



November 2014

Thou, That, and An/Other: Hearing Śaṅkara's Indexicals and Finding Cusa's Seeking God

Brad Bannon
Harvard Divinity School

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bannon, Brad (2014) "Thou, That, and An/Other: Hearing Śaṅkara's Indexicals and Finding Cusa's Seeking God," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 27, Article 6.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1578>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Thou, That, and An/Other: Hearing Śaṅkara's Indexicals and Finding Cusa's Seeking God¹

Brad Bannon

Harvard Divinity School

FINGER-pointing is a gesture generally discouraged in polite society. Having someone point a finger at you can be jarring or unsettling. However, if the finger belongs to one's parent or to a dear and respected teacher, accompanied by an attentive gaze and direct vocative address, the experience can be powerfully awakening. According to the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, such was the experience of a young man whose father-turned-guru spoke to him directly and particularly with the words *tattvamasi, Śvetaketo*, "Thou art that, O Śvetaketu."²

The intimacy of this encounter between father and son is easily overlooked, despite its familiarity to those who study Vedānta. As one of only a handful of *mahāvākyāni*, or "great sentences," the significance of the text all too often overshadows the specific context of its utterance. In part, this is because we tend to experience the text as a *text*, which is to say as "scripture" or sacred *writing*. The reading context differs substantially from the literary context, meaning that the words on the page

are read and absorbed in a very different context than that between father and son, teacher and student. Nine times in the Chāndogya, Uddālaka concludes his teachings about Brahman by addressing his son directly in the vocative: "Thou art that, O Śvetaketu."

Grammatically, the words "that" and "thou" (*tat* and *tvam*) are indexicals. As such, their meaning changes according to context. In the context of the intimate exchange between Uddālaka and Śvetaketu, the word "that" (*tat*) unambiguously refers to Brahman as Brahman has been described in each of the nine teachings. When this same intimate exchange is encountered as a written text, the indexicality of the word "that" remains unambiguous. Much like the index at the end of a book, the word "that" points to another part of the text, i.e., the teaching that immediately precedes it. The referential meaning of the word does not change when the spoken word is recorded in a text.

The same cannot be said, however, of the word "thou" (*tvam*). In the embodied encounter

Brad Bannon is a Th.D. candidate (ABD) at Harvard Divinity School. His dissertation, entitled "Apophatic Measures: Toward a Theology of Irreducible Particularity," comparatively examines Śaṅkara's *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā Bhāṣya* and a pair of texts by Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* and *On the Beryl Stone*. His research interest concerns the intersection of sense perception and scriptural revelation, especially in the context of embodied, pedagogical encounter. Passionate about teaching as well as academic research, Brad received Harvard's Instructional Technology award (2010), Distinction in Teaching award (2011), and was appointed as the Bok Center teaching fellow in Religion in 2013-14.

of Uddālaka and his son, the word “thou” unambiguously indexes Śvetaketu since he is directly addressed by his father/teacher in the vocative: “Thou art that, O Śvetaketu.” However, when this same intimate exchange is written down and encountered as a recorded text, the indexicality of the word “thou” necessarily becomes ambiguous. Literally, the word continues to point to Śvetaketu, but it also points to the reader of the text, to the “thou” who is reading the text. As a written word in a sacred text, the word “thou” (*tvam*) stands in two markedly different contexts; this indexical pronoun indexes “thou,” viz. Śvetaketu, but also another “thou,” viz. the reader.

On the one hand, this double indexicality is quite obvious. For the text to communicate its sacred meaning to the reader, the “thou” must point to the reader; it must index someone other than Uddālaka's son, Śvetaketu if it is to have meaning for anyone other than him. To this extent, Śvetaketu is a stand-in for the reader. On the other hand, and far less obvious, the nature of the indexicality differs significantly when “thou” points to the reader of this sacred text rather than to Uddālaka's son. In this sense, then, Śvetaketu cannot be a stand-in for the reader because the father-son context differs considerably from the reader-text context. As a word in a text, the word “thou” points in a generic or universal way to the reader. When uttered by father/guru to son/student, however, the same word points in a specific and particular way, accompanied by direct address in the vocative: “Thou art that, O Śvetaketu.” Although this distinction is subtle, I argue that it is, nevertheless, quite significant.

Like the other three articles in this journal issue, this essay examines the relationship

between canons and contemplation. In doing so, it also examines the limits of what can be accomplished alone and what requires the graceful revelation of an/other. Without denouncing or devaluing contemplation as a spiritual exercise, I argue that the meaning of Uddālaka's sacred teaching, “Thou art that,” cannot be grasped through contemplation because the indexical word “thou” only performs its meaning when uttered in the intimate context of a trusted, compassionate teacher and an attentive student. While a wide range of spiritual exercises may rightly fall under the heading “contemplation,” I use the word to broadly refer to various reflective practices undertaken by an individual person, whether in thought, prayer, or meditation, etc. In contrast, the pedagogical context requires another person; it requires “an/other” who can utter the word “thou” such that the word can index (i.e., point) specifically and particularly to its hearer. It is only in the intimate, embodied encounter of teacher and student that the word “thou” can index its hearer in the same way that it did when Uddālaka uttered to his son: “Thou art that, O Śvetaketu.”

The first portion of the essay examines chapter I.18 of the *Upadeśasāhasrī* (*Thousand Teachings*) by the eighth century Indian theologian, Śaṅkara. Therein, a student claims that since enlightenment may not dawn when one first hears scriptural teachings such as “Thou art that,” contemplation and scriptural reasoning are necessary.³ Without rejecting scriptural contemplation as a valuable spiritual exercise, Śaṅkara's lengthy response emphasizes that the meaning of such teachings only dawns when a student hears the scripture uttered by a compassionate, enlightened teacher. I argue that this is due to the indexical

nature of the word “thou,” which points directly and particularly to its hearer differently in the pedagogical context than in the more solitary, introspective contexts of contemplation or reading. To support this claim, I examine the two examples Śaṅkara provides: Brahmā’s utterance to Rāma, “Thou art the Lord Nārāyaṇa,” and Śaṅkara’s allegory of the ten pilgrims, which culminates in the teaching, “Thou art the tenth.” Following a brief analysis of the quality of the relationship between teacher and student, I then conclude the first portion of the essay by drawing from Śaṅkara’s *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*, wherein he directs teachers to literally point a finger at the student’s heart when uttering the words “This Self is Brahman.”⁴

The second portion of the essay turns to the fifteenth century German theologian, Nicholas of Cusa, and his contemplative text, *De quaerendo Deum (On Seeking God)*. Although the context here is unequivocally contemplative and introspective, it culminates in a radical re-indexing. Whereas Śaṅkara insists that the Brahman revealed by scripture is only grasped in the pedagogical context, Cusa explicitly states that the pathway for seeking God is a pathway “within yourself.” Drawing upon Paul’s sermon on the Areopagus from Acts 17, Cusa emphasizes that the God for Whom we seek is the God in Whom “we live, move, and have our being.”⁵ Reading Cusa’s contemplative text after Śaṅkara’s pedagogical text, a similar grammatical re-indexing is observed. Through his creative etymological reading of Paul’s name for God, *Theos*, as a “seeking” or “hastening to see,” Cusa dialogically re-indexes seeker and sought. *Theos*, the God for Whom we seek, is realized to be *Theos*, the God Who seeks for us.

On each side of this Hindu-Christian study, therefore, the teachings culminate in an experience wherein one discovers oneself to be the “thou” of an/other: The “thou” addressed directly and particularly by a compassionate teacher, or the “thou” who is sought by God rather than the “I” who seeks for God. Realizing oneself to be the thou of an/other, one discovers one’s true Self in a moment of grace.

Pretext: The Teaching Situation

Perhaps his only independent text, Śaṅkara’s *Upadeśasāhasrī* (Upad) is a pedagogical text written by a teacher (an *ācārya*) as a manual for other teachers (*gurus*). Its purpose is not to teach about Brahman, thereby rendering the scriptures superfluous, but rather to serve as a repository of case studies demonstrating how Śaṅkara taught students the meaning of Vedānta scriptures. It models strategies for teaching the scriptures without obviating the need to read them.⁶ As Reid Locklin has well stated, “the work may be best approached not as ‘writings’ at all, but as performative ‘scripts’ arising from and oriented to a variety of teaching situations.”⁷ Hence, we must first ask ourselves: What teaching situation is scripted in Upad I.18?

Śaṅkara begins the lengthy chapter by comparing the teaching style of the scriptures to an attentive mother who removes misunderstandings about the Self.⁸ These misunderstandings, he explains, result from being disoriented (*digbhrāmādivat*).⁹ Verbal roots meaning “to point” (*dis*) and “to roam” (*bhram*) are compounded here in a noun implying one who is wandering around in circles, uncertain which direction to point.¹⁰ Hearing “thou art that” removes these disorienting misunderstandings. Having been

pointed in the right direction, realization arises.¹¹

A student then objects:

[But, dear teacher:] After [a student] is told "Thou art indeed the Existent," it is not the case that the Self which is liberated and calm is attained. Therefore, it is to be thought about through contemplation with reasoning.¹²

Here, the student reminds the teacher that even though the teaching may be simple, grasping its meaning is not easy. The student's carefully worded query reveals that contemplation is not the pedagogical issue; the problem is the order of events proposed by the student. The grammatical construction (locative absolute), verb ending (optative), and even verb prefix (*anu-*) accentuate a distinct order of events. According to the student, there is a *thinking-after* that is *to-be-done* (*anu-cintayet*) even *after* the teacher has told the student "Thou art indeed the Existent." In other words, if a student hears the teaching but does not understand it, the student should sit and think about it until the meaning is grasped. Śaṅkara disagrees.

The teaching situation scripted here is one in which the student misunderstands the didactic order. Although the rare student will grasp the meaning of *Thou art that* upon the first hearing, most will not. As Śaṅkara notes, even Śvetaketu required additional instruction and repetition.¹³ Śaṅkara does not object to the student's request to contemplate the teaching, but merely insists that this cannot be the final step. While each of Uddālaka's nine teachings differed in content, each *concluded* with the direct, vocative address of teacher to student:

"Thou art that, O Śvetaketu." Understanding sometimes dawns immediately upon hearing "Thou art that" the first time, and other times requires repetition or further instruction, perhaps punctuated with contemplation and reasoning. Nevertheless, understanding will *only* dawn upon hearing the sentence uttered in the vocative. Understanding will not dawn in the context of isolated contemplation. An/other, i.e., a teacher, is required for the word "thou" to index (i.e., *point to*) the student in the proper way. Only in this embodied, interpersonal context will the student finally grasp the meaning of the teaching: "Thou art that."

Context: Contemplate...then Hear

Śaṅkara insists that the moment of realization can only occur when one *hears* the *śruti* spoken to them.¹⁴ While he does not denounce contemplation whatsoever, he restricts its utility to maintain the central authority of scripture.¹⁵ Although contemplation can prepare one to hear the scripture, "the text must be performed in a conducive pedagogical environment if it is to be understood," as Francis Clooney asserts.¹⁶ In Upad I.18, Śaṅkara provides two examples of such a conducive pedagogical environment.

First, he argues that "right knowledge arises at the moment of hearing," just as it did for Rāma in the final book of the great Sanskrit epic, the Rāmāyaṇa.¹⁷ In context, Rāma has rescued his wife, Sītā, by defeating the demon Rāvaṇa, but he still does not know his divine identity. He does not know who he is. When Rāma forces Sītā to walk through fire, he seems to be the only one in the story still ignorant of his identity:

Dost thou not yet, supremely wise,

Thy heavenly nature recognize?
 They ceased: and Rāma thus began:
 'I deem myself a mortal man.'¹⁸

Rāma fails to understand until Brahmā speaks to him pointedly, in the second person:

Thou art the Lord Narayan, thou,
 The God to whom all creatures bow.¹⁹

It is only upon hearing “Thou art Nārāyaṇa” that Rāma comes to recognize himself as the incarnate *avatāra* of the Supreme Lord Viṣṇu. Although he was divine, he was unaware of his divinity until it was revealed to him by an/other: by Brahmā. As with Śvetaketu, understanding did not dawn in the midst of isolated contemplation; he only understood his vocation upon hearing the teaching in the vocative, without further effort.²⁰ After the meaning of “Thou art that” has been understood, says Śaṅkara, the scripture repeats it again to finally remove the hearer’s delusion.²¹ The teaching always concludes with the recitation of scripture because, Śaṅkara insists, it is *only* the direct perception (*śravaṇa*) of what is heard (*śruti*) that will lead to understanding.²²

As a second example, Śaṅkara offers the parable of the tenth person to underscore the importance of hearing the teaching from an/other.²³ Devoting thirty verses to this allegory, Śaṅkara emphasizes the difficulty of self-realization. Since seeing inherently involves seeing some thing or some/one, the seer’s sight is naturally drawn away from itself. This is poignantly illustrated by the allegory of the ten pilgrims who mistakenly mourn the loss of their fellow pilgrim after each of the ten has erroneously counted only nine disciples.

Somewhat ironically, the seer’s sight in this example is blinded by its own seeing:

Because their eyes are bound by nescience, those people whose intellect is seized by desire do not clearly realize themselves to be the Seeing, just as [the tenth] does not realize himself to be the tenth.²⁴

An/other is needed to tell the counter who s/he is. This can only be done in the second person nominative: “Thou art the tenth.” Mistakenly believing that they have lost a friend, the mournful pilgrims are blinded by their grief. They see one another, but each fails to see himself/herself. Being seen by the compassionate passerby empowers them. Being seen removes their sorrow by reversing their gaze. So long as one’s orientation is from the “inside” looking “out,” it is oriented from the ego (*aḥaṃkāra*), and is thus dis/oriented (*digbhrāmādivat*).²⁵ The perspectival voice of the other, speaking to one in the second person nominative, enables one to see oneself from the outside, as it were; the other informs me of my place in the fold: “*Thou art the tenth.*”

Picturing the scene in our minds, we might imagine each of the ten pilgrims pointing her/his index finger as s/he counts. Pointing to each of the other nine in turn, the pilgrim points away from himself/herself. Each literally points away from the Self. At a literary/allegorical level, the pilgrims mourn because the one who is lost, i.e., the one they fail to see, is one’s very Self, the Ātman. When the compassionate other observes the scene, s/he reverses the direction of the pointing finger. Pointing, perhaps, at the pilgrim’s heart, the compassionate other re/orients the dis/oriented pilgrim: “*Thou art the tenth.*”

Texture: Ceding agency to a Graceful Other

Noting the critical distinction between a reader of scripture and a hearer thereof, Francis Clooney observes, "Advaita's truth about Brahman does not exist outside of its texts, but only after them."²⁶ He adds, in a footnote, "... there are striking differences to be expected in the responses of hearers and readers."²⁷ Although Vedānta's truth is revealed only through the sacred *śruti*, that truth is only grasped after the *śruti*, through hearing (*śravaṇa*).²⁸ As the examples discussed above illustrate, another person is required in order for the word "thou" to properly index its hearer. Whether or not its utterance is accompanied by an index finger pointing to the heart of the student, the grammatical indexicality of the word "thou" necessitates an embodied, dialogical context. In other words, in order for the word "thou" to perform its meaning, it must be spoken by another person directly and particularly to "me." I must see that I am seen.

One might object to this, arguing that a careful and attentive reader of the written text could pause and consider the context contemplatively. Granting the grammatical indexicality of the word "thou" and the necessity for another person to utter this word to "me," might it be possible to imagine the scene in one's mind? Is the embodied, dialogical context truly necessary? If so, doesn't this exclude persons for whom a qualified *guru* is either unavailable or unwilling? Most of us have access to the text, but few of us have access to a qualified *guru*.

Śaṅkara, I argue, considers the embodied encounter between teacher and student to be necessary; imagining the scene in one's mind will not suffice. Without denying or

overlooking the implications of this with respect to gender, caste, or social standing, I argue that Śaṅkara's insistence on the need for a *guru* arises for reasons quite aside from exclusion. Inseparable from the grammatical significance of the indexical "thou" is a profound theological point. The two examples discussed above are woven into Upad I.18 so as to emphasize the need for the student to cede agency. Hence, the indexical nature of the word "thou" is inextricably linked to grace.

Between the student's initial claim that scriptural contemplation is the path to realization (I.18.9-18) and the two examples discussed above (I.18.90ff, I.18.170ff), Śaṅkara emphasizes at length the need to cede agency.²⁹ If he has any objection to scriptural contemplation at all, it is because the contemplative person retains agency.

In verses 17-18 (a continuation of the initial objection), the student argues that because scriptural comprehension is an end, then scriptural contemplation is the means to that end. In a somewhat capacious reading of the objection, we might imagine a confounded student simply longing for some time and space to sit and think through the teaching. If so, then Śaṅkara denies the request. Quoting Yājñavalkya's teaching to his wife, Maitreyī, in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Śaṅkara responds by insisting that *śruti* negates all duality, including egoistic agency (*ahaṃkartrā*), through teachings such as *neti, neti*.³⁰ Śaṅkara's denial of the student's request to contemplate the scripture is simply pragmatic: Contemplation is not the means to comprehension because comprehension will only arise when the student relinquishes all egoistic agency and personal effort. Because agency is necessary to read, study, and contemplate the scriptures,

these cannot result in the realization of *brahmanjñāna*. Final comprehension will only arise when the student cedes all agency to the *śruti*, embodied by the guru. Far from being a shortcut to realization, relinquishing all effort and striving is the final but necessary step which follows the arduous work of learning, studying, and contemplating the scriptures.

For *śruti* to be the true agent of revelation, the student must cede all agency and effort. But cede to whom? *Strictu sensu*, the guru who utters the words “Thou art that,” is merely the medium of revelation; the *śruti* itself is the agent. The student cedes agency to the *śruti*, which is embodied by the guru. Having abandoned all effort, all striving, all agency, and all *dharmas*,³¹ realization dawns in a moment of grace.

Entrusting everything to the *śruti*, embodied by the guru, the student gracefully receives the revelation of his/her true identity: “Thou art that.” Hence, the grammatical indexicality of the word “thou” is inextricably linked to grace insofar as the *śruti* is the agent of revelation and realization. When one reads the words “Thou art that, O Śvetaketu,” the reader retains agency. The reader is the indexed referent of the word “thou,” but is also the agent of its indexing. Analogously, pointing a finger at oneself is a very different experience than discovering that someone else is pointing at oneself. Thus, the reader stands in need of a compassionate other, who is the medium of *śruti*’s graceful agency. One can only receive grace; one cannot be the agent of one’s own grace. One cannot give grace to oneself. An/other is needed.

I insert a slash in the word “another” in an attempt to emphasize that the other who is needed cannot be “just any other.” Certainly,

Śāṅkara has ideas about what may or may not qualify a person to be a guru. A discussion of such qualifications is not only beyond the scope of this essay, it would also be quite beside my point. Moreover, in the second example discussed above, Śāṅkara tells us nothing about the passerby other than that this person was compassionate enough to stop and reveal to the pilgrim, “Thou art the tenth.” At issue, then, is not the qualification of the passerby, but only his/her compassion and the pilgrim’s willingness to believe the revelation.

Setting aside (without obviating) questions of the guru’s *adhikāra*, or qualifications to be a teacher of advaita, it becomes easier to say something about the quality of the relationship between teacher and student, from Śāṅkara’s perspective. To do so, it is helpful to notice the texture of the various relationships exemplifying the *guru-śiṣya* relationship. As noted earlier, Śāṅkara anthropomorphizes *śruti* in the opening verses of Upad I.18: *śruti* teaches like an attentive mother.³² As I’ve emphasized, the Chāndogya records an episode where a father (Uddālaka) is teaching his son (Śvetaketu). The *neti, neti* teaching occurs in an intimate exchange between husband and wife. Whatever else may be true of the relationship between teacher and student, it seems clear that Śāṅkara regards this relationship as one characterized by intimacy, trust, and compassion. The student must trust the teacher in the way that one trusts a parent or loving spouse. To cede all agency, the student must have faith not only in the *śruti*, but also in the teacher. Thus, regardless of whatever additional qualifications a teacher must have, one requirement is that the student must trust the teacher and believe that the teacher is acting compassionately and selflessly. Even

when spoken in the pedagogical context of *guru* and *śiṣya*, it is fruitless for the student to hear the words “Thou art that,” if the student lacks faith in the teacher. Naturally, the teacher must also believe the words, acting only out of compassion: “Thou art that, [O dear one].”

Much later in Upad I.18, Śaṅkara insists that it is *only* the direct perception (*śravaṇa*) of what is heard (*śruti*) that will lead to understanding.³³ As Clooney has well stated, “The ‘system’ of Advaita is a well-planned event, not a theory.”³⁴ Learning the scriptures, studying the Upaniṣads and traditional commentaries,³⁵ logically reasoning through the teachings (*manana*, *yukti*), and engaging in scriptural contemplation (*nididhyāsana*) or meditation (*parisaṅkhyāna*)³⁶ are important and perhaps indispensable endeavors that prepare a student of advaita for realization of Brahmanjñāna. But Śaṅkara insists that even the written scriptural books (*grantha*) themselves are only *indirectly* referred to as Upaniṣads.³⁷ The dry pages (or palm leaves, as it were) only become Upaniṣads when they are embodied by a teacher. The teacher gives breath to the texts so that they may be heard (*śruti*).

Like a gardener cultivating the soil, scriptural contemplation and reasoning cultivate a particular way of approaching the canon, preparing a student to receive scripture's graceful revelation. They do not replace direct scriptural revelation as the only valid means of knowing Brahman; they remain ever preparatory, nurturing students by removing boundaries to hearing. These endeavors are part of the “well-planned event”³⁸ which culminates in a moment of grace wherein the student cedes all agency to the *śruti*, embodied in a trusted and

compassionate teacher, who then reveals: “Thou art that, [O dear one].”

Graceful Gesture

I began this essay reflecting on the significance of pointing fingers. As I've attempted to show, the indexical pronoun, “thou” *points* to its referent in a very different manner when uttered by a compassionate, trusted teacher than it does when read on the page or contemplated in isolation. In his *Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad Bhāṣya*, Śaṅkara underscores this grammatical indexicality by advocating a literal finger-pointing.

Commenting on the sentence, “This Self is Brahman,” from the second verse of the *Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad*, Śaṅkara explains that the teacher should accompany the word “this” with a gesture (*abhinayaḥ*).³⁹ In his subcommentary, Ānandagiri explains that the teacher should indicate the student's particular body (*asādhāraṇaḥ śārīraḥ*) by pointing his/her finger (*hastāgraṃ*) at the region containing the heart.⁴⁰ Regardless of whether or not the teaching “thou art that” must be literally accompanied by finger-pointing, it is clear that Śaṅkara means to underscore the unique indexical quality of words like “this” and “thou” in the human interaction of a teacher who incarnates the *śruti*. For the very reason that the indexical, “thou,” points to a different person in a different context, the embodied, interpersonal context of teacher and student is indispensable since it is only in this embodied context that student will grasp that the word points directly and particularly to him/her: “Thou art that, [O dear one].”

In his exposition of *Divine Grace* in Śaṅkara's writings, Bradley Malkovsky notes that Śaṅkara elsewhere compares a teacher to a

compassionate soul (*kāruṇika*) who guides an individual who has lost all sense of direction (*digbhrāma*), whose eyes are bound, crying out in the wilderness, by pointing them in the right direction, having liberated them.⁴¹ In the Upad, Śāṅkara describes the student as disoriented and personifies the eternal *śruti* as an attentive mother, gracefully gesturing the student along the path of knowledge.⁴² Likewise, Uddālaka acts divinely, which is to say selflessly, compassionately, and graciously, when the father says, pointedly and particularly, to his son, *tattvamasi Śvetaketo*.

Without denying or forsaking the long and difficult work of learning the scriptures, logically reasoning through commentaries, and contemplating their meaning, the realization of *brahmanjñāna* only arises, in the end, when the student cedes all agency, relinquishes all effort, and entrusts herself/himself to the teacher as the embodiment of *śruti*. Despite all he had experienced and accomplished, Rāma only understood his divine identity when Brahmā gracefully revealed: “*Thou art Nārāyaṇa*.” It was only when the compassionate stranger reversed the pilgrim’s counting finger that the pilgrim realized the identity of the lost Self: “*Thou art the tenth*.” This compassionate soul (*kāruṇika*), gesturing with a finger to the student’s particular body (*asādhāraṇaḥ śārīraḥ*), then becomes the medium of *śruti*’s graceful revelation. Only from the mouth of an/other is one able to hear (*śravaṇa*): “*Thou art that, [O dear one]*.”

Listening to Cusa

Nicholas Cryfftz, or Nicholas of Cusa, was a fifteenth century Cardinal theologian and mathematician from Kues, Germany. Best known, perhaps, for his *On Learned Ignorance*

(1440) and *On the Vision of God* (1453), Cusa composed *De Quaerendo Deum (On Seeking God)* in 1445 as an elaboration of a sermon he preached on Epiphany of that year. This short but important text begins with a reflection on Acts 17, Paul’s sermon on the Areopagus regarding the monument to the “Unknown God.” Like concentric circles, each of the work’s five chapters is shorter than its predecessor, offering progressively refined pathway(s) for seeking God. The fifth chapter, which is just two paragraphs long, concludes:

You turn yourself toward [God] by entering daily more deeply within yourself and leaving behind all that is outside, so that you may be found to be on that pathway whereby God is discovered—so that thereafter you can apprehend [God] in truth.⁴³

At first glance, it would seem that this text may pose a considerable challenge for comparison given the conclusions of the previous portion of this essay. After all, the first portion of the essay has emphasized the importance of the embodied, pedagogical context of teacher and student, privileging that context, to large extent, to the context of inward contemplation. In contrast, Cusa’s text is undoubtedly introspective and contemplative. Nevertheless, reading Cusa’s contemplative reflection *after Vedānta*, as it were, one observes a similar discovery of oneself, gracefully revealed to oneself by an/Other, i.e., by God. As above, moreover, this graceful revelation hinges, in large part, on a significant reorientation of a single word: *Theos*.

Theos: Seeking God

Cusa begins his reflection by admitting that he “marvel[s] at Paul’s procedure.”⁴⁴ In his sermon on the Areopagus, (Luke’s) Paul professes that he “wanted to make known to [these] philosophers the Unknown God, whom thereafter he affirms to be [inconceivable].”⁴⁵ If the Unknown God is inconceivable, Cusa asks, “then how is it that God can be sought in order to be found?”⁴⁶

In his preface, Cusa describes his text as an “analysis of God’s name.” As the reader soon learns, the title of the text, *De quaerendo Deum* (*On Seeking God*), is rooted in Cusa’s creative etymological analysis of the Greek word *Theos*. Guided by Paul’s assertion in Acts 17 that the Unknown God is the God in Whom “we live, move, and have our being,”⁴⁷ Cusa contemplates the word *Theos* as a method for seeking the God in Whom we live.

Cusa explains:

Theos is the name of God only insofar as God is sought... So let [one]-who-seeks take careful account of the fact that in the name *Theos* there is enfolded a certain way-of-seeking whereby God is found, so that [God] can be groped for. *Theos* is derived from *theo*, which means “I see” and “I hasten.” Therefore, the seeker ought to hasten by means of sight, [to] attain unto God, who sees all things.⁴⁸

Cusa’s intention is clearly not to provide a lesson in etymology. Rather, he guides his reader in a contemplation (*theo*) of a single word in Paul’s scriptural speech. Whether exegetical or eisegetical, his intention is to imbue the word *Theos* with a particular meaning, associating this word with the

activity of seeking. As he states clearly in the passage above, “*Theos* is the name of God only insofar as God is sought.”⁴⁹

For good reason, Nicholas of Cusa is often associated with the phrase *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of opposites. The coincidence of opposites is one of Cusa’s favorite strategies for contemplation and hermeneutics. It is hardly surprising, then, that he has begun his text by accentuating, rather than mitigating, a certain contradiction or paradox. How can it be, Cusa asks, that Paul can profess the Unknown God while continuing to assert that this Unknown God is inconceivable? How can one profess the inconceivable? Moreover, if “we live, move, and have our being” in God, then how can it be that this God remains unknown and inconceivable? We have here two pairs of contradictions, i.e., two coincidences of opposites.

***Theos*: The Seeking God**

As Cusa’s text unfolds, the reader comes to realize that the word *Theos*, at least from Cusa’s perspective, constitutes a third coincidence of opposites which dramatically resolves the previous two. As stated above, “*Theos* is the name of God only insofar as God is sought.” The “pathway of seeking God,” he writes, is a pathway of “removing boundaries *within yourself*.”⁵⁰ Delving progressively deep within oneself, one seeks God, *Theos*, in profound separation and isolation.

In stark contrast to what we have observed above regarding Śāṅkara, Cusa states clearly that God is not sought with the aid of a qualified teacher, but only in the depths of isolated contemplation. Here, there is no *śruti* akin to an attentive mother. There is no loving father, Uddālaka, instructing his son. There is

no devoted spouse, like Yājñavalkya. There is no trusted preceptor, like Brahmā. There is not even a compassionate passerby, as in Śaṅkara's allegory of the tenth person. Rather, those who seek God "with maximum desire," seek God in contemplation, in silence, and in isolation.⁵¹

Striving ever more diligently to behold God, the seeker becomes ever more aware that God is elusive, Unknown, and inconceivable, as Paul has preached on the Areopagus. Coming, finally, to the depths of isolation and unknowing, one learns that one is ignorant. It is only through the painstaking search for God that one learns that God cannot be found. Coming to rest in the tranquility of unknowing and the stillness of motionless searching, one comes to realize that wisdom can only be "given by the gift of grace."⁵² Having sought for *Theos*, the seeker relinquishes all agency and effort, calling out to *Theos*, the name of the One Who is sought.⁵³

In this moment wherein the seeker of God abandons all effort in a stillness that can only arise by sincere seeking, *Theos*, the God Who is sought, is found to be *Theos*, the Seeking God. Cusa explains:

[W]hen [God] is sought with maximum desire, then [God] is sought contemplatively... And when [God] is sought in that way... [God] will be found by [God's] revealing [Godself]."⁵⁴

In the isolated and lonely depths of contemplation, when one has exhausted one's sincere search for *Theos*, one finds oneself approached by an/Other. Cusa masterfully re-indexes what he calls "Paul's name for God." Previously, he has told us that the name *Theos* derives from *theoro* meaning "I see," "I hasten,"

and "I seek."⁵⁵ Without altering this meaning, Cusa reverses the subjectivity. The finger pointing towards God reverses; God's finger now points to the seeker. *Theos* hastens to see the devotee who hastens to see *Theos*. In the isolated depths of contemplation, one is found by an/Other.

The word *Theos*, then, constitutes a coincidence of opposites. *Theos* is the name of the God Who is sought, but also, coincidentally, the name of the Seeking God. In this *coincidentia oppositorum*, we observe the resolution of the two previously mentioned paradoxes. Paul is able to profess the Unknown God who remains inconceivable because, Cusa explains, "in [God's] light all our knowledge is present, so that we are not the ones who know but rather God [knows] in us."⁵⁶ Moreover, we are able to seek for the God in Whom "we live, move, and have our being," because, Cusa states, "just as being depends on [God], so too does being known."⁵⁷

Hence, in the solitary depths of contemplation, one discovers oneself as the one who is sought, the one who is seen, and the one who is known. In a moment of grace, one discovers oneself to be the "thou" of an/Other; the "thou" who is addressed by God. Having tread the "pathway of seeking God" which is a pathway of "removing boundaries *within yourself*,"⁵⁸ one finds oneself to be living, moving, and having one's being in God.

Conclusion

In this study of Hindu and Christian theologies, we are, perhaps, able to conclude little about the distinction between scripture and contemplation. Reading each of these theologies together, however, we are, perhaps, able to conclude something about grace and the

need for an/other. Śaṅkara and Cusa present us with two very different pathways, informed, of course, by different scriptures, different traditions, and perhaps different goals.

Śaṅkara emphasizes the importance of the intimate, embodied encounter of teacher and student. It is only in this context that the indexical arrow is able to point directly, particularly, and fully to its referent. An/other person, a trusted guru, is required as a medium of *śruti's* graceful revelation. Having relinquished all agency, having ceased all effort, and having abandoned all *dharmas*,⁵⁹ the attentive and faithful student becomes prepared to hear (*śravaṇa*) the sacred revelation (*śruti*), uttered by the compassionate and selfless teacher: "Thou art that, [O dear one]."

Cusa's pathway for seeking God, on the other hand, is rooted in the context of isolated contemplation. "[B]y entering daily more deeply within yourself and leaving behind all that is outside,"⁶⁰ one begins with scripture and the teacher's text, but leaves these behind in search of the Seeking God. This quest, Cusa avers, is marked by maximal desire and daily effort,⁶¹ but its apex is the abandonment of seeking and hastening to see. It culminates in a still, small voice calling out to the God Who is sought (*Theos*). The search prepares the searcher for the stillness and attentiveness necessary to truly listen to the One Who Seeks (*Theos*). It is here that one finds oneself because one finds oneself addressed, gracefully, by an/Other: "Thou."

While the distinctions between scriptural revelation and scriptural contemplation are simultaneously sharpened and dulled by this comparison, perhaps the comparison reveals something about grace and what might

(clumsily and pretentiously) be called the "indexical metanoia" of theology. While the often arduous work of scriptural exegesis, analysis, and contemplation should neither be discounted nor decried, neither should the final abandonment of these. Perhaps theo←logy, as the discourse about God and the faithful quest for understanding is at its best when it makes us aware of its own limitations. Perhaps theo←logy, as the search for the Ultimate, or Wholly Other, cultivates a tranquil attentiveness wherein agency is yielded to an/other, a compassionate and selfless other who can reveal our identity when our own striving reaches its limit. That is to say, when our isolated striving reaches its limits, we stand in need of an/other. Perhaps, as Śaṅkara states in the *Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad Bhāṣya*, a pointing finger is needed to reverse our gaze. So long as the effort remains our own, we cling to the agency of the ego, the I-maker (*ahaṃkāra*). An/other is needed so that the pointing finger of theo←logy can become the graceful revelation of theo→logy.

Notes

¹ The unrevised version of my AAR presentation is available at: <http://harvard.academia.edu/BradBannon>.

² Chāndogya Upaniṣad (CU) VI.8-16.

³ Śaṅkara, *Upadeśasāhasrī* I.18.9. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Śaṅkara, *Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad Bhāṣya*. Shastri, Subrahmanya, Ed. *Upaniṣadbhāṣyam*, V1 (Māuṅṭa Ābū: Maheśa-Anusandhāna-Saṃsthānam, 1979), 217.

⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Quaerendo Deum (Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa)*. Vol. 1. Trans. Jasper Hopkins.

60 Brad Bannon

Minneapolis: A.J. Banning, 2001), 314-5.
<http://dx.doi.org/2027/mdp.39015052668509>.

Cf. Acts 17:28.

⁶ Cf. Francis Xavier Clooney, *Theology After Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 69.

⁷ Reid B. Locklin, *Liturgy of Liberation: A Christian Commentary on Shankara's Upadeśasāhasrī* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 11.

⁸ Upad I.18.3d.

⁹ Upad I.18.7d.

¹⁰ Cf. CUBh VI.14.1.

¹¹ Upad I.18.8c-d.

¹² Upad I.18.9.

¹³ UMSBh IV.1.2.

¹⁴ Upad I.18.216-7.

¹⁵ Contra: Sengaku Mayeda, *Thousand Teachings: The Upadeśasāhasrī of Śaṅkara* (Albany: SUNY, 1979), 196.

<http://dx.doi.org/2027/mdp.39015001793580>

¹⁶ Clooney, 39.

¹⁷ Upad I.18.99-103.

¹⁸ Griffith, Ralph T.H. *Ramayan of Vālmiki*, (London: Trübner & Co., 1874), Canto CXIX, 499.
<http://dx.doi.org/2027/hvd.32044004526489>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Upad I.18.100c-d.

²¹ Upad I.18.99.

²² Upad I.18.216-7.

²³ Upad I.18.170-200. This allegory also appears in Upad I.12, BUBh I.4.7, and TUBh II.1.

²⁴ Upad I.18.173, Mayeda trans. 190.

²⁵ Upad I.18.7d, 24-33.

²⁶ Clooney, 34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 215: “Though there are striking differences to be expected in the responses of hearers and readers, the latter is the primary focus of this study.” The former is the primary focus here.

²⁸ Upad I.18.216-7. See also Jacqueline Suthren Hirst, “Strategies of Interpretation: Śaṅkara’s Commentary on Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116.1. (1996): 58-75. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/606372>. As Suthren Hirst demonstrates, while Śaṅkara does not deny the importance of *manana* and *nididhyāsana*, he repeatedly emphasizes *śravaṇa* as the final vehicle of realization.

²⁹ See, especially, Upad I.18.25-28.

³⁰ Upad I.18.25.

³¹ See *Bhagavadgītā* 18:66 and Śaṅkara’s *Bhāṣya* thereupon. Therein, Śaṅkara explains that without effort or action, a king retains agency as his troops fight in battle; conversely, a magnet lacks agency, even though it alters its surroundings.

³² Upad I.18.3.

³³ Upad I.18.216-7.

³⁴ Clooney, 102.

³⁵ See also BUBh II.1.20.

³⁶ Upad II.3.

³⁷ See Śaṅkara’s introductions to Kaṭha Upaniṣad Bhāṣya and Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya.

³⁸ Clooney, 102.

³⁹ Shastri, 217.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ CUBh VI.14.1-2. Bradley J. Malkovsky, *The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śaṅkarācārya* (Vol. 91. Numen Book Series ; Boston: Brill, 2001) 300-1.

⁴² Upad I.18.3,7.

⁴³ Hopkins, 330.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁴⁷ Acts 17:28.

⁴⁸ Hopkins, 315.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 325.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁵⁹ *Bhagavadgītā* 18:66.

⁶⁰ Hopkins, 330.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 324.