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Editor's Introduction

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The aim of the *Journal* is to create a worldwide forum for the presentation of Hindu-Christian scholarly studies, book reviews, and news of past and upcoming events. Materials selected for publication will be balanced between historical research and contemporary practice and, where possible, will employ analytical and theoretical analysis set within the context of our shared contemporary experience. Contributions are invited and may be addressed to either the Editor or the Co-Editor. Articles of roughly 4000 words are preferred, though occasionally longer pieces will be published. Send manuscript in paper form as well as on diskette. A style sheet is available on request. The *Journal* adopts a policy of non-gender-specific language where applicable. All articles are subject to review before acceptance and may be edited in the course of publication.

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Editor's Introduction

ADVAITA Vedanta, the Hindu exegetical tradition that has espoused a non-dualistic interpretation of the Upanishads for more than two millennia, has also established itself since the nineteenth century as perhaps *the* branch of Hindu thought and praxis most familiar to Christian theologians and scholars of Indian religion. Though in recent decades there has been a growth of scholarship on other forms of Hindu thought and spirituality Advaita still remains one of the systems that most challenges and potentially enriches Christian thinking and spirituality today.

The articles on Advaita presented here are revisions of most of the papers delivered at the annual meeting of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies a few years back. The main purpose of that gathering was to discuss the appearance of two new books on Advaita: Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (SUNY, 2006) and John Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Fortress, 2006). Both books have been well received in scholarly circles and together they were the cause of a lively discussion at our own meeting.

The first essay is by **Michelle Voss Roberts**, who, in responding to both the aforementioned books, begins by praising them for their nuanced and careful approach to Advaita, one that avoids the old stereotypical contrast of a monolithic world-rejecting Advaita versus the more world-affirming Christianity. But she goes on to suggest that in attempting to show the contemporary relevance of Advaita both books are in fact offering a revised version of the tradition that is perhaps, in the final analysis, more indebted to Christian values than to traditional Advaitic concerns. She wonders whether "these dynamic, active, worldly non-dualisms [are] new vindications of an essentially 'Christian' way of thinking." She points out, too, conversely, that some forms of Christianity (e.g. mysticism; rapture expectations) themselves resemble the same world-denying attitudes common to traditional Advaita. It

might be useful, then, she suggests, for scholars like Rambachan and Thatamanil, engaged as they are in comparative inquiry, to reflect on such foundational questions as "why values like activism, equality, and real worldly diversity are so significant" for them in the first place.

Rambachan justifies his own world-affirming approach to Advaita by cautioning against making Sankara, the renunciant, the final authority of doctrinal orthodoxy. Other more positive attitudes to the world emerging from non-dualistic insight should also be recognized. Moreover, the author advocates the possibility that, against Sankara, not only women and *sudras* should be eligible for Vedic study, but also members of other religions. Advaita, after all, has always understood itself as addressing a universal human problem with a universal remedy. Moreover, the Upanishads, Bhagavadgita, and Brahmasutra are less obviously restrictive in their understanding of eligibility for study than is Sankara himself. The engagement of Advaitans with members of other traditions on issues pertaining to non-duality might even prove to be rejuvenating for the ongoing Advaita tradition. Rambachan points out that Advaita has always presented its teaching in the context of conversation with followers of other traditions. Why should it now restrict itself to engagement with classical texts and positions when other vibrant traditions present themselves today as new and worthy dialogue partners?

In the third essay **Michael McLaughlin** critiques Thatamanil's book on a number of points. He suggests that in approaching the issue of immanence Thatamanil gives primacy to the philosopher Robert Neville over Upanishadic texts. McLaughlin further asserts that the choice of Paul Tillich for comparison with Advaita necessarily moves the discussion into existential and psychological considerations that end up focusing more on pure inner quiescence than on opening oneself to the prophetic challenge of God to transform the world through engaged praxis. This is due at least in part, McLaughlin says, to Thatamanil's

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general neglect of christology in his book. He worries "whether Thatamanil is not, in effect, homogenizing these religions in a huge metaphysical blender called 'process' theology to make them more palatable and optimistic. Do religions reduce to metaphysical systems in which history is ultimately unimportant?"

Thatamanil responds to McLaughlin's critique by noting that the primary orientation in his book is to compare particular Hindu and Christian understandings of divine immanence, both of which are rooted in their respective scriptures. Neville and Sankara were chosen as expositors of these scriptures, not their replacements. In the Advaita version immanence is understood as non-duality; in Christianity it is the Holy Spirit acting within the believer. Thatamanil notes that other Hindu understandings of divine immanence were available to him for his comparison with Christianity. The Tamil poet-saint Nammalvar, for example, reveals a greater affinity with Paul's understanding of the Spirit praying within us than does Sankara. Yet Sankara was deliberately chosen, because his very different understanding of immanence, i.e. nondualism,

presented "a more difficult and demanding challenge to Christian habits of mind." He adds that in his comparative approach he was careful to avoid the mistake of the old orientalism, which attempted to show the superiority of Christian views over Hindu views of the world. The Advaita tradition already contains within it the resources for a positive world-engaging praxis, as Rambachan has rightly shown. Further, far from trivializing evil and suffering, as McLaughlin asserts, Thatamanil argues that his presentation of both Tillich and Sankara has tried to show the seriousness with which the two thinkers evaluate the human condition. He states further that one of the primary aims of his book was to "reconfigure Christian theology by appeal to Sankara," from whom he personally has learned much. He sees his book as an example of the worthwhile aim of comparative theology, which is to ready oneself to "learn from and be transformed by interreligious encounter."

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