

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# INDIAN WISDOM.

## LECTURE I.

### *The Hymns of the Veda.*

IN the following Lectures I propose to offer examples of the most remarkable religious, philosophical, and ethical teachings of ancient Hindū authors, arranging the instances given in regular sequence according to the successive epochs of Sanskrit literature. In attempting this task I am conscious of my inability to do justice in a short compass to the richness of the materials at my command. An adequate idea of the luxuriance of Sanskrit literature can with difficulty be conveyed to occidental scholars. Perhaps, too, the severe European critic will be slow to acquiesce in any tribute of praise bestowed on compositions too often marked by tedious repetitions, redundant epithets, and far-fetched conceits; just as the genuine Oriental, nurtured under glowing tropical skies, cannot easily be brought to appreciate the coldness and severe simplicity of an educated Englishman's style of writing. We might almost say that with Hindū authors excellence is apt to be measured by magnitude, quality by quantity, were it not for the striking thoughts and noble sentiments which often reward the student who will take the trouble to release them from their surplusage of words; were it not also, that with all this tendency to diffuseness, it is certainly a fact that nowhere do we find the art of condensation so successfully cultivated as in some departments of Sanskrit literature. Probably the very prolixity natural to Indian writers led to the opposite extreme of brevity, not merely

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

by a law of reaction, but by the necessity for providing the memory with aids and restoratives when oppressed and debilitated by too great a burden. However that may be, every student of Sanskrit will certainly note in its literary productions a singular inequality both as to quantity and quality ; so that in studying Hindū literature continuously we are liable to be called upon to pass from the most exuberant verbosity to the most obscure brevity ; from sound wisdom to little better than puerile unwisdom ; from subtle reasoning to transparent sophistry ; from high morality—often expressed in impressive language worthy of Christianity itself—to precepts implying a social condition scarcely compatible with the lowest grade of culture and civilization.

Such being the case, it will be easily understood that, although my intention in these Lectures is to restrict myself to selections from the best writings only, it does not therefore follow that every example given will be put forth as a model of style or wisdom. My simple object is to illustrate continuously the development of Hindū thought ; and it will conduce to a better appreciation of the specimens I offer if I introduce them by brief descriptions of the portions of literature to which they belong.

To give order and continuity to the subject it will be necessary to begin with that foundation of the whole fabric of Hindū religion and literature—the Veda.

Happily this word ‘Veda’ has now a familiar sound among Englishmen who take an interest in the history and literature of their Indian fellow-subjects, so that I need say but little on a subject which is really almost trite, or at least has been already elucidated by many clear and able writers. Indeed, most educated persons are beginning to be conscious of the duty of studying fairly and without prejudice the other religions of the world. For may it not be maintained that the traces of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE HYMNS OF THE VEDA.

3

the original truth imparted to mankind should be diligently sought for in every religious system, however corrupt, so that when any fragment of the living rock is discovered<sup>1</sup>, it may (so to speak) at once be converted

<sup>1</sup> Surely we should study to be absolutely fair in our examination of other religions, and avoid all appearance of a shadow of misrepresentation in our description of them, endeavouring to take a just and comprehensive view, which shall embrace the purest form of each false system, and not be confined to those corruptions, incrustations, and accretions which in all religions tend to obscure, and even to conceal altogether, what there is of good and true in them. Missionaries would do well to read 'An Essay on Conciliation in Matters of Religion, by a Bengal Civilian,' published in Calcutta in 1849. Let them also ponder the words of Sir William Jones, in his 'Discourse on the Philosophy of the Asiatics' (vol. iii. p. 242, &c., of his Works). This great Orientalist there maintains that our divine religion, the truth of which is abundantly proved by historical evidence, has no need of such aids as many think to give it by asserting that wise men of the heathen world were ignorant of the two Christian maxims which teach us to do to others as we would they should do unto us, and to return good for evil. The first exists in the sayings of Confucius, and the spirit of both may be traced in several Hindū precepts. One or two examples will be found in the Hitopadeśa. Jones' instance is the following: *Su-jano na yāti vairam para-hita-buddhir vināśa-kāle 'pi Īhede 'pi Āndana-taruḥ surabhayati mukham kuḥḥā-rasya*, 'A good man who thinks only of benefiting his enemy has no feelings of hostility towards him even at the moment of being destroyed by him; (just as) the sandal-tree at the moment of being cut down sheds perfume on the edge of the axe.' Sir W. Jones affirms that this couplet was written three centuries B. C. It is given by Boehtlingk in his 'Indische Sprüche.' Professor Aufrecht, in his late article on the Śārngadhara-paddhati, mentions a similar verse in that Anthology attributed to an author Ravi-gupta. The Persian poet Sādi of Shirāz has a maxim taken from the Arabs, 'Confer benefits on him who has injured thee.' Again, 'The men of God's true faith grieve not the hearts e'en of their foes' (chap. ii. story 4). Hāfiz is also quoted by Sir W. Jones thus:

'Learn from yon Orient shell to love thy foe,  
And store with pearls the hand that brings thee woe.  
Free, like yon rock, from base vindictive pride,  
Imblaze with gems the wrist that rends thy side.

B 2

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

into a fulcrum for the upheaving of the whole mass of surrounding error? At all events, it may reasonably be conceded that if nothing true or sound can be shown to underlie the rotten tissue of decaying religious systems, the truth of Christianity may at least in this manner be more clearly exhibited and its value by contrast made more conspicuous.

If, then, a comparison of the chief religions<sup>1</sup> of the world, and an attempt to sweep away the incrustations which everywhere obscure the points of contact between them, is becoming every day more incumbent upon us, surely Brāhmanism, next to Judaism and Christianity, has the first claim on our attention, both from its connection with the religion of ancient Persia (said to have acted on Judaism during the captivity), and from its close relationship to Buddhism, the faith of about thirty-one per

---

Mark where yon tree rewards the stony shower  
 With fruit nectareous or the balmy flower.  
 All nature calls aloud, "Shall man do less  
 Than heal the smiter and the railer bless?"

In Sārṅgadhara's Anthology a sentiment is given from the Mahābhārata, which is almost identical with St. Matt. vii. 3—*Τί δὲ βλέπεις τὸ κάρφος τὸ ἐν τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου, τὴν δὲ ἐν τῷ σῶ ὀφθαλμῷ δοκὸν οὐ κατανοεῖς.*

<sup>1</sup> These are eight in number, as shown by Professor Max Müller in his Lectures on the 'Science of Religion,' recently published, and not seen by me till after the present Lectures were written and delivered. The eight are — Judaism, Christianity, Brāhmanism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Islām, and the systems of the Chinese philosophers, Confucius (a Latinized form of Kūng-fū-tsze, i. e. 'Kūng the master') and Lau-tsze ('aged master'); and these eight rest on eight sets of books, viz. 1. the Old Testament, 2. the New Testament, 3. the Veda, 4. the Tri-piṭaka, 5. the Zand-Avastā, 6. the Kurān, 7. the five volumes or Kīng (viz. Yi, Shū, Shī, Li-ki, Chūn-tsiu) and the four Shū or books, some of which were written by the philosopher Mencius (Mang-tsze), 8. the Tau-te-Kīng ('book of reason and virtue'); and are in seven languages, viz. 1. Hebrew, 2. Greek, 3. Sanskrit, 4. Pāli, 5. Zand, 6. Arabic, and 7, 8. Chinese.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

cent of the human race<sup>1</sup>. Now it is noteworthy that the idea of a direct revelation, though apparently never entertained in a definite manner by the Greeks and Romans<sup>2</sup>, is perfectly familiar, first, to the Hindūs; secondly, to the Pārsīs, as representing the ancient Zoroastrian Persians; thirdly, to all the numerous races who have adopted the religion founded by Mohammed<sup>3</sup>, and by

---

<sup>1</sup> About two-thirds of the human race are still unchristianized, so that, supposing thirty per cent to be Christians, about thirty-one per cent are nominal Buddhists, about fifteen per cent Muslims, about thirteen per cent Hindūs, and the remainder belong to various other creeds. It has been well observed that Christianity and Buddhism, the two most prevalent religions of the world, and in their very essence the two most opposed to each other, though, at the same time, the two which have most common ground in their moral teaching, have both been rejected by the races which gave them birth, and both, when adopted by other races, acquired the greatest number of adherents. Christianity, originating with a Semitic race, has spread among Āryans; Buddhism, originating among Hindū Āryans, has spread chiefly among Turanian races. Buddhism was driven out of India into Ceylon and still continues there. Thence it passed into Burmah, Siam, Tibet, China, and Japan. It does not seem to have become established in China till the first century of our era, and did not reach Japan till much later. The form it has assumed in these countries deviates widely from the system founded by the great Indian Buddha, and its adoption by the masses of the people is after all more nominal than real. The ancient superstitious belief in good and evil spirits of all kinds (of the sun, wind, and rain; of the earth, mountains, rivers, trees, fields, &c., and of the dead) appears to prevail everywhere among the Chinese people, while the more educated are chiefly adherents of the old moral and philosophical systems taught by Kūng-fū-tsze (Confucius) and Lau-tsze.

<sup>2</sup> Numa Pompilius is, however, supposed to have derived his inspirations from the prophetic nymph Aegeria; as the Greek poets are imagined to have owed theirs to the Muses.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the great Arabian Pseudo-prophet is properly spelt Muhammad, and means 'the highly praised' or 'praiseworthy.' We very naturally call the religion he founded Mohammedanism, but he laid no claim to be a founder. Islām is a word denoting 'submission to the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

him called Islām. Let us beware, however, of supposing that the Veda occupies exactly the position of a Bible to the Hindūs, or that it is to them precisely what the Avastā is to the Pārsīs or the Kurān to Muslims. Such a notion must lead to some confusion of thought in studying these very different religious systems. For the word Avastā probably signifies ‘the settled text’ delivered by Zoroaster (properly Zarathustra, and in Persian Zardusht), which was written down and accompanied with its commentary and paraphrases in Pahlavī<sup>1</sup>; as in the Hebrew sacred writings, the Old Testament was furnished with its accompaniments of Chaldee translations and paraphrases called Targums.

Again, the word Kurān means emphatically ‘the reading’ or ‘that which ought to be read by every one<sup>2</sup>,’ and is applied to a single volume, manifestly the work of one author, which, according to Mohammed, descended entire from heaven in the night called Al Kadr<sup>3</sup>, in the month called Ramazān, though alleged to have been revealed to him by the angel Gabriel at different times, and chapter by chapter. In fact, Mohammed affirmed that, being himself illiterate, he was specially directed and miraculously empowered by God to commit the revelation to writing for the spread of the true faith.

---

will and ordinances of God,’ whose absolute unity Mohammed claimed as a prophet to have been commissioned to proclaim.

<sup>1</sup> Pahlavī is a later Iranian dialect which followed on Zand and the old Persian of the inscriptions, and led to Parsī or Pāzand and the Persian of Firdausī. The word Zand at first denoted commentary.

<sup>2</sup> قرآن *qur’ān*, ‘reading,’ is the verbal noun of the Arabic root *qara’a*, ‘to read.’ In the 96th chapter of the Kurān the command is twice repeated, ‘Read, in the name of thy Lord,’ ‘Read, by thy most beneficent Lord, who taught the use of the pen.’

<sup>3</sup> That is, ‘the night of *qadr* or power.’ The 97th chapter of the Kurān begins thus, ‘Verily we sent down the Kurān in the night of Al Kadr.’ See Sale’s translation.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The word Veda, on the other hand, means 'knowledge,' and is a term applied to divine *unwritten* knowledge, imagined to have issued like breath from the Self-existent<sup>1</sup>, and communicated to no single person, but to a whole class of men called Rishis or inspired sages. By them the divine knowledge thus apprehended was transmitted, not in writing, but through the ear, by constant oral repetition through a succession of teachers, who claimed as Brāhmans to be its rightful recipients. Here, then, we have a theory of inspiration higher even than that advanced by the Pseudo-prophet Mohammed and his followers, or by the most enthusiastic adherents of any other religion in the world. It is very true that this inspired knowledge, though its very essence was held to be mystically bound up with Śabda or 'articulate sound' (thought to be eternal), was ultimately written down, but the writing and reading of it were not encouraged. It was even prohibited by the Brāhmans, to whom alone all property in it belonged. Moreover, when at last, by its continued

---

<sup>1</sup> In Manu I. 3 the Veda is itself called 'self-existent.' There are, however, numerous inconsistencies in the accounts of the production of the Veda, which seem not to have troubled the Brāhmans or interfered with their faith in its divine origin. One account makes it issue from the Self-existent, like breath, by the power of A-drishta, without any deliberation or thought on his part; another makes the four Vedas issue from Brahman, like smoke from burning fuel; another educes them from the elements; another from the Gāyatrī. A hymn in the Atharva-veda (XIX. 54) educes them from Kāla or 'Time.' The Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa asserts that the Creator brooded over the three worlds, and thence produced three lights, fire, the air, and the sun, from which respectively were extracted the Ṛig, Yajur, and Sāma-veda. Manu (I. 23) affirms the same. In the Purusha-sūkta the three Vedas are derived from the mystical victim Purusha. Lastly, by the Mīmāṃsakas the Veda is declared to be itself an eternal sound, and to have existed absolutely from all eternity, quite independently of any utterer or revealer of its texts. Hence it is often called *śrūta*, 'what is heard.' In opposition to all this we have the Rishis themselves frequently intimating that the Mantras were composed by themselves.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

growth, it became too complex for mere oral transmission, then this Veda resolved itself, not into one single volume, like the Kurān, but into a whole series of compositions, which had in reality been composed by a number of different poets and writers at different times during several centuries.

There is this great difference, therefore, between the Kurān and the Veda, that whereas the reading of the former is regarded as a sacred duty, and constantly practised by all good Muslims, the Veda, even after it had been committed to writing, became absolutely a sealed book to the masses of Hindūs, and with the exception of some of the later Vedic works, called Upanishads, is to this day almost entirely unread even by the learned, however much it may be venerated and its divine authority as an infallible guide nominally upheld<sup>1</sup>.

Of what, then, does this Veda consist? To conduce to clearness in arranging our examples we may regard it as separating itself into three quite distinct divisions, viz.

1. *Mantra* or prayer and praise embodied in texts and metrical hymns.

2. *Brāhmaṇa* or ritualistic precept and illustration written in prose.

3. *Upanishad*, 'mystical or secret doctrine' appended to the aforesaid Brāhmaṇa, in prose and occasional verse.

---

<sup>1</sup> The absolute and infallible authority of the Veda is held to be so manifest as to require no proof, and to be entirely beyond the province of reason or argument. Manu even extends this to Smṛiti (II. 10), where he says, 'By *śruti* is meant the Veda, and by *smṛiti* the books of law; the contents of these must never be questioned by reason.' Nevertheless, the want of familiarity with the Mantras of the Ṛig-veda is illustrated by the native editions of Manu. That published in Calcutta with the commentary of Kullūka is a scholarlike production, but almost in every place where the Mantras of the Ṛig-veda are alluded to by Manu (as in VIII. 91, XI. 250, 252, 253, 254) errors disfigure the text and commentary.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE HYMNS OF THE VEDA.

9

To begin, then, with the Mantra portion. By this is meant those prayers, invocations, and hymns which have been collected and handed down to us from a period after the Indian branch of the great Indo-European race had finally settled down in Northern India, but which were doubtless composed by a succession of poets at different times (perhaps between 1500 and 1000 years B.C.). These compositions, though very unequal in poetical merit, and containing many tedious repetitions and puerilities, are highly interesting and important, as embodying some of the earliest religious conceptions, as well as some of the earliest known forms, of the primitive language of that primeval Āryan race-stock from which Greeks, Romans, Kelts, Teutons, Russians, and Poles are all offshoots.

They are comprised in five principal Saṃhitās or collections of Mantras, called respectively Ṛik, Atharvan, Sāman, Taittiriya, and Vājasaneyin. Of these the Ṛig-veda-saṃhitā — containing one thousand and seventeen hymns — is the oldest and most important, while the Atharva-veda-saṃhitā is generally held to be the most recent, and is perhaps the most interesting. Moreover, these are the only two Vedic hymn-books worthy of being called separate original collections<sup>1</sup>; and to these, therefore, we shall confine our examples.

<sup>1</sup> The Atharva-veda (admirably edited by Professors Roth and Whitney) does not appear to have been recognized as a fourth Veda in the time of Manu, though he mentions the revelation made to Atharvan and Angiras (XI. 33). In book XI, verse 264, he says, *Ṛīco yajūnshi cānyāni sāmāni vivīdhāni ca, esha jñeyas tri-vid veda yo vedainaṃ sa veda-vit*. The Sāma-veda and the two so-called Saṃhitās or collections of the Yajur-veda (Taittiriya and Vājasaneyin or Black and White) all borrow largely from the Ṛik, and are merely Brahmanical manuals, the necessity for which grew out of the complicated ritual gradually elaborated by the Hindū Āryans. A curious allusion to the Sāma-veda occurs in Manu IV. 123 &c., ‘The Ṛig-veda has the gods for its deities, the Yajur-veda has men for its objects, the Sāma-veda has

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00795-5 - Indian Wisdom: Examples of the Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Doctrines of the Hindus

Monier Williams

Excerpt

[More information](#)

To what deities, it will be asked, were the prayers and hymns of these collections addressed? This is an interesting inquiry, for these were probably the very deities worshipped under similar names by our Āryan progenitors in their primeval home somewhere on the table-land of Central Asia, perhaps in the region of Bokhara, not far from the sources of the Oxus<sup>1</sup>. The answer is: They worshipped those physical forces before which all nations, if guided solely by the light of nature, have in the early period of their life instinctively bowed down, and before which even the more civilized and enlightened have always been compelled to bend in awe and reverence, if not in adoration.

To our Āryan forefathers in their Asiatic home God's power was exhibited in the forces of nature even more evidently than to ourselves. Lands, houses, flocks, herds, men, and animals were more frequently than in Western climates at the mercy of winds, fire, and water, and the sun's rays appeared to be endowed with a potency quite beyond the experience of any European country. We cannot be surprised, then, that these forces were regarded by our Eastern progenitors as actual manifestations, either of one deity in different moods or of separate rival deities contending for supremacy. Nor is

---

the Pitṛis, therefore its sound is impure.' Kullūka, however, in his commentary is careful to state that the Sāma-veda is not really impure, but only apparently so. This semblance of impurity may perhaps result from its association with deceased persons and its repetition at a time of A-śauca. The Sāma-veda is really a mere reproduction of parts of the Ṛik, transposed and scattered about piece-meal, only seventy-eight verses in the whole Sāma-veda being, it is said, untraceable to the present recension of the Ṛik. The greatest number of its verses are taken from the ninth Maṇḍala of the Ṛik, which is in praise of the Soma plant, the Sāma-veda being a collection of liturgical forms for the Soma ceremonies of the Udgātri priests, as the Yajus is for the sacrifices performed by the Adhvaryu priests.

<sup>1</sup> Professor Whitney doubts this usual assumption (Lectures, p. 200).