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The God of Love and the Love of God: Thinking With Rāmānuja About Grace in Augustinian Christianity

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ABSTRACT: Rāmānuja’s exegetical-theological struggles with the question as to whether his doctrine that the Lord Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is the inner controller of the finite self dissolves moral autonomy remind us of one of the most vexed debates in Augustinian Christian theology – whether divine grace infallibly moves the predetermined soul to perform virtuous action, or whether divine grace is rendered efficacious by free human response. I suggest that Christian systematic theologians can profitably explore Rāmānuja’s integration of an emphasis on divine grace with an affirmation of human autonomy in his devotional universe.

I begin with a deep theological paradox that structures the doctrinal systems of Christianity and various forms of devotional Vaiṣṇava Hinduisms – the simultaneous affirmation of divine sovereignty and human volitional response. On the one hand, God is

not restricted in any way by the worldly structures over which God exercises sovereign control – a scriptural declaration which could suggest that human volitions too are subsumed into, and even negated by, divine agency. On the other hand, however, the uncoerced response of human beings to the divine self-revelation is regarded as a pivotal moment in their progressive overcoming of worldly imperfections. A survey of the religious histories of Christianity and Vaiṣṇava Vedānta indicates a series of polarised groups who have taken up embattled positions by highlighting one of these two theses over the other – for instance, the Ariminians versus the Calvinists, or Martin Luther versus Desiderius Erasmus in one context, and the Tēngalais versus the Vaḍagalais in another. Our purpose in this essay is threefold: first, to highlight Rāmānuja’s attempts to hold together the two

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'moments' of the Lord's gracious help offered to the devotee and also the active response of the devotee; second, to indicate the contours of an Augustinian Christian resolution of this theological paradox; and third, to offer some reflections on what Christian theologians could learn through an engagement with Rāmānuja's understanding of the divine presence. As we will see, the doctrine of production of the world and the doctrine of divine favour are mutually interrelated across Vaiṣṇava Hindu and Augustinian universes. For the later Augustine (411–430 CE), the key theological note is the utter incapability of human beings, who have a single lifetime on earth, to initiate even the first turn towards God, and he concludes that for those saints who are timelessly foreordained to receive salvation this initial *conversio* itself is prepared by God's grace. In Rāmānuja, on the other hand, we do not encounter such theological anxieties relating to a specific temporally-locatable moment – certain human beings, through the fruition of their beginningless (*anādi*) stream of *karmic* merits, are beginning to move in this lifetime towards the Lord Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa who is constantly assisting them in their spiritual endeavours. The Either/Or dichotomy between 'divine grace' versus 'human autonomy' which appears with sharp contrasts in Augustine and, following him, in the Reformed doctrinal systems of theologians such as Calvin, is largely absent from Rāmānuja's understanding of how structured human response and divine favour are mutually intertwined in the human spiritual pilgrimage.

(A)

The theological system of Rāmānuja, which intertwines dense layers of scriptural exegesis, reasoned discourse, and devotional

experience, is structured by a dynamic polarity between divine transcendence over the world and divine accessibility to human interiority. The creative tension between 'transcendence' and 'immanence' that Rāmānuja works with appears pointedly in the topic of whether his doctrine that the Lord Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is the inner controller (*antaryāmi*) of the finite self dissolves human moral autonomy. According to Rāmānuja's distinctive understanding of the term 'body' (*śarīra*), it is any substance which a conscious being is capable of completely controlling and supporting for its own purposes, and whose essential form (*svarūpa*) is to be the accessory of that being.¹ Since the finite self, thus encompassed in the body (*śarīra*) of the Lord, is said to be controlled by the Lord, this immanent control would seem to threaten its moral autonomy.² Rāmānuja replies that the Lord has equipped individuals with the instruments necessary for performing action (such as the organs of speech, the power of thought and willing) and remains within them as their support and inner controller, while with the help of these capacities individuals either perform or desist from action. We may take the analogous case of a carpenter who has at hand the necessary implements such as an axe but uses them only when they wish to work. We must at the same time, however, recognise the limitation of this analogy for while the carpenter is necessarily extrinsic to the tools used at work, the Lord resides within the embodied self as its inner controller in a way that does not take away its moral agency. When the finite self chooses to perform a certain act, the Lord, the embodied self's metaphysical support, consents to its fulfilment, and without such permission (*anumati*) no action is possible. In the final analysis, we must affirm both that the Lord is the ultimate cause behind every action and

that nevertheless the finite self remains a moral agent. Thus, commenting on the scriptural text which states that it is the Lord who causes those whom the Lord wishes to lead upwards or downwards to perform good or bad actions respectively (*Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* III, 8), Rāmānuja argues that the Lord favours those who perform actions as devotional worship and produces in them the desire (*ruci*) to perform more virtuous actions, while on the other hand, the Lord produces in those who are intent on violating the divine commands the desire to perform non-virtuous actions which will further hinder their progress towards the Lord.³ Therefore, in this case too the progress or the regress of the embodied self towards or away from the Lord is a consequence of its own prior actions for which it remains morally responsible.

However, although all embodied selves are embraced by the divine body, not all of them are moving towards the Lord, and many are, in fact, overwhelmed with the burden of their past *karma* in the present life-time. It is only by withdrawing itself from the impermanence of the mutable *prākṛtic* world, including that of its own body, that the finite self gradually becomes more con-centrated in itself, and by realising its essential nature as the accessory (*śeṣa*) to the Lord it begins to see the whole phenomenal world as an unbroken reality pervaded by the Lord. In this process, by seeking refuge (*prapaddi*) in the Lord whose body it constitutes, it begins to perform all actions with the knowledge that it is the Lord who is the supreme agent behind them.⁴ While the way back to the Lord through the perils of *samsāra* is not 'predestined' in a strong Augustinian-Calvinist sense, according to which certain individuals are timelessly elected to receive salvation, neither must it be understood as a 'Pelagian' self-striving

unaided by the Lord, for Rāmānuja explains that only they whom the Lord chooses obtain the supreme goal, and the Lord strives to bring them, who are His beloved, to Him. Rāmānuja clearly states in one place in the *Vedārthasaṃgraha* that release from *samsāra* is not possible without resort to the supreme Lord.⁵ Regarding the supreme lovers of the Lord, the *jñānins*, Rāmānuja writes that it is the Lord Himself who chooses them and grants (*dadāti*) them the capacity to progress in their worship by removing from them all the obstacles that hinder the further increase of their devotion towards Himself.⁶

The *Kātha Upaniṣad* 1, 2, 23 is the basic scriptural text on which Rāmānuja builds his theology of the Lord's grace (*prasāda*), which assists the embodied self on its journey towards liberation. Rāmānuja states that it declares that it is not possible for the finite self to attain the Lord through the mere hearing of scripture, reflection on it and meditation on it, for only they who have been chosen by the Lord shall obtain this supreme end, which is Himself. These 'chosen' people are beloved of the Lord, and it is the Lord Himself who strives to bring them to Him. Because of His favour, they begin to acquire a direct presentation of the Lord in their minds, and this is a steady remembrance dear above all things since the object of this remembrance is of such a nature. Such a steady remembrance of the Lord in those whom He has chosen is called devotion, and for Rāmānuja this is synonymous with worshipful meditation (*upāsana*). While the devotee's meditative worship of the Lord is the cause of the devotee's being chosen by the Lord, this worshipful 'remembrance' *itself* is aided by the Lord's gracious choosing of the devotee.⁷ The devotees who seek the Lord alone will acquire moral qualities, perform 'good works' as forms of worship, and through

devotion become absorbed in incessantly glorifying Him. They become completely dedicated to the most compassionate (*paramakāruṇika*-) Lord by taking refuge at His lotus-feet (*śaraṇāgatī*), and are assisted by His grace (*prasāda*) which dispels their ignorance. Thus, they are able to attain Him through their fervent devotion (*bhakti*) to Him.⁸ The supreme person, the reliever of the distress of supplicants, has stepped into the world out of supreme compassion and parental love for His devotees so that He may become a refuge for all.⁹ By seeking refuge (*prapad*-) in the Lord who will enable the selves to overcome their ignorance about the spiritual nature of the finite self, they shall be able to perform all actions easily until they attain perfection through His grace (*prasāda*).¹⁰

(B)

Rāmānuja thus presents Viṣṇu as the supremely adorable deity who is the transcendental abode of all supereminent qualities, and who, as the inner controller (*antaryāmi*) in the embodied human self, is also intimately accessible to the devotee. J. B. Carman notes that a similar motif of a transcendent God who condescends to the depths of sinful humanity lies at the core of the theologies of various Christian figures, and writes: ‘We can feel in Christian faith the same tension that Rāmānuja senses in his apprehension of the Lord revealed to him in the Vedas and through the Vedānta and the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition. That tension is the inner dynamic of the supreme lordship and utter availability within the same Divine nature and the same Divine person. That is why, although Christians stand outside Rāmānuja’s tradition, they are able to grasp and appreciate so much of his thought.’¹¹ Thus, Rāmānuja’s exegetical-theological struggles

with the central theological paradox – of simultaneously affirming divine sovereignty and human freedom – can illuminate one of the most vexed debates in Christian theology, namely, whether divine grace infallibly moves the predestined soul to perform virtuous action, or whether divine grace is rendered efficacious by free human response. As a matter of fact, Rāmānuja’s own Śrī-Vaiṣṇava community split into two traditions after his death over the question of whether (a) Rāmānuja had primarily outlined a structured system of human *karmic* responses to the Lord’s gracious initiative or (b) Rāmānuja had advocated the complete renunciation of human agential capacity (*prapatti*) in the wake of the Lord’s offer of grace (*prasāda*) to worldly beings as an independent means towards final renunciation.¹² Rāmānuja himself sought, as we have seen, to hold together two theses which also lie at the doctrinal core of the mainstream Christian traditions: (a) while human beings must (actively) work out their salvation in ‘fear and trembling’ (Philippians 2: 12); (b) without their (passive) reception of divine grace, they are incapable of seeking and finding God (John 5: 15).

What is distinctive about the Augustinian Christian theological problematic is a series of interlocking theses about divine atemporal eternity, the (utter) bondage of the human will due to original sin, and the divine timeless foreknowledge of human responses to God. The famous Augustinian resolution of numerous theological paradoxes is that the predestined are timelessly chosen not because they have already turned to God but *in order that* they may believe in the future.¹³ Predestination, which is the timeless God’s (fore-)knowledge of what God is going to do, is therefore a preparation for grace (*gratia*), which follows as its effect.¹⁴ The eternal God

does not have to wait upon the created order in any manner and timelessly (fore-)knows those saints who will be resurrected into eternal life after the final judgement. God (fore-)knows the whole created order of causes in the universe and since the free choices of human beings, which are the causes of their specific actions, are *themselves* encompassed by this order, God timelessly (fore-)knows all their future actions in a manner that does not destroy their free agency. For example, when we ('freely') pray to God and God has mercy on us, it does not imply that God is now acting on some new motive in response to a temporal event (that is, our praying); rather, God timelessly (fore-)knows that we shall, as a matter of fact, offer our prayers. Therefore, while Augustine asserts that human beings must make an active response to the divine offer, he also emphasises that the fact that God timelessly (fore-)knows that some of them shall in fact make this response does not detract from their free moral agency.¹⁵ However, although by being baptised into the body of Christ, predestined individuals have indeed entered a new existential state, their regeneration is not yet complete, and they are exhorted to constantly renew 'the inner man' (2 Corinthians 4 : 16), while they wait, with hope, for the redemption of their bodies at the resurrection. In other words, Christians cannot slacken their efforts for even though it is the Spirit of *God* who is constantly leading them towards holiness, it is *they* themselves who must do the running. Thus, Augustine declares in a sermon that God is building up a temple with Christians as stones, but they are not dead pieces of matter to be passively thrown about but rather are 'living stones' who must actively cooperate with God in this construction.¹⁶ Therefore, the saints who have

been timelessly predestined to receive saving grace are not coerced but are inclined to come to Christ for their wills have been 'prepared' by grace, and they are drawn to Christ in a manner that does not annihilate their free choice of will. A child who loves nuts will come running to a person who is offering them, this very love giving the child the strength to run; similarly, God has shaped the hearts of the elect to love God, and God sweetly appeals to these saints to accept the divine offer.¹⁷ The omniscient God has the timeless (fore)knowledge of what human beings will freely choose to do under which conditions, and by presenting the elect with specifically those inclinations and motives that God (fore)knows to be congruent with their circumstances, God brings them to become faithful and holy.¹⁸

(c)

While Augustine did not – as it is sometimes claimed – deny that human beings have free will (*liberum arbitrium*), by insisting, however, that the temporal beginning (*initium*) of faith *itself* is a gift of God, he bequeathed to Christendom a question of momentous proportions: is the will's *first* movement towards God founded on its own (natural) resources or is *this* return foreordained within God's (supernatural) gracious economy? While Rāmānuja's devotional universe too is shaped by the simultaneous assertion of divine control and human autonomy, the pointed Augustinian question does not arise on his horizons partly because these are shaped by the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth, which operate in a beginningless (*anādi*) universe. Even if people following the discipline of works do not attain liberation in this birth, they will regain in the subsequent birth the mental disposition with which they have been performing actions in

this birth. Consequently, like someone who has just woken up from sleep, they will carry on from where they had left off and strive once again for complete success.¹⁹ Thus, since the cycles of re-embodiment do not have a temporal origination, the vexed theme – one volatile source of Christian divisions during and after the European Reformation – relating to the spiritual dynamics of the *first moment* does not appear in Rāmānuja’s theological commentaries. Rather, divine gracious presence and human agency are beginninglessly so densely entangled that they cannot be neatly separated.²⁰ In the Augustinian worldview, in contrast, there is no ‘before’ to the present lifetime, so that the question of whether the first turning towards God is directed by human effort or inspired by divine grace becomes a vexed conundrum. The former possibility would seem to negate Christ’s saying, ‘Without me ye can do nothing’ (John 25:5), which is constantly used by Augustine as one of his proof-texts for the necessity of grace as a divine aid (*adiutorium Dei*). The second possibility would invoke the spectre of a theological determinism where human volition is drawn to God with an ‘irresistible’ compulsion. This dilemma clearly shapes Augustine’s exegetical struggles with Biblical data such as God’s love of Jacob and hatred of Esau (Malachi 1:2-3; Romans 9:13) even before the twin brothers were born, from within his Christian framework of a linear symbolism of time according to which human beings have only one life on earth. Rāmānuja, however, would argue that the various inequalities (mental, socio-economic, moral dispositions, and so on) that we see in the phenomenal world are, on the one hand, not predetermined by the Lord in an Augustinian sense, and are, on the other hand, not random happenings either. Because of the beginningless nature of the stream of *karma*

he can maintain that the empirical distinctions in each new world-order are a recompense for the non-annihilated *karma*, handed over from the previous ones, of finite beings.²¹

What, then, might Christian theologians learn through a careful exploration of Rāmānuja’s theological terrain? The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is sometimes understood as teaching the world’s temporal origination, which only foregrounds the vexed question: which arrives *first*, unmerited divine grace or free human response? In some sectors of Catholic doctrine, the world is placed under the sign of a ‘pure nature’, which is then sharply contrasted in an extrinsic sense with the *subsequently* superadded dimension of the ‘grace’ of divine creativity. Because nature is regarded as a self-sufficient realm that is not ‘always already’ orientated towards God, grace appears as an external superstructure which is imposed on the former, with the implication that until an individual experiences grace through the verbal revelation preached by the Church, she remains locked into a state of pure nature.²² Such an understanding of creation *ex nihilo* motivates the claim that an *initial* state of the corrupted human will, belonging to a pure nature, is *succeeded* by divine grace, which generates the extremely subtle – and seemingly interminable – scholastic disquisitions on the temporal relation between divine foreknowledge of future contingents and human responses. However, if the doctrine of creation is instead read as emphasising the utter metaphysical-existential dependence of the world on Christ, it could shift the theological focus away from a *temporal priority* of grace over freewill (or vice versa), towards a *mystical priority* of grace which ineffably ‘encapsulates’ human agency.²³ Cyril Veliath, S.J. writes in this vein that the ‘antinomy that exists between the

agency of the individual *Atman* and that of the Brahman ... stands a better chance of acceptance when observed not from a metaphysical but from a Mystical point of view.... When viewed from such a perspective therefore, it is of little consequence to consider whether the agent be the *Atman* or the Brahman, for in the ultimate perspective there is nothing else but the Brahman, and any individual that the *Atman* may possess is wholly due to the Brahman alone ...²⁴ Veliath's view is echoed more recently by Martin Ganeri, O.P. who writes that the polarities of divine grace and free will in Rāmānuja are 'to some extent ... the common ones that abide in such theistic accounts in many traditions and mark the limits of human reason to make sense of realities that transcend them'.²⁵

To understand the themes of 'mystical' and 'polarity' in this context, we may highlight two radically distinct types of distinction which are involved in the vexed debates relating to divine grace and human response. On the one hand, we observe various forms of empirical distinctions in the everyday world between, say, these chairs and those tables, one chair here and another chair there, and one book yesterday and the same book today. On the other hand, the 'distinction' between God and the world cannot be spelled out in this manner in terms of spatio-temporal relations, for God is not *another* object who stands in contradistinction to the world: God is being-itself who is the ground of the world's existence at every moment. Therefore, the 'distinction' between God and the human devotee should not be viewed in terms of two (quasi-finite) individuals – one, a faultless grandmaster and another, a paltry novice – who are competing with each other to weave a carpet from two opposite ends. Such 'synergistic' images invoke dilemmas such as:

'If the novice abandons all self-effort, how can the novice progress towards perfection? But if the novice does not abandon all self-effort, would not this assertion of autonomy be an affront to the sovereignty of the master?' Such metaphors, in effect, domesticate divine transcendence, and lead to the perception that divine sovereignty is related to human freedom in a 'zero-sum game' such that highlighting the former can only entail the negation of the latter.²⁶ The way through this dilemma is to remind ourselves that God and the world are not related as two 'distinct' enumerable powers in the sense that one entity – the grandmaster – works with another isolable entity – the novice, but in the sense that the one ineffable reality of the creator God mystically envelopes, encapsulates, and encompasses the finite being of the world to which God remains graciously bound in relations of polarity. While a distinct temporal origination (say, 14 billion years ago) has often been associated with creation *ex nihilo*, it has also been argued that the core of this doctrine is, in truth, the notion of existential dependence of the world on God.²⁷ In this understanding, then, God is 'prior' to the world not primarily in a temporal sense but in the ontological sense that God remains the gracious fund of being who sustains human beings on their return to their transcendental home.

In the light of our discussion, we may turn to the *Congregatio de Auxiliis* which was established by Pope Clement VIII (1597) to examine the highly scholastic debates between the Dominicans and the Jesuits: they furiously disputed the point whether grace is efficacious because of the nature of grace itself or because of divine (timeless) omniscience of how human beings would respond to offered graces.²⁸ Finally, Pope Paul V (1607) gave his

decision *not* by stating what the Roman Catholic position is but by sketching the contours of what it is *not* – thus, the Jesuits are not ‘Pelagians’, the Dominicans are not ‘Calvinists’, and each side should cease to slander the other as heretics. The Pope’s apophatic *via media* could be seen as an assertion of the ‘mystical’ priority of God’s providential care over human response – in a

manner that cannot be comprehended through logical categories, the former does not erase but effectuates the latter. If Rāmānuja had been invited by the Pope as a religious observer to the Quirinal on this occasion, one might suggest that he would have approved this Papal appeal to divine mystery.

Notes

- ¹ *Śrī-Bhāṣya* II, 1, 9.
- ² *Śrī-Bhāṣya* II, 3, 40.
- ³ *Śrī-Bhāṣya* II, 3, 41.
- ⁴ *Gītā-Bhāṣya* 9, 27.
- ⁵ *Vedārtha-Saṃgraha* para. 78.
- ⁶ *Gītā-Bhāṣya* 8, 14.
- ⁷ Introduction to *Gītā-Bhāṣya* Chapter 7; *Śrī-Bhāṣya* III, 4, 26.
- ⁸ *Vedārtha-Saṃgraha* para. 91.
- ⁹ *Gītā-Bhāṣya* 7, 24; 7, 25.
- ¹⁰ *Gītā-Bhāṣya* 15, 5.
- ¹¹ J.B. Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1974), p. 271.
- ¹² E.J. Lott, *God and the Universe in the Vedantic Theology of Rāmānuja* (Madras: Ramanuja Research Society, 1976), pp. 3–7.
- ¹³ Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), pp. 310–38.
- ¹⁴ Strictly speaking, we should not speak of the Augustinian God’s foreknowledge of the future: God ‘sees’ the entire sequence of temporal events with one sweeping glance in the eternal now (*nunc stans*).
- ¹⁵ M. T. Clark *Augustine, Philosopher of Freedom* (New York: Desclee, 1959); W.L. Rowe, ‘Augustine on foreknowledge and freewill’ in R.A. Markus (ed.), *Augustine: a collection of critical essays* (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 209–17.
- ¹⁶ Sermo 156, 13 (419 CE).
- ¹⁷ *Tractatus in Evangelium Iohannis* 26, 5.
- ¹⁸ *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum* 6, 11; 9, 17; 18, 36.
- ¹⁹ *Gītā-Bhāṣya* 6, 44.
- ²⁰ R.C. Lester, ‘Rāmānuja and Śrī-Vaiṣṇavism: The Concept of Prapatti or Śaraṅāgati’, *History of Religions* 5.2 (1966), pp. 266–82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/462526>
- ²¹ F. X. Clooney, ‘Evil, Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom: Vedānta’s Theology of Karma’ *Journal of Religion* 69 (1989): pp. 530–48. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/488203>
- ²² K. Rahner, ‘Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace’ in *Theological Investigations Volume 1: God, Christ, Mary and Grace / translated by Cornelius Ernst* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), pp. 297–317, here pp. 299–303.
- ²³ R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1952), pp.18–19.
- ²⁴ Cyril Veliath, *The Mysticism of Rāmānuja* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, Pvt. Ltd., 1993), p. 192.
- ²⁵ M. Ganeri, ‘Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Rāmānuja’, M.R. Dasti and E.F. Bryant (eds), *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.232–54, here p.253. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199922734.003.0011>
- ²⁶ W.C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 182.
- ²⁷ R. Taylor, *Metaphysics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p.107.
- ²⁸ R.J. Matava, *Divine Causality and Human Free Choice: Domingo Báñez, Physical Premotion and the Controversy de Auxiliis Revisited* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004310315>