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Rethinking Advaita: Who is Eligible to Read Advaita Texts?¹

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MY most recent work, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World and Humanity*, exemplifies two related movements.² First, I join the growing stream of scholars who are making efforts to distinguish the interpretations of Sankara from later Advaita exegetes. The uncritical equation of Sankara's views with those of later exegetes needs to be challenged.³ Second, I contend that Advaita reflection and scholarship cannot limit itself to the clarification of Sankara's interpretations. These interpretations must also be critically evaluated in order for the tradition to be relevant and creative. It is problematic to assume that Sankara was immune from historical influences, cultural presuppositions and his stage in life as a renunciant. The latter is particularly important since renunciation traditionally implied specific attitudes to the world, community and family that inform his reading of texts and the possibilities of meaning. A renunciant brings different questions and concerns to these texts than a householder, and the renunciant reading of the Upanisads has been the dominant one. The traditional reverence for Sankara and his deified position in the Advaita lineage ought not to exclude critical questions and historical inquiry. His monumental contributions can be both gratefully acknowledged and interrogated.

Thatamanil's work, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament*,

presents us with a number of significant questions centered on eligibility to read Advaita texts, the insider-outsider dilemma, and the Christian theologian as reader of Advaita. Am I as an Advaitin committed to an important stream of the Hindu tradition, authorized to speak for and about the tradition in ways that Thatamanil cannot? Who are the new conversation partners for Advaita? I want to focus my response on some of these questions through an examination of the issue of the qualification to read Advaita texts that are considered to be authoritative.⁴

The classical Advaita tradition, as expounded by Sankara, understands the Upanisads to be a *pramana* or valid source for our knowledge of *brahman*.⁵ As Sadananda states it in *Vedantasara*, "Vedanta is the evidence of the Upanisads, as well as the Sariraka Sutras and other books that help in the correct expounding of its meaning."⁶ In the traditional sequence of Advaita study the next step, after establishing the valid source of knowledge, is determining the competency of the student, the subject matter, and the connection between the authoritative source and subject matter.⁷ Eligibility was traditionally interpreted on the basis of the categories of caste and life stage rights and duties (*varnasramadharm*). Within the confines of this socio-religious system, eligibility for Vedic study was limited to male members of the upper

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three castes. Women and *sudras* were excluded as well as the untouchables who were without caste. This interpretation of eligibility circumscribed unjustly those who are entitled to read Advaita texts. Sankara is a defender of the traditional order and argues against the eligibility of *sudras* to study the Vedas. "The *sudra*," according to Sankara, "has no competence, since he cannot study the Vedas; for one becomes competent for things spoken of in the Vedas, after one has studied the Vedas and known these things from them. But there can be no reading of the Vedas by a *sudra*, for Vedic study presupposes the investiture with the sacred thread, which ceremony is confined to the three castes."⁸ One cannot, in other words, develop a desire for the goal of liberation described in the Vedas without exposure to these texts. The sacred thread ceremony (*upanayana*), which confers permission for Vedic study, is forbidden to *sudras*, exemplifying a religious and social vicious cycle.

Are there resources in the Advaita tradition for overcoming these limits and welcoming non-traditional readers whose identities are not defined by caste or life-stage? Clearly there are and have been non-traditional readers; many are present in AAR sessions. Fortunately, the Advaita tradition does not have a central authority issuing permission to read texts! The absence of a controlling authority is a weak argument for the reading of texts by those traditionally excluded, and the case remains and ought to be made from within the tradition on the issue of eligibility. A detailed articulation of this case is beyond the scope of this presentation, but some of its crucial elements can be identified and commented upon.

First, Advaita understands the human problem it describes and the solution it prescribes to be universal. According to Advaita humans everywhere experience the existential lack that remains unsatisfied by the gain of wealth, pleasure, fame and power. The tradition also affirms that all beings are identical, at the most fundamental level of self, with the infinite *brahman*. Advaita is an excellent example of an Indian tradition making explicitly universal claims about the human condition and its resolution; the Upanishads clearly do not address themselves only to persons of South

Asian ancestry! Any tradition making such universal claims cannot limit access on the basis of restrictive criteria, such as caste or gender. Such restrictions undermine the heart of Advaita truth propositions. Second, the Advaita tradition, as already noted, understands itself as a source of valid knowledge (*vedanto naamopaniṣatpramanam*). In addition, Advaita defines valid knowledge as "that knowledge which has for its object something that is not already known and is uncontradicted."⁹ A definition of truth such as this cannot privatize or privilege theological claims from open and unrestricted inquiry. Since the validity of Advaita claims are essentially advanced on epistemological grounds and are similar to claims advanced on the basis of other sources of valid knowledge, such as perception or inference, a response is invited. In other words, the grounding of its claims about the nature of reality in a *pramaṇa* argument necessarily opens the tradition to critical examination from so-called outsiders who may subscribe to alternative authoritative sources of knowledge and different truth claims. Advaita is not reticent about the fact that its assertions about the nature of reality are different from commonly held views and has not avoided efforts to refute claims that are incompatible with its own. The tradition should not expect anything less from rival contemporary views. Third, the limiting of eligibility on the basis of caste and gender is much less obvious in the three authoritative pillars of the tradition (*prastanathraya*): the Upanishads, Bhagavadgita and the Brahmasutra. In these sources the emphasis is on the more universal qualities of head and heart such as ability to distinguish between the real and unreal (*viveka*), detachment from that which is finite and subject to change (*vairagya*) and longing for liberation (*mumukṣutva*). There is a tension between the so-called inherited criteria, like caste, and those (*sadhanacatuṣṭaya*) that are available universally to any interested human being. The latter are clearly more consistent with the nature and character of Advaita truth claims and need to be emphasized over the conservative requirements of caste and gender. These requirements need to be consistently and explicitly refuted by prominent Advaita teachers.

Of course, in making the argument for a universal understanding of eligibility based on qualities that may be cultivated by any interested and committed human being, one is still advancing special criteria for the reading of Advaita texts. Although I think that there are valid epistemological grounds for these qualities, based on the traditional understanding of the function of the text and its salvific power, the Advaita tradition needs to acknowledge the possibility and value of different kinds of readers and seekers.¹⁰ The tradition has not had the need to reflect before on this possibility that arises, in particular, from the work of comparative theologians like Thatamanil or Frank Clooney. I can think of at least two kinds of Advaita readers. The first, is the aspirant for liberation (*mokṣa*), spoken of as the *mumuksu*. This reader comes to the tradition with an intense desire for liberation arising from dissatisfaction with the limits of finite gains and achievements. The *mumuksu* comes to the Advaita text and teacher with the faith (*śraddha*) and hope of receiving a wisdom that teaches a way across suffering. Sadananda describes the *mumuksu* as coming to the teacher like one whose head is on fire rushes to a lake. For such a seeker the teaching of the text has the potential to come with the impact of a revelation. Traditionally, such a reader became a renunciant before commencing the study of authoritative texts with a teacher or did so during or after study. Renunciation was understood to indicate the severing of all ties and commitments other than the devotion to liberation (*mokṣa*). The *mumuksu* is the reader with which the tradition is most familiar.

The second kind of reader, I want to suggest, is the *jijnasu* (one who desires to know). Although the Advaita tradition has not distinguished the *mumuksu* and *jijnasu*, I think that a contemporary distinction is appropriate and helpful, and I offer this distinction in the hope that the tradition will welcome and be enriched by the insights and methodology of non-traditional readers. The *jijnasu* comes to the tradition as an inquiring reader working within a recognized discipline such as theology, history of religion, religious studies or anthropology. Such *jijnasus* may be outsiders to the Advaita tradition with commitments to other religious

traditions or none. The Advaita tradition has not always noted or appreciated the contributions of the *jijnasu*, defined in this way, and has, especially in more recent times, dismissed the work of the *jijnasu* especially when the person is a so-called outsider.¹¹ The tradition has yet to define a proper space, value and role for the contemporary *jijnasu* and to see the rejuvenating possibilities of engagement with the public intellectual. A dialogue between the *mumuksu* and *jijnasu*, although difficult in an atmosphere of growing suspicion about the agenda of the scholar who is an outsider, is a necessity.

I should mention in passing, since it is beyond the scope of these comments, a third type of reader who combines the approaches of both the *mumuksu* and *jijnasu*. This is the one who comes to the tradition with the predicament of the *mumuksu* and reads the text with a teacher for the attainment of liberation but who brings to the texts an academic training in historical critical modes of study. Such readers are very few in number but their potential to rejuvenate and creatively interpret Advaita are immense. Such a reader may be distinguished from the *jijnasu*, as described above, by the fact that he or she comes to the tradition with a religious faith in the teacher or text and is seeking the resolution of an existential problem. At the same time, the person brings to the tradition the critical reading skills of the *jijnasu*.

This is the context in which I welcome Thatamanil's Advaita scholarship and his critique of Sankara. He is an excellent example of the *jijnasu* trained as a Christian theologian and bringing the insights and methodology of his discipline to the study of Sankara. It is proper, in my judgment, for the theologian of another tradition to offer critical judgments about Advaita. In addition to the arguments that I offered above for the *jijnasu* as reader of Advaita texts, there is a further point to advance. The Advaita tradition has always defined and explained itself in conversation with rival systems, orthodox and heterodox. It always took the critique of these systems seriously and was not unwilling to incorporate elements of rival worldviews. We see the evidence of this approach prominently in Śaṅkara's commentaries. He expounds his interpretations in disputation with orthodox schools such as the

ritualist Purva Mimamsa, Sankhya, Yoga, and Nyaya and heterodox traditions like Buddhism and Jainism, and he demonstrates a commendable effort to present and engage these perspectives. In the process of engaging these sophisticated traditions and attempting, when necessary to refute some of their claims, Sankara incorporated many of their insights, and the Advaita tradition was enriched. We ought to see the questions and assessment of the Christian theologian in the context of this rich tradition of openness to dialogue and engagement. The primary dialogue partners for Advaita are no longer those of the classical period, and we must now be willing to note and welcome interested partners from other religious traditions or none.

Today, unfortunately, Advaita is still taught in traditional institutions as though the conversation partners and the principal matters of dispute have remained unchanged. Although very interesting and historically enlightening, significant portions of Sankara's commentaries are devoted to arguments with opponents and traditions that are no longer relevant. Clearly our location is now different and our disputations, unlike Sankara, are no longer with Mimamsakas or exponents of Sankhya. The living traditions that ought to be our dialogue partners include Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism as well as contemporary materialist and secular perspectives. We must welcome readers from these locations. There is still, however, too much mutual stereotyping between Advaita and those monotheistic traditions that expound an ontological dualism. Many Advaita exponents respond to dualistic traditions like Christianity, Islam and Hindu *bhakti* traditions with a condescending elitism. Dualistic traditions, on the other hand, equating Sankara with later exponents, dismiss Advaita as a Godless illusionism. Advaita needs to take more seriously questions about the value of the world and the nature of God presented by monotheistic traditions.

In the specific case of Christianity, Advaita practitioners, like most Hindus, associate the tradition with Biblical fundamentalism, sin, and faith in Jesus as an exclusive savior. The rich intellectual tradition of philosophical theology exemplified in the works of such figures as Thomas Aquinas, Saint Augustine, Anselm,

Athanasius, William of Ockham and contemporary thinkers like Paul Tillich, Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne is largely unknown. Hindus continue to imagine and encounter Christianity as an exclusive religion which is not genuinely open to the religious claims and experiences of others and which is concerned primarily with increasing its institutional power and domination through evangelization and conversion. It is still seen as an ally of westernization. Such perceptions and experiences induce uneasiness, defensiveness and, on occasions, hostility. Hindus have the perception that mission is the most important concern of Christianity. Such attitudes, legitimate or not, constitute a significant roadblock to enriching engagement characterized by attentive learning and questioning.

For reasons, some alluded to above, few Advaitins make the necessary effort to understand and engage these traditions through reading seminal texts. When engagement does occur, I find that these are too often based on simplistic and stereotypical understandings of these traditions. The reasons for the disinterest in dialogue are many and complex, but one of the principal ones, in my view, has to do with the representation of Advaita, both by insiders and outsiders, as fundamentally mystical.¹² The implication of this understanding is that theological engagement and the life of reason are seen as more appropriate to religious traditions that give value to doctrinal claims. Traditions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism are represented as doctrine-based and more congenial to dialogical engagement. While mystical experience has been a part of the wider Hindu tradition, it was not always championed at the expense of the life of the intellect and reason. The prominence that is given in contemporary exposition to mystical experience is connected to the reinterpretation of the authority of scripture and the consequent decline in the significance of scriptural exegesis. The consequence, in my view, is a weakening of scholarship in Advaita and a lack of interest in engagement with other traditions. It is not possible here to trace the historical roots of this process of reinterpretation, and I have done this elsewhere.¹³ There are new and interested

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partners for Advaita today, but the tradition must welcome them and take their traditions and critiques seriously. New Advaita conversation partners must not be consigned to engagement only with Advaita texts.

Others will comment with much greater competency on Thatamanil's reading of Tillich. I welcome his careful explication of Sankara and, in particular, his appreciation for the centrality of scripture to Sankara's epistemology. As he states it so well, "Sankara rejects the possibility of epistemologically extraordinary experience of the sort that modern thinkers typically categorize as mystical. For Sankara scripture is the only valid source of liberating knowledge."¹⁴ I am challenged by Thatamanil's invitation to think of *brahman* as ontological creativity rather than as immutable and absolute "substance." One of the intriguing possibilities of such an understanding is the affirmation of human agency that is no longer consigned to the realm of the unreal. Action is not only a characteristic of that which is other than *brahman*. "What can and must be preserved from Sankara's theological anthropology is rich portrait of liberated persons as established in the knowledge of Brahman, a knowledge that liberates persons from the self-serving compulsions of conventional life. Typically such persons embrace a life of renunciation, but it is also possible that such persons can engage in spontaneous and compassionate action on behalf of the world's well being."¹⁵

Is there justification in the *sruti pramana* for understanding *brahman* as ontological activity rather than immutable substance? Thatamanil does not pursue this question in his fine study, but its investigation would make for fascinating comparative work. There are several Upanisad texts that describe *brahman* as active, while characterizing this activity as non-pareil. It is activity without ontological change or loss. Isa Upanisad (4-5), for example, describes the activity of *brahman* in a series of paradoxes:

Although not moving, the one is swifter than
the mind;
the gods cannot catch it, as it speeds on in
front.
Standing, it outpaces those who run;

within it Matarisvan places the waters.

It moves - yet it does not move
It is far away - yet it is near at hand!
It is within this whole world - yet
It is also outside this whole world.¹⁶

"Sitting down," says Katha Upanisad (2.21), "he roams far. Lying down, he goes everywhere." There is a clear concern in the Upanisads to establish that *brahman* can be related to the world while at the same time not limited by such relations.¹⁷ Texts like these may well reveal Thatamanil's work to be less of a graft and more in the nature of a faithful, but different reading of *sruti*.

Although particular characterizations of *brahman* may be more faithful to the *sruti* and more helpful for understanding *brahman's* nature, it is important to acknowledge, in Advaita, that all words and characterizations, including ontological creativity, fall short and do not reveal the intrinsic nature of *brahman*. *Brahman*, as the Taittiriya Upanisad (2.9.1) reminds us, is "that from which all words turn back, together with the mind." The content of liberating knowledge is the identity between the *atman* and the limitless *brahman* and *brahman* as the single ontological reality, non-different from the essential nature of everything. This is not the same as knowing the intrinsic nature of *brahman* which eludes all definitions. Its intrinsic nature can only be pointed to by denying the validity of all descriptions as in the Brhadarnanyaka Upanisad (2.3.6) text, *neti neti* (not this, not this). To know *brahman*, in this sense, is to know it as transcending all descriptions. This is a point on which all readers can agree.

This insight about the limits of all finite language and symbols in the Upanisads is an excellent reason why Advaitins must be attentive to multiple readings and ways of understanding the nature of *brahman* and the *brahman*-world relationship. Although acknowledging the wisdom and salvific effectiveness of traditional readings and our need to be always grounded in these, such readings must not become idols and claim exemption from scrutiny and questioning. We must be grateful to so-called outsiders whose

questions enrich our understanding by helping to see more clearly the assumptions underlying our particular claims and the possibilities inherent in alternative ways of seeing and comprehending.

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to Bradley Malkovsky and my two anonymous readers for their helpful comments and questions.
- ² *The Advaita Worldview: God, World and Humanity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
- ³ Paul Hacker and Sengaku Mayeda have made important contributions to this task.
- ⁴ I do appreciate the complexity of defining insiders and outsiders, especially in the context of the diversity of Advaita and the contending meanings of non-duality. This requires further reflection. For the purposes of this essay, I understand insider to be someone committed to the truth of non-duality and who identifies with a non-dual teacher or tradition.
- ⁵ I have articulated Śaṅkara's arguments for the Vedas as the authoritative source for our knowledge of *brahman* in *Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a Valid Source of Knowledge in Sankara* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).
- ⁶ *Vedantsara of Sadananda*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1968), verse 3.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, verse 5.
- ⁸ Swami Gambhirananda, trans., *Brahmasutra Bhasya of Sankaracarya* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), 1.3.38. Hereafter abbreviated BSBh.
- ⁹ See *Vedanta Paribhaṣa*, trans., Swami Madhavananda (Howrah: The Ramakrishna Mission, 1972), p.5.
- ¹⁰ For my epistemological arguments see *The Advaita Worldview*, Chapter 2.
- ¹¹ I have explored some of the reasons for this anti-intellectual stand in *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).
- ¹² Thatamanil labors to correct this representation. See *The Immanent Divine*, pp.60-66.
- ¹³ See *The Limits of Scripture*.
- ¹⁴ *The Immanent Divine*, p. 61.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.201.
- ¹⁶ *Upaniṣads*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York:Oxford University Press, 1996).
- ¹⁷ See, *The Advaita Worldview*, pp.86-91.