Volume 31 Celebrating Rāmānuja at 1000: The Heritage and Promise of the Study of Rāmānuja in a Christian-Hindu Comparative Theology

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VOLUME 31, 2018

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EDITOR:  
Gopal K. Gupta  
University of Evansville  
Department of Philosophy and Religion  
1800 Lincoln Ave.  
Evansville, IN 47722  
email: journalhcs@gmail.com  
Phone: 812-488-2588

INTERNET EDITION EDITOR:  
Chad Bauman  
Bulter University  
4600 Sunset Avenue  
Indianapolis, IN 46208  
email: cbauman@bulter.edu

Book Review Editor: Katherine C. Zubko, University of North Carolina at Asheville  
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The aim of the journal is to create a worldwide forum for the presentation of Hindu-Christian scholarly studies, book reviews, and news of past and upcoming events. Materials selected for publication will be balanced between historical research and contemporary practice, and, where possible, will employ analytical and theoretical analysis set within the context of our shared contemporary experience. Contributions are invited and may be addressed to the Editor. Articles of roughly 4000 words are preferred, though occasionally longer pieces will be published. Send manuscript in paper form as well as on diskette. A style sheet is available on request. The Journal adopts a policy of non-gender-specific language where applicable. All articles are subject to review before acceptance and may be edited in the course of publication.

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Editor’s Introduction

ŚAṆKARA (788-820) and Rāmānuja (1017-1137) have frequently emerged as the “go-to” thinkers for Christian-Hindu comparative theologians. And in the narrower field of Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparative study, Rāmānuja, the influential south Indian Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindu theologian, has been most popular, both historically and in recent years. In 2017, Vaishnavas around the world celebrated the 1000th birth anniversary of Rāmānuja. This occasion gives us an opportunity to reflect on how Rāmānuja has been studied and drawn into comparative theological study since at least the 19th century. Based on the 2017 American Academy of Religion panel honoring Rāmānuja at his 1000th birth anniversary, this volume of the Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies focuses on the Christian study of Rāmānuja and explores why Rāmānuja has consistently attracted Christian theological attention.

The first paper, “Rudolf Otto’s Encounter with Rāmānuja as Model for Comparative Theology” by Hugh Nicholson, takes up one of the most famous historical instances of the serious Christian study of Rāmānuja, by the great theological and religion scholar, Rudolph Otto. Among his more noteworthy achievements, Rudolf Otto introduced Vaiṣṇava theism, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita in particular, to a broader theological audience. Nicholson argues that despite the well-known shortcomings of Otto’s comparative work, Otto’s encounter with Rāmānuja and Vaisnavism nevertheless anticipates two of the characteristic features of the contemporary practice of Comparative Theology. The first of these is this discipline’s concern with problematizing the often invidious representations of non-Christian traditions that have historically sustained notions of Christian uniqueness. The second is its skillful use of comparison to foreground features of the home tradition that might otherwise escape notice.

The second paper, “Thinking the Creator and Creature Together” by Martin Ganeri, shows how Christian theologians have tended to focus on Rāmānuja’s doctrinal account of God instead of his account of language in general. The paper goes on to develop a theological dialogue between Rāmānuja and the Christian Scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas. Whereas Christian theology has tended generally to avoid language that identifies the world with God as being pantheistic and opposed to the doctrine of creation, an appropriation of Rāmānuja’s account of language encourages the use of such unitive language as a powerful way of expressing the unique relation that is creation.

In the third paper, “Does God Have a Body? Rāmānuja’s Challenge to the Christian Tradition,” Jon Paul Sydnor notes that contemporary Christian theology is pushing the analogy of being into new territory. Social Trinitarians assert that God is tripersonal, united by love. Process theologians assert that God is temporal, flowing with time. Yet the possibility of divine embodiment, within the Godhead itself, has received scant attention. Yet Rāmānuja and his tradition wholeheartedly endorsed divine embodiment, not just by way of positing an incarnation or avatar, but also by seeing embodiment as an ultimate attribute of the divine. As Christian theologians contemplate divine embodiment
today, we may do so more fruitfully with the assistance of Rāmānuja’s developed theological positions.

The fourth paper, “The God of Love and the Love of God: Thinking With Rāmānuja About Grace in Christianity,” by Ankur Barua, examines Rāmānuja’s exegetical-theological struggles with the question as to whether his doctrine that the Lord Visnu-Narayana is the inner controller of the finite self dissolves moral autonomy. That the 1000th year of Rāmānuja is also the 500th anniversary of the Reformation reminds us of one of the most vexed debates in 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. The paper suggests 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.

The fifth paper, “Proper Acts: Rāmānuja and Luther on Works,” by Rakesh Dass, also notes that 2017 offered a reason to celebrate and compare two great theologians, Śrī Rāmānujācārya and Luther. This paper observes that Luther’s commentary on good works resonates with Rāmānuja’s teachings on proper acts in three important ways. First, the idea of merit or reward-inspired actions preoccupied and shaped both Rāmānuja’s and Luther’s respective theologies. Second, their teachings on merit reflect a shared interest in placing the work of a gracious God at the center of soteriology. Third, their occupation with the idea of merit inspired them to differentiate good or proper acts from improper acts. This paper further explains that this convergence is more than an accident. Luther echoes Rāmānuja on works because both theologians faced a common quandary – what should I do to be saved? – to which their responses were shaped by a shared set of theological commitments.

The sixth paper, “Why Rāmānuja? Some Reflections on Christian-Vaiṣṇava Comparative Theology,” by Gopal Gupta, examines the very idea of developing a Christian-Hindu comparative theology by focusing on Rāmānuja in particular. This paper reflects on possible reasons—social, political, theological and philosophical—for Rāmānuja’s central place in Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparative theology. The paper charts moments in Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparison that would have looked different had the comparison been done with Madhva rather than Rāmānuja.

The seventh paper, “Rāmānuja at 1000: The Heritage and Promise of the Study of Rāmānuja in a Christian-Hindu Comparative Theology,” by Francis Clooney, is a response to the essays collected in this issue of the journal, based on the 2017 AAR panel honoring Rāmānuja at his 1000th birth anniversary. The response highlights key features of each essay as giving us insights into the theology of Rāmānuja and his place in the Western study of Hinduism. The response ends with some reflections on the future of Rāmānuja studies, suggesting the agenda before the next generations of scholars.

In the eighth paper, “Expanding and Refining Christian Interpretations of Rāmānuja,” John Carman reflects on the development of scholarship on Rāmānuja in the past century. The paper highlights the Christian contributions to the study of Rāmānuja, and points out unresolved questions and possible lines of inquiry for future comparative studies. The paper reflects on the essays in this issue of the journal, showing ways in which these contemporary
writings relate with the rich history of Rāmānuja studies.

This issue also marks a transition for the Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies. After sixteen years of service, Prof. Bradley Malkovsky has retired from being the Journal’s editor. His untiring service, professional expertise and caring hand as the editor will be sorely missed by the Journal’s editorial board, the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies and the readers of this Journal. This volume features essays by Michelle Voss Roberts and Reid B. Locklin in appreciation for his service and scholarship. As past-editor, Brad continues to offer guidance to the incoming editor, and for this I am very grateful.

Gopal Gupta
University of Evansville
Rudolf Otto’s Encounter with Rāmānuja as a Model for Comparative Theology

Hugh Nicholson
Loyola University of Chicago

ABSTRACT: Among his more noteworthy achievements, Rudolf Otto introduced Vaiṣṇava theism, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita in particular, to a broader theological audience. In this paper, I argue that despite the well-known shortcomings of Otto’s comparative work, in particular, his tendency to essentialize the compared traditions and his presumption of Christian superiority, Otto’s encounter with Rāmānuja and Vaiṣṇavism nevertheless anticipates some of the characteristic features of the contemporary practice of Comparative Theology. The article describes how Otto’s work on Vaiṣṇavism exemplifies two such features of the new Comparative Theology in particular. The first of these is this discipline’s concern with problematizing the often invidious representations of non-Christian traditions that have historically sustained notions of Christian uniqueness. The second is its skillful use of comparison to foreground features of the home tradition that might otherwise escape notice.

As is well known, the German Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto undertook a serious study of Sanskrit and the theological traditions of Hinduism in the second half of his academic career. Arguably his greatest Indological achievement was introducing Vaiṣṇava theism, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita in particular, to a broader theological audience. In this short paper I would like to argue that not only does Otto’s encounter with Rāmānuja and Vaiṣṇavism represent a significant moment in the reception history of Indian religious thought in the West, but it also exemplifies some of the characteristic features of the contemporary practice of Comparative Theology. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, Otto was a comparative theologian avant la lettre.

There are two characteristic features of the new Comparative Theology in particular that I wish to highlight, the first of which is critical, the second constructive. The first of these is the discipline’s concern with problematizing the often invidious representations of non-Christian traditions that have historically sustained notions of Christian uniqueness. The second, more constructive aspect of Comparative Theology is its skillful use of comparison to foreground features of the home tradition that might
otherwise escape notice. I shall discuss each of these in turn with reference to Otto’s encounter with Rāmānuja and the Śrī-Vaiṣṇava tradition.

I.

That the works of Christian missiological and apologetic literature often contain gross misrepresentations of the teachings of non-Christian faiths is well known. And yet the construction of a “projected other” to sustain notions of Christian uniqueness need not rely on gross mischaracterizations of non-Christian teachings. Biases can creep in, even without the theologian being fully aware of them, in the seemingly innocent, and indeed unavoidable, selection of voices within a religious tradition to represent that tradition more broadly. A textbook example of the way in which an act of selection can misrepresent a tradition is the valorization of the Non-dualist Vedānta of Śaṅkara as the epitome of Hindu religious thought in the orientalist construction of Hinduism. For a complex set of reasons, the Advaita Vedānta doctrines of the illusory nature of the phenomenal world and the complete renunciation of action as the path to liberation held particular interest for European students of Indian religion. As critics of “orientalism” have long noted, the notion that these Advaita doctrines somehow represent the putative essence of Hinduism served as a foil for the virtues that were taken to define European culture, virtues such as scientific rationality, a spirit of industriousness, and an active, ethical concern for the welfare of others. Apart from the fact that Śaṅkara’s thought is far more subtle and complex than the world-negating quietism that is commonly attributed to him, it is entirely misleading to use Śaṅkara as an exemplar of the religious thought of India. A perusal of the various works in which Otto introduces Rāmānuja and Vaiṣṇavism to a Christian audience carries a salutary reminder of just how pervasive this misconception of Hinduism was.

Otto dramatizes the challenge Rāmānuja presents to the orientalist picture of Hinduism in a moving account of his visit with a Vaiṣṇava gosvāmin in Benares. Otto and his English guide are surprised to learn that the gosvāmin maintains that the world is real, not illusory. “But do not the sages of India teach,” the two Europeans object, “that the world is appearance, devoid of essence and truth?” “So teaches Śaṅkara,” replies the gosvāmin, “But Śaṅkara is not ‘the sages of India’.” So obvious is this point to contemporary scholars of Hinduism that we might suspect that Otto exaggerates the shock produced by this discovery for rhetorical effect. Nevertheless his depiction does accurately convey the prevailing conception of Indian religion in the West during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Rāmānuja’s principal significance for Otto was as Śaṅkara’s great adversary, a role no more clearly evident than in the former’s polemical commentary on the opening verse of the Brahma-sūtra. The dispute between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja takes on almost mythic proportions in Otto’s rendering. The two adversaries symbolize the perennial antagonism, reenacted throughout the history of religions, between, on the one hand, an austere, world-denying mysticism centered on an impersonal and incomprehensible Absolute and, on the other, faith in the living, personal God of religious devotion.

As mentioned above, Otto’s achievement in broadening the prevailing conception of Indian religious thought – at least to German speaking audiences – to include a full-fledged devotional theism provides a model for today’s comparative theology. But the kind of challenge exemplified by Otto’s retrieval of
Rāmānuja is only a beginning. Contemporary comparative theologians have extended this critical aspect of Otto’s project by deliberately selecting peripheral and indeed marginalized voices within the compared traditions as a way of proactively unseating hegemonies held in place by the inertia of tradition. As Michelle Voss Roberts eloquently argues, nowhere is this critical task more urgent than in the retrieval of women’s voices in the compared traditions, effectively excluded, even if unintentionally, by a preoccupation with canonical texts.  

II.

Although Rāmānuja is important to Otto as a figure challenging Śaṅkara’s hegemony in the Western conception of Hinduism, Otto’s primary interest lies less in Rāmānuja’s theology per se than in later developments in Rāmānuja’s Śrī-VAiṣṇava tradition that more closely resemble the sola gratia doctrine of Otto’s Protestant faith. In keeping with Rāmānuja’s rejection of Śaṅkara’s doctrine of complete renunciation, Rāmānuja’s concept of bhakti presupposes a continuing commitment to ritual practice or, expressed in Otto’s Protestant idiom, “works.” Out of this integrative concept of bhakti later VAiṣṇava theologians will distill a radical concept of surrender or prapatti, which they will henceforth contrast with what will appear in retrospect as a rather staid and dispassionate concept of bhakti. Otto cannot resist seeing in this radicalization of the concepts of devotion and grace a parallel with Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone. When we widen our focus from Rāmānuja’s authored works to those of the larger VAiṣṇava movement of which he was a part, the second feature of Comparative Theology exemplified by Otto – namely, the use of comparison as a heuristic of theological discovery – comes clearly into view. Otto’s use of comparison as an instrument of theological discernment occurs, perhaps unexpectedly, in the context of his unabashedly apologetic concern with demonstrating the superiority of the Christian religion. A favorite apologetic strategy of Otto’s, found not only in his comparative theological study of VAiṣṇavism, *India’s Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted*, but also in his earlier comparison of Śaṅkara and Meister Eckhart, is to build a case for the superiority of Christianity – somewhat paradoxically -- on the basis of the closest of parallels. Otto’s *India’s Religion of Grace* is based on the striking resemblance between, on the one hand, the characteristically Protestant Christian doctrine of unmerited grace and, on the other, VAiṣṇava theologies of prapatti, particularly the most radical form of the VAiṣṇava doctrine of grace – the way of the cat – propounded by the southern, Tenkalai school of Śrī-VAiṣṇavism. The prapatti concept of VAiṣṇava theology presents a stark challenge to apologetic claims of Christian superiority based on the putative uniqueness of the doctrine of divine grace. And yet, for Otto, the discovery of this parallel does not lead to an abandonment of the apologetic project. Rather, it challenges the Christian apologist to work harder, to discern more precisely how the Christian doctrine of grace differs essentially from that of its Indian counterpart. For Otto, the comparison foregrounds the central place that the concept of holiness or sanctity has in the Christian concept of salvation. Otto does not claim that the concept of holiness, together with its associated concepts of redemption and sin, are absent in Hindu devotionalism. Nor, conversely, does he claim that the controlling idea of Rāmānuja’s Vedānta, namely, the liberation from perishableness through communion with the imperishable, is lacking.
in Christianity. And yet comparison reveals the dominant and characteristic aspect of each form of devotionalism. Otto expresses this idea with his metaphor of the axis around which a physical body – here extended to the notion of a religion as a spiritual formation – turns. Thus the axis of Christianity “is not ātma-siddhi but the idea of the Holy.” The axis metaphor allows Otto acknowledge the presence of shared elements in the various religions while still retaining the apologetical notion of an essential or qualitative difference between them. Put differently, Otto uses the axis metaphor to counter the relativistic notion that the difference between Christianity and Hinduism is simply a matter of the degree of emphasis given to shared elements.

One can certainly take issue with the essentialist presuppositions of Otto’s specific comparative judgments, as well as with his a priori presumption of Christian superiority. And yet, I would argue that his general method – using comparison not only to disabuse Christians of factually untenable claims of Christian uniqueness but also to fine-tune one’s concept of Christian identity – remains valid. One sees this method on display, for example, in the case studies comprising Francis Clooney’s exemplary book, Hindu God, Christian God. The main take-away of Clooney’s study is that there are striking Hindu parallels for theological arguments – for divine embodiment and revelation, for example – that are commonly assumed by Christians to be distinctively, if not uniquely, Christian. And yet, while Clooney’s emphasis clearly falls on the first, critical aspect of Otto’s method, he allows for the possibility of an apologetics, albeit one that is informed and respectful of the religious other, to be taken up on the other side of comparison.

We can appreciate not only Otto’s comparative theological method, but also the spirit of generosity and theological sensitivity that informs his theological judgments if we compare his work with that of scholars even a couple of generations after him. A good example of the latter, taken more or less at random, would be Adam Hohenberger’s theological study of Rāmānuja, Rāmānuja: ein Philosoph indischer Gottesmystik, published in 1960. Hohenberger concludes a more or less descriptive presentation of Rāmānuja’s teachings with a brief assessment of Rāmānuja’s tradition entitled “Rāmānuja in Light of the Gospel.” There one finds a set of traditional, indeed predictable, Christian apologetic judgments. The figure of Visnu, as evident particularly in his incarnation as the treacherous and cunning Kṛsna of the Mahabharata, reveals himself to be nothing more than the product of the human imagination. The wonders attributed to the Hindu deities like Visnu, Hohenberger declares, owe their origins to unbridled human fantasy. In stark contrast, the evangelists who recounted the miracles of Jesus were witnesses to actual historical realities. Hohenberger regards the later Vaiṣṇava doctrine of prapatti to be unduly compromised by the doctrine of rebirth that underlies Hindu soteriology. And seemingly unable to believe that a radical doctrine of grace could be indigenous to India, he countenances Richard Garbe’s dubious hypothesis that Rāmānuja’s doctrine of grace resulted from historical contacts with early Nestorian Christians. Examples like Hohenberger’s support Hans Rollmann’s summary assessment of German language theological scholarship after Otto: “A quick glance at subsequent German scholarship reveals that the comparative theological task did not achieve Otto’s standard again.”
Hugh Nicholson

would hope that things have changed since 1979 when Rollmann wrote these words. Today’s Comparative Theology has certainly surpassed Otto, both in the depth of its engagement with non-Christian traditions as well as in its capacity to question the essentialist presuppositions not only of Christian apologetics but also of earlier forms of Comparative Religion. And yet, in his commitment to the theological value of interreligious comparison and his sensitivity to the religious import of the Hindu traditions he studied, particularly when judged by the standards of his time, Otto set a standard for the contemporary comparative theologian.

Francis X. Clooney, ed. (New York: T and T Clark, 2010), 109-128.


9 Visnu-Narayana, 222-223; India’s Religion of Grace, 15-16.

10 India’s Religion of Grace, 16-18.


12 India’s Religion of Grace, 94 ff.

13 Ibid., 94.

14 Ibid., 93.

15 Ibid., 94.

16 Ibid., 94, 100.

17 Francis X. Clooney, SJ, Hindu God, Christian God (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/0195138546.001.0001 See Clooney’s summary statement (p. 165): “While there may be some beliefs, practices, and creedal formulations justly recognized as unique to particular traditions, almost all of what counts as theological thinking is shared across religious boundaries.”

18 Ibid., 11.


20 Ibid., 145.

21 Ibid., 147-148.

‘Thinking the Creator and Creature Together’: How Rāmānuja’s Account of Scriptural Meaning Encourages Unitive Language in Christian Discourse about God and the World

Martin Ganeri OP
Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford

ABSTRACT: The interest shown by Christian theologians in the work of Rāmānuja has tended to focus on his doctrinal account of God and his embodiment cosmology. This paper explores instead Rāmānuja’s account of language in general and then those Vedāntic texts that grammatically identify the world with the ultimate reality, Brahman. It shows how Rāmānuja is able to affirm the primary meaning of these texts, but in such a way as to express the complete contingency of the world on the ultimate reality as well as their distinction. The paper goes on to develop a theological dialogue between Rāmānuja and the Christian Scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas. Whereas Christian theology has tended generally to avoid language that identifies the world with God as being pantheistic and opposed to the doctrine of creation, an appropriation of Rāmānuja’s account of language encourages the use of such unitive language as a powerful way of expressing the unique relation that is creation.

Introduction
At the heart of Rāmānuja’s theology is his exegesis of the Vedāntic scriptural texts. In support of his exegesis Rāmānuja advances a number of arguments about how language works both in general and in the theological context. And he puts forward a distinctive account of the semantic relation between language and the reality of entities in the world, including the nature of their relationship with the ultimate reality, Brahman. A central application of this is in his account of those scriptural texts that grammatically identify the world with Brahman. For Rāmānuja such statements can be taken at their primary meaning without denying that the world is distinct from Brahman and that it exists as a reality wholly dependent on Brahman, as the body of Brahman. It is his account of language that enables him to resolve the apparent contradiction that this involves. For such identity statements, taken straightforwardly,
imply that Brahman and the world form a substantial unity, i.e. that they have a metaphysical identity. Yet, Rāmānuja’s cosmological account denies such a substantial unity.¹

Christian theological engagement with Rāmānuja has tended to give more attention to his cosmology as a resource for the creative enrichment of Christian theology.² However, his account of language is also very interesting and in this article I would like to argue that Christian theology might also embrace and appropriate his account of identity statements as a resource for expressing the unique relationship that is creation.³ Christian theology has generally shunned such identity statements on the basis that they do imply a pantheistic relationship, a substantial unity, one that is alien to Christian understanding of the relationship between God and the world. Engagement with Rāmānuja’s account of language, however, encourages a creative rethinking of Christian accounts of language when it comes to this relationship.

Rāmānuja: language and reality

The presence of sentences in which the world is grammatically identified with Brahman is a striking feature of the Vedāntic scriptures and the question of how to interpret them becomes a major topic in the Vedāntic schools. Of particular concern are those that identify the finite self with Brahman, such as ‘I am Brahman’ (aḥam brahmaṁ, Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10) or ‘That you are, Śvetaketu’ (tat tvam asī śvetaketu, Čāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7ff). For the Advaitic school these are taken as affirming a strict identity between the finite self and Brahman and this then forms the central doctrine within Advaita as a whole. For those Vedāntic schools, such as Rāmānuja’s, that affirm that the world and the finite selves within human beings are distinct from Brahman there is inevitably the question of what meaning to give them, when their primary seem to contradict the distinction being otherwise maintained. Rāmānuja’s general account of language emerges in contexts where he is discussing these texts and serves to give a basis for being able to justify his exegesis of them.

Rāmānuja’s first develops a general account of how to understand sentences where words of the same case are co-ordinated with each other, such as ‘The cloth is red,’ or ‘Devadatta is dark-complexioned, young, reddish-eyed, not poor, not stupid, of irreproachable character.’ (Rāmānuja Śrī Bhāṣya (Ś.Bh.) 1.1.13).⁴ For Rāmānuja it is commonly agreed that what characterises such sentences is that there is the ‘predication to one entity of several words having different reasons for their application.’ (Ś.Bh1.1.13).⁵ There is a single grammatical subject about which a number of predicates are made and these predicates inform us in different ways about the nature of that subject. And in terms of their relation to reality, they refer to single entities in the world and tell us about what kind of entities they are and what they are otherwise like.

Supporting this account is Rāmānuja’s argument that there is a structural correspondence between language and reality, taking the inflected language of Sanskrit as his model. In other words, the differentiation present within Sanskrit words constructed of verbal roots and their affixes, as well as that present in sentences composed of a number of words, reflects real differences in entities themselves. As he puts it:

Language, in particular, is capable only of denoting an entity having distinct attributes, because it takes the form of words and sentences. For a word is the union of a root and an affix. Because of the difference in the meaning of the root and
affix, it cannot but make known a complex object. And the differentiation within a word is linked to differentiation in the object (Ś.Bh. 1.1.1).

A second aspect of Rāmānuja’s account of language is that he asserts that the reality of how entities are determines the meaning of language for us. In the case of the redness of a cloth we know that the redness only exists by virtue of the cloth. The redness inheres in the cloth. This Rāmānuja calls the relationship of a mode (prakāra). For Rāmānuja this means that part of the primary meaning of the word ‘red’ is the cloth, in that part of our understanding of what ‘red’ means is that it refers to the cloth in which it inheres. Thus, for Rāmānuja, a sentence like ‘the cloth is red’ has a double primary meaning; first, its primary meaning is that the cloth is characterised by the colour red and is one entity; second, the meaning is that ‘red’ is a mode of the cloth, referring us to the cloth.

Rāmānuja extends this account to include the relationship between a body and its self and to sentences that talk of bodies and their selves. The relation of a body to its self is a modal relationship, like that of an attribute and the entity in which it inheres, since the body also only exists as dependent on the self. So, any word for a body also refers us to the self within it. This is also part of the primary meaning of the word. Summing up both his account of the meaning of words denoting modes and how it relates to the relationship of bodies to the selves of which they are the bodies, Rāmānuja states:

Because a body is the mode of the self that possesses the body, and because words naming a mode terminate in the mode possessor, words naming a body rightly terminate in the self that possesses the body. For a mode is the part perceived as ‘thus’ in some entity perceived as ‘this is such.’ A word that makes the mode known has its terminus of meaning in the mode possessor, rightly doing so because the understanding of a mode depends on the mode possessor, since the mode depends for its existence on the mode possessor (Ś.Bh. 1.1.13).

Rāmānuja uses this account of language to support his exegesis of those Vedāntic scriptural texts that co-ordinate the world and Brahman, in particular the statement, ‘That you are, Śvetaketu.’ (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7ff). For Rāmānuja the Vedānta texts make known to us that the world, or more precisely each entity within the world, is the body of Brahman, who is its inner self. This is something that is revealed to us, rather than something obvious to us from observation of the world. But once we do know this, then what the language we use for entities in the world means for us changes. Words for entities in the world now also refer us to Brahman as the self on which they depend for their existence, since we now know that they are modes of Brahman (Ś.Bh. 1.1.13 M. 57-60):

Persons untutored in the Vedānta do not see that Brahman is the self of all individuals and types of beings, and they think that the terminus expressed by all [substance] words is only the various types of being [overtly expressed by these words]. But these are in fact only a part of what is expressed. Once they study the Vedānta statements they know that everything is ensouled by Brahman and that all words express Brahman as conditioned by various modes, in that everything is Brahman’s effect and he is their inner controller (Rāmānuja, Vedārtha Saṃgraha para. 21).

The text, ‘That you are, Śvetaketu,’ cannot be taken to mean that the world itself is strictly identical with Brahman, since we know from
revelation that each entity in the world is the body of Brahman, distinct from Brahman, having its own substantial existence, but completely dependent on Brahman for its existence. But, at the same time, the text can still be taken at its primary meaning, because, in the light of revelation, we now see the primary meaning of words for entities in the world refers us to Brahman. Thus, in the sentence, ‘That you are, Śvetaketu, the word ‘you,’ as well as the word, ‘That,’ refer us to Brahman. The grammatical identity within the sentence can be upheld, since both words refer to Brahman. Hence, such statements express in a particularly emphatic way the relationship the world has with Brahman:

In the case of the co-ordinative text, ‘That you are,’ the word ‘that’ makes know the supreme Self who is the maker of the world, who is characterised by all auspicious qualities, whose will is always realised and from whom any suggestion of any taint is rejected and the word, ‘you’ makes known the supreme Self who has as his body the embodied finite self (Ś.Bh. 1.1.13).

### Christian Discourse about God and the World

Turning now to Christian theological engagement with Rāmānuja, I would like first to mention a comment made by the contemporary Christian theologian David Burrell C.S.C. Burrell became familiar with another form of Christian encounter with Vedānta, in the form of the work of twentieth century Catholic Thomist theologians, who brought the Scholastic thought of Thomas Aquinas into a sustained encounter with classical Advaita Vedānta. Two of these theologians, Richard de Smet S.J. and Sara Grant R.S.C.J. argued for a convergence between the account given of the Brahman and Brahman’s relationship with finite reality found in Advaita Vedānta and the account of God and of God’s relationship with the world found in the work of Thomas Aquinas, based on a realist reading of some works of Śaṅkara. In the light of becoming familiar with their work in the form of a set of lectures given by Sarah Grant, Burrell has commented in a number of his writings that Vedāntic non-dualistic language might help us, as he puts it, ‘think creator and creature together.’

Burrell does so in the context of his own detailed examination of Christian Scholastic theology’s use of Islamic thought as Christian Scholastics sought to find an adequate way of expressing the creational relation between God and the world. Both Islamic and Christian thinkers were faced by the inadequacy of the ordinary causal language describing types causation within the world for expressing the unique case of causation that is creation. Creation is the doctrine that the world is produced by God in such as way that the world is distinct from God, but dependent for the entirety of its existence on God at all times. The world is distinct from God, but does not exist separate from God. The world has a substantial existence of its own, but is totally dependent for this existence on God. On the one hand, the ordinary causal language of a human craftsman making other things can be used to express the production of the world by God, but suggests that world is separate from God, since the things made by craftsmen are separate from their maker. On the other hand, the causal language of natural generation or emanation of one entity from another thing does expresses the total dependence of the world on God at all times, but suggests that God and the world are one substance in a pantheistic fashion.

Christian scholastic theologians such as Thomas Aquinas sought to combine both types of causal language, interpreting them in such a way that the disadvantages of both were minimized (e.g. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (S.T.) 1.44-45). For his part, Burrell suggests
that we might find in Vedāntic language a further resource for expressing the creational relationship that helps us express this unique relation, one that complements existing solutions. Following his lead, I want to explore how Rāmānuja’s own account of language and of Vedāntic identity statements can itself serve as a kind of catalyst for using identity language in a Christian context, without any fear that we will end up with a pantheistic account. Following the lead of those earlier Christian theologians who engaged with Advaita Vedānta I will also take Thomas Aquinas as the point of encounter on the Christian side and ask of his theology whether it can accommodate and be enriched by an engagement with Rāmānuja. Since the encounter with Advaita Vedānta was itself based on a realist reading of Advaita Vedānta, this can fittingly be extended to an encounter with the realist form of Vedānta found in Rāmānuja.

Aquinas: language and reality

For his account of language in general Aquinas draws on Aristotle and on Aristotle’s semantic triangle of entities, words and concepts. Here words are said to refer to entities via the concepts of those entities formed in human minds. When we use a sentence like ‘Socrates is a human being and is wise,’ we have a concept in our minds about what a human being is and what wisdom is. The concept is the definition or ratio of what a human being and what wisdom are:

According to the Philosopher (Peri Herm. Lib. 1, l.1, n.2) words are signs of ideas and ideas the likenesses of entities. And so it is evident that words signify entities through the medium of the concept the intellect has [of the entity]. It follows therefore that we can give a name to any entity insofar as we can understand it (S.T. 1.13.1). The ratio that a name signifies is the concept of the intellect about the things signified by the name (S.T. 1.13.4). So, for Aquinas, language relates to the reality of the world through the medium of human thought. This means that words and sentences are dependent on human agreement about what they mean and how they can be used (e.g. Aquinas, In Peri Hermeneias Lib. 1.1.2, n.5).

We noted that Rāmānuja affirms a structural correspondence between language and the reality of entities. Likewise, for Aquinas there is a structural correspondence in the relation between language and finite entities, via the concepts formed about these entities. In a sentence like ‘Socrates is a human being and is wise,’ the ratio or defining concept of what ‘human being’ and ‘wise’ is a mental concept in the human being using this language. But the sentence, ‘Socrates is a human being and is wise’ is said to be a true sentence only if it corresponds to the reality of what Socrates is, since truth, for Aquinas, is the conformity of the mind and entities, as that is expressed in language (S.T. 16.2). Thus, the ratio of ‘human being’ and ‘wise’ is something that can also be said to inhere in the entity itself in the sense that it is the reality of what kind of entity a human being is and what kind of quality being wise is. The different concepts correspond to different aspects of the reality of finite entities.

For Aquinas the exception to this is God, whose existence is entirely simple, that is to say, not characterized by the forms of composition that characterize finite reality. For Aquinas we can use certain words that denote perfections of existence, such as ‘wise,’ of both finite entities and of God and predicate them literally both of finite entities and of God. Yet in so doing we are speaking analogously, since how these words correspond to the
reality of finite entities and God is different. In the case of a finite entity, such as Socrates, his being a human being and his being wise correspond to really different aspects of his existence, but in God there is only the infinite existence that is God and while to say that he is wise does correspond to the reality of his existence, this does not correspond to real differences in his existence (S.T. 1.13. 2,5).

We can already see here certain convergences between Aquinas’ account of language and how it relates to reality and that of Rāmānuja. For Aquinas, when we use a sentence like, ‘Socrates is a human being and is wise’ we name aspects of what kind of entity Socrates is and what he is like and these are aspects that inhere in Socrates. Moreover, the human nature of Socrates and his being wise only exist because they are found in the concrete entity called Socrates. This is what Rāmānuja calls the modal relationship. So, it might also seem natural, after reading Rāmānuja, to extend Aquinas’ account and also say that when we use these words they also refer us to the concrete entity we are talking about. Their primary meaning for us extends to that concrete entity on which they depend for having existence. Moreover, in terms of God and the world, for Aquinas we know in the light both of revelation and human reasoning that the world is created by God. We know that the world has been produced by God and depends on God for its existence at all times. So, we could say that for Aquinas the world has a modal relationship with God, in the wider scope of that term given by Rāmānuja.

Now, if we put these things together, I think we can see how Rāmānuja’s account of identity statements between Brahman and the world can be appropriated creatively and usefully by a Christian theologian using Aquinas’ account both of language and of creation. We noted that for Aquinas words refer to entities via concepts and that human agreement determines what words and sentences mean. In the theological context in which we know that the world is created our understanding of the reality of the world acquires a new depth. And we could agree that the concepts we have about things in the world should reflect this new depth. Hence, what the words themselves mean for us extends to the Creator on whom all the entities we name by these words depend. In this deeper theological context, a word like ‘human being’ would refer immediately to the concrete human being in which human nature inhere, but also to the God on whom the existence of any concrete human being depends. In effect, this is what Rāmānuja himself does. In the light of revelation he expands the concept of what the primary meaning of words for entities in the world is.

Thus, a sentence like ‘Socrates is God’ could be made by a Christian theologian, if it is said that the concept of what ‘Socrates’ includes the meaning that he is created by God. The sentence would mean that Socrates is a human being who depends for his existence on God. It would not mean that Socrates is the same as God, or has a substantial unity with God. We could think creature and creator together and do so in way that upholds both the distinct reality of the creature and the inseparable relation of dependency that are both elements of the doctrine of creation.

For Aquinas words denoting perfections of existence, such as ‘wise,’ can be predicated literally, if analogously, of finite entities and of God because the ratio or defining concept of such terms is not tied to any particular mode of existence. They can characterise both the finite and composite mode of existence found in finite entities and the infinite and simple mode of existence found in God. Yet with words like ‘human being’ the ratio or defining concept is tied to finite reality, to the nature of
created things, since a 'human being' is inherently a finite and composite entity. The Bible often does predicate words that denote finite or created reality of God, but within Aquinas’ understanding of this, such language is inherently metaphorical and expresses ways in which God is similar to created entities (S.T. 1.13. ad.1). For instance, when the Bible calls God a ‘rock’ (Psalm 18:2) or a ‘shepherd’ (Psalm 23:1) it means that God is a secure refuge for human beings to rely on like a rock or is the guide, provider and protector of human beings, like a shepherd. Yet, what underlies both analogous and metaphorical language is the reality that God is the cause of all the aspects of existence found in finite entities. Finite entities such a human being only exist as such because God causes them to be and they can only be wise or good or powerful because God causes them to be such. Thus, a creative use by Christian theologians of identity statements to express the inseparable relationship of dependence between God and the finite entities that make up the created world helps make manifest something that is already present in Aquinas’ wider discussion of how language is used of God.

This creative extension of Aquinas’ account of language accords also with ways in which Aquinas himself interprets sentences in the Bible where human beings are said to share in the divine nature. In terms of creation there are few such texts, but they are not completely absent and have required Christian exegetes to explain how they could be true. Thus in Psalm 82:6 it is said, ‘I said, ‘You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.’ For Aquinas the meaning of this sentence cannot be an affirmation of any strict identity between human beings and God, but rather that human beings have a certain likeness to the divine nature. As he puts it:

This name, ‘God’ is nonetheless communicable [to other entities], not according to its whole signification, but according to some aspect of it through a certain likeness, so that they are called gods, who share in an aspect of divinity through a likeness, according to the text, ‘I said, You are gods.’ (Psalm 82.6) (S.T. 1.13.9). In other words, human beings share in aspects of the nature of God, above all by having intellect and will whereby they can be said to be made in the image of God.

In keeping with this, Aquinas explains the meaning of texts where human beings and God are identified in the order of salvation or of grace, sentences that have led to rich spiritual language of ‘divinization’ within the Christian tradition. Thus, in 2 Peter 1:4, the promise is given that by divine power human beings can ‘become partakers of the divine nature’ (R.S.V translation) or in John 17:21, Christ prays ‘that they be one even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us’ (R.S.V.) For Aquinas these texts do not mean that human beings enter into a substantial unity with God, but rather that there is a certain assimilation to the divine nature through participation in divine grace. It is this operation of divine grace that makes it possible to talk of the deification of human beings:

The gift of grace exceeds every faculty of created nature, since it is nothing other than a certain sharing in the divine nature, which exceeds every other nature.

For it is necessary that only God deifies by communicating a fellowship in the divine nature through a certain participated likeness (S.T. 1-2.112.1). In the first place, this is a metaphorical way of speaking, just as the predication of words that express concept that have an inherently finite or creaturely connotation of God are metaphorical, since the divine nature as such is inherently incompatible with finite reality.
Yet, such language does denote the real assimilation of human beings to the divine nature, insofar as the life of human beings is drawn into a fellowship with the divine nature.

Concluding Remarks

Thus, a further use of identity statements to include the modal dependency advanced by Rāmānuja can creatively extend the account Aquinas already gives. It can provide Christian theologians working with the Thomist or similar theology a resource to ‘think the creator and creature together.’ One final comment can support such a creative appropriation of Rāmānuja’s thought as a natural extension of what Aquinas himself does. Aquinas does have an account of how Christian theology can engage with non-Christian thought. For Aquinas, Christian theology can take from non-Christian thought what he calls ‘likenesses’ (similitudines). A likeness is where something in the natural world or in human thought is taken to resemble something that revelation reveals to us. Christian theology can use such elements of non-Christian thought, be it about the nature of the world, the nature of language, causality and so on in order to make revelation more intelligible. In keeping with this, a Christian theologian could also take the likeness identified in Rāmānuja between ordinary language and language in the theological context as a model for expanding the way Christian theology uses language about creation.

Notes


3 Rāmānuja’s theory of language is given sustained treatment in Liner, J.J. (1986) The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedāntic Theology of Rāmānuja. Albany: State University of New York Press. This article draws on his work and extends it into a comparative theological engagement with Christian thought. In Ganeri, M. (2015, 1) I undertake a wider comparative study of Rāmānuja and Thomas Aquinas and this article is an extension of that comparative study into the particular aspect of way both thinkers give accounts of language in a theological context.


5 Melkoṭe Vol. II, pp. 45, 51: raktaḥ paṭo bhavati, devadetaḥ sāmyo yuvā lohitākṣaḥ adinaḥ akṛpaṇaḥ anvadayaḥ


7 Melkoṭe Vol. II, p.58: śārīrasya śārīrināṃ prati prakāratvāt prakāravācīnāṃ ca śabdāṇāṃ prakārīnayeva paryvāsanāt śārīravācīnāṃ śabdāṇāṃ śārīriparyavāsānaṃ nyāyam. prakāro hi nāma ‘idam ityam’ iti pratiyāmāne vastūni ‘ittham’ iti pratiyāmānāḥ aṃśāḥ, tasya tadavastvapekṣatvena tatpratīteḥ tadapekṣatvāt, tasminneva paryavāsānam yuktamiti, tasya pratipādako pi śāda tasminneva paryavasyati


Thinking the Creator and Creature Together

10 The Teape lectures, which Sara Grant gave in Cambridge in 1989, were subsequently published as Grant, S. R.S.C.J. (2002). Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dual Christian. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, with an introduction by Bradley J. Malkovsky


13 Ratio enim quam significat nomen est conceptio intellectus de re significata per nomen.

14 This account of the two ways in which Aquinas uses ratio and its significance for Aquinas’ theology of language is made by Klima, G. (2012) in ‘Theory of Language’ in B.Davies and E. Stumps (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas, Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195326093.003.0028

15 Est nihilominus communicable hoc nomen Deus, non secundum suam totam significationem, sed secundum aliquid eius, per quondam similitudinem, ut dii dicantur, qui participant aliquid divinum per similitudinem, secundum illud, ego dixi, dix estis.

16 Donum autem gratiae excedit omnem facultatem naturae creaturae, cum nihil aliud sit quam quaedam participatio divinae naturae, quae excedit omnem aliam naturam.

17 Sic enim necesse quod solus Deus deificet, communicando consortium divinae naturae per quondam similitudinis participationem.

18 There is an extended treatment of how Christian theology can use non-Christian thought in Aquinas’ commentary on Boethius’ De Trinitate, Aquinas Super de Trinitate 1.2.3.
Does God Have a Body?
Rāmānuja’s Challenge to the Christian Tradition

Jon Paul Sydnor
Emmanuel College, Boston

ABSTRACT: The Christian tradition’s core theological assertion is the embodiment of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet, even while asserting God’s incarnation in space and time, the tradition has usually denied embodiment unto the Godhead itself. Theologians have based this denial on Jewish iconoclasm, Greek idealism, and inferences from God’s omnipresence, transcendence, and infinity. This speculative essay will argue that Hindu Śrīvaiṣṇava theologian Rāmānuja successfully addresses these concerns. He argues for the embodiment of an omnipresent, transcendent, and infinite personal God. Rāmānuja largely derives his arguments from the Hindu scriptures. Nevertheless, their rational explication and internal coherence render divine embodiment a legitimate theological option for the Christian tradition, whose scriptures present both anthropomorphic and iconoclastic concepts of God. Since Godhead embodiment is ontologically coherent and rationally defensible, Christians must accept or reject it based on axiological grounds, by evaluating the felt consequences of the doctrine in Christian life. For embodied beings, any pastoral theology should commend embodiment within the Godhead.

Hinduism, Christianity, and Godhead Embodiment: Continuing a liberal Christian trajectory toward divine embodiment.

The Christian tradition presumes divine embodiment, founded as it is on the expression of the divine Logos in Jesus Christ (John 1). At the same time, the tradition has usually denied the possibility of Godhead embodiment—the assertion that God in Godself possesses a body. This essay will tentatively, provisionally, and speculatively assert divine embodiment within the Godhead itself. Since creation is an expression of the overflowing love of God, our created condition must be a blessing. Hence, our material existence cannot be inferior to any purely spiritual existence, nor need we subordinate body to soul.

Biblically, Genesis 1.24-27 defines humankind as made in the image of God. The Christian tradition has interpreted this text in many different ways. Athanasius defines the image of God as, at least in part, our ability to

Jon Paul Sydnor is Associate Professor of World Religions at Emmanuel College in Boston, U.S.A, where he chairs the Theology and Religious Studies Department. His academic specialization is interreligious thought. Dr. Sydnor is the author of Ramanuja and Schleiermacher: Toward a Constructive Comparative Theology (2011) and numerous articles. Currently, he is researching fundamental ontologies of relation across multiple traditions. Dr. Sydnor is an ordained Protestant minister and theologian-in-residence at Grace Community Boston where his wife, Rev. Abby Henrich, serves as pastor.
reason. Augustine, basing his interpretation of the image of God on the Trinity, notes that psychologically we are three making a whole—memory, intellect, and will co-operating within one person. More sympathetic to our agenda, Irenaeus insists that the image of God includes every part of a human—soul, spirit, and body. Hence, to invoke the divine image is to integrate all three aspects of our person into one experiential unity. Like Irenaeus, we are now attempting to define the image of God in this-worldly, embodied terms. Defined thus, creation in the image of God invites us to celebrate our condition as personal, local, and sentient beings. Indeed, creation in the image of God allows us to imagine God in Godself as embodied—personal, local, and sentient—although limitless with regard to this universe.

This consideration of divine embodiment continues the trajectory of liberal Christian theology which, over the past several decades, has adopted reforms that celebrate the human condition. For example, most authoritative Christian theologians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, deem God to be impassible: without passions, free of appetites, and incapable of sensation. However, many theologians of late—feminist, womanist, process, open, etc—have reconsidered the doctrine of impassibility, describing it as both unbiblical and patriarchal. As unbiblical, the doctrine ignores numerous biblical texts in which God is interactive, emotional, even conversational (Exodus 33:11). The Bible ascribes qualities to God that imply passibility such as compassion (Exodus 22:27). God even changes the divine mind, when presented with a convincing argument (Numbers 14:13-25, Amos 7:3, 6). As patriarchal, the doctrine of divine impassibility suggests a stoical male ideal who is personally distant and emotionally unavailable. Impassibility celebrates the rugged, lone maverick who thrives outside of community, who is nonexpressive, unemotional, and antisocial. He needs no one.

In response to this diagnosis, certain theologians, such as Thomas J. Oord, have instead argued for the passibility of God—that God feels, and feels deeply. God is sympathetic to human events, responsive to human cries, and personally active in human affairs. God is highly involved, as a full person—thinking, feeling, talking, and changing. This passible concept of God implies rejecting another traditionally ascribed quality of God, that of immutability. This doctrine asserts that God, being perfect, cannot change. The universe cannot affect this perfectly actual God, who transcends the vicissitudes of creatures within creation. However, as noted above, the biblical God changes often. Moreover, if God is a divine person, or a community of divine persons, and not an abstract ideal, then God must be receptive to interpersonal influence. Love demands both openness to reality and vulnerability to community, so steadfast love will produce unceasing change.

The divine mutability suggests, by way of consequence, the divine temporality. God is not atemporal, in some timeless, transcendent state. Instead, God is temporal, participating in time, open to change to the very core of the divine being. To clarify: God as the creator and sustainer of our spacetime cannot be limited to it—God is not restricted to our temporal universe, as it were. But God is open to the succession of feelings, events, and emotions that relationality affords. God is personal and relational, which is to be timeful.

Finally, the doctrine of the social Trinity has received increased attention over the past several decades, led by such theologians as Jurgen Moltmann, Catherine Mowry Lacugna, John D. Zizioulas, and Leonardo Boff. While the concept of God as three persons in
communion has perennial expression within Christianity, concerns regarding tritheism caused the tradition to, at times, emphasize the unity of God over the diversity within God. The theologians above, on the other hand, emphasize interpersonality within the Godhead. In their view, God is three always becoming one, rather than one with three different expressions. The multiplicity of God precedes the unicity of God, not temporally, but ontologically. Without community, without increase-through-relation, God would not be.

To many Christians, these three theological reforms—interpreting God as mutable, temporal, and social—are highly salutary. They re-articulate the biblical assertion that we are made in the image of God—for love, relationship, and community. And they celebrate the human condition as an expression of the divine condition. Now, let us consider how the thought of Rāmānuja might help us to continue along this liberal Christian trajectory and consider divine embodiment, even unto the Godhead. (Please note: what follows is speculative theology. I believe the position taken is worth consideration, but I do not assert that it is true.)

**Cosmic embodiment: The universe as the body of Nārāyaṇa.**

Rāmānuja’s theology offers several modes of divine being. We must distinguish these modes of divine being in order to understand how they cohere. To begin, Rāmānuja proposes a panentheistic, emanationist account of divine embodiment, in which Nārāyaṇa supports and controls the universe of sentient and nonsentient beings. Just as our self controls and supports our body, Nārāyaṇa controls and supports the universe as his body. All souls and bodies, all spirit and matter, derive their being from Nārāyaṇa, as distinct modes of Nārāyaṇa’s self-expression. Nārāyaṇa unifies them through his sustenance and diversifies them with real difference. They are, simultaneously, one and many.

Such panentheism has parallels within the Christian tradition, even as Christianity has usually rejected emanationism. Emanationism is found suspect on several counts. First, in the substantialist wording of the traditional creeds, only Christ is of one substance (homooúsios) with the Father. In order to preserve the uniqueness of Christ, the rest of the universe must be of a different substance from the Father. Since emanationism implies the universal sharing of one divine substance, substantialist christologies preclude emanationism.

If the universe must be of a different substance from the Father and Son, but is not made of pre-existing, recalcitrant matter (as in Plato’s *Timaeus*), then it must have been created from nothingness. In other words, the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation from nothing, results at least partially from substantialist Christology. The universe arose by the will of God, but it does not derive from the very being of God. It derives from elsewhere, from the nihil, which God’s gracious will overcomes through creative speech. So crucial was *creatio ex nihilo* to the integrity of Christian thought that The Fourth Lateran Council declared it dogma in 1215 (Constitution I), and the First Vatican Council of 1869-1870 anathematized all who asserted emanationism (Canon I.3-4).

The liberal Christian theological tradition within which we are speculating has newly celebrated vulnerability, participation, and dynamism as coordinate with love, hence integral to God. Theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher have offered Christologies based on agapic phenomenology rather than substantialist ontology. Since such Christologies do not hinge on a substantialist
distinction between the Creator and creation, we no longer need reject panentheism as Christologically incoherent. Instead of being unified in substance with the Creator, Christ can become the One who is perfectly aware of the universe’s source in creative, divine love. Through this awareness, Christ imbues humanity with the universal, unconditional love that is its rightful inheritance.  

Some process theologians, such as Charles Hartshorne, David Ray Griffin, and Marjorie Suchocki, have objected that classical theism divides the world (matter) from God (spirit), rendering the universe profane. As a correction, they assert the presence of God within the universe through a soul-body analogy similar to Rāmānuja’s. According to these theologians, the soul-body analogy allows us to sense God within the universe, while also acknowledging that God exceeds the universe. The concept articulates our experience of God as both immanent and transcendent. It ascribes the holiness of the universe to a source beyond, thereby celebrating the divinity of all reality, while avoiding pantheism and championing panentheism.

Thus, these Christian theologians offer concepts of the God-world relationship analogous to Rāmānuja’s. God’s creative, sustaining power results in cosmic embodiment. The universe is the body of God, who includes and exceeds the universe, just as we include and exceed our own bodies. 

Personal embodiment: The beautiful, sensible, humanlike form of God.

As we have seen, according to Rāmānuja divinity finds embodiment in the universe. Rāmānuja’s doctrine of divine embodiment could certainly inform Christian panentheism. Indeed, Ankur Barua has magisterially utilized Rāmānuja to buttress Christian concepts of the cosmos as the body of God. However, Rāmānuja makes another move that is more central to our argument for Godhead embodiment. In addition to cosmic divine embodiment, Rāmānuja also advocates personal divine embodiment. In other words, Rāmānuja proposes that God possesses a divine form (divyarūpa)—a sensible, humanlike, embodied expression of divinity that is unconditionally ultimate. Crucially, this divine form is unified with an essential form (svarūpa)—an invisible, omnipresent, transcendent aspect. In Rāmānuja’s theistic tradition, the abstract, essential form of God begins expression in the concrete, personal form of God, just as the concrete, personal form finds it saving completion in the abstract, essential form. Humans need God to be a person who is somewhere and a presence who is everywhere, so God fulfills both needs. Below, I will explicate Rāmānuja’s doctrine of the divyarūpa (concrete, personal form) of God as I note how it addresses traditional Christian objections to Godhead embodiment. Since most of the Christian sources in this essay are systematic theologians, for my explication of Rāmānuja I will primarily rely on the Vedārthasāṅgraha, his most systematic work of theology.

A Constructed Hindu-Christian Dialogue

Christian objections to Godhead embodiment.

Christian objections to embodiment within the Godhead have taken several forms, which we will review below. Before we begin, we must note that Rāmānuja cannot address objections based on Christian scripture. Some Christians interpret the commandment against making graven images (Exodus 20:4) as a declaration of the disembodiment of God. More compellingly, John 4:24a declares: “God is Spirit”. Conversely, other passages suggest the embodiment of God. Genesis 3:8 describes God as walking in the Garden of Eden. Jacob claims to have seen God face to face (Genesis 32.30). In Exodus 33:22, God covers Moses’ face
with the divine hand in order to protect Moses from seeing God. So, even though Rāmānuja cannot refute biblical arguments against Godhead embodiment, these arguments are not themselves conclusive, since the Bible offers multiple attitudes toward embodiment. In order to avoid the quicksand of scriptural polemics, this essay will present theological objections to Godhead embodiment, not scriptural objections. After presenting each theological objection, I will present Rāmānuja’s implicit response to it. Cumulatively, the responses will provide a serviceable introduction to Rāmānuja’s doctrine of divine, personal embodiment.

**Objection: The embodied God is an anthropomorphic projection.**

*If thy predicates are anthropomorphisms, the subject of them is an anthropomorphism too. If love, goodness, personality, &c, are human attributes, so also is the subject which thou presupposest, the existence of God, the belief that there is a God, an anthropomorphism - a presupposition purely human...Thou believest in love as a divine attribute because thou thyself lovest; thou believest that God is a wise, benevolent being because thou knowest nothing better in thyself than benevolence and wisdom; and thou believest that God exists, and that therefore he is a subject...because thou existest, art thyself a subject. (Ludwig Feuerbach)*

The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach most famously asserted that God is a projection of the highest human ideals. Feuerbach himself insisted that he was not an atheist. Nevertheless, his religious humanism has occasionally earned him a place among Paul Ricoeur’s masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. According to Feuerbach, predicates constitute a subject. There is no subject without qualities. Problematically, humans cannot “think” the divine attributes as divine attributes. Due to our limited human epistemological situation, we can only “think” human attributes, then project them onto God. Therefore, God can be no more than a conglomeration of the best human attributes. Theology is epistemologically limited to anthropology. Inevitably, to worship God is to celebrate the best in humankind. Having ascribed the best of our qualities to God, we may then infer the existence of God underlying those qualities. But that is only because we are familiar with our own existence, underlying our own (more mixed) qualities. In the end, the existence of God is but a projection of our own, very human, existence.¹⁹

**Rāmānuja replies: God is not anthropomorphic; humans are theomorphic.**

Rāmānuja’s concept of God maintains a profound tension. Rāmānuja defines God’s svarūpa, the proper form or essence, as infinite, pure, blissful knowledge. This definition is abstract and impersonal, in accord with the early, nontheistic Upaniṣadic tradition. At the same time, Rāmānuja also conceptualizes God as possessing a divyarūpa, or divine form. This divine form has a beautiful, youthful appearance. He is a person with a personal name: Nārāyaṇa. This concept of the divine accords with the highly personal devotion that characterizes Rāmānuja’s own Śrīvaisṇava tradition.

Worried about theological literalism, the Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have traditionally been chary, to varying degrees, of humanlike depictions or conceptions of deity. The academic study of religion has come to categorize such depictions as “anthropomorphic”. But, from the perspective of Rāmānuja, the ascription of
a divine form (divyarūpa) to Nārāyaṇa is not technically anthropomorphic, since human knowledge of Nārāyaṇa’s bodily form is scripturally derived rather than humanly projected. Indeed, Rāmānuja insists on the reality of the divine form based on the authority of scripture, particularly the Brahma Sutras (1.1.21), which claim that Brahman (a more generalized term for the ultimate, personal God) dwells within the Sun. Elsewhere, Rāmānuja cites theistic Upaniṣads that describe Brahman as wearing a saffron-colored garment, having the color of the sun, and being moon-faced. Crucially, Nārāyaṇa’s humanlike form ontologically (not chronologically) precedes and grounds human existence. Therefore, any interpretation of Nārāyaṇa as anthropomorphic is mistaken. Nārāyaṇa is not anthropomorphic; humans are theomorphic.

Objection: Embodiment would diminish God.

[The most ancient philosophers] all posited an infinite first principle of things, as though compelled by truth itself. Yet they did not recognize their own voice. They judged the infinity of the first principle in terms of discrete quantity, following Democritus, who posited infinite atoms as the principles of things, and also Anaxagoras, who posited infinite similar parts as the principles of things. Or they judged infinity in terms of continuous quantity, following those who posited that the first principle of all things was some element or a confused infinite body. But, since it was shown by the effort of later philosophers that there is no infinite body, given that there must be a first principle that is in some way infinite, we conclude that the infinite which is the first principle is neither a body nor a power in a body. (St. Thomas Aquinas)

Embodyment suggests finitude. A body is not infinite, it is finite. A body is not every body, it is some body, so it becomes one among many, an object among objects. This status precludes divinity. God cannot be a supreme being among beings, because then God would be exceeded by being itself. By way of consequence, God must be something more. God must be, at least, the ground of being that sustains all beings. For this reason, Christian theology has generally rejected Godhead embodiment.

Rāmānuja replies: Embodiment and infinitude are compatible; the embodied God remains transcendent.

Writing for his devotional, theistic Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, Rāmānuja seeks to preserve the majestic transcendence of Nārāyaṇa. Some religious traditions assert divine transcendence by adopting apophatic interpretations of God, denying to God all humanly knowable attributes, in an attempt to preserve the wholly other nature of the divine. Śaṅkara and his later Advaitin followers utilized this approach, arguing that Brahman is ultimately nirguna, without qualities, but may be conceptualized as saguna, with qualities, by those less advanced on the path to enlightenment.

Rāmānuja, on the other hand, categorically rejects nirguna, apophatic approaches to understanding God. Yet his saguna, cataphatic approach, which ascribes real qualities to God, risks rendering the divine comprehensible or mundane. If we use language to describe God, and assert that the language is in some way true, then the infinite God may become bound within our finite language. Thus, the transcendence of God would be lost to the linguistic description of God. We seem to be caught in a theological vise: either we can describe God (the cataphatic approach) and render God finite, or
we can leave God a contentless mystery (the apophatic approach) and preserve God’s infinity.

Rāmānuja navigates this Scylla and Charybdis of theology through the practice of transcataphatic theism. That is, he uses language to describe God, and asserts that his language reveals something true about God. But the positive attributes ascribed to God are themselves infinite, as befitting an infinite God. Hence, his approach unites divine transcendence with cataphatic theology—it is transcataphatic. In other words, Rāmānuja’s concept of God has positive content yet exceeds human understanding. Metaphorically, Rāmānuja describes Nārāyaṇa as an ocean of auspicious qualities, possessing excellences beyond comprehension. In this way, Rāmānuja transfers the immensity of the ocean to the person of Nārāyaṇa, leaving him as unfathomable as the depths of the sea.27 The sheer infinity of Nārāyaṇa’s attributes, and Nārāyaṇa’s capacity to bear this infinity of attributes, establishes Nārāyaṇa’s eclipse of all human thought. He is always more than what we have said, so his being remains within sublime mystery. By adopting transcataphatic theism, Rāmānuja preserves the beauty, personality, and transcendence of the divine, yet rejects the impersonal transcendence that characterizes Advaitin apophatic (nirguṇa) transtheism. Nārāyaṇa is a loving divinity rather than an indifferent absolute, a relational personality rather than pure consciousness.

**Objection: Divine embodiment suggests limited locality rather than unlimited omnipresence.**

*On account of His greatness [God] is ranked as the All, and is the Father of the universe. Nor are any parts to be predicated of Him...For the One is indivisible; wherefore also it is infinite,* not considered with reference to inscrutability, but with reference to its being without dimensions, and not having a limit. And therefore it is without form and name. (Clement of Alexandria)28

If an embodied God were everywhere, then those parts constituting God’s body would mix with the parts constituting the universe. God would be divided and jumbled. In order to avoid this confusion, we could assert that God is somewhere, not everywhere. But then God would be limited in space. God would be there instead of here, or here instead of there. As sinners, we could hide from God. As sufferers, we could find ourselves outside God’s grace. But scripture, tradition, reason, and experience all attest that God is uniformly and absolutely present throughout our lives, both in time and space, undiluted and undivided. God is perfectly God, everywhere. Therefore, God cannot be embodied. God must be spirit—indepent, invisible presence.29

Rāmānuja replies: Embodiment and ubiquity are reconciled in Nārāyaṇa.

Rāmānuja provides a coherent account of the embodiment and ubiquity of Nārāyaṇa. In his doctrine of the ātman (the soul; here, the personal soul), Rāmānuja asserts that the ātman is both anus (atomic, localizable) and vibhū (pervasive within the body). Just as a sandalwood object scents a room with the fragrance of sandalwood, so an atomic soul pervades a body with sentience. Similarly, we can conceptualize Nārāyaṇa as anus, localizable within his heavenly abode of Vaikuṇṭha, in the presence of his consort Śrī. At the same time, we can conceptualize Nārāyaṇa as vibhū, pervasive within all that exists as the ground of being. In this way, Nārāyaṇa becomes a person who is somewhere (Nārāyaṇa in Vaikuṇṭha) and a substance that is everywhere (jñāna, or wisdom, as the underlying substrate of reality). In this way,
Rāmānuja unites the strengths of theism and transtheism in one personal, omnipresent deity.  

**Objection:** An omnipresent body would displace all other bodies. 

*How can the principle be maintained, that God permeates and fills all things, as Scripture says, “Do not I fill Heaven and Earth, saith the Lord?” [Jeremiah 23.24]. For it is impossible to permeate and be permeated by others without dividing and being divided, without being blended and contrasted, just as when a number of liquids are mixed together and blended. (St. John of Damascus)*

Two bodies cannot occupy the same space. They displace one another. That’s why billiard balls move other billiard balls and couples sharing a bed fight for territory. If God is omnipresent and has a body, then God would displace all other bodies. Quite simply, no other bodies could exist besides God’s. Therefore, God cannot have a body.

**Rāmānuja replies:** The Śrīvaishnava doctrine of dreaming creation resolves the contest between bodies.

Rāmānuja’s tradition provides a visual reconciliation of the divine embodiedness and omnipresence, in the figure of Viṣṇu dreaming the universe into being. To this image of Viṣṇu Rāmānuja dedicates his *Vedārthasamgraha*: “I offer adoration to Vishnu, the all-pervading Supreme Being, who is the overlord of all sentient and non-sentient entities, who reposes on the primordial Shesa, who is pure and infinite and in whom abound blissful perfections.” In this image, Viṣṇu is in Vaikuṇṭha where he reclines on the cosmic serpent Śeṣa, generating our own universe by the power of his imaginative dreaming. But Viṣṇu’s dreaming is not like our dreaming—it is free, aware, and purposeful, directed by Viṣṇu. It is the means of Viṣṇu’s creation, not an accident of his subconscious. As the occupants of Viṣṇu’s magic, we occupy the mind of God, which pervades our universe even as Viṣṇu resides locally in heaven.

Our own experience of dreaming illustrates the spatial elasticity of embodiment. When we dream, our dreaming body is somewhere. But in our dream, our dreamed body is somewhere else. We are two places at once, as both dreamer and dreamed. All the other bodies in our dream exist, alongside our dreamed body, in spatial relation to our dreamed body, within our dreaming mind. That is, they are spatially related to one another in the dream, but not spatially related to the dreaming mind, being unaware of their invisible sustainer. God, like any dreamer, can be embodied and pervade bodies, just as we are embodied and our mind pervades the bodies within our dream.

*Figure 1: Viṣṇu Dreaming (Credit: Wikicommons)*

**Objection:** Embodiment limits to a place, hence limits our knowledge to a perspective.

*Intellectual knowledge, moreover, is more certain than sensitive knowledge. In nature we find an object for the sense and therefore for the intellect as well. But the order and distinction of powers is according to the order of objects. Therefore, above all sensible things there...*
is something intelligible among things. Now, every body having actual existence is sensible. Therefore, we can find something nobler above all bodies. Hence, if God is a body, He will not be the first and greatest being. (St. Thomas Aquinas)'

Aquinas argues that if God is embodied, then God would be something that we know sensibly rather than intellectually. But sensible knowledge changes; it can be distorted by perspective, lost to memory, influenced by prejudice. Intellectual knowledge, such as mathematical truth, is higher, purer, more universal, and more reliable than sensible knowledge. Hence, God must be something or someone we know intellectually; God must be disembodied like mathematics, not embodied like a landscape (Aquinas, §20, 6).

Rāmānuja is not working within Aquinas’ Platonic hierarchy of being. As we saw above in our section on the cosmic embodiment of Nārāyaṇa, for Rāmānuja both material nature and intellectual truth are fully divine, since both are solely from God. One cannot be ranked over the other, as God cannot be ranked over God (Rāmānuja, §12, 15). For this reason, sensible experience is as true and real as intellectual experience. Both sensibility and intellectuality are gifts of God, sustained by God, and to be trusted—like God.

Related to the objection from locality, the possession of a body suggests limitation to a perspective. If we depend on our senses for knowledge, then our knowledge will be local. But if we rely on our intellect for knowledge, then our knowledge will be universal. Classical theism defines God as omniscient, knowing all things from everywhere. Since embodied beings can only know some things from somewhere, God cannot be embodied. In other words, God’s knowing cannot be limited, subjective, and situated. It must be transcendent, objective, and universal.

Rāmānuja replies: Nārāyaṇa is an embodied person who knows, but Nārāyaṇa is also knowledge itself.

The proper form (svarūpa) of Brahman/Nārāyaṇa, consisting of infinite, pure, blissful knowledge, is not an abstraction that one can solely meditate upon, nor is it a mode of being with which one attempts to achieve identity. In other words, it is not the nirguṇa Brahman of monistic Advaita. In the end, perfectly blissful knowledge is the proper form of Nārāyaṇa, the Supreme Person (Puruṣottamam) and the sole object of Śrīvaishṇava devotion. Of the svarūpa’s attributes, two are defining: knowledge in the form of bliss (ānandarūpajñānam), and opposition to all impurity (malapratyanika). These defining attributes (dharma) are fundamental to all auspicious attributes (kalyāṇaguṇas). Indeed, dharma suggests establishing or supporting, implying that the defining attributes serve as a ground for the auspicious attributes. Nevertheless, even these defining attributes are but attributes (guṇas). They characterize the proper form of Brahman, but are not that proper form (svarūpa). Nārāyaṇa, then, presents with form and without form, and offers all the benefits of Personalist devotion as well as Idealist meditation. According to Rāmānuja, we don’t have to choose. Nārāyaṇa is an ocean of auspicious attributes, even those that our limited logic might define as opposing.

**Objection: Embodiment subordinates God to time.**

Our God did not begin to be in time: He alone is without beginning, and He is the beginning of all things. God is a Spirit, not pervading matter, but the Maker of material spirits; and of the forms that are...
in matter; He is invisible, impalpable, being Himself the Father of both sensible and invisible things. (Tatian the Syrian)"#20

Divine embodiment suggests temporality rather than eternity, timefulness instead of timelessness. As noted above, for classical Christian theologians, God’s perfection—God’s perfect actuality, devoid of any potentiality—precludes change. But a body that does not change, a body outside of time, would be a statue, and a lifeless statue cannot symbolize a living God. The ascription of timelessness to God necessitates the disembodiment of God, or else God becomes frozen.41 (The liberal theological trajectory within which we are speculating is much less suspicious of divine participation in time and/or divine change. Nevertheless, we include this objection and response for the sake of thoroughness.)

Rāmānuja replies: Nārāyaṇa is not subject to time as we know it.

For Rāmānuja, Nārāyaṇa as embodied is also Nārāyaṇa as eternal, transcending our entropic temporality. Hence, divine embodiment, and its connotation of change through relation, need not limit God to time as we know it. Rāmānuja explicitly states that Nārāyaṇa is beyond the changes (parināma) that occur within time (kāla).42 More explicitly, time is dependent upon Nārāyaṇa for its existence, as is all that exists that is not Nārāyaṇa. Therefore, he is not under the dominion of time. Rather, time is under the dominion of Nārāyaṇa. Nārāyaṇa, who is perfectly free of all impurity, does not know decay, or karma, or vice, or suffering, or any of the other negative qualities that pervade our temporal universe.

Since Nārāyaṇa is beyond the changes (parināma) inherent in time, Nārāyaṇa is also beyond the cause and effect experienced within samsāra. So, he is not subject to the reciprocal interactions of everyday existence. Instead, he grounds that cause and effect as the substantial and efficient cause of all that is. He is both the marble and the sculptor, as it were. For this reason, Nārāyaṇa is denoted as the šeṣa (Preserver, Sustainer, Principal) of the šeṣin (Preserved, Sustained, Accessory), or the prakārin (mode-possessor) of the prakāra (mode).

Objection: The incarnation of God in Christ renders Godhead embodiment redundant.

The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for Him Who came to heal and to teach the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it. (Athanasius of Alexandria)44

The Christian tradition asserts the embodiment of God in Jesus of Nazareth. This divine embodiment ratifies creation as the good handiwork of the Creator. Materiality and temporality are the twin blessings of our divinely intended life, a life that God celebrates through participation. Because Christian theology already asserts the divine embodiment in Jesus Christ, we need not assert embodiment within the Godhead itself. Such an assertion provides no added value and creates unnecessary theological problems.

Rāmānuja replies: This-worldly incarnation and heavenly incarnation are both necessary.

Rāmānuja powerfully addresses the above criticism by drawing clear distinctions between human and divine embodiment in relation to time. As noted above, the divine form (divyārūpa) is not subject to the vicissitudes of time (kāla or muhūrta).45 Time,
conceptualized as a substance devoid of guṇas (qualities) and coordinate with prakṛti, does not affect Nārāyaṇa who, even as form, is unchanging. Because Nārāyaṇa is beyond the influence of time, Nārāyaṇa’s divine form is eternal. That is, Nārāyaṇa does not temporarily assume form within time for the benefit of worshippers, nor is Nārāyaṇa’s form a mere illusion created for their devotional meditations. Instead, any temporal manifestation of Nārāyaṇa is a manifestation of the real, eternal form of Nārāyaṇa. The divine form may be individualized specifically for the meditative benefit of devotees, but that individualization remains a projection of the real, eternal form that exists prior to any devotional need.

The form that Nārāyaṇa assumes explicitly for the benefit of the world is the form of the avatāra (descent), earthly manifestations of Viṣṇu that increase his accessibility to earthly devotees and restore the earthly dharma. But the avatāra is not the divine form per se. It is instead a temporal descent of the eternal divine form for expressly temporal purposes. The divine form itself remains in Vaikuṇṭha, the heavenly abode, transcendent of entropic, prakṛtic time as we know it.

**Objection:** Assertion of divine embodiment reduces divinity to materiality.

Matter is in potentiality. But we have shown (I: 2:3) that God is pure act, without any potentiality. Hence it is impossible that God should be composed of matter and form. (St. Thomas Aquinas)

In the classical world, Greco-Roman Idealism—Platonism, Plotinianism, Stoicism, etc.—rejected anthropomorphic gods and their accompanying imagery as illiterate superstition. Fearing that material gods produced materialistic worshipers, they substituted such abstract concepts as the Good, the One, or the Logos for the personal gods of the masses. Articulating Christian faith within Hellenistic culture, Christian intellectual elites frequently endorsed iconoclasm (the rejection of divine imagery), even while the popular tradition remained iconodulic (enthusiastically utilizing divine imagery). The elites suspected that embodiment connoted entanglement with matter. God, as the perfectly actual creator of matter and the natural laws that govern it, could not be limited by or subject to His own potential-laden creation. God must be spirit.

Rāmānuja replies: Nārāyaṇa’s body is not constituted by the same matter that constitutes us.

Nārāyaṇa’s divine form is aprakṛtic, or free of any taint by that profane psychokarmic complex that Śrīvaśīvaṇas call prakṛti. While it has an appearance, it is supersensory and visible only to the inner eye of the mind. This is a body, but it is not a material body. Here, Rāmānuja is influenced by Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.1.8, which he quotes in part and we supply in whole:

Not by sight, not by speech, nor by any other sense; nor by austerities or rites is he grasped.

Rather the partless one is seen by a man, as he meditates, when his being has become pure, through the lucidity of knowledge.

We must note that just as Nārāyaṇa’s body is aprakṛtic it is also free from karma and voluntarily chosen. Jīvas (individual souls), on the other hand, involuntarily receive bodies (human or otherwise) appropriate to their karmic destiny. They then live out their lives within that body subject to the bonds of karma and bound to the pleasures and pains of saṃsāric existence. So, Nārāyaṇa’s aprakṛtic
body is necessarily an *akarmic* body. Nārāyaṇa is embodied because he is omnipotent and has chosen to become embodied.⁵⁵

**Nārāyaṇa’s omnipotence; Nārāyaṇa’s transcendence.**

While reconciling Nārāyaṇa’s role as both material and efficient cause of the universe, Rāmānuja notes that reason cannot restrict the power of God. By mundane standards, material and efficient causality are mutually exclusive—the marble does not carve itself into a statue. But by divine standards material and efficient causality are reconcilable within one entity. Indeed, Nārāyaṇa unites material and efficient causality through the divine omnipotence (*sarvasākṣipti*)—creating, sustaining, and forming the universe and all beings within it.⁵⁶

Throughout Rāmānuja’s arguments above is an underlying conviction that exclusivist logic does not bind Nārāyaṇa. We humans cannot be here and there, located body and omnipresent spirit, but Nārāyaṇa can. For Rāmānuja, Nārāyaṇa is so exalted that the accusation of divine contradiction is incomprehensible. Rational law, created and sustained by Nārāyaṇa, cannot restrict the overflowing grace of Nārāyaṇa, who chooses to be both embodied and omnipresent, *for us*. By way of consequence, we should dismiss the charge of divine contradiction as a human attempt to limit the divine freedom.

God is equally embodied and formless, accessible and transcendent. That is, according to Rāmānuja as he interprets Śrīvaiṣṇava scripture, God is characterized by both form (a located aspect that is somewhere) and formlessness (an omnipresent aspect that is everywhere). Yet, neither of these aspects is subordinate or ancillary to the other. Rather, they are equally real, equally legitimate, and equally proper to Nārāyaṇa. In fact, when introducing the divine, embodied form (*divyarūpa*) in relationship to the divine formlessness (*svarūpa*), Rāmānuja states that it is *tadvad eva*, or “just like that”. Rāmānuja then goes on to state that “this divine form is of Brahman’s essential way of being” [*divyarūpayyān api svaḥāvikam asti*]. In other words, Nārāyaṇa with form is not penultimate to Nārāyaṇa without form; they are two manifestations of one, ultimate unity.⁵⁷

Nārāyaṇa’s beauty attracts, while Nārāyaṇa’s pure, blissful knowledge provides a goal of human spiritual becoming. Nārāyaṇa’s personality begets love, while Nārāyaṇa’s *svarūpa* engenders meditation. The devotee thus seeks both the transcendent (insofar as Nārāyaṇa retains a humanlike form in Vaikuṇṭha), and the immanent (insofar as Nārāyaṇa’s pure, blissful jñāna (wisdom) remains the infinite ground of the finite *jīva’s* [individual soul’s] being). Through worshiping Nārāyaṇa who is in Vaikuṇṭha, the devotee become paradoxically aware of the omnipresence of divinity. Through reception of Nārāyaṇa’s grace, the devotee is purified into his or her true self. According to Rāmānuja, for the devotees of Nārāyaṇa the transcendent is immanent, ecstatic is enstasis, love is wisdom, and beauty is bliss. There is no longer any need to choose between devotion and meditation. All has been reconciled in the divine person, Nārāyaṇa, who offers all manner of salvation.

**Godhead embodiment and the Christian tradition: A metaphor too far?**

Proposing the embodiment of God, unto the Godhead, may draw criticism as an excessive anthropomorphism. Some theologians, insisting that God is wholly other, might complain that embodiment risks too much and brings God too low. Ideally, theological metaphors point to a reality they cannot reach. The metaphors of personhood, vulnerability, and participation may suggest
an involved God, but do not necessitate embodiment. Instead, our critics might argue, the concept of embodiment unnecessarily lowers God into our analogies, reducing the divine to human comprehension and eradicating any sense of mystery.

For these reasons, the Christian theological tradition has generally rejected Godhead embodiment. However, in the thought of Rāmānuja we find a highly sophisticated theology that enthusiastically endorses embodiment. Indeed, Rāmānuja anticipates and responds to Christian theological (not biblical) arguments against embodiment. The rationality of his theology challenges these Christian arguments, even as they derive from the sources and methods of the Hindu Vedānta tradition. Given Rāmānuja’s success in addressing theological arguments against embodiment, constructive theologians must evaluate embodiment on axiological, not ontological, grounds. In other words, we must consider the consequences of the doctrine, its resonance with felt human existence, how it would play out in communitarian life, the ethics it would commend, and the future it would hope for. Below, I will argue (speculatively) for Godhead embodiment in the Christian tradition. These arguments will utilize and adapt the theology of Rāmānuja for the Christian tradition.

**Embodiment fulfills the tripersonal Godhead.**

Recent doctrines of divine vulnerability, affectivity, relationality, and mutability beg completion through divine embodiment. Embodiment dovetails with personality. In the Latin etymology of the word “person,” a “person” was a dramatic mask, that which an actor would “sound through” (*personare*). The mask was a concrete expression of the character’s abstract values, dispositions, and habits—of their personality. Personality suggests relatedness, and relatedness suggests embodiment. Certainly, God’s embodiment differs from our embodiment. Nevertheless, to be truly distinct, to truly experience increase-through-relation, the divine persons would benefit from bodies through which their selves sound. If the Trinitarian Godhead is a tripersonal community of joy, then it requires differentiated centers of identity through which that joy can flow. It requires bodies, because bodies facilitate locatedness and difference, everything that makes relatedness meaningful.

**Idealism is not more sophisticated than personalism.**

In the history of religious interactions, Idealist religions frequently condescend to Personalist religions. In the West, for example, contemplative Platonism, Plotinianism, and Stoicism looked down on popular theism. Likewise, Rāmānuja’s primary opponents were the transtheistic, meditative Advaitins, who prioritized nirguna (attributeless) Brahman over saguna (attributed) Brahman. Indeed, Rāmānuja’s theological vocation was to inspire devotional, Śrīvaiṣṇava Tamils as they confronted meditative, Advaitin elitism.

A powerful Advaitin condemnation of devotional theology may be found in Śaṅkara’s commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*:

*He, one who is not a knower of Brahman, who worships another god, a god different from himself, approaches him in a subordinate position, offering him praises, salutations, sacrifices, presents, devotion, meditation, etc., thinking, “He is one, non-self, different from me, and I am another, qualified for rites, and I must serve him like a debtor”—worships him with such ideas, does not know the truth. He, this ignorant man, has not only the evil of ignorance, but is also like an animal to the gods. As a cow or other animals are utilized through their services such as*
carrying loads or yielding milk, so is this man of use to every one of the gods and others on account of his many services such as the performance of sacrifices. That is to say, he is therefore engaged to do all kinds of services for them.\textsuperscript{58}

Śaṅkara then goes on to assert that these gods, being pleased by the service of their devotees, would not want the devotees to achieve mokṣa (realization, release), since this release would end the devotees’ service toward the gods. Just as a human becomes distressed at losing a valued animal, so the gods become distressed at losing a valued servant. Therefore, the gods attempt to keep many humans in bondage by convincing them of the difference between gods and humans when in fact, all that is, is Brahman.

Advancing his own theistic Śrīvaiṣṇavism, Rāmānuja counters the Advaitins by insisting that Brahman as Nārāyaṇa (the personal name of God) is an ocean of auspicious attributes even as his proper form is pure, blissful knowledge. In this way Rāmānuja reconciles Tamil devotionalism with the Upaniṣadic emphasis on the ultimacy of wisdom (jñāna).

But in achieving this reconciliation, Rāmānuja makes the weighty decision to emphasize Nārāyaṇa’s differentiation over against his unity. This emphasis establishes as real and ultimate all attributes associated with Nārāyaṇa, including those more closely associated with the embodied, highly personal divine form (divyarūpa).

**Pastoral benefits of the both/and God.**

Rāmānuja’s reconciliation of divine transcendence and divine embodiment has important ecclesiastical implications. By adopting and adapting Rāmānuja’s theology, Christians can marry personal attributes to transcendent attributes in a seamless synthesis who is intimately accessible yet utterly majestic. And this marriage need not be forced—form and formlessness are not competing aspects of the divine person; they are complementary qualities that manifest God’s superabundance. Biblically, based on the doctrine of *imago dei* in Genesis One, Christians can propose divine embodiment, confident that they are not projecting human identity onto God, but respecting God’s own gracious creation of humankind in the divine, personal image. Rāmānuja’s triumph can inspire Christians, empowering them to celebrate the human situation through the doctrine of Godhead embodiment.

In the end, the most important fact regarding the *svarūpa* and *divyarūpa* of Nārāyaṇa is the simultaneous existence of each within Rāmānuja’s Śrīvaishṇava tradition. His ascription of two distinct manifestations to one ultimate Nārāyaṇa grants the tradition both spiritual comprehensiveness and cultic elasticity. With regard to spiritual comprehensiveness, in Nārāyaṇa the Śrīvaishṇava devotee finds the Infinite Absolute of Upaniṣadic meditation married to the personal God of Śrīvaishṇava devotionalism. With regard to cultic elasticity, the Śrīvaishṇavas are now justified in practicing both the ecstatic, relational worship of their own saints (the Alvars), as well as the enstatic, nondual meditation suggested by the early Upaniṣads. In other words, the *divyarūpa* and *svarūpa* of Nārāyaṇa represent a synthesis of traditions generally considered exclusive, creating a spacious tradition within which different religious personalities could find a home.

Christians considering Godhead embodiment should experience the idea as opportunity, not threat. We all of us are embodied souls or ensouled bodies. We are both qualified (bearing difference, viṣiṣṭa) and nondual (perfectly unified, advaita). We are viṣiṣṭādvaita, synthesizing spirit and matter.
into diversified, unified experience. To privilege spirit over matter or matter over spirit rejects the interwoven, inseparable nature of reality as God intended it. Out of love, God has joined our souls to bodies, so that spirit might experience differentiation and perspective. This differentiation and perspective grants uniqueness to each member of the community, allowing them to make a singular contribution, rendering their uniqueness vital. Collectively, each individual’s difference helps the group. By opening ourselves up to the vision of all members, we can achieve a dynamic interplay of viewpoints that quickens our knowing. We can know more as individuals uniting than we ever could as individuals separated, or even as one universal mind. To paraphrase Paul, we can know more as an ecclesia (1 Corinthians 12:12-20).

We should not separate what God has joined. God invites us to celebrate our dual nature as perfectly unified, or nondual. Yet, if embodiment is a blessing, then embodiment may not only be from God; it may also be of God. Since embodiment and transcendence are not logically exclusive, we can have both and the synergistic concept of God that they offer. Rāmānuja has shown that reason does not demand the disembodiment of God, and that embodiment does not lower God into the limits of our metaphorical language. Hence, our decision to accept divine embodiment or not is an axiological decision, not an ontological decision. It is plausible, but is it good? According to Rāmānuja, divine embodiment is salvific. If he is right, then our acceptance of divine embodiment will help us to celebrate our own embodiment, and the rich relation to God, others, and the cosmos that this embodiment allows.

Notes


Does God Have a Body? Rāmānuja’s Challenge to the Christian Tradition


33 Rāmānuja, *Vedartha-Samgraha*. Dedication, page 1. Italics added.


36 Rāmānuja. *Vedartha-Samgraha*. Translated by Raghavachar, §6, 6-7.

37 Ibid.


42 Rāmānuja. Vedartha-Samgraha. Translated by Raghavachar, §41, 847.

43 Ibid., §157, 126-127.


47 Ibid., §222, 174-175.

48 Ramanuja, Vedanta-Sutras, transl. by Raghavachar, §162, 130.

49 Ramanuja, Vedartha-Samgraha, transl. by Raghavachar, §3.1.8, 275.

50 Ramanuja, Vedanta-Sutras, transl. by Thibaut. §1.4.10, 117.


53 Rāmānuja. Vedartha-Samgraha. §222, 223, 174-175.


56 Ramanuja, Vedartha-Samgraha, transl. by Raghavachar, §35, 32.

57 Rāmānuja. Vedanta-Sutras. Translated by Thibaut. §1.1.21, 240.


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Jon Paul Sydnor


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

Ankur Barua
Cambridge University

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 Tengalais versus the Vaḍagalais in another. Our purpose in this essay is threefold: first, to highlight Rāmānuja’s attempts to hold together the two
‘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 (antaryāmī) 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 (Kauśitaki 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. 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. 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 Vedārthasamgraha 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 (dadāt) 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 Kaṭha Upaniṣad I, 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 (śaraṇāgati), 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. 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. 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).

Rāmānuja thus presents Visnu as the supremely adorable deity who is the transcendental abode of all supereminent qualities, and who, as the inner controller (antaryāmī) 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.' 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.

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. 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. The eternal God
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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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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 (\textit{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 \textit{karma} he can maintain that the empirical distinctions in each new world-order are a recompense for the non-annihilated \textit{karma}, handed over from the previous ones, of finite beings.\textsuperscript{21}

What, then, might Christian theologians learn through a careful exploration of Rāmānuja’s theological terrain? The doctrine of creation \textit{ex nihilo} is sometimes understood as teaching the world’s temporal origination, which only foregrounds the vexed question: which arrives \textit{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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{22} Such an understanding of creation \textit{ex nihilo} motivates the claim that an \textit{initial} state of the corrupted human will, belonging to a pure nature, is \textit{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 \textit{temporal priority} of grace over freewill (or vice versa), towards a \textit{mystical priority} of grace which ineffably ‘encapsulates’ human agency.\textsuperscript{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. 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.’

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. 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. 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. 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.
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).
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 Šarāṇāgati’, History of Religions 5.2 (1966), pp. 266–82. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1086/462526
Act Properly: Rāmānuja and Luther on Works

Rakesh Peter Dass
Hope College

ABSTRACT: 2017 offered a reason to celebrate and compare two great theologians. In April 2017, Hindus celebrated the 1000th anniversary of Śri Rāmānujācārya. In October, Christians celebrated the 500th anniversary of Luther’s reformation. The occasion to compare was also an opportunity to show that the ideas of Rāmānuja and Luther converge in certain ways. This paper explains that Rāmānuja’s teachings on proper acts prefigure Luther’s commentary on good works. This echo is threefold in nature. First, the idea of merit or reward-inspired actions preoccupied and shaped their respective theologies. Second, their teachings on merit reflect a shared interest in placing the work of a gracious God at the center of soteriology. Third, their occupation with the idea of merit inspired them to differentiate good or proper acts from improper acts. I further explain that this convergence is more than an accident. Rather, Luther echoes Rāmānuja on works because both theologians faced a common quandary – what should I do to be saved? – to which their responses were shaped by a shared set of theological commitments. Both asserted the importance of proper acts or good works even as they exhorted a dependence on God for liberation.

Introduction

2017 marked a milestone with the celebration of two great theologians. In April 2017, Hindus celebrated the 1000th anniversary of Śri Rāmānuja.¹ In October, Christians celebrated the 500th anniversary of Luther’s reformation. In a way, Rāmānuja is to Hindu theology what Luther is to Christian theology. Both teachers brought still-lasting changes and substantial reforms to the dominant theologies of their respective religious traditions. Rāmānuja’s qualification of non-dualism affirmed an appreciation of the reality of things and inspired the development of a work-concerned devotional theology while Luther’s questioning of intermediaries between God and grace reframed Christian notions of salvation and scripture. Both asserted the importance of proper acts or good works even as they exhorted a loving surrender to God.² As I show in this essay, this similarity is more than an accident. Rather, Luther’s arguments on good works echo Rāmānuja’s arguments on proper works because both theologians were faced with a common quandary – what should I do to be saved? – to which their responses were shaped by a shared set of theological commitments.

Dr. Rakesh Peter Dass studies the role of religion in society, and his research and teaching focus on the intersections of religion with business, language, law and politics. Ongoing projects include manuscripts on language and religion in modern India, Hindi Hindu nationalism and Christianity, and the shaping of religious rights in legal rulings by the Supreme Courts in India and the U.S.A. At Hope College, which he joined in 2016, he teaches courses on world religions, the Bhagavad Gita, business and religion, and Hindu-Christian theology.
Differently put, Luther can be considered a Christian Rāmānuja. No work exists that compares Rāmānuja and Luther on works. This paper, and a companion book to follow, address this gap in Hindu and Christian scholarship. While comparative studies of Rāmānuja and Christian sources have addressed topics like grace, the nature of the world, incarnation, philosophy, metaphysics, and absolute dependence, no comparative work has addressed the value of works in the writings of Rāmānuja and Luther.

This essay argues that many of Luther’s arguments on good works are prefigured in Rāmānuja’s teachings on the means to liberation. To the best of my knowledge, a historical line cannot be sketched from Luther to Rāmānuja in real time. Luther was not reading Rāmānuja, talking to modified non-dualists, or pen-palling with sixteenth century Tamil love-poets. Rather, the echo of Rāmānuja’s arguments in Luther’s proposals is better understood as the result of certain shared theological commitments in response to a common question: what is the place of my actions in God’s salvific saga? Luther’s echo of Rāmānuja follows not only in the footsteps of his teacher, Yāmuna, but also remains truthful to the Gītā. About the Gītā’s analysis of actions, Surendranath Dasgupta writes, “Prakṛti, or the collection of the five factors, moves us to work. That being so, no one can renounce all actions.” Or, as Angelika Malinar suggests in her commentary on the Gītā, the teaching of karma yoga counters the idea of giving up social duties and ritual obligations as an alternative path to liberation.

Rāmānuja’s Śrī Bhāṣya and Gītā Bhāṣya exemplify the argument for the performance of dharma. Dharma has been traditionally understood as prescribed conduct, obligatory actions, or duty. It is a performance of acts according to law or what is right. R. C. Zaehner translates dharma in the Gītā as ‘duty’ (see 3:35 and 18:47). So does Swami Ādidevānanda, translator of Rāmānuja’s Gītā Bhāṣya (3:35 and 18:47). When translating 4:7-8, Zaehner and Ādidevānanda interpret dharma as a system of laws. In doing so, they follow in the footsteps of Rāmānuja, who takes dharma to mean duties according to the system of four castes and four stages. Zaehner suggests that Rāmānuja in turn may be taking his cue from Kṛṣṇa’s claim in 4:13 to have been the founder of this system.
Rāmānuja’s argument on duty unfolds in his commentaries in four moves. First, actions are inescapable for an embodied soul, Rāmānuja explains. Second, the soul, in addition to inert Prakṛti, is also an agent of action whose agency comes from God. Third, given the soul’s nature as a complementary agent, it is accountable for its actions; this means the Lord favors those who are virtuous and vice versa. Finally, as we are responsible for our actions, we must be able to distinguish virtuous acts from non-virtuous ones, proper acts from improper ones (more on this below).

Arjuna’s desire to renounce his warrior-duty is not the only challenge Rāmānuja is trying to address. He also seems invested in addressing another challenge: the argument that I am not responsible for my actions and all agency rests solely with nature. In this construction, no actions are good or bad, proper or improper.

In his commentary on the Brahma-Sūtras, Rāmānuja explains that the problem with sāṃkhya is that it cleaves the body from the soul in matters of agency. “When the soul realizes the difference between itself and the Prakṛti, it attains Liberation,” so the Sāṃkhyas claim. For even though the Sāṃkhyas acknowledge the existence of souls, souls are incapable of doing work and all work is done by the gross elements. In response, Rāmānuja argues that scriptural injunctions – to desire Brahman, perform sacrifices, and fulfill sva-dharma – show that the soul is an agent. An intelligent self alone can have desires and inert Prakṛti cannot, he writes in the Śrī Bhāṣya. Hence, scriptures prompt a person who desires certain things to perform certain acts. While scriptures also say that Kṛṣṇa is the antaryāmin or “inner controller” (e.g., see Rāmānuja’s commentary on Gītā 7.7, 9.4, and 18.61), responsibility for the action is not cleaved from the soul. The Lord does not make a person do good or evil but rather acts as an amplifier. The Lord aids the good resolve of virtuous people and gives evildoers great delight in their actions. Since we must act, and are responsible for our actions, the type of our actions must be proper. Given the value of proper acts, Rāmānuja takes the trouble to define what constitute proper acts. In Rāmānuja’s schema, detached actions are proper acts because they (a) are enjoined by scripture, (b) lead to merit, and (c) provide aid for meditation on Brahman. Rāmānuja, then, finds merit in the performance of proper acts.

Merit was a dominant issue for Martin Luther too and shaped his teachings on good works. As Timothy Wengert notes, Luther was trying to promote a “new, down-to-earth piety to all Christians” in response to those who argued that Luther’s position implied that Christians were “free from the obligation to perform any good works at all.” Luther’s purvapakṣa is a religious world occupied with praying, fasting, holy days, almsgiving, acquiring indulgences, pilgrimages, and a host of other recommended or required works.

For a medieval Christian, the development of piety was important. Piety was identified by the performance of Christian virtues (‘you will know a tree by its fruits’). However, failure in piety was a fact of life and so mechanisms for remission from the effects of un-virtuous acts were in place. The sale of indulgences was one such option available to a medieval Christian. Works mattered and remission could be earned. Luther’s response to the argument for merit – that salvation was by faith and not works – posed its own challenge to his listeners and readers. What is to be of a virtuous life? Does it even matter? Should I be virtuous? If so, how? Given that my soul is saved outside the necessity of my acts, how should I live? Luther responds to these concerns.
First, he argues that grace does not negate a virtuous life; this is because the gift of grace does not negate the word of God to do certain things and not do certain things. God has already decreed the performance of actions. Where Rāmānuja pegs the inescapability of actions in embodiment, Luther pegs it in God’s word. Where Rāmānuja plants the fruits of work in the shared agency of the soul, Luther grounds the propriety of acts in the keeping of God’s commandments. God commands and forbids. God has already decreed two types of acts: prescribed ones and proscribed ones. Good works do not save and salvation is an unearned gift. Yet, some acts are prescribed and others are proscribed by God. Recognizing salvation as a gift negates neither this distinction among acts nor the need to act according to this distinction. Rather, scripture tells us we must keep God’s commandments (Matt 19.17). Scripture is, Luther asserts, rather clear about not just the need to keep God’s commandments but also the content of God’s commandments. 

It should be known that, first of all, that no good works exist other than those that God has commanded, just as there is no sin other than what God has forbidden. Whoever wishes to recognize and perform good works need only learn God’s commandments. Accordingly, Christ says in Matt. 19: “If you wish to enter life, keep the commandments.” And when the young man asks in Matt. 19 what he has to do to be saved, Christ holds up to him the Ten Commandments and nothing else. Therefore, we must learn to distinguish among good works from God’s commandments and not from the appearance, magnitude, or quantity of the deeds themselves or from human opinion, laws, or approaches.24

A virtuous life of good works can fulfill the desire to enter eternal life. Good works should be practiced, if the questions is, what am I to do to enter life? Further, scripture does not leave the content of “good works” undefined. Rather, scripture gives us the Ten Commandments that Christ recommended to the young man in Matthew 19 as the sole code of conduct that is prescribed. In making this argument, Luther is following the medieval practice of using the Decalogue as a code of conduct.25 Finally, not all works that seem good are ‘created’ equal. The source of a prescribed action defines its value as a good work. For Luther, God-created works, like the Decalogue, are good and obligated to a Christian precisely due to the fact that these works are commanded by (and so ‘created’ by the word of) the God in whom she places her trust for, and from whom she receives, her salvation. Human-decreed works, like pilgrimages, clerical celibacy, and other secular and ecclesiastical laws that enjoin good works are useful in a secondary sense and can help those Christians who are not voluntarily inclined to keep God’s commandments.

Second, faith in Christ – which Luther describes as the “foremost and noblest good work”26 – motivates a person to act in ways that are pleasing to God. Such a person is confident and peaceful in the knowledge that her actions are pleasing to her God. At issue for Luther is the degree of confidence that a person can have in the value of her acts before God. Only faith in being saved freely gives one confidence to act freely. Without such faith, one is left trying to act better and better never knowing whether all this effort is enough to save the soul. When salvation is free from the weight of right choices, one is free to act simply and boldly in the assurance of salvation.
Should I Act? The Lord Saves

In light of their comparable contexts – where the value and necessity of works were under debate – Rāmānuja and Luther assert that proper acts (Rāmānuja) or good works (Luther) are not optional. To make their respective case, Rāmānuja draws on sāṃkhya ideas on prakṛti and Luther proposes that obedience to God is the outcome of a life thoroughly shaped by faith in the work of Christ. Further, and consequently, since works are not to be considered optional, the proper way to act is to act in ways that are informed by scripture and shaped by grace. The shape of proper acts or good works constitutes the second point of contact between Rāmānuja and Luther.

It seems that the reason why Rāmānuja and Luther can both emphasize proper acts on the one hand and make them devotional in intent rather than salvific in effect on the other hand is a shared instinct about the way in which a person is saved. The comparable forms of their respective theologies of mokṣa (or, mokṣalologies) are best understood as the logical outcome of their shared interest in placing a gracious God at the heart of mokṣa.

Rāmānuja gives high regard to prescribed actions and does not promote their abandonment. He affirms the importance of actions like rituals, sacrifices, oblations, control of breathing, etc. for those seeking ends in the material world.27 “[O]ne should not relinquish one’s works [or duties],” he writes.28 He clarifies that when Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna to abandon all of his duties in order to seek God alone, the lesson is not to relinquish all devotional duties but to relinquish one’s sense of agency and attachments to the fruits of actions.29 Those actions are proper that are done with proper knowledge, which refers to knowledge of the real nature of the self and of its claims to sole agency. Knowledge of this real nature should lead one to act free from the desire for the fruits of such actions. Detached actions allow the self to experience itself as “It really is.”30 Such actions, however, only seem to take you so far. Attainment of Brahman remains an act of grace. As Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna in the Gītā: one who worships Me with his own duty, performed in the proper way, attains Myself by My grace (18:46).

Rāmānuja is insistent that salvation or mokṣa ultimately resides in Kṛṣṇa and is a gift of the Lord’s grace. This is partly because Rāmānuja’s theology seems to reorient the locus of liberation. Where a Vedāntic (and Advaitic) view held that release can be achieved by proper knowledge, Rāmānuja’s theology poses devotion as the means to deliverance. In his construction, the removal of ignorance in a self-aware self is not the form of salvation. Rather, as C. J. Bartley notes, the achievement of salvation is “conceived of as relationship with Viṣṇu.”31 Liberation is open to all whose exclusive goal is Viṣṇu. Extending this argument, Rāmānuja explains, “You will live in Me alone immediately after focusing your mind on Me by forming the conviction that I alone am the supreme object to be attained.”32 A focus on Kṛṣṇa alone does not mean the relinquishing of all duties. Rather, it means the relinquishing “only of the sense of agency and the fruits” of all duties, which are now all to be done in a devotional mode and as such directed toward God who is the source of my release from all obstructions to mokṣa.33 Detached actions, or actions done without regard for their merit but with regard for their obligatory nature, then become the proper way to act in the world.

In similar fashion, Luther suggests: since salvation is through the work of God in Christ, good works are detached from claims of merit that can be viewed as earning justification. A reliance on works can only frighten us, but we
can find comfort in God’s grace. Good works matter. Since not all are inclined to voluntarily to good works, secular and ecclesiastical laws regarding good works serve both as reminders of the importance of good works and catalysis for the performance of good works. Faith does not negate good works. Rather, faith in God for one’s salvation is the source and “master artisan” or “captain” of good works. Faith both shapes good works and directs them (toward God). While a righteous person needs no law, those who are young or immature in faith need these guiderails. Yet, even for a righteous person good works can take her only so far. Good works do not manufacture faith, Luther writes, any more than they earn mercy. Since original sin is by nature innate in all, no amount of good works in themselves can root out the effect of sin, death.

The inability of good works to save from death is a function partly of the source of goodness in works. “Many good works” are contained in the commandments, Luther offers, “but they are not good in and of themselves but only when they are done in faith [that God saves in Christ] and with confidence in divine benevolence [that we are saved without regard for merit].” Faith in Christ gives good works their goodness. Good works draw their goodness from God’s works and words. “Good should not be judged and evaluated,” Luther writes regarding the value of the Sermon on the Mount, “on the basis of our suppositions but on the basis of what God says and pronounces to be good.” Good works draw their goodness from God in two broad senses.

In one sense, faith in Christ shapes works in certain ways. Good works are given content by the work of Christ. We know certain works are good and right because Christ did them in certain ways. The classic examples Luther relies on to explain the content-giving mode of Christ’s work are the recitation of the Lord’s prayer, the performance of baptism and last supper, and the keeping of the ten commandments. Each of these actions was done by Christ in a certain way and as such are to be repeated regularly by Christians. In another sense, how a Christian interprets Christ shapes her understanding of works. Here Luther is speaking of proper interpretations of Christ.

Luther proposes that there are two modes of understanding the life and work of Christ. In the first and common mode, Christ is seen as an exemplar of the types of work recommended to Christians. In this mode, Christ is “an example that is presented ... which you [Christians] should follow and imitate.” This mode of interpretation is a lower way of understanding Christ. The higher mode of understanding Christ is to “accept and recognize him as a gift” and the “chief article and foundation of the gospel” is to recognize Christ as the saving gift before making him an example. Understanding the content of and committing to the performance of good works is a Christ-based activity. The works that are good for Christians are given both their meaning and content by the bimodal interpretation of Christ.

Proper works matter to both Rāmānuja and Luther. Proper works are also rewarding for both teachers. However, proper works matter only to the extent they are grounded in the work of the Lord. Finally, we turn to the third point of contact between their theologies when we ask: how do I act properly? How can I know which work is proper? Differently put, how do I discern among types of acts?

What Should I Do? Works That Matter

Rāmānuja and Luther suggest that those works are to be considered proper and good that are informed by the work of God. Sacred
scripture is the source of this *jñāya*. Scripture reveals that proper works do not accrue merit nor produce liberation. They help humans live a life of true surrender to God in the comfort that God saves. Knowledge of God’s work helps separate proper works from improper ones. Following the Vedās, Rāmānuja distinguishes between three types of duties that are to be considered appropriate and necessary. There are obligatory duties, duties that are occasionally obligatory, and duties performed for desired ends. Karma Yoga, in Rāmānuja’s theology, consists in not relinquishing all these duties but rather in performing them without attachment to their fruits.43

Rāmānuja argues that toward the performance of works or duties one can adopt three types of attitude: the non-performance of work, the cessation of work already begun, and detached actions. Rejecting the first two approaches to the question of whether works are to be performed, he writes that it is only through “actions done without attachment to the fruits and by way of worshipping the Supreme Person” that a person receives liberation.44 Proper works or works done in *bhakti* nurture release or *mokṣa*. The relinquishing of duties creates obstacles to one’s salvation. Rāmānuja writes of the relationship between the performance of duties and the attainment of the Lord:

In this way, the crowning development has been told starting from the disinterested performance of periodical and occasional rites suitable for the various stations and stages of life, which are to be performed to propitiate the Supreme Person. [Further,] even for actions meant for attaining desired objects (*Kāmya-karmas*) the crowning stage is the same as for these described above, provided they too are done not for fulfilling one’s desires but as offerings to propitiate the Supreme Person.45

In similar fashion, Luther distinguishes between ‘necessary’ works and ‘unnecessary’ works. Not all works are good. Faith gives good works their goodness. Further, not all works that are done in faith are necessary. Since it is hard enough to keep the commandments God has enjoined, a Christian should have no need, nor would she have the time, to chase secular and ecclesiastical good works. Luther explains in his conclusion to the treatise on good works, “Since people have their hands full with obeying the commandments God has given, even if they used all their strength and neglected everything else, and still cannot do all these good works, why should people look for other works that are *neither necessary nor commanded and ignore the ones that are*?”46 The source from which good works are so enjoined adjudicates whether a good work is necessary. As a consequence of this logic, proper or good works represent the effect of God’s work (in Christ) on human acts.

In conclusion, we can return to our opening question – what is the place of my actions in God’s salvific saga? – and surmise an answer drawn from the respective theologies of Rāmānuja and Luther. Due to a shared theological claim that *mokṣa* is a gift that shapes the behavior of recipient and seeker alike, surrender to God has a necessary counterpart in the realm of actions: the performance of proper acts, proper as such due to their genesis and grounding in scripture. Grace never unmoors one from obligations because both Rāmānuja and Luther hold that scriptures enjoin certain actions and forbid others. Like the farmer who tends seeds in order to enjoy the best chance for a healthy and fruitful crop, a seeker of grace tends to good deeds (and surrenders her work to God) in order to enjoy union with God.
In conclusion, then, Rāmānuja’s and Luther’s discourses on proper (and, ipso facto, rewarding) acts present us with a shared

**Notes**

1 This date assumes the earlier birthdate ascribed to Rāmānuja by the Śrīvaishnava tradition. On the traditional year of Rāmānuja’s birth, see Tapasyananda, *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta*, 1. Ranjeeta Dutta agrees with this date (Dutta, *From Hagiographies to Biographies*, 12-13). For a different year of birth, see Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja*, 27.

2 John Carman and Vasudha Narayanan have argued for the provenance of prapatti in the authentic works of Rāmānuja (Carman and Narayanan, *The Tamil Veda*, 42. See also Narayanan, *The Way and the Goal*). For the purpose of this paper, however, the provenance of prapatti is a tangential matter. Both the northern and southern schools of the Śrīvaishnava tradition take grace seriously and see it as the primary means of liberation. (On the primacy of ‘divine grace,’ see also Lester, “Rāmānuja and Śrī-Vaishnavism”) That this dependence on the Lord for liberation is not a negation of complementary obligations (regarding one’s proper works or dharma) is also evident in the works unambiguously authored by Rāmānuja. As Carman has succinctly put it, “For neither group does the doctrine of grace lead to an antinomian lifestyle.” (Carman, “Śrī Vaśnavas,” 8728)

3 In 1953, J. Calvin Keene published “Rāmānuja, The Hindu Augustine” in *The Journal of Bible and Religion* (now the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*). I was unaware of Keene’s thesis prior to my own framing of Luther as a Christian Rāmānuja. However, both projects share certain impulses: they show how similar questions have led to similar answers across religious traditions. They identify points of contact between Hindu and Christian theologies. The projects also differ in certain ways. While I focus on the importance of works in the respective mokṣalologies (or soteriologies) of Rāmānuja and Luther, Keene primarily compares Augustine and Rāmānuja on the nature of God, the nature of human, and the relation of God to the world and to humans. refrain: do good works as scripture enjoins; surrender this work to God; receive grace and find liberation.

Keene’s third section on salvation seems to track my commentary on salvation. However, where Keene focuses on the role of God in salvation – the essay ends with the debate between bhakti and prapatti within the northern and southern schools – I have focused on the role of human responsibility and the importance of proper works in salvation.

4 Otto, *India’s Religion of Grace*.

5 Overzee, *The Body Divine*.

6 Tsoukalas, *Kṛṣṇa and Christ* and Dunn, *A. J. Appasamy and his Reading of Rāmānuja*.

7 Prasad, *Rāmānuja and Hegel*.

8 Kumar, *Rāmānuja and Bowne*.

9 Sydnor, *Rāmānuja and Schleiermacher*.


15 Rāmānuja, *Śrī Bhāṣya*, 295 (2.3.41).

16 Ibid., 243 (2.2.1).


18 Rāmānuja, *Śrī Bhāṣya*, 292 (2.3.33).

19 Ibid., 295 (2.3.41).

20 Ibid., 435 (3.4.51).

21 Luther, “Treatise on Good Works” (1520).


23 Ibid., 259.

24 Ibid., 267.

25 See, for instance, Smith, *The Ten Commandments* and Desplenter et al. (eds.), *The Ten Commandments in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*.


27 Rāmānuja, *Gītā Bhāṣya*, 181 (Gītā, 4.31).

28 Ibid., 584 (Gītā, 18.48).

29 Ibid., 598 (Gītā, 18.66).

30 Ibid., 587 (Gītā, 18.53)

31 Bartley, *The Theology of Rāmānuja*, 78, 156.

Ibid., 598-599 (*Gītā*, 18.66).


Ibid., 280.

Ibid., 281-282.

Ibid., 285.

Ibid., 302.

Ibid., 268.

Pelikan, *Luther’s Works* 21: 263.

Luther, “What to Expect,” in Lull, *Basic Theological Writings*, 94.

Ibid., 95.


Ibid., 121 (*Gītā*, 3.4).

Ibid., 589 (*Gītā*, 18.55).


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Why Rāmānuja? Some Reflections on Christian-Vaiṣṇava Comparative Theology

Gopal Gupta
University of Evansville

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.

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. Influenced by Christian critiques, the British-educated Indian

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.

As scholarship broadened to recognize the importance of non-advaitic traditions within Hinduism, Rāmānuja’s Viṣiṣṭādvaita 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 Laksmi and Viṣṇu, presents fewer problems than the Kṛṣṇa-centric traditions. Furthermore, Rāmānuja is the earliest Vaiṣṇava to write a commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra* and, as Martin Ganeri has observed, Vedāntacize, the Vaiṣṇava tradition.

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. 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 texts, and Sheridan argues the same for the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

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 Vaiṣṇava 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.” 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.” 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 Vaishnava 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.

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. 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.” 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.” 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.”

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...” 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, sakti, of God, Bhagavān. Both Bhagavān and his saktis are fully real. Regarding the relationship between them, Bhagavān and his saktis 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 saktis. 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 saktis of all beings are outside the range of reasoned knowledge. Therefore, Brahman’s natural saktis, such as creation, are also such—just like the heat of fire.” 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.”

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 Vaiṣṇava theologians: Rāmānuja, Madhva, and Jīva Gosvami. 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-Madhava 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
3 Ganeri, Martin, Indian Thought and Western Theism: The Vedanta of Rāmānuja (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group), 5. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315731339
7 Ganeri, Indian Thought and Western Theism, 102.
8 Ganeri, Indian Thought and Western Theism, 102.
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.
Rāmānuja at 1000: The Heritage and Promise of the Study of Rāmānuja in a Christian-Hindu Comparative Theology

A Response to the Panel Papers by
Francis X. Clooney, SJ,
Harvard University

ABSTRACT: This brief essay is a response to the essays collected in this issue of the journal, based on the 2017 AAR panel honoring Rāmānuja at his 1000th birth anniversary. The response highlights key features of each essay as giving us insights into the theology of Rāmānuja and his place in the Western study of Hinduism. The response ends with some reflections on the future of Rāmānuja studies, suggesting the agenda before the next generations of scholars.

It was fitting to honor the millennial anniversary of Rāmānuja by a panel cosponsored by the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies and the Comparative Theology Group of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). So much might be said on such an occasion, following old and new approaches to Rāmānuja, and we are lucky to have heard the papers published in this issue of the Journal. Here I can only highlight some particular and interesting points made by our authors.

Hugh Nicholson is ever alert to the explicit and hidden but influential influences, even from the 19th and earlier 20th century, that still influence us today. His paper valuably draws us back into one of the most famous and early uses of Rāmānuja for comparative purposes by way of attention to the example of Rudolph Otto, who figured prominently in Hugh’s first book, Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry. There Hugh investigated why Otto, in Mysticism East and West, was so interested in making use of Śaṅkara in rethinking the mysticism of the West. This time, Nicholson turns to Otto’s work on Rāmānuja, asking why Otto studied Rāmānuja so seriously over time. He notes that Otto presents Rāmānuja as a natural and worthy adversary for Śaṅkara, the Indian theistic alternative to nondualism. As a result, “the

Francis X. Clooney, S.J., joined the Harvard Divinity School faculty in 2005. He is Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology. After earning his doctorate in South Asian languages and civilizations (University of Chicago, 1984), he taught at Boston College for 21 years before coming to Harvard. Clooney is the author of numerous articles and books. He is currently completing Slow Learning in Fast Times: On Reading Six Hindu and Christian Classics and How It Matters, based on the 2017 James W. Richard Lectures at the University of Virginia, and writing shorter essays on the Manual of Daily Worship (Nityam) by the Hindu theologian Ramanuja, and on Constantine Beschi, S.J., a Jesuit missionary in South India in the eighteenth century.
dispute between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja takes on almost mythic proportions in Otto’s rendering. The two adversaries symbolize the perennial antagonism, reenacted throughout the history of religions, between, on the one hand, an austere, world-denying mysticism centered on an impersonal and incomprehensible Absolute and, on the other, faith in the living, personal God of religious devotion.” In this light interest in Rāmānuja makes sense, for the scholar of Hindu theologies, but also for the scholar of the two kinds of mysticism in the West; looking to India, we see these things with a fresh eye.

Otto’s diligent study of Rāmānuja and his school in the end still feeds back into Otto’s own Christian theological agenda, where his prior intentions as a theologian and what he discovers stand in tension: “When we widen our focus from Rāmānuja’s authored works to those of the larger Vaikṣṇāta movement of which he was a part, the second feature of comparative theology exemplified by Otto — namely, the use of comparison as a heuristic of theological discovery — comes clearly into view. Otto’s use of comparison as an instrument of theological discernment occurs, perhaps unexpectedly, in the context of his unabashedly apologetic concern with demonstrating the superiority of the Christian religion.” The apologetic concern may appear to weaken the comparative discernment, but it also fueled Otto’s extraordinary work on Rāmānuja.

John Carman’s “Expanding and Refining Christian Interpretations of Rāmānuja” — a bonus to this issue of the journal, reaching far beyond John’s modest opening remarks at the panel. We are most fortunate to have this thoughtful and comprehensive reflection by the scholar who has, by his Theology of Rāmānuja, done more than anyone to bring Rāmānuja to the attention of modern scholars of Hinduism and comparative theology, myself included. His essay is impressively comprehensive regarding issues related to the Christian reception of Rāmānuja, touching insightfully but in a still broader perspective on many of the points raised in the various essays and even in his response of mine as well. As befits a scholar with such great experience over so many decades, Carman’s essay is also wonderfully autobiographical here and there, for instance regarding his encounter with Professor M. Yamunacharya, grandson of the great Algondavilli Govindacharya, pioneer in bringing Śrīvaishṇavism to the attention of the English-reading audience. Blessed with the longest memory among us — and our enduring link to a fading past — Carman is strikingly among the most hopeful about the possibilities before us as we contemplate the further study of Rāmānuja.

Four of our papers aim at solid theological contributions — Hindu, Christian, and comparative. We can first take note of Jon Paul Sydnor’s paper, perhaps the boldest of the set. Sydnor is diligent in outlining Rāmānuja’s teachings on God’s body, and he makes a strong argument in favor of taking seriously that position simply on its own theological merits, irrespective of its Hindu religious context. He raises the issue of materiality in God (not the Incarnation), and suggests that from Rāmānuja, Christians can learn to accept the idea that God is embodied – even before the Incarnation. He points to the advantages of the distinctive combination of Sanskrit and Tamil sources that characterizes Śrīvaishṇavism, the convincing way in which Rāmānuja develops his ideas, and the overall advantages of Rāmānuja’s view on God’s body: “Since embodiment and transcendence are not logically exclusive, we can have both and the synergistic concept of God that they offer.
Rāmānuja has shown that reason does not demand the disembodiment of God, and that embodiment does not lower God into the limits of our metaphorical language. According to Rāmānuja, divine embodiment is salvific. If he is right, then our acceptance of divine embodiment will help us to celebrate our own embodiment, and the rich relation to God, others, and the cosmos that this embodiment allows. All of this is quite interesting, and it is right to notice and appreciate the remarkable view of God held by Rāmānuja.

More of course must be to be said regarding how and why Rāmānuja’s insights turn out to affect any particular group of Christians and Christian theologians, helping us in a more fruitful relationship to God. Sydnor offers us many clues, but they beg for specification, regarding the kind of body that God and humans have, and the nature of the limitation experienced by God within time. Since Christian theologians have a variety of views on God, time, matter, and creation, it will also be strategically important to engage specific audiences, if the goal is to change the minds of Christian theologians who do not already agree with Rāmānuja.

Three papers explore in a more complete manner both sides of the comparative project, and represent solid instances of Hindu-Christian theological work drawing on Rāmānuja: Rakesh Peter Dass bringing in Martin Luther, Ankur Barua dialoguing with Augustine, Karl Rahner, and Cyril Veliath, while Martin Ganeri reads Rāmānuja with Thomas Aquinas. They write with a subtlety I need not try to summarize, as they delve richly into the theological possibilities so evident in Rāmānuja’s commentarial works, and some comments will help situate what we are learning here.

Inspired by the coincidence of Rāmānuja’s 1000th anniversary with the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Rakesh Peter Dass highlights teachings that resonate strongly between Rāmānuja and Luther: the nature of good and bad actions; the problem of merit; the reason for continued action in light of the necessity and sufficiency of grace. Dass’ intent is clear in his overview near the start of the paper. He is convinced of “prefigurements” grounded in “certain shared theological commitments,” since “many of Luther’s arguments on good works are prefigured in Rāmānuja’s teachings on the means to liberation.” Dass spells this out with admirable clarity: “Luther’s echo of Rāmānuja... is threefold in nature. First, the idea of merit or reward-inspired actions preoccupied their respective theologies. Second, their teachings on merit reflect a shared interest in placing the work of a gracious God at the center of soteriology. Third, their occupation with agency and action led them to differentiate proper acts from inappropriate acts, promoting the former over the latter in the face of questions surrounding the salvific value of good works.”

In the end, Dass is content in noticing this convergence of Rāmānuja’s and Luther’s positions: “Due to a shared theological claim that mokṣa is a gift that shapes the behavior of recipient and seeker alike, surrender to God has a necessary counterpart in the realm of actions: the performance of proper acts, proper as such due to their genesis and grounding in scripture. Grace never unmoors one from obligations because both Rāmānuja and Luther hold that scriptures enjoin certain actions and forbid others... Rāmānuja’s and Luther’s discourses on proper (and, ipso facto, rewarding) acts present us with a shared refrain: do good works as scripture enjoins; surrender this work to God; receive grace and...
find liberation.” Why are there these convergences? Since there is no historical influence connecting the two theologians, “the echo of Rāmānuja’s arguments in Luther’s proposals is better understood as the result of certain shared theological commitments in response to a common question: what is the place of actions in God’s salvific saga?”

Ankur Barua speaks to the related issue of grace and free will, examining how one is to look at the God-human relation in the doctrine of creation, shifting to a deeper metaphysical slant, and from there quickly to a mystical perspective: “However, if the doctrine of creation is instead read as emphasizing the 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.” Barua approvingly cites Cyril Veliath, S.J., 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 …” Probing deeper, Barua highlights deeper commonalities that make such comparisons, however inexact they may be, even possible. He refers also to the observation of Martin Ganeri, OP, that traditions share commonalities that signal their struggle to make sense in words of realities that transcend both word and reason.

Ganeri himself brings to his reading of Rāmānuja deep erudition in his own Dominican tradition and in the works of Thomas Aquinas. In his refined and careful exploration, Ganeri explores the possibility of the divinity – divinization – of the human, worked out by a more acute understanding of the reference of words. While in the past cosmology has occupied center stage, Rāmānuja’s “account of language is also very interesting,” and Christian theologians would do well to “embrace and appropriate his account of identity statements as a resource for expressing the unique relationship that is creation,” and more specifically, the Christian theologian can also “take the likeness identified in Rāmānuja between ordinary language and language in the theological context as a model for expanding the way Christian theology uses language about creation.” This suggestion, perhaps echoing earlier work done by Julius Lipner in The Face of Truth (1986), merits close attention by Christian theologians. Ganeri accordingly does important work in showing us what it will take for a Thomist to learn from Rāmānuja in a substantive way, for the sake of new insights into how Thomas’ own theology works. After elaborating Rāmānuja’s theology of language, he observes that for Aquinas words that name what kind of entity something is – as when the name ‘human being’ names what kind of entity Socrates is – have a double meaning: they name both the nature of the entity and the concrete entity itself. Thus, “human being” names both what kind of entity certain things are and names concrete men or women. Rāmānuja then returns, so to speak, to help elaborate the implications of Aquinas’ position: “Moreover, in terms of God and the world, for Aquinas we know in the light both of revelation and human reasoning that the world is created by God. We know that the world has been produced by God and depends on God for its existence at all times. So, we could say that for Aquinas the world has a modal relationship with God, in the wider scope of that term given by Rāmānuja.” Ganeri concludes rather daringly that “a creative appropriation of Rāmānuja’s thought” is “a natural extension of what Aquinas himself does,” which I take as a complement to both
Aquinas and Rāmānuja, and to the well-read comparativist.

Turning in a different direction, Gopal Gupta invites us to look away from Rāmānuja for good reason, even more Rāmānuja’s sake: Why Rāmānuja, as opposed to other Vedāntins? Gupta is quite right in asking about the other Vedāntins, and it is satisfying to find this last essay helping us to circle back to Nicholson’s paper. Nicholson had showed us that there were specific reasons why Otto turned to Rāmānuja and his Viāśa tradition, in part due to recognizing in Rāmānuja a voice by which to counter Śaṅkara. Gupta is obliquely reminding us that the times keep changing, and previously persuasive constraints are no longer in place. We do no honor to Rāmānuja or to Vedānta by reading either only in the shadow of Śaṅkara. Since the scholarly community now knows much more now about other Viāśa traditions, other choices can be made.

Gupta urges us to see that studying other Vedānta theologians will affect the results of comparative theological exchange. This is because other forms of Vedānta — Madhva’s, Vallabha’s — “offer innovative and distinctive contributions to Viāśa theology, and taking them seriously would till new ground in comparative theology.” Likewise, after reflecting on the issue of creation ex nihilo, Gupta notes that we can see how “a single theological issue — for example, creation ex nihilo as developed by Thomas Aquinas”— brings different results such as “emerge when we compare with three influential Viāśa theologians: Rāmānuja, Madhva, and Jīva Gosvāmī.” Reading Rāmānuja only with Aquinas “highlights and obscures” elements in both their theologies. We miss what might be gained by re-reading them by way of the study of other Vedāntins. Shifting to new vistas, we can listen to Madhva on eternal, dual creation, or Jīva Goswāmi on acintya-bhedābheda, and glean different theological insights. For instance, “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.” This is because “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.”

Of course, it will take time and effort and persuasion to expand the theological and comparative conversation, once the very small set of “go-to masters” is greatly expanded. As traditions break down (or diversify), there will be less and less reason to hold one or another theologian up as the paradigm. This widening of the options creates new possibilities, but may also further fragment theological and Hindu-Christian conversations, if there is no consensus on who we should be studying. We must therefore make sure that our Indological work is kept closely connected to the larger theological agenda Hindus and Christians beneficially share.

If so, a converse question arises: How do Hindu theologians decide which Christian theologians to study in depth, if they study a Christian thinker at all? If we want to shake up and enrich the Hindu-Christian theological conversation in the 21st century, the lead on this might fairly be thought to come from Viāśa scholars, who can do the pioneering work of studying a variety of Christian theologians — not just Augustine or Aquinas,
for instance — so as to draw Christians into new conversations. If a Hindu theologian starts writing about Origen or Bonaventure, Barth or Rahner, for instance, scholars dedicated to the traditions of those thinkers will perk up and pay attention. Here too, the broadening of options will be refreshing, provided we do not give up on the work of finding common ground for our deliberations.

The comparative work proposed by our authors is therefore quite promising. Our authors are continuing a long and honorable tradition in this regard, particularly since they point to specific theological issues and show incrementally how theological progress can be made across religious boundaries.

But some caution too is required. Certainly, we can get far in the study of Rāmānuja, particularly in a Hindu-Christian conversation, by proposing an analogy of scholasticisms that are naturally able to be in conversation with one another. That Rāmānuja can be fruitfully understood as a scholastic thinker is a fine idea, one can I have endorsed often enough in my own writing. But in its strength is also some danger, if Rāmānuja is read only, or even primarily, as a scholastic thinker, author of the two Bhāṣyas and the Vedārthasamgraha. We may inadvertently encase Rāmānuja in a genre inaccessible to us today, so that a loss of interest in scholasticism may lead to a loss of interest in reading Rāmānuja, identified as a quintessential scholastic. As the number of scholars interested in and capable of working through scholastic texts decreases, he may swept along by the same decline, left aside by the growing number of those who opt for the study of lived religion, religion in practice, etc.

But there are resources at our disposal to counter the sidelining of Rāmānuja. He is more than a commentator and systematic theologian, and more richly a person and personality than the Śrībhāṣya and Gitābhāṣya alone can suggest. In the full canon of his writings are fresh resources that can aid us in seeing him more complexly and, I suggest, in a way more in tune with the diversified nature of the study of religion today. This is not to deny the traditional theological and historical questions raised regarding him, but to expand the field of our study.

First, we can attend more closely to his other works, beginning with the three Gadyas, prose prayers of surrender to the Lord, at the temple (Śrīraṅgagadyam), eternally in heaven (Vaikunthagadya), and, it seems, simply in one’s own heart (Śaranāgatigadyam). We should similarly pay attention to his most neglected work, the Nityam, a manual of the daily worship of the advanced devotee.

As Carman notes, more than 50 years ago Robert Lester worked with Agnihotram Rāmānuja Tathachariar in provoking discussion about the “real Rāmānuja,” the Rāmānuja of history. Lester suggested that since the language and theology of the Gadyas differs significantly from what we find in Rāmānuja’s major commentaries, scholars must posit that “Rāmānuja” did not write the Gadyas or the Nityam. Many scholars, traditional and Western (from Carman on) have disagreed with Lester, deciding that his hypothesis ought not outweigh the very long consensus in Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition that the Gadyas and Nityam are in fact by Rāmānuja. In practice, though, few scholars ever turn to the Gadyas or the Nityam to fill out their understanding of Rāmānuja. This is omission that harms our understanding of Rāmānuja the person, thinker, monumental leading figure of a long Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. If we study those works, then we find our way to a more affectively rich and ritually committed Rāmānuja, attentive not just to the theory of karma, but actually to the actual practice of his
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dition. Then we can “rejuvenate our entire study of Rāmānuja, re-reading the scholastic treatises in light of the devotional and ritual works.

Second, we can also mine the store of memories of Rāmānuja in the Tamil tradition which, even if Carman refers to them, remain largely unstudied. In my occasional study of Nampillai’s Iṭṭu, the greatest commentary on Saṭṭakōṇa’s Tiruvāyumoḷi, I have a number of times come across Rāmānuja’s name (emperumāṇār, our revered lord) in the most interesting contexts, with reference to exegeses of particular verses, discussions with his disciples, exemplary acts of piety, applications of his theology to the Tamil context, etc. According to the tabulation in M. A. Venkatakrisnan’s large and invaluable Vāḻyum Vākkum, there are over one hundred references to Rāmānuja – his teachings, his sayings, his readings of āḷvār texts – in the commentaries on the Divya Prabandham. Though hagiographical in tone, these very particular references are also insights into Rāmānuja as a flesh and blood figure of history and tradition. It is be highly improbable that these many particular references could possibly have been invented.

Third, we need also to study more fully Śrīvaīṣṇava writings about Rāmānuja. Of course, there is also the literature in the tradition about Rāmānuja, including texts such as the Divyastiricaritam and the Yatirājavaibhavam, and Vedānta Deśika’s Yatirāja Saptati and Tiruvaranakkattā Amatpār’s Rāmānuja Nṛṇantāti. As an excellent starting point, the works of Vasudha Narayana – the Tamil Veda, with John Carman, but especially the Vernacular Veda and The Way and the Goal – remain pioneering resources that help those of us from outside the tradition to appreciate the living context in which Rāmānuja’s works thrived a millennium ago, and still now. Nor should we neglect more recent Śrīvaīṣṇava writings, even those of a century and more ago: Algondavalli Govindacharya’s The Life of Rāmānījacharya (1906), C. R. Srinivasa Ayyengar’s Life and Teachings of Rāmānuja (1908), and Swami Ramakrishnanda’s Bengali-language life of Life of Śrī Rāmānuja (serialized between 1898 and 1906, revised and translated into English some 50 years later). There is also the remarkable play by Indira Parthasarathy, Rāmānuja: the Life and Ideas of Rāmānuja (2008, English tr.), and also the book’s excellent introductory essay by C. T. Indra, “Hagiography Revisited.” More recently, Ranjeeta Dutta’s From Hagiographies to Biographies: Rāmānuja in Tradition and History (2015) stands out as an excellent contemporary example of the study of Rāmānuja, taking seriously both tradition and history. The controversy between R. Nagaswamy (Rāmānuja: Myth and Reality, 2008) and A. Krishnamachari (Sri Rāmānuja a Reality Not a Myth, 2009) is a refreshing example of the heated debate among Tamil intellectuals, Western scholars at best spectators who can learn much about Rāmānuja by reading both books carefully.

This further contextual work will only complement and enhance the work done in the papers included in this issue of the Journal. We can use this next millennium of Rāmānuja studies to enrich our manner of thinking about him, and thus too ensure that the study of him remains relevant as the fields of theology and the study of religions as these fields continue to evolve, the whole Rāmānuja rediscovered anew in each generation and in the ongoing research and writing of Hindu and Christian scholars working together.
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 Śrīvaishnava 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 Vedanta, with Roman Catholic scholars tending to favor Śaṅkara and Protestant scholars Rāmānuja. The Belgian Jesuit Pierre Johanns argued for a Christian reinterpretation of the Vedanta 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 Vedanta. Christian studies continue to expand their treatment of Rāmānuja, examining not just his great commentary on the Vedanta Sutras 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 Seshaseshin 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 Śrīvaishnava 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 Śrīvaishnava 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. 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 Vedanta. 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.”

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 Vedanta, 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 Smarta 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. In a series of journal articles stretching out over more than a decade he argued for a merger of the truths in different Vedantic 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 Vedantic 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. However, De Smet’s interpretation of the Vedāntic schools was rather different: only Śaṅkara’s version of the Vedanta 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 Cabezon’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 Vedanta Sutras, with most attention given to his effort to refute Śaṅkara, especially in the lengthy

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comment on the first sutra. There was also some attention to Rāmānuja’s commentary on the Bhagavadgīta, 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 Śrīvaisnava scholars. About this same time another Śrīvaisnava 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. The consequence of this denial of authorship was an interpretation of Rāmānuja’s teaching as being sharply different than that of later Śrīvaisnavism. 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 Śrīvaisnava tradition, which include the poetry of the Alvars, the many commentaries on the poem-cycle of Nammalvar, the *Tiruvaymoli*, and many doctrinal treatises.

These links between Rāmānuja and the Śrīvaisnava traditions before and after him are important for understanding him, not only as a commentator on the Vedanta and as a systematic thinker, but also as a worshiper in Vaishnava temples and the head of a growing Śrīvaisnava 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 Vedanta. 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 Vedanta 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 Vedanta 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 Śrīvaśnava 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 Śrīvaśnava 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. 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, Śrīvaśnava 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 Śrīvaśnava, a monk did object to my studying Nammalvar’s hymns on two grounds: my lack of initiation (ritual “surrender” or śaranāgati) 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.

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. 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.”

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. 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 Śrīvaishnava 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 Śrīvaishnava 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 Śrīvaishnavism.

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.

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 Śrīvaishnavism and European scholarship. We may presume that this is why he and Otto became acquainted and why he invited Otto to visit 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.

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*.

*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

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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 Kṛtyuga,”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).

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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).

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.

4 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 avataras,” 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)

5 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.

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


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 appearing as Poetry as Theology: The Śrīvaishnava 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 Śrīvaishnava 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).
Expanding and Refining Christian Interpretations of Rāmānuja

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).

19 See Note 10 above.
21 Ibid. pp.143-44.
22 Ibid. p.144.
23 Ibid. p.144.
Abhiṣiktānanda: A Reception History

Enrico Beltramini
Notre Dame de Namur University

ABSTRACT In this article, I present an evaluation of the scholarly reception history of Abhiṣiktānanda. I argue for an identifiable threefold division in Abhiṣiktānanda scholarship: the earliest biographies and appraisals focused on his 'spiritual search;' a second wave of scholarship stressed Abhiṣiktānanda's role as a pioneer in the interreligious dialogue; and, most recently, a third 'turn' has emerged in which a generation of scholars are concentrating on 'internal' Christian doctrinal critiques of Abhiṣiktānanda's theology. I also suggest that today's escapable and perplexing Abhiṣiktānanda is not necessarily the same Abhiṣiktānanda who inspired scholars in the past.

Introduction

Who could have imagined in 1973, when Abhiṣiktānanda (born Henri Le Saux, 1910-73) died, that the reclusive monk and poetic but theologically imprecise writer would maintain a limited but specific ascendancy on Hindu-Christian dialogue? And yet as I show in this article, this is exactly what happened to Abhiṣiktānanda in the last half a century. Few Roman Catholic (or simply 'Catholic') expatriates in India have been more actively present on the Hindu-Christian intellectual scene than Abhiṣiktānanda; possibly nobody has been more variously interpreted, his ideas more imaginatively reformulated and his life story more spectacularly retold than Abhiṣiktānanda's. Spiritual seekers and genuine advocates of interfaith dialogue, Europeans and Indians, Catholics and Anglicans, all might find in him something to which they can relate.

In this article, I cover a wide range of literature on Abhiṣiktānanda, in a certain sense, to build an incomplete, concise, probably syncopate version of the history of ‘Abhiṣiktānanda studies.’ In documenting Catholic interpretations of, and engagements with, Abhiṣiktānanda’s life and thought, I do not intend to enumerate the

Enrico Beltramini, Ph.D., is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at Notre Dame de Namur University, California. Enrico Beltramini studied business, history, and theology. His interests cover the history of 20th-century theology of religions and sacramental theology in Roman Catholicism, with a special focus on religions of India. He also researches the history of the economic equality in the United States. His publications include India and the Sacramental: Catholic Theology Between Mystic India and Dominus Jesus (forthcoming with Peter Lang) and Guns and Butter: The Economic Ideas of the Civil Rights Leaders (1946-1974) (forthcoming with Praeger). His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Studies in World Christianity, Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques, Rupkatha Journal, Fire! The Journal of Black Studies, and as chapters in anthologies such as The Cultural History of Money and Credit: A Global Perspective and The Economic Civil Rights Movement.
various ways scholars have used Abhiṣiktānanda’s body of writings. I prefer instead to see these interpretations and engagements as a prism through which to trace a possible trajectory followed by Abhiṣiktānanda studies in almost half a century. More precisely, I identify three phases in ‘Abhiṣiktānanda studies:’ the earliest biographies and appraisals, which came out in the 1970s shortly after Abhiṣiktānanda’s death and often written by close friends and acquaintances, tended to emphasize the idiosyncrasies of his ‘spiritual search’ and leave the impression of an enigmatic, but ultimately concrete individual on a personal quest. A second wave of scholarship redressed this balance by focusing on Abhiṣiktānanda’s role as a pioneer in the sort of dialogue between Christianity in Indian clothes and Hindu forms of spirituality, which had been given new impetus by Vatican II. Most recently, a third ‘turn’ has emerged in which a generation of scholars with no first-hand knowledge of Abhiṣiktānanda are concentrating less on biographical material, ‘theology of religions,’ or interreligious dialogue to target instead ‘internal’ Christian doctrinal critiques of Abhiṣiktānanda’s theology, exploring, for example, his understanding of Trinity or Incarnation and assessing the orthodoxy of his thought.

This article is a historical account of the forms Abhiṣiktānanda has taken in Christian literature. While technically a work of intellectual history, this article engages with theology. The image of theologians, who have their say on Abhiṣiktānanda independently from their different historical periods and various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, is charmingly appealing, but relies on a serious misunderstanding. Theological work is affected by the specific physiognomy of the historical world in which it emerges and which scholars have to reconstruct. In other words, the study of Abhiṣiktānanda is also everything that has happened around such as study. Accordingly, one of the article's assumptions is that the study of Abhiṣiktānanda -- with all the questions he posed, the debates his work generated and the invitations to self-reflection that commentaries on it often formulated – has been profoundly and multifariously affected by larger concerns. I would suggest that the reception of Abhiṣiktānanda’s work and life is part of the enormous efforts of Roman Catholics to understand their own experience of living in a Church increasingly engaged with other religions without compromising her integrity. Thus, this article is a chronicle of the phenomenon that could aptly be called ‘the Abhiṣiktānanda image,’ including a summary description of the multiple theological contexts in which Abhiṣiktānanda’s name, manuscripts, ideas, and life have been addressed over time.

I assume the reader's familiarity with Abhiṣiktānanda, thus I do not include a lengthy survey of his life. For the economy of this article, the humble monk was born in Brittany and grew up a beloved child with an early vocation for silence and prayer. After entering the monastic life in the pre-council Catholic Church in Brittany, in which Abhiṣiktānanda lived a cloistered, unadventurous life, he moved to India to pursue an extreme form of inculturation, the Hindu samnyāsa. At 60, he met his only disciple and then, at 63, died of a heart attack.

This article is divided in two parts. The first part offers a concise reception history of Abhiṣiktānanda’s life and thought and some reflections on it. While there was obvious interest in his writings already in the 1960s,
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this reception history begins with Abhisiktananda’s final departure. The second part comes with a more analytical version of the same reception history. It supposes to document the trajectory of studies on Abhisiktananda and substantiates the case for the three identified ‘turns.’ For the sake of brevity, I make a claim and then offer a voluminous footnote without close textual analysis of the various works cited. A more granular analysis would require a close reading of a few representative works from each turn to provide evidence for the claim of thematic unity. The second part also offers a voluminous bibliography, which may prove a useful resource for scholars working on themes relating to Abhisiktananda.

First Part

In the late hours of December 7, 1973, Abhisiktananda laid in a bed at the Robert’s Nursing Home in Indore, unconscious from what would be fatal heart failure. A nun, Sister Théophane, announced Abhisiktananda’s death by saying: “He was anointed and slipped quietly away to the Lord.” Abhisiktananda’s death set off a wave of intense mourning throughout the Indian Church and beyond. Suddenly, the meaning of his unusual vocation seemed no longer so strange or impenetrable to many outside the strict circle of closest friends. Yet much as people felt they knew him based on reputation and teachings, and friends on affinity and affection, they probably didn’t. Abhisiktananda had always been something of an enigma, even to those closest to him. As a monk, he was inclined to silence. In the years following his death, biographers, friends, and scholars attempted to fill those gaps and their research and profiles subsequently created the Abhisiktananda known to the world today.

An argument could be made that for almost half a century, Abhisiktananda has been created and recreated, and this says as much about the construction of historical memory as it does about the man himself. Abhisiktananda exists in the Roman Catholic imagination through a series of iconic yet fleeting images that range from the acosmic on the banks of Ganges River to the wandering monk wearing the orange cloth of the sannyasa; these images powerfully evoke the era’s confounding mixture of high spirituality and Mystic East. Indeed, the iconography of Abhisiktananda in Saccidananda Ashram at Shantivanam in Tamil Nadu, his retreats in one of the caves near Ramana Maharshi’s ashram, and his lifelong attempt to understand Hinduism serves as a kind of visual shorthand to understanding the history of a fascinating era, but such images reveal little about the scholarship that birthed them.

In the last half a century or so, an interdisciplinary body of literature has emerged in a new subfield which can be referred to as ‘Abhisiktananda studies.’ The mission of this subfield, Abhisiktananda studies, was and remains the discernment of the life and the thought of a man who is hard to capture. Scholarly interpretation of Abhisiktananda and his legacy has evolved over time. In the post-Council era, a first generation of his friends focused on his monumental spiritual search and thus framed Abhisiktananda as a spiritual seeker; then, under pressure to sustain the emergence of an indigenous Indian Christianity with regard to local theologies and interreligious practices, a second generation of biographers and acquaintances re-created Abhisiktananda as a master of inculturation, a pioneer of the pluralistic approach to the theology of religions; today, a third generation of scholars, increasingly concerned with the
character and implications of this age of World Christianity, are investigating Abhiṣiktānanda’s theological thought.

To the first generation of friends and scholars in the aftermath of the Vatican Council II, Abhiṣiktānanda provided an image of the spiritual seeker willing to go it alone without inherited prejudice, without institutional affiliation, without rock or refuge for his truth claims. These themes, encompassing Abhiṣiktānanda’s persona and ideas, figure prominently in the first studies on him. Readers took an interest not only in Abhiṣiktānanda’s radical ideas, but also in the tortured life that gave birth to them. They examined why his orthodox and eventually conformist monastic training gave way to acosmism, catalogued his spiritual battles that blurred into illnesses, questioned why he left his missionary project for a lonely life of itinerancy, and debated whether courage and authenticity were the appropriate explanation for his unique biography. The facts of the monk’s solitary wandering life—his books largely ignored by specialists upon publication, his mind burdened by ceaseless doubts and eventually pain—were, for most readers, inseparable from the emphatically self-described commitment to Christ and his scandalous Neolithic Christianity, as he called the Church of his time. And this fusion of life and work made him, especially in the eyes of Catholic readers in the decades immediately post-Council, a prophet and icon embodying freedom. The history of Abhiṣiktānanda as a spiritual seeker is a story of individual readers coming to terms with themselves and with their faith, as they imagined Abhiṣiktānanda speaking to and about them.

Then, a generation of Indian theologians and pioneers of an interfaith dialogue rescued Abhiṣiktānanda from the taint of spirituality, placing him in the context of the interreligious enterprise and turning him into a founding father of an indigenous form of Christianity. Their work dramatically transformed Abhiṣiktānanda from a robust yet little-explored undercurrent of twentieth-century Catholic mission into the quintessential European who advised the Indians precisely not to inherit Europe. These theologians noted that Abhiṣiktānanda paid a heavy price for daring to strip away the comforting props of Christian concepts and dogmas, bringing readers face to face with the imperative ‘to experience.’ He launched his own version of interreligious dialogue, which begins with the recognition that “the myth of the Church is left behind.” The time was ripe: how thrilling it must have been for pluralist theologians long shackled to the “Latin captivity” of the Indian Church, in R.H.S.
Boyd’s phrasing. It was at this time that discussions of his thought began studding theological journals, spiritual books, and public lectures. In virtually every reading, a new Abhiṣiktānanda emerged. The interest in Abhiṣiktānanda grew so dramatically that by the 1990s observers could, without hyperbole, claim that it was one of the most significant intellectual romances of the Hindu-Christian studies. Barely known in his birth country of France during his productive lifetime, Abhiṣiktānanda had become a posthumous spiritual guru and respected intellectual. The rediscovery of Abhiṣiktānanda as a champion of Hindu-Christian dialogue presented the latter as precisely that kind of serious and passionate thinker with whom a generation of theologians engaged in the construction of a more inclusive form of Christianity could concur. The transposition of Abhiṣiktānanda’s writings into a grand framework, a theological approach expressing a genuine encounter with Hinduism, was facilitated by the traits of his personality. His lack of appetite for dogmatic theology was compatible with the Indian inclination to regard experience as the primary criterion in theology. His life showed a surprising proximity with the Indian life. Throughout the story of Abhiṣiktānanda’s successful inculturation in India, theologians of dialogue saw a possible path for the future of Christianity.

The first generation of scholars articulated the ‘French interpretation’ of Abhiṣiktānanda’s work which sees his life as primarily a spiritual search, while the second generation proposed the ‘Indian interpretation,’ which places Abhiṣiktānanda’s work as primary in the space of interreligious dialogue. These two generations of scholars produced innovative, original studies that offer new interpretations of Abhiṣiktānanda’s life and thought. They linked these interpretations to paramount issues of their age–post-Council, Indian Church–and were successful in making Abhiṣiktānanda relevant to Catholicism of their time. However, the Church of India’s shift towards the social eventually questioned the primacy that Abhiṣiktānanda allocated to the spiritual over the social, or, in Abhiṣiktānanda’s terms, to being over doing.

Shifting the focus from one that highlighted spirituality and interreligious dialogue to one that centered on Abhiṣiktānanda’s thought became the concern of a more recent wave of scholarship. This shift occurs during a period of reappropriation of doctrinal orthodoxy and dismissal of existentialist approaches to theology. Dominus Iesus requires theologians to stop stretching Christian dogmas in order to accommodate theology to the dialogue with Hinduism, and to rather reframe the Christian dialogue with Asian religions according to the limits and constraints of non-negotiable dogmas. Recent scholarship is reconsidering Abhiṣiktānanda’s works in the light of Dominus Iesus and has expanded the traditional understanding of Abhiṣiktānanda’s contribution to spirituality, monasticism, and Hindu-Christian dialogue, connecting more with Christology, Trinity, theology of religions, and ecclesiology. To illustrate what a growing number of theology scholars considers the most exciting area of new research on Abhiṣiktānanda, the theme of correctness, or orthodoxy, of Abhiṣiktānanda’s theology, Jesus Christ. Quest and Context of Abhiṣiktānanda (Henri le Saux) is a case in point. Brief introductions written by theologian Gavin D’Costa and Indologist George Gispert-Sauch SJ. add prestige to this book. Author Fr. Santhosh Sebastian Cheruvally reads Abhiṣiktānanda in the light of the magisterial teaching of the Church,
especially Vatican II’s teaching on non-Christian religions and *Dominus Iesus*, from a Christological perspective, and investigates whether Abhiṣiktānanda’s Christology is compatible with the question of the fullness of the revelation of Christ and the unicity of Christ as the Word made flesh. He concludes that Abhiṣiktānanda elaborated two peculiar, different Christological approaches, with only the former being healthy and nourishing. Fr. Santhosh’s analysis presents a succinct version of the arc of Abhiṣiktānanda’s theological development: in his early works, Abhiṣiktānanda disciplined his romantic exuberance, on the advice of his friend Monchanin, in an attempt to achieve total orthodoxy and a harmonious prose style; later he tended to give free rein to his flamboyant imagination.

The way Fr. Santhosh wrestles with Abhiṣiktānanda’s orthodoxy is acutely similar to the manner in which other theologians struggle to protect Abhiṣiktānanda from the crime of apostasy—while keeping distance from his theological synthesis. In Monchanin’s and Panikkar’s view, Abhiṣiktānanda maintained his faith but went theologically off course. Fr. Santhosh’s conclusions reinforce a pre-existent conventional scholarship narrative, which accepts as wisdom the idea that Abhiṣiktānanda’s status as a prophetic figure in the Hindu-Christian dialogue operates at the level of personal experience, not of intellectual thought or theology. For a long time, a small circle of Abhiṣiktānanda’s friends, scholars, and practitioners has managed to live with the cognitive dissonance of thinking that Abhiṣiktānanda made a mistake by rejecting theological formulations, that is, he was theologically heterodox; regardless, to that circle he remains an important source of theological insight and this tight group would likely smooth out the inherent incongruity, assuming with Raimon Panikkar that “Abhishiktananda’s experience [is] of great importance.” Panikkar continues cautiously framing Abhiṣiktānanda not as a model—“I do not say that he offers us a model to be copied uncritically”—but in the more general sense of a symbol—“he symbolizes a life lived in depth in the midst of a world that has fallen apart.”

A question can be raised about why Abhiṣiktānanda has proved so popular: What is the life and thought of an outsider doing in an ecclesial reality like Catholicism? Abhiṣiktānanda became the exemplar for those seeking, in a nutshell, not instruction, but example, not intellectual doctrine but the visceral sense of liberation in hearing the inner voice. Thus, a case can be made that until *Dominus Iesus*, Catholics studied Abhiṣiktānanda not to get closer to him but to get closer to themselves; they saw in him a reflection of their own best image. Since 2000, however, the reverse process has been at work: For decades, the name Abhiṣiktānanda has typically come up in the context of the Hindu-Christian dialogue that he helped pioneer. In an era of pluralistic religious awareness and post-colonialism, interreligious dialogue inspired many Christians, especially young people, with messages of respect and mutual understanding in the face of enduring inclusivism. In these present times, however, in which Catholic theologians lives under the constellation of *Dominus Iesus*, Abhiṣiktānanda’s existentialist approach to dialogue appears as sort of fighting a war from a forgotten time. The reappropriation of doctrinal orthodoxy in Catholic theology treats Abhiṣiktānanda as someone who is anachronistic. The immense effect of *Dominus*
en the current trend to subject Abhiṣiktānanda’s non-theological predisposition to theological criticism, on the other, suggest the possibility that Abhiṣiktānanda studies as a subfield is submitted—despite the enduring interest—to a risk of irrelevance. Only time will say if the current intellectual trend of theological criticism is the most appropriate form of reading of Abhiṣiktānanda’s work in this age of World Christianity.

**Second Part**

In this part, I offer a chronological interpretation of a body of knowledge, which I labeled Abhiṣiktānanda studies. According to a basic principle of reception history, the question of the legitimacy of one’s grasp of Abhiṣiktānanda’s ideas is beside the point. Anyone who tries to understand Abhiṣiktānanda is confronted with at least three different views about the very core matter of his legacy. The first generation treats Abhiṣiktānanda as a Western spiritual searcher, the second generation considers him as an Indian pioneer of interreligious dialogue, and the third generation addresses Abhiṣiktānanda as a spiritual teacher and assesses his doctrinal orthodoxy. So pervasive is the multiplicity of readings, so characteristic of Abhiṣiktānanda interpretations are the variety of expositions, that one may argue that an attempt at understanding Abhiṣiktānanda is still a work in progress.

**Spiritual Seeker**

In the first two decades after his death, people who had a direct contact with Abhiṣiktānanda and who had direct access to his original writings considered him a spiritual searcher. Studies on Abhiṣiktānanda’s monastic experience and spiritual search are the most common products of this generation of scholars. Shirley du Boulay’s *The Cave of the Heart* was the second biography to appear, following James Stuart’s *Swami Abhiṣiktānanda: His Life Told through His Letters*. There are also tributes written by Abhiṣiktānanda’s friends, such as David Rogers’s memoir, and personal recollections by acquaintances like Odette Baumer-Despeigne, George Gispert-Sauch, S.J., and others. Finally, excerpts from Abhiṣiktānanda’s journal were edited by his friend and internationally renowned scholar Raimon Panikkar, who published the content as *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*.

Full of poetic and yet incomplete claims written in a personal, diarist style, Abhiṣiktānanda’s published and unpublished works established their author as preeminent spiritual pathfinder. Not surprisingly, this line of thought drives scholars to the conclusion that Abhiṣiktānanda’s legacy lies in his authentic, uncompromised, serious search of the Absolute. His merit was to have lived from the inside, in a wholly authentic way, a passage through religions to the ultimate Source. In his diary and in the letters, he wrote to clarify his thoughts for himself and for his friends, although his thought was always evolving. Accordingly, Abhiṣiktānanda was seen as a spiritual writer, more suited to live new experiences, elaborate new intuitions and insights, and open new spiritual paths. The inevitable implication is that Abhiṣiktānanda poses questions rather than offering answers.

**Interfaith Pioneer**

Then the focus shifted. The first generation of scholars and commentators concerned with Abhiṣiktānanda’s spiritual life and writings was replaced with those more interested in his experience of inculturation at the border between Christianity and
Hinduism. He was initially recognized as a disciple of a leading pioneer of the inclusive theology of religion before turning his devotion to Hindu sages and becoming a bridge between two religions. Investigation now focused on the efforts that led Abhiṣiktānanda to be actively involved in the indigenization of the Indian Catholic Church during and after the Vatican Council, with the collateral elaboration of an attempted synthesis of Advaita and Trinity. Abhiṣiktānanda's writings were commonly viewed by this second generation of scholars as contributions to the development of Hindu-Christian dialogue in the context of a pluralistic approach to theology of religions.

Abhiṣiktānanda’s importance was recognized as providing the spiritual basis and practical example for dialogue, and for sustaining, in the last years of his life, the process of inculturation of the Indian Church and formation of an indigenized Christian theology. He was applauded or attacked as the author of works of theological and spiritual compass, who took the ideas and methods of Monchanin and Panikkar and developed them less prudently and far beyond anything their first authors had imagined. While Abhiṣiktānanda’s work was predominantly seen as an episode in the history of the encounters between religions, reservations about his theology remained, especially regarding his synthesis of Advaita and Trinity.

The variety and ramifications of Abhiṣiktānanda’s commitment to Hindu-Christian dialogue have also been investigated with regard to the notion that “dialogue creates theology,” treating theology as the result of Abhiṣiktānanda’s commitment to inter-religious dialogue rather than as a cause of dialogue. In this context, dialogue does not only produce “mutual understanding,” but also empowers “self-understanding.” By bringing to the surface and making explicit the implicit, deepest assumptions of one’s own religion, inter-religious dialogue acts as a step in the direction of self-reflection and self-criticism. Ragunta Yesurathnam’s study returns to the subject of Abhiṣiktānanda’s contribution to Christian dialogue, while George Gispert-Sauch, SJ., suggests that Abhiṣiktānanda’s life and thought exercised a certain amount of influence on Jacques Dupuis, a Belgian Jesuit and the leading theologian on the subject of religious pluralism.

Some works not totally focused on Abhiṣiktānanda still show the influence he exerted on the Church of India, a Church that is dealing with religious pluralism and the need to feel inculturated in India. Indian Catholicism operates in a post-colonial, post-Council setting: it requires being less dependent upon Western theological and philosophical categories and relies more on principles of the conditioned nature of all religious languages. Some studies recognize Abhiṣiktānanda’s contribution to Indian Christian theology and practice in the areas of the movement of Christian ashrams, the indigenizing of the Roman Catholic Church in India, the framing of an Indian model of inculturation, and the development of an Indian Christian theology. A few studies consider his life and thought in the context of comparative studies, addressing Abhiṣiktānanda as part of the group of Western expatriates in India.

**Blurring the Boundaries**

By strategically locating Abhiṣiktānanda in two broad theological areas of interest, spirituality and inter-religious dialogue, the first two generations of scholars depicted him
either as a mystic or as a pioneer of a pluralistic approach to Hinduism. When portrayed as a spiritual seeker, Abhiṣiktānanda is pursuing an individual path of realization. He seems to come out of an ancient past, with his readings of the Greek mystics of the 4th and 5th centuries and his tendency toward acosmism. He belongs to an old order, the Benedictine order, and appears to belong to an even older age, the epoch of the Desert Fathers, the early Christian hermits, ascetics, and monks who preferred to live in the desert rather than compromise their search of the divine in the imperial church of Constantine. When considered in the context of Hindu-Christian dialogue, he is a pioneer who opens new paths for the benefit of many. He seems to break the archaic mental boundaries of the Roman Catholicism of his time, embracing the notion that world religions, including Hinduism, are true and equally valid in their communication of the truth about God, the world, and salvation. When the two polarities of his life and thought, spirituality and inter-religious dialogue, are connected, two main stories can be told. First, Abhiṣiktānanda reaches the highest level of spirituality through his open-minded approach to Hinduism. He accepts the truth of Hinduism and through a Hindu spiritual path he reaches the deepest sources of mysticism. Second, Abhiṣiktānanda commits to a radical spiritual quest and through such a search, breaking one mental barrier after the other, he reaches a pluralistic view of world religions, including Hinduism and Christianity. Both stories suggest a portrait of the ancient monk with a modern mindset. The connection between spirituality and interreligious dialogue has been called by Wayne Teasdale “interspirituality.” The term is supposed to denote a ‘new mysticism’ emerging out of the “sharing of ultimate experiences across [religious] traditions.”

“Aligned with early works on Abhiṣiktānanda, which make clear that his encounter with Hinduism cannot be investigated without referencing his monastic vocation, comes a more recent study by Benedictine monk André Gozier. Gozier’s work focuses on Henri Le Saux’s encounter with the Upanishads.” New studies research Abhiṣiktānanda as a primary example of inter-monastic dialogue, in which the very reality of monasticism constitutes common ground for the meeting.

A specific area of research highlights the connection between the experience and the interior nature of Abhiṣiktānanda’s commitment to dialogue, the spiritual-contemplative approach to dialogue. These studies reveal the spiritual and mystical dimension of his experience, such as new monographs on Abhiṣiktānanda that investigate the non-Christian destination of his spiritual journey (Oldmeadow) and the mystical dimension of his experience (Gozier, Trianni and Skudlarek), contributing to the already voluminous output on Abhiṣiktānanda’s encounter with the divine.

Scholarly works on Abhiṣiktānanda’s commitment in Hindu-Christian dialogue investigate Abhiṣiktānanda’s specific approach to dialogue, a Christian monastic approach to Advaitic experience, in which an element or two of the approach receives specific attention. Some of the recent studies on Abhiṣiktānanda focus on the fruitfulness of his life consecrated to the encounter with Hinduism, in continuity with a line of investigation that links Abhiṣiktānanda’s personal experience with engagement in Hinduism. Some research on Abhiṣiktānanda, including two doctoral theses, focus on his commitment to Hindu-Christian dialogue in the context of the
emerging topics of multiple religious belonging and borderline identities.¹⁶

Theologian

There is now emerging a third generation of scholars, digging up all the bits and pieces related to Abhiṣiktānanda, indulging in theological criticism. These scholars present Abhiṣiktānanda’s work as material for theological elaboration and they analyze his thinking from a theological perspective. This new generation of scholars and commentators presents an important thesis, that is, in the aftermath of Dominus Jesus, Abhiṣiktānanda should be studied in the context of contemporary Catholic theology, not necessarily restricted to India. Much of this new scholarship is built upon a revisionist literature that has enlarged the traditional understanding of Abhiṣiktānanda’s contribution in terms of spirituality and inter-faith dialogue, while attempting to engage him with greater theological concerns.¹⁷

The work of these scholars, disconnected by time from Abhiṣiktānanda’s life, can be classified according to two well-known distinct approaches to the history of Christian ideas: Christian thought and Christian theology. The first is associated with a focus of interest on the content of Abhiṣiktānanda’s theological ideas rather their formal structure; the second emphasizes a reading of Abhiṣiktānanda’s ideas as primarily concerned with the formal structure of the Christian thought of the period. The latter might eventually connect Abhiṣiktānanda’s ideas to the internal history of the Christian doctrines. More recent studies try to decipher the theological core of Abhiṣiktānanda’s thought in a post-Dominus Iesus age, that is, within the boundaries of the Roman Catholic tradition, with specific interest in Christology, Trinity, and ecclesiology.¹⁸ Some scholars address the discursive nature of his interreligious dialogue, a dialogue that has considerable hermeneutical significance and seeks genuine understanding—rather than experience—for sake of a shared quest/pilgrimage and search of truth/absolute. Paolo Trianni’s recent work on Henri Le Saux’s encounter with Indian philosophy falls within the broader area of study that investigates the intellectual journey that was Abhiṣiktānanda’s engagement with Hindu-Christian dialogue.¹⁹

Recent Developments

Today there is burgeoning interest in the life and work of this obscure but extraordinary monk. In 2010, an international symposium at Shantivanam, the ashram founded by Henri Le Saux and Jules Monchanin, was initiated to commemorate the centenary of Le Saux’s birth. Other workshops had been held in France (Abby of Landevennec in Brittany), India (Uttarakhand in the Indian Himalayas), and England (Gaunts House, Wimborne, Dorset). The Shantivanam conference yielded a collection of papers, published in spring 2011, under the title Witness to the Fullness of Light: The Vision and Relevance of the Benedictine Monk Swami Abhiṣiktānanda. Another selection of papers, gathered on the centenary of Abhiṣiktānanda’s birth, has been published in French and in English.²⁰ The Abhiṣiktānanda Centre for Interreligious Dialogue, formed in 2008 after the closing of the Abhiṣiktānanda Society (1978–2008) to promote Swami Abhiṣiktānanda’s thought, plans to republish Abhiṣiktānanda’s titles, all of which are now out of print. The Centre has recently republished two well-known titles, and six more titles are slated for republication over the next few years.²¹
Notes

1 I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this paper for providing insightful comments and directions for additional work which has resulted in this improved version. For advice and encouragement in my research on this topic, I thank Leonard Fernando SJ, previously Professor of Church History and Systematic Theology, Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi, now rector at St. James’s College, Tiruchirappalli, India. Unless otherwise noted, all translations to English in this article are my own.

2 Ascent to the Depth of the Heart, p. 319 (September 9, 1970). The full reference is provided later.


4 Ascent to the Depth of the Heart, p. 373 (February 17, 1973).

5 Introduction to Ascent to the Depth of the Heart, pp. xvi–xvii; italics are mine.

6 In general, bibliographic data in footnotes follows the sequence of quotations in the main text; if not quoted in the main text, the bibliographic entries are organized chronologically. In this case, a selection of the most recent bibliography is highlighted, while the less recent bibliography is added, from the oldest date of publishing to the latest. Priority is given to books over book chapters and academic articles.


90 Enrico Beltramini


Abhiṣiktānanda: A Reception History


Writing, Living, and Editing Hindu-Christian Studies: Appreciation for Bradley Malkovsky’s Contribution

Michelle Voss Roberts
President of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies

I initially encountered Dr. Bradley Malkovsky when, as a graduate student, I presented my first paper with the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies, and he encouraged me to submit it for publication in the Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies. He has performed this role of cultivating new scholars in the field over his sixteen years as editor of the JHCS. Now, as he steps down from the editorship, a look back on his contribution to the field thus far reveals a remarkable trajectory of scholarship and service to the institutions that make Hindu-Christian studies a thriving academic community.

As a member of the founding Board of Directors of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies in 1994, Malkovsky and his peers envisioned “a scholarly society dedicated to the study of Hinduism and Christianity and their interrelationships.” Through its journal and annual conferences, the Society would “create a forum for the presentation of historical research and studies of contemporary practice [and] for the fostering of dialogue and interreligious conversation, carried forward in a spirit of openness, respect and true inquiry.” In 2002, Malkovsky became the second editor/treasurer of the Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin (which became the Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies in 2004), after Harold Coward had served in the role for fourteen years. In 2018, upon passing the editorial torch to Gopal Gupta, he continues as Treasurer of the Society.

Malkovsky is also Associate Professor of Comparative Theology at the University of Notre Dame, where he has been a member of the faculty since 1992. Previously, he taught systematic theology for two years at his alma mater, St. John’s University in Collegeville, MN. Before that, his graduate studies took him abroad. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in Systematics at Universität Tübingen in Germany (1983, 1994), and he wrote his dissertation while studying for five years at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Sanskrit at the University of Poona (Pune, India).

Scholar of Śaṅkara

As highlighted in Reid Locklin’s essay in this volume, many know Malkovsky primarily

as an important scholar of Śaṅkara, the eighth-century figure whose commentaries on Vedānta texts established him as the founder of the Advaita school. Malkovsky’s collaborations as editor of the volume, New Perspectives on Advaita Vedānta, highlight how these studies have changed so that Śaṅkara is now understood in relation not only to his later exegetes, but also in relation to other earlier Indian schools of thought and to various contemporary intercultural and interreligious considerations. His own scholarship has facilitated these shifts.

As an important contribution to these changes in Śaṅkara studies, his 2001 book, The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śaṅkarācārya, participates in the twentieth-century reassessment of the great teacher’s thought. It defends several strong claims that go against the grain of much received interpretation, particularly regarding the personalistic element of Śaṅkara’s Absolute (amplifying Paul Hacker), and Śaṅkara’s realism (building on Richard De Smet, whom the aforementioned edited volume commemorated).

The unique contribution of this book is the case it builds for the importance of grace (prasāda, anugraha) in Śaṅkara’s corpus by reading backwards for historical connections—to the earlier Vedanta teachings of Adiśeṣa, Nimbarka, and others—rather than interpreting Śaṅkara in ways that anticipate the developments of the later Advaita school, as many of Malkovsky’s predecessors have done. Through this approach, he discovers a “welding of theistic [namely, Vaiṣṇavite] and non-dualistic visions of life,” including evidence that “Śaṅkara tends to identify the grace-giving Lord with the highest reality.”

Malkovsky traces teachings about divine grace across Śaṅkara’s corpus which, though unsystematic, nevertheless show that for him grace is “indispensable for liberation.” As Malkovsky explains juxtapositions that remain unresolved in Śaṅkara’s work,

[We] learn that Śaṅkara has not one but two theologies of freedom, and that he has not resolved the tension between them, although both share important elements .... [and] the compatibility of liberation-through-knowledge with liberation-through-grace. The first is always primary in Śaṅkara’s thought, yet the second turns out to be indispensable.

The result of this dive into these tensions is a serious look at Śaṅkara’s teaching about grace. Although this doctrine “is nothing akin to the Protestant Christian teaching of sola gratia”—after all, liberation comes primarily through knowledge—it is substantial nonetheless. For Śaṅkara, grace is threaded through a person’s preparation for liberation in the forms of scripture, one’s teacher, and the desire for liberation itself; and the sādhaka’s final illumination is finally due to the impartial grace of the Lord.

Malkovsky’s preparation in Catholic and ecumenical theologies, though not immediately evident in the published version of this project, contributes important sensitivities to its rereading of Śaṅkara. The comparative sections of the earlier dissertation do not appear in the monograph. Nevertheless, he raises the sorts of questions that abound in Christian theology, and in Catholic-Protestant polemics in particular, about the relative weight of divine grace in relation to human effort. His careful textual study allows him to search for evidence of grace in Śaṅkara’s thought, but this agenda does not overdetermine his interpretation of the great teacher. The contours of the debates he discovers there cannot be reduced to whatever parallels one might recognize in Christian discussions. Indeed, he follows
Śaṅkara into nuanced treatments of issues that lack direct correlates: the relation of divine grace to yogic powers (siddhis) gained on the way to liberation, divine impartiality in relation to human freedom and karma, and the grace of the teacher and scripture. By pursuing the topic of grace, his line of questioning allows him to tease out nuances related to an important role for grace and a personal deity that does not automatically dissolve into a “higher,” non-personal Absolute, which other scholars had neglected.

**Comparative Theologian**

Malkovsky’s rethinking of Śaṅkara from an Indological angle is already a contribution to Hindu-Christian Studies, as Reid Locklin has argued in this issue. However, readers of this journal will also know Malkovsky as a comparative theologian whose religious and interreligious concerns animate his scholarly trajectory explicitly.

Among the many topics Malkovsky has illuminated through a comparative approach are the diverse views of Christ in Hinduism, questions raised at the confluence of teachings about reincarnation and purgatory, theologies of the infinite, cosmic and historical revelation, and interpretations of the Lord (Īśvara) in the Yoga Sutras and the teachings of B. K. S. Iyengar in comparison with Christian understandings of God.

Take, for example, his mapping of a range of views of God, divine grace, and religious practice in the latter project. Emphases on divine love, the eschatological completion of the human person, and moral accountability to God set Christian teaching apart from both of the yogic traditions Malkovsky surveys here. However, although devotion to Īśvara is only an optional aid in the Yoga Sutras, this role has grown in some schools, so that “in some respects Mr. Iyengar’s understanding of God is closer to the Christian understanding of a supreme transcendent reality than it is to the Lord of the YS” in its “personal and grace-giving” character.14 Malkovsky also notes that something like a “healthy dualism” can be affirmed in both traditions, which recognizes that “all is not well with the body” and that “we are a reality that transcends our own body.”15 Without attempting to reconcile the differing metaphysics and anthropologies, Christians who practice yoga can affirm two kinds transcendent experience: both the devotional/relational experience of union with God and the yogic/non-relational experience of transcendence that passes beyond self-centeredness.

One often witnesses in Malkovsky’s choice of topics a willingness to paint with a broader brush than other comparative theologians. He writes in defense of this methodological choice,

One of the things notably amiss in the work of much comparative theology today is an almost exclusive and excessive attention to the particular, especially its emphasis on individual texts, to the point that anything like the broad fundamentals of a religion are overlooked. I think this is a mistake. The fact is, almost all Hindus do believe in reincarnation ... they are therefore dualistic in their anthropology, and they do not subscribe to individual or cosmic transformation in a future eschaton.16

Methodologically, then, Malkovsky differs from a comparative theologian like Francis X. Clooney, who prefers fine-grained textual analysis over general patterns.

Nevertheless, Malkovsky’s projects exemplify the kind of study Clooney has recently hailed as the future of Hindu-Christian Studies: a scholar-practitioner’s contributions that are “intellectually and spiritually compelling on all sides.”17
early article, “Advaita Vedanta and Christian Faith,” Malkovsky anticipates this combination of the intellectual and spiritual when he compares Richard De Smet, S.J., who emphasized intellectual encounter, with Abhishiktananda, who pursued experiential points of contact to argue “that both approaches are viable and necessary for an in-depth encounter between Advaitins and Christians.”

**Seeker of Interreligious Wisdom**

Malkovsky’s global travels occurred within a timeframe when it was possible to sit at the feet of some of the greatest twentieth-century Christian theologians of religious pluralism. In Tübingen, he studied with leading ecumenical thinkers such as Walter Kasper, Hans Küng, and Gerhard Lohfink. He stayed during his dissertation studies at Bede Griffiths’s Saccidananda Ashram and with the sisters at the C.P.S. Ashram in Pune—settings which supported his concurrent explorations in Sanskrit, yoga, and vipassana meditation. This scholarly itinerary included both intellectual and spiritual points of contact between Hindu and Christian traditions.

It was during this time that he also formed a relationship with a Sunni Muslim family that led to his marriage to their daughter Mariam. A sense of the sacredness of the personal encounter emerges in his reflections on interfaith friendship:

> During moments of deep personal exchange, I become aware that I am in the presence of God who surrounds us and blesses us. Our friendship is therefore a gift of God, a reminder of God’s presence to all, and a reminder that God is greater than our religions, even when our faith traditions rightly seek to honor God and call us to submit to the divine will, which is Love.19

The personal dimensions of his story appear most vividly in God’s Other Children: Personal Encounters with Faith, Love, and Holiness in Sacred India (HarperOne, 2013), a project that received the Huston Smith Prize from the HarperOne publishing company. Like another classic text for the classroom, Diana Eck’s Encountering God, Malkovsky’s skillful conversational style makes religious encounters come alive on the page.20 The engaging narrative of his adventures in India introduces readers to important features of India’s religions in a remarkably accessible manner. For example, as he describes how he came to study yoga amid certain Christian objections to the practice, he peppers his response to criticisms with such engaging anecdotes that the reader is barely aware that she is being schooled in the limbs of yoga.

In several passages of the memoir, Malkovsky articulates the theological motivations for his ongoing study of the world’s faith traditions:

> To be sure, I had expected to find goodness among the followers of other religions as well as a sincere search for spiritual liberation, but I was surprised to find just how much more was already there waiting to be discovered. What I did not know was that for centuries Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam had produced a multitude of saints and holy sages, a wisdom of the greatest depth, and countless miracles. All this has become for me a sign that God is very much at work in those religions, using them as vehicles of His power and grace.

But my new awareness of the greatness of other religions has also raised many questions about the relation of those religions to Christ and to Christianity, questions having to do especially with Christ’s universal lordship and authority,
how to best express his salvific meaning, and the proper way to witness to him in my encounter with Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. The more I have wrestled with these issues, the more certain I’ve become that witnessing to Christ must also involve my readiness to learn how God is already present and working in the lives of people of other faiths. I therefore think that what is most important in this era of human history, a time in which religious traditions are interacting with each other like never before, is that we open ourselves to the truth and beauty of other faiths in a living, respectful, and receptive encounter.21

This receptive and discerning spirit is on display in many of Malkovsky’s other writings on interfaith understanding. Take, for instance, his discussion of Swami Vivekananda and Fr. Bede Griffiths. Both exemplify an openness to the genuine religious experiences in other traditions, even as they rank these experiences according to “the a priori acceptance of [their] religion’s foundational revelation as normative … [and] the personal experience of the Absolute mediated to them by their tradition.”22 In dialogue with them, Malkovsky urges deeper knowledge of other traditions so that a posteriori theologies of religions may also be accountable to the self-descriptions and complexities of those traditions.

In recent years, Malkovsky has contributed constructively to Catholic theologies and practices in relation to religious diversity.23 In a volume honoring Griffiths, he imagines a future “Vatican III,” which might acknowledge revelation in other religions: “Perhaps Father Bede anticipated such a future Council when he repeatedly challenged his listeners to consider the possibility that God has revealed Godself in multiple ways to the world with Christ always remaining at the center.”24 Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholic theologians such as Jacques Dupuis have explored how to hold the centrality of Jesus Christ alongside this multiplicity. Malkovsky adds his voice by positing a complementarity of cosmic and historical revelations in Griffiths’ teachings: cosmic revelation “is to be found potentially everywhere in the world” through an intuited “interior unity of being and consciousness” in “nature and the soul,” while the historical revelation is found in events that show the value of the finite world, embodied persons, and living societies.25 Adherents of traditions that primarily emphasize one of these dimensions might benefit from encounter with the other basic experience of revelation.

An Enduring Legacy for the Field

Bradley Malkovsky’s editorship of the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* leaves a considerable legacy for the field. He has graciously invited newer scholars into the field and shaped their development through the peer review process. He has been especially keen to reach an Indian audience and invite articles from Indian scholars. These efforts have made this scholarship available to an audience spanning North America and India—first in print and now in digital format.

Under his leadership, the *JHCS* has grown, averaging seven or eight articles and ten book reviews per year. The substantial book reviews, often in the range of one thousand words, have proven to be a popular feature for online downloads. Recent issues have fostered lively discussion of topics from contemplative traditions (2014) to aesthetics (2015) to God and evil (2016). This editorial work culminated in a special issue in 2017, which includes color photographs and additional articles and reviews. Focusing on a topic dear to his heart—Yoga and God—this final issue from
Malkovsky’s tenure extends the conversation begun in his own scholarship and in the 2012 issue. The thoughtful unfolding of the topic encompasses both the recent objections to the appropriation and commercialization of yoga as well as the enduring value of practicing yoga for Christians who may still wrestle with the compatibility of its teachings with their faith.

As editor for the past sixteen years, then, Malkovsky has had the crucial function of amplifying the “dialogue and interreligious conversation, carried forward in a spirit of openness, respect and true inquiry” that characterizes the best of Hindu-Christian Studies and the aspirations of this journal. Certainly, the product itself, which boasts subscribers across the globe and offers free access to much of its content to non-subscribers, advances conversation between Hindus and Christians. More significantly for those who know him, Bradley himself embodies the spirit of the publication. He gathers high quality contributions in the pursuit of “true inquiry,” but always with a personal touch. He values the opportunity to reach out to subscribers, including (as I can attest) the occasional gentle reminder to renew whenever a subscription has lapsed. The importance of personal relationships visible in his memoir extends into his leadership of the Society, often behind the scenes. Bradley’s kindness and habitual posture of friendship admirably sets the tone for the rest of us who continue alongside him in the ongoing work of Hindu-Christian studies.

Notes
1 Society for Hindu-Christian Studies. https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs/about.html
4 Ibid., xii.
6 Malkovsky, The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śaṅkara’s, xi.
7 Ibid., xvi.
8 Ibid., 380.
9 Ibid., xvii.
15 Ibid., 41.


Ibid., 52-53.
Getting Real with Advaita Vedānta: Receiving Bradley J. Malkovsky’s Gifts of Grace

Reid B. Locklin
St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto

I recently had the pleasure of spending time with Joël Dubois’s rich study The Hidden Lives of Brahman. This work, I was delighted to discover, begins on its first page with the academic equivalent of a colophon with salutations to the scholar's paramparā.

Most interpreters have regarded Śaṅkara’s works as an intellectual tradition concerned primarily with brahman, understood as the ultimate reality transcending all particular manifestations, words, and concepts. Śaṅkara’s primary teaching, this view asserts, is that the transcendent brahman cannot be attained through any effort or activity, as it is already the essential nature of anyone who seeks it. Building on the work of Marcourelle (2000), Malkovsky (2001) and Suthren Hirst (2005), I show in this book that such a characterization is technically correct, yet also significantly misleading, as it ignores the hidden lives, as it were, of the notion of brahman.

In this passage, Dubois nicely sets up the detective story he will unfold in the rest of the volume, through painstaking study of Śaṅkara’s commentaries and significant field work. But he also, just as importantly, places himself in a lineage of great sages whose number includes our own beloved Bradley J. Malkovsky.

Michelle Voss Roberts has done a great service to the Society in offering a survey of Brad’s scholarly œuvre and his fifteen years at the helm of this Journal. In this essay, I am setting out to do something less ambitious but, I hope, no less important: to trace the impact Brad has had on the work of other scholars of Advaita, including Dubois, myself and a host of others. The scholarship I survey here includes many sources that I found using search engines, as well as a number I have encountered through my own reading. I am very conscious of my limited reach. I’m sure that I have omitted important interlocutors, and I know that this kind of survey, by necessity, tends to emphasize Brad’s earlier work to the detriment of more recent publications. Michelle has, appropriately, drawn attention to Brad’s memoir and other

Reid B. Locklin is Associate Professor of Christianity and the Intellectual Tradition at the University of Toronto, a joint appointment with St Michael’s College and the Department for the Study of Religion. His research focuses on a range of issues in Comparative Theology and Hindu-Christian Studies, particularly the engagement between Christian thought and the Hindu tradition of Advaita Vedanta. He also writes on the scholarship of teaching and learning in theology and religion. Dr. Locklin grew up in Athens, Georgia, completed a BA in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, a MTS from Boston University, and a PhD in Theology from Boston College in 2003. He has taught at the University of Toronto since 2004.

significant contributions in the last decade. I take it for granted that Brad’s most important contributions to Hindu-Christian studies still lie ahead, which makes the reception that his work has already received all the more impressive.

**Grace**

Brad completed his doctoral thesis at the University of Tübingen on the concept of divine grace in Śaṅkara’s teaching, and this thesis was eventually brought out as a monograph in the prestigious Numen Book Series at Brill. It would be fair, I think, to say that this monograph is to this date the most influential and most frequently cited of Brad’s works. Nevertheless, his core argument in the book and related essay—namely, that Śaṅkara’s soteriological vision advances a strong theology of divine grace—has met with a mixed reception.

In several instances, Brad’s work is cited briefly as an uncontested authority on the topic. Thus, Sucharita Adluri notes his study in connection to her own work on Rāmānuja. Andrea Pinkney positions her synthetic account of prasāda in South Asian religion in reference to two different literatures: a contemporary, ethnographic approach exemplified in the work of R.S. Khare, Paul Toomey, and Lawrence A. Babb, and a more conceptual, philological approach exemplified by Brad and Andy Rotman. Entertainingly, in a provocative essay entitled “Salvation, Damnation and Economic Incentives,” Brad’s work is cited as demonstrating Śaṅkara as an exception to the unrelenting monism and intellectual aridity of most traditions of Vedānta. No doubt, this would come as a surprise to Madhusūdana Saraswati!

This last example highlights an important element of Brad’s argument about the important role of grace in Śaṅkara’s theological project: namely, that it is counterintuitive. This has led some to critique his views. Writing in the *International Review of Hindu Studies*, Deepak Sarma notes with some irony that, although he finds Brad’s exhaustive and careful scholarship persuasive, he is “nonetheless struck by the beliefs of thirteen hundred plus years and countless followers of Advaita Vedānta, who would vehemently dispute Malkovsky’s claims.” T.S. Rukmani and Peter Stephan each attempt, in extended review essays, to explain this apparent disconnect by questioning Brad’s philology and interpretative choices. Most perceptively, Rukmani suggests that the meaning and function of a concept should not be reduced to the analysis of individual terms; it must instead take into account the overall philosophical framework of the author in question. Such an holistic approach, and Rukmani’s more general commitment to the “economy of reasoning” (lāghava) typical of South Asian philosophy, leads her to doubt that divine grace plays a particularly significant role in Śaṅkara’s soteriology.

Other scholars who engage Brad’s argument fall somewhere between uncritical acceptance and wholesale rejection. In my own comparative reading of Śaṅkara in conversation with Augustine of Hippo’s theology of election, for example, I found myself lingering on Brad’s proposals, only to move eventually to the self-revealing character of ātman itself as a more fitting analogue to an Augustinian understanding of effectual grace. Jacqueline G. Suthren Hirst offers a more substantive engagement in her *Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta*, but she reaches similar conclusions. Brad provides bookends for Suthren Hirst’s treatment of the Lord. First, she introduces his work as one side of a debate about Śaṅkara’s devotional theism, and then she engages him more directly towards the end of the chapter, in a discussion of
Like Brad, Suthren Hirst situates Śaṅkara’s theology in the context of ancient and medieval Vaiṣṇavism and criticizes any too-easy contrast between saguna and nirguna brahman. For Suthren Hirst, however, this has less to do with Śaṅkara’s commitment to a gracious God than with his commitment to the truth, coherence and efficacy of śruti.

As scholars, we make arguments, and generally we intend to convince others of the rightness of our conclusions. But sometimes the true value of our work has less to do with the questions we solve than with the questions we lay to rest. The scholarly consensus on Brad’s scholarly account of grace in Śaṅkara’s theology may be that this work, on this topic, is impressively broad, careful and definitive. We may or may not be persuaded by the argument. Nevertheless, we can expect that—at least for the foreseeable future—our various positions will of necessity be developed in serious, considered dialogue with Bradley J. Malkovsky.

Realist Vedānta

If relatively few scholars have walked through the door that Brad opened on the role of divine grace in Advaita, the same cannot be said for the realist approach to the tradition that his work on grace both presumes and advances. In this respect, Brad stands in a scholarly tradition that includes, among others, Richard De Smet (1916-1997) and Sara Grant (1922-2002). Brad’s edited collection, entitled New Perspectives on Advaita Vedānta, was dedicated to De Smet, he contributed an introduction to the published edition of Grant’s Tepe lectures, and his early essays engaged their contributions to a deepened understanding of Advaita’s theism and its potential for dialogue. The approach taken by Brad and his intellectual mentors is “realist” in at least two senses. First, at the level of name and form, it attempts to situate the teaching of Advaita Vedānta in the real, living contexts of those teachers and disciples that have brought it forward, from one generation to the next. Second, at the level of the highest truth, it argues against those monist or illusionistic interpretations of Advaita that have tended to carry the day, at least in the modern period.

With regard to establishing an adequate social and historical context for interpreting Śaṅkara, Brad is frequently recognized for his careful, detailed treatments of primary and secondary sources. I have already noted Suthren Hirst’s self-conscious affinities with Brad’s work on a probable Vaiṣṇava context of Śaṅkara’s teaching. Suthen Hirst, among others, also invokes his authority to establish authentic texts and legendary traditions associated with the great teacher. And Vijay Ramnarace draws on his expertise to explore Śaṅkara’s chronology in relation to the bhedābheda Vedāntin Nimbārka.

The most ambitious attempt to engage this aspect of Brad’s realist approach to Advaita, however, is undoubtedly the work of Joël Dubois, with whose invocation I began this essay. In his book, Dubois commends Brad for, among other things, paying close attention to Śaṅkara’s commentaries on the Upaniṣads alongside his commentaries on the Brahma-sūtras and Bhagavad-Gīta. As Dubois engages Taittirīya and Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣyas alongside ethnographic studies of the students, disciples and visiting scholars of the Śringeri māth and related institutions in Karnataka, he demonstrates their profound commitment to practice and ritualized performances of various kinds. In the Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya and related texts, Śaṅkara describes a discriminating intellect, disenchanted with the world and yearning for liberation, and mental self-mastery as prerequisites for study; in practice, the
tradition prescribes upāsana, grammatical and philosophical training, and even mindful participation in ritual sacrifice as necessary disciplines to foster these virtues and to produce skilful hearers of the Advaita teaching.19 Such disciplines, of course, only make sense in a rich devotional context that presumes many of those realities traditionally dismissed in more philosophical accounts.

Dubois underscores his indebtedness to Brad for this insight into the Advaita tradition in very strong terms, towards the end of his monograph:

My hope is that readers of this study, considered alongside the work of Marcaurelle, Malkovsky, and Suthren Hirst, will no longer let stand unchallenged the claim that Śaṅkara’s vedānta teaching is indifferent to the details of saṁsāra— the minds, bodies, methods, goals, and efforts inherent in life’s cycling from one limited experience to the next. I have joined the abovementioned authors in arguing that, while Śaṅkara undoubtedly urges those he addresses to renounce saṁsāra, he also makes good use of saṁsāra’s diversity and limitation.20

The empirical world may be provisional, but that does not render it irrelevant for Śaṅkara or for the traditions that would follow in his wake. Brad has helped all of us see this more clearly.

The vital centrality of empirical experience is highlighted in another major study that draws on Brad’s work: Anantanand Rambachan’s *Advaita Worldview*. Here the reality of the world is correlated closely to the robust, nondual reality of God. In two successive chapters of this work, tellingly entitled, “Brahman as the World” and “Brahman as God,” Rambachan makes repeated reference to Brad’s and De Smet’s arguments for a realist approach.21 Inveighing against those Advaita scholars who deny the natural world reality and value, Rambachan proposes what he contends is a more consistently nondual reading of the world as a “celebrative expression of brahman.”22 The world has its origin and purpose in brahman, as attested by both Śaṅkara and the Upaniṣads, and the transcendence of brahman the divine self is not threatened or weakened by its association with empirical realities. By the same principle, it is false to introduce any hierarchy into God’s own nature by means of the distinction between nirguna and saguna brahman.23 Though Rambachan draws mainly on traditional Advaita sources to make his case, he also privileges an insight he gained from Brad. “Malkovsky,” he writes, “has correctly argued that the term advaita does not seek so much to define brahman, but to correct a false understanding of reality. It is only indirectly a statement about brahman.”24

Others have also learned from this wisdom, and from the realist interpretation of brahman and the world that it implies.25 Others demur, at least with respect to the teaching of Śaṅkara.26 But Rambachan’s work invites us to consider whether the interpretation of Śaṅkara is the sole, or even the most important, issue at stake in this discussion. Rambachan, though he built his reputation as an exegete of Śaṅkara and draws heavily on the great teacher in his own proposals, does not hesitate to critique aspects of Śaṅkara’s thought where he believes criticism is warranted.27 Śaṅkara aimed to teach the truth of brahman not to construct a seamless system for all ages, but to facilitate the liberation of concrete, living persons, in the here and now. Contemporary interpreters should do no less. Brad’s work, alongside that of De Smet and Grant, suggests alternative possibilities for the interpretation of Advaita,
possibilities from which the tradition itself may have occasion to learn. The work of Anant Rambachan, arguably the most provocative and constructive Advaita theologian in contemporary North America, well demonstrates the fruitfulness of the offer.

**Christianity and Advaita**

Like De Smet and Grant, Brad offered his interpretations of Advaita Vedānta as a Christian theologian, and indeed his dissertation originally included a significant Hindu-Christian comparison. In his recent work—particularly his memoir—Brad has moved even more clearly in the direction of interreligious dialogue and reconciliation. But his earlier work also made an indelible mark advancing the living dialogue of Christianity and Advaita.

This element of Brad’s legacy follows seamlessly from the previous discussion, for it is precisely a realist interpretation of Advaita that has suggested new avenues for dialogue with Christianity. Two significant works, for example, draw upon Brad’s expertise to update a very specific form of engagement: the conversation between classical traditions of Vedānta and classical Thomism. In his *Synthesizing the Vedanta*, Sean Doyle offers a critical account of the Jesuit Pierre Johanns’ articles in the periodical *Light of the East*, in which he purported to show how only the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas could successfully integrate the insights of non-dualist, qualified non-dualist and dualist traditions of Vedānta. Towards the end of this work, Doyle invokes Brad to note the limitations of Johanns’ engagement of Śaṅkara and Advaita—restricted as it was to the “majority” acosmic, illusionistic school. Martin Ganeri picks up a similar thread of criticism closer to the beginning of his impressive comparative reading of Thomas Aquinas and Rāmānuja, *Indian Thought and Western Theism*. In this case, guided in no small part by Brad, Ganeri traces a trajectory from Johanns through De Smet to Sara Grant, attentive not only to the developing interpretations of Śaṅkara as such, but also to the ways that these interpretations also inflect the reception of Rāmānuja. The choices one makes in interpreting Śaṅkara, both works suggest, reverberate well into other traditions of Vedānta and even into one’s dialogical reading of Christianity.

Of course, the place where the realist reading of Advaita may make the most difference in the dialogue with Christianity has to do with the relation between God and the world—and the significance of this relation for reflecting on questions of meaning, value and authentic liberation. Thus, Moses P.P. Penumaka draws on Brad’s first monograph to draw a contrast between the majority, acosmic reading of Śaṅkara’s thought and Martin Luther’s doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*, concluding that only the latter can suitably ground an adequate Dalit theology in India. On the other hand, both Timothy C. Tennent and N.N. Trakakis, informed by Brad’s scholarship on De Smet and Grant, note that the denial of personhood in *nirguṇa brahmaṇ* by Śaṅkara may be read less to negate a positive understanding of the divine-world relationship than to emphasize the transcendence and absolute mystery of the one God—as well as new conceptions of personhood and relationality themselves. “Is not this conception of personhood, where the emphasis is placed on free and loving communion,” Trakakis writes, with reference to De Smet, “more in keeping with the patristic understanding of divine personhood than the forensic Lockean view that highlights individual agency and responsibility?”
Other scholars have also drawn on Brad’s work to inform their Hindu-Christian studies, but I would like to conclude this discussion by focusing on just one: Ankur Barua’s article entitled, “Christian Visions of Advaita Vedânta.” In this appreciative, critical reading of Bede Griffiths and Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux), Barua frames their respective theological explorations with both the realist Vedânta of De Smet and Grant, on one side, and the existentialist Christian theology of Paul Tillich, on the other. Despite their significant differences, on Barua’s reading, both Griffiths and Abhishiktananda were pursuing “one of the most profound themes in Christian philosophical theology—how to speak of the otherness of God in a manner that does not “objectify” God and reduce God to a condition of finitude.” Both pursued this question by developing nuanced correlations between advaita and Trinity, as well as by profound experiences of mystical interiority. In so doing, they offer Advaita Vedânta to Christian faith as a “constant reminder” of God’s apophatic transcendence and as a “providential means” to rediscover its own contemplative foundation.

Barua’s essay is a strong piece of synthesis, persuasive in its conclusions and appreciative in the use it makes, at several points, of Brad’s scholarship. But it also, I think, represents a kind of update of several of Brad’s earlier essays by a younger, up-and-coming scholar—one who is also, as it happens, familiar to readers of this journal. The legacy of Brad’s scholarship is not restricted to citations and the explicit use that others make of it (though there is plenty of that); it is also realized in a new generation of scholars, like Barua, who take up similar questions, investigate many of the same sources and bring fresh eyes and further nuance to a path that Brad has staked out precisely for others to follow.

Again, Grace

Of course, writing in the pages of the Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies, note must be taken of yet another expression of Brad’s legacy: the growth, expanding reach and ever-increasing professionalism of the journal itself. One of the first refereed articles I ever successfully brought to press was published in this journal, and I vividly recall the kindness and care that Brad brought to the review process. At several points, he reminded me how important it was for Christian theologians to engage creatively with Advaita, and I have no doubt that he was similarly encouraging of others, whether Advaitin or Vaiṣṇava or Christian or Agnostic. He was working tirelessly, with great love, to keep the conversation vital and growing.

Brad began his academic vocation researching the question of grace. For many of us, however, he is a gift of grace, in his scholarly insight, in his commitment to Hindu-Christian studies, and in his deep compassion. We shall dearly miss him at the helm of the journal, while also looking forward to the next phase of his scholarly career. We still have so much to learn.

Notes


2 Ibid., 1. The works Dubois cites are: Roger Marcarelle, Freedom through Inner Renunciation: Śaṅkara’s Philosophy in a New Light (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Bradley J. Malkovsky, The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śaṅkara (Leiden: Brill, 2001); and Jacqueline Suthren Hirst, Śaṅkara’s
Getting Real with Advaita Vedānta: Receiving Bradley J. Malkovsky’s Gifts of Grace 107

8 Rukmani, Review of Role of Divine Grace, 814.
11 Ibid., 117, 132, 213n29.
12 Ibid., 118-23, 129-35.
13 See especially ibid., 120-23, 135-36, 211n8.
18 Dubois, Hidden Lives, 15-17, 78.
19 Ibid., 10-15.
20 Ibid., 347.
21 Rambachan, Advaita Worldview, 67-97.
22 Ibid., 67-69, 78-80.
24 Rambachan, Advaita Worldview, 125n1.


28 This is actually part of Stephan’s critique of the published book—that, by leaving out the comparative portion from the original thesis, the book seemed to pass itself off as a work of Indology rather than a contribution to interreligious understanding. See his “Göttliche Gnade,” esp. 397-98.

29 See Bradley J. Malkovsky, *God’s Other Children: Personal Encounters with Love, Holiness, and Faith in Sacred India* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), and the further discussion by Voss Roberts.


33 On the latter point, see especially Ganeri’s discussion on Grant in ibid., 30-31.


39 Ibid., 526-31.

40 Ibid., 550.

41 Ibid., 551.
VIEWPOINT: Rethinking My Religion

Bradley Malkovsky
University of Notre Dame

WHEN Gopal Gupta, my successor as editor of this journal, kindly invited me to write this year’s Viewpoint piece, I agreed, but with great hesitation, not knowing if I would have anything new or meaningful to contribute to thinking about contemporary Hindu-Christian engagement. In the intervening months since Gopal’s invitation, I have considered many possible themes, but I have finally rejected all of them, as one by one they ended up seeming not so very important or timely, after all. But I eventually came to recognize that there was something far more important slowly emerging in my mind that I might articulate and bring to print, and that I should do this as honestly as possible.

What I have slowly come to realize was just how much my thinking about Christianity and Christian doctrine has changed over the past four decades and how much this change was due to my long encounter with other religions, especially with Hinduism. I first discussed this with the late Noel Sheth, SJ (1943-2017) a few years ago. Noel, a Catholic priest and professor, was a great Sanskritist from India who had contributed much to Hindu-Christian scholarship as well as to cordial relations between Hindus and Christians. His advice came as a warning: what you say out loud is one thing, but putting it into print is another. If you put something into print that doesn’t easily conform to Catholic teaching, the Catholic authorities will have an easier time coming after you. But I will offer this brief reflection, anyway, not knowing its outcome and hoping for the best.

Perhaps instead of calling these changes in myself a kind of theological development, they might be better termed a process of undevelopment in theological matters, a kind of unlearning, a gradual whittling away of some things I once held dear and essential to what it means to be a Christian, and in their place has emerged a gradual relearning of what is truly important. This is a development I never could have imagined earlier in my life, especially during my many years in Germany when I was studying Christian theology with some very famous Catholic and Protestant theologians, prior to going to India.

During my time in Germany in the late 1970s and early 1980s I was continually reminded of the central importance of Christian doctrine. Both in Catholic and Protestant faculties of theology German scholars have long been unrivalled in their ability to trace the development and importance of Christian teaching through the ages, starting with its foundation in the New Testament, continuing through the patristic and medieval eras, and finally arriving at modernity and our own contemporary world. Always one of the big themes was fidelity, i.e. faithfulness in changing times to what God

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Bradley Malkovsky teaches comparative theology at the University of Notre Dame in the U.S. and was previously the editor of the Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies.
Bradley Malkovsky

had definitively given to humanity for all times through the unsurpassable revelation in Christ.

There was an assumption during those days of the obvious superiority of Christian teaching over all the other teachings of the world religions. Not that the subject of other religions came up very often in the classroom. When religions were mentioned at all, it was always in sweeping statements, the implication being that other religions were on uncertain and doubtful ground with regard to truth and salvation. We didn’t even have to bother to really look at them or see what they were about; the superiority of our doctrines was something that could be safely assumed, because we had Christ, and the other religions didn’t. Part of this lack of interest in other religions also had to do with more urgent spiritual and cultural issues that needed addressing at the time, for example, the rise of secularism, materialism, and atheism in the West. But perhaps the bigger problem was ignorance. It is a sobering fact that there were no Christian theologians anywhere in Germany at the time I was studying theology who knew enough about Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam to speak about them with any authority in the classroom or in writing.¹

The contrast with today cannot be greater. Nowadays the issue of the salvation of members of other religions has faded for many (not all) Christians, as they have come to know Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists first-hand in an ever-shrinking world and have seen for themselves the goodness and even holiness manifested in the lives and faces of these people. The holiness of others is recognizable across religious and doctrinal divides. And from the Christian perspective holiness is always a fruit of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul, in his New Testament Letter to the Galatians 5:22-23, lists the transformative effects of the Holy Spirit in the following way: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” One sees these fruits of the Spirit both in Christians and in people of other religions.

Now if people of other religions are made holy by God it seems to me they should not be excluded from salvation just because they espouse doctrines that contradict Christian teaching. I am thinking here of the Muslim rejection of the Trinity and of the divinity of Christ, the Buddhist rejection of a creator God, and the Hindu teaching of reincarnation and its rejection of the Christian teaching of one earthly life. The Catholic Church’s Vatican II document from 1965, Nostra Aetate, formally recognized the presence of truth and holiness in other religions. The unsaid implication here is that people of other religions can be saved,² even if they embrace teachings that contradict Christian teaching.

All of this affirmation of the value of other religions as places where holiness is communicated does not mean that Christian teaching is now unimportant. I believe the central teachings of Christianity are relevant for all humanity, namely that God is love, that God was revealed in a decisive way for the good of all people in the life of Christ, that the resurrection is real, that all human beings have infinite dignity and value, that to be spiritual is not only to orient oneself to a deepened interior spiritual life, but also to work for peace and justice in the world, to work for the Kingdom of God, which was at the center of Jesus’ teaching. The standard Christian teaching, moreover, is that Christ definitively reveals God’s will to the world as well as the final aim of human life, which is loving communion between all people and between people and God.

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In fact, I think that it is better for all people - even holy people of other religions - to be familiar with the story of Jesus as given in the New Testament than it is to be ignorant of that life. And many people of other religions have indeed come to know the story of Jesus in at least a partial sense, and they find that story attractive and inspiring: There is probably no human being in history who has been so variously interpreted and adopted by other religions as has Jesus. His life in service to others, his renunciation of family life for the sake of God, his radical teaching of divine love, his fellowship with the poor and marginalized of society, and his example of patient suffering have endeared him to many. But at the same time I recognize that the understandings of Jesus found in other religions also diverge in almost countless ways from the way Christians see him. And even though some of these interpretations of who Jesus is contradict what Christians believe, they still have the capacity to inspire people to compassion and sacrifice. It is impossible to determine the extent of this ripple effect of the life of Jesus on the lives of people of other religions in the past two millenia, and even on people who do not know his story at all, but it is surely very great.

It is also true that many of the teachings of other religions and the challenges they present to Christian doctrine are quite substantial and significant. They have caused me to stop and rethink what is really essential regarding what God has revealed in Christ. I am no longer so sure about the truth and value of certain Christian teachings as I once was, for I have concluded that some of those teachings are actually secondary and non-essential to the basic story and teachings of Christ. I will not list here precisely what these teachings are, but I hope to write about them soon in a different essay.

One of the greatest changes I find in myself when compared to when I was first studying Christian theology is that I am not so quickly put on the defensive now when it comes to doctrinal disagreement. This is true both in regard to Catholic-Protestant disputes as well as to disagreements between Christianity and other religions. My desire to step into the shoes of the other as far as possible, to sympathize more and more with their views even when they contrast with those of my own tradition is, I think, a gift of God. Indeed, this seems to be a change of attitude embraced today by more and more people of different religions. There seems to be a greater readiness in interreligious encounters to acknowledge the merits of the other's argument while simultaneously recognizing the continued value but also the possible limitations of one's inherited teaching or at least the way that teaching has been articulated. We are no longer always talking past each other, as we have so often done during the past two thousand years. We sometimes recognize that we share a common pursuit of wisdom and a common spiritual journey. We often find ourselves today, representatives of different ancient faiths, grappling with the interlocking mysteries of life, death, human identity, and hope. Can we continue to learn from each other without compromising or abandoning the most precious insights of our wisdom traditions? How far can our doctrines bend and adjust themselves to the insights of the other without breaking? That is something each person must decide for herself.

Many years ago, in a remark I can no longer find, Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010), one of the great pioneers of Hindu-Christian interaction, observed that in addition to the three classical Hindu spiritual paths (margas) of inner knowledge (jnana), selfless action
(karma), and loving devotion to God (bhakti) a new fourth path has emerged in modern times. This is the path of interreligious dialogue. Such dialogue can be spiritually transformative for each person involved in the encounter. It is more than an exchange of information about one’s religion. It is ideally deeper than that. Sometimes in deep personal exchange with a person of another religion, especially when discussing the mystery of the divine, when heart speaks to heart in openness and humility, we may find ourselves suddenly enveloped by a palpable presence of God. We are reminded then of how much greater God is than any of our religions. In such encounters we sometimes find ourselves in the presence of the divine who is shining in the face of the other, an other whose doctrines are sometimes very different from our own. I believe that the God revealed in such encounters is a God of love who is at work in all the religions of the world, a God who creates community, even across religious boundaries, even when our doctrines don’t agree.

And I also see more clearly now than before how love and kindness are what is most important in what we do and how they must be put into action, not just by giving alms to the poor and oppressed, but also by working for social transformation. This approach to religious interaction was stated very well in Bombay more than half a century ago by Pope Paul VI in his address to the Indian people, especially to Hindus:

You, too, are engaged in the struggle against the ills that darken the lives of innumerable people all over the world: against poverty, hunger and illness; you too are fighting the relentless battle for more food, clothing, housing, for education, for a just distribution of the wealth of this world. Are we not all one in this struggle for a better world, in this effort to make available to all people those goods which are needed to fulfil their human destiny and to live lives worthy of the children of God? Therefore we must come closer together . . . with our hearts, in mutual understanding, esteem and love. We must meet not merely as tourists, but as pilgrims who set out to find God – not in buildings of stone but in human hearts. Man must meet man, nation meet nation, as brothers and sisters, as children of God. In this mutual understanding and friendship, in this sacred communion, we must also begin to work together to build the common future of the human race. Such a union . . . cannot be built on a universal terror or fear of mutual destruction; it must be built on the common love that embraces all and has its roots in God, who is love.³

So let us, Hindus and Christians, continue to learn from each other about the mystery of God and the divine will as it is disclosed to us in different ways in our different traditions of faith, as we journey forth to the divine, and let us put this love into action for the good of the world. And let us never forget that love, as St. Paul declared in his First Letter to the Corinthians 13:13, is the deepest of all mysteries and the greatest goal of all.

Notes

¹ This started to change among European Catholic theologians during the early 1980s. Hans Küng, a Swiss, having been removed from his position teaching Catholic theology at the University of Tübingen, because of accusations of heresy, turned his scholarly attention to other religions. Walter Kasper, also from Tübingen and for many years now a Cardinal in Rome, attended with great satisfaction (I know, because I was there) a Hindu-Christian theological conference in Austria in 1983. Around that time Karl Rahner of
Germany and Piet Schoonenberg, from the Netherlands, both discovered the Hindu teaching of non-duality (advaita) and wrote approvingly of it.

2 By salvation I mean full union of the human person with God, full participation of the human person in the life of love and self-knowledge of the divine, whereby the human being is transformed into a perfect expression or likeness of the divine.

3 This is from his “Address to the Members of Non-Christian Religions” from December 3, 1964. See http://www.clerus.org/bibliaclerusonline/en/g0u.htm
Annual Meetings

The society's annual meetings are held in conjunction with the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion. Please consult the AAR web site for details as to location, housing, and the like.

The format of our meetings typically consists of two sessions, the first on Friday evening and the other on Saturday, Sunday, or Monday, with a business meeting (open to all members) in the final half hour of the second meeting.

The society’s 2018 Annual Meeting will be held in Denver, Colorado, Nov. 16-18.

2018 Annual Meeting Program

Friday, November 16
7:00-9:00pm, Hilton City Center, Penrose II (Lower Level 1)
AAR Program: P16-501

Discussion of *To Be Cared For* by Nathaniel Roberts, Winner of the 2018 SHCS Book Award

Kerry San Chirico, Villanova University, Presiding

Panelists:
- Amy L. Allocco, Elon University
- Sarbeswar Sahoo, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi
- Eliza Kent, Skidmore College
- Shana Sippy, Center College, Carleton College

Responding: Nathaniel Roberts, University of Göttingen
Saturday, November 17  
7:30-8:30am, Hilton City Center, Independence (Lower Level 1)  
AAR Program: P17-6  

**Society for Hindus-Christian Studies Board Meeting**  
Michelle Voss Roberts, Emmanuel College Toronto, Presiding  

Sunday, November 18  
12:30-3:00pm, Hilton City Center, Penrose II (Lower Level 1)  
AAR Program: P18-104  

**An Invitation to Comparative Theology: Francis X. Clooney’s Argument for the Future of Hindus-Christian Studies**  
Jeffery D. Long, Elizabethtown College, Presiding  
Kalpesh Bhatt, University of Toronto  
*A Hindu-Christian “Third Space”: Integrating Comparative Theology with the Anthropology of Religion*  
Michelle Voss Roberts, Emmanuel College, Toronto  
*‘Study’ is a Verb: Toward a Not-(Only)-Elite Future of Hindu-Christian Studies*  
Daniel Soars, University of Cambridge  
*Hindu-Christian Studies: Theology and Interreligious Dialogue*  
Jonathan Edelmann, University of Florida  
*An Answer to the Call: Exploring the Risks and Rewards of Hindu-Christian Studies for Hindus Theology*  
Rita Sherma, Graduate Theological Union  
*Francis X. Clooney’s Timely Theological Imperative: Constructive Theology & The Lacuna in Religious Studies Methodology*  
Responding: Francis X. Clooney, Harvard University  

**Business Meeting**  
Michelle Voss Roberts, Wake Forest University, Presiding
Past Annual Meetings

2017 Boston, MA
2016 San Antonio, TX
2015 Atlanta, Georgia
2014 San Diego, California
2013 Baltimore, Maryland
2012 Chicago, Illinois
2011 San Francisco, California
2010 Atlanta, Georgia
2009 Montréal, Quebec
2008 Chicago, Illinois
2007 San Diego, California
2006 Washington, D.C.
2005 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
2004 San Antonio, Texas
2003 Atlanta, Georgia
2002 Toronto, Ontario-
2001 Denver, Colorado
2000 Nashville, Tennessee
1999 Boston, Massachusetts
1998 Orlando, Florida
1997 San Francisco, California
1996 New Orleans, Louisiana
1995 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
1994 Chicago, Illinois
BOOK REVIEWS


RAIMON Panikkar (1918-2010) was one of the most distinctive and memorable philosophical, theological and spiritual writers of last 50 years. It would be a real gap to think about the field of Hindu-Christian studies – as Christians study Hindu traditions and Hindus study Christian traditions – without discussing his many contributions and challenges to the field, and so this new book is welcome, and appropriate to this journal. “Without Ceasing to Be A Christian” is notable for three reasons. First, as the subtitle indicates, the book takes seriously Panikkar the (Catholic) Christian theologian, looking closely into his writings with respect to Christology in particular, rather than taking the “Christian part” for granted or focusing only on his contribution to the pluralist theology of religions.

Second, it takes seriously the early Panikkar, not only the first edition of The Unknown Christ of Hinduism, but also key and lesser known essays from the 1950s and 1960s, some of which have yet to appear in English. Erik Ranstrom takes the lead in the early chapters that focus on the early period. Fittingly so, since at Boston College he wrote a dissertation assessing Panikkar as a Christian theologian. Ranstrom writes the first three chapters (“Unknown Jesus or Unknown Christ? The Diversity of Panikkar’s Early Christology,” “The ‘Orthodox’ Creativity of Panikkar’s Early Dialogue with Hinduism,” “A Critical Reading of Panikkar’s Cosmotheandric Christology”) and leads the reader through strata of Panikkar’s thought on Christ. In Chapter One, Ranstrom moves back beyond the famed Unknown Christ to the older “Meditación sobre Melquisedec” (1962), which reflects on the significance of Melchisedek in Genesis as a mysterious Gentile predecessor to Christ. He argues that this essay offers the more solid vision of religions in Christ, whereas the book even in its first edition already prefigures Panikkar’s move toward a grander Christ, beyond Jesus. In Chapter Two, again attending to lesser known works such as Le Mystère du culture dans l’hindouisme et christianisme (1970) Ranstrom highlights Panikkar’s attention to sacrifice (yajna) and recognition of the importance of ritual action (karma) and thus his fruitful turn to the liturgical nature of Christian life and faith. Le Mystère turns out to be more useful in understanding the Vedic tradition than the more well-known The Vedic Experience: Mantra Manjari. Ranstrom concludes at the chapter’s end, “Panikkar’s efforts to understand more deeply the christological and sacramental tradition alongside Hinduism is a noteworthy contribution” (71). Chapter Three looks toward the later Panikkar. Here Ranstrom is less sympathetic, thinking that Panikkar lost his Christological balance later in his career, prey to a confusing mix of Christian language, insights from Advaita, and
a cosmotheandric mix of things that is notably his personal syncretism than good theology.

A third distinctive feature of the book is that it is also a commendable collaborative venture with a strong ecumenical flavor. Bob Robinson, Ranstrom’s co-author, wrote his dissertation and first book on Hindu-Christian relations, *Christians Meeting Hindus: An Analysis and Theological Critique of the Hindu-Christian Encounter in India* (2004). Here he writes the fourth chapter (“A Constructive Protestant Appreciation and Interaction”) and the fifth (“The Great Tradition Ruptured? A Constructive Interaction and Critique”). Robinson gently but firmly interrogates Panikkar’s Christian identity, not only in terms of how his deep Catholic loyalties meshed with his seeming post-Christian identity, but also in terms of his tendency to neglect Protestant insights into the very issues preoccupying him. Robinson aims at fairness, seeing the good before the critique. Thus he devotes Chapter Four to commonalities that Protestants can appreciate: neither the Church nor theology is ever static, but must always be reformed, even now in light of many religions; sensitivity to context; and recognition, growing among Protestants too, that Christ is present and effective in other religions. Robinson does not think that Panikkar and Evangelicals agree on everything – far from it – but that common ground is real and worth noting.

In the equally valuable Chapter Five, however, he points to Protestant concern over the disappearance of Jesus of Nazareth from Panikkar’s later Christology. We find here a sense of regret too, that Panikkar did not seem to engage in ecumenical learning that might have corrected certain tendencies in his thinking. Panikkar’s starting points are Catholic, which is fine, but not ecumenical, which means that his work misses important Christian resources for engaging the Hindu traditions. The ecumenical dimension of interreligious learning is important for all of us. I know that my own work, often placed in the category of Hindu-Christian studies, is really an instance of “(American) Catholic-Hindu studies.” I need to remind myself, over and again, that if I do incorporate a deep ecumenical dimension, I need at least to indicate the limits of my work. To put it positively: no single Christian tradition speaks for all Christians; the Christian contribution to Hindu-Christian Studies must be open to ecumenical correction, beginning to end; and Hindus, too, do not speak with a single voice, and so too must be ecumenical in their portrayal of the Hindu side of Hindu-Christian Studies.

Consequently, Hindu-Christian studies is a field that, as it matures, must continually pay attention to the intellectual history of those contributing to the field, Hindus studying Christianity, and Christians studying Hinduism. Ranstrom and Robinson show how Panikkar’s evolving Christian (and possibly post-Christian) identity kept reshaping his study of Hinduism. His insights were not timeless. In the later and more fluid phases of his life (both in India and in the USA), his reflections on Hinduism became more personal and less grounded in fresh study. The later writings are the freer flowing reflections of an older cosmopolitan figure, one who had the freedom to do and speak as he pleased, “for himself,” in a manner that is both fruitful and less productive.

The lesson for us in the field of Hindu-Christian studies, whether we are Hindus or Christians, is not that we should engage only in serious textual study and avoid generalizations or the reach for mystical wisdom. Rather, we need to remain autobiographically candid at each stage of our
lives, ready to admit what and how we have been accustomed to study, and where and for what reasons we are repeating ourselves. Certainly too, we need always to be ready to welcome younger and fresher contributors to the field as they bring different energies to Hindu-Christian studies. In our era, those of us who are Christian must also keep rethinking our Christology, so as to keep returning to Jesus himself, if we are to have anything to contribute to Hindu-Christian understanding.

Francis X. Clooney, SJ
Harvard University


It is somewhat surprising that one of the giants of Indian theology from the middle half of the 20th century has, since his death, been quite quickly forgotten or deemed irrelevant in theological circles and conversations. Such has been the fate of A. J. Appasamy (1891-1975), a prominent theologian and bishop of the Church of South India. The reasons for his neglect will be discussed later, but Brian Dunn’s rich and perceptive study of Appasamy, which is capped by the author’s own constructive exegetical and theological work, should cause comparative and Christian theologians to reexamine the thought of the intellectual pioneer.

Dunn begins his work with an introduction to the life and thought of Appasamy. He was born into a Tamil Christian family; however, his parents had radically different understandings of the faith. His father, a convert from a Shaiva devotional background, wanted to preserve the ties between his Hindu upbringing and his adopted religion. It was the senior Appasamy who impressed upon his son “the need for a truly Indian Christianity” which required an “immersion in classical Hindu literature” (13).

His mother, on the other hand, was quite conservative in her religious views, “and believed implicitly that all those who were not of the Protestant faith . . . were heading directly for hell” (13).

The son lived with this double inheritance all his life, on the one hand exploring and mining the Hindu tradition to craft a reinterpretation of Christianity for the Indian context, and on the other hand being deeply wedded to his inherited Anglican tradition. Appasamy’s multifaceted hybridity proved to be a source of both great creativity and great misunderstanding, as Dunn skillfully argues with the use of Homi Bhabha’s theoretical insights. Appasamy was educated at Madras Christian College, Hartford Theological Seminary and Harvard before going to Oxford where, in 1922, he completed a DPhil under the supervision of Canon B. H. Streeter, writing a dissertation entitled “The Mysticism of Hindu Bhakti Literature: Considered Especially with Reference to the Mysticism of the Fourth Gospel.” The gospel of St. John was to Appasamy “the source text for Christian bhakti, ‘India’s Gospel’” (15). It was also at Oxford that, under the deep influence of Rudolph Otto, he developed his interest in Ramanuja, which “would eventually culminate in 1930’s India’s Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted” (21). When he returned to India in 1923 after a time in Marburg, Appasamy joined other
Indian theologians such as Vengal Chakkarai and Pandideppi Chenchiah in creating Christian theologies that were drawn from Indian religious and philosophical sources. In 1932 he was ordained an Anglican priest, and worked for church union in India. He was consecrated bishop of the Church of South India in 1950, serving in Coimbatore until his retirement in 1959. Appasamy continued to write pastorally and theologically into the 1970s.

The second chapter of Dunn’s work deals with issues of methodology. Using Alasdair MacIntyre’s categories of Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition for pursuing philosophical and theological inquiry, as well as the work of Francis X. Clooney, Dunn argues for the integrity and importance of the field of comparative theology in the academy today. This argument is to counter those scholars who would discredit theology in favor of secular religious studies, confining the former to seminaries. Dunn ends the chapter by showing how theological inquiry as “a kind of reasoning about ultimate concerns as referenced to and rooted in traditionally recognized sources of religious revelation and authority” (70) is also practiced in Hindu religious traditions.

The following two chapters deal with Appasamy’s theological work. Chapter three explores the first decade (1922-32) of his oeuvre, as he interpreted St. John’s gospel in light of Rāmānuja’s philosophy and theology. The main themes of these years were the indwelling of God in the universe and the Incarnation. Such themes brought on criticisms from various quarters, especially the Gurukul Theological Research Group that was led by Swedish missionaries, who accused Appasamy of having a “panentheistic view” (94) and “no Atonement or Redemption in [his] theology” (119). The chapter helpfully clarifies Appasamy’s true position, and demonstrates that he was, in many ways, simply using the theology of his Anglican teachers and tradition in his reading of St. John’s gospel, even as he also employed terms and ideas to be found in Rāmānuja. The chapter closes with a discussion of Appasamy’s “somewhat surprising” (130) use of the term Avatāra for the Incarnation. Chapter four concerns itself with the development of Appasamy’s thought from 1933 to 1950. In these years he turned to important topics that he had earlier neglected, namely his understanding of the Holy Spirit and, following that, of the Trinity. Again, Appasamy explains these using terminology from Rāmānuja, although again his thinking has been deeply influenced by his Anglican heritage. With his ordination in 1932, Appasamy also turned more deliberately to discussion of the Sacraments, and following the lead of thinkers such as Canon Quick developed a sacramental view of the world (163). The chapter ends with topics pertaining to ecclesiology – Appasamy’s view of the church as the body of God, and his work for a united South Indian church.

The fifth chapter critically examines Appasamy’s reading of Rāmānuja, in order to assess how the former actually used the latter: “what exactly has he learned from Rāmānuja? How has he allowed Rāmānuja’s tradition to help him ‘rethink’ his ‘fundamental ideas’?” (181). The answers are varied. Interestingly, the Bishop referred to Rāmānuja far more frequently in his earlier work than in his later. Part of this had to do with the topics he was covering: the more his theology became concerned about Anglican tradition and practice, the less use he had for the Indian philosopher theologian. Yet Appasamy also suffered from his own restricted vision: he “seems to have missed or deliberately
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ignored” Rāmānuja’s “tradition-specific realities . . . in his reading of the Ācārya” (182).
So the chapter ends with an investigation of Ramanuja’s theology and philosophy in his sectarian and temple-based context. Dunn’s final chapter develops his own “Christological Reconstruction” of the Gospel of John. He does this not “on the basis of Rāmānuja’s philosophy,” but by rereading John after a close reading of Appasamy and Rāmānuja (229).

Brian Dunn has produced a very well argued and compelling investigation of A. J. Appasamy’s theology. Dunn is clearly irritated by the bishop’s detractors who “have entirely misread him if indeed they have even read him at all” (180). However, Dunn’s defense is not polemical: he discusses weaknesses and flaws in his subject’s work. Dunn’s own constructive project, a theological rereading of John’s gospel, is fascinating, although it tends to ignore tensions within the book. The main disagreement I have – and it is a minor one – regards the reasons for the current neglect of Appasamy. Dunn, following Homi Bhabha, lays the blame at the feet of colonial attitudes to Indian theology. However, contemporary criticisms of so-called “brahminic” Christian theologies do not care about what Swedish Lutheran missionaries said in the 1950s. Rather, the criticisms arise from Dalit and Tribal theologies (43). Until the logjam created by pitting Dalit against brahminic Christian theologies is disrupted, theologians such as Appasamy will continue to be disregarded, much to the detriment of Indian Christianity, as well as Hindu-Christian comparative theology.

Arun W. Jones
Emory University


To conduct solid comparative scholarship requires clarity in purpose, an authoritative deftness with the nuances of two different religious systems, and a writing style that can create a bridge of understanding for its intended audience. Voss Roberts has excelled at all of these markers in her latest book, Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology, all while broadening commitments to inclusivity by centering feminist, ecological and disability studies’ perspectives.

The primary intention of her work is to re-embody the imago Dei and trace out some of the implications of making this shift within Christian theology. Going beyond the explicit goal of centering mind and reason as the dominant lenses employed by theologians when interpreting the imago Dei (xx-xxi), Voss Roberts works to upend the underlying dualism and hierarchies of body-mind constructions of personhood (13, 86) and between humans and creation (134) through her innovative engagement with her interlocutor, Abhinavagupta (10th-11th century), a Hindu philosopher within a branch of Kasmiri non-dual Saivism.

As a theological anthropology, the emphasis lies in the effects of the imago Dei metaphor on human beings as they see themselves as a reflection of God. For those unfamiliar to this genre of constructive theology, this volume does not involve the typical methods of fieldwork and interviews known to the discipline of anthropology, but...
rather involves biblical references, engagement with a wide spectrum of classical and contemporary theologians, memoirs especially related to mental health, and commentary on current affairs with the intent of expanding the “anthro,” or human dimensions, of embodied selfhood as framed by Christian doctrine.

Unique to Voss Roberts’ approach to theological anthropology is the comparative window she places at the center of this enterprise. Within the complex oeuvre of Abhinavagupta, she carefully selects his interpretation of cosmic-divine-human manifest form detailed in two commentaries related to The Goddess of the Three (Paratrisika). Her work creates a responsibly bounded space in which to utilize a reading of the embodiment of divine consciousness, enacted through the Hindu god Siva. Her purpose for this comparison is to “spark new possibilities – or revive the memory of forgotten parts of the Christian heritage” (xxx) in order to present an imago Dei in Christian thought that embraces multiplicity, limits, and equitable relationships (81).

Abhinavagupta’s processual emanation of consciousness, creating a non-hierarchical multiplicity within a simultaneous unified state, moves through thirty-six parts as grouped together in five categories that Voss Roberts adopts as an organizational strategy for her chapters. Starting with the “conscious body,” as Siva begins to recognize a distinct self in relation to other, the analysis takes the finely-tuned layers common to Hindu philosophical parsing to gradually examine facets of increasing density of embodied consciousness with chapters devoted to the limited body, the subjective body, engaged body, and elemental body.

Voss Roberts accomplishes loosening the influence of the cognitive capacity of the mind on imago Dei through highlighting a model that places manas, the mind/heart as emerging only halfway through the embodying of consciousness as part of the subjective body, rather than its primary and most important feature (84-6). The second is through taking seriously each tattva, or part, as embodied (xxxv). These thirty-six tattvas include minute interactional processes common to many Hindu conceptualizations of “body” related to limitations, sensations and elements that co-create bodiedness in time and space.

This is some of the hardest bridgework Voss Roberts engages in when juxtaposing this complex “body”, helpfully envisioned in a table that reappears in each chapter, with a “body” consisting of few explicit correlates found within Christian theology. Why Voss Roberts is able to effectively engage these seemingly disparate models is because her goal is not a direct comparison of the conceptualizations of the body, which might unintentionally elide major differences between ideas of consciousness and soul. Instead, her more productive examination concentrates on the possible effects of viewing imago Dei through Abhinavagupta’s model as a resource for living Christian practitioners seeking to bring forth the “heavenly banquet – communal, inclusive, and countercultural – [that] is still breaking in” (157).

How do these thirty-six tattvas open up more inclusive Christian understandings of the imago Dei? One of Voss Roberts’ strongest argumentative threads occurs in chapters two and three on the limited body. In Abhinavagupta’s model, parts of Siva’s unfolding consciousness are circumscribed, namely power, knowledge, satisfaction (desire) as experienced within further confinements of time and space. These five limitations are predicated through maya, or
the illusion of being other or separate from the underlying unity of divinely pervaded creation (37). In Hindu devotional traditions, these limitations of divine consciousness can be found in Krishna taking the form of a child reliant on a mother’s care, his heartbroken despondency in relation to hurting Radha, and consecrated murtis that must be attended to through puja. These examples note divine limitations, taken on by choice, in order to cultivate affection or deeply experience difference that can only be tasted through interacting with a perceived otherness.

Why this matters for Voss Roberts is that it points to how an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent God leads to an imago Dei in which limitations experienced by humans prevent their full selves as they are from being included and valued within divinely sanctioned creation. When humans exist in limited states, permanently or temporarily, from the coma patient to those experiencing physical and intellectual disabilities or mental health struggles, all examples Voss Roberts explores, the imago Dei is off limits. Voss Roberts adroitly critiques scholars, such as Reinhold Niebuhr for his ableist self-transcendent solutions that “leaves bodies [in all states] behind” (32), builds off of the work on “normalization” of disability by Deborah Creamer, and points to underexamined Christian resources, such as the Trinitarian vulnerability of the Christ child within the work of feminist theologian Elizabeth Gandolfo (61-2). Ultimately, Voss Roberts utilizes Abhinavagupta to make the case for a positive valuation of limits in relation to God and humans. Limits can no longer be perceived as a “deficit in divine perfection,” leading to an imago Dei in which “human limits reflect something of God’s experience in the world” (54).

A noteworthy feature is the inclusion of “practices of attention” included at the end of each chapter. These invite readers to engage in practices in order to unlearn deeply seeded ideologies and in this case, metaphors such as the imago Dei, that have an impact on habits (xlv). Examples include bringing awareness to the everyday, engaging the imagination, and “yoking the instruments of cognition” to understand the stories of others (98). The practices are discussed more meta-discursively rather than presented as a “how-to” guide, the latter an approach remedied by the accompanying website. In some ways the discussion about “practices of attention” in the book may remain too tied to mental and able-bodied capacities that Voss Roberts intends to bring awareness to in her argument for inclusivity, but for many of her intended readers invites a more holistic engagement with the ideas presented.

On a final note, this is a work committed to religious pluralism (66), and one in which those steeped strictly in classical Christian or Hindu theologies may find difficult to engage. As an example of this pluralism, the imago Dei is extended as a possible category to all religions, while imago Christi is connected to a particularly Christian experience (116-20). Even if this form of pluralism goes too far for some readers, or if Christian theology is not your main expertise, there are many worthy offerings in this text for scholars interested in responsible comparative work, body theorizing, and disability studies.

Katherine C. Zubko
University of North Carolina Asheville

*Kanal*, translated by Right Reverend Jebanesan, it must be said, is a book that disturbs by choice. Written by K. Daniel, *Kanal* is a fine piece of writing that fictionalizes the contact zone within which encounters between Jaffna’s castes occurred at the time when the Christianization of the Hindu lower castes was catching fire. This historical fiction, represents the struggles of S. Gnana Prakasar and the Dalit communities of Jaffna. Their search for ways to deliver themselves from the hierarchy of caste and its various discriminations and the practice of bonded labor makes demands on the reader to enter the religio-cultural context of the upper and lower castes. The novel retains the flavor of Jaffna through effective usage of Sinhalese and Tamil words that are used within sentences. This method of writing and translating does well in the service of representing a culture such that the colonial language of English is not permitted to erase contexts. Jaffna caste hierarchies and caste critiques are rendered plausible through this method of writing and translation.

The encounter between Christianity and Hinduism that polarizes Jaffna’s agricultural communities is vividly represented by the writer. The struggle that Christianity engages in to gain hegemonic dominant status within a majority Hindu community holds the attention of the reader to the end. However, the failure of the Christian priest to find a solution to the increasing trauma that poverty brings to the people brings the novel to an end. The mirage (*kana*) that the Catholic priest sees in the last chapter brings the narrative to the tail end of the argument it has been formulating all along. The liberative potential that Christianity holds for the lower castes of Jaffna’s farm laborers is shown to be a limited liberation. While it gives the Christian converts a definite dignity and sense of self-worth, it compromises on the issue of caste towards the end of the novel. The writer thus announces the brevity of the victory against the caste system after a battle that Christianity is depicted to have waged against it in order to grow the numbers of the new church in Jaffna.

The fictionalized account of caste practices and gender violence that is strewn through the narrative makes it a very real portrayal of the life in this part of Sri Lanka. While the lives of the Dalits are portrayed in a more positive light, the fact of the common trauma of caste is the bond that holds them together. The Dalit community is imaged as more sensitive and compassionate while only one or two of the upper caste men are shown to be capable of being humane.

A very useful set of ‘Explanatory Notes’ added at the end of the novel asserts the varied implications and micro-contexts within which the characters play out their roles in the narrative.

The novel’s pointed use of the female subject and her body at regular intervals in the narrative by upper-caste men, including the strongman Tampapillayar, a land owning upper-caste character who is employed by K. Daniel to represent the violence that was perpetuated along caste lines, is significant given the intimate connection that caste politics has with bodies and the subjugation of the body. The assault and abuse of female
Bodies reverberates through the narrative as a linking device used to narrate the increasing potential that Christianity deploys in bettering the lives of the Jaffna Dalits. The assault of female bodies by upper-caste Hindus has a crucial function: that of raising villains and protectors along caste lines, rendering the female characters helpless and lacking in agency. This is noticeable all through the narrative except when Cinni, now Terici after her conversion to Christianity and marriage to Cimiyon, is developed by the writer as a female character who grows within the embrace of Christianity. The other female characters are the recipients of abuse or minimally employed by the author to further the plot.

Caste and gender therefore come together such that the deliverance from caste atrocities parallels the deliverance from gender atrocities. Christianity however briefly plays deliverer before showing itself as incapable of having complete liberative tools to set the captives free.

So while this is a book that voices a virulent caste critique, it also registers a critique of Christianity. This is a novel which captures the nature of organized religions’ failures and the limited hopes that it doles out to the Dalits of Jaffna.

Amitha Santiago
Bishop Cotton Women’s Christian College


ZOE Sherinian, Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Oklahoma, specializes in the intersections of culture, music, religion, caste, and gender studies, particularly in the context of South Asian Christianity and Dalit social life. This, her first monograph, brings to life the sound, power and liberative theological dimensions of understudied forms of Tamil folk music through an intimate and compelling portrait of the Tamil professor, musical composer, theologian and activist Theophilus Appavoo (1940-2005).

The book is not simply a biography, however, but presents Appavoo as a “catalytic node” (61) at the hub of this theoretically-informed, culturally-thick ethnographic study of the practice, values, and contexts of the music, politics, spirituality, and people he championed. The first three chapters (Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2) describe the book’s theoretical orientations, introduces Tamil folk music, and the context of Dalit oppression. While the Introduction is grounded in ethnomusicology, it builds on and beyond it to consider “music as . . . the human experience of and relationship to the divine” (3) that enables a “transformative process . . . informed by a commitment to emancipation from caste, gender, and class oppression” (4). Chapter 1 makes clear that high-caste Hindu notions about culture concealed within the history of Dalit conversion to Christianity maintain caste hierarchies in social life, specifically in the form of classical karnatak music in liturgy and, notably, “objective” western ethnomusicology (53-54). Despite this, and contra Mosse (24) and others who question Dalit Christianity’s historical liberative role, Sherinian turns to Ortner’s “subaltern practice theory” to listen for the subaltern voice via “slippages” within repressive systems (46). Thus, Chapter 2 narrows the focus to examine Appavoo’s family history and Dalit Christians’ historical
relationship with Christian conversion and music. She stresses how the family’s conversion narrative resists the patterns described in previous scholarship, and, moreover, how Dalit mastery of brahmanical music was the first phase of what Bhabha notes as the “mimicry” of resistance.

In Chapters 3-4 Sherinian focuses on Appavoo himself, on his theology and his specific seminary performances, respectively. Slippage may be too weak a word to capture the creative power of Appavoo’s own transformation to “Dalit consciousness” and attendant turn to folk music described here. That is, Chapter 3 details not only his rejection of brahmanical classicism but also his constructive praxis of: 1) everyday Eucharistic communal eating and shared labor; 2) a sense of universal family drawing on Dalit village religion and a bi-gendered divine; 3) and strategic reversals that reclaim village art and culture. Sherinian contextualizes these dimensions through fine-grained analysis of Appavoo’s songs, lyrics, and rhythms, along with his storytelling and theological learning from years of dialogue with poor, rural Dalits.

The chapter ends by placing Appavoo’s theology in a global conversation with feminist and womanist theologians, such as bell hooks, foreshadowing the transnational turn by the book’s conclusion. Ch. 4 offers the most sustained ethnographic account in the book, describing the liberative focus and dialogic performance process of Appavoo’s compositions at the Christmas Carol Service. The reader gets a sense of the dialogical dynamism—including participatory composition and community building—that Appavoo’s methodology enables. Sherinian’s account includes her own participation in and personal, social transformation through the relationships and dialogue she experienced through the music, shared meals, and relationships formed during her field work.

Finally, Chapter 5 moves beyond Appavoo and his specific context to examine the experience of rural Dalits through the lens of receptions of Appavoo’s music and the broader Dalit activism of three Tamil Theological Seminary graduates. The ways in which Appavoo’s vision and Dalit activism have been limited, often among urban, middle-class, Christians, however, are balanced effectively by a number of significant successes. From an Appavoo student helping organize Dalit village women to march and tear down a toddy (hard liquor) shop and work for labor organizing, to a Dalit caste group refusing to play their drums (para) in compliance with brahmanical hierarchy for the first time in history as they sing Appavoo’s songs, this chapter demonstrates that the songs and theology analyzed here are not that of an individual, but a “people’s theology” (241). Widening the angle still further, Chapter 6 broaches the broader question of the relation of Dalit struggle to the other struggles of the “oppressed” by examining Appavoo’s “most universal” song (Chapter 6). More specifically, by including examples such as the performance of a Dalit drumming group at the UN’s 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, she makes clear that the questions raised by Appavoo’s work are not confined to him or even to his wider South Asian Dalit context, but are a vital part of and thus relevant to emerging global networks of liberation.

In conclusion, Sherinian’s book offers a compelling account of Tamil Folk music (complete with transcriptions and links to online recordings); its social locations, and broader theological potential—and makes a number of important contributions along the way. In choosing Appavoo, a Dalit Christian...
composer and activist as her main example of liberation theology, Sherinian’s work makes a specific intervention: illuminating not only a denigrated form of music, but bringing much needed attention to the practice of the arts as vital to political and spiritual liberation. As she points out, the lived performance of music can be experienced as a form of freedom in itself, a point typically overlooked in accounts of liberation theology, yet nonetheless central to James Cone’s insight that “to sing the spiritual was to be free” (qtd. 59). The centrality of direct experience is also important to this book’s second major contribution: its attention to the ethnographer’s own impact and subjectivity in the fieldwork context and its clear endorsement of advocacy anthropology. These dimensions of advocacy and self-reflexivity in Sherinian’s ethnographic methodology lead to the work’s final major contribution, namely, its attempt to incorporate biography. Though some may question if the book’s strategy of focusing on Appavoo doesn’t veer too far towards “tribute”, in my view at least, and as Sherinian states, the focus on the individual here is itself a necessary corrective to views of Dalit individuals who function mainly to represent a group (59). More theologically, as Appavoo says about his own Christian guru (108), it is only through an embodied human individual that the divine—and thus, this ethnomusicology as theology—can become real.

Timothy Dobe
Grinnell College


*PENTECOSTALISM* and Politics of Conversion in India draws upon several years of periodic ethnographic fieldwork among the Bhils of southern Rajasthan, and particularly among those who have converted to Pentecostal Christianity. The volume opens with chapters on the growth of Pentecostalism in the region, the nature of conversion, and issues of gender, and then concludes with two chapters on Hindu-Christian conflict and anti-Christian violence. Sahoo’s thesis, in his own words, is that the “ideological incompatibility and antagonism between Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists provide only a partial explanation for anti-Christian violence in India” (7). A more complete explanation, Sahoo suggests, would include factors such as “competing projects of conversion of both Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists, the politicization of identity in relation to competitive electoral politics, and the dynamics of the (BJP-led) development state” (7).

That last point, on the dynamics of development, is worth highlighting. One of the things that makes this work particularly rich is the fact that Professor Sahoo’s earlier research was on development, and especially on the competing development projects of different religious communities among the Bhils. As Sahoo shows in the Bhil context, and as is true elsewhere, development projects are often initiated for the very purpose of securing the loyalty or sympathy of those served. This purpose adds a layer of complexity and competition to interreligious interactions, and contributes, in Sahoo’s view, to their volatility.
Sahoo is among a very small number of scholars who have studied Pentecostalism in India, and an even smaller number who have looked closely at the political implications of this form of Indian Christianity. That alone makes this book a unique and valuable contribution. In addition, however, Sahoo has a broad range of related literature (on Indian Christianity, on conversion, on nationalism and politics, on development, etc.) at his fingertips, and regularly brings his own research into conversation with that literature, drawing upon it, testing it, and applying its insights to his own work.

One of the scholarly debates with which he regularly engages concerns the nature of conversion. Two competing explanations for conversion to Christianity in India are dominant at both the popular and scholarly levels. While these explanations usually reflect the bias of the people articulating them, they are united in presuming that most converts have been lower-caste and/or impoverished. The first common explanation is that lower-caste Christians convert for equality and dignity that they cannot find within their own Hindu tradition. The second is that they convert for the economic or social advancement they can achieve by making use of Christian educational, vocation, and medical services. Sahoo’s work among the Bhils confirms my own intuition that whatever may have been the case in the past, the vast majority of those who convert to Christianity in India today, and particularly those who convert to Pentecostalism, do so in the wake of a miraculous healing. As one of Sahoo’s informants remarks, “in tribal society, a small miracle is a big thing; it increases people’ astha (faith), in Christ and they begin to visit the church...” (37). The occasionally temporary nature of these affiliations with Christianity—those who cease to be healed within Christianity are liable to look elsewhere—demands that we think about conversion as a process rather than a momentary act, a process that does not in every situation lead to a deepening of faith, but at least in some cases leads to deconversion.

It is interesting, in this regard, that Sahoo’s Christian informants themselves have begun to distinguish between “believers” or “followers,” on the one hand, and “converts,” on the other (74). Followers, according to Professor Sahoo, are those who have “become disenchanted with [their] earlier belief system and have experienced a spiritual and religious transformation and transition in their lives” (76). Many have received baptism, but, in Professor Sahoo’s estimation, “The only reason why they have not followed the legal means of conversion is the fear of persecution and the legal disadvantages that will follow their conversion...” (76). While these legal matters do indeed prevent many Indian Christians from openly identifying as such, I do also suspect at least a few of these “followers” might avoid formal conversion not only because of a fear of persecution and the legal disadvantages of conversion, but also because of the primacy of healing in their religious behavior and choices, that is, because of an efficacy orientation that leads them to affiliate with the community where they find healing and prosperity, and also encourages them to shop around, as it were, in search of it.

Historically, one of the points of contention between Hindus and Christians on the issue of conversion is—to use language borrowed from Reid Locklin—that Hindus have generally conceived of conversion as conversion “up” (that is personal transformation within one’s own tradition) whereas Christians have tended in the modern era to conceive of conversion as conversion
“over,” that is, conversion marked by a complete and transformative shift in identity from one community to another. This contention lies at the heart of Gandhi’s assertion (and complaint, when speaking to Christian missionaries) that it was better to encourage a person to advance spiritually within their own tradition than to convert them to one’s own. My sense, however, is that Indian Christians have in recent decades begun to think a bit more like Gandhi in this regard. As Kerry San Chirico and others have shown, for example, *Yeshu bhakt* (Devotees of Jesus) and *Khrist bhakt* (Devotees of Christ) movements have recently proliferated in India. In these movements, non-Christians are welcome to come and have a transformative spiritual encounter with Jesus like they might with any non-Christian deity, but, importantly, *are not encouraged to convert in the sense of formally becoming Christian*. They are, in essence, encouraged to convert “up” but not “over.” One finds this new way of thinking primarily among mainstream Catholic and Protestant Christians, however. The last place one would expect to find it is among Pentecostals, because Pentecostal theology has historically tended to encourage a complete rupture with the non-Christian past at the moment of conversion (the reality, of course, is always much messier). In light of this, one of Sahoo’s most interesting discoveries is that even Pentecostal conceptions of conversion seem to be shifting, such as in the words of one of his interviewees, Madam Mary, who, according to Sahoo, “pointed out that real conversion is not about *dharma parivartan* (change of religion) or acceptance of Christian baptism; it is rather about *jeevan parivartan* or total transformation of life” (72). Whether this decreasing emphasis on a formal change of religious affiliation is a result of the influence of Hinduism or a response to the challenges that come with formal changes in religious affiliation (e.g., social resistance and hostility, a loss of reservation benefits) is a more difficult question to answer.

*Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India* is the work of an intelligent and thoughtful interpreter with excellent scholarly instincts, a knack for lucid prose, and a very broad and wide-ranging grasp of the relevant scholarly literature. It is eminently readable and would be accessible even to an advanced undergraduate audience.

Chad Bauman
Butler University

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THE Khrist Bhaktas can be found in and around Roman Catholic spaces of the Banaras region. These “devotees of Christ” are mostly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). They are majority women, though male numbers are increasing. And they regularly seek the ministrations of Indian Missionary Society (IMS) priests, nuns from various orders, and fellow Khrist Bhakta and lay Catholic *aguas*, or catechists, who travel to scores of local villages fanning out of Matri Dham Ashram like ripples on water. On the second Saturday of each month, thousands of Khrist Bhaktas can be found at the ashram...
worshiping Yesu, testifying to healings received from his Spirit, and seeking material and spiritual succor from those that comprise Indian Catholicism’s devotional constellation. The plot twist: Because they are unbaptized, Khrist Bhaktas do not receive the sacraments accompanying a Catholic from cradle to grave. So in lieu of the sacraments various means have been enacted between bhaktas and clergy allowing for tangible encounters with a novel deity—in Kashi, of all places. The essentialized mind reels.

Mark Juergensmeyer once wrote that India is “good to think with.” The same can be said of the Khrist Bhaktas, an anomalous community that this reviewer has himself been studying and (thinking with) since 2008. What are the Khrist Bhaktas? A hybrid Hindu-Christian religious movement in the making? A new form of charismatic Christianity in which devotees remain within their inherited family and jati? A Hindu movement with a surprising ishtadevata? The religious expression of on-going low caste emancipation? All are reasonable conclusions, but they are hardly academic due to complicating factors, some legal: due to Indian personal religious law, the Khrist Bhaktas are considered Hindu because they are identified with communities deemed not Christian, Muslim, or Parsi; but because they are unbaptized they can neither be considered Catholic by Catholic canon law (which requires baptism) nor Christian by terms set by the Indian constitution. Khrist Bhaktas thus dwell both in between and across religious boundaries. This would matter less in a country where particular religious and class identities are unidentified in favor of individual rights before the law. Yet in India, where such identities are explicit and legally defined, where different laws attend to different communities, and where affirmative action programs aid some and not others, it matters a great deal.

For Catholics in relationship with the Khrist Bhaktas, and to those sensitive to their existence, the community evokes certain challenges and evocations—regarding the nature of salvation and the Church’s role in it, the way ecclesial structures are understood to inhibit mission (the view of many Indian clergy), the inability of a tradition to socially control meanings that originate from within its own history (e.g. baptism), and the concomitant vagaries of choosing to follow Yesu (for Khrist Bhaktas and Catholics) at a time when doing so can be, at least, complicated and, at most, dangerous.

Kuttiyanikkal’s text, a doctoral dissertation written at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology in the Netherlands, seeks to examine the Khrist Bhaktas to see whether they provide a model for being “the Church” in contemporary India. First, however, the scholar admirably provides necessary historical and theological context for answering the question in a sustained and systematic fashion. The Introduction sets the stage for the rest of the text, notes prior research, and attempts to identify criteria for determining “a successful inculturation in the area of community building” (34). This is both a descriptive and prescriptive work seeking to accomplish something on behalf of the Indian Catholic Church in the hope that it might contribute to the wider tradition, particularly as understood through the Second Vatican Council. For as IMS clergy often say, and as the author concurs, the Khrist Bhaktas represent “a new way of being the Church.” Chapter 2 places the community within the context of Indian Catholic inculturation efforts, noting widespread (elite) Indian Catholic dissatisfaction with structures and practices that are often yoked to the popular (read
Hindu) perception of Catholicism as foreign imposition attractive only to dalits. Chapter 3 explicates the history, organization, and function of the movement. Chapter 4 describes ashram and Khrist Bhakta practices and the negotiations made between devotees, priests, and nuns. These chapters present a necessary prolegomena to what must be considered the work’s core as well as its primary contribution to Catholic thought—that is, Chapter 5 and the Conclusion.

In Chapter 5, “The Ecclesiology of the Khrist Bhakta Movement,” the author acts as a kind of ecclesial archeologist, seeking ways to explicate a doctrine of the church that is rather implicit. In the end we find that the ecclesiology is rather undeveloped, perhaps by design, in favor of more robust articulations of the salvific efficacy of Christ and the Holy Spirit, led by a charismatic figure with a small number of clergy, lay, and Khrist Bhakta support. Thus, the operative ecclesiology is remarkably Pentecostal and evangelical. Historically, the canonical, pakka—that is normative—progression into the Church begins with the catechumenate (the period of instruction into the Catholic faith), followed by baptism, and culminates in reception of the Eucharist. Yet because they do not receive baptism, they cannot be considered official members of the Church and thus cannot receive communion, “the core of the whole sacramental system” (259). Meanwhile, their piety suggests to Catholics, including Kuttiyanikkal, that they are, ironically, the most Christian, in a kind of simplified, pious, Hindu (often a rather vague signifier), early church kind of way. If they are not part of the Church, then who is? The further one gets into the weeds of such discussions, the more one feels like the scholar is attempting to fit a square peg into a round hole. We find ourselves in a peculiar situation where there exist devotees of Christ, often more pious than baptized Catholics, who cannot fully participate in the Catholic Church as it is historically construed. This is because baptism is perceived as ipso facto breaking Hindu bonds (possibly evoking Hindu violence,) and because, surprisingly, Catholic clergy fear that baptizing these thousands would not only endanger themselves and the Khrist Bhaktas, but would actually lead these believers towards nominalism. This oft-repeated argument should give us pause. Kuttiyanikkal mentions such revelations, but fails to explore their profound implications.

Meanwhile, the author alludes to another body of Christians ready, willing, and able to afford Khrist Bhaktas full status, who suffer no scruples regarding precipitate baptism, and are only increasing in number. Should Khrist Bhaktas tire of being unable to receive the highest form of encounter with Yesu (as they have been taught that paramprasad, or Eucharist, represents), and if they should begin to perceive themselves as second-class citizens among baptized Catholics, then Pentecostals stand ready to accept them into their fold.

Unfortunately, the text lacks an index, but it does contain an exhaustive Table of Contents and a helpful system of transliteration for those unfamiliar with Hindi and Sanskrit. The robust footnotes are a treasure trove for those eager to attend to the author’s sources, perhaps reaching their own unique conclusions. The dissertation is therefore a valuable contribution to ongoing reflection on a movement likely still in its early stages, and to issues of inculturation, Indian Catholicism, and the surprising intersection of bhakti, Catholic ashrams and charismatic Catholicism.

So can the Khrist Bhakta movement be a model for community building? The author is
inconclusive. Perhaps this community is too idiosyncratic, the tradition too tied to structures and intransigent theologies born of different soil. We should note in closing that the challenges to Catholic ecclesiology are problems for the Indian Catholic Church, not necessarily for the Khrist Bhaktas. As is their wont, they continue to worship Yesu, Mata Mariayam and other saints as they are able, with all the Hindu/Christian/human tools at their disposal. They do so on terms often mediated by the Catholic Church in a charismatic, top-down, semi-acculturated register, but there is certainly no guarantee that this shall continue indefinitely.

Kerry P. C. San Chirico
Villanova University


PREMA Kurien’s *Ethnic Church Meets Megachurch* supplies the field with an important sociological account of the transnational religious and ethnic contestations within the Mar Thoma church, a Syrian Christian church based in Kerala. Her extensive ethnographic research, dating back to 1999, is a refreshingly data-rich study that is longitudinally oriented in its inclusion of the extensive history of the Mar Thoma church since its inception in the early decades of the Christian era. It is also a geographically cross-sectional study in its attention to the transnational intersections between the Mar Thoma church in India and in the United States. Kurien’s data reveals that research on religion and ethnicity in the United States must account for generational differences and specific nuances of a particular ethnic denomination’s negotiations in multicultural America.

Most provocatively, Kurien’s research demonstrates that second-generation Indian American Christians of the Mar Thoma church are decoupling ethnicity from religion by choosing to worship in multiracial, non-denominational evangelical Christian congregations. She reveals how they are adopting American evangelical ideals of “antitradition, antiliturgical, and individual worship orientation” (110) and centralizing the experience of personal salvation and the importance of proselytization. At times, one can almost hear Kurien mourning for the loss of a tradition-centric, liturgically heavy, Malayalam-based locus of support and community for immigrant Malayalee Christians (only 20-30 percent of the second and third generation attend the Mar Thoma church on a regular basis) (114). This is compounded by her legitimate fear that the second-generation millennials who are turning away from their parents’ ethnic churches may lose the support system of the ethnic church that their parents built and become lost in “anonymous and impersonal gatherings” (243). However, this hint of lament is heavily veiled by Kurien’s data-driven sociological account, which allows such generational fissures to exist in unresolved tension in their own voices derived from her extensive interviews and results in a substantive and enduring scholarly contribution.

Kurien’s findings are quite anomalous in the field of ethnicity and religion in the United
States; therefore, they warrant particular scholarly attention. The centrality of the ethnic church is one of the basic points of consensus among scholars in the fields of Asian-American and Asian religions in the United States. A myriad of studies of religion and ethnicity in the United States have demonstrated how minority groups in the United States build communal strength through religious institutions and how churches, temples, and mosques provide additional resources to minority communities above and beyond their religious function. Religious institutions become *de facto* safe havens, schools, cultural centers, language learning institutions, restaurants, public relations interlocutors, immigration liaisons, and activists for political and social causes. This is particularly true for non-dominant religions in the United States (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam), but scholars of East Asian American Christians also agree that ethnicity and religion are intertwined and mutually reinforcing in Asian American Christianity (128). Because of their racialization outside of ethnic churches, East Asian American Christians return to the safe-haven of the ethnic church after “feeling marginalized” in large multi-ethnic evangelical churches. In contrast, the second-generation Mar Thomites that Kurien interviewed preferred multi-ethnic evangelical churches and downplayed incidents of racism as isolated encounters. Instead, they emphasized the importance of “culture-free” Christianity (128). Kurien suggests that their assimilation into dominant strains of American evangelical Christianity may be because Indian Americans have smaller and more diverse social networks than East Asian Americans, which may make them more comfortable in white or multiracial religious communities (141). Once established in emotive and entertainment-oriented evangelical services, these second-generation millennials begin to find fault with the formal, Malayalee liturgy, the first-generation leadership, and the exclusive Indianness of the Mar Thoma church (209).

Kurien divides her book into six chapters. The first chapter is a lengthy account of the pre-colonial and colonial Mar Thoma church in India. The second outlines the church’s role for first-generation immigrants in the United States, while the third chapter reveals the second-generation’s decoupling of religion and ethnicity in the United States and its critiques of the Mar Thoma church. The fourth chapter includes an intersectional analysis of the impacts of race, class, and gender on Mar Thomite values in the United States. The fifth chapter returns to the generational divisions highlighted in chapter three by focusing on generationally distinct ideals of social engagement and religion. Chapter six guides readers back to India to witness the changes that international migration has had on the Mar Thoma church in India.

The trajectory of these chapters carries readers from early Syrian Christianity and colonial encounters in India to Mar Thomites’ negotiations of religion and ethnicity in the United States, and then back to India with a focus on the impact of emigration on the Mar Thoma Denomination globally. Her chapters aim rectify what she views as “the biggest limitation of migration studies frameworks,” which is that “they currently focus primarily on the one-directional influence of either the home or host country instead of examining the impact of both home and host societies on migrants, as well as the impact of migration on home and host societies” (245). She continues, “similarly, frameworks of religious change are currently focused on national processes” (245). While I agree with Kurien’s attention to...
the global, dynamic, and multi-sited nature of transnational religion, these two sentences, both without citation as to the author’s subjectiv referent, are emblematic of the author’s tendency to speak in general terms of theories or scholarship on transnational religion. This tendency weakens what is a very strong work, and leads educated readers to conjure exceptions, mentally accumulating a bibliography of scholars who address the multi-sited and global dynamics of transnational religion. Further, by detailing both the Indic and US contexts from precolonial to present, Kurien holds high expectations for one book. While she is largely successful, there were times when a more contextualized investigation into any one of these foci may have been useful, particularly the differences between various Asian ethnic congregations in the United States, since her data complicates a scholarly consensus in this field. She concludes, “it is important not to take the studies of East Asian American Christians as the last word on the interaction between race and religion [in the United States]” (242). Agreed, but how would the data look if we included research on Asian non-Christians or non-Asian ethnic minority Christians? Certainly, we cannot sound the death knell for ethnic congregations in the United States when for many ethnic and religious minorities they remain the primary sites for worship.

In short, Kurien’s book is wonderful to think with and provides a provocative, evidence-driven account, which complicates existing conventions in scholarship. That is to say, it is solid, well-crafted, substantive scholarship, which will be useful and effective for scholarly and undergraduate audiences alike.

Amanda Lucia
University of California-Riverside

**The Past, Present, and Future of Theologies of Interreligious Dialogue.**

**THEOLOGICAL** discourses on interreligious dialogue within the Roman Catholic Church flourished especially after Vatican II (1962-65). In this volume, Terrance Merrigan and John Friday compile some of these theologies and theologians into a conversation. Written primarily for those committed to critical reflection on interreligious dialogue and its study and practice, these essays discuss the historical antecedents, current trends, and future possibilities for the field. This volume is a sure sign of the maturity of interreligious dialogue as a field of study and a welcome addition to the continuing conversations.

The volume is divided into three sections to focus on the past, present, and future of the theologies of interreligious dialogue. Part I, comprising the first five chapters, interprets various canonical documents that influenced the basic attitudes of the Roman Catholic Church towards other faith traditions and thus contributed to interreligious dialogue. The writers focus on doctrinal nuances in the church documents related to dialogue and summarize select theologians who contributed to the field of interreligious dialogue. This part is a helpful and engaging introduction to the history of interreligious dialogue in the Catholic Church.
In Part II, the focus shifts from the church tradition to religious experience. The writers unequivocally acknowledge religious experience as a valid source of theology. In order to buttress their argument, they draw insights from both Evangelical and Hindu traditions as well as the writings of William James and Bernard Lonergan. They creatively and courageously point to sources of theology beyond the canonical documents and scriptures and skillfully demonstrate how these can contribute to the theological enterprise. For example, Michelle Voss Roberts draws from the Hindu aesthetic tradition and demonstrates how rasa contributes to one’s understanding of and experiences with God.

Part III, the most inclusive, edifying, and assuring among the three sections, suggests ways to include the historically marginalized “Others” in the discourse. As promised in the section title “The Acknowledgement of Otherness,” the five chapters in the section acknowledge the possibilities of learning from religious others and suggest ways to do so while rethinking interreligious dialogue. The writers challenge the claims of supremacy and parochialism within the Christian communities and admit the limits of human knowing. Boldness to compare with and humility to learn from the social and religious margins mark the section.

This attempt to bring together those engaged in studying interreligious dialogue to critically examine this growing academic field and analyze the emerging trends within the Roman Catholic Church is much needed and commendable. The book certainly showcases conversations within the Roman Catholic Church and their possible contributions to the field of religious dialogue beyond the Catholic Church. It provides an engaging conversation between 13 highly respected experts in the field, mostly trained in comparative theology. However, alerting the reader of the scope of the conversation either in the title or in the introduction would have rightly and humbly acknowledged the growing and robust conversations about interreligious dialogue in other confessional and religious communities and thus subtly invited others to the field of interreligious dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church. This note aside, the volume is a tremendous gift to the study of interreligious dialogue.

James Elisha Taneti
Union Presbyterian Seminary


In her Prologue, Christine Mangala Frost indicates to her reader that *The Human Icon* sets out to achieve two primary goals. First, she wishes to map “the spiritual terrain” of both Hinduism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, thus providing a model for how Hindu-Christian interreligious dialogue might proceed most fruitfully (1). Second, she intends her study to be “an exploratory effort in comparative theology that is conducted thematically” (7), and, as one might expect, she explicitly engages both Francis X. Clooney and Raimon Panikkar on multiple occasions throughout the text. *The Human Icon* is thus an ambitious work in terms of its scope, and like most ambitious works it succeeds quite
well in achieving some of its goals, while leaving other aims unfulfilled or obscured.

In keeping with the dominant approach of those who work in the areas of comparative theology, the theology of religions, and interreligious dialogue, Frost autobiographically acknowledges her own relation to the subject at hand, as well as her own faith commitments. Born in India and raised Hindu, Frost possesses insider knowledge of Hindu beliefs, spirituality, and practices that she “pursued zealously” until this very pursuit resulted in her conversion to Anglican Christianity (1-2). Disillusioned with what she views as the “politicization of worship” within the Anglican Communion, she ultimately converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which she now maintains “possesses the fullness of the truth” (2). Frost draws on resources within the Eastern Christian tradition to advocate for the position that the doctrine of the “fullness of truth” does not exclude other religious traditions from encounter with the divine and the possession of profound truth(s).

The Human Icon proceeds thematically, with each section exploring a prominent aspect of Hinduism, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, or both. In Chapter One Frost seeks to describe phenomenologically what it means to “inhabit a Hindu world” (9-33). In the second chapter, she does the same with respect to Eastern Orthodoxy, but with the twist that she focuses primarily on the indigenous Indian Orthodox Churches, primarily the Kottayam school of theology. This chapter may be the most productively provocative in the entire book, especially in her embrace of the genuine “orthodoxy” of these non-Chalcedonian churches, even though she herself belongs to a Chalcedonian Orthodox Church and professes the articles of faith that these Indian Orthodox communities reject. Even more provocative are her claims that the Indian Orthodoxy in general, and the Kottayam school in particular hold the keys to a Hindu-Christian dialogue that is untinged with Western (Protestant and Roman Catholic) Christian biases (35-63).

Chapters Three and Four concern themselves with the shared Hindu and Orthodox Christian goal of rendering the human divine, and thus she compares Vedanta and Bhakti with the Orthodox doctrine of theosis and Orthodox devotional practices. Chapter Five explores Hindu and Christian theodicy and thereby feels slightly out of place at it disrupts a consistent focus on the shared teachings of human divinization by Hindus and Christians that otherwise runs throughout the book. Chapters Six and Seven return to this focus by comparing the meditative prayer practices within yoga and hesychasm and by comparing the characteristics and function of the “holy man” within both religious traditions.

The book is highly successful in setting the parameters for dialogue and for accurately describing how metaphysical beliefs connect with spiritual practices in both traditions. It is also significant in that it will provide theological grounding for promoting openness amongst Orthodox Christians of the valid truths within Hinduisms (and, by extension, other religious traditions as well). At the same time, however, the book suffers as a work of comparative theology due to its resolutely inclusivist theology of religions, together with the attitudes of religious supremacy and triumphalism that are implicit in most, if not all, inclusivist perspectives. In Chapter Seven, for example, Frost rightly applies a critical eye towards the various kinds of Hindu “holy men” and suggests how an Orthodox perspective might help Hindus differentiate between genuinely “holy” gurus,
and those who are profiteers, egoists, and/or coercive and abusive to their followers. When discussing Orthodox elders, on the other hand, Frost waxes eloquently about their virtues, while failing to acknowledge that chicanery and abuse are rampant problems in the Orthodox world as well (311-312).

Because of these tendencies, the book ultimately fails as a work of comparative theology. Those looking for an Orthodox version of Catholic comparative theologians such as Raimon Pannikar or Francis Clooney will be disappointed. As Frost herself acknowledges, her book “provides a way to train Christians in the art of listening to Hindus and an opportunity for Hindus to ponder the life-changing implications of a Christian approach to God” (319). Instead of accomplishing the comparative theological goal of learning more about God from each other, Frost provides only a way for Hindus to learn from the Orthodox, while the Orthodox simply learn to be less judgmental and disparaging of Hindus.

*The Human Icon* is a skillfully written and well-researched text and should be of great interest to some readers, while somewhat disappointing for others. For Eastern Orthodox theologians and practitioners, it is a welcome exploration of what Eastern Orthodox Christians and Hindus have in common, and it provides a roadmap for future efforts at interreligious dialogue between Hindus and Orthodox. Moreover, Frost’s inclusivist theology of religions will provide many Orthodox readers with ways to conceptualize how theological truths are not the exclusive property of the Eastern Orthodox Church. For non-Orthodox readers, *The Human Icon* will also serve as an excellent introduction to the comparison of Hindu and Eastern Christian beliefs and practices from an Orthodox perspective. On the other hand, readers who hold to a pluralist theology of religions may find this text limited in its analyses due to its underlying premise that Orthodox Christianity uniquely contains the “fullness of truth” in a way that Hinduism does not. Moreover, those working in the field of comparative theology may find that *The Human Icon*’s focus on theology of religions and interreligious dialogue ultimately undermines any positive comparative theological contributions the book may otherwise have had.

Rico G. Monge
University of San Diego


**INTERRELIGIOUS** encounters permeate our culture, the university, and many of the personal and public corners of our lives. As suggested in the title, *Teaching Interreligious Encounters* explores the art of teaching, including pedagogical theory, actual lesson plans and classroom activities, suggested texts, and narratives for how and why particular approaches to teaching interreligious studies work. This multidisciplinary volume is the fruit of the American Academy of Religion/Luce Summer Seminars on Comparative Theology and Theologies of Religious Pluralism (2009-2013). The book is divided into five sections, each emphasizing a different method of encounter:
Theorizing Encounters; Designing Encounters; Textual Encounters; Practical Encounters; and Formational Encounters.

Part I includes seven chapters that each look at specific theoretical underpinnings of interreligious learning. Jeannine Hill Fletcher begins this section by emphasizing the role that the instructor has in shaping what counts as religion. Prioritizing certain narratives and scriptures over others can lend authority to those narratives, thus it is critical to centralize previously marginalized voices, including women and minorities. Fletcher gives particular attention to the absence of women religious thinkers/leaders in a variety of textbooks and looks at how the inclusion of a special section on women or the particular focus on women’s biological difference may actually work to maintain established androcentric religious perspectives.

Next, Leo D. Lefebure looks at the late Japanese Buddhist scholar, Masao Abe and considers how his life and work exemplify comparative theology as a method that openly begins from a particular religious commitment, encounters another tradition, then returns to the tradition of origin with new insights. Lefebure suggests both benefits and drawback to Abe’s approach.

J. Derrick Lemons then integrates Pierre Bourdieu’s ethnographic, sociological work on reflexivity with Francis X. Clooney and James L. Fredericks’ comparative theology. Lemons includes examples from an introductory course he teaches to emphasize the possibility of “reflexive comparative theological skills.”

In the essay that follows, Hsiao-Lan Hu argues that learning about pluralism is not nearly as effective as providing an environment and model for embodying it. He looks specifically at Judeo-Christian approaches that appear to reify particular concepts of “Religion” versus an East-Asian approach that integrates a variety of “Teachings,” and thereby demonstrates a pluralistic approach to learning about diverse traditions.

Robert McKim turns next to the concept of neutrality and the demand that an instructor should remain neutral towards a variety of truth claims while teaching religious studies. McKim examines how standards are established and how facts about truth claims are evaluated in a “neutral” context.

Next, Marianne Moyaert engages the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur to reflect upon hermeneutical, anthropological and pedagogical principles. Here, selfhood is understood as “interconnected with and constituted by otherness.” Moyaert then explains how she applies these concepts in scriptural reasoning with her diverse student body at VU University Amsterdam.

Lastly in this section, Louis Komjathy explores some basic principles of comparative theology from his perspective as a scholar/practitioner of Daoist theology and how these affect the basic parameters of his classroom. Komjathy proposes a normative polytheistic or pluralistic theological view such that different religious accounts are understood as describing different realities with different soteriological consequences.

Part II, Designing Encounters, includes four chapters that look more specifically at teaching interreligious encounters. This section of the book will be especially helpful to graduate students who are new to teaching and to experienced professors who are interested in expanding their repertoire. First, Imranali Panjwani examines certain challenges that exist in teaching Islamic studies in western universities including the scope and relationship between the subject of Islam and the people who practice Islam, and underlying mindsets/prejudices. Panjwani
then discusses course outlines and specific techniques for teaching Islam at a university.

Hans Gustafson begins his chapter with a thoughtful example of coursework from a student who had studied Hinduism and Christianity comparatively. His chapter, subtitled “A Primer on Undergraduate Course Design,” describes course content, activities, assignments, and offers points for facilitating interreligious encounters, both textual and in person, as a new course, or as material to be integrated into an existing introductory course on World Religions.

In the following chapter, Joshua R. Brown presents material for “Teaching Comparative Political Theology.” In particular, Brown looks at text selection and desired learning outcomes. While his theoretical approach can be broadly applied, he grounds his discussion in a classroom example that compares Christianity and early Chinese traditions. This is a helpful approach and might speak especially to those at smaller universities or where interreligious learning is a new approach since Brown’s consideration of learning outcomes translates, in effect, the various skills learned in comparative religious studies into terms that can be appreciated by both students and department administrators.

Devorah Schoenfeld and Jeanine Diller next discuss the art of disagreement in comparative theology using Hevruta, a traditional Jewish method of study. The chapter details exercises for introducing students to the method, text interpretations, and directions for facilitating classroom discussions. The authors contend that the emphasis on disagreement and the process of hevruta study can motivate students to want to do comparative theological work.

Part III turns to Textual Encounters and looks more specifically at four examples of textual comparisons that the authors have successfully used in the classroom. Daniel Maoz and Allen Jorgenson reflect on their experience co-teaching Exodus from two different religious perspectives. This is part of an ongoing project whereby the authors team teach different texts and the chapter is creatively presented to mirror the act of dialogical team teaching, whereby each author contributes separately, building upon and responding to the other.

Hussam S. Timani provides a review of a number of central texts and chapters that the author has found useful for teaching religious pluralism and comparative theology. Timani also touches on scriptural reasoning, service-learning activities, and Islamic approaches to religious diversity.

Next, Thomas Cattoi discusses his experience leading a joint seminar reading of Ignatius of Loyola’s Exercises and Śāntideva’s Bodhicaryāvatāra (The Way of the Bodhisattva). Using specific examples from the textual comparison Cattoi addresses confessional, dialogical theology and the effort to be “vulnerable,” to the other, yet grounded in a specific tradition.

In the final chapter on textual encounters Jonathan Edelmann introduces specifically Hindu techniques for reading and teaching the Bhagavad Gītā as a method to avoid appropriation and mistaken interpretations. Edelmann looks specifically at commentarial traditions, epistemological categories, historical context, and key terms, and then traces these themes through particular parts of the text.

Part IV, Practical Encounters, looks at case studies, site visits, and immersion programs. The first author in this part, Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, who examines sacred spaces, states: “Who we are is inextricably related to where we are physically and existentially.” The chapter considers different forms of sacred
space and introduces the idea that interreligious learning can constitute a “third space” that is open to connection in new and unexpected ways.

Authors Emily Sigalow and Wendy Cadge discuss case studies as a method for teaching interreligious encounters. Although the Pluralism Project at Harvard University has been documenting case studies for the past two decades, the authors here note that scholars of religious studies have been slow to adopt this approach for use in the classroom. As the chapter aptly demonstrates, examples from real life interreligious dilemmas provide an engaging context for both readers and potential students to grapple with core religious concepts and the challenges of pluralism.

Next, Brandan W. Randall and Whittney Barth also engage the use of case studies with a more focused look at how or if the use of the case study method would promote a “pluralistic disposition,” in students. Results of this study highlight the importance of including multiple voices and perspectives. In particular, conservative students feared a liberal bias and were thus less likely to fully engage with the material.

Lastly, in this section Marianne Farina, CSC and Robert W. McChesney, SJ consider study abroad or intensive immersion experiences as invaluable opportunities for interreligious encounters. The authors point out that immersion experiences offer a unique, intrinsic, motivation for interreligious learning. They also suggest that this experience can be strengthened in several ways including a contextual model for learning abroad and by offering students an opportunity to share and meet with others who have studied abroad.

Part V, Formational Encounters, turns towards questions of vocation and civic engagement. Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer begin this final section with a chapter on methods for teaching interfaith leadership, which they describe as being “about creating positive interactions between those who orient around religion differently.” This practice is aimed at working towards the common good and building religious pluralism, that is, a context for the positive engagement of diversity. Taking a step beyond the book’s title, Teaching Interreligious Encounters, Patel and Meyer focus on forming strong leaders who will teach and work in communities.

In the next chapter Kelly R. Arora brings attention to the value of teaching interspiritual dialogue to health care and pharmacy professionals. She notes that this approach has been appreciated in the fields of palliative care and by hospice workers, but that the importance of diversity, including diverse religious, cultural, and spiritual beliefs is a relevant factor for successfully treating health and illness. This chapter includes a course outline for a class on interspiritual dialogue for health care professionals.

In the last chapter of Part V, Patricia Zimmerman Beckman suggests that global travellers share the language and intentions of many religious mystics and scholars of mysticism. She also proposes that the interreligious study of mysticism may help these travelling seekers to find greater experiences of ultimate meaning, transformation, and cultural exchange. This chapter engages new-age or spiritual-but-not-religious perspectives with genuine challenges that are grounded in a respectful, but serious, pedagogy of interreligious studies.

Teaching Interreligious Encounters covers a broad scope of interreligious encounters and, as a whole, develops a nuanced discourse for re-thinking interreligious dialogue and
pedagogy. However, the major strength of this volume is that each theoretical and methodological consideration is presented alongside concrete examples and practical suggestions.

Stephanie Corigliano
Independent Scholar
The Society for Hindu-Christian Studies

THE Society, founded in November 1994, is dedicated to the study of Hinduism and Christianity and their interrelationship. It seeks to create a forum for the presentation of historical research and studies of contemporary practice, for the fostering of dialogue and interreligious conversation, carried forward in a spirit of openness, respect, and true inquiry. Its scope includes issues related to religious practice, spirituality, and education.

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For membership information, please contact:
Bradley Malkovsky (574) 631-7128 phone
232 Malloy Hall (574) 631-4268 fax
University of Notre Dame bmalkovs@nd.edu
Notre Dame, IN 46556
U.S.A.
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