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John B. Carman
Harvard Divinity School

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Expanding and Refining Christian Interpretations of Rāmānuja

John B. Carman

Professor of Comparative Religion, Emeritus
Harvard Divinity School

ABSTRACT: In the last century there has been a remarkable expansion of studies of Rāmānuja by scholars outside the Śrīvaiṣṇava community. This paper concentrates on the contributions of some Christian scholars. Many of the earlier studies focused on Rāmānuja's opposition to Śaṅkara's interpretation of the Vedānta, with Roman Catholic scholars tending to favor Śaṅkara and Protestant scholars Rāmānuja. The Belgian Jesuit Pierre Johanns argued for a Christian reinterpretation of the Vedānta that would merge the truths in the different Hindu schools, giving primary importance to Śaṅkara, but modifying the Hindu teaching through the distinctive Christian doctrine of "creation out of nothing." Later his fellow Jesuit Richard De Smet reaffirmed the primary value of Śaṅkara's own genuine teachings for Christian theology. Current studies represented in this issue affirm the positive value for Christian theology of Rāmānuja's

version of the Vedānta. Christian studies continue to expand their treatment of Rāmānuja, examining not just his great commentary on the Vedānta Sūtras but also all the other writings that his community ascribes to him. In addition, some scholars are looking at the devotional traditions before and after him, especially the hymns of the Tamil poet-saints, composed before, and the commentaries on those hymns, written in the first centuries after him. Such expansion of Christian interpretation requires greater interpretation among scholars, both Christian and Hindu. Christian learning from another religious position begins with noticing something similar though not the same as that in their own religion. Thus far, in the case of Rāmānuja, there is no agreement as to which similarities are more significant and how they relate to some specific version of Christian theology. There may be instances of partial convergence where it is impossible for a

John B. Carman is the Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Religion, Emeritus at Harvard Divinity School, where he was a faculty member from 1963 to 2000. Before that he spent five years in South India under the auspices of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society. His recent publications are, "The Dignity and Indignity of Service: Further Reflections on Ramanuja's Interpretation of the *Sesha-seshin* Relationship in *Vedarthasangraha*," (in *Sri Ramanuja's Sahasrabdi Volume* 2017-18) and, with Chilkuri Vasantha Rao, *Christians in South Indian Villages, 1959-2009: Decline and Revival in Telangana* (William B. Eerdmans 2014).

Christian either to affirm or deny the truth of Rāmānuja's teaching. Here it may be important to recognize what is often considered an aesthetic judgment: appreciation. One example is a later Śrīvaiṣṇava estimate of Rāmānuja himself, that he fulfilled the "prophecy" of the poet-saint Nammalvar, being the one who initiated the end of our age of darkness and the return of the golden age.

Going Beyond Rāmānuja's Opposition to Śaṅkara

It is remarkable that anyone outside Rāmānuja's particular Hindu community, the Śrīvaiṣṇava *Sampradaya*, would celebrate his thousandth birth anniversary. Such recognition shows the growth of our modern international scholarly culture. It is also a sign of the growing interest of Christian scholars in Rāmānuja, scholars who relate their work to that of Hindu scholars and the many Western students who separate their own religious identity from their religious study.¹

This essay is not a comprehensive survey of recent scholarship. It will touch briefly on both objective and subjective aspects of Christian contributions to the study of Rāmānuja. Many of the contributors have regarded him as the most important scholar of theistic Vedānta. Those belonging to other *bhakti* communities would dispute this, but many recognize his importance in an early stage of what modern Hindu scholars have called the "Bhakti Movement."²

Many scholars in modern times, both Indian and European, have considered their study of Hindu intellectual systems to be "philosophy" rather than "theology." Whatever the rubric, both European and Indian scholars generally gave most attention to the Brahminical tradition of Vedānta, and the Vedāntin considered most important was

Śaṅkara, with Rāmānuja recognized as his most formidable opponent. They gave intellectual and religious reasons for their preference. We might also note certain historical and social factors. The Smārta Brahmins, who often claimed Śaṅkara as their primary teacher, often had a high social status. The Bengali reformer Rammohan Roy recommended a rather theistic version of Śaṅkara's teaching, followed by a more monistic interpretation advocated by Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Also important for Christians was the support for Śaṅkara's teachings by the Bengali Brahmin convert to Roman Catholicism, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya.

This preference continued in the Twentieth Century among a number of Roman Catholic missionary scholars but was somewhat modified by the Belgian Jesuit Pierre Johanns.³ In a series of journal articles stretching out over more than a decade he argued for a merger of the truths in different Vedāntic positions, starting with Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. This merger would produce an Indian Christian theology compatible with Thomism. However, one important change would have to be made: the acceptance of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which he held was given only in Revelation and therefore could not have been known by any of the great Vedāntic teachers.

Two generations later, Johanns' fellow Jesuit in the Belgian Chapter, Richard De Smet, honored Johanns' memory by helping to arrange for the publication of the journal articles in book form.⁴ However, De Smet's interpretation of the Vedāntic schools was rather different: only Śaṅkara's version of the Vedānta was compatible with the Christian theology of Aquinas, while Rāmānuja's version was fatally flawed by his "pantheism," his central doctrine that the universe is the body

of God. The compatibility of Śaṅkara and Aquinas does depend on an understanding of Śaṅkara's teaching that does not require the illusory character (*maya*) of the world. De Smet found this by focusing on what he considered Śaṅkara's genuine writings, as opposed to later works falsely attributed to him, as well as interpretations of his teaching by many of his later disciples. With this view of Śaṅkara different from that of many of his modern followers, De Smet was able to affirm that God is indeed pure consciousness and that this is in agreement with the Thomist Christian doctrine of the Divine "simplicity."

Some recent and current Roman Catholic scholars of Hindu thought and ascetic practice have followed De Smet or Johanns, emphasizing the positive connections in doctrine and/or ways of meditation between Vedanta and Christian spirituality. This was also true of the late Jacques Dupuis, who spent much of his life teaching in India. His last two books were concerned with the modern development of Roman Catholic doctrine concerning all other religions. He sidestepped the issue of how Catholic theologians should assess Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja in what seems to me a curious way. About "Advaita Experience and Jesus' Consciousness," he writes, "We shall pause to consider what may be viewed not as the most widespread current of Hindu faith and theology, which, undoubtedly, must be found in bhakti theism, but as the most challenging view for Christian mystics – the advaita experience rooted in the Upanishads and elaborated by the Vedanta theologians." Dupuis seems to be referring to Śaṅkara's interpretation of the advaitic experience and/or to the elaboration of Vedanta by Śaṅkara's successors, but he does not say so. He thus cannot discuss whether Śaṅkara's version of Vedanta is "most challenging" for Roman Catholic Christians.⁵

This issue of the *Journal* shows how a number of scholars have taken up the comparable challenge of Rāmānuja's Vedanta for Christians. In previous writings a number of them have continued the practice of other scholars who have compared Rāmānuja's thought with that of a single Christian theologian.⁶ To these comparisons we can now add those with Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and, implicitly, modern process theologians. Martin Ganeri's recent book provides a link with the previous debate by challenging the previous interpretation of Aquinas that seemed to bring his theology much closer to Śaṅkara than to Rāmānuja.⁷

Ganeri has usefully suggested that Rāmānuja and Aquinas share a common scholastic method, both recognizing the superior truth of Scripture along with the need for rational demonstrations, which are especially necessary when arguing with those who do not accept the authority of Scripture. He summarizes Jose Cabezón's proposal to recognize a "scholasticism" common to different cultures and religious traditions.⁸ The fact that such scholastic thinking is present in Indian Buddhist philosophy does, however, raise the question of whether theistic systems share something more crucial than their method of systematic thinking: a doctrine of God based on authoritative scriptures and the Divine revelation assumed to underlie them. Do we need an expanded view of Rāmānuja's theology in order to undertake such theological comparison?

Expanding the Scholarly Focus

In the early twentieth century Christian scholars generally recognized that Rāmānuja was the leading teacher of one branch of Vaishnavism, but scholarly study was often confined to his commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras*, with most attention given to his effort to refute Śaṅkara, especially in the lengthy

comment on the first sutra. There was also some attention to Rāmānuja's commentary on the Bhagavadgita, but with the exception of Rudolf Otto, Protestant scholars joined more secular interpreters in a non-theological approach. A more expanded and intensive study was heralded by Hans van Buitenen's dissertation on Rāmānuja's Gita Commentary in 1951 and his translation of Rāmānuja's first work, the *Vedarthasangraha*, in 1957. In the previous year two other English translations of the same work appeared in India, authored by Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars.⁹ About this same time another Śrīvaiṣṇava scholar, Agnihotram Rāmānuja Tatacharya, challenged Rāmānuja's authorship of the shorter theological works attributed to him. His view was accepted by my Yale student colleague, Robert Lester.¹⁰ The consequence of this denial of authorship was an interpretation of Rāmānuja's teaching as being sharply different than that of later Śrīvaiṣṇavism. Since I was writing my dissertation on Rāmānuja at this same time, I was drawn into a controversy that I did not have the means to settle. I thought that the liturgical works were genuine and that they were a link between Rāmānuja's philosophical writings and the later positions of his followers. However, I concluded that the judgment of historically minded scholars would depend on further study of the writings of Rāmānuja's immediate followers. A number of these studies have now been done. I believe that they make the genuineness of all of the writings attributed to Rāmānuja even more likely. These studies also illuminate the obscure links between Rāmānuja and the Tamil side of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, which include the poetry of the Alvars, the many commentaries on the poem-cycle of Nammalvar, the *Tiruvaymoli*, and many doctrinal treatises.¹¹

These links between Rāmānuja and the Śrīvaiṣṇava traditions before and after him are important for understanding him, not only as a commentator on the Vedānta and as a systematic thinker, but also as a worshiper in Vaishnava temples and the head of a growing Śrīvaiṣṇava community. The many recent publications on these topics may also be considered a valuable expansion of Rāmānuja studies.

Gopal Gupta's essay in this issue invites us to develop another dimension: comparisons of Christian theology with other theistic schools of Vedānta. There have been modern studies of the various theistic schools, both Vaishnava and Saiva, but we need successors to Pierre Johanns, who almost a hundred years ago tried to link the other Vaishnava interpretations of the Vedānta to the Christian discussion about Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Such a new effort might well require cooperation among a number of scholars, for each version of Vedānta is related to a rich variety of traditions, expressed both in Sanskrit and in various Indian vernaculars, and articulated in distinctive ritual practices. Christians in South India are also drawn to comparative study of different schools of Saivism, especially Saiva Siddhanta in Tamilnadu and Jaffna, and Virasaivism in Karnataka and Andhra.

All these expansions in our study of Rāmānuja face what should be an obvious problem: the limits of a single scholar's capacities. Medicine and the Natural Sciences have realized for some time that there are important research projects far too large and complicated to be undertaken by a single scientist. The Humanities in general have been slow to recognize the same fact. This is certainly the case in both theology and the history of religion. The more we recognize the many important facets of the study of Rāmānuja, the more obvious it should become

that a greatly increased cooperation is required among scholars. This certainly applies to the relation of scholars inside and outside the Śrīvaiṣṇava community.

Opening the Tradition to Outside Inquiry

Behind much of the interest in comparative theology is the hope for an ideal dialogue or colloquy in which all the participants are well informed about the religious positions being discussed. Only rarely is this actually the case. The meeting place of “Indian Philosophy” in modern Indian universities may have hidden the problems, which are somewhat different for Śrīvaiṣṇavas than they are for Christians. Only in modern times have the Vedas and Upanishads, along with other Sanskrit scriptures, both in the original and in translation, been available for all to read. Instruction in these sacred texts has been even more restricted. Many outside his own community know the story about Rāmānuja going up on the temple balcony and shouting out the secrets with which he had just been entrusted.¹² The modern version may be even more “democratic” than earlier ones, but perhaps it is just as important to note how exceptional this behavior was. It did not end “secrets” or the practice of passing these “secrets” on, with great solemnity from one generation to the next, only to qualified disciples.

In modern times, however, Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars have shared their translations and interpretations with many students outside the community. I have received generous help from several of them. Only once has my access to such knowledge been challenged, and this was not because of being a foreigner or a non-Brahmin. While visiting the remarkable shrine of Nammalvar in Bangalore maintained by lower caste Śrīvaiṣṇavas, a monk did object to my studying Nammalvar’s hymns on two grounds: my lack of initiation (ritual

“surrender” or *śaraṇāgati*) and my lack of instruction by a qualified teacher (*ācārya*). Christians have different grounds for excluding outsiders; usually only baptized Christians are allowed to participate in Holy Communion. The Christian scriptures are open to non-Christians because it is hoped that hearing or reading these sacred words might lead to their conversion. Earlier Protestant missionaries in India drew the line at a different point. Many who supported translating the Bible into modern Indian languages and training pastors to preach in those languages firmly believed that “advanced” theological study had to be conducted in English (or in some cases, German).

It is quite remarkable that in India many Protestant theological students, many of whom are of Dalit background, should be required to include some study of “Hinduism” in their seminary curriculum. Anything approaching a dialogue with Hindus, however, is often thwarted by caste differences – or simply by a lack of interest in a subject that seems so irrelevant to their future ministry. Many seminary professors do recognize that Indian Christian theological language includes many terms from Vaishnava and Saiva sources, some of them frequently occurring in Christian hymns.¹³

Such use of Hindu terms is inevitable when scriptures, catechisms, and hymns are in Indian languages. It may have been increased by the frequent participation of Hindu scholars in Protestant Bible translations.¹⁴ Ever since the first translations Christians have debated which words should be used for key Christian names and concepts, starting with the names for God. For example, Indian Christians differ as to whether *avatāra* is an appropriate designation for Jesus. Reaching a decision is made more difficult by the different

meanings of the term for different Hindu communities. For Śrīvaiṣṇavas, it does not mean the illusory appearance of God in a human (or animal) body but Lord Vishnu's descent to earth in a real body of "pure matter."¹⁵

Outside of South Asia, Christians who want to learn about Rāmānuja or other teachers in a *bhakti* tradition do not already have Hindu words embedded in their theological vocabulary. For the few who are interested, there is much to learn from current discussion among Indian Christians. For those of us who do not think in an Indian language, it is still possible to recognize both important similarities and evident differences between Rāmānuja's teachings and one or more types of Christian theology. Can Christians learn from differences as well as perceived similarities? It could be argued that to learn means to accept something new, something we do not already know or have previously believed. In practice, however, interreligious learning that is less than conversion to the other faith begins with noticing a doctrine, ritual or moral rule that seems similar to something in one's own religion, but not quite the same. Closer acquaintance and further reflection may cause us to modify or enlarge our previous conception. This learning might lead us to move from one past Christian position to another. In Jon Paul Sydnor's case, this might mean a move from classical theism to process theology, perhaps assisted by his earlier comparison of Rāmānuja with Schleiermacher.¹⁶ Martin Ganeri, on the other hand, considers Rāmānuja's view of Divine embodiment more compatible with the theology of Aquinas. Both Sydnor and Ganeri, along with other contributors to this issue, focus on similarities that modify previously emphasized differences in Christian discussions.

A Missed Opportunity in a Previous Encounter

At an early stage in writing my dissertation on Rāmānuja's theology, I went with Prof. M. Yamunacharya of Mysore to meet with scholars at the Śrīvaiṣṇava temple in Melkote, renowned for sheltering Rāmānuja for several years from persecution by the Chola king, a fanatic devotee of Lord Siva. Before signing the guestbook we were shown some signatures from a previous page, 33 years before. The first was that of my host's grandfather, A. Govindacharya, a civil engineer who retired very early, spending the rest of his life translating into English and commenting on Śrīvaiṣṇava texts, many of them written in Manipravalam, the form of Tamil full of Sanskrit words that developed about the time of Rāmānuja. Govindacharya also wrote a book in English on the varieties of mysticism, including Christianity and his own Tengalai Śrīvaiṣṇavism.¹⁷

The next signature was that of Govindacharya's guest, Rudolf Otto, the German Lutheran theologian and Indologist. He wrote under his signature, "When I return to Germany I shall write a book on Rāmānuja." I was thrilled to see his signature and the comment that followed because the book that he wrote two years later, while not mainly about Rāmānuja, was for me as a college freshman, my introduction to Hindu *bhakti*. Hugh Nicholson has introduced this book and some of Otto's other writings in his paper.¹⁸

The first part of Otto's book presents the theistic devotion of Rāmānuja and other Vaishnava teachers as real religion, in contrast to the monistic mysticism of Śaṅkara, which previous European scholars of Indian religion had favored. In contrast, in the second part of the book Otto tries to demonstrate that even this type of Hinduism, the closest to Christianity, has a doctrine of salvation that is

decisively different from that of Christianity; it runs on a different axis.

It was the first part of the book that aroused my interest in Hindu bhakti and in Rāmānuja. I didn't need to learn that even this type of Hindu religion was different from Protestant Christianity, but Otto had convinced me that the two religions were worth comparing.

Much later I thought more about the first signature on the page: A. Govindacharya. Prof. Yamunacharya told me that his grandfather had resigned from Mysore government service as a bridge builder because the Maharaja of Mysore had ordered him to do obeisance to the head of the monastic establishment in the Śaṅkara tradition. He refused because he was a strict follower of Rāmānuja. For the rest of his life we might consider him an intellectual "bridge builder" between Tengalai Śrīvaiṣṇavism and European scholarship. We may presume that this is why he and Otto became acquainted and why he invited Otto to visit him during Otto's trip to India in 1927-28. They may have had extended conversation over several days, or they may have mainly seen the sights together. It is not surprising that there is no record of their "interreligious dialogue", but it is surprising that their writings after they met don't reveal that they learned anything from one another that would have at least given more nuance to each one's understanding of the other's religion, either in doctrine or in personal experience.

This historical speculation is presented, not to criticize these two giants in their fields from whom I have learned so much, but to note a rare opportunity for scholarly and religious exchange that seems to have been missed. In different historical circumstances, what opportunities are we missing? Perhaps it is more important to know that

Govindacharya did take Otto to visit this temple. Could they go further inside together, or were they, like Prof. Yamunacharya and me, content to visit the school room at the temple's edge? Hugh Nicholson's paper suggests possibilities of what some imaginative looking back might mean in going forward.

Refining the Christian inquiry

There are only a few Christian scholars who have had the wide range of competence to be both Indologists and systematic theologians, thus far more Roman Catholics than Protestants. In addition to the practical obstacles to gaining such double competence, there is the division in the potential audience for the scholar's writings, a widening divide, perhaps, in our increasingly secular academy.

There are still many conservative theologians reluctant to concede much of theological interest for Christians in Hindu "philosophy." That situation is changing for the better, not only for Roman Catholic scholars, but also for Protestants. In terms of our particular topic, there is more recognition of similar beliefs and common concerns. There may even be willingness to consider points where Rāmānuja's teachings are close enough to Christian doctrines for Christians to learn, not only from what is similar, but also from what is different.

Christian theologians do formulate various distinct doctrines. Comparing these with somewhat similar doctrines in other religious systems often leads them to find greater similarity with regard to some doctrines than with others. Sometimes a more general distinction is drawn between a knowledge of God the Creator, universally available through sincere piety and intellectually grounded through rational inquiry, on the one hand, and knowledge of God the Redeemer, on the other. The latter is

held to be available only through scriptural revelation, whether individually discerned or interpreted by the Church's teaching office.

Many Christians trying to share the Gospel with those in another culture than their own have had to use some words shaped by other religious traditions. For some theologians, the words for God in any language imply a knowledge of God already present among those to whom the Christian message is addressed, and the beliefs utilizing and explicating those words point to theological similarities that need to be explored. For Christian theologians who emphasize the uniqueness of the saving knowledge in the Gospel, similarities to comparable teachings of other religions are more of a problem than similarities in the acknowledgement of God the Creator. For many conservative Protestants, it is only the truth of the Christian faith as an indivisible whole that counts.¹⁹

The articles in this issue touch on only a few of the many disagreements and unresolved questions. Is Rāmānuja's interpretation of Divine embodiment closer to Aquinas's doctrine of creation or to the process theology differently articulated by Whitehead, Hartshorne and Cobb? What difference does convergence in some doctrines make if the affirmations about incarnation or salvation greatly diverge? Even if Christian and Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars could reach agreement on some points, what difference would that make to the great majority of lay people?

We may hope that such unresolved questions will not prevent Christian scholars from continuing the various lines of inquiry pursued by the contributors to this issue of the *Journal*. It may be easier to agree on certain points of doctrine than to face the implications of choosing between two different and rival religious communities. For

those who find it impossible to answer such hard questions, there may be a middle ground between understanding another religious position and affirming or denying its truth. This is appreciation, the valuing of some practice or vision of reality apart from its truth or even its practical utility. We may think of this as only an aesthetic category, but it may be something more. Do we not admire something in another person, or family, or country that we would not want to adopt for ourselves? If religious belief can be conceived as a series of discrete doctrines, it is easier to agree with one and reject another. But if the beliefs form a seamless whole requiring a total commitment, any alternative cannot be affirmed. It might, however, be appreciated or admired. In the midst of a tradition rich in poetic expression, Rāmānuja appears to have written no poetry, but there are many emotional expressions in his prose, and the later tradition credits him with oral comments on the sacred poem-cycle of Nammalvar, the "Holy Word of Mouth." Frank Clooney has shown how a Christian scholar can appreciate both the poems and the commentaries and can fruitfully compare them with the commentarial tradition on the *Song of Songs*.²⁰

The Śrīvaiṣṇava Estimate of Rāmānuja

We would not be recognizing and even celebrating Rāmānuja's thousandth birthday if the Śrīvaiṣṇava community had not held him in such high esteem. In a paper I contributed to a conference on "Faith and Narrative," I argued that far from lacking a sense of history, India's religious communities have often had a double sense of history.

The first sense of history is cosmic and generally pessimistic: the awareness of the great cycles of cosmic time and their own participation in the worst of the four ages: the age under the demon Kali when human beings are scarcely able any longer

to act rightly and to work toward their liberation from this cosmic [time]. The second sense of history is more paradoxical and more optimistic: the confidence that within their own community of devotees, their God has released them from the imprisonment of this evil age and instituted, or at least set the stage for, the return of the righteous age.²¹

One set of Nammalvar's verses in the *Tiruvaymoli* refers to the end of the present evil age. While the verses seem to describe a present reality, it is not surprising that they were also interpreted as a prediction of the future. The earliest author of a surviving commentary, Pillan, who was Rāmānuja's disciple and cousin, paraphrased the final verse of the set as "The Lord . . . has the nature of graciously changing Kaliyuga to Krtayuga,"²² in Western terms, moving from the Age of Iron to the Age of Gold.

The first ode in praise of Rāmānuja is attributed to Amudanar, considered an immediate disciple. Three of the hundred verses connect Rāmānuja's coming to end the Kaliyuga. One verse reads, "When Rāmānuja appeared in the world, the righteous path became straight, the 'six religions' disintegrated, and cruel Kali died."²³ This sounds like the exaggerated praise often heaped on Indian kings. Indeed, one of Rāmānuja's titles was *Yatiraja*, "King of Ascetics." Such poetic praise is but one of the

ways in which Rāmānuja is treated as a teacher and leader with a special role in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. His own ritual surrender to Lord Vishnu-Narayana brings assurance of his disciples' salvation.

I argue in that article that the hagiographies contain many stories that help us to comprehend Rāmānuja as a historical figure in our modern sense of history. In addition, the extravagant praise of Rāmānuja in the hagiographies, as well as in the poems and commentaries, opens up for us the Śrīvaiṣṇava "sacred history" in which Rāmānuja plays such a central role. Christians might be reminded of the claim in the New Testament that the greatest defeat in secular history leads to the greatest victory in God's own time. If Christians cannot affirm the truth of the claims for Rāmānuja, they should be able to appreciate them and respectfully discuss them with Śrīvaiṣṇavas. They might read together and ponder this first verse of Nammalvar's poetic vision:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!
The persisting curse of life is gone,
the agony of hell is destroyed,
death has no place here.
The force of Kali is destroyed.
Look for yourself!
The followers of the sea-colored Lord
swell over this earth, singing with melody,
dancing and whirling [with joy].
We see them.²⁴

Notes

¹ This essay refers, not only to avowedly Christian interpretations of Rāmānuja, but also to studies by Christians who do not write as systematic theologians, though they have strong theological interests that are expressed in various articles. Among English-speaking scholars I would note two in particular: Julius Lipner and Eric Lott. See especially: Eric J. Lott, *God and the Universe in*

the Vedantic Theology of Rāmānuja: A Study in His Use of the Self-Body Analogy (Madras, India: Rāmānuja Research Society, 1976); Julius Lipner, *The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedantic Theology of Rāmānuja* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

² John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University

Press, 2015). See also Gopal Gupta's essay in this issue.

³ P. Johanns, S.J., *To Christ through the Vedanta* (in two volumes) (Bangalore, United Theological College, 1996).

⁴ De Smet acknowledged his indebtedness to Johanns in an unpublished article, "The Trajectory of my Theological Activity," which he prepared for Bradley J. Malkovsky's Introduction to *New Perspectives on Advaita Vedanta*.

⁵ Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1997), p. 269. With respect to "the Hindu bhakti doctrine of avatara," Dupuis does make a more specific Christian evaluation: "the worship of sacred images can be the sacramental sign in and through which the devotee responds to the offer of divine grace." (p. 303)

⁶ I do not have a complete list, but they range from Bonaventure to John of the Cross, Schleiermacher, Teilhard de Chardin, and Borden Park Bowne.

⁷ Martin Ganeri, *Indian Thought and Western Theism: The Vedanta of Rāmānuja* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁸ *Ibid*, pp.36-46.

⁹ M.R. Rajagopala Ayyangar, *Vedartha Sangraha of Rāmānuja*. Translation with introduction (Chromepet [Madras]: published by the author, Jan. 1956); S.S. Raghavachar, *Vedartha-Sangraha of Sri Rāmānujacarya*. Text and translation (Mysore: Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, 1956, 2nd ed. 1968).

¹⁰ Robert Lester, *Rāmānuja on the Yoga*, Adyar Library Series 106 (Madras, India: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1976).

¹¹ Vasudha Narayanan has written an illuminating overview of the early Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition up through three of Rāmānuja's immediate disciples in *The Way and the Goal: Expressions of Devotion in the early Sri Vaishnava Tradition* (Washington, D.C. Institute for Vaishnava Studies and Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions, 1987). A fuller study of the theology in the poems of Rāmānuja's "secretary," Kuresa, and Kuresa's son Parasara Bhattar has been written by Nancy Ann Nayar,

appearing as *Poetry as Theology: The Śrīvaiṣṇava Stotras in the Age of Rāmānuja* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1992). Among the many recent studies of the tradition after Rāmānuja, Frank Clooney's comparisons of the Tamil hymns of the Alvars and their commentaries with the Christian commentaries on the *Song of Songs* stand out as Christian interpretations. See especially: Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014). Further development of this type of scholarship will need close collaboration between Śrīvaiṣṇava and Christian scholars, as well as contributions from the many scholars now writing without an evident religious commitment. Comparison of forms of worship will be enhanced by field observations and reference to liturgical texts. Cf. the studies of the Pancaratra tradition by Gerhard Oberhammer and his students at the University of Vienna. A unique study focusing on the Vaikuntha Perumal temple in Kanchipuram is the posthumously edited volume of D. Dennis Hudson, *The Body of God: An Emperor's Palace for Krishna in Eighth-Century Kanchipuram* (Oxford: University Press, 2008).

¹² I have discussed this story of Rāmānuja's instruction from Tirukottiyur Nambi (Goshti Purna) in *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974) pp. 39-41.

¹³ Cf. Bror Tiliander, *Christian and Hindu Terminology: A Study in Their Mutual Relations with Special Reference to the Tamil Area* Uppsala: (Almqvist and Wiksell, 1974).

¹⁴ Cf. my article in the *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*, Vol. 4, 1991: "Protestant Bible Translations in India: An Unrecognized Dialogue?", pp. 11-20, <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1041>; and the "Response to De Smet and Carman" by Francis X. Clooney, S.J. and Dennis Hudson, pp. 21-26, <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1042> and <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1043>.

¹⁵ See Chapter 10, "Avatar and Incarnation: Two Conceptions of Divine Condescension," in my *Majesty and Meekness: A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God*

(Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994) pp. 188-212.

¹⁶ Jon Paul Sydnor, *Rāmānuja and Schleiermacher: Toward a Constructive Comparative Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

¹⁷ A. Govindacharya Svamin, *A Metaphysique of Mysticism (Vedically Viewed)* (Mysore, South India, 1923).

¹⁸ Rudolf Otto, *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted*, translated by Frank Hugh Foster (London: Student Christian Movement Press, Oct. 1930). The German original is *Indiens Gnadenreligion und das Christentum: Vergleich und Unterscheidung* (Munich: C.H. Beck'sche Verlag, 1930). In his Foreword to the German edition, written in January 1930, Otto thanks the Maharaja of Mysore, his official host to whom the book is dedicated, and sends special greetings to various scholars and religious leaders, including Govindacharya. Otto begins the Foreword by stating that the book is a revision and expansion of two earlier lecture series, a pastors' conference in Kassel in 1924 and lectures at the University in Uppsala and Oslo in 1926. A Swedish translation of the Uppsala lectures were translated into English in India in 1929, with the title, *Christianity and the Indian Religion of Grace*. Otto writes in the Foreword to the 1930 book that his visit to Mysore gave him the opportunity to deepen his acquaintance with bhakti religion, so that the earlier lectures were enlarged and several appendices were added. The later book is thoroughly rewritten and expanded, but the topics of the four chapters remain the same, as well as the theological movement from unexpected similarity to decisive contrast.

¹⁹ I have discussed these and related issues at the end of the last chapter of *The Theology of Rāmānuja*, pp. 258-71. Rudolf Otto's position is of interest here. He maintains that in principle all human beings are capable of knowing what religion is (apprehending the Holy), but saving knowledge of God's atonement through Christ is only possible in Christian faith. This differentiation is similar to an older Christian distinction between natural knowledge of God the Creator and revealed knowledge of God the Redeemer. Christians in various cultures and theological traditions have differed as to how or whether to build on the first kind of knowledge to reach the second. Mark Heim's approach might seem to reverse the theological process by starting with Christian faith in the Triune God. He explores the possibility for Christians to recognize the important but very different ends of human life emphasized by different religions as encompassed within the reality of the Trinity. See S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 2001).

²⁰ See Note 10 above.

²¹ John B. Carman, "Hagiography and Hindu Historical Consciousness," in *Faith and Narrative*, edited by Keith E. Yandell (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 139-40.

²² Ibid. pp.143-44.

²³ Ibid. p.144.

²⁴ Vasudha Narayanan's translation of *Tiruvaymoli V.2.1* in Carman and Narayanan, *The Tamil Veda: Pillan's Interpretation of the Tiruvaymoli* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989) pp.210-11.