

## **In Defense of a God with Form: A Clash of Monotheisms** *Greco-Biblical Beginnings, Monistic Imperialism, and the Lord with the Lotus Eyes*

**Significance and Contribution:** Mainstream Hinduism ubiquitously and overwhelmingly consists of the worship of God, *Īśvara*, as manifest in the divine Forms of the great Hindu Deities such as Viṣṇu, Śiva, Kṛṣṇa, the Goddess and countless other such divine manifestations. Yet the elaborate monotheistic (or monist) theologies that support the traditions featuring these divine Forms have almost never been given serious intellectual attention outside of India. From the late 18th century to the most recent 'Introductions to Hindu Philosophy' published in 2020, scholarly engagement with 'Hindu Philosophy' does not even mention these intellectual traditions, featuring instead the so-called 'six orthodox schools' (along with Buddhism, Jainism, and 'the materialists'). The reason for this is clear: these six schools, the purview of a tiny scholastic elite, even if theistic, do not mention these divine Forms.

While modern-day scholars no longer call the Forms of *Īśvara* (and *Īśvari*, the feminine Divinity) 'monstrosities' and the plethora of other such terms that earlier counterparts used, the term 'mythological' is still the standard way to refer to them. A myth, of course, points to something that may have cultural or ethical value but, in plain English, is not factually true. However, nowhere in the hundreds of thousands of verses of the vast corpus of Epic and Purāṇic traditions are these Divinities presented as mythological: they are taken as real Divine presences. In fact, the intellectual lineages and traditions associated with them are sophisticated and profound and, indeed, absorb, rework, and supersede much of the intellectual content of the so-called six schools deemed 'philosophical' by scholars. Why, then this complete cold-shouldering of these traditions? Clearly, it is the central presence of these supposed 'mythological' divine Forms of God that causes these traditions to be deemed philosophically unworthy and hence neglected.

This research first sets out to excavate the origins and philosophical rationale of this aversion to the notion of God possessing Form, tracing its genealogy from the encounter of the Bible with the Greek philosophers, to the theologizing of these two epistemes by the great Christian scholastics, and on through the entire course of Western theological and philosophical culture to present-day academic attitudes. While much has been done in the post-colonial period to extricate important expressions of Hinduism from their earlier intellectual colonialization and allow them to speak in their own voices, scholars have thus far remained shy of engaging what is, in fact, the most visible facet of Hinduism: the rationale and logic of the worship of a God with Form. The second major goal of this research is to fill that lacuna.

**Organization, Concepts, and Methods.** After an Introduction, clarifying, among other things, our terminological usages and their semantic genealogies - monotheism, monism, material versus spiritual Form, God-in-the-world as incarnation/avatāra, etc., the book will consist of four parts.

**Part I** deals with the Greco-Biblical underpinnings of our theme, juxtaposing the anthropomorphic references to the revealed God of the Bible with the notion of God as construed by the pure rationality of the Greek philosophers. Careful consideration will be given to how the great Christian theologians blended these sources. **Part II** traces the history of Western encounters with Indian Philosophy and compares which aspects of Indian traditions prominent Western intellectuals deemed to be of rational interest with those that they relegated to categories of superstition and myth. **Part III** focuses on the epistemology of Divine Perception and mystical experiences in contemporary academic discourse and engages Hindu claims to visions of these Forms. **Part IV** considers the philosophical positions and arguments of various schools of Hindu philosophy *apropos* of God's nature, exploring the theological rationale of positing Divine Form.

**Chapter Contents. Part I.1 *The Biblical God and the Greek God.*** This chapter traces the gamut of Biblical references pertaining to an anthropomorphic God with Form, and engages scholarship uncovering how Christians (and Jews) of the first two centuries naturally conceived of God as embodied.

We then engage the logic of especially Platonic and Aristotelian theories about the Supreme Being behind the perceived universe, culminating in the Formless God of 'the Philosophers' as construed by pure rationalism. We underscore how the philosophers only engaged a notion of *material* Form in evaluating the possibility of God possessing Form. This sets the stage for a central theme of this work: tracing the Greek inherited genealogy of the presupposition that Form necessarily entails materiality throughout the entire book, so as to contrast it with Hindu notions of Divine *non-material* Form in later chapters.

**I.2 *The Great Christian Scholastics: Theologizing about Form.*** This chapter elaborates on how the great Christian scholastics have responded to the bodily references found in the Bible, featuring the works of the early church fathers (Clement, Origen, and others, building on earlier Jewish hermeneutics by Philo) who set out to give philosophical dignity to Christianity in the Greek intellectual milieu of their time. Proceeding to the later scholastics (Aquinas, especially, Augustine, and others), the chapter traces the Christianization of the Platonic and Aristotelian notions of God and explores the superimposition of the God of the 'philosophers' onto the Biblical God. This chapter stresses again that all theologized resistance to the notion of God, a perfect Being, having a Form, assumes all Form to be material and therefore subject to the imperfections of materiality (divisibility, limitation, etc.).

**Part II.3 *Representations of Hindu Philosophy amongst Western Philosophers.*** This chapter engages a wide range of Western philosophers and Indologists, from the earliest Deists and Romantics of the 18th century to the Philosophy Departments of the 20th century, to examine which aspects were featured and appropriated from Hindu philosophies as scholars became aware of them. We document how Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, and numerous others monolithically represented Hindu philosophy as monistic, viz, professing the unity of the individual self with the impersonal Absolute, *Brahman* - usually referencing the 8th-century Sankara's *advaita* (non-dual) Vedānta - to the neglect of mainstream and philosophically sophisticated monotheistic traditions featuring a personal God with Form.

**II.4 *Comparative Mysticism: Monistic Imperialism and the Favoring of the Impersonal.*** This chapter demonstrates that works central to the Western discourse of mysticism also persisted in the selective portrayal of Hindu philosophy as monistic and transpersonal (paralleling the previous chapter on philosophy). We consider the works of William James, Walter Stace, Rudolf Otto, and others, noting how accounts of mystical experiences and visions of a personal God are completely neglected (or unknown) and Hindu mysticism has largely been reduced in portrayal to monistic trans-personal experiences. In the chapter we also examine a wide range of academic Introductions to Indian Philosophy, World Religions, and Comparative Religion from the 18th century onward, observing the scope and depth afforded to the various schools of Indian philosophy to determine which schools appear to be emphasized - here too documenting the almost universal prioritization of *advaita* Vedānta as Hinduism writ large.

**II.5 *Early Missionary and Colonial Views on the Hindu Deities.*** This chapter considers how early missionary and colonial views about Hinduism inherited the theologizing of Aquinas *et al.* in accordance with the anti-Form genealogies outlined previously. From the earliest missionaries such as the Jesuit De Nobili, we document how, at their most sympathetic, Western observers tried to identify an original Vedic period of "pure" (i.e., pre-Form) monotheism, but one that degenerated into superstition and decadence exhibited by the multifarious worship of Hindu Gods with fantastic Forms. We examine how terms like 'monstrosities' were directed against the Forms exhibited by the great Hindu deities such as Viṣṇu and Śiva, and how no attention was directed to considering their elaborate and sophisticated theologies.

**Part III.6 *Epistemology of Divine perception in the Philosophy of Religion.*** This chapter considers arguments in Western epistemological discussions by philosophers such as Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, and others in support of the viability of belief formation based on mystical

experiences. These are juxtaposed with the parallel epistemological arguments from the Vedic Mīmāṃsā school; the common thread here is that truth claims predicated on any epistemic system cannot be subject to verification by some other epistemic system on pain of infinite regress. The purpose of this chapter is to suggest that claims of visions by Hindu devotees of a God with Form must be given legitimate consideration rather than be superficially subject to default psychological interpretative categories.

**III.7 The Centrality of Hindu Visions of the Divine with Form.** This chapter considers Hindu accounts of mystical perceptions throughout history. It acknowledges the centrality of monistic transpersonal experiences, but juxtaposes these with the vast array of claims of mystical visions of a God with Form. Part of the thrust of this chapter is to point to the diversity of Hindu mystical experiences, which are impoverished and in fact violated by attempts to streamline them exclusively into the monistic categories noted in the previous chapters to the neglect of the Personal Form-centric theologies.

**Part IV.8 Responses from Early Indian Intellectuals/Figureheads.** Featuring the likes of Rammohan Roy, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Dayanand Sarasvati, Aurobindo, and numerous others, this chapter examines a sampling of Hindu reactions and resistances to the various constructions and evaluations of the Hindu Divinities by missionaries and colonial interlocutors. We cover a range of responses here, from those coopted into jettisoning notions of God with Form and adopting a more Christian notion of a formless monotheistic God with Indian flavorings, to those promoting the monistic strands of Indian philosophy in some version of *neo-advaita*, to traditionalists who mounted elaborate philosophical defenses of the philosophical viability and indeed necessity of Divine Form.

**IV.9 God's Form in Indian Philosophical Traditions.** This final chapter demonstrates that acceptance of God having a bodily Form pervades all schools of Vedānta, whether they endorse an Absolute Truth, *Brahman* that is ultimately trans-personal (like *advaita* Vedānta), or one that is ultimately personal and embodied, as in the Vaiṣṇava Vedānta traditions. These latter, which have the most robustly theologized notions of a Personal Deity with Form, are of central interest to this research. This chapter features scholarship from the Philosophy of Religion pertaining to Perfect Being theology. We introduce the Vaiṣṇava arguments that beauty must be an attribute of a complete God, and hence a Perfect Being must have a non-material Form to be supremely beautiful - but this is not a material Form, but a Form made of pure, condensed, non-divisible consciousness with no epistemological or other limitations. Indeed, such a Being must have unlimited (omni-) Forms to be perfect and complete, and to complement His infinity of omnis - omnipotence and omniscience, etc. To contrast this notion of a non-material Form - characterized as a Form of *sat, cit, ānanda* (eternal, blissful consciousness) - we revisit the focus in chapter 2 which demonstrated that all intellectual rejections of notions of God's Form engaged the category of 'Form' as a material substance. We also deal here with representative objections directed against God's body from within Hinduism by the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā schools (the former being theists that accept an intelligent Overseer God, and the latter non-theists), both of which explicitly reject the plausibility of God's body. These are compared with Aristotelian and Thomasian objections to stress the same presupposition: even these Indian rationalists have only engaged the possibility of Form as a material substance.

**The Conclusion** will theorize about interreligious hermeneutics when Scriptures clash on the most fundamental of postulates, such as whether a perfectly complete God cannot, or must, have a Form.