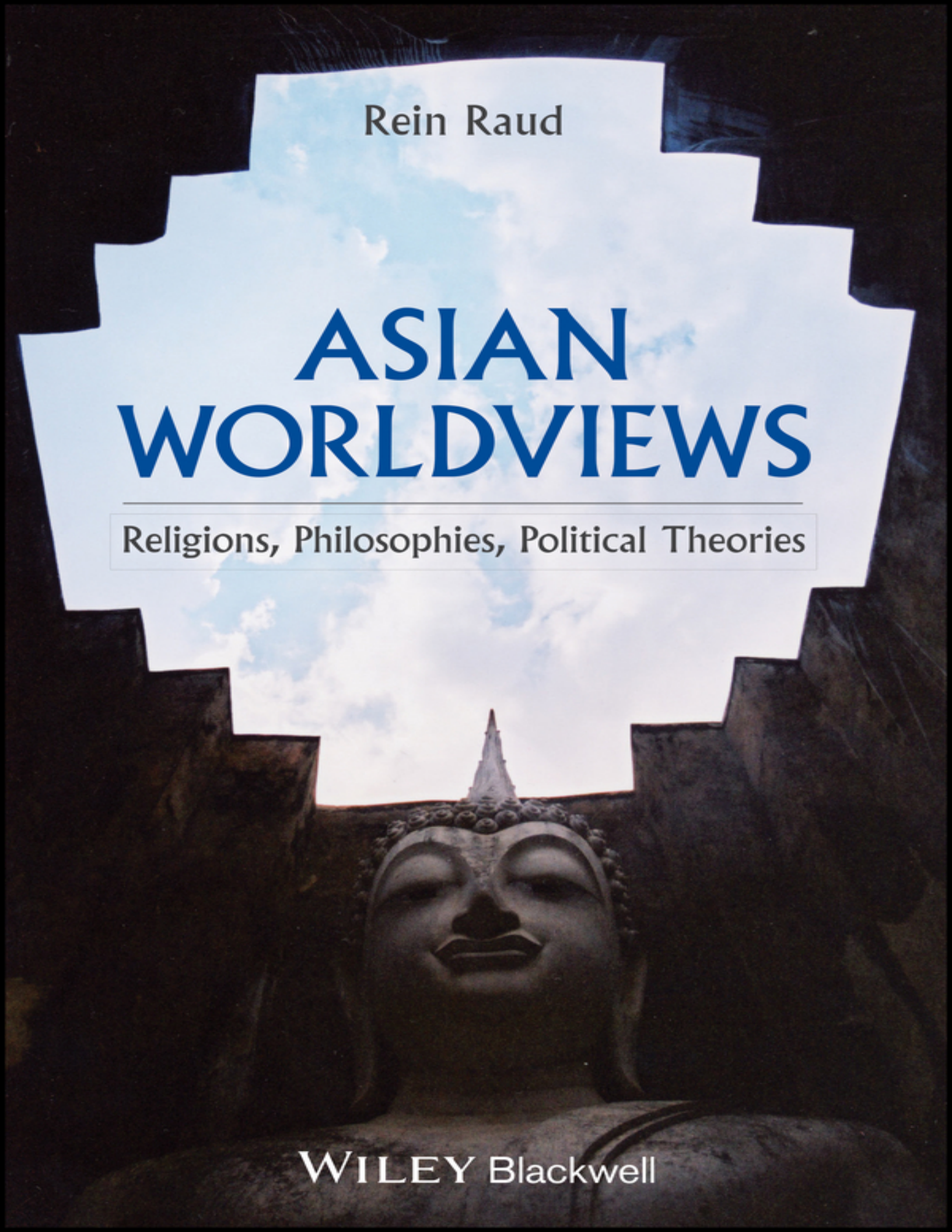
Rein Raud

ASIAN WORLDVIEWS

Religions, Philosophies, Political Theories



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Preface

The aim of this book is to acquaint its reader with the rich thought traditions of Asia (India, China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and South East Asia), which have mutually influenced each other throughout history and consequently share large parts of their intellectual heritage. It can serve both as an introductory textbook for the future specialist and as a source of background knowledge for those whose primary interest lies outside Asian studies, be it religious studies, Western philosophy, political science or anything else. No previous knowledge of the history or cultures of this region is presupposed, entanglement in specific debates is avoided and names and terms have been kept to the minimum. If you think that an educated person anywhere in the world should know who are St Augustine, Luther, and Mother Theresa or Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein or Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Marx, or what is the meaning of ‘cardinal sin’, *cogito*, and ‘separation of powers’, the names and terms printed bold in this book are those you should be familiar with from a range of Asian points of view. I have done my best to keep the scope of the book equally balanced throughout and to maintain a more or less similar level of coverage in all areas. The book thus addresses all teachings, schools, and individuals that have usually been included in the range of such introductory intellectual histories. However, the reader will notice that some authors and ideas not always present in similar overviews, such as feminist theorists, have been given more space here than has been customary up to now.

The worldviews described in this book influence the choices and actions of the people who currently make up about one half of the world's population. This alone is

reason enough to be interested in Asia, but there is more. Having been economically handicapped for over a century by Western domination and inefficient, if not directly harmful domestic politics, Asian countries have now emerged to form the world's most quickly developing region, one that can no longer be excluded from global decision-making. Culturally, geographically and politically, Asia is perhaps more diverse than any other part of the world. Dominated by two ancient, multilayered, and rich civilizations, India and China, this region is the home of some of the world's oldest and worthiest literary and philosophical cultures, theatrical traditions, and aesthetic systems. So undoubtedly at least some knowledge of Asian worldviews is necessary for anyone with an interest in the world beyond one's own home ground, were it for cultural history or current political and economic affairs.

Of course, traditional opposition pairs such as ‘east–west’ always rely on simplifications. Norway differs from Portugal and Texas from Scotland perhaps more significantly than Singapore from Vancouver. Moreover, for the purposes of this book the ‘West’ includes also a large portion of what most Westerners consider to be in the East, namely the Islamic world. This may seem strange, because religious wars throughout centuries and recent political conflicts as well as European colonial presence in the ‘Orient’ have shaped the image of Muslims for most Westerners as the Other, whose cultural and social habits are incompatible with ‘Western values’. However, historically and etymologically, Islam is most certainly a part of ‘Western’ culture, sharing both in the traditions of Greek antiquity – which it actually preserved for Europe during the times when the West was militantly fundamentalist – and the Judaic legacy of monotheism. Muslims themselves have always felt a unity with other ‘people of the Book’, that is, those whose religion is based on the foundations of the Old

Testament, and Islamic thought has exercised a decisive influence on Western intellectual history through the work of such thinkers as, for example, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) or Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Thus, even though Islam is prominently present also in Asia, it is treated there as a Western import that has taken on local colour, but nonetheless has its roots elsewhere – not unlike Christianity or Marxism. The reader who would like to be better informed about the teachings of Islam will find a few suggestions in the section of further reading recommendations at the back of this book.

As a result, the term ‘Asia’ does not refer in this book to the entire geographical range that includes also the Middle East, the majority of the territory of Russia and the former Soviet republics of central Asia, but only to those parts of Asia that are usually addressed in publications dedicated to ‘Asian religions’, ‘Asian philosophies’, and ‘Asian politics’, namely south, east and southeast Asian countries as well as Tibet. More attention has been dedicated to the two most ancient civilizations of Asia, India and China, as well as to Japan as the first successful modernizing country to have emerged from outside the traditional West. Smaller subchapters have been dedicated to Korea, Tibet, Indic South East Asia and Vietnam, not because their intellectual contributions would be less valuable, but largely due to the fact that these regions have, for historical reasons, had less impact on the global processes and the interest in their intellectual history has been mostly academic up to the present.

There are quite a few good introductions to the religions, philosophies and political ideologies of each of the countries and regions that this book deals with, but most of the time these different types of convictions and beliefs are kept separate. However, as soon as we leave the Western cultural environment, the division of worldviews into

‘religions’, ‘philosophies’, and ‘political theories’ starts to obscure more than it reveals. Philosophy and religion have been in a complicated relationship in the West, almost since their moment of separation, when Socrates was accused of disrespect for the gods, yet many Western philosophers, too, have been devoutly religious and have made significant efforts to bring their beliefs and their reasoning into harmony. Religions can seldom manage without a certain metaphysical grounding, and we often see them prompting rulers how to conduct their affairs properly. Political ideologies are always grounded in theories of justice and ideas about the course of history, which are related to both the religious and the philosophical convictions of their proponents. It therefore makes sense, especially when stepping on unfamiliar ground, to highlight these connections rather than the divisions, and to treat worldviews as holistic, even if they occasionally seem incoherent to us – they seldom do to the people whose lives they guide.

But we might want to go even further than that and question at the outset the very validity of the concepts ‘religion’, ‘philosophy’, and ‘ideology’ as such for a broader perspective. Most Westerners associate religion on a non-analytical level with belief in a god, or gods, which is grounded in a certain doctrine, one normally fixed in scriptures and upheld by an institution of spiritual professionals. Religions are also exclusive and make strong claims on the identity of the individuals who profess them, often causing distrust or even open hatred between religiously defined communities. Philosophy, in turn, is a kind of rational and conceptual inquiry into the first principles of how the world is, how we are in it, and how we should reason about things, while political theories and ideologies are sets of principles on which their proponents consider the build-up of society and its governing should be

based – these principles can also be implicit and presented to the community as a sort of natural order, which nonetheless does not affect their ideological character.

All of these commonsensical assumptions are challenged to a certain degree by Asian worldviews. In fact, what is known as an Indian or Chinese religion and philosophy may not correspond to these tentative definitions at all. Quite a few so-called religions, such as early Buddhism or Confucianism, do not speak about any supernatural agency, others, such as Shintō, do not have doctrines or scriptures. Their institutions, like the huge Buddhist monasteries of pre-Islamic India, may appear more similar to what we call universities than to what look like monasteries from our point of view. And people can often identify with several religions at the same time in many regions of the area. Strangely enough, the term ‘religion’ is often forced on such worldviews that lack some, if not most of the characteristics many Westerners consider to be core properties of religion – such as the belief in a transcendent agency – while the label of ‘philosophy’ is being denied to sophisticated conceptual constructions because they lack some particular element that the critic considers crucial, even though there are Western thinkers, who are legitimately called philosophers and lack that same element as well.

The entanglement of different intellectual pursuits is also one of the reasons why the book is organized according to a historical principle rather than treating worldviews such as Buddhism or Confucianism one by one. Asian worldviews are more often than not lacking in the type of jealousy that characterizes Western religions, and ideas, motifs, and practices migrate relatively freely over their borders. Thus, for example, the Japanese Shintō took shape as a kind of an institution only when the Dao creed had entered Japan from China, and the Dao creed itself had been inspired to do the

same by Buddhism, which had been imported to China from India. A treatment by tradition might perhaps encourage us to emphasize the borders between them, while progressing along the historical timeline makes it easier to trace borrowings and influences and to understand how and why the worldviews developed in the way they did.

Another related problem that often occurs in literature is the separation of classical heritages from the ideas of the present. Excellent books on traditional thought seldom venture to see it reflected in modern ideas, and brilliant analyses of new views often summarize their classical origins in succinct introductions and then proceed to treat the thinkers of the last 150 years exclusively in the context of Western discourses. These have undeniably played a decisive role in the development of present-day Asian societies and their worldviews, but the ways how all these Western discourses have been received, interpreted, and modified can hardly be understood without a sufficient knowledge of past thought systems. It could be said that many people in contemporary Asia operate with parallel conceptual structures in which traditional ideas and Western notions are used side by side. A treatment of Asian ways of thought as simply local and possibly imperfect versions of universal patterns best exemplified by Western cultures is not only racist and imperialist, it is also quite wrong. Asian ideas have been in dialogue with Western thought in the past and should be doing so also in the future, and mutual understanding between structurally different cultures should start with an open approach to the other. This book is for those who would like to take the first step on this way and I can only hope that it will inspire its readers to pursue their study of Asian worldviews forward to higher levels of competence.

The transcription of Indian names and terms is given in a simplified spelling, thus Shankara instead of Śaṅkara and

Vishishtādvaita instead of Viśiṣṭādvaita, given that the nuances of pronunciation indicated by these diacritics are largely ignored also by advanced readers of Indian texts. Unlike in many texts that use a simplified spelling, the distinction between short and long vowels is maintained and the reader is encouraged to make note of it. Chinese terms and names have been written in the pinyin transcription unless used in a different form by the persons in question, Japanese terms and names are given in the modified Hepburn transcription, Korean names are given in the Revised Romanization system, with the exception of widespread family names such as Kim and Pak/Park. Vietnamese names appear in the quoc ngu Latin script without the diacritics, Tibetan names in phonetic approximations regularly used in literature.

Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of quoted source texts are my own.

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I hope colleagues will forgive me that instead of quoting them by name, I refer to their (as well as my own) views as 'recent scholarship' throughout this book which, meant as it is for novices in the discipline, is in any case already overcrowded with names and terms. But let those to whom my work is most directly indebted be listed here (in alphabetical order): Roger Ames, Stephen C. Angle, Christopher Bartley, Douglas Berger, John Berthrong, Richard Bowring, Bidyut Chakrabarty, Anne Cheng, Chung-ying Cheng, Julia Ching, George Chryssides, Edward Chung, Philip Clart, Fred Clothey, Arthur Cotterell, Paul Dundas, Gavin Flood, Jeaneane Fowler, James D. Frankel, Edmund S. Fung, Yiu-ming Fung, Jonardon Ganeri, Jay Garfield, Richard Gombrich, Angus Graham, Chad Hansen, Chang Hao, Peter Harvey, Richard Hayes, James Heisig, Barbara Hendrischke, Radhika Herzberger, Tze-ki Hon, Yong Huang, Tao Jiang, Matthew Kapstein, Thomas Kasulis, Halla Kim, Nick Knight, Gereon Kopf, Karyn Lai, Whalen Lai, Jae-Cheon Lim, Liu Feng, JeeLoo Liu, Donald S. Lopez Jr., David Loy, Dan Lusthaus, Vera Mackie, John Makeham, Linnart Mäll, Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, John Maraldo,

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1
India

Introductory remarks. India is home to one of the oldest continuous civilizations on Earth and simultaneously to a degree of cultural variativity with which few other regions can compare. It is also the birthplace of many inventions and discoveries that have influenced the development of science, philosophy, linguistics, literature, art, architecture, theatre, and religion far beyond its borders. Indian religions have attracted a large following in many Asian countries and Buddhism, in particular, around the whole world. Today, the Republic of India, with a population over 1.3 billion people, is the world's biggest democracy. At present, India has the world's seventh biggest economy, but only ranks third in purchasing power parity. It is projected to bypass the United States in the next decades and rank second only to China on this scale. Besides, when we speak of the ‘Indian subcontinent’, we do not think only of India as a country, but also of quite a few neighbouring states that have a common cultural history with it and, for some of these, experts project similarly spectacular growth. What takes place in these societies, however, is difficult to understand without a knowledge of the background concepts that inform all spheres of thinking in Indian and related cultures, from the most general views of how the universe is organized to particular processes of decision-making and political preferences.

All of this should be enough to promote interest in Indian thought. Nonetheless, it would be just as worth studying even if India would not have such a growing role in the world of the present. Some Hindu and Buddhist philosophical systems belong to the most profound

achievements of human thought. Indian views on language, logic, psychological processes as well as ontological problems have historically influenced Western thought and are able to contribute to philosophical debates also in the present. Many twentieth century landmarks of Western philosophy bear similarities to the positions of Indian thinkers, which put these advances into a much broader perspective. The developments of science, the move from a Newtonian space populated primarily by solid, self-identical objects to relativity and quantum physics, have lent even more actuality to Indian thought, which historically has developed many categories and conceptualizations that are often better equipped to speak of such phenomena than the language of traditional Western metaphysics.

Periods of cultural history. The highly advanced Harappan civilization, which dominated the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent for the better part of the second millennium BCE, has unfortunately left us only with very short inscriptions, up to now undeciphered. Thus, the documented history of India begins with the advent of the Aryans, a mixed company of nomadic tribes who shared an Indo-European language, which later evolved into Sanskrit. Starting with the arrival of the Aryans, we can divide the historical development of Indian thought into six distinct periods. First, there is the Vedic period (c. 1500–600 BCE), which has received its name after the Vedas, initially orally transmitted Aryan scripture, which allegedly forms the basis of the Hindu worldview to this day. During that time, a worldview usually called **Brahmanism** was developed out of the Indo-European shared corpus of beliefs, possibly influenced by a substratum derived from the Harappan civilization, and reflecting the adaptation to local circumstances that the Aryan society went through during that time. One of these was the emergence of the **caste** system, which placed the priests at the top of the social

ladder. A theory of divinely sanctioned kingship helped them to maintain this position even though they did not directly hold any political power after states began to consolidate.

The Vedic period is followed by the period of reform movements (c. 600–200 BCE), sometimes also called the period of ‘second urbanization’. During this time, social processes, notably the transformation of a large number of small-scale settlements into republican states collectively governed by the warrior estate, led to religious innovation, which opposed the simultaneous opposite development of strict social divisions within the Brahmanist tradition. The questioning of the Brahmanist worldview by such reform movements, primarily the Jains and the Buddhists, also triggered a sophisticated response on the traditionalist side that started the development of new practices and religious trends that gradually formed what we now call **Hinduism**.

It is also during this time that the first contacts of the Indian civilization with other cultures were established. The eastern outposts of the Iranian empire of the Achaemenids served to open up both trade and the movement of ideas. Towards the end of the period of reform movements, India was briefly invaded by Alexander the Great (327–325 BCE), which inaugurated a dialogue between Greek and Indian thought, with ideas moving in both directions. Even though Alexander retreated quite soon, Hellenic states continued to exist for some time in the Indian north-west and, a few centuries afterwards, Greek and Roman traders started a commercial maritime traffic to the extent that trade stations were established in the south of India.

Soon after Alexander, India was united into a short-lived empire by the Maurya dynasty (c. 322–180 BCE), which inaugurated the period of classical Indian culture (c. 200

BCE–1200 CE), during which kingdoms were the norm of government, even though only one of them, the empire of the Guptas (c. 240–590 CE), gained control of most of the subcontinent for a longer period of time. The culture of the classical period is characterized by a highly sophisticated urban lifestyle, a tremendous amount of literature in a variety of genres as well as theatre, music, and science. During that time Buddhism and Hinduism existed side by side in India and influenced each other, and both of them also spread to neighbouring countries. The Hindu religion became dominant in both continental and maritime South East Asia, while Buddhism spread to the south and south-east, on the one hand, and to the north and north-east (China and Tibet), on the other.

But this was not to last. The start of a new era was predicted by waves of immigration of Parsis (Persians), the followers of the ancient Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism, fleeing from Muslims who were taking over their country. The period of Islamic conquests (c. 1200–1800) led the Indian subcontinent to be dominated by Muslim rulers, dynasties of various origins replacing each other until the Mughals finally established themselves as the rulers of the country. The Muslims introduced Islam to India, but the greatest rulers of the Mughal empire, such as Akbar (1542–1605), were tolerant leaders interested in interfaith dialogue rather than the subjugation of all other religions. This led to attempts at the synthesis of Muslim beliefs with the Hindu heritage – from one such effort, the creed of the Sikhs emerged – and fierce struggles for domination. Buddhism, however, having already lost much of its royal patronage before the Muslim invasion, now suffered a final blow from which it never fully recovered in India.

The discovery of the sea route around Africa to India by Vasco da Gama (1498) soon led to an era of colonial wars, during which the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British

vied for control of the Indian subcontinent. The British finally emerged victorious over their competitors as well as the Mughal empire and its descendant states. Modern Indian thought (approximately from 1850 onwards), started to emerge already under the British colonial regime and provided the discourses for a cultural and political independence movement. Contemporary Indian thought, from after the end of the colonial rule and the partition of the subcontinent (1947), presents us with multiple efforts at synthesis of concepts inherited from the past and imported from the West, and this dialogue is still ongoing. However, this has also been the period when various nationalist and fundamentalist ideologies have tried to gain control of the public space.

Linguistic diversity. It should be noted that cultural and linguistic diversity has been one of the characteristic features of the Indian subcontinent for many centuries, and attempts to create discourses for living together have constantly competed with conservative strivings to separate different ethnic and religious groups from each other. The Aryan tribes that invaded India spoke Indo-European dialects that were related to English and many other European languages, while many indigenous people (possibly including the creators of the Harappan civilization) spoke Dravidian dialects, the forefathers of modern Tamil, Telugu, and other languages.

The classical Indian civilization was based on the single, shared, and strictly normed literary language of Sanskrit. However, Sanskrit was a learned skill for all its users, who spoke a variety of Indo-European and Dravidian languages as their mother tongues – a situation quite similar to medieval Europe, where Latin was used for official and scholarly purposes, while local vernacular languages were used in daily communication. After Sanskrit lost its position due to the Islamic conquest, new Indian languages (Hindi,

Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, and so on) have gradually developed into full-fledged vehicles of cultural self-expression and modern Dravidian languages have similarly been able to establish themselves. This has created a cultural and linguistic diversity comparable perhaps only to Europe, which also functions as a political and supranational entity with a shared cultural base.

Practice. Before moving on to the discussion of the views expressed in Indian thought systems, it should be pointed out that none of these were conceived for mere intellectual beauty or out of the need to learn the truth for its own sake. They were meant to elucidate and give a conceptually sound foundation to the various methods to achieve, or at least proceed towards, a fulfilment of one's purpose in life. For most of these systems, this goal was synonymous with ‘liberation’ or ‘emancipation’ from the circle of rebirths. Knowledge about the architecture of the universe and its internal dynamism was only necessary in order to understand why and how the practice one had undertaken would lead to this goal. Not all forms of practice needed such a justification – for some, the intellectualism of the Hindu philosophical systems might even appear as a hindrance rather than help in their religious advancement. However, for most Hindus, practice pervades their life in any case: to be alive is tantamount to engendering new karma, and being careful about it is not necessarily a distinct activity or sphere of life, but just a commonsensical attitude to things like, for example, being mindful of what one eats or drinks or remembering to have one's documents in order before a journey. Ritualist practice is thus also a way to maximize the positive karma-producing potential of one's position in the world. Just as medieval Europeans, Indians did not have a distinct word for *religion*, which was just another natural aspect of their life.

All in all, there are three distinct directions of practice that most Indian worldviews could take: ritualist, ascetic, or devotionalist. All three can be traced back to the scriptures. *Ritualist* practice derives from the assumption that transcendent agency responds to ritualist action and can therefore be manipulated by priests who are, through the scriptures, privy to secret knowledge of how this is done. By performing certain lower-level rituals laypeople may similarly assure themselves of a certain degree of goodwill of the gods and contribute to the upholding of the cosmic order. This is in accordance with the view that the logical order of the universe is manifested in the social hierarchy. Therefore the kind of involvement in ritual practice expected from people with different social standing and in different stages of life varies accordingly.

Ascetic practices are grounded in the belief that by controlling the body one can increase and manipulate the energy of life and put it to unexpected uses. In particular, the epics abound with stories how ascetics, by accumulating spiritual power, can perform supernatural acts. On a more realistic level, asceticism of varying degrees has been advocated by some Hindu and Jain traditions as a method for calming the emotions and clearing the mind to such a level that one can perceive the truth and attain liberation. Ascetic practices are normally combined with psychotechnical exercises, including various forms of meditation, which are meant to emancipate the mind from the confines of daily routines and to control its activity. The historical Buddha has warned against ascetic practices as an excess and advocated a ‘middle path’ between extreme approaches to the body, but also advocates meditation as the way to spiritual progress. This is in accordance with the Buddhist rejection of all attachments: when someone starts to engage in ascetic mortification of the flesh, it may quickly turn into a sport

practised for its own sake to commit increasingly further feats of corporal austerity. However, such an attitude is not conducive to mental liberation at all.

The last variety of practice is *devotionalism*, which is an attitude first met in some Vedic hymns that credit a particular deity with maximum power and positive attributes that can just as well be attributed to some other deity in some other hymn. Constantly ongoing activities of worship and veneration, dedicated to particular deities, have later become the main form of practice of some sectarian movements that have gathered a strong following. In particular, the *bhakti* movement, which arose in south India in the seventh century, has been influential in supporting the split of Hinduism into branches of devotees of different gods, primarily Vishnu and Shiva. The word *bhakti* means ‘devotion, love, attachment’, but a primarily spiritual one, even if sex and erotic connotations often also have a significant role in Hindu beliefs.

The Brahmanist Worldview

Background. The worldview that developed from the beliefs of the Indo-Aryan tribes who moved into India between 1500 and 1300 BCE is designated by two terms, Brahmanism and Hinduism. Hinduism normally refers to the newer (including present) forms of it, because the term ‘Hindu’ started to gain general currency only after the Muslim invasion as a term for people who were not Muslims. However, their forms of worship started to evolve already during the classical period. Sometimes the term ‘Hindu’ is also used for the much earlier forms of this religion, especially in popular literature.

During the Vedic period, Indian society went through a series of changes. Initially, it was a fairly egalitarian association of householders, who were responsible for both

the economic well-being of their dependents and the performance of necessary rituals, that is, sacrifices to the gods. Soon enough, the society evolved into a much more strictly organized hierarchical system, with an institutionalized division of labour. This fostered the appearance of small states and the development of urban culture. Dealing with the divine became a profession and the knowledge associated with it a closely guarded form of cultural capital, which was used by the priests to guarantee themselves the leading position in the social system.

Eventually, the political system started to change and the privileged status of the priests came to be questioned by new religious movements that did not recognize their authority. These reform movements, two of which (the Jain religion and Buddhism) have survived to this day, forced Brahmanism to reinterpret some of its own basic tenets and started a philosophical dialogue which provided Indian thought with a broadly accepted conceptual foundation for centuries to come.

Vedic scripture. The word *veda* means ‘knowledge’. Technically, the term refers to four groups of texts, each of which is headed by a collection (*samhita*) of hymns and formulas used during the sacrifice ritual. However, the titles of these collections all contain the word ‘veda’, so quite often the term is used to refer to these alone, without the other texts in the group. Collectively, the Vedic scriptures are also called *shruti*, ‘what is heard’, because they were initially transmitted in oral form, and opposed to authored treatises as well as the epic poems that describe, in wildly mythicized form, the history of ancient Aryan India. Older sources credit the vedas to ancient sages, who have given shape to this authorless wisdom, but in some texts we find them also attributed to the creator-god Brahmā. The orthodox tradition considers the Vedas to be uncreated eternal truth.

The oldest and most important samhita is called ***Rigveda***. It is divided into 10 books and contains the hymns and invocations (1017 in number) used for summoning gods to participate in the ritual. Other collections contain formulas to be used during the ritual and after the ritual, checking its efficacy. There is a great deal of overlap between the five collections. While the *Rigveda* has been partially (and sometimes also in full) translated into several Western languages, including English, and is widely studied by scholars of comparative religion and mythology as well as philosophy, most of the others are of interest mainly for specialists in early India.

The secondary texts in each group are divided into three further categories and present early comments on Vedic knowledge. Of these, the last category of the ***upanishads*** is the most important. This group of texts originates from the very end of the Vedic age and the period of reform movements, reflecting the changes towards a more philosophically grounded worldview that Brahmanism was undergoing at the time.

veda ('knowledge') the scriptural tradition of Brahmanism/Hinduism, collections of ancient, initially orally transmitted hymns and comments to them

Vedic gods. Most Vedic hymns are dedicated to a particular deity, although there are some that evoke them collectively or tell the story of creation. The gods of the Vedas are called *devas* and *asuras*. While deva remained the standard designation of a divine being, asuras were later described as demons. The early Vedic texts still talk about them in a positive key and sometimes even the same deity can be categorized in both groups. The difference, however, must have been developing from earlier on, as it had been one of the causes to split the Aryan tribes into

Indians and Iranians – for Iranians, it was the asuras who were the good deities and devas were considered evil.

Many of these deities are originally of shared Indo-European stock, with possibly a few additions from the Harappan civilization. Thus, for example, we find in some hymns of the *Rigveda* invocations to Dyaus pitar (Father Heaven), who is recognizably the same figure as the Greek Zeus pater or the Roman Jupiter. In the Vedas, Dyaus pitar is usually mentioned together with Prithivi, or Mother Earth. In contrast, we know almost nothing about the Harappan gods. There is a figure, depicted on many seals, sitting in a lotus posture with horned headgear and an erect penis, has sometimes been identified as a predecessor of the god Shiva, even though Shiva (bearing the name Rudra) only plays a minor part in the Vedas. Most of the Vedic gods are male, but there are a few goddesses as well.

Characteristically, many Vedic deities are personalized natural phenomena, so Agni (Fire, important for his central role in rituals), Vāyu (Wind), Sūrya (Sun), Vāk (Speech), and Soma (a certain hallucinogenic drug) are glorified by names that are the usual Sanskrit words referring to these things. Similarly, the river Sarasvati also appears as a deity.

The greatest of all Vedic gods, however, is **Indra**, whose name has no other meaning. He is depicted as a warrior, and the most important story about him is the slaying of the dragon or serpent Vritra, the personification of drought. Later on, Indra becomes the god of thunder and the smashing weapon he uses is transformed into a thunderbolt. He is also often depicted consuming large amounts of the hallucinogenic soma, which gives him power to combat his enemies. One of his companions is Vishnu, who later eclipses him as one of the central figures of the pantheon.

The Vedic gods can be grouped into categories, but they are not organized into a clearly hierarchical system, where one of them would have the power to command others. Hymns dedicated to each of them mostly extol the virtues of that particular god as the supreme figure, and they often credit their addressee with the creation of the universe, while another hymn may ascribe that feat to some other deity.

> He has a form corresponding to every form; this form of his is for display.
>
> Indra keeps going about in many forms through his magical powers, for ten hundred fallow bays are yoked for him.
>
> (*Rigveda* VI 47: 18, trans. S. Jamison and J. Brereton)

Similarly, to Greek gods, Vedic gods, especially Indra, can adopt different shapes. This eventually led to the appearance of another well-known characteristic feature of Indian deities: they have certain more stable forms in which they can appear among the humans of the Earth and perform certain tasks. These forms came to be called *avatars*. The word means ‘descent’, that is, the descent from heavens of a deity to assume an earthly shape. The word does not yet appear in Vedic texts, although the idea is already there, but it is met in some Brahmanist texts written during the period of reform movements. The concept is most often associated with the god Vishnu, but some others are known to engage in such appearances as well.

avatar the form a deity takes to appear and act on Earth

Towards the end of the Vedic period, we see a new figure appearing on the scene who soon displaces Indra as the greatest god. This is Brahmā, more powerful than any other deity, the creator of the universe, before whom all other deities are just as powerless as humans. The appearance of Brahmā signalizes the transition from a mythological pantheon to a philosophically conceptualized view of divinity, as elaborated in the last layer of Vedic texts, the *upanishads*, where **Brahmā**, a personalized creator god (a masculine noun) gradually approaches *Brahman* (a neuter noun signifying 'foundation'), the absolute, ubiquitous world-spirit.

Upanishads . The *upanishads* are only loosely associated with the samhitas and even though they claim to uphold their authority, they present a worldview that is already quite different from what can be deduced from earlier Vedic scriptures. They present a philosophical response – or an array of related responses – to the changes in the society and the challenges to the Brahmanist worldview posed by the reform movements.

A later tradition identifies the *upanishads* as the final and deepest teaching that a knowledgeable person has to grasp in life. During the first centuries of the common era, the followers of the Brahmanist tradition started to divide the ideal human life into four stages (student, householder, forest ascetic, recluse), but some scholars think that such a division was already being invented at the time when the principal *upanishads* were written. In any case, it conveniently corresponds to the fourfold division of Vedic scripture and credits the *upanishads* with the ultimate wisdom of the sage. The precise original meaning of the word *upanishad* is unclear, and the classical explanation of it as 'secret teachings', meant only for the most advanced followers, is unfounded. Recent scholarship has suggested that the word indicates a 'juxtaposition', that is, a doctrine

establishing an equivalence between the external and the internal, or the macrocosm and the microcosm.

There are altogether more than 200 *upanishads* of varying length and importance. The more important ones have been composed during the eighth to fourth centuries BCE. The two best-known texts of this category are the *Brihadāranyaka* and the *Chāndogya upanishads*, which both date from before the advent of Buddhism and thus represent the internal development of Brahmanist thought.

Concepts and doctrines. As any student of Asian worldviews quickly discovers, the very terms Indian thought uses to speak about the world differ considerably from the vocabulary Westerners usually take for granted. However, even though there is considerable variation between Indian worldviews as well, most of them share a common conceptual vocabulary that has been developed by and inherited from Brahmanism and is thus shared also by those religions and philosophical schools that have challenged it and do not recognize the authority of the Vedas.

In Greece, one of the foundational moments of philosophy was the trial of Socrates, accused of disrespect for gods. The early impulses inspiring the Brahmanist philosophical tradition, however, stem from the opposing need to uphold the worldview expounded in the scriptures. That said, the concept of divinity in Indian and Greek thought is quite different, even though both systems are polytheist. While Greek gods are organized in a hierarchy, on the one hand, and myths report their (very human) struggles, on the other hand, Indian gods form a curious polycentric system of various layers. The scriptures contain several conflicting accounts of creation and texts dedicated to particular gods often place their particular object of veneration above all others. Perhaps this could be interpreted as excessive

politeness – after all, the goal of the hymns was to incline the gods to grant what was asked of them during rituals of sacrifice. This resulted in an interesting view: knowledgeable humans started to see themselves on par with the gods they were addressing, because their activities were able to manipulate them. Professionals well-versed in techniques of interaction with the divine did not think they were at the mercy of their gods any longer. On the contrary, it was them who controlled the rituals on which the gods were dependent. The knowledge of the general order which the gods also had to obey became the real target of learning. This supported the emergence of a strictly hierarchical society in which the priests, or Brāhmans, were at the top, the warriors-rulers (*kshatriya*) ranked second, the self-employed (*vaishya*, or agriculturalists, merchants, and owners of handicraft businesses) ranked third, and hired labour (*shūdra*) ranked fourth. The upper three castes were called ‘twice-born’, because their male members had to go through an initiation ritual that qualified them for instruction in some scriptural wisdom, while hired labour was not supposed to do that. At the bottom of this society were the casteless, or untouchables, contact with whom was considered polluting. These included many indigenous ethnic groups as well as such professions that were not considered pure enough by the dominant culture. A legitimation of this division is to be found in one of the scriptural hymns, which describes the emergence of the universe from the symbolically sacrificed body of a primary Man.