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Knowledge and Love of God in Ramanuja and Aquinas

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Introduction

A major characteristic of Catholic Christian intellectual encounter with Hinduism in the 20th century is the meeting of Thomism and the Vedanta. Thomism is the tradition of Christian thought which is based on the work of the scholastic and Dominican friar, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74 CE) and which was the norm for Catholic theological formation for most of the 20th century. A central concern in this encounter was to explore ways in which Vedanta could be used to express the Thomist Christian account in Hindu terms.

For the most part a preference is shown for Sankara (c.788-820 CE) and Advaita Vedanta rather than the theistic Vedanta of Ramanuja (c.1017-1137 CE), the great teacher of Sri Vaisnavism, and for Visistadvaita. This is reflected in the work of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) and the 'Calcutta School' of Jesuit indologists, which included Pierre Johanns (1885-1955) and Richard de Smet (1916-1998). This inclination towards Advaita is also manifest in the spiritual and monastic encounter in the Catholic Christian ashrams, perhaps best known through the popular and influential works of Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri le Saux) (1910-1973), the head of Saccidananda Ashram. Both these intellectual and spiritual engagements with Advaita are also reflected in the life and work of de Smet's student and joint head of the Christa Prema Seva Ashram, Sara Grant (1922-2000), whose Teape lectures brought this encounter to the attention of contemporary Thomists outside of India.¹

There were a number of historical and conceptual reasons that inclined Catholic Indologists and the leaders of the Christian ashrams to favour Advaita rather than Ramanuja. During this period Advaita was routinely depicted as the high point of Hindu thought, while theistic Vedantic traditions were held to be inferior, both by European indologists and neo-Hindus, such as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975). Moreover, Ramanuja's theistic cosmology, in which the world is depicted as the body or mode of Brahman, was interpreted by Catholic Indologists as pantheistic and therefore as fundamentally incompatible with Thomism. Both of these judgements would now be challenged, yet they exerted considerable influence on Catholic perspectives well into the second half of the 20th century.²

This tendency is unfortunate, for Ramanuja's theistic Vedanta and Thomist Christianity would seem immediately to have much in common, however different their traditions may often be. Not least they share a common orientation when it comes to the supreme goals of human life. For Ramanuja and for Aquinas the supreme goal of human life, is the full and blissful knowledge and love of God. It is this goal that informs how they understand the spiritual path that human beings should pursue in the here and now.

Some recognition of this is to be found in the early work of Pierre Johanns, in the collection of articles on Vedanta he produced in the 1920s and 30s.³ Johanns is quite appreciative of Ramanuja's account of bhakti, which he calls the "crown of his system,"

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teaching that “the love of God is both the end and the means of our self-realisation.”⁴ Moreover, Johanns does recognise common ground with Aquinas in that “Ramanuja, like St Thomas, emphasises the intellectual or rather the spiritual character of divine love,” and “asserts that right knowledge entails happiness and that the knowledge of God constitutes the highest possible bliss.”⁵

Johanns, however, emphasises that Ramanuja’s system differs from that of Aquinas in that the finite self is the body and mode of God and the final human goal is the rediscovery of the nature the finite self always had, whereas for Aquinas it is the elevation of the human intellect and will to a supernatural dignity through divine grace. For Johanns, this undermines the value of Ramanuja’s account and represents “the wrong metaphysical conception that overcasts like a shadow this sunshiny path of bhakti.”⁶

While open to Ramanuja’s account, Johanns’ approach is limited both by the evaluations he makes and by the presuppositions at work in his approach. Even apart from the inaccuracy of his charge that Ramanuja’s cosmology is pantheistic, his concern is purely to draw on the Vedanta for materials to express the Thomist account. What is valued is where the account corresponds to that of Aquinas, while differences are deemed problematic rather than interesting. There is no sense that Ramanuja’s thought in its integrity might prove a subject of interest and creative reflection for Christian theologians studying it.

Seventy years later a somewhat different approach is manifest in the work of the Jesuit Francis X. Clooney. Clooney is a major representative of those who have promoted the discipline of comparative theology, in which practitioners from religious traditions seek to engage creatively with other traditions as a means to enrich their own theological reflection and spirituality. In his study of the Tiruvaymoli of the Alvar, Satakopan, Clooney describes his approach as “Indological, comparative and theological”.⁷ His method is to read the Hindu account in its integrity and context, then both explore its relation to the Christian theologian’s own tradition and ask what difference it makes, what it demands of the Christian theologian after

undertaking this study.⁸ For Clooney reading Hindu and Christian accounts side by side creates a “new, larger narrative that encompasses both traditions,” as the context in which theology is done, characterised as a “reading religiously across boundaries.”⁹

There is then a shift here from the search for correspondences towards an openness to complementarity and for dialogical learning. Clooney’s work provides a model for the following comparison of how Ramanuja and Aquinas present knowledge and love of God. Apart from exploring common ground between the accounts it will also consider how a Thomist might engage constructively with Ramanuja’s distinctive account of the world as the body of God. For it is his cosmology that grounds what Ramanuja has to say about the pursuit of knowledge and love of God and it is reflection on that which might creatively stimulate the theological imagination of a Thomist Christian.

1. Ramanuja.

For Ramanuja the blissful goal of human life is the knowledge or realisation of the true reality of the finite self and of God, Supreme Self.¹⁰ Fundamental to this reality is that the self is the body of God and God the Self of the body, the central cosmological paradigm of Ramanuja’s thought. Ramanuja defines this self-body relationship in terms of three constitutive sub-relationships: that of the controller and controlled (*niyantr-niyamya*); that of the supporter and supported (*adhara-adheya*); and that of the principal and accessory (*sesin-sesa*).¹¹ It is in his account of the third constitutive relationship of principal and accessory that Ramanuja articulates how knowledge and love of God are manifested and interrelated.

1.1. All things as the accessory (*sesa*) of God.

Ramanuja defines the concept of the accessory (*sesa*) more precisely in a number of passages when in discussion with the ritualist Mimamsaka opponent.¹² It is in fact within the ritual context that the notion of the accessory has

its earlier meaning, where certain elements are purely accessory or subordinate to more important elements of ritual actions or to the purpose for which the ritual is undertaken.¹³ Ramanuja compares this with the relation between a born slave and its master. In the Sri Bhasya the discussion of the relation of slave and master to each other leads into the idea of the mutuality of the relationship, with the master as well as the slave acting for the good of the other.

An accessory by its very nature exists for the sake of and for glorifying the principal.¹⁴ For Ramanuja all the entities of the world, as accessories of God, thus point to God and exist for God. Moreover, for Ramanuja, conscious entities, the finite selves, can and should also know that they are by nature accessories of God and consciously desire and delight in the realisation of this.¹⁵ Moreover, the finite self desires and delights in the direct knowledge or vision of God, the Principal.

The final goal and bliss of the finite self are thus in the knowledge or realisation of both its nature as accessory and in the knowledge of God. All the features of its goal represent, moreover, the recovery of what the finite self was already before entering into the samsaric state, samsara being the process of rebirth that the finite self undergoes as a result of wrongly thinking itself to be by nature a composite of self and body and being attached to the actions and results of them which it performs in each body. The essential nature of the finite self is really only obscured and contracted through karma.¹⁶

1.2. Bhakti.

Within Ramanuja's Vedantic account the path by which the finite self comes to its goal is through bhakti, which is usually translated as devotion and often as love. Through bhakti shown to God the finite self hopes for release from samsara. In such a relationship there is the expectation that God will respond to such devotion and will give his divine help or grace to the devotee. Ramanuja, for his part, develops an understanding of bhakti, which is a process of increasing knowledge as well as of love.

For Ramanuja there are various levels of bhakti. The first, or lower bhakti, arises when

the finite self comes to know through the revealed texts and under the guidance of a teacher about its own true nature and its proper relationship with God. It engages in the performance of the duties proper to it, but without attachment to the results they bring, and offers them in devotion to God, to please God and win his favour. For Ramanuja this level of bhakti should be practised throughout life, but is nonetheless a preparation for the second level of bhakti, the higher bhakti, in which the finite self meditates on the revealed texts that teach the true nature of God and of the finite self.

Ramanuja identifies this higher bhakti with the kind of knowledge of God that the Vedantic texts enjoin as the means to release. It is further specified as worshipful meditation (upasana).¹⁷ Ramanuja depicts it as a steady calling to mind of God (druvanusmrti), which, through repeated acts of meditation, becomes continuous, like a flow of oil, and takes the form of an increasingly direct perceptual representation of God (saksatkara), the same as seeing God (darsanasamanakara). Through such worshipful or devout meditation on the revealed texts, there forms a mental image of God that becomes more and more clear and uninterrupted.

This activity is driven on by the intense love the finite self comes to have for this knowledge.¹⁸ Ramanuja re-enforces the close connection between knowledge and love in his concept of bhakti, when he states that bhakti is a particular kind of love (priti) and love a particular kind of knowledge (jnana).¹⁹ Ramanuja also stresses that God must choose the devotee and bestow his grace on the devotee, if the finite self is to make progress and gain release, and here it is the love the finite self shows that evokes this divine response, giving maturity to the meditational activity of the finite self, the steady calling to mind of God, as it develops into direct perceptual representation or vision of God.²⁰ God reciprocates the love of the finite self with his own desire for the self to attain him.²¹

Finally, in the state of liberation, the finite self comes to have full knowledge and direct vision of God, as well as of its own proper nature as finite self and as accessory. The released finite self becomes like God and shares in the bliss of God, which results from the self's

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knowledge of God.²² Though the recovery of an identity it already has by nature rather than the elevation of its nature, the finite self is nonetheless dependent on God at all times for the status it enjoys in release.²³

2. Thomas Aquinas

For Aquinas, likewise, the sole and final happiness of a rational being is the loving contemplation of God, what is called the beatific vision, the knowledge of God as he is and the love or delight which accompanies this.²⁴ Just as we located Ramanuja's account of the goal of human beings within the wider context of his cosmology, so Aquinas' account can be set within his creational account, especially in its emphasis that all things have God as their final cause.

Whereas the central cosmological paradigm for Ramanuja is that each and every entity is the body of God, for Aquinas it is that of the created dependence of all things on the self-subsistent being of God. Aquinas expresses this using Greek causal categories: all things are said to participate in the uncreated being of God and God to be the efficient and final cause of all things.²⁵ Within the idea that God is the final cause, he can say that all things are ordered to God in a way that parallels the idea of the principal and accessory relationship in Ramanuja.

2.1. God as the final cause that all things love

For Aquinas, this ordering is also expressed in the idea that all things love all God.

Aquinas defines love (*amor*) as a basic inclination or tendency that all things have towards what is suited to their nature, towards what perfects them, towards what is their good.²⁶ Different types of things love God in different ways according to the kind of nature they have. All things love God because God is the creator, the source of all things and of the good of all things. All things love what is good for themselves, but in so doing they also implicitly love God, because each created good reflects the goodness of God the creator and

because the goodness of each thing, as a part of the universe, contributes to the good of the whole.²⁷

For their part, human beings have intellect and will and they have a kind of love that is the inclination of the will, the rational appetite, for the good that is apprehended through the intellect. Aquinas calls this type of love intellectual love.²⁸ Like all other creatures, human beings love God in loving their own good, but in so doing they also love God explicitly, if they recognise him to be the source of all goodness.²⁹ Moreover, human beings also love God directly in that they desire to know the one who is the source of all things and it is in this that there is the perfection of their intellects.³⁰

Such love, moreover, can be said to have two moments: there is an inclination or desire for the good that is not yet gained, and there is rest or delight in the good when obtained.³¹ Aquinas distinguishes, moreover, between two forms of love: love of desire (*amor concupiscentiae*) and love of friendship (*amor amicitiae*).³² Love of desire is when a human being desires or delights in his or her own good, in the things that make the human being flourish and become perfect; love of friendship is when he or she desires and delights in the good of others, in their flourishing and perfection.

Human beings are thus different from other things in that that they love God directly and have their final goal and happiness in the knowledge and love of God as he is.³³ However, though this vision fulfils the natural yearning of a human being, it lies beyond the natural powers a human being has. The human intellect needs to be elevated to a higher capacity through divine grace, in order to be able to share in God's knowledge of himself and his love of himself.³⁴

2.2. Faith and Charity

Whereas Ramanuja defines progress towards human goals in terms of levels of *bhakti*, the fundamental paradigm for Aquinas is the life of the virtues. These are divided into those natural virtues that human beings should be able to pursue through their own natural capacities and the theological virtues of faith,

hope and the love that is charity, whereby the human being is elevated to a higher capacity to share in the life of God. For Aquinas the path in this life towards the beatific vision is through participation in the saving effects of the life and death of Christ, communicated through the Holy Spirit. The divine grace given in this way both heals human nature from the damage caused in the Fall in order to be able to attain what its nature is capable of and elevates it to higher capacities. It is in Aquinas' account of the theological virtues of faith and charity that we can find a parallel for Ramanuja's level of higher bhakti and can compare their accounts of how human beings come to knowledge and love of God.

For its part, faith is the adherence or assent of the human intellect and will to God and to what God has revealed.³⁵ Faith is said to be midway between knowledge and mere opinion: on the one hand it brings certainty about the truth of what there is faith in, and this makes it seem like knowledge; on the other hand there is a lack of any proof or demonstration for its truth, which makes it seem more like opinion. As such faith is a stage towards the full knowledge of God that is the beatific vision. In Aquinas' understanding, such faith is dependent on grace, both because the things in which there is faith are revealed by God and because God moves human beings to have this faith in God and in this revelation.³⁶

Faith is, however, inseparable from charity. Faith is said to work through charity, to be informed by it and to be dead without it.³⁷ For Aquinas, charity is a form of intellectual love, directed towards the goodness of God, towards the God we have faith in. Such charity is the love of God that human beings have for God, which results from God pouring his own love (as the Holy Spirit is called) into them.³⁸

Aquinas describes charity as love of friendship. Not only does love of friendship wish the good of the friend rather than one's own good; it is also characterised as a mutual loving of one friend for another, manifested in a fellowship (*societas*) that friends have with each other. Charity is both these things: in charity there is love God himself for his own sake, and there is a fellowship with God that comes about

because God shares with human beings his own beatitude.³⁹

In the beatific vision the other theological virtues of faith and hope disappear, because they give way to perfect knowledge in the attainment of what is hoped for. Yet charity, which is already the direct love of God, remains and is perfected, the desire for God giving way to delight in the vision of God as he is.⁴⁰

Conclusion: a New, Larger Narrative

We can now return to the question posed by Clooney of what the creation of an expanded narrative through the encounter of Hindu and Christian accounts demands of those who undertake it. Given the earlier bias in Catholic encounter with Vedanta in favour of Advaita, it is an important contribution to interreligious understanding and appreciation simply to bring out just how much common ground there is between Ramanuja and Aquinas, though also acknowledging that they remain distinctive accounts worked out in very different traditions.

For both Ramanuja and Aquinas the goal of human life is the knowledge and love of God. This is the fullness or fulfilment of human nature itself, for the desire to know and love God arises from the very nature of a conscious or rational being. Moreover, Ramanuja and Aquinas emphasise the necessity of divine grace given out of love for progress towards and attainment of the final goal. In Ramanuja's account of the gift, through grace, of an increasingly clear representation of God we can find common ground with Aquinas' idea of the gift of faith, while in the vision and bliss of the self in release we find common ground with Aquinas' idea of the beatific vision. For both, however, there is a tension between the progress that can and should be made in knowledge and love of God in the present life and the complete vision and delight as something that cannot be realised in this life.

Moreover, once we move away from the earlier approach represented by Johanns, which found difference to be problematic, we can begin to explore how a Thomist Christian theologian might find his or her reflection enhanced through the encounter. This is not simply to be understood as identifying any

deficit in the account that is corrected by the other, but rather, as we noted at the beginning, a matter of how the theological imagination is inspired and enriched through the ideas and images to be found in Ramanuja's account, of how Thomist finds his or her thinking affected from reading Ramanuja.

This is where Ramanuja's concept of the principal and accessory within his embodiment cosmology comes to play a creative role. The concept of accessory grounds his account of knowledge and love of God. Rather than see it as simply manifesting the difference between Ramanuja's account and that of Aquinas, a Thomist might instead find in it a powerful symbol of the continuity of the created and redeemed levels of human existence. It might be seen as an invitation for a richer mediation on the Christian doctrine that each Christian is a member of the body of Christ, as something that completes the created existence of human beings and, as an extension of this, it might encourage the exploration of the experience of being created as itself like being the body of God.

This exploration might also come to be shaped by the account of what it means to be an accessory as further developed in Ramanuja's account. A Thomist might be impressed by the way Ramanuja articulates the desire and delight a human being feels in the realisation of being the accessory and be led on to reflect on the delight of being a created being ordered to God, of being by nature inclined to know and love God, a delight that finds its fullness in the direct knowledge and love of God in himself. This encounter might encourage a Thomist to re-explore the Christian experience and journey into knowledge and love of God in terms of the delight of Christian service to God.

This encounter between Ramanuja and Aquinas is, moreover, an incentive for a wider encounter between the Sri Vaisnava tradition and Catholic Christianity, Thomist or otherwise, of the sort undertaken by Clooney. In the wider Sri Vaisnava tradition the concept of the principal-accessory relationship and its understanding as one of devout service on the part of the accessory, as well as its mutuality, are of major importance in the tradition's theological reflection on and spirituality of the

devotional relationship between the finite self and God.⁴¹

As this encounter moves further, there is the wider articulation of these ideas in the Sri Vaishnava tradition, the way the devotional relation as servant is enriched by other devotional relations, such as that of friend and lover. There is the boldness of the language used whereby the intensity, mutuality and tenderness of the relationship between God and devotee are expressed. As Clooney suggests, there is an incentive here for the Christian reader to explore and even develop his tradition's own use of bold and tender language, as in the Song of Songs and its commentaries.⁴² All the while this encounter encourages an ever-richer theology and spirituality, an ever-richer experience of the knowledge and love of God.

Notes

¹ These have been published as *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-dualist Christian* (edited by Bradley Malkovsky) (UND: 2002). David Burrell heard her lectures and has argued that the Thomist account might benefit from an open engagement with Advaitic thought. See his "Act of Creation and its Theological Consequences," in T. Weinandy, D. Keating, J. Yocum (eds.), *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 27-44, 38-40.

² For a critique of twentieth century Catholic appraisal of Ramanuja see Martin Ganeri, *The Vedantic Cosmology of Ramanuja and its Western Parallels* (Oxford: 2003, D.Phil. Thesis).

³ These were originally published in the *Journal The Light of the East* (1922-1934) edited by Johanna and Georges Dandoy. References here are to the English translation of their collection by T. de Greef and J. Patmury, *The Writings of P. Johanns, To Christ Through the Vedanta*, Vols. 1-2 (Bangalore: United Theological College, 1996). Johanns deals with Ramanuja's account of bhakti in articles 48-51, pp. 173-185.

⁴ 1996: 173.

⁵ 1996: 173.

⁶ 1996: 182.

⁷ Francis X. Clooney, *Seeing Through Texts: doing theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India* (SUNY: 1996), xvii.

⁸ 1996: 297.

⁹ 1996: 302-4.

¹⁰ Vedartha Samgraha (VedS) 2, van Buitenen, J.A.B., *Ramanuja's Vedarthasamgraha* (Pune: 1956)

¹¹ Sri Bhasya 2.1.9 (SBh); VedS 76.

¹² SBh 1.1.1 (Melkote critical edition (M), volume 1, pp 264-5); VedS 121.

¹³ VedS 121; KMS 3.1.2.

¹⁴ VedS 121-2, 142-4; Sri Bh.1.1.1(M) 264-5.

¹⁵ VedS 142-4; Gita Bhasya (GBh) 9.27-8. Ramanuja uses a number of terms that could be translated as love. In particular, he favours the word, priti, which seems to correspond well to Aquinas' notion of love, both as desire and delight. Other common terms are sneha, rati (or rasa) and ananda. These last two are closer to the concept of delight.

¹⁶ SBh 4.4.1ff.

¹⁷ SBh1.1.1 (M)15-19.

¹⁸ SBh 1.1.1 (M.19).

¹⁹ VedS 141.

²⁰ SBh 1.1.1(M.19); 3.4.26; GBh 8.14; 10.10.

²¹ SBh1.1.1 (M.19).

²² SBh 4.4.1ff; 1.3.7.

²³ SBh 4.4.21.

²⁴ Summa Theologiae (ST) 1a2ae 3,8.

²⁵ ST 1a 44-5.

²⁶ ST 1a20, 1.

²⁷ ST 1a 44,4; 1a2ae 109,3.

²⁸ ST 1a2ae 26,1.

²⁹ ST 1a2ae 109,3; 1a60, 5.

³⁰ ST 1a12 1.

³¹ ST 1a2ae 26, 2.

³² ST 1a2ae 26,4.

³³ ST 1a2ae 3,8.

³⁴ ST 1a12, 1& 4-5.

³⁵ ST 2a2ae 1.

³⁶ ST 2a2ae 6,1.

³⁷ ST 2a2ae 4, 2-3.

³⁸ ST 2a2ae 23, 2 ad 1; 2a2ae 24, 1- 2.

³⁹ ST 2a2ae 23,1.

⁴⁰ ST 2a2ae 67, 3- 46.

⁴¹ For instance see Chari, S.M. Srinivasa, *Vaisnavism* (Motilal Banarsidass: 1994), pp. 245-258 or Carman, J.B., *The Theology of Ramanuja* (Yale University Press: 1974), pp. 147-157.

⁴² As Clooney does, 1996: 259-264.