheism, and nontheistic spiritualism – in the kind of pantheism and pagan animism that Indian, Nepalese, and Balinese Hinduism came to embrace – but never in its history did a decisive conception of a monotheistic God emerge. And R.C. Zaehner is wrong that the theological evolutionary transition from Vedic pratēnatism (a kind of paganism for him, really) to the Upanishadic monism (non-dualism is not how Zaehner saw the sophiodicy of Brahman) through finally to monotheism (only just as the Supremely conceived Almighty Creator Godhead) matures in the *Bhagavadgītā*, for whatever Kṛṣṇa projects himself to be (the universal divinely transcendental being, Puruṣottama), he does not succeed in usurping Śiva and Kālī, and the other 333,000+1/3 gods from the popular imaginary.

But when Buddhism came to prominence and threatened to undermine the vestiges of Divinity so (monotheistically)-conceived from the extant religious practices and theological enclaves with its emphasis on transcendence without the gods of yore, and some threats that the Buddha might be cast as the only omniscient pseudo-deity (although regarded to be the Great Divine Replacement in Buddhist theōntology), the Brahmins were enraged. And hence they entrusted the logicians in Mithila and Navadvīpa – adjacent to the thriving Buddhist seminars where Hindus and Buddhists mingled in gallant dialogical debates – to work up an epistemological defence of a monotheistically-conceived Divine that or who would withstand the ravages of the Buddhists against Hindu gods. It is still something of a mystery why they tended toward a full-blown monotheistic deity and not, say, pantheistic or panentheistic variety (the resources for which were already in the annals and canons of the tradition). Was there pressure also from Vedānta, or did they aspire to retain their distance from Vedānta and its quaintly abstract concept of *Brahman*?

Monotheism might be a dangerous turn in global theology and has been responsible for more pestilence and religious wars than other forms of theism and nontheistic conceptions of divinity, such as in the idea of The One in Plotinus, The Good in Plato, The *Deus Absconditus* in Gnostic philosophers, the Missing God in Heidegger, Hegel's God-in-Nothingness, or for that matter closet to out times, a nonviolent Amida Buddha (Avilokeshvara) or M.K. Gandhi's *Truth* as God, with nonviolence as its secular spirituality.

Reference

1. Jorge, Luis Borges. *Labyrinths*, trans. J.E. Irby, Penguin Books, 2000. (I am thankful to Amelia Barili for drawing my attention to this forgotten exquisite storyline!)