On the Shoulders of Giants: the Vedic Puruṣa and Vaiṣṇavism

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September 25, 2006

1 Introductory Comments

There are few images in the history of the religions of the world that are as striking as that of the Vedic Puruṣa, the thousand-headed giant, whose hymn was incorporated into the huge collection of ancient hymns called the Ṛg Veda at the very end of its compilation: a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet, covering the whole earth and yet rising above it by ten fingers. Whoever Nārāyaṇa, the author or "seer" of the hymn, was. he had a profound influence on the directions that the later Hindu tradition was to take. No doubt there is much that is mysterious about the hymn for us today. If one were to speak truthfully, one would admit that most of the hymn is mysterious. Still, somehow it managed to capture and shape the religious imaginations of generation after generation of Hindu, student and thinker alike, all of whom, no doubt, were required to memorize it at some point in their educations. I remember once, during one of my periods of stay in Vrindaban, India, meeting and befriending four Nepali *brāhmaṇa* scholars who were instructors at one of the local Sanskrit schools. They recited the Puruṣa hymn in unison for me one night in my room with suitable hand motions and vocal intonations and accents. When they were done I asked them what it meant. Their answer in Sanskrit, delivered with sheepish smiles, was "*śanaiḥ śanaiḥ*," "slowly, slowly." I have often in the past taken that to mean that they were not entirely sure themselves about its meaning. But perhaps it was more a piece of advice or a realistic assessment of how one comes to understand the hymn, slowly, over time, and after great periods of thought and meditation. That phrase, "slowly, slowly," seems now an accurate historical description of how the Hindu tradition and specially its Vaiṣṇava subcurrent has come to discover meanings in the hymn and bring it life.

What I hope to do in this essay is ponder the meaning of the ancient hymn as well as anyone can who is dealing with a document around 3000 years old. In addition, I hope to trace in outline the history of the hymn's interpretation as that history has survived in later texts that bear the imprint of the hymn's ideas and images. It seems that once the thousand-headed giant was invoked and brought to life it was hard to put him to rest again. Like the *golem* of the Jewish mystical tradition, once life is inscribed on its forehead, it is hard to erase it. On which of those thousands of heads was it first inscribed? And who now can reach it even if we knew which it was? The world within which the *Hymn of the Giant* was written has long since passed away. Moreover, that world has been superseded by tens if not hundreds of other worlds since then.

While hope for the full recovery of the hymn's meaning is slim, we have certain advantages today that have not been available to interpreters in the past. We know for instance much more about the ancient religious worlds that once were fashioned and habited by our ancestors. We know also that the human religious imagination often operates in similar ways in response to similar constructive engagements with the environment or with the lived

worlds within which that imagination finds itself. Therefore, as striking as the Vedic image of the thousand-headed giant who is sacrificed to create the world may be, we know it is not alone. There are other divine creatures from other parts of the world who resemble it. We also have access to many more of the texts that reflect the image of the giant as it changed over time. We can watch as the giant transforms in the newer textual mediums it is reflected in into the modern images of deity. Gradually, or "slowly," we ought to be able to piece together the puzzle of its shifting meanings.

How, though, does one sift through over three thousand years of continuous religious and intellectual history, with a huge and rich textual tradition like that of India's, to trace the history of the reading of an ancient religious text? Fortunately for us, the Indic tradition has been, and still is, extremely conservative.[1] Through all of the periods of change and challenge that have faced Indic religious traditions, they have preserved and repeatedly returned for inspiration to particular visions, creatively reinterpreting them in accordance with the new contexts. There are thus certain strands or *sūtra* that tie together great spans of Indian religious history and that reveal a kind of familial connection between those ancient visionary hymns, medieval religious speculations, systems and revivals, and modern religious resurgences and recoveries. The ancient *Hymn of the Giant*[2] from the Ṛg Veda (*Puruṣa-sūkta*, Ṛg Veda, 10.90) is one such strand that has been profoundly influential in the history of religions in India.

The *Hymn of the Giant* is among the latest of the hymns to be added to the collection. This hymn comes in the Tenth Maṇḍala of the Ṛg Veda, its final chapter, thought generally to be one of the latest groups of hymns to be added. Moreover, the hymn itself refers to the Ṛg, Yajus, and Sāman Vedas, thereby indicating that those texts already existed in some form when it was written. It is often assigned a date of around 1000 B.C.E., but given the recent re-dating of Buddha,[3] it may be slightly more recent (900-800 B.C.E). By comparison, the earliest hymns of the Ṛg Veda are often dated to around the 15th century B.C.E. Like the backbone of the body, or the Mount Meru of Hindu mythology which runs through the center of the universe, the *Hymn of the Giant* seems to run the length of Indic religious understanding and practice, often providing a central structure upon which the various forms of Indic theism and monism have hung their doctrines and found support. The prominence of this hymn

[1] This may be the one good thing about conservatism.

[2] I am translating *puruṣa* as "giant" which strictly speaking is not correct. *Puruṣa* means male person, but as anyone reading the hymn will see the translation "giant" seems appropriate. The hymn describes the primordial, sacrificial dismemberment of a huge divine being whose eyes, ears, hair and bones become the various features of the universe. In this respect, the myth behind the Puruṣa hymn is part of a worldwide group of myths involving cosmogonic, sacrificial dismemberments. In Norse mythology there is Ymir (the Norse Frost Giant), in Chinese mythology Pan Guh, in Mesopotamia there is Tiamat, and in Mexico there is Quetzlcoatl or Huitzilopoztli. One can often connect these myths with the development of agriculture in these various cultures and societies.

[3] See Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, pp. 37-39. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1996)

when many of the other hymns of the Ṛg Veda have been all but forgotten has probably to do with its early and continued connection with ritual practices. It is still recited today in various ceremonial contexts and is used in the sixteen-step ritual of worship, called *pūjā*, that is the cornerstone of the temple ritual that constitutes the worship of images of Viṣṇu. And as I mentioned before it still forms an important part of the Vedic education of *brāhmaṇas*. Let us look at the hymn itself as our starting point.

2 The Hymn of the Giant

1. Puruṣa has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet. Having covered the earth in all directions, he stood (rose) above it the length of ten fingers.

2. All this is but Puruṣa, that which has been and will be, and he is the lord [controller] of immortality, which grows beyond itself by means of food.

3. So much is his greatness, and greater than that still is Puruṣa. One quarter of him is all beings; three-quarters of him is the immortal in heaven.

4. Three-quarters of Puruṣa went upward; a quarter of him was still here [below]. From that he expanded in all directions into what eats and does not eat.

5. From that, Virāṭ [fem.] was born and from Virāṭ [was born] Puruṣa. When born, he extended over the earth, behind as well as in front.

6. When with Puruṣa as the offering the gods spread the sacrifice, spring was its clarified butter, summer the fuel, and autumn the oblation.

7. Him, the sacrifice on the sacred grass did they sprinkle, Puruṣa, who was born in the beginning. With him the gods sacrificed, those Sādhyas and seers.

8. From that sacrifice, a total offering, was collected together the spotted butter. It made the animals: those of the air, of the forest, and of the village.

9. From that sacrifice, a total offering, the Ṛks (Hymns of Praise) and Sāmans (Chants) were born; the meters were born from it; the Yajus (Sacrificial Formula) from it was born.

10. From it horses were born and whatsoever have teeth in both jaws. The cows were born from it. From it were born the goats and sheep.

11. When they divided up Puruṣa, in how many ways did they fashion him? What are his mouth, his two arms, his two thighs, and his two feet called?

12. His mouth was the Brāhmaṇa, his two arms were made the Rājanya. Then what were his two thighs were made the Vaiśya; from his feet the Śūdra was born.

13. The moon from his mind was born; from his eye the sun was born; from his mouth both Indra and Agni; from his breath the wind was born.

14. From his navel was the atmosphere; from his head the heaven evolved; from his feet the earth; the directions from his ear. Thus they fashioned the worlds.

15. Seven were its enclosures; thrice seven faggots were made, when the gods, offering the sacrifice, tied Puruṣa as their animal.

16. The gods sacrificed with the sacrifice to the sacrifice. Those were the first *dharmas*. Those powers reached the heavens, where the ancient Sādhyas are and also the gods.[4]

3 Commentary

Much can be said by way of commentary on this extraordinary hymn. I will say a few general things about it and then take it verse by verse. Perhaps it is best to start with what every commentator on a Vedic hymn starts with: information concerning who the *ṛṣi* or seer was who revealed the hymn, what its meter is, and who its divinity is. According to Sāyaṇa's (15th cent. C.E.) comment, the seer who revealed this hymn was named Nārāyaṇa. Its meter is mostly *anuṣṭubh* which has four quarters with eight syllables in each. The last verse in the hymn, however, is *triṣṭubh* which has four quarters with eleven syllables each. Finally, the divinity of the hymn is given naturally enough as Puruṣa, which according to Sāyaṇa is "consciousness completely distinct from the unmanifest (*avyakta*), the great (*mahat*), and so forth."[5] The unmanifest, the great, and so forth are evolutes of *prakṛti*, which according to the Sāṅkhya school of Indian philosophy is Puruṣa's female counterpart, material nature, unconscious matter. Sāyaṇa's is, of course, a very late and very Vedānticized reading of Puruṣa, Puruṣa as pure consciousness. The true source and derivation of the word is lost in the shadows of ancient history, but there are two old derivations (Yaska, 8th cent. B.C.E. ?) that are of interest. In one the word is derived from the root $\sqrt{pur}$, "town," and means "one who lives in a town." The other derives it from $\sqrt{p\bar{u}r}$, to fill with air and has it mean that which "fills [the body] with air."[6] Since the body or the cosmos (cosmic body) is later under-

[4]This my translation done with one eye on Sāyana's commentary and the other on the fine translation done by Walter H. Maurer from his book *Pinnacles of India's Past: selections from the Rgveda*, pp. 271-272. (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1986)

[5]Sāyaṇa's comm. on Ṛg Veda, 10.90.1.

[6]This derivation also points to the idea of the *puruṣa*'s being full, *pūrṇa*, an important idea in the Upaniṣadic idea of God.

stood to be the "town" in which *puruṣa* resides,[7] both point to the later meaning of *puruṣa* as the inner self, synonymous with *ātman*. The word *puruṣa* occasionally appears in various other places in the Vedas outside of the *Puruṣa-sūkta*, but only in the sense of "person," specifically "male person." There seems little doubt, though, that the *puruṣa* of the hymn is a divine being, a personal god.

The hymn tells a story, the story of the descent of a divine being who is sacrificed by other gods and out of whose dismembered body come the various essential features of the world. It is a cosmogonic hymn in which the primordial act, the act that creates the world, is the sacrifice and dismemberment of a personal god. In verses one through four, we have the first *puruṣa*, the all-inclusive *puruṣa*, who has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, and a thousand feet. Of course, the numbers do not work out if each head is to have two eyes and each head is to be correlated with two feet or perhaps four feet. Sāyaṇa rightly points out that the numbers are inconsequential and are only meant to mean "many heads, many eyes and many feet." That first *puruṣa* is praised as being all that is, all that has been, and all that will be. He is all beings that live on the earth and much more besides. Only one quarter of him is here in this world. Three quarters of him, his major part, exists beyond it as immortal in heaven. Even the part of him that is here is too abundant for the earth. In verse one he stands above the earth by ten fingers. In verse five he extends beyond the earth, behind and in front.

One of the most striking elements of this part of the hymn is its abundance. The *puruṣa* is overwhelming abundant, more abundant than the world can handle. This vision of the nature of the world is in stark contrast with the vision of the world that grew up in the Near East. That world, the Near Eastern world, the world behind the Tanakh and later the New Testament and the Koran, is one of scarcity, one that does not have enough for everyone. Thus, some are chosen to partake, but others are rejected. Recently some scholars have discussed the way religions, especially those from the Near East, have promoted the idea of scarcity and how the idea of scarcity leads to tendencies to violence. Since there is not enough to go around, those who want must fight for it.[8] The Vedic vision of the nature of the world, at least as it is presented in the *Hymn of the Giant*, seems to be quite different. It points beyond itself to the abundance of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions that grew out of it. It remains to be seen, however, whether this vision of abundance, of fullness, was maintained and even fostered and nourished throughout the long history of the traditions rooted in it, or whether they, like their neighbors to the west, became purveyors of scarcity as well.

In verse five, something interesting happens. Something is born out of *puruṣa*, something called Virāṭ or Virāj. Though later readings sometimes take

[7]The allegory of Purañjana (town-folk) is created out of this idea in a section of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Fourth Canto, chapters 25-29). The "town" in the allegory is the body.

[8]See Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* and Hector Avalos' *Fighting Words: The Origins Of Religious Violence*.

this Virāj to be male, it is more likely that the Virāj is a female principle. We see this line of interpretation carried on in an important passage of the Upaniṣads as well as in the Epics and Purāṇas later.[9] Virāj comes from the root $\sqrt{rāj}$ which means "to reign, rule, govern, master, shine forth, shine out, appear as." It is hard to tell which of these senses is meant here, but those that seem more appropriate are the ones having to do with shining or appearing. There is really nothing to rule or govern yet in the cosmogony. This introduction of a female principle into the process of creation stands in agreement with another late Ṛg Vedic hymn, the mysterious and contemplative *Nāsadīya Hymn* (Ṛg Veda, 10.129). In the *Nāsadīya* creation is connected with the appearance of desire (*kāma*) and arises through the interaction between primordial male and female forces.[10] Incidentally, Sāyaṇa has an interesting explanation of the meaning of the word *virāj* in his commentary on verse five. He defines it as "that in which various substances appear."[11] For him, Virāj is the universal body, or the universe as the body into which Puruṣa comes to reside as the superself (*paramātman*). This reading does not fit very well with the verse because the verse seems to suggest that a second *puruṣa* is born from Virāj.[12] It is this second *puruṣa* who is sacrificed by the gods in the following verses. This *puruṣa* no longer has a thousand heads, eyes, and feet. References to those body parts in the rest of the hymn are either in the singular or dual (i.e., for eyes and feet).

It is tempting to draw an analogy here between this Vedic descent and that western religion in which there is a father god, a female intermediary or mother god, and a son god who winds up being sacrificed for the betterment of the world. There is not likely to be any connection between this Vedic religious vision and that Western one, however. It remains just an interesting similarity. What is of greater interest, though, is the transition from the first, thousand-headed *puruṣa* to the second single-headed *puruṣa*. The thousand-headed *puruṣa* seems to represent the realm of infinite possibilities. A thousand different channels down which creation might have flowed, a thousand directions it might have taken; but when the transition is made between possibility and reality, through the lens of Virāj, only one of those thousand possibilities expresses itself. Perhaps in other universes, other possibilities are expressed. This may be an early, vaguely expressed instance of the principle of hierarchy that is so evident in the later texts wherein the higher levels of the hierarchy are more general and more inclusive while the lower levels which come out of the higher levels are more specific, defined and limited in scope and ability. This sort of hierarchy is noticeable in the discussions of the caste system in

[9] I have in mind that interesting passage from the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* in which Puruṣa splits into a male and female half and by shape-shifting and copulation populate the world. See B. ā. U., 1.4.1-5.

[10] Ṛg Veda, 10.129.4-5.

[11] On Ṛg Veda, 10.90.5: *vividhāni rājante vastūnyatreti virāṭ*.

[12] The word *adhi* in the verse, though, is a bit puzzling. It generally means"on" or "on the basis of." So the translation would read, "on that (Virāj) *puruṣa* was born." This lends some small support to Sāyaṇa's interpretation. He thus takes the second quarter of the verse to mean: "some *puruṣa* was born that identified with its body, the Virāj, the universe-body." Thus *puruṣa* is not born from Virāj; it is born identifying with Virāj.

the Upaniṣads and in the processes of evolution, or perhaps it should be called devolution, in Sāṅkhya.

Verses six through sixteen describe the sacrifice of *puruṣa*. It is clearly a human sacrifice of the sort that are commonly found in agricultural societies. Agricultural societies often have myths that involve the sacrifice of a god or divine being out of whose corpse arises the main crop or crops that sustain the community.[13] There are several indications of agricultural practices and beliefs in other parts of the hymn as well. The reference to "food" (*anna*, lit. grain) in the second verse is quite telling. Though the verse is rather obscure, one of its possible interpretations is that *puruṣa* who is the lord of immortality grows beyond itself by means of grain. Grain is rendered nourishing and able to prolong one's life probably because of the sacrifice of the divine being (*puruṣa*) with which the hymn culminates. The reference in the third verse to the *puruṣas* becoming spread out in all directions and becoming "what eats and does not eat" seems to confirm this idea. What eats is *puruṣa* and what does not eat (i.e., is eaten) is also *puruṣa* and through that eating and being eaten *puruṣa* grows beyond itself. The reference to the seasons in verse six, if not meant to convey a year (the full year has six seasons), refers to the growing season. Spring when crops are planted, summer when they grow, and autumn when they are harvested. The sacrifice of *puruṣa* lasts for the duration of the growing season. From the parts of the body of *puruṣa* come all the necessary ingredients for village life. With one exception, everything needed for agriculture arises out of the sacrifice. There sun, wind, earth, moon and so forth are there, but there is no rain. This is a strange element to leave out. The only mention of water in the hymn is in the sprinkling of the victim in verse seven. Perhaps that is sufficient for the growth of *puruṣa* after the sacrifice. Later versions of this sacrificial creation make up the absence by deriving rain from the urine of the victim.[14] Two of the verses (eight and nine) of this part of the hymn mention that the sacrifice is one in which everything is offered (*sarva-hut*); nothing is kept back. Thus, *puruṣa* disappears into the universe of entities that come out of him. Nothing remains of him to be honored or worshiped.

It is time now to reflect on the meaning of sacrifice and the sacrificial vision of reality, specially in the context of the *Hymn of the Giant*. The English word sacrifice means "to make sacred" from Latin words *sacer*, sacred, plus *facere*, to make. The word for sacrifice in Sanskrit is *yajña* from the root $\sqrt{yaj}$ which means "to worship, honor, adore." Its connection with making sacred may not be immediately apparent, but by the acts of worshiping or adoring or offering, someone or something is being set apart as "sacred." To what, though, does this action of making sacred apply? There are a huge variety of sacrifices and it appears that in different types of sacrifices different objects or beings are made sacred. One also has to ask how this making of the sacred is achieved. It would seem that in the case of the sacrifice of *puruṣa*, which is a sacrifice of a being

[13] An major example comes from Ceram where the story of Hainuwele's murder is told. See Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, pp. 28-39.

[14] *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka*, 1.1.1 written at least a couple of centuries later than the hymn.

who is already divine, it is not *puruṣa* who is made sacred. The making sacred must apply to what *puruṣa* becomes, that is, the world and all the beings in it. Through the sacrifice of *puruṣa* at the beginning of time the world and all the beings in it become sacred. They (we) all become recognized as parts of the divine and therefore as divine themselves (ourselves). Moreover, in the peculiar logic of sacrificial rites, the dividing of *puruṣa* creates a unity, the unity of all life forms and even more than all life forms, for parts of *puruṣa* become aspects of the cosmos that we do not generally associate with life today: the sun, the moon, the directions (space), the earth, etc. In short, the dismemberment of *puruṣa* extends membership to all beings in the universe, membership in the divine and membership in a vast community all rooted in the divine. Thus, the universe is no longer a strange place nor is the human being a stranger in a strange land. This vision of the nature of reality most profoundly distinguishes the religions of India from the Abrahamic religions according to which humankind is set over against the world. I have already pointed out the abundance of the vision of the world in India. Now we see another important aspect of that vision. In India the human being is a fully integrated part of the whole, inseparable from the rest.

Being rooted in the divine and surrounded on all sides by the divine, does not guarantee, however, that the living beings are aware of their divine origin. Therein arises the fundamental problem recognized by Indic religions, the reason why the world somehow seems "awry" or wrong. It is the forgetfulness of the living being of its divine source and of the divine being that surrounds it on all sides. Forgetfulness is a form of ignorance and thus the antidote to such forgetful ignorance is knowledge (*jñāna*). One might say that this is the fundamental Indo-European problem or diagnosis of the problem, for in most of the cultures that have grown out of Indo-European roots, ignorance or forgetfulness is at the root of suffering. One need only reflect on the importance of knowledge (*gnosis*) and remembering (*anamnesis*) in Greek culture, specially in the works of Plato, to get some sense of this kindred spirit.

There is a deeper understanding of the meaning of sacrifice, one centering around the idea of the gift which is at the center of the sacrifice. *Puruṣa* for instance gives the gift of life to the world. But the gift is a complex phenomenon and perhaps it is impossible to describe it any better than the well known scholar of the phenomenology of religion, G. van der Leeuw, has:

> But *dare* does not mean merely to dispose of some arbitrary object with a quite indefinite intention; the word *dare* means, rather, to place oneself in relation to, and then to participate in, a second person by means of an object, which however is not actually an "object" at all, but a part of one's own self. "To give," then, is to convey something of oneself to the strange being, so that a firm bond may be forged. Mauss refers, together with other writers, to Emerson's fine essay, *Gifts*, with respect to this "primitive" view of giving:

> "The gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem" ... "The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him." In fact, giving demands gift, not however in the sense of any commercial rationalism, because the gift allows a stream to flow, which from the moment of giving runs uninterruptedly from donor to recipient and from receiver to giver: "the recipient is in the power of the giver."[15]

Here we have the most fundamental and deepest meaning of the *Hymn of the Giant* for the later traditions, specially for the Vaiṣṇava traditions that later appropriate this hymn. Through the sacrifice of the giant a channel is opened into the world and a relationship is established between the divine and all living beings. Through that channel flow gifts back and forth and the divine and the living beings become engaged in an intimate relationship of reciprocity. In short, the sacrifice of the giant lays the foundation for, that is, creates the psychological and philosophical bases for, the later development of *bhakti*. The meaning of the word *bhakti* itself points to this idea. *Bhakti* is from the root $\sqrt{bhaj}$ which means "to participate in, to divide, to share." *Bhakti* is the state of mind in which a being is aware of its own participation in or sharing of the life of a larger being, a divine being of whom all living beings are part and with whom all living beings are in an intimate relationship. The only appropriate response to the appearance of this state of mind is to return the gift given by *puruṣa* at the beginning of time by offering oneself in return. Thus, as we see in the later Purāṇic ways of viewing *bhakti*, it culminates in *ātma-samarpaṇa*, the offering of one's whole self to the divine just as the divine *puruṣa* offered a sacrifice at the beginning of time that was *sarva-hut*, a total offering.

In the last verse of the hymn the author sings: "those were the first *dharmas*" and adds: "they, the great ones [or great powers], reached heaven." Maurer translates *dharma* as rites, a translation that makes sense here since what has been described in this hymn is a rite. This suggests that the rite described in the hymn was meant to be taken as a model for all later rites, the later *dharmas* that uphold (*dhṛ*) the cosmos. Eliade has written clearly on this topic in his *Patterns*:

> To find the meaning of these human sacrifices we must look into the primitive theory of the seasonal regeneration of the forces of the sacred. Clearly, any rite or drama aiming at the regeneration of a "force" is itself the repetition of a primal, creative act, which took place *ab initio*. A regeneration sacrifice is a ritual "repetition" of the Creation. The myth of a creation includes the ritual (that is,

[15] G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, vol. 2, p. 351.

> violent) death of the primeval giant, from whose body the worlds are made, and plants grew. The origin of plants and of cereals in particular is connected with this sort of sacrifice; we have seen (113 ff.) that herbs, wheat, vines, and so on grew from the blood and the flesh of a mythical creature ritually sacrificed "at the beginning," *in illo tempore*. The object in sacrificing a human victim for the regeneration of the force expressed in the harvest is to repeat the act of creation that first made the grain to live. *The ritual makes creation over again*; the force at work in plants is reborn by suspending time and returning to the first moment of the fullness of creation. The victim, cut to pieces, is identified with the body of the primeval being of myth, which gave life to the grain by being itself divided ritually.[16]

Thus, the *Hymn of the Giant* may have originated in the context of the performance of a yearly or periodic human sacrifice, in which, in the course of time, humans were replaced by animals. As van der Leeuw notes:

> If however man gives in order the he may also receive, nevertheless he externalizes part of himself in the gift. Here again, I believe that I can keep a certain rationalistic viewpoint, so as to be able to set it in its correct connection with life: that namely of the so-called vicarious sacrifice. Usually it is maintained that vicarious sacrifice is a *pis aller* [last resort], just as the substitute formerly was in the military service: no one ever sacrifices himself willingly, and therefore one sacrifices one's children, and later a slave or prisoner, finally an animal, and if that is too costly, a cake in animal form. In fact, we know how human sacrifice was actually replaced by that of animals, for example in the story of Isaac, and also that the sacrificial cake very often retained the form of the animal whose place it had taken.[17]

There is evidence that this is the course sacrifice took in India as well.

If we take *dharma* however not as "rite" but more in accord with one of its major meaning complexes as "trait, quality, defining or distinctive characteristic," then the *dharmas* are the many and diverse forms of existence that are born out of the sacrifice. Thus, each being created out of the sacrifice has its own *dharma* as that quality which distinguishes it from all the other beings. There are then the *brāhmaṇa-dharma* and the *rājanya-dharma* and so forth. In that case *dharma* means those traits or characteristic acts that keep things separate, that hold ($\sqrt{dhṛ}$) things apart, as Halbfass has suggested in his excellent essay on

[16] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 345-6. (New York: World Publishing, 1958 [8th printing, 1972]).

[17] van der Leeuw, ibid., vol.2, p. 355.

the meanings of *dharma*.[18] Observing one's own *dharma* prevents the unhealthy or unholy blending of discrete, divinely ordained forms of existence. *Dharma* is not the sacrificial rite itself but one of the results of the sacrificial rite. This view of *dharma* bleeds over into another meaning of the word, a meaning picked up by later philosophical traditions in India, *dharma* as merit. Thus according to the last verse of the hymn, the gods who sacrifice, made great (*mahimānaḥ*) by *dharma*, go to heaven.

4 Vaiṣṇava Appropriations of *Puruṣa*

4.1 Upaniṣadic Bridges to the Vaiṣṇava Readings

There is nothing about the *Hymn of the Giant* that is particularly Vaiṣṇava. In fact, claiming that it is Vaiṣṇava is rather like claiming that Moses was a Christian or a Muslim. Though Viṣṇu, a relatively minor Vedic deity connected with the sun, was extolled in a few hymns in the Ṛg Veda, it is unlikely that Vaiṣṇavism existed when the hymn was written. Nevertheless, much of what the hymn says, much of its vision of the sacred reality, has been adopted into and adapted within the later ideology of the Vaiṣṇava traditions, and that in a variety of interesting ways. It is similar to the way the Ten Commandments were adopted into Christianity from Judaism, though most the rest of the six hundred or so commandments have been overlooked or ignored by Christians. The hymn inspires at least two of the cosmogonies found in the *Bṛhad-āranyaka Upaniṣad*, the oldest of the Upaniṣads. In the cosmogony with which it opens the human-like *Puruṣa* has been replaced by a horse,[19] Here is that famous passage:

> Oṃ! Verily, the dawn is the head of the sacrificial horse; the sun, his eye; the wind, his breath; the universal fire, his open mouth. The year is the body (*ātman*) of the sacrificial horse; the sky, his back; the atmosphere, his belly; the earth, the under part of his belly; the quarters, his flanks; the intermediate quarters, his ribs; the seasons, his limbs; the months and half-months, his joints; days and nights, his feet; the stars, his bones; the clouds, his flesh. Sand is the food in his stomach; rivers are his entrails. His liver and lungs are the mountains; plants and trees, his hair. The orient is his fore part; the occident, his hind part. When he yawns, then it lightnings. When he shakes himself, then it thunders. When he urinates, then it rains. Voice, indeed, is his voice.[20]

[18] Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: an essay in understanding*, pp. 317-8. (Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1988)

[19] B.ā., 1.1.

[20] Robert Ernest Hume, trans., *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.1.1, p. 73. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, revised, 1931)

This is, of course, a reference to the Aśvamedha or the horse sacrifice, a sacrifice described in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (13.1-5). The horse sacrifice was an important ritual used by kings to establish or to confirm their sovereignty over their kingdoms and possibly over their neighboring kings' kingdoms as well. Moreover, there is much about the rite that suggests that the horse is a substitute for the king and thus that the horse sacrifice was a replacement for the *puruṣa-medha* or human sacrifice. The original rite may have been a human sacrifice in which the sacrificial victim was the king of a people.[21] Perhaps this earlier rite is true context for the Hymn of the Giant. The king was often regarded in ancient times as an embodiment or representative of his kingdom and all the living beings in it. This might be another reason behind the giant's thousand heads, eyes and feet in the hymn. Be that as it may, this passage is clearly a development of the sacrificial vision of the Hymn of the Giant and a step closer to the universal form that Arjuna will encounter in his hierophantic vision in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Of special interest here is the fact that although the horse is described as a sacrificial horse (*aśvasya medhyasya*) the sacrifice itself is not depicted. In fact, the passage suggests that the horse is still alive as a unitary being and capable of the shaking that causes thunder and the urination that causes rain. Though we have not yet arrived at a clearly Vaiṣṇava interpretation of the Hymn of the Giant, this passage is an important bridge between the hymn and it later Vaiṣṇava interpretations.

There is another fascinating cosmogony in the *Bṛhad-āranyaka* that forms another bridge between the ancient hymn and later Vaiṣṇava thought. This might be considered a secondary creation. It portrays *Puruṣa* splitting into male and female and by a combination of shape-shifting on the female's part and copulation with the male, the universe is filled with its variety of living beings. Here I reproduce that whole passage:

> In the beginning this world was Soul (*ātman*) alone in the form of a Person (*puruṣa*). Looking around, he saw nothing else than himself. He said first: 'I am.' Thence arose the name 'I.' Therefore even today, when one is addressed, he says first just 'It is I' and then speaks whatever name he has. Since before (*pūrva*) all this world he burned up ($\sqrt{uṣ}$) all evils, therefore he is a person (*pur-uṣ-a*). He who knows this, verily, burns up him who desires to be ahead of him.
>
> He was afraid. Therefore one who is alone is afraid. This one then thought to himself: 'Since there is nothing else than myself, of what am I afraid?' Thereupon, verily, his fear departed, for of what should he have been afraid? Assuredly, it is from a second that fear arises.
>
> Verily, he had no delight. Therefore one alone has no delight. He desired a second. He was, indeed, as large as a woman and a man

[21] Whether the king was actually sacrificed is up for debate.

> closely embraced. He caused that self to fall ($\sqrt{pat}$) into two pieces. Therefrom arose a husband (*pati*) and a wife (*patnī*). Therefore this [is true]: 'Oneself (*sva*) is like a half-fragment,' as Yājñavalkya used to say. Therefore this space is filled by a wife. He copulated with her. Therefrom human beings were produced.
>
> And she then bethought herself: 'How now does he copulate with me after he has produced me just from himself? Come, let me hide myself.' She became a cow. He became a bull. With her he did indeed copulate. Then cattle were born. She became a mare, he a stallion. She became a female ass, he a male ass; with her he copulated, of a truth. Thence were born solid-hoofed animals. She became a she-goat, he a he-goat; she a ewe, he a ram. With her he did verily copulate. Therefrom were born goats and sheep. Thus, indeed, he created all, whatever pairs there are, even down to the ants.
>
> He knew: 'I, indeed, am this creation, for I emitted it all from myself.' Thence arose creation. Verily, he who has this knowledge comes to be in that creation of his.[22]

In this cosmogony the thousand heads are not understood as simultaneous but as cumulative; more heads appear as more and more creatures are created through copulation of the divine couple. Here, too, sacrifice has receded into the background. The fires of sacrifice have been replaced by the fires of sexual intercourse. In fact, the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* is famous for drawing an analogy between sexual intercourse and the sacrificial rite.[23] This reading interprets the Virāj correctly to be female, born out of the first *puruṣa* and the source of all the third-level *puruṣas* to follow. This theme of the bifurcation of a primeval being and then creation through their incestuous union appears fairly frequently in the Purāṇas. We find Brahmā, the creator god, in that situation with Vāk, Speech, in the later *Bhāgavata*, though in her case she is regarded as his daughter.[24] In another place Brahmā splits into two creating Svāyambhuva Manu and his wife, Śatarūpā (Hundred-formed).[25] It is interesting to note that in both of these examples from the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka* the four castes are not included among the aspects of reality that issue from *Puruṣa*. The Upaniṣad has its own way of accounting for the castes later.[26]

The *Puruṣa*-Giant is featured in several other Upaniṣads as well. There are also numerous brief references to the hymn and citations of stray verses from it in various of the texts. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, for instance, has a section (2.1)

[22] ibid., 1.4.1-5

[23] See section 6.4 in this Upaniṣad, for instance.

[24] Bhāg., 3.12.28-34. Brahmā is in the process of creating the world from the parts of his mind and body, like *Puruṣa*.

[25] ibid., 3.12.51-52. The *Bhāgavata* says that Manu had only five children by her, but her name suggests her ability to take many forms like the daughter-sister-wife of *Puruṣa* in the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka*.

[26] Bā., 1.4.11-15.

in which hymn figures prominently. There, too, the sacrifice is not mentioned. Rather, an interesting metaphor is used to portray the issuing forth from and re-entering into *Puruṣa* of all beings:

> As, from a well-blazing fire, sparks
> By the thousand issue forth of like form
> So from the Imperishable, my friend, beings manifold
> are produced, and thither also go.[27]

Though sacrifice is not mentioned, the image of the fire, the medium of sacrifice, inevitably calls it to mind. This image of sparks flying out of a fire is later picked up by some Vaiṣṇava traditions as a metaphor to explain the difference and sameness of Bhagavān with the living beings.

The *Aitareya Upaniṣad* has an interesting version of the *Puruṣa* myth in its opening section (1.1). There too sacrifice is not mentioned. It is replace by *tapas*, austerity or heat.

4.2 *Puruṣa* in the *Bhagavad-gītā*

The earliest of the clearly Vaiṣṇava readings of the *Hymn of the Giant* appear in the epics and in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.[28] The image of the thousand-headed giant is clearly behind that impressive scene of Kṛṣṇa's revelation of his universal form to Arjuna in the Eleventh Chapter of the *Gītā*:

> Sañjaya said:
>
> Saying that, then, o king, Hari, the great controller of yoga, showed the son of Pṛthā his highest, godly form (*paramaṃ rūpam aiśvaram*. That deity had many faces and eyes and contained many amazing sights. It wore many divine ornaments, held many raised divine weapons, wore divine garlands and clothes, and was smeared with divine fragrances. It consisted of all wonders, was unlimited, and faced in all directions. If a thousand suns rose in the sky simultaneously, the light would be like the light of that great one. There in the body of the god of gods that descendent of Pāṇḍu then saw the whole universe in one place yet divided into many parts. Then overcome with amazement, his hair standing on end, Dhanañjaya, bowing with his head spoke to the deity with folded hands.[29]

[27] Hume, ibid., *Muṇḍaka*, 2.1.1.

[28] The *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* is a possible exception to this. Some scholars have given that text a fairly early date, Deussen for instance. It may not be much earlier than the epics, however.

[29] *Bhagavad-gītā*, 11.9-14. My own translation.

This is the view of ancient Vaiṣṇavism.[30] Kṛṣṇa's divinity, his supremacy, is demonstrated by revealing this universal form, by revealing, that is, that he *is* none other than the ancient Vedic *Puruṣa* from whom the whole universe has arisen. The commentators beginning with Śaṅkara say that Kṛṣṇa's statement: "supporting this whole universe with one part of me I am present in it," at the end of the last chapter (10.42), created a desire in Arjuna to see that form. Thus, he asks to see it and that takes up the next whole chapter of the text. The idea that the whole universe is the product of only a portion of the supreme deity is, of course, an example of the influence of the Hymn of the Giant.

It is clear from the wording of the Eleventh Chapter that the author of the *Gītā* regarded the universal form to be the highest form of the deity. In addition, Arjuna must be given special, divine eyes to see it, and seeing it he becomes awe-struck and then frightened and unsettled. What he sees is not the dismembered and charred corpse of a Giant. He sees the living body of the deity in which everything in the universe is located. The deity's living body is the living universe. In the *Gītā* as in the Upaniṣads, the sacrificial dismemberment has faded out of sight. What is newly added here, perhaps, is the idea that Puruṣa's becoming the universe is not a thing that happened only at the beginning through a ritual act, but rather that this becoming it is happening even now and through all time. The priority of Puruṣa is not one of time but of being. The gift that in the hymn was given then, at the beginning, is continuously being given in the *Gītā*'s understanding of Puruṣa. The relationship established by that gift or flow of gifts remains and is continuously being renewed. Everything and everyone is interconnected with each other through it and is part of it; that is, everyone has *bhakti*, a share in the universal form of Viṣṇu.

Arjuna, after seeing the universal form, says:

[30] Ancient Vaiṣṇavism is the name used here for the form of Vaiṣṇavism one finds in the epics (including the *Gītā*) and the early Purāṇas (the *Hari-vaṃśa* and perhaps the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*). Old Vaiṣṇavism is the Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkarācārya, the middle Purāṇas (the *Bhāgavata*) and the Alvars. Medieval Vaiṣṇavism is that of the *ācāryas* (Rāmānuja, Madhva, up through Caitanya), their followers and the late Purīṇas (*Padma*, *Braham-vaivarta*, etc.). After Medieval Vaiṣṇavism comes pre-Modern Vaiṣṇavism in which religious works are written predominantly in the vernaculars of various regions. Finally there is the Modern Vaiṣṇavism of the 20th and 21st centuries. In each of these periods there were a number of more or less distinct currents or streams of Vaiṣṇava thought, practice and belief. It is not certain when Vaiṣṇavism itself as the religious ideology and accompanying cult that regard Viṣṇu and later, for some, Kṛṣṇa as the highest manifestation of divinity and the source of all the other gods, first appeared; however, it is clearly present in India by the time of the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, who mentions it in one of his inscriptions, referring to the Bhāgavatas, and counts himself a member of the tradition. His dates are 350 to 290 B.C.E. It is also interesting to note that all of the texts that clearly espouse Vaiṣṇavism as defined above are post-Buddhistic works. Not only that, they are all clearly post-Pāṇinian works as well. Pāṇini's dates have been set at around the middle of the 4th century B.C.E., because of his references to the Ionians, the Greeks, through the word *yavana*. It may be then that Vaiṣṇavism developed contemporaneously with or perhaps slightly before the rise of Buddhism, that is, around the time of the Buddha or a little before. Recently his dates have been revised on the basis of several reconsidered sources and arguments. The eminent scholar Hajime Nakamura now dates the Buddha to the years between 463 and 383 B.C.E. (Nakamura, *A History of Early Vedānta Philosophy*, p 33.) This is all one can say about the beginnings of Vaiṣṇavism on the basis of the available data.

> You are the Primal God, the ancient Puruṣa; you are the foundation of this universe. You are the knower and what is known, the highest abode. By you, possessor of unlimited forms, is the universe pervaded. You are Vāyu, Yama, Agni, Varuṇa, the Moon, the Lord of Creatures and the Grandfather. Let me bow to you repeatedly a thousand times. Again and yet again do I bow to you. I bow to you from the front and from behind. I bow to you from all sides. O You of unlimited virility, your power is immeasurable; you pervade everything, therefore you are everything.[31]

Arjuna's response is meant to be the model response for all who come to understand their true relationship to the cosmic being they are part of. In other words, his is an expression of profound *bhakti*, of the sense that he is small and insignificant before the vastness and power of the full being of whom he is a small part and with whom he suddenly finds himself confronted. His response is one of praise and of humble submission. He humbles himself before the overwhelming power of that being. One can imagine similar feelings and responses being evoked in sensitive hearers and chanters when the Hymn of the Giant was sung in its proper ritual context as well.

Though sacrifice has receded into the background as the means by which the Giant creates or inhabits the world, it is very much present in Arjuna's vision. He saw:

> These sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra along with hordes of rulers of the earth, and Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and Karṇa along with our best warriors as well, they are rushing into your mouths filled with dreadful teeth and frightening to behold. Some are seen sticking to some of the teeth with their heads crushed. Like many rivers filled with rushing water flowing towards the sea, these heros of the human world enter your burning mouths. As moths enter with reckless speed into a burning flame to their destruction, living beings speed into your mouths to their destructions.[32]

The sacrificial aspects of this scene and indeed of the whole *Mahābhārata* war have been noticed and discussed before by other scholars.[33] Suffice it to say this scene is almost like a mirror image of the primordial sacrifice of *Puruṣa*. There the primal giant is sacrificed to produce the beings; here the beings are being sacrificed and enter into the cosmic giant. That kind of entry into the primal giant does not bring salvation, however, for many of these heros of the human world are entering as enemies, not as *bhaktas*. Nevertheless, the whole universal process is here envisioned as or assimilated to a cosmic sacrifice. Kṛṣṇa says

[31] Bg., 11.38-40.
[32] Bg., 11.26-29.
[33] Biardeau and Malamud.

at the peak of the experience: "Ancient Time am I, the destroyer of beings. I am here to destroy these beings. Except for you, all these warriors in each army will not be."[34]

But is it inevitable for all to be smashed in the teeth of Time? Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna later in the chapter:

> This form[35] of mine as you have seen it is very difficult to see. Even the gods are always wishing to see this form. I cannot be seen in this way, the way you have seen me, through the Vedas, by austerity, by charity or by offerings. Arjuna, only by unmixed *bhakti* can I be known, seen, and truly entered into in this way, destroyer of foes. One who performs action for me, who regards me as the ultimate, who is my *bhakta*, free of attachment, without enmity towards all living beings, that person comes to me, Pāṇḍava.[36]

The implications of the primordial gift, the total sacrifice, of *Puruṣa* have here been teased out. They lead to state of being called *bhakti*, unmixed *bhakti*. That is the proper way to respond to that gift. The concept of *bhakti* and forms it may take are not fully developed at this point in the history of Vaiṣṇava thought. A thousand or fifteen hundred more years will be needed for the complexities of *bhakti* to become more fully articulated. Here it is primarily represented as a means, a means to knowledge and beyond that to seeing the deity directly and finally to entering into him in another way than through his burning, gnashing mouths. *Bhakti* as goal is nowhere on the horizon at this point. Nevertheless, *bhakti* as understood in the *Gītā* is well represented in the last verse of this passage: acting for the satisfaction of Kṛṣṇa, regarding him as the ultimate, regarding oneself as his part, being free of attachment or connection to other things, and not being inimical towards any living being. Śaṅkara's comment on this passage is interesting. Of course, Śaṅkara represents Old Vaiṣṇavism, not the Ancient Vaiṣṇavism of the text. Nevertheless, he defines unmixed *bhakti* as "*bhakti* that is not directed anywhere else apart from Bhagavān at any time. That is, by all of the means of knowledge [all of the senses including the mind] nothing but Vāsudeva is perceived." Entering into Kṛṣṇa for Śaṅkara meant liberation, *mokṣa*. For Śaṅkara, the final verse in this passage is the very core meaning of the *Gītā*: "One who performs action for me, who regards me as the ultimate, who is my *bhakta*, free of attachment, without enmity towards all living beings, that person comes to me, Pāṇḍava." These then are some of the major aspects of the *Gītā*'s reading of the Hymn of the Giant. There are other passages that we could look at, such as that in the Fifteenth Chapter concerned with three *puruṣas* (15.16-18), but the main elements of the *Gītā*'s reading have already been encountered.

[34] Bg., 11.32.
[35] The universal form.
[36] Bg., 11.52-55.

4.3 *Puruṣa* in the *Bhāgavata*

The Hymn of the Giant is all over the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Everytime the process of creation comes up or there is a discussion of the descents (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu, Puruṣa seems to make an appearance, too. He is the first descent and the descent through which all other partial descents are channelled. He appears, for instance, in the lead up to the discussion of the various descents of Viṣṇu found in the First Canto, Chapter Three. Puruṣa then again appears in the Second Canto, again in the context of the creation and before another discussion of the descents. The end of Chapter Five and the whole of Chapter Six, for instance, is devoted to the *Bhāgavata*'s reading and expansion of the Puruṣa narrative. Then Chapter Seven of the same canto moves on to a discussion of the descents of Viṣṇu. Puruṣa once again appears in Chapter Ten of the same canto and we get yet another account of how the many elements of the universe come from his various body parts. When the creation is discussed again in the Third Canto, sure enough Puruṣa is discussed beginning with Chapter Six. Apart from these major discussions there are numerous other places in the *Bhāgavata* where Puruṣa is briefly referred to (at 3.13.5, 3.26.25, 9.14.2, for instance). Given this Purāṇa's tendency to comment, often times through narrative, on important passages of the Upaniṣads, this is perhaps not surprising, though the frequency and variety of the presentations is. The Hymn of the Giant is, no doubt, an important part of the history of the Vaiṣṇava tradition. It is regarded as an important self-revelation of divinity. Since it is not possible to take into our account all of these passages and references, though it would be interesting and instructive to do so, I will focus on only two important passages. This should be sufficient to leave us a basic sense of how the readings of Old Vaiṣṇavism differ from those of Ancient Vaiṣṇavism and anticipate some of the readings of Medieval Vaiṣṇavism.

The first appearance of Puruṣa in the *Bhāgavata* is an interesting example of the development of the Vaiṣṇava reading of the primordial giant. We find it at the beginning of the Third Chapter of the First Canto:

> In the beginning, Bhagavān accepted the form of Puruṣa, born along with the *mahat* and so forth and possessing all sixteen parts, out of a desire to create the worlds [or living beings, *loka*, according to Śrī Jīva]. From the lotus in the lake of the navel of him who was lying in the water in the sleep of yoga, was born Brahmā, the lord of the world-creators. The expanse of world [living beings] is likened to (*kalpita*) the arrangement of his limbs. That form indeed of Bhagavān is pure *sattva* and therefore powerful. They [the yogins according to Śrīdhara Svāmin] see that form with powerful eyes as astonishing with its thousands of feet, thighs, arms, and faces, with its thousands of heads, ears, eyes, and noses, and shining with thousands of crowns, clothes, and ear-rings. This is the depository of

> many descents, their undiminishing seed, by whose parts of parts are created gods, animals, men and so forth.[37]

Here we note a difference from the *Gītā* in the way Puruṣa is understood. In the *Gītā* the Puruṣa form was considered the highest form of Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. That is, Puruṣa is their source or hypostasis. Here, we see Bhagavān taking the form of Puruṣa for the purpose of creating the universe. Thus, the whole vision of Puruṣa and Puruṣa's relationship to the universe is now framed by a higher reality, the reality of Bhagavān, the possessor of *bhaga*, good fortune or wombs. Later on in the same chapter we learn the identity of Bhagavān more specifically:

> And these are the parts and subparts of Puruṣa, but Kṛṣṇa is Bhagavān himself. They cause delight age after age to a world that is troubled by the enemies of Indra.[38]

Thus, Puruṣa who is the source of all the descents and all living beings is recognized as a form of Kṛṣṇa who, though listed among those descents, is higher than or beyond Puruṣa. He is the hypostasis of Puruṣa. Puruṣa, then, who is awe-inspiring and even frightening in his form as Time or Death is reduced to a secondary manifestation of deity, a manifestation that applies only to the universe which is also awe-inspiring and frightening at times. Beyond him is the mysterious Kṛṣṇa who now comes to represent that three-quarters of divinity referred to in the hymn that is beyond the earthly world. The *Bhāgavata*, indeed, regards itself as the revealer of that mysterious Kṛṣṇa who stands in the shadows behind Puruṣa. Its Tenth Canto, the longest single section of the work, is exclusively devoted to the story of Kṛṣṇa. It builds certainly on the earlier accounts of the descent of Kṛṣṇa in works like the *Hari-vaṃśa* and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* but gives the story a masterful and more poetic expression which, though attempted, is not matched in any later work on Kṛṣṇa.

Much more detailed and complex are the representations of Puruṣa found in the Second Canto of the *Bhāgavata*. In Chapter Five. for instance, Nārada asks Brahmā, the demiurge and his father, to tell him truthfully whose form this world is, who is its substratum, from whom is it created, in whom it rests, and for whom it exist? After describing the creation of the various natural constituents necessary for the creation he says:

> When these existents [constituents], namely,the elements, the senses, the mind and the threads (*guṇa*), being uncombined were not able to create the body, o best of the knowers of Brahman, then, impelled by the power of Bhagavān, they mixed together with one another, accepted states of being and non-being [becoming primary and secondary], and created that [body, egg] consisting of both [collective

[37] Bhāg., 1.3.1-5. My own translation.
[38] Bhāg., 1.3.28.

> and distributive aspects]. After a thousand years the living being [*jīva*, Puruṣa, the Superself], depending on time, action and innate nature, brought that lifeless egg, floating on the waters, to life. That Puruṣa then split the egg and came out, he who has thousands of thighs, feet, arms and eyes, thousands of faces and heads. The thoughtful compare (*kalpayanti*) the worlds with his limbs, seven with those from the rump down and seven with those from the hips up. Puruṣa's mouth is Brāhmaṇa, his arms are the Kṣatriya, his thighs are the Vaiśya, and his feet are the Śūdra.[39]

This whole chapter is an interesting and complex blend of a variety of influences. In the section leading up to this passage we find a Sāṅkhya-like discussion of the evolution of the constituents of creation beginning with the unbalancing of the three threads (*guṇa*). It is the unbalancing of their equilibrium by Time that begins the process of evolution. Those constituents once evolved are then tied together into a body through the nudging of Bhagavān's power. That body has the form of an egg floating on water which has all the materials necessary for the creation of the universe, but it is lifeless. It is, therefore, brought to life by the giver of life (therefore he is called the Jīva, say the commentators), Puruṣa. At this point in the creation account we meet with another Vedic cosmogonic idea, that of the Golden Embryo (*hiraṇya-garbha*) or the Golden Egg. This is surely a reference to Ṛg Vedic hymn 10.121 which extols the Golden Embryo:

> The Golden Embryo arose in the beginning, born of the elements; it was the one lord. It held apart the earth and this sky. To what god should we give offerings? He is the one who gives the self, who gives strength, whose order all the gods honor, whose shadow is immortality and death. To what god should we give offerings?[40]

Here the Golden Egg or Embryo takes the place of the Virāj of the Hymn of the Giant. Since Virāj carries the meaning "shining," connecting it with the Golden Embryo which shines like gold is a clever way of combining the two cosmogonic hymns. From that Golden Egg is born Puruṣa with thousands of everything. The seventh and eighth verses of the same hymn suggests this as well:

> The rising waters were holding up the embryo, consisting of the universe, and generating fire. From that, he, the one life-breath of the gods, arose. To what god should we give offerings? He who with his greatness looked over the waters which were holding up ability and creating sacrifice, he was indeed the one god among the gods. To what god should we give offerings?[41]

[39] Bhāg., 2.5.32-37. My own translation.
[40] Ṛg Veda, 10.121.1-2. My own translation.
[41] ibid., 10.121.7-8. My own translation.

These two verses suggest the floating of the embryo-egg on the waters at the beginning of the creation and the appearing out of or splitting of the embryo-egg by Puruṣa, the one god among the gods. Perhaps this is the source of the cosmic egg in the passage cited above.

After the interlude of the egg, we return in the *Bhāgavata*'s account to the Hymn of the Giant, updated to account for the new areas of knowledge or belief held by the author of the *Bhāgavata*. Thus, the fourteen worlds, not mentioned or even hinted at in the original hymn, are now said to issue from the body of Puruṣa, seven from below the waist and seven from above.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this passage, though, is the use of the verb *kalpayanti* in verse thirty-six. It is from the root $\sqrt{kḷp}$ which means "to produce, arrange, compare, imagine." Though it can mean to create, it is more often used in the sense of arranging or assembling already existing materials into a whole. Or, it is used in the sense of comparing something with something else or imagining something to be something else. Thus, the verse could refer to the actual assembling of the world from the parts of the Puruṣa by the wise or thoughtful. Or, it could suggest that the wise only compare the parts of the world with the body of Puruṣa or even more radically, only imagine the parts of the world to be aspects of the body of Puruṣa. This is different from saying that the world *is* composed of the parts of the body of Puruṣa. This may be importing too much of a modernist or sophisticated view into the text, but the frequent use of words built from $\sqrt{kḷp}$ both here and in Canto One, Chapter Three must be significant. It could be that the author of the *Bhāgavata* is saying that though the world is not built out of the body of Puruṣa — at least not in the rather crude way the old hymn describes or not in any way easily comprehensible to limited living beings — it is valuable to meditate on the universe as being constructed from the parts of the divine body. In this way one comes eventually to perceive Bhagavān in all aspects of the universe, with all the senses and at all times. This it may be recalled was Śaṅkara's characterization of the unmixed *ananya-bhakti*: by all of the means of knowledge [the senses including the mind] nothing but Vāsudeva is perceived. Thus, the hymn and its various modified, expanded forms found in the *Bhāgavata* become more important as meditative aids for the cultivation of *bhakti*. Ritual which must have driven the point home powerfully, in a dramatic way, is replaced by meditation, *kalpanā*. Perhaps that is why it is repeated so many times in the text.

The whole of the next chapter, Chapter Six, is taken up with a detailed retelling of the hymn. In some places, even the wording comes very close to the original hymn; see verses 16, 18-20 of that chapter, for instance. The sacrifice of Puruṣa is not mentioned here but instead is replaced in a rather interesting way. Brahmā tells his son Nārada:

> When I came to be from the lotus of the navel of the great being,
> I did not know of any ingredients for sacrifice except for the limbs

> of Puruṣa. In them [I collected] animals, trees, grass, this place for sacrifice, this most qualified time, ... [42]

Thus, we learn that in the view of the author of the *Bhāgavata* the "gods" mentioned in the hymn who offered sacrifice with Puruṣa as the oblation to Puruṣa as the object of offering were Brahmā and perhaps his nine other sons and that he took the necessary ingredients for the sacrifice from the body of Puruṣa himself because there was nothing else to use, then in the beginning. Rather than Puruṣa's being sacrificed to produce the living world, as it appears from the hymn, he becomes the living world in order to promote sacrifice, sacrifice being the only means of properly honoring and worshiping him. The calculus of the gift remains the same nevertheless. The channel of giving is opened up at the beginning by the gift of life and all the ingredients needed to respond to that gift through sacrifice. Those who respond appropriately do so by willingly and lovingly giving back that which has been given.

This passage and the one before raise another question. Where does the birth from Puruṣa's navel-lotus of Brahmā, the demiurge, come from? It is not part of the original hymn. Brahmā is not mentioned in the Vedas. He first appears in the *Brāhmaṇas* and there, though he is connected the the Golden Embryo, he is not regarded as having been born out of a lotus, much less Viṣṇu's navel-lotus. The *Bhāgavata* is not the originator of the idea of Brahmā's birth from the navel lotus, but it may be the first to try to incorporate it into the Puruṣa cosmology. The idea of Brahmā's birth from the navel-lotus may be traceable to a Vedic hymn related to the mythology surrounding the Golden Embryo or Egg. Its incorporation into the Puruṣa creation is another demonstration of the determined effort on the part of the author of the *Bhāgavata* to synthesize and harmonize the different cosmogonic visions of the Ṛg Veda. The eighty-second hymn of the Tenth Maṇḍala is a hymn to Viśvakarman, the All-doing God. In its final verses it is said:

> What was the embryo the waters first carried, which is beyond heaven, beyond earth, beyond the gods and the demons, in which the all gods saw completely? That embryo the waters first carried, in which all the gods gathered together, *was one and fixed upon the navel of the unborn* [italics mine]; in it all the worlds were present. You do not know him who gave birth to all these; another has come in between you. Enveloped by fog, speaking gibberish, and infatuated with life, the utterers of praise wander about.[43]

Whether this is the source of the idea of Brahmā's birth from the navel-lotus or not, it bears some resemblance to the role Brahmā plays in the creation: the other one who comes in between.

[42] Bhāg., 2.6.22-3. My own translation.
[43] Ṛg Veda, 10.82.5-7. My own translation.

It is clear from the passages we have looked at that the author of the *Bhāgavata* was very conversant with the major hymns of the Vedas and that he was anxious to harmonize the various cosmogonic visions with each other. Moreover, he wanted to bring the ancient vision up to date, so to speak, so that the rather sparse, simple connections drawn in the ancient hymns are expanded to include the set of ideas current for him in his day. Thus, for instance, when he speaks of Puruṣa's mouth, he refers to it as both the "place of speech and of fire," recognizing the advancements made in the study of language by the great grammarians Pāṇini, Kātyāyana, and Patañjali. So, too, he adds the seven physical substances (saliva, blood, flesh, fat, bones, etc.) as the places of the seven major meters and the tongue as the place of the various kinds of offered food and of all the flavors.[44] The physical substances and flavors (*rasas*) are the result of the development of the medical sciences in India of which the author of the *Bhāgavata* had knowledge but the author of the Hymn of the Giant did not. It is also clear that he wanted to set the whole Vedic vision inside an outer frame that recognized Kṛṣṇa as the supreme being, thus not invalidating it but instead making it a limited but valuable part of a larger picture. Finally, there is the suggestion that the old Vedic Puruṣa even in his new Vaiṣṇava incarnation played a more valuable role as a meditative tool meant to train the mind to see the supreme deity, ultimately recognizable as Kṛṣṇa, in all aspects of the world around one. The successful cultivation of that ability leads ultimately to a state of mind called *bhakti*

5 Concluding Remarks

This is a very brief and sketchy survey of some of the main readings of the *Hymn of the Giant* that were influential in the development of Vaiṣṇavism. A much more detailed and careful examination of the history of the interpretation of this extraordinary hymn is needed to understand more fully the role it has played in the development of Hindu religious thought, not just in Vaiṣṇavism, but in Śaivism and Śāktism as well. Like the divine being it describes, the *Hymn of the Giant* has grown thousands of heads over the three thousand years of its transmission through Hindu culture and religious history. Each head represents a different reading or interpretation and many of those have led to further interpretations. The most profound way the hymn has influenced later religious thought seems to radiate from the drama of sacrifice that it describes. The world is made livable by the ultimate gift of a generous giver at the beginning of time and that act of supreme generosity calls upon all who live in the world to respond in kind. The channels of giving are open and only those who are ignorant or forgetful of the gift received pay no heed to the call for reciprocity and relationship. When they awaken and realize their indebtedness, not to mention their connectedness, they will certainly gladly respond.

[44] Bhāg., 2.6.1.

That response has been called *bhakti*. Thus, the *Hymn of the Giant*, like the great serpent-bed of Viṣṇu called Ananta, who also has thousands of heads, became the resting place and vehicle of Viṣṇu as he "grew beyond himself through food" from a minor solar deity in the Vedas to one of the great gods of medieval and modern Hinduism.