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Why Rāmānuja? Some Reflections on Christian-Vaiṣṇava Comparative Theology

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the very idea of developing a Christian-Hindu comparative theology by focusing on Rāmānuja in particular. The paper begins by reflecting on some possible reasons—social, political, theological and philosophical—that Rāmānuja, instead of Madhva and other Vaiṣṇavas, has held, and continues to hold, such a central place in Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparative work. It then compares the Thomist doctrine of creation *ex-nihilo* with the theologies of Rāmānuja, Madhva and Jīva Goswami to illustrate that engaging with multiple Vaiṣṇava voices can enrich and expand the Christian-Rāmānuja comparative discourse.

Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja have frequently emerged as the “go-to” thinkers for Christian-Hindu comparative theologians. And in the narrower area of Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparative study, Rāmānuja has been most popular, both historically and in recent years. Due to his insistence on difference between souls, the world and God, and his relentless monotheism, Madhva seems to be a natural comparand for the Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparativist. This essay begins by reflecting

on some possible reasons that Rāmānuja, instead of Madhva and other Vaiṣṇavas, has held, and continues to hold, such a central place in Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparative work. This essay then compares the Thomist doctrine of creation *ex-nihilo* with the theologies of Rāmānuja, Madhva and Jīva Goswami to illustrate that engaging with multiple Vaiṣṇava voices can enrich and expand the Christian-Rāmānuja comparative discourse.

Some of the reasons for the Rāmānuja preference in Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparative thought may be historical, tied up in the colonial study of Hinduism, or even earlier, in the sheer influence of Rāmānuja on other Vaiṣṇava systems. Since the colonial period, Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta has been a subject of special fascination for the Western study of Indian religions. As Sardella and Ghosh have described in their work on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*’s reception history, 19th century Christian missionaries often considered the *līlā* of Kṛṣṇa, and the Purāṇas’ theistic narratives in general, to be inappropriately carnal and immoral.¹ Influenced by Christian critiques, the British-educated Indian

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reformers of the *bhadraloka*, such as Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), Bankim Chandra (1838-1894) and Vivekananda (1863-1902), found the amorous play of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata* to be a source of embarrassment. The indigenous *bhadraloka* came to regard the *Bhāgavata*'s account of Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs* as a celebration of moral misconduct, and thus both Christian missionaries and Indian intellectuals undermined the importance of the *Bhāgavata* and the Kṛṣṇa-centered Vaiṣṇava traditions, in favor of Advaita Vedānta which they portrayed as the central core of Hinduism.²

As scholarship broadened to recognize the importance of non-advaitic traditions within Hinduism, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita may have served as a natural bridge to Vaiṣṇava thought. In comparison to the *Bhāgavata*, Rāmānuja's Vaiṣṇava Vedānta is theologically nearer to Śaṅkara's Vedānta, and Rāmānuja's Vaishnavism, centered on the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and worship of the wedded Lakṣmi and Viṣṇu, presents fewer problems than the Kṛṣṇa-centric traditions. Furthermore, Rāmānuja is the earliest Vaiṣṇava to write a commentary on the *Brahma-sutra* and, as Martin Ganeri has observed, Vedānticize, the Vaiṣṇava tradition.³

The fact that Rāmānuja is the founder of the largest and most influential Vaiṣṇava tradition may have also made him an attractive choice for Christian comparative study. Most traditions within Vaiṣṇavism are deeply influenced by Rāmānuja, more than by any other Vaiṣṇava theologian. Take, for example, the 16th century Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition which aligns itself formally with Madhva, although its major thinkers, such as Jīva Gosvami, draw more heavily from Rāmānuja than Madhva.⁴ This is partly due to the fact that Rāmānuja's philosophy of qualified non-dualism is more characteristic

of the philosophy of Vedānta and Samkhya texts. Gerald Larson, in his work on Samkhya, notes that *bhedābheda* is by far the most popular position in these texts⁵, and Sheridan argues the same for the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.⁶

Given that Rāmānuja's influence is immense in the Vaiṣṇava tradition, the Christian engagement with Rāmānuja makes sense. However, Madhva and other Vaiṣṇava thinkers offer innovative and distinctive contributions to Vaiṣṇava theology, and taking them seriously would till new ground in comparative theology. To reflect upon the question of what is gained and lost by adding comparands, I would like to select a single theological issue—creation *ex-nihilo* as developed by Thomas Aquinas—and examine the differing results that emerge when we compare with three influential Vaishnava theologians: Rāmānuja, Madhva, and Jīva Gosvami.

In his study of Rāmānuja and Thomas Aquinas, Martin Ganeri has noted that “in earlier Thomist encounters with Rāmānuja's work there was felt to be a fundamental contrast between Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity and Rāmānuja's insistence that we can only know reality, including divine reality, as complex.”⁷ In the course of his work, however, Ganeri has shown that such a contrast is exaggerated. Rāmānuja, like Aquinas, insists that “ultimate reality is entirely noncomposite in its existence.”⁸ How successful Rāmānuja is in demonstrating that God is both complex and immutable is open to debate. For Rāmānuja, creation is real and distinct from God, yet fully present in God, the cause. Souls are also truly distinct, but they are inseparably related to, completely dependent on, and eternally present in their Cause (*amsa-amsin*).

Madhva's views regarding the “oneness” of God offer an alternative to Rāmānuja's

viśiṣṭādvaita. Madhva rejects key ideas in *viśiṣṭādvaita*, such as Brahman's creative self-transformation (*parināma-vāda*) and oneness and difference (*bheda-abheda*), asserting that whatever is incompatible with the divine sovereignty should be rejected. Madhva's emphasis is on Brahman as the one independent Lord whose supreme *will* controls the immense variety of different entities throughout the universe, each with its distinct innate characteristics. Madhva diverges rather radically from the other Vaiṣṇava theologians on the nature of creation, and on what constitutes the substantial cause of the universe. He does not accept that Brahman himself comprises the substantial cause (*upadāna*) of the world and the individual living beings.⁹

Similar to Madhva, Aquinas considers and rejects the idea that God is either the formal or material cause of the world on the basis that such an idea entails that God is in composition with other things. Aquinas argues that the material causes of things are in composition with them, and thus God cannot be the material cause of the world.¹⁰ Madhva and Aquinas agree that God is not the material or substantial cause of the world.

Madhva further believes that *prakṛti*, the world, is beginningless. Aquinas also allows for the possibility of an eternal world. He writes, "Those who would hold that the world was eternal, would say that the world was made by God from nothing; not that it was made after nothing, according to what we understand by the term creation, but that it was not made from anything."¹¹ When creation *ex-nihilo* is understood in this way, it indeed appears that Madhva and Aquinas are teaching virtually the same doctrine. A cursory study of Madhva and Aquinas suggests that, in comparison to Rāmānuja, Madhva's ontology is closer to Aquinas. But a deeper

study reveals that the matter is far more complex.

Although Aquinas posits that God is not the material cause of the world, and he agrees that the world could be eternal, Aquinas believes that matter is created by God (*ex-nihilo*) and God is responsible for every aspect of its existence. "Aquinas sees the postulation of uncreated matter as resulting from a failure to account fully for the existence of things, in which only accidental or substantial change of form is felt necessary to explain, rather than the existence of things as such."¹² For Aquinas, creation *ex-nihilo* entails that God creates matter and the world out of nothing.

Madhva, on the other hand, posits that although the world is utterly dependent upon God, it is not created by him. Madhva does not believe that God is the material cause of the world, nor does he believe that the world has a beginning. Thus, he contends that *prakṛti*, nature, in its unmanifest form, is co-eternal with God, and therefore not created by God. As Deepak Sharma points out,

The Madhva god is like a 'chef' who uses eternally existent 'ingredients,' namely *prakṛti*, to 'cook' the universe. The Madhva god is an instrumental, rather than material, cause... The idea that material entities evolved from *prakṛti* has its roots in the Samkhya tradition, one of the oldest traditions of South Asian speculation. Though the mechanism of the evolution of *prakṛti* differs, Madhvacarya shares the belief that previously unmanifested *prakṛti* manifests itself and differentiates itself into worldly entities through the will of Viṣṇu.¹³

Madhva ascribes to Samkhya metaphysics, which state that *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* are co-eternal. He then distinguishes his own Dvaita philosophy from Samkhya by claiming that *prakṛti* is eternally and wholly dependent

upon *puruṣa*. The idea of uncreated matter is a concept that Madhva embraces, but a notion that Aquinas fiercely opposes.

Rāmānuja adheres to the idea that God is the material and substantial cause of the world and all its living beings. The implication of this is that Rāmānuja sees the world as beginningless and he sees matter and the souls as created by God. He believes “that the soul is created by Brahman, is ruled by it, constitutes its body, is subordinate to it, abides in it, is preserved by it, is absorbed by it, [and] stands to it...”¹⁴ Thus, similar to Aquinas, Rāmānuja believes that the world is eternal and that matter and the souls are created by God. Both Rāmānuja and Aquinas do not accept Madhva’s doctrine of uncreated matter.

Thus, Rāmānuja and Madhva are each theologically near to (and far from) Aquinas in different ways. Madhva believes matter is uncreated, while Aquinas does not. Rāmānuja believes that God is the material cause of the world, while Aquinas does not. Each Vaiṣṇava theologian, however, develops his own theological thought and has unique contributions to offer in comparative theological work. When reading Rāmānuja and Aquinas together, we learn that they both believe that matter is created by God, but they do so in different ways. When reading Madhva and Aquinas together, we learn that they agree that God is not the material cause of the world, but for very different reasons.

A third Vaiṣṇava ontological position regarding the relationship between God and the world is presented by the Chaitanya tradition, which draws from, and often attempts to synthesize, the teachings of Rāmānuja and Madhva. This theological position is called *acintya-bhedābheda*, inconceivable oneness and difference. In regards to the nature of the world and creation, this doctrine states that the world is

inconceivably one with, and different from, God.

In this doctrine, the use of the word *acintya*, inconceivable, is significant. According to Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, the world is the energy, *śakti*, of God, Bhagavān. Both Bhagavān and his *śaktis* are fully real. Regarding the relationship between them, Bhagavān and his *śaktis* are identical—and they are different. The difficulty arises in recognizing these two facts simultaneously, and the inability to do so leads to *acintya*. And this inconceivability arises necessarily, for a contradiction is inaccessible to the intellect, in principle.

The concept of *acintya* does not need to be limited to Bhagavān and his *śaktis*. In the *Bhāgavata Sandarbha*, Jīva Goswami points out that the relationship between any object and its energy is inconceivable to the mind. He quotes from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, “O best of ascetics, the *śaktis* of all beings are outside the range of reasoned knowledge. Therefore, Brahman’s natural *śaktis*, such as creation, are also such—just like the heat of fire.”¹⁵ Kapoor explains:

We cannot think of fire without the power of burning; similarly, we cannot think of the power of burning without fire. Both are identical. Fire is nothing except that which burns; the power of burning is nothing except fire in action. At the same time, fire and its power of burning are not absolutely the same. If they were absolutely the same, there would be no sense in... saying “fire burns.”¹⁶

The theory of *acintya-bhedābheda* could be useful in understanding Aquinas’s doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. In his writings, Aquinas attempts to embrace two positions: 1) God is the creator of matter in every aspect of its existence and 2) God is not the material cause of the world. It is plausible that the doctrine of

acintya may be useful to a Thomist in simultaneously maintaining, and making sense of, these two positions. In the context of the object-energy relationship, God is the object, and matter is the energy. Although the energy, matter, is created by God in all its being, and is therefore nothing but God, it is inconceivably simultaneously one with, and completely different from, God.

Thus, Madhva and other Vaiṣṇava thinkers offer innovative and distinctive contributions to Vaiṣṇava theology, and taking them seriously reveals new pathways in Aquinas-Rāmānuja, and, more generally, Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparative theology. We have seen that a single theological issue—creation *ex-nihilo* as developed by Thomas Aquinas—brings different results when we

read it in light of three influential Vaishnava theologians: Rāmānuja, Madhva, and Jīva Goswami. Reading Rāmānuja with Aquinas highlights and obscures certain elements of their theologies because of their respective similarities and differences, and an Aquinas-Madhva or Aquinas-Jīva Goswami comparison highlights and obscures other elements of their respective theologies. Furthermore, we have seen that reading Aquinas-Madhva and Aquinas-Jīva together not only highlights elements of their respective theologies, but also elements of Rāmānuja's theology. Thus, new insights will be gained in Christian-Vaiṣṇava and Christian-Rāmānuja comparative work as we engage with these missing Vaiṣṇava voices.

Notes

¹ Ferdinando Sardella and Abhishek Ghosh, "Modern Reception and Text Migration of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa," in *The Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Sacred Text and Living Tradition*, eds. Ravi Gupta and Kenneth Valpey (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 227.

² Sardella, "Modern Reception and Text Migration of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa," 225-231.

³ Ganeri, Martin, *Indian Thought and Western Theism: The Vedānta of Rāmānuja* (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group), 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315731339>

⁴ Ravi Gupta, *Chaitanya Vaisnava Vedanta of Jīva Goswami: When Knowledge Meets Devotion*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203500682>

⁵ Gerald Larson, *Classical Samkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning*, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2011).

⁶ Daniel Sheridan, *Advaitic Theism of the Bhagavata Purāṇa*, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 42.

⁷ Ganeri, *Indian Thought and Western Theism*, 102

⁸ Ganeri, *Indian Thought and Western Theism*, 102

⁹ Deepak Sarma, *An Introduction to Madhava Vedanta*, (New York: Routledge, 2003). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315262666>

¹⁰ Ganeri, *Indian Thought and Western Theism*, 134.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.46.2 ad 2, in Ganeri, *Indian Thought and Western Theism*, 143.

¹² Ganeri, *Indian Thought and Western Theism*, 135.

¹³ Sarma, *An Introduction to Madhava Vedanta*, 61

¹⁴ Ramanuja, *Sri Bhasya*, 2.3.32.

¹⁵ *Visnu Purāṇa* in O. B. L. Kapoor, *The Philosophy and Religion of Sri Caitanya*, (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1977).

¹⁶ Kapoor, *The Philosophy and Religion of Sri Caitanya*, 153.