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# Book Review: *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One*

Harold Coward  
*University of Victoria*

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demonize and denigrate Hinduism (and that thereby reverse the general movement of Christian evangelistic thought towards more irenic approaches to non-Christian faiths) are, as I have argued in my own work, affecting the debate about conversion in India in significant ways. Yet the views and impact of such Christians are considered only in a few lines on the last pages of the book. Nevertheless, this should be taken as a mere statement of fact, not a judgment; to criticize Barua for having a limited focus, as all scholars necessarily do, would be to unfairly criticize him for not riding what is currently my particular hobby horse.

In the end, *Debating 'Conversion'* is a unique and important contribution to the study of

Hindu-Christian relations. Its more general, historical sections and chapters would be accessible even to undergraduates, and could provide a useful summary of extant material in that context. Its more theological and philosophical material will be of interest particularly to scholars and graduate students who work on related topics, though the presentation of even this material is such that it may not be beyond the grasp of advanced undergraduates.

Chad Bauman  
Butler University

***A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One.* Anantanand Rambachan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015, xi + 230 pages.**

IN my view a key challenge for Religious Studies today is to show its scholarship to be relevant to major problems facing the world. One such challenge is to mine the theology of religious traditions for justice and the overcoming of oppressive structures in society. Anant Rambachan takes on this challenge for the Advaita Vedanta tradition, within which he is both a practitioner and a scholar. He recognizes that other non-dual and dualistic Hindu traditions will begin from different theological presuppositions than Advaita and produce different ethical conclusions—resulting in a rich intra-Hindu conversation. And the Hindu views on topics such as justice for women, homosexuals, children, caste, and the earth need also to engage with knowledge

from secular social science on how the world can achieve justice. In this book, Rambachan's focus is on Advaita and is two-fold:

First, to offer an interpretation of Advaita that does not trivialize the world, but establishes its value and meaning in relation to *brahman*. Second, to retrieve core guiding values that we must bring to our...response to issues of contemporary concern.

Rambachan's earlier works *Accomplishing the Accomplished*, and *The Advaita Worldview* established his own interpretation of Advaita Vedanta theology. His aim in this book is to build on those earlier discussions by

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establishing the normative theological and ethical perspectives of Advaita that do not trivialize the world (e.g. by dismissing it as illusion), “but establishes its value and meaning in relation to *Brahman*.” Thus, Part One presents “an essential theological teaching in Advaita that affirms, without compromise or exception, the identity of unity and the infinite as the self of all beings and of the universe. *Brahman* is the single ontological truth of everything, allowing us to see the world as its celebrative multiplication (p. 12).” This is the theological basis for a strong ethic that Rambachan develops in Part Two by showing Advaita as refuting all assumptions of human inequality that produce oppressive social institutions such as Patriarchy, caste, and homophobia. Advaita, he shows us, is clearly on the side of justice in the interactions of humans with each other and with nature, and is thus in tune with many ethical positions of Christianity, Buddhism and other religions when it comes to responding to the major challenges facing us today.

Rambachan’s laudable goal is to contribute “to the larger ongoing conversation on the resources of the religious traditions for justice and the overcoming of oppressive structures (p. 13).” Hindu traditions, he notes, can learn from and have much to contribute to this dialogue – as he has done by participation as a Hindu representative in many World Council of Churches meetings (some of which I have attended with him). Rambachan also acknowledges that in his Part Two application of Advaita to contemporary ethical problems, he is to some extent following the earlier example of Swami Vivekananda (p. 13).

I find all of Rambachan’s writings on Advaita to have a freshness, simplicity, and

depth that strongly communicates to the contemporary reader. This is true in the Part One’s masterful presentation of Sankara’s Advaita thought. In the Hindu scripture, the Upanisads and Bhagavadgita, show that the human problem of suffering (*duhkha*) and lack of happiness is rooted in *avidya* or ignorance (rather than willful sin for Christians or selfish desires for Buddhism). And it is through the insight of seeing ourselves and the world to be nothing but *Brahman*, that we are liberated from ignorance (*avidya*), suffering, and selfishness. But a key point for ethics is that all of this occurs in the present, in this life (*jivanmukti*) and not at the end of our existence in some heavenly hereafter. In Christian terms it is a “realized eschatology,” the Kingdom of God on earth that, as Rambachan emphasizes, is the liberation goal of Advaita theology and the basis of its this-worldly ethics. This also relates well to the Buddhist *bodhisattva* requirement of remaining behind (even though personal liberation or *nirvana* has been realized) until all other sentient beings and even the last blade of grass experiences release from suffering.

It is the application of this-worldly liberation ethics that Rambachan unpacks in Part Two (the larger section of the book) where Advaita liberation from ignorance is shown to evidence a paralleling of the teaching of Jesus’ parables such as the Good Samaritan or the Sermon on the Mount, and the *bodhisattva*’s compassion. Moksa is not, as is sometimes suggested by Advaita scholars, seeing the world and its suffering as illusion, inaction, or freedom from all action, but rather as action for the good of the world—in both personal and collective contexts. Thus, Part Two focuses on both personal and social ethical implications for liberation from: patriarchy, homophobia,

anthropocentrism (environmental ethics), the value of the child (equality of girls), and overcoming caste oppression. Let us take a brief glimpse at Rambachan's approach by looking at one chapter in more detail.

In Chapter 5 on "Liberation from Patriarchy," in spite of the fact that Advaita theology sees the same conscious Self (*Brahman*) as present in all beings, Rambachan finds that women are given significance and value only in relation to men, especially as wives or widows. Thus, rather than being seen as an equal manifestation of *Brahman*, girls and women are often devalued and debased. Today, says Rambachan, Hindu scriptural revelation regarding the equality of women as manifestation of *Brahman* "must translate into a social order characterized by relationships of justice, mutual respect, and freedom from violence (p. 112)." Patriarchy, he says, is an expression of *avidya* (ignorance) and is a fundamental misunderstanding of the equality and unity of all human beings. Thus, the liberation of women to become full beings is a necessary condition for the true liberation of men (p. 113). Rambachan uses a similar approach, in the following chapters, of exposing ethical failures of Hindu thought and practice "head-on" and then searching Advaita teachings for norms of equality and justice in *Brahman*. Chapter 7 "Liberation from Anthropocentrism" and the restoration of respect for nature is also challenging, since Advaita scholars have often been more

concerned with the negation of the world and not its intrinsic worth—to know Brahman, the world must be discarded (p. 133). In Chapter 8 on the value of the child and Chapter 9 on overcoming caste oppression serious challenges are presented for Hindu ethics. Yet, Rambachan does not "blink" and calls a "spade a spade" throughout. His personal and scholarly courage in self-critically examining his own tradition with such honesty deserves commendation. Rather than blaming the so-called "outsiders" for problems in the Hindu tradition, Rambachan identifies oppression and injustice within the tradition itself – along with its own sources for establishing justice. He is also open to seeing ethical patterns for social justice present in other traditions and urges all religions to engage in constructive discussion together.

If you have only one book on the Advaita tradition or Hindu ethics in your library, this is the one to have. Aside from his scholarly honesty, Rambachan is an excellent writer of clear and concise prose and makes Hinduism accessible. This book is essential reading for anyone doing comparative theology on ethics, and along with similar volumes from other traditions such as Christianity and/or Buddhism would make an excellent text for a comparative ethics course.

Harold Coward  
University of Victoria

***Kṛṣṇa and Christ: Body-Divine Relation in the Thought of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Classical Christian Orthodoxy.* By Steven Tsoukalas. Eugene, OR: WIPF & STOCK, 2011, 310 pages.**