Contents

List of Contributors vi
Acknowledgements vii

Introduction xi

Perry Schmidt-Leukel

Part One: Buddhist and Christian Perspectives on the Issue of Creation

1 Hindu Doctrines of Creation and Their Buddhist Critiques
   Ernst Steinkellner 15

2 Three Buddhist Views of the Doctrines of Creation and Creator
   José Ignacio Cabezas 33

3 Buddhist Forms of Belief in Creation
   Eva K. Neumaier 47

4 Creation and the Problem of Evil
   Armin Kreiner 61

5 Refuting Some Buddhist Arguments about Creation and Adopting Buddhist Philosophy about Salvation History
   John P. Keenan 69

6 Creation and Process Theology: A Question to Buddhism
   Aasulu Lande 81

7 Buddhists, Christians and Ecology
   John D'Arcy May 93

Part Two: The Unbridgeable Gulf? Towards a Buddhist-Christian Theology of Creation

Perry Schmidt-Leukel

8 Preparing the Ground 111

9 Buddhist Criticism and Its Motives 123
10 Bridging the Gulf 143
11 Conclusion 177

Index 179
Chapter 1

Hindu Doctrines of Creation and Their Buddhist Critiques

Ernst Steinkellner

Some Preliminary Considerations

At the very beginning of this chapter, a short note of apology seems to be appropriate. When the editor confirmed my positive answer to the invitation to write this contribution, I felt flattered by his words ‘I am glad that you approach the area of Buddhist philosophy not only with a philological and historical interest, but also with a philosophical one – this, after all, makes it really interesting.’ I felt flattered, because in my youth philosophy appeared to me to be the peak of human activities. Throughout my working life, I nonetheless never came near these high ranges, and while facing the task of preparing this paper I had to admit to myself that my philosophical interest is actually quite minimal by now, and more and more my hopes focus rather on philology strictly speaking, especially when the questions to be addressed are within the framework of ‘Buddhist–Christian Dialogue’. For ‘philology’, as I would like to understand it, is an area of exercise in the never-ending social process of understanding information which originates from human sources with the intention to be understood by another human being, thus providing a basis for a dialogue which aims at mutual understanding rather than at preparing for non-verbal application of sticks or bombs.

The inter-linguistic and inter-cultural difficulties and impediments that are met with are well known. Projects like the present one, however, testify to the fact that a possibility to overcome these difficulties in a meaningful way is still to be hoped for, and is certainly preferable to the alternatives of cultural solipsism and military monism which result from intellectual attitudes such as those of the recently fashionable hermeneutical despair.

Intra-culturally, we are confronted with similar difficulties. Debates between different strands of Indian societies, too, are held in the same language and use roughly the same logical forms, and yet they often tend to end in irreconcilable differences. Precise conceptual clarity and neatness is therefore required in order to

discover the – mostly – silent presuppositions brought into such debates based on backgrounds of different social conditions, motivations, and aims.

In my following attempt to fulfill the task requested in the title of my paper, I shall naturally stay within the borders of the Indian culture. And, in order not to possibly misread in an inter-cultural discourse, I will try, as closely as possible, to identify the key concepts by their function in context. In addition, in order to do justice to those key concepts also within intra-cultural debates, we must take into account both the starting point and the direction of these debates. For, as a rule, a specific polemical argument tends to be selective and restrictive from the beginning: it chooses targets and prepares them for easier destruction through weapons wielded in the owner’s factory. Consequently, the theories and concepts of the party under polemical attack are always broader and more meaningful in their natural and homogeneous conceptual environment than when put up as isolated targets in polemics.

I shall therefore structure my paper in the following way: before looking at the various arguments developed by Buddhist traditions and philosophers, I will introduce some examples of ‘creation’ concepts from the early brahmanical and Hindu context which the Buddhists respond to in their critiques. This should reveal at least the more important reasons for their polemical efforts and identify the specific types of their targets. Since the Buddhists were quite selective, targeting not even all the main Indian doctrines of creation, this survey will really be no more than a typological one, with no comprehensiveness intended. Subsequently, I will summarize the historical development of the Buddhist arguments, attempt to identify the Buddhists’ reasons for their critical enterprise, and, finally, I shall present in more detail, but again only as an example, a particular argument which was elaborated by one of the most influential and differentiating Buddhist philosophers, Dharmakīrti.

It will remain to be seen whether any of these arguments can be transferred meaningfully to the Christian–Buddhist dialogue, and whether any objective can be seen in such an enterprise. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Buddhists tried to use their traditional polemical lore to confront Christian ideas in much the same way as had been used against the concepts developed by Indian theistic traditions. This, however, is not my topic, and will be dealt with in a later chapter.²

Creator and Creation in Traditional Hindu Thought

‘Creation’ together with its various explanations in India is an answer to the question of ‘Why are we, here and now?’ The question is searching for a first cause. By the time of the Buddha’s appearance, many answers had already been given. Starting from the later parts of the Rgveda to the earlier Upaniṣads, mythic notions of beginnings within a pre-existing set-up of the Vedic gods prevailed.³ Some cosmogonic hymns of the Rgveda speak of a personal creator-god, Viṣvakarman (‘Whose acting is the universe’), who as a priest carries out creation as a sacrifice, and who works with pre-existing material in the manner of a craftsman. In the hymn to puruṣa (‘man’) (Rgveda 10.90), we find the idea of an emanation of the universe, including the macro cosmos and our worldly surrounding with its social institutions, from a single entity, the puruṣa, as causa materialis. This is a clearly monistic tradition, identifying the cause as ‘the One’ (tād evam), but naming it by the names of the great Vedic gods Indra, Varuṇa, or Agni.⁴ The early Upaniṣads identified this Vedic ‘One’ with bhūtah, the truth of the Vedic word and reality of everything existent, the source and substance of the world in matter and consciousness, and finally identified this impersonal principle with the conscious core in living beings, the ‘Self’ (Ātman). Vedic polytheism thus gave way to Upaniṣadic monism, and the Vedic gods were relegated to the realm of the finite with their tasks. The absolute bhūtah does not necessarily require a creator of the universe. The created world could be seen as being only phenomenal, an illusion, and a falsely imagined transformation of the ultimate reality. Such ideas do not, however, exclude the assumption of a temporarily active creator-god as long as the impersonality of the absolute bhūtah is not associated with a function. Materialistic monism is known as well, in which creation is seen as an ‘outflow’ (vṛtti), or in a dualistic garb, in which an active undifferentiated primal matter (prakṛti) creates by transforming itself for the purpose of inactive but observing units of consciousness (puruṣa).

Along with these atheistic ideas of creation we also find personalistic-theistic concepts developing from late-Vedic monism. The Vedic ‘One’ was assumed to exist, have a wish to create and a consciousness to know what is to be created in all its details. Such a wishful and conscious ‘One’, however, can hardly be a neutral principle, but must be a personal one. The alternative to an unfathomable bhūtah without form and qualities (nirguṇa) is thus a personal God with qualities (saguṇa), an agent of creation of the world, as well as its upkeep and destruction, the masculine god brahma (n. brāhma) with only a shift of the accent. He is not known in the Veda, but Vedic and early Upaniṣadic mythic notions, for example, the ‘lord of creatures’ (praśātpati) or the ‘golden (that is, eternal) germ’ (hiraṇyagarbha) were seen as ‘the One’ that has subsequently taken form as a personal God, the Lord of creation, Praśātpati or Puruṣa in the Veda, later Bhagavān and Śivara, who designs the elements and laws of nature, and starts the process of creating all living beings beginning with the various gods. Theories of rebirth and a cyclic conception of the cosmos were also developed in this period and completed the notion of a highest personal God: at the end of a world-period, this God takes both the world and its creatures back into himself. Formless neuter bhūtah before creation, that is, the

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² Cf. José Cabré’s contribution in Chapter 3.
moment when the 'golden germ' is born, is god Brahmā (brāhmaṇa) as long as the world, space, time and creatures exist. Therefore, a relationship between the eternal creator and creatures is possible, and no alternative is left to this monotheistic option: he creates and supports, he is omniscient, omnipotent and eternal. The Vedic gods have now become part of the circle of finite existences, even if long-lasting. This highest personal and eternal God is subsequently identified by historically and socially different groups, the representatives of the developing Hindu religions, under the various names praised, loved and feared, for example by Vaiṣṇava believers as Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, or by Śaiva believers as Siva. These early theistic tendencies, becoming monotheistic traditions and finally Hindu religions properly speaking, incorporate the inherited basic structure of identity or difference between transcendent and immanent aspects of the ultimate being in different ways. Roughtly, it can be said that the Supreme Being brahma is personalized in the sense that a creative aspect is attributed to it: it is assumed to be responsible for the origin and order of the cosmos. The idea of a transcendent, all-pervading, inactive and impersonal principle, the late-Vedic brahma, remains alive, however, for in many of the mythic accounts of the creation that are available, for example, in the Maha Smriti or in various Purāṇas, the actual creation of the world lies in the hands of a demiurge. Often, the god Brahmā is given this special task, but the demiurge may also be seen as the creative power (māyā, sakti) or a manifestation (vyūha) of the ultimate reality. What these general myths and later theologies then present are elaborate variations on the answers to two main questions: How did God create the world? And why did God create the world?

The general scarcity of written sources for centuries of oral tradition allows only for a hypothetical history of these developments: they begin already in the last parts of the Rgveda, and become stronger around the time of the Buddha’s activity, the fifth to fourth centuries BCE, during the first North Indian empire of the Nandas, and the time of the Maurya dynasty. With the development of the classical Indian philosophical traditions from the last centuries BCE onwards, we can assume that the theistic conceptions, which so far were only asserted in the form of mythic accounts, finally become to receive theoretical justifications.

I cannot touch upon the question of why God created the world, and the direction of this chapter does not allow for a comprehensive survey of the variations in the manner of his creation. I would offer, rather, a typology of conceptions of creation, and exemplify the two types proposed respectively. Their main difference seems to consist in whether an all-pervading or only a limited function of God is assumed to be the cause of the world. For God may be seen as being both, the material and the instrumental or efficient cause of the world, or only its instrumental cause.


The first type of creation theory can perhaps be characterized as evolutionary. It aims at harmonizing a monistic position with the ancient idea of an original transcendent unity of impersonal being. An example is the creation theory of the vishuqta Pāñcaratā tradition. Here, two main stages of creation are distinguished, a higher or pure one (suddhasarga), and a lower or gross one. Viṣṇu, the ultimate being, wakens Lakṣṇī, his Śakti ('Power'). Why remains a mystery, for even 'diversion' (līla) given as an answer is not satisfying in the case of a perfect being. Viṣṇu’s ‘Power’ is twofold as action and becoming, that is, as the instrumental and material cause of the world. This ‘Power’, which is nothing but Viṣṇu’s will to create, is symbolized by God’s discus-weapon (Sudarśana), and is understood to be the principle that supports and orders the world. Manifestations (vyūha) and ‘appearances’ (avatāra) of Viṣṇu as part of this pure creation enrich the possibilities of special kinds of divine support.

The second stage of creation includes categories such as māyā ('power of illusion'), the guṇas ('constituent qualities of primal matter'), the natural law of ārtham and its character of necessity, and kāla ('time'). In fact, the whole system of evolutionary products developed in the philosophical tradition of the Sāṅkhyā is included as a distinct kind of creation called 'creation from primal matter' (pradhānāsarga), to which the final step, 'creation by Brahma' (brahmāsarga), is added in order to incorporate the traditional epic accounts. All this sets limitations for the evolving products and increasing estrangement of these products from their original perfection and purity. When the last essence (atman), earth, is evolved, the activity of the Manus, the fathers of mankind, begins.

According to the second type of creation theory, God is thought to be an eternal ‘supreme soul’ (paramātmā) or even a special substance separate from other eternal elements of being. The idea of creation by a ‘creator-god’ (Iśvara) as developed in the philosophical traditions of Vaiṣnava and Nyāya may serve as an example in this case, for their conceptions are the main targets of the later Buddhist polemics. These brahmanical philosophical traditions, which eventually merged to a certain extent, seem to have been conceived in their beginnings as atheistic systems for explaining the modes of bondage into an unsatisfying worldly existence and the means of liberation from the same. It is generally agreed that, considered as a whole, there was no need in these systems to consider an Iśvara as a necessary component in the cycles of cosmic formation, existence and dissolution. Material atom-shaped elements as well as souls existed without beginning, that is, eternally, and thus were not created.

The movements of the atomic elements, resulting in various combinations of matter and souls at the beginning and their dissolution at the end of world-periods, is caused

Buddhist and Christian Perspectives on Creation

by an unconscious, omnipotent force, called ‘the invisible’ (adīrga). This force is the product of both the good and bad activities (karma) of living beings, and is responsible for all phenomena not explainable by natural causes.

At a certain stage, this explanation was no longer considered satisfactory. For how could an unconscious (acetanu) ‘invisible’ direct the process of building a universe and then even be responsible for keeping it in order? In addition, pressure from the side of theistic movements – in this case from Saiva circles (Pāśupata) – resulted in introducing the Iśvara into these systems. Iśvara, that is, Śiva, now assumed the role of supervising (adhiṣṭhāṭa) the ‘invisible’ in its activities of combining the elements and souls during the periods of creation and dissolution, as well as sustaining order during world-periods. Here, the concept of God is qualified by three main functions: God as creating (kārti) the world, God as supervising (adhiṣṭhāṭa) the fate and order of both living beings and the world, and God as pronouncing the Vedic scriptures (vedakārti), the concept of God as creator being the basic idea of the theology developing in these traditions.

God, in this context, is understood, of course, only as being the instrumental cause (nimittakārānta) of the world, an aspect that is underlined by the introduction of an additional demiurge. I take as example a mythic account of creation that is found in the Pāḍīṭhādhammasaṅgraha, a systematic commentary on the Vaiśeṣikaśātras from the sixth century CE, although this account is probably older.11 The dissolution of the world is followed by a period of Śiva’s repose of ‘a hundred Kṛṣṇa-years’ (that is, 8640000000 human years). Following this, Śiva desires to re-create the universe to provide a possibility for living beings to experience the fruits of their karma. Subsequently ‘the Invisible’ then starts its activity of combining the ultimate atoms into gross, that is, composite, elements. To quote:2

When in this way the four composite elements have come into existence, a great egg comes into being solely because of God’s (Mahēśvara’s) meditation-volition (abhidhānya) out of atoms of fire mixed with atoms of earth. In this (egg) (God) causes Brahmā to arise (upādya), with four faces … the grandfather of all the worlds, and with all the worlds. He then enjoins him with the duty of creating living beings (prājñāraja). That Brahmā, thus enjoined by God and endowed with eminent knowledge, detachment and power, knows the effects of the (previous) deeds of living beings. He creates the Pranjūpas, etc. … and

What is common to both types of creation theories is the assumption of an eternal, either impersonally or personally interpreted cause of the world, to which possibilities of considerable further variations are added by different conceptions of causality, such that the eternal cause may either be seen as transforming itself into its products, or as causing new ones.

‘Creation’ in this context, therefore, is either the beginning of an evolutionary process within an ultimate being, or the beginning of a generative process in which a sovereign consciousness combines independent elements of similar eternity. In all Indian traditions, ‘creation’ is also not a unique event, but an eternally repeated one. And this cyclic perception of world-periods is the reason for the fact that the concept of a creation ‘without a cause’ (ahetu) or ‘from nothing’, although theoretically known, has never become part of an accepted creation theory.

Presuppositions of the Buddhist Anti-theistic Critique

All this forms part of the background of ideas in front of which and – as I prefer to think – against which the Buddha shaped his analysis of worldly existence. The so-called ‘three characteristics’ (trīṣaṭkaṇṇa) of existence, for example, which constitute the framework of all later Buddhist ontologies are clearly formulated as contradictory to those of the highest being in the monistic and early monothestic traditions. These characteristics of existence (bhāva) are all negations: ‘non-eternal’ (aniyata), ‘non-self’ (anatta) and ‘suffering’, or better: ‘non-satisfactory, distressful’ (duḥkha), and negate the essential characteristics of the ultimate being, brāhmaṇ, as eternal, as personal, and as blissful. The Buddha’s characteristics mutually support each other, but ‘suffering’ is, as a rule, directly derived from ‘non-eternal’. ‘Non-eternal’ together with ‘non-self’, therefore, can be considered to be the core concepts of every Buddhist analysis of existence. It is because of this analysis as a fundamental condition of the Buddhist tradition that it was always strongly opposed to the idea of an eternal and personal god as creator (kārti) and supervisor (adhiṣṭhāṭa) of the universe.

With the historical and religious transformations of the Buddha’s tradition – from the origins and early Buddhism to the various developments within Mahāyāna Buddhism and Buddhist Tantrism up to the modern forms of Buddhism in our time – we encounter ideas, side by side, that seem to contradict these basic notions: e.g., the idea of an eternal Buddha in the second part of the Lotus Sūtra and with Nichiren in thirteenth-century Japan, or the theologies developed around the supreme sovereignty of the Buddha Amītābha. A certain tension between the efforts to refute

9 Cf. Chemparathy, op. cit. (fn. 8), pp. 115f.
12 From Bronkhorst, ‘God’s Arrival’, op. cit. (fn. 11) p. 286 (with some deviations).
13 ‘The term duḥkha is to be taken as an adjective meaning ‘that which causes suffering’.
the existence of God as a perfect supreme being and the cause and holder of the universe on the one hand, and their own ideas about the nature of the ultimate, Nirvāṇa or Buddha, which often are expressed in terms appropriate to God as well on the other, seems to accompany later Buddhism, especially in its various Mahāyānist forms. Occasionally, this tension seems to coagulate into a veritable self-contradiction.

In order to overcome this apparent contradiction, we best resort to the Mahāyānist notion of 'two realities' (Satyādvaya): a relative or finite one, and an absolute or real one. If we may apply this distinction to interpret the early heritage, we can say that 'the Buddha', when he proposed an intellectual method for release from the eternal unsatisfying circle of existences, namely by analysing its different constituents – body, feeling, notions, dispositions, and perceptions – was referring, strictly speaking, to the Upaniṣadic idea of a truly existing, eternal, unchanging and therefore blissfully satisfying Self. But he does not mention such a Self. He states merely what we normally consider to be a Self – that is, any of the named constituents or their combination – cannot be a Self, because such a Self could not be harmed or diminished. Admittedly, in general terms, this means that the Buddha, in his analysis, keeps to the realm of the finite, the world in which we find ourselves. The other realm is not of his immediate concern. Silence and occasional metaphors seem to have been his answers to inquisitive inquiries in this direction. There is, however, also no outright negation.

Any discourse on 'creation' refers to the finite realm of existences here and now. Buddhist polemics against Hindu concepts of creation, but also against an eternal God in his function as creator, therefore refer to the same realm of reality. The Buddhists assume worldly existence to be caused by previous deeds (karma). In order to explain this in detail, the Buddha proposed the concept of 'origination in dependence' (pratītyasamutpāda). This 'sentence', which, in its classical form, distinguishes a causally connected series (Upānishad) of twelve members as the main causes and conditions of rebirth, offers, like a flashlight illuminating a certain section of the cycle of existence, an explanation of the cycle's origin (saṃudaya), and at the same time provides the structure of its possible ending (nirvāṇa). It is not to be understood as the Buddha's 'theory of causality'. Since the members of this origination are causally connected, however, in the form 'when this is the case, that arises' (asmin satītāṃ bhavati), causality as such is an undisputed presupposition. Existence, then, is an interplay without beginning of the 'groups' or 'branches' (skandha) – body/matter, feeling, and so on – perpetuated by the likewise beginningless main binding causes of 'misconceptions' or 'wrong orientations' (avidyā) and craving for life and lust (trṣṇā).

Because of the experience of change in everything existent, the reality at hand can only be impermanent, non-eternal. In discussing creation theories that involve an eternal principle in order to explain continuity and the order of the cosmos, the relationship between a permanent entity and impermanent entities, therefore, is a major point for developing Buddhist arguments. The other main point is the assumption of a conscious agent in causal processes, especially identified in acts of creation. The Buddha understands causal processes, material as well as emotional and mental ones, as taking place among the constituents of existence that are, as such, not a Self, that is, impersonal. This is because they do not last; or stated inversely: therefore, they do not last.

Such basic notions resulting from the Buddha's analysis of existence – to be equated roughly with the first and second of the four Noble Truths – have to be considered as silent presuppositions in all Buddhist refutations of concepts of creation that involve an eternal and conscious personal creator. Buddhist critiques of Hindu doctrines of creation are focused on the impossibility of such a creation because of the impossibility of an eternal, omniscient and omnipotent Master of the universe.

However, presuppositions of this kind do not prevent the Buddhist tradition from occasionally transporting veritable accounts of creation as part of their own mythic lore. A striking example is the Aggaṇṭha Sutta (Dīghanikāya 27) in which the Buddha identifies his first translator, called 'A Book of Genesis'. This account has always been taken by all Buddhists 'as being a more or less straight-faced account of how the universe, and in particular society, originated'. The god Brahman, the creator-god in this story, seems to have been always acceptable to all Buddhists on the silent (?) assumption that he is presented here as a demigod of impermanent nature. Thus, Brahman functions just like any of the other gods in the Indian pantheon who are considered useful for a specific task for the world and its beings which is assigned to them, and in the realization of which they are consuming the fruits of their own specific karmic heritage.

However, that this story came to be regarded as the Buddha's account of creation in the canonical tradition and even later is evidently due to the fact that the real purpose and style of this Sutta and its various allusions were not properly understood from very early on in the formation of the canonical literature. Richard Gombrich recently and convincingly found that, in fact, it is to be read as a mockery of Brahman conceptions, and he was able to show that the Buddha in this discourse was 'setting out both to deny the Brahman view of the origin of society and to make fun of it'.

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21 Cf. ibid.
22 Ibid., p. 163.
An Outline of the Buddhist Arguments

The Buddhist refutations differ to some extent in their forms of expression according to the general development of the culture of debate and the formulation of arguments on the one hand, and, on the other, as conditioned by the specific aims of the types of literature conveying them. In terms of their contents, the arguments propounded are rather limited. They were developed in refutations coming from the early Madhyamaka school or, more importantly, from the dogmatic treatises of the Sarvástivāda school, prominently represented in the writings of Vasubandhu, the author of the classical dogmatic treatise the Abhidharma-kosa and its commentary. After the middle of the first millennium CE, the Buddhist philosopher Dignāga (c. 480–540 CE) finally succeeded in being broadly accepted by Indian intellectuals in the essential points of his logic. Subsequently, proof as well as refutation of God as creator of the world were now subject to more formal rules of logic, presented and discussed accordingly, and became the task of specialists. Simplified, it can be said of this period that on the side of the theistic traditions, the brahmanical Nyāya school, and on the side of the Buddhist, the tradition of Dignāga, and from the seventh century of Dharmakīrti and his followers, represented opposing parties on the battlefield. Up to the time of the disappearance of the Buddhist ‘atheists’ from Indian soil under the onslaught of the Muslims, the new and less tolerant theists in India, this contest flourished richly both philosophically and logically, in which the problem of God’s existence and activity was developed in all its logical perspectives. As an early stage in the development of Buddhist refutations, the Nīkayas of the Pāli canon seem to represent a period in which the idea of a creator-god was mainly mocked and ridiculed. As a rule, the god Brahmā – in fact, he is better known from such Buddhist travesties than from early Indian monotheistic circles – is the victim, as, for example, in the Brahmaṇa-kāla-sūtra. Brahma is the first being to arise at the beginning of a new cycle. Lonely, he wishes for companions. When they appear, he wrongly thinks they were created by his wish, instead of realizing that, in fact, they had arisen because of their own karmic causes.

Real arguments are still rare in this literature. Rejection on the grounds of theodicy, however, already occurs on various occasions. If God created the universe and conducted its order, man would not be morally responsible and God would not be benevolent, since evils and suffering are his creation too. The argument of human morality’s depreciation is also repeated in the Buddhismātra of the poet Aśvaghosa

(first century CE). In general, however, the Suttas prefer rather to compare the certainty in the Buddha’s proposals for a goal of spiritual efforts with the aims of theistic devotees, for example, ‘companionship with God’ (brahma-saṅkhyā), which are dismissed as being ridiculous (hassaka) and vain (ritaka), for these devotees are striving towards something of which no one has any evidence.

The founder of the Madhyamaka philosophical school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Nāgārjuna (c. 200 CE), aimed at establishing the truth of ‘dependent origination’ on the level of relative reality. To this end, he used traditional lists of alternatives proposed as causes for worldly existence, God among them. Such alternatives, or God alone, are also discussed in a number of works of questionable origin, but attributed to Nāgārjuna. God as cause is also a target of Bhāvya, a major polemic of this school, as well as of the didactic poet Śāntideva.

Similarly, the arguments derived from theodicy are presented here in many variations, but also an argument from causality is elaborated which refutes God on the grounds that he is only one – that is, single and permanent – it cannot be explained how he could be active at all. The historical origin and development of this argument is still unclear to me. It provides for the main argumentation in Vasubandhu’s Abhidharma-kosabhāṣya, and its essential parts are already found in the first great dogmatic summa of the Sarvástivāda school, the Mahāvibhāga:

(27) (If Īvara is the cause of everything, then he must create everything at once (since efficiency implies immediate causation); (b) if he requires help, then he is not the sole cause; (c) if he is undifferentiated and eternal, so must be his effects (since effect must resemble cause); (d) since effects are known to be impermanent, their alleged permanent cause has no more ‘existence’ than other inexistence entities.

27 Buddhismātra IX, 63 (IX, 53 according to the enumeration of E.B. Cowell in Sacred Books of the East 49).
Dharmakīrtī’s Argument from Ontology

In order to properly understand this Buddhist line of argumentation against a permanent being such as the omniscient God (Īśvara), we have to look at the Buddhist concept of being, existence (sattva). The Buddhist concept of being is determined by the Buddha’s assessment of all worldly existence as ‘non-eternal’ (anītya). This assessment is then further developed and sharpened into the concept of existence being only ‘momentary’ (kṣanīka). The ontology of momentariness is supported by proofs, and Dharmakīrtī finally proposes a proof of momentariness from the logical reason of ‘existence’ (sattva). The tautological character of such a proof is intentional, because its aim is to demonstrate that only where the concept of momentariness is applicable is the concept of existence also justified. In other words: only momentary, impermanent, non-eternal entities can be considered to be existing (sattat).

A classical proof-formula of Dharmakīrtī reads like this: ‘Whatever is existent is exclusively momentary, since, if it were non-momentary, it would be excluded from being a real entity because of its contradiction to causal efficacy (arthakriya), (for a real entity) is characterized by having this (causal efficacy).’ Here, the link to refutations of permanently existing entities becomes evident, if we further take into account that the concept of existence is defined by causal efficacy (arthakriya), that is, by a capacity to produce an effect, for example in creating a universe. In fact, the negation of the existence of eternal entities becomes a logically necessary part of Dharmakīrtī’s proof of the momentariness of being.

In his second main work, the Pramāṇavāsinicacya, this proof takes the following more explicit form by including a secondary proof to demonstrate that the proving property, ‘existence’, does not occur in a locus that lacks the property to be proven, ‘momentariness’:

Such a non-momentary (entity) is not in a position to produce an effect, since it contradicts graduality as well as simultaneity (implied by causal efficacy). Gradually it is not (efficacious), for, (if) it becomes an agent (as a cause which produces an effect) independently (of cooperative causes) on the strength of (its) mere existence, it is not possible for (it) to remain (inefficacious). For that which was not an agent earlier cannot be (an agent) later either, since no change occurs to its own nature. Also if it depends on (other cooperative causes), it would not be efficacious, for as an eternal unchanging entity it would depend on such other causes that cannot causally influence this entity. Nor is (this non-momentary entity efficacious) simultaneously, since it is not possible that its own nature (of being efficacious) remains inefficacious later. Therefore, that which is void of any capacity (for producing an effect) exceeds the characteristic of existence.

35 Cf. A. von Rossouw, The Buddhist Doctrine of Momentariness: A Survey of the Origin and Early Phase of this Doctrine up to Vasubandhu (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag [1995]).
37 Hetawali 4,16, as translated in Yoshimizu, op. cit. (fn. 36), p. 234.
38 Pramāṇavāsinicacya 2.29, 15–24, as translated in Yoshimizu, op. cit. (fn. 36), pp. 234f.

This proof contains all the ingredients used in the polemics against a creator-god brought forward by Dharmakīrtī and his school against the proofs of the existence of God developed in the Nyāya school and in related Svaṭtiic circles.39 These proofs of God as creator of the universe that were attacked by Dharmakīrtī in the second chapter of his first work, the Pramāṇavārttika,40 were formulated by different Nyāya philosophers of the sixth century CE, for example by Uddyotakara, who may have been a believer in Siva.

The context and reason for Dharmakīrtī’s efforts to destroy these proofs of God must be indicated briefly: the second chapter is a ‘religious treatise’ written as an elaborate commentary on the benedictory stanza of Dignāga’s Pramāṇasamuccaya which marks the spiritual and historical beginning of the Buddhist epistemological tradition as a cultural phenomenon. Dharmakīrtī demonstrates that it is possible to rely on the Buddha as a ‘person of authority’ (pramāṇaparāyu) in the sense that he ‘has become (a means of) valid cognition’ (pramāṇabhūt, metaphorically speaking, because he shares with ordinary, everyday kinds of valid cognitions, perception and inference, the characteristic that he is non-belying, reliable, trustworthy (āvedyānītya), and the characteristic that he makes hitherto unknown states of affairs known (ajñātātthagacāya). At the same time, Dharmakīrtī explains that the Buddha has developed this double capacity during innumerable existences as is implied by the term ‘become’ (bhūta) used by Dignāga. This progress of becoming an authority is then accounted for in the rest of the chapter by explaining the necessary causes. After giving a definition of what can be considered to be this kind of ‘valid cognition’ (Pramāṇavārttika = PV 2:1–6), stanza 7 identifies the Buddha as sharing these defining characteristics because of his appropriate efforts.

This introduction, a rational foundation of Buddhism, is followed by a refutation of the idea that a permanent Īśvara could fulfilled the requirements of this definition in the same way, a refutation that ‘may be the most important single anti-theistic passage in all of Buddhist literature’.41 It begins with the statement, ‘A permanent authority does certainly not exist’ (nityam pramāṇam naivāstī, PV 2:8a).

In the following stanzas (PV 2:8–28), Dharmakīrtī first demonstrates the impossibility of a permanent kind of epistemic source (PV 2:8–9), following which he refutes the proofs of God propounded by the Nyāya school (PV 2:10–16), applies this refutation also to other schools’ proofs (PV 2:17–20), and concludes by pointing out some contradictions in the Nyāya conception of God (PV 2:21–8).

40 Cf. Jackson, op. cit. (fn. 15) and Krasser, op. cit. (fn. 23), pp. 19–55.
41 This translation I understand as conveying the same meaning as Krasser’s literal rendering of the karmadhāraya-compound by ‘one who has come into existence being a pramāṇa’. Cf. H. Krasser, ‘On Dharmakīrtī’s Understanding of pramāṇabhūta and His Definition of pramāṇa’, Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Sudasiens 45, 2001, 173–99, p. 184.
The last section reformulates some of the traditional arguments in new arrangements, for example the argument of incompatibility between the idea of God’s eternal nature and his creating the universe. For such an idea would imply, he says, that God has a nature before creation which is not a cause, whereas – in the moment of creation – his nature is capable of being a cause. However, both concepts, permanence and being a cause, cannot be attributed to the same entity (PV 2:21). But if God is assumed to create when he is not a cause, then there is no relationship between God and his creation – instead of attributing an effect (for example, the healing of a person) to its proper cause (medicine), it could then be attributed to anything (such as a wooden post) (PV 2:22). Further: since to a Buddhist all causal phenomena can be explained, or at least should be able to be explained, by referring to conventional, finite causes, there is no need to propose a permanent necessary condition behind these available causes. A transcendent God is especially inappropriate for this purpose, because any activity would imply a change in his permanent nature (PV 2:23). If such a God is nevertheless assumed to be the cause, that is, if a different cause is thought to be responsible for a particular effect than the cause that can be determined, then there is no end of causes, and causality becomes inexplicable (PV 2:24–8).

Dharmakīrti’s refutation of the Nyāya proofs43 introduces a new stage in these discussions: it is part of his argumentation against God as being the permanent cause of an impermanent universe along traditional lines. This argumentation was provoked by the fact that such proofs had recently been proposed – after earlier proposals mainly from theistic Śāṅkhya circles – by proponents of the leading brahmanical tradition of logic and dialectics, the Nyāya school, that about this time seems to have sided with Śāvaitic groups. The essential point of Dharmakīrti’s refutation is that such proofs of God are logically impossible.

A few words on the logical foundation upon which this turn of the argumentation has been built: Dignāga, Dharmakīrti’s predecessor, had refined earlier proposals for controllable logical forms and rules in his theory of ‘the logical reason with three characteristics’ (trilakṣaṇo hetuḥ). What this means is basically: (1) that a proving property, the reason, must occur in the proof’s subject, that is, the locus where the property to be proven, the problematic property, occurs; (2) that the proving property, besides the subject, must occur only in similar cases, that is, cases where the problematic property is known to occur, and (3) that the proving property must never occur in dissimilar cases, that is, cases where the problematic property does not occur. Thus the occurrence of the problematic property in the proof’s subject is ascertained by controlling the positive and negative concomitance between the two properties.

These logical principles in Dignāga’s version were also accepted by the Nyāya logicians for their proofs, and we can assume that by the end of the sixth century all

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44 Jackson terms the former an ‘Intermittence Argument’, and the latter a ‘Design Argument’ (cf. op. cit., fn. 15), pp. 480 ff.
In other words, the logical concomitance between proving and problematic property cannot be ascertained by demonstrating examples, since the causal relationship between the properties ’having a particular shape’ and ’having a conscious cause’ is specific and cannot be generalized, and the proving property used is therefore not established in any example. Thus, we can infer the activity of a conscious potter from the shape of a pot, but not from the shape of a territe hill with its many makers, and not from the shape of mountains and oceans, which may also have a conscious cause, but that this cause is an Iśvara with all his specific qualities and attributes cannot be ascertained by inference.

Dharmakīrti’s critique is followed by a centuries-long dispute in which all major figures of the two leading logical schools participate. On the side of the Nyāya, the problems indicated by Dharmakīrti provoked some special developments in their logic. Their main focus also shifted from proposing new logical reasons beside the main ones, to wit that a conscious cause must be assumed because unconscious elements cannot organize themselves and because they are effects, to establishing, by additional methods, that the acceptance of a conscious cause implies a specificity consisting in God with his specific qualities. Most prominent among these methods is a proof proposed by Vācaspatimiśra (ninth century) through the exclusion of other possibilities (partiseṣāti). He says, for example, that the specificity of God being this conscious cause can be derived from the fact that the generic proving property is a property of the subject (paksadharmaśi), and that the specific characteristics of the problematic property must be present in the subject, because they are contained in the generic property, since there is no generic property without something specific. This specific entity is God or any of his qualities, such as omniscience and so on, which he demonstrates by excluding other alternatives.

Concluding Remarks

To summarize this highly elliptic and imperfect survey in the light of Christian-Buddhist dialogue: What can an acquaintance with Indian ideas on creation, a creating God, and the anti-theistic criticism of the Buddhists tell us in comparison with those of the Mesopotamian and Christian traditions? I think, mainly, that such ideas are referring to a finite realm of discourse within which they cannot be harmonized because of pre-dialogue decisions that have not been put at disposal in any of these discussions. All participating Indian positions share the acceptance of causality as a red thread in understanding the world and existence. Whereas the Hindu partners see the continuity in the flow of impermanent entities as the basis of cosmic order to be provided by a permanent factor, the Buddhists focus on the change of the same impermanent entities as only explicable by their essential impermanence in the form of momentariness. They therefore argue against the possibility of any causal interaction between a permanent factor and impermanent entities: not only because it is impossible, but also because it is unnecessary, meaningless. Moreover, Hindu concepts of a permanent creating factor are modelled on an analogy to human activity: change in everything thus also presupposes a planning consciousness. Theologically speaking, it may then be worth considering the questions of whether the focus on continuity and the human analogy of causal activity – both referring to the finite realm – are necessary to a discourse on God.

48 Cf. ibid., pp. 339f.