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Book Review: *Kṛṣṇa and Christ: Body-Divine Relation in the Thought of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Classical Christian Orthodoxy*

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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.

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***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.**

work of comparison between Kṛṣṇāvatāra and the incarnation of Christ proceeds in the concluding Chapter Seven, focused around the question of whether, in light of the demonstrable differences between avatār and incarnation, the two words should be used interchangeably, a question with a long history necessitated by Christian missionary activity in India, particularly involving the work of Bible translation. For his part, Tsoukalas argues that while the terms can be identified, discretion is advised:

I maintain that the content that fills the words “avatāra” and “incarnation” in advaita, viśiṣṭādvaita, and traditional Christian orthodoxy should be carefully outlined before using the words in an interchangeable manner...I hold this position because in certain senses Christ is a “descent” of God, and because in certain senses the Kṛṣṇāvatāra-s of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja are “incarnations” and “enfleshments” of *some sort* within their respective frameworks” (227).

Not that these significant differences lead the author towards an argument for incommensurability, although he acknowledges this as a possible conclusion. Unsurprisingly for a Christian apologist, the truth of his tradition over the other rests on the historicity of Christ and possible ahistoricity of Kṛṣṇa—not that this claim is a central argument of his conclusion. As he himself demonstrates, epistemology matters, and for a Western Christian, particularly a post-Enlightenment one who understands truth as inextricably tied to historical fact, it matters a lot. That the author is willing to make

normative claims may be offensive to readers accustomed to epoché all the way down. Yet from the outset, Tsoukalas argues that the work of comparison should lead to “religious dialogue and debate in order to see which tradition offers the more plausible and/or correct explanations of the issue(s) at hand” (17). In other words, scholars need not shy away from making truth claims. Yet Tsoukalas demonstrates throughout his work that the “issues at hand” between Christianity and Hinduism are not identical, since doctrines about these liberating figures arise in such differing metaphysical and soteriological contexts. For example, Christianity is not concerned with ending transmigration and putting an end to karma, while Hinduism generally is not concerned with atoning for sins through the death and resurrection of its fully God and fully human deities. So while Kṛṣṇa and Christ may not be quite talking past each other, their more sophisticated adepts just might be.

Meanwhile, another problem remains. For all the difference between Kṛṣṇa and Christ, epistemologically, ontologically, and theologically, such differences—real as they are—appear to be quite irrelevant on the ground. Both figures are born unusually than other humans vis-à-vis a single woman; both miraculously subdue forces of evil; both offer solace to the afflicted; both promise liberation through participation in divinity by means of devotion (though any discussion of theosis is sadly absent due to the author’s commitment to a juridical understanding of the atonement.) These may in fact be superficial similarities, as the author argues. Yet the subtle distinctions that Tsoukalas ably parses are not so distinguishable in the lives of adherents, where

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devotees care more about the promises of salvation from various forms of lack and oppression than whether one deity bore a true body or not—and what constitutes a “real,” physical body in the first place (and why that matters). Indeed, the author takes us into deep theological waters, careful to understand Kṛṣṇa and Christ from within their respective theological and philosophical contexts, then doing the dangerous work of comparison of one savior-within-a system with another savior-within-a system. Most seekers are either unable to delve into such waters or are simply uninterested to do so. For such as these there

exist weightier concerns. Succor might be had—and depending on where one lives, that could be from Kṛṣṇa or Christ, or both, much to the chagrin of those eager to police the borders of orthodoxies Hindu and Christian. Still, the author has provided a valuable resource for understanding classical understandings of the person and work of Kṛṣṇa and Christ within and across religious boundaries, and he has provided a vigorous response to those who would facilely paint with brushes far too broad.

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***A Hundred Measures of Time: Tiruviruttam* By Nammalvar. Translated and introduced by Archana Venkatesan. Penguin Books India, 2014, 272 pages.**

LOVE poetry is a treasure of the ancient Tamil *cankam* (“academy”) flourished in the early centuries CE. The poetry — mapping what A. K. Ramanujan termed the “interior landscape” — is comprised, with only several exceptions, of verses in the voice of either the (unnamed) man or woman. These are usually single verses, free-standing, that speak of love, separation; they offer seeming replies to messages we have not heard, or send messages in hopes of a response from the silent beloved. This love poetry famously reminds us of the Song of Songs. Unlike the Song, though, such poems were never incorporated into a canon of religious literature, and never become the subject of mystical readings. Centuries later, though, Saiva and Vaisnava poets composed fresh poems in the old genre, but now with heightened and explicit religious meanings.

“He” is the beloved Lord, and “she” is the soul searching for that beloved, too often inexplicably absent.

The Tiruviruttam, a poem of one hundred verses in the *virutta* (*vrutta*) meter, is a stellar instance of this new religious poetry. It was composed by the Tamil saint Satakopan, known more familiarly in the Srivaisnava Hindu tradition as Nammalvar, “our saint” or “our deep mystic.” He was foremost among the twelve alvar poets of the 7th to 10th centuries. Satakopan authored four works, the most famous of which is the *Tiruvaymoli*, one hundred songs, each ten verses in length. *Tiruviruttam*, perhaps his first work, consciously and amazingly evokes the power, feeling, and uncertainties of the old *cankam* poems. It, along with the other alvar works, became the ground of a long tradition of