Source: Owen Ware, *Indian Philosophy and Yoga in Germany* (Routledge 2024)

Appendix: Images of India

Voltaire and Herder

I have in my hands the translation of one of the oldest manuscripts in the world.
Voltaire[1]

Voltaire and the Vedas

By 1760, flocks of visitors were making pilgrimage to Ferney, just outside of Geneva, where they sought the company of François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire. In the autumn of that year, one Comte de Maudave arrived at Ferney on the recommendation of Jean la Rond d'Alembert, Voltaire's friend and fellow polymath. Maudave was not the most distinguished of Voltaire's guests, but he did come with a rare gift. Little is known of their encounter other than what Voltaire later reported in letters: that Maudave, in his capacity as governor of Karikal, had managed to earn the trust of a local Brahmin who worked for the Indian Company and was fluent in French. It was through this Brahmin that Maudave was able to secure what many European scholars had dreamed of possessing for over a century: an authentic commentary on the Vedas.

One can imagine Voltaire's delight as the French officer revealed this text before his eyes, and the world would soon hear the tone of triumph in Voltaire's words as he shared its contents to readers. For years Voltaire had speculated that a pure form of monotheism, and an equally pure form of morality, predated the Abrahamic traditions from which Christianity grew. With the text brought by Maudave, titled *Ezour Vedam*, he now possessed the proof. Prior to this, Voltaire's attitude to India was one of mild reverence. In the first edition of his *Essai sur l'histoire universelle* (1754), for instance, he placed China at the beginning of his historical chronology, and the section on the "Indies" made only passing reference to Indian religion. "These Brahmins," he wrote, "have in their hands one of the oldest

books in the world, written by their first sages, in which only one supreme being is recognized."[2] In the 1757 edition Voltaire asked whether it is conceivable, "amidst so many extravagant opinions and bizarre ideas," that the people of ancient India "recognized, like us, an infinitely perfect Being." These ideas, he answered, "are contained in the Vedam [i.e., the Vedas], which is the book of the ancient Brahmins."[3]

At this time, knowledge of the Vedas in Europe was entirely second hand. Reports of their existence had been making their way from India since the early sixteenth century, when Christian missionaries made contact with Brahmins in South Asia. In writing his "universal history," Voltaire's understanding of the world of India was mediated largely by travelogues and missionary reports. From these texts he could piece together the outlines of a religion committed to the existence of a single divinity. Lacking an original text, of course, he could go no further than hypothesize – that is, until the *Ezour Vedam* came into his possession.[4] In a letter dated February 24, 1761, we find Voltaire sharing his excitement over this discovery with the marquis d'Argence:

> If you are curious about news of philosophy, I will tell you that an officer, commander of a small fort on the Coromandel coast, brought me the gospel of the ancient Brahmins from India; this is, I believe, the most curious and oldest book we have.[5]

Later that year he wrote a similar report to Jacob Vernes, saying that the *Ezour Vedam* is "assuredly very authentic." It is "all the more ancient," he stressed, "as it fights the beginnings of idolatry."[6] The implications of this discovery were not lost on Voltaire; if anything, the *Ezour Vedam* confirmed his suspicion that the idolatry, superstition, and "fabulous mythology" of Indian religion were corruptions of an original, pure source.[7] By what right, then, could anyone claim that Hebrew monotheism was prototypical? While this question was never far from the surface of Voltaire's engagement with India, his target was closer to home. By what right could the clergy of France claim authority for the Catholic church if its theological tenets were preceded by an older foundation? Having pushed back the chronology of universal history to India, Voltaire could declare that India has "the oldest form of religion," one based on the idea of a "Supreme Being" (*l'Être suprême*), and one that was free of "superstition and fanaticism."[8]

Not surprisingly, the discovery of a commentary on the Vedas led Voltaire to write new sections for his *Essai*, the most striking of which was titled "The Brahmins, the Vedas, and the Ezour Vedam." His language was nothing less than glowing. The first Brahmins were "peaceful

rulers," their people "mild and discerning," and their faith "simple and rational":

> It is so natural to believe in one God, to worship him, and to feel in the bottom of one's heart that he must be just. … It takes time to establish arbitrary laws, but a brief moment is all one needs to teach a number of people assembled to believe that there is a God, and to listen to the voice of their own hearts.[9]

Voltaire's contemporaries would not have had any difficulty reading between the lines of such remarks. The religion of ancient India offered not only an example of a primordial monotheism, one that predated the writings of the Hebrew patriarchs: for Voltaire, the Vedas offered a foil for everything that was wrong with the clergy. Where the religion of the Brahmins was rational, the Catholic church was opposed to reason, and where the Brahmins taught a simple faith of the heart, the church issued multiple laws, rules, clauses, and subclauses, all of which betrayed the "natural" belief Voltaire found alive in all persons, the belief in "one God."

My task here is to review this eighteenth-century debate about the chronology of human history, with the aim of providing a context for understanding the controversies that would later surround the reception of Indian philosophy. I will begin by exploring why Voltaire affirmed the antiquity of the Vedas in an effort to combat the Catholic church and its claims to authority in matters of religion. Then, in the remaining sections, I will turn to the work of Herder, whose relationship with India is often in tension with his conception of the Hebraic tradition. Contrary to his reputation as the "German father of Indomania," Herder's attitude toward India is more complex, and more ambivalent, than what scholars have supposed. As we shall see, Herder's late appreciation of ancient Indian religion did not alter his long-standing philosophy of history, which left room for the kind of anti-Hindu attitudes that would guide thinkers in the nineteenth century.

Voltaire's Deism

The passages I have already quoted might give the impression that it was Voltaire's discovery of a Vedic commentary alone that prompted him to see that monotheism and morality are not exclusive possessions of Christians or their Hebrew forebears. But the more we examine Voltaire's writings, the more we see that his enthusiasm for India was mediated in part by a long-standing interest in what came to be termed *deism*, otherwise known as "natural religion," according to which the basic tenets of religious faith are accessible through one's use of reason alone. This interest was sparked

during Voltaire's years of exile in England from 1726 to 1728, when he had occasion to study some of the most influential deistic thinkers of the era. While they did not constitute a unified front against Christian orthodoxy, the English deists inspired Voltaire to reflect upon his own religious views, and he soon settled upon two deistic commitments himself.

The first of these commitments is that belief in a single God can be established by attending to the arrangement of the material universe, which in the early eighteenth century was often likened to a giant clock. In the same way that, after spending time reflecting on the inner mechanism and arrangement of parts in a clock, one can infer the existence of a clockmaker, so too, Voltaire argued, one can infer the existence of a single Creator behind the created universe, and no belief in miracles or revelations is required to feel the force of this inference. Many English writers argued further that natural religion grounds an equally natural morality, which came to inform Voltaire's second deistic commitment. In *Christianity as Old as Creation*, for example, we find Matthew Tindal making this connection:

> By *Natural Religion*, I understand the Belief of the Existence of a God, and the Sense and Practice of those Duties which result from the Knowledge we, by our Reason, have of him and his Perfections, and of ourselves, and our own Imperfections; and of the relation we stand in to him and our Fellow-Creatures, so that the *Religion of Nature* takes in every thing that is founded on the Reason and Nature of things.[10]

Voltaire's heavily underlined copy of Tindal's book shows that he was impressed by such claims.[11] Not only does monotheism grow in the light of reason, but morality too has its source in "the nature of things"; in this respect morality is open to everyone, everywhere, and at all times. Voltaire joined Tindal and others in arguing that reflection is sufficient to establish a rational foundation for ethics and religion: "By natural religion," he writes, "I mean the moral principles common to humanity," all of which spring from a "law" known throughout the universe: "Do what you want people to do to you."[12] The person Voltaire would later define as the "true theist" is someone who says before God, "I adore and serve you"; this is the same person, he adds, who says "I love you" to the rest of humanity, including the "Turk, the Chinese, the Indian, and the Russian."[13]

On these grounds Voltaire staked his belief in God, and he could not understand why anyone would be content with the image of a created universe without a Creator. Nor could he see any reason for mediating faith through the structures of institutionalized religion, Christian or otherwise. For Voltaire, those structures at best confirm what reason can access on its own, making traditional religion unnecessary; or worse – and this was

his real cause for concern – they serve to keep people blind to the powers of reason, making traditional religion a threat. At the same time, the more Voltaire turned to the religion of ancient India as a foil for the present age, the more he had to separate the teachings of the Brahmins from their subsequent "corruptions." There was no shortage of denigrating reports of Indian religion transmitted to Europe through the work of missionaries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with Indian polytheism being a recurring topic of criticism. But even before he came into possession of the *Ezour Vedam*, Voltaire had to be selective in choosing which teachings to foreground, guided by his own deistic views.[14]

If Voltaire's eulogizing of India played a strategic role, it was never more transparent than in his tributes to the ancient Brahmins. "Isn't it plausible," he asks, "that the Brahmins were the first legislators of the earth, the first philosophers, the first theologians."[15] Elsewhere he even speaks of the Brahmins' morality as a system of "ten commandments":

> They are divided into three kinds: sins of the body, those of the word, those of the will. To strike, to kill one's neighbour, to rob him, to rape women, these are the sins of the body; to conceal, to lie, to insult, these are the sins of the word; those of the will consist in wishing for evil, in looking at the good of others with envy, in not being touched by the miseries of others. These ten commandments make us forgive all their ridiculous rites.[16]

Turning an eye to the present, Voltaire adds: "We obviously see that morality is the same among all civilized nations, while the most consecrated customs among a people may appear to others as extravagant or hateful."[17] To be sure, Voltaire did not go so far as to say that the ten commandments issued by the Hebrew God (as recorded in Exodus 20:2–6) bear any trace of Indian influence. But he had no need to make a claim of influence here: for the purposes of challenging the biblical chronology central to Christian orthodoxy, it was enough that he could cite a moral code older than anything found in the Books of Moses.

On Voltaire's account, the emerging portrait of the ancient Brahmins made their moral code appear simple, reasonable, and universal – another foil for what he took to be the arbitrary laws of the Catholic clergy. The Indian ethical commandments were more evidence, for Voltaire, that traditional religion separates us through beliefs, doctrines, and rituals, and that true morality brings people together because it reflects what is common to our nature: "We cannot repeat too often that all dogmas are different, and that morality is the same among all human beings who make use of their reason."[18] This is what inspired Voltaire's growing appreciation of ancient India. The Brahmins confirmed his conviction that our common means of

accessing the truths of religion and morality is reason, not revelation. Of course, before 1760, all Voltaire could do was guess at the contents of this ancient religion based on second-hand reports. But with the *Ezour Vedam*, he now possessed (or so he believed) a "commentary" on the Vedas, the next best thing to the Vedas themselves.

The Forgery

Since the day Voltaire announced the existence of this commentary, over two and a half centuries ago, the *Ezour Vedam* has been called many things: a "coarse forgery" (Müller), a "pious fraud" (Schlegel), a "notorious hoax" (Schwab), and a "poor compilation of Hindu and Christian doctrines mixed up together in the most childish way" (Figueira).[19] Still, it makes sense that someone seeking evidence of monotheism predating the Abrahamic traditions would have greeted the text with enthusiasm. And what may have inspired Voltaire's particular attachment to this text was its attack on Indian polytheism, along with its claim that true faith is based on the unity of a supreme God.

What complicates matters is that it takes little effort to see the *Ezour Vedam* for what it is: a document written by a Jesuit missionary, either with the aim of converting Indians to Christianity or with the aim of educating new recruits to engage Brahmins in debate. How could Voltaire, the most famous man of letters in the French Enlightenment, fall prey to the illusion of the text's authenticity? Whatever the cause, the irony has not escaped the attention of scholars. A text written by a Jesuit missionary was eventually turned into a forgery – under whose direction we do not know – and then, by a strange turn of events, made its way to the great *philosophe* François-Marie Arouet, in whose hands the *Ezour Vedam* became a weapon against the very institution behind its first author, the Catholic church.[20]

Even with the *Ezour Vedam*, however, Voltaire had to be selective in deciding which themes to foreground for his readers. The text consists of a dialogue between two characters, Biach and Chumantou. Biach, a religious leader, repents for having spread the teachings of polytheism, a "poisonous doctrine," and decries the "soulless century" of India as a time of "universal corruption." Turning to Chumantou, he makes a plea for help: "Be a leader for me, a father; save my soul; free me from error!"[21] Chumantou is willing to offer guidance, for he knows the true Vedas, which uphold a monotheistic God. Yet the tone he takes toward Biach is mostly reprimanding, and he shows no willingness to sympathize with Biach's plight. Voltaire approved of Chumantou's hard line against idolatry and his intolerance to superstition, and he cites these scenes of the dialogue as a way of placing the Vedas in a favourable light. On more than

one occasion Voltaire even calls attention to a section of the text where Chumantou recounts how God named the first man Adimo and the first woman Prokriti (evidently taken from the Sanskrit *prakṛti*, "materiality" or "nature").[22]

If Voltaire ever had occasion to speculate that the Hebrews borrowed from the ancient Brahmins, it was never more tempting than in this counterfeit cosmogony. These first human beings bear an uncanny resemblance to Adam and Eve, and Voltaire enjoyed having his readers decide which pair came first in the course of human history. Yet Voltaire does not mention Chumantou's diatribe on sin and the need for penance. He does not mention the punishment polytheists and idol worshippers can expect from God and the forgiveness they can hope to receive from Him if they abandon their errant ways. Nor do we hear of any element which makes the Brahmin priest sound like a Christian missionary hoping to save the Hindus (and there are many such elements in the book). All of these omissions from Voltaire's presentation are revealing, if only because they show the extent to which Voltaire had to meet this Vedic commentary halfway. He put the attack on polytheism front and centre, as well as parts of Chumantou's account of creation, leaving out the non-deistic themes that sustain much of the dialogue.

The fact that such themes did not shake Voltaire's faith in the text's authenticity goes to show how ignorant European writers were about the Vedas themselves. If Voltaire ever fell prey to moments of skepticism, they were never made public, nor were they put to the test by further study. He did take the opportunity to compare the contents of the *Ezour Vedam* with the latest works of British travellers from India, yet he detected enough similarity in their reports to trust the supposed Vedic commentary he possessed.[23] Voltaire himself had criticized previous scholars for writing universal history in the image of their own time, and he took pains to define his own philosophy of history as truly universal in scope.[24] The complaint would soon emerge, however, that Voltaire had done little to improve upon the methods of his predecessors, and that his "universal history" was more of a platform to stage his mixture of deism, classicism, and modern science.[25] For those who found this method lacking, Voltaire's work was not the place to begin a study of human history. A *new* philosophy of history would have to be established, some believed, one that would make a genuine encounter with past cultures possible.

Herder and the Hebrews

> At last, my dear Hartknoch, I can answer you, because one of my books is finished – and a very lovely one too. It is called *Another Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* [*Auch eine Philosophie der*

> *Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*]. … Fortunately it has little in common with Voltaire … , aside from the title. It is really my philosophy of history.[26]

So wrote Herder on August 10, 1773, during his time as head pastor in Bückeburg. At the age of twenty-nine, Herder had already distinguished himself through a number of writings, but this letter to Hartknoch shows the sense of anticipation he felt toward his first major work on history, which was published the following year in 1774.

Aside from the allusion to Voltaire's *Philosophie de l'histoire*, Herder's choice of title is revealing for a number of reasons. First, it signalled that his book belonged to a genre popularized by the French, one that aspired to cover the entire scope of human history across the world. It also signalled that the reader could expect something new (where "another" implies "an alternative"). Lastly, by calling attention to humanity's "education" or "formation" (*Bildung*), Herder was letting his audience know the stakes of the project. If we are able to approach history in the right way, and understand what path human beings had to traverse through the ages, then we can catch a glimpse of the path before us, that of a redemptive future. For this project to succeed, however, we need to avoid the mistakes made by previous writers – above all, in Herder's eyes, those made by Voltaire.[27]

Many writers come under attack in *Another Philosophy of History*, including Diderot, Hume, Helvétius, Montesquieu, Newton, and Winckelmann,[28] but there is no question that one of Herder's main adversaries was Voltaire. It becomes clear that Herder does not follow Voltaire in locating the centre of the "Orient" among the Brahmins of ancient India. *Another Philosophy of History* mentions "India" on just two occasions, both times in passing and without raising the question of India's chronological priority. This is surprising, all the more so given that Herder is credited for being the "German grandfather of Indomania,"[29] a view first defended by Paul Theodor Hoffmann over a century ago and adopted by most scholars since (including Willson, Taylor, Faust, and Herling).[30] During the years leading up to 1774, "Orient" in Herder referred to the "land of God" founded by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and "Hebraic" and "oriental" are synonymous terms in Herder's earlier writings.[31]

This is not to say that Herder was falling back on a biblical account of the origin of humanity. He was reaffirming it in subtle and increasingly clever ways. At the time, debates over universal history were in full swing, and Voltaire's work had triggered a predictable backlash from both members of the Church and scholars who wished to defend views of human history in line with the Abrahamic traditions. Herder was aware of a growing wave of scholarship from England that pointed to a South Asian origin of our cultural history, and the fact that this scholarship confirmed

the hypotheses of Voltaire must have been occasion for alarm. Yet Herder resisted making India the centre of his Orient, and this resistance continued to inform his thinking much longer than scholars have recognized.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his monumental yet unfinished *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menscheit* (*Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, 1784–1791).[32] On first glance, it might seem that Herder's view of the Orient underwent a shift in this work, as the title of section 3 suggests: "The Course of Civilization and History Provides Historical Evidence that the Human Species Originated in Asia." Herder would even go on to characterize the "cosmologies of India" as the "voice of the primeval Asiatic world," asking: "What then if we were to follow this voice and … endeavour to trace it to the original source?"

> This is indeed a treacherous path, as if one were to pursue a rainbow or Echo's voice; for as little as a child is able to give an account of its birth, though present at it, as little may we hope that the human species may provide us with historically rigorous reports of its creation, of the earliest teachings, of the invention of language, and of its first habituation.[33]

Herder agrees that it would be an "estimable advantage to possess knowledge of the most ancient tradition of the old Hindu people."[34] Nevertheless, in this same passage he discourages hope of ever accessing these treasures:

> We probably have long to wait for the original Sanskrit language as well as for the true Vedas of the Indians, and even then we can expect little of their most ancient tradition, as they themselves deem the first part of the Vedas to be lost.[35]

As Suzanne L. Marchand has shown, Herder found a way to reassert the primacy of the Abrahamic traditions while conceding the new chronology of human history advocated by Voltaire and others.[36] The solution he struck upon was to grant the *temporal* primacy of ancient India, as the birthplace of civilization, but then to affirm the *cultural* primacy of the Mosaic tradition, on the basis of surviving written artefacts. It was this distinction that allowed Herder to reframe the problem of universal history that Voltaire had set in motion. The search for the "origin of humankind" and the "beginning of history" was no longer a matter of chronology alone: what we needed, he argued, was an origin based on "*written* sources":

> Thus, even in terms of history, there remains nothing for us upon the broad extent of the earth but the written tradition which we commonly

> call the Mosaic. Laying aside all prejudice, and thus also without the slightest convictions as to its origin, we know that it is more than three thousand years old, and that it is indeed the oldest book possessed by our young species of humankind.[37]

This was effectively Herder's counterargument to Voltaire: all he had to do was appeal to the fact that, while nobody in Europe had yet laid eyes upon the oldest of Brahmanic works, the Books of Moses had been preserved and they were available to all. With such texts already on hand, why would anyone then wish to hazard the journey further East, where the trail of surviving texts recedes into a land of hearsay, fantasy, and fable?[38] Why, Herder asked, would anyone want to recollect the Indian *birthplace* of humanity when we have much better access to its Hebrew *childhood*?

Herder's *Scattered Leaves*

As it happens, this line of argument soon turned against Herder. Just as he was completing the *Ideas*, in which he lamented our lack of access to Sanskrit originals, two significant – and authentic – books appeared in translation for the first time, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Śakuntalā*, both of which gave European scholars a new window to look into India's cultural past.[39] Voracious reader that he was, Herder approached these texts with genuine excitement, and for a period of time they seem to change his view of India for the better.

This change appears in the fourth volume of Herder's *Zerstreute Blätter*, or *Scattered Leaves,* a collection of essays, translations, and fragments that Herder published in 1792.[40] One of the main topics of discussion is the play *Śakuntalā* by the classical Indian dramatist Kālidāsa, translated into English by Sir William Jones as *Sacontalá: Or, The Fatal Ring* (1789) but traditionally known as *The Recognition of Śakuntalā* (*Abhijñāna-śakuntalā*). Georg Forster produced a German translation in 1791, which Herder and Goethe read that same year.[41] Śakuntalā, the central character of the play, whom Kālidāsa describes as "virtue in human form,"[42] moved German readers with her devotion and gracefulness. Herder was likewise impressed by the moral qualities of Śakuntalā and the play as a whole, but what made the 1792 volume of *Scattered Leaves* a ground-clearing text was the way Herder supported his commentary on the play with insights drawn from another Indian classic, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which had only just become available to European readers.[43]

We do not know when Herder came into possession of the *Gītā*, but he did include a small selection of translations (the first to appear in German[44]) just prior to his discussion of *Śakuntalā*. And it is revealing to see what selections he chose, for among all of the *Gītā*'s complexities,

both literary and conceptual, Herder spotlights portions that convey the idea of God as an *active* and *indwelling* principle of things (saying little about the two main speakers of the dialogue: Lord Kṛṣṇa and the Pandava prince Arjuna). He also explains the Indian doctrine of creation, preservation, and destruction, which he interprets as three expressions of a single "power" (*Kraft*).[45] Thus, the result is a picture of Indian philosophy very much committed to *pantheism*, the idea that "One is all, and All is one,"[46] but with a *vitalistic* twist, since all things are presented as dynamic forces expressing the "Being of beings."[47] In short, Herder drew upon the two aspects of the *Gītā* he saw as representative of his own newly formulated system of metaphysics inspired by *Spinoza*.[48]

What similarities, then, did Herder find between Spinoza, who defended a controversial view of the God-nature relationship, and the *Gītā*? The answer takes us back a few years – to 1787 – when Herder wanted to reconcile Spinoza's philosophy with his conception of nature as a system of forces.[49] As I argued in Chapter 1, the result was a fusion of theories that some have labelled "vitalistic pantheism," the view that God exists in all things, not as a static substance but as a dynamic force. Herder was without question intrigued by the parallels he detected between this revised version of pantheism and the *Gītā*, so much so that he used nearly identical language in 1792 to describe the *Gītā*'s highest concept, that of Brahman. At one point he even defined Brahman as the indwelling divinity or "the Being of beings in everything," of which "no thing is a part," but instead "all things are in it."[50]

Many of these reflections came to inform Herder's treatment of *Śakuntalā*. The play revolves around Śakuntalā, daughter of the sage Vishwamitra, and Dushyanta, the king of Hastinapura. A chance encounter brings the two together in a forest, and upon meeting they fall in love. As a token of their love, Dushyanta gives Śakuntalā one of his rings, and the two young lovers plan to reunite back at the king's palace. But misfortunate befalls them twice: first, evil forces conspire to cloud Dushyanta's mind, and all his memories of Śakuntalā become erased during his separate journey home; then Śakuntalā loses the one token of her connection to the king, the "fatal ring." Upon her promised arrival to the palace, Dushyanta turns Śakuntalā away, having forgotten her, and she is then swept off to a divine grove. After a period of time, the ring is found and brought back to the king. The sight of it lifts the veil from his mind; he *remembers* Śakuntalā, now gone, and is torn by grief over his actions.[51] Yet the drama ends on a happy note: Dushyanta and Śakuntalā are reunited, their love restored to its original state.

Aside from his praise of *Śakuntalā* as expressing "sacred images" that serve as "recollections of divinity,"[52] Herder says little about the larger allegorical dimensions of Kālidāsa's drama. Nor does he show signs of

having revisited his earlier chronology of human history after *Scattered Leaves* was published. Instead, his next major work ends with a call for the spread of universal humanism under the direction of Christian faith, echoing his earlier work in the 1770s.[53] This is surprising in light of what we have examined here, for if Herder's encounter with Sanskrit originals had in fact changed his assessment of India as a wellspring for European culture, one might expect him to have revised his philosophy of history accordingly. Yet in the texts he left behind, there is no sign that Herder ever broke with a view of human history that gives pride of place to the Abrahamic traditions.

Concluding Remarks

During most of the 1770s, Herder did not want to view India as the childhood of humanity, and in the 1780s, appealing to our lack of access to Sanskrit texts, he was willing to call India the site of humanity's birthplace, with the caveat that we have no reason to hope for knowledge of its origin. *Śakuntalā* and the *Gītā* seem to have changed his mind, and one cannot deny that Herder's *tone* toward India altered dramatically in the 1790s. But even then, his enthusiasm for Indian thought stemmed largely from the fact that he perceived its metaphysics as a precursor to his own brand of pantheism, in a manner not unlike Voltaire, who saw Brahmanic religion as a precursor to his own brand of deism. The difference is that Voltaire committed himself to writing world history from a starting point in India, whereas Herder, up to the end of his life, maintained deep allegiances to a biblical chronology.

To be sure, Herder exposed a flaw in the methodology of the *philosophes*, who were happy to judge the past by the standards of the present. And his call for a new philosophy of history seems to have been both sincere and significant: sincere in that he showed every indication of wanting to encounter past times and other cultures on their own terms; and significant in that he displayed an attitude, missing at the time, of open-mindedness to non-European ways of thinking and living. Nevertheless, one is left with the impression that Herder's late "love" of India, for all its vibrancy, was of little substance. And that, I think, is one of the ways in which Herder's philosophy of history left room for Hegel's subsequent rejection of Indian thought – a point of influence brought home by the fact that Hegel openly borrowed Herder's notion of "pre-history." For these reasons one cannot help but conclude that Herder's new approach to human history, while an improvement on Voltaire's in theory, was a failure in practice. At the very least, Herder's reluctance to take Indian history seriously outlived the praise he bestowed on *Śakuntalā* and the *Gītā*.

As we revisit these encounters today, it should not be surprising to discover that what many European writers were most concerned with were theological issues. Critics of Indian religion found popular mythology, and thought they were encountering a crude polytheism, the belief in many gods. Voltaire got his hands on reports of the Vedas and thought he was encountering a pure deism, the belief in a single author of nature. Herder, having touched the *Gītā* in translation, thought he was encountering something more radical still: the view that divinity dwells within nature, a vitalistic pantheism. Given what we have learned, there is no question that Herder's image of India was the most influential, as the association he made between pantheism and Indian systems of thought came to dominate much scholarship into the nineteenth century. With the association of pantheism, as we have seen, the spectre of nihilism was not far off.

Notes

1 Voltaire, *Additions l'essai sur l'Histoire générale* (Amsterdam: published by the author, 1764), 18. Translations are my own.
2 Voltaire, *Essai sur l'histoire universelle*, vol. 1 (Basel: Walther, 1754), 22.
3 Voltaire, *Essai sur l'histoire universelle*, vol. 3 (Paris: Cramer, 1757), 202.
4 For important studies of Voltaire's engagement with India, see Daniel S. Hawley, "L'Inde de Voltaire," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century,* 120 (1975): 139–178; Dorothy M. Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); Jyoti Mohan, "*La civilisation la plus antique*: Voltaire's Images of India," *Journal of World History,* 16, no. 2 (2005): 173–185.
5 Voltaire, letter to the marquis d'Argence, February 24, 1761, in *Lettres*, vol. 52 of *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1877–1885), Letter #4474. Hereafter cited by letter number.
6 Voltaire, Letter #4096.
7 Voltaire, *Essai sur l'histoire universelle*, nouvelle édition (Paris: Cramer, 1761), 46.
8 Voltaire, *Supplement*, 13.
9 Voltaire, *Supplement*, 13–14.
10 Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as Creation, or, The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London: W. Bickerton, 1730), 11.
11 This is explored in detail by Norman L. Torrey, *Voltaire and the English Deists* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930).
12 Voltaire, *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*, vol. 15 of *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1877–1885), 111, 112–113.
13 Voltaire, *Supplement*, 253.
14 For a good overview of the European reception of the Vedas, see Will Sweetman, "The Absent Vedas," *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* 139, no. 4 (2019): 781–803.
15 Voltaire, *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (Geneva: published by the author, 1774), 65.

16 Voltaire, *La philosophie de l'histoire*, 124. Voltaire supplies no reference for these so-called Indian commandments, and I have been unable to find their source.
17 Voltaire, *La philosophie de l'histoire*, 124.
18 Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Geneva: published by the author, 1770), 60, s.v. "morale."
19 Max Müller, *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature so Far as It Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1859), 5; August Schlegel, "Ueber die in der Sanskrit […]," *Indische Bibliothek* 2 (1827): 50; Raymond Schwab, *Vie d'Anquetil-Duperro* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1934), 97; Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins*, 13. For a detailed exploration of this text, see Ludo Rocher, ed., *Ezourvedam: A French Veda of the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 1984).
20 Well before the *Ezour Vedam* caused its scandal among Europe's literati, Jesuit missionaries had already been busy in meeting their non-Christian colonies halfway: they were "accommodating" their customs, languages, and life ways, with the aim of revealing a flaw in their world that only the Christian path, they claimed, could overcome. The work of Roberto de Nobili was famous for illustrating a strong form of such accommodation. De Nobili, a seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary, lived in India for forty years. Among his various writings, he composed the *Dialogue on Eternal Life* (ca. 1610) in Tamil, translated into English by Anand Amaladass and Francis X. Clooney in *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises by Roberto de Nobili, S.J., Missionary and Scholar in 17th Century India*, Jesuit Primary Sources in English Translation 19 (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000), 233–324. The dialogue involves two characters, a master (*guru*) and a disciple (*shishya*). De Nobili has the guru say:

> What the Lord revealed to people with less maturity in knowledge can be called the "old Veda," while what he granted to those with full maturity in knowledge can be called "new Veda." But both were revealed by one and the same Lord, and there is no contradiction between them. Both are true. The difference between them is like the difference between the stages of childhood and old age, nothing more. This is why we said that the Lord taught the commandments in a manner which was appropriate to a world which for some time was like a child. Then, after he became human, the Almighty graciously taught the path of the highest righteousness to those who were longing for righteousness and who, like elders, were in possession of full maturity in knowledge.
>
> (260)

By associating the Vedas with divine revelation for humanity in its childhood and the Christian Bible as divine revelation for humanity in its adulthood, de Nobili was applying a form of supersessionism (the view that Christianity replaced Hebrew religion) to an Indian context. For further discussion of de Nobili and Jesuit strategies of accommodation, see Jeffrey Muller, "The Jesuit Strategy of Accommodation," in *Jesuit Image Theory*, ed. Karl Enenkel (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 461–492; Andrés I. Prieto, "The Perils of Accommodation: Jesuit

Missionary Strategies in the Early Modern World," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 4, no. 3 (2016): 395–414; and Francis X. Clooney, "Roberto de Nobili's *Dialogue on Eternal Life* and an Early Jesuit Evaluation of Religion in South India," in *Western Jesuit Scholars in India: Tracing Their Paths, Reassessing Their Goals* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 82–96.

21 These are my translations from *L'Ezour-Védam, ou L'ancien commentaire du Védam. Tome 1. contenant l'exposition des opinions religieuses et philosophiques des Indiens, traduit du samscretan par un Brame, revu et publié avec des observations préliminaires, des notes et des éclaircissements*, ed. Guillaume Sainte-Croix (Avignon: Yverdun, 1778), 179.

22 *Ezour Vedam*, 195.

23 See John Zephaniah Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events Relative to the Province of Bengal* (London: Becket & de Hondt, 1767), and Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan* (London: Becket & de Hondt, 1768). Both Holwell and Dow served in the British East India Company; for an informed discussion of their work, see Jessica Patterson, "Forging Indian Religion: East India Company Servants and the Construction of 'Gentoo'/'Hindoo' Scripture in the 1760s," *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies,* 44, no. 1 (2021): 77–100. Herder too was familiar with these texts, as we learn in a letter he wrote to Heyne in early August 1772: "My previous question about the Indian religion from the Sanskrit language is, I find, answered in Holwell's Part 2, which boasts of and praises India for having presented the oldest book"; in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Briefe: Gesamtausgabe, 1763–1803*, ed. Karl-Heinz Hahn, vol. 3, 196. Holwell had claimed that ancient Indian religion was monotheistic, and argued, more strongly than Voltaire, that the Vedas are the oldest texts of any religious tradition.

24 Voltaire often made this criticism against Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (Paris: Sébastien Mabre, 1681).

25 This view has been defended by Hawley, Halbfass, and Mohan. In general, it reflects what Peter Gay aptly calls Voltaire's role as a "subversive anthropologist"; see Gay, *The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 84.

26 Johann Gottfried Herder, letter to Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, August 10, 1773, in *Briefe*, 3:35.

27 For helpful treatments of Herder's historicism, see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), and *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); John Zammito, "Philosophy of History: The German Tradition from Herder to Marx," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century: 1790–1870*, eds. Allen W. Wood and Songsuk Susan Hahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 817–865; Kristin Gjesdal, *Herder's Hermeneutics: History, Poetry, Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Michael Forster, *Herder's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Karl Ameriks, "History, Progress, and Autonomy: Kant, Herder, and After," in *Kant and the Possibility of Progress: From Modern Hopes to Postmodern*

Anxieties, eds. Paul T. Wilford and Samuel A. Stoner, 137–152 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

28 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 272–358.

29 Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 186.

30 See Amos Leslie Willson, *A Mythical Image: The Ideal of India in German Romanticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964); Ronald Taylor, "Herder, India, and the Ideals of European Culture," *Forum for Modern Language Studies,* 3, no. 1 (1967): 15–26; Ulrich Faust, *Mythologien und Religionen des Ostens bei Johann Gottfried Herder* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1977); Herling, *The German Gita*. The direction of Hoffman's 1919 study was hinted at by Rudolf Heym, *Herder nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken dargestellt* (Berlin: R. Gaertner, 1885), 457. See also Paul Theodor Hoffman, "Der indische und der deutsche Geist von Herder bis zur Romantik" (PhD dissertation, University of Tübingen, 1919).

31 See, for example, Johann Gottfried Herder, "Von den deutsch-orientalischen Dichtern," in *Ueber die neuere deutsche Litteratur*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Hartknoch, 1767), 207–229.

32 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menscheit* [*Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, 1784–1791], in *Johann Gottfried Herder on World History: An Anthology*, eds. Michael Palma et al. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2015).

33 Herder, *Ideas*, 208.

34 Herder, *Ideas*, 209.

35 Herder, *Ideas*, 242. The chapter titled "India" remains surprisingly close to Voltaire's presentation; see Herder, *Ideas*, 242.

36 See Suzanne L. Marchand, "Herder and the Problem of Near Eastern Chronology in the Age of Enlightenment," *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies,* 47, no. 2 (2014): 157–175.

37 Herder, *Ideas*, 212.

38 Herder also identifies the Ganges as one of the four rivers mentioned in Genesis 2:10–14, making South Asia the geographical site of the Garden of Eden; see Herder, *Ideas*, 221.

39 Herder never mentions the *Ezour Vedam* in any of his published work. Pierre Sonnerat was one of the first European writers to question the text's authenticity in his *Voyage aux Indes orientales*, a book Herder cited in *Ideas* and elsewhere; see Pierre Sonnerat, *Voyage aux Indes orientales et à la Chine, fait depuis 1774 jusqu'à 1781* (Paris: chez l'auteur, 1782). Herder's doubts about the authenticity of *Ezour Vedam* surface in a letter he wrote on December 22, 1786; referring to the German edition, translated in 1779 by Johann Ith, he remarked that it is "no true original" (*kein wahres Original*). Nonetheless, Herder was likely inclined to be agnostic, as others were at the time, which would explain his choice to keep silent about the *Ezour Vedam* in his published work.

40 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Zerstreute Blätter*, 4 vols. (Gotha: Carl Wilhelm Ettinger, 1792).
41 William Jones, trans., *Sacontalá; Or, The Fatal Ring* (London: Edwards, 1789).
42 Jones, *Sacontalá*, 100.
43 Sir Charles Wilkins, a fellow member with Jones of the Royal Asiatic Society, translated the *Bhagavad-Gītā* from Sanskrit into Latin before finalizing his English version under the title *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon* (London: C. Nourse, 1785). Herder worked with both the English and German translations.
44 These translated excerpts of the *Gītā* appear in part 2 of the essay "Ueber Denkmale der Vorwelt" ["On the Monuments of the Prehistoric World"; from the 1792 volume of *Scattered Leaves*], in which Herder translated *ślōkas* 9.2, 9.4, 7.2, and 10.5 from Wilkins's English version. Later in the same collection Herder added a collection of partially translated and paraphrased fragments from the *Gītā* in an essay titled "Gedanken einiger Brahmanen" ["Thoughts from Some Brahmins"]. A complete German translation did not appear until 1802, made by Herder's student Friedrich Majer, whose translation of Wilkins's edition appeared in the first and second volumes of the *Asiatisches Magazin*, edited by Heinrich Julius Klaproth. Interestingly, Majer added the following in his brief preface: "No attentive reader will miss how these roughly four thousand year old ideas and dreams of wisdom coming from the Far East–consisting of a highly peculiar combination of strange fables and abstract speculation–stand in a wonderful connection, though in completely different times and climates, with what Plato, Spinoza or Jacob Böhme believed" (406–407). For a discussion of the *Gītā*'s transnational migrations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Gerald James Larson, "The *Bhagavad Gītā* as Cross-Cultural Process: Toward an Analysis of the Social Locations of a Religious Text," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43, no. 4 (1975): 651–569; Catherine A. Robinson, *Interpretations of the* Bhagavad-Gītā *and Images of the Hindu Tradition: The Song of the Lord* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Mishka Sinha, "Corrigibility, Allegory, Universality: A History of the Gita's Transnational Reception, 1785–1945," *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 2 (2020): 297–317.
45 Herder, *Zerstreute Blätter*, 4:77. Note that "power" (*Kraft*) has a technical meaning in Herder's vitalistic metaphysics; for further discussion, see Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, and Herling, *The German Gita*.
46 This phrase (*Eins ist Alles*, *und alles ist eins*) was commonly used during the 1780s and 1790s.
47 Herder, *Zerstreute Blätter*, 4:79.
48 Herling, *The German Gita*, has given the most extensive treatment of this connection in the literature, to which I am here indebted.
49 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *God: Some Conversations*, trans. Frederick H. Burkhardt (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940).
50 This is Herder's gloss on *Gītā* 9.4: "All beings abide in Me / I do not abide in them." Abstract as this may sound, this distinction made room for Herder to articulate a position that upholds the dependence of all created beings on Brahman, not as their causal ground, but as their metaphysical ground. Thus,

Herder was close on the trail of reading the *Gītā* in terms of what theologians would later call "panentheism." As the additional prefix "en" indicates, panentheism is a hybrid position, combining the transcendence of God found in theism with the immanence of God found in pantheism. The term "panentheism" (*Panentheismus*) was coined in 1828 by Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, *Vorlesungen über das System der Philosophie* (Göttingen: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1828).

51 See *Śakuntalā*, 121: "Was it sleep that impaired my memory? Was it delusion? Was it an error of my judgment? Or was it the destined reward of my bad actions? Whatever it was, I am sensible that, until Śakuntalā return to these arms, I shall be plunged in the abyss of affliction."

52 Herder, *Zerstreute Blätter*, 4:80.

53 See, for example, Herder's *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* [*Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 1791–1797], in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See Letter 24, in particular.