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A Natural Dialogue Partner: Sri Ramakrishna’s Anekānta–Vijñāna Vedānta and Claim to Avatārhood as a Resource for Hindu-Christian Studies

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Abstract
Recent studies on Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings—particularly Swami Medhananda’s recent groundbreaking work, Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality—suggests that this modern Hindu sage has even more to offer to the field of interreligious studies, and to Hindu-Christian studies in particular, than was previously suspected. Medhananda’s work has demonstrated that Ramakrishna, though not a professional philosopher or scholar in the traditional sense of the word, was a thinker of deep subtlety who expressed revolutionary insights into the nature of ultimate reality which have great potential to inform the contemporary discourse of religious—and, to speak even more broadly, of worldview—pluralism. Sri Ramakrishna’s affirmation that ultimate reality involves dimensions that are both personal and impersonal, that both have form and are formless, that none of the facets of the divine reality is to be subsumed under the others, and that each of these facets can serve as the basis for a path to spiritual...
liberation, provides the foundation for a non-reductionistic pluralism that is minimally distorting to the self-understandings of diverse traditions of thought and practice. This paper will briefly sketch the points of contact between Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching, as it is now better understood, and Christian theology, in a way that, it is hoped, might help chart out a possible agenda for future Hindu-Christian studies.

Sri Ramakrishna and His Teaching in the Context of Hindu-Christian Studies

A number of facets of both Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching and the self-understanding which he expresses of being an avatar—a “descent,” or divine incarnation—make him a natural dialogue partner for Christian thinkers seeking to engage with Hinduism, and also for Hindus (at least those who locate themselves in his tradition) seeking to engage with Christianity. A recent reappraisal of Ramakrishna’s teaching points to both philosophical and theological depths that have hitherto been neglected, both by “outsider” scholars who have studied Ramakrishna as a figure of primarily psychological and phenomenological relevance, and by “insider” scholars within the Ramakrishna tradition who have tended to focus on those dimensions of his teaching that reflect an Advaita Vedānta perspective, to the neglect of its strong theistic Vaiṣṇava and Tāntric aspects. Concepts found in Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching, such as his affirmation of the presence of relationality within the godhead, which resonate with Christian understandings of the nature of divinity, suggest a rich area for dialogue. And Sri Ramakrishna’s claim to avataṛhood, when coupled with his affirmation of the avataṛhood of Christ, amounts to a claim that Christ has, in fact, returned (as Ramakrishna)—a return long awaited by Christians. This implies that Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings have authority for Christians, if his claim to avataṛhood is indeed to be taken seriously. This possibility is not one which Christian or Hindu thinkers appear to have taken up to any great extent, but it is one whose implications are, it seems, worthy of exploration.

Given the limits of space, this paper will not so much plumb the depths of these possibilities (a project which will require at least one, and more likely two, books) as present them in a broad outline, in the hope that such a presentation might inspire precisely the kind of in-depth exploration that they warrant.

Why Not Study Sri Ramakrishna’s Teaching?

Readers may be surprised to learn that the teaching of a renowned religious figure such as Sri Ramakrishna has not been a central focus of much work in the field of religious studies. Why has he not been treated as a significant philosopher of religion, or a major Hindu theologian of the modern period? He is arguably both. Though not a professional scholar, he was well versed in the central teachings of several major Hindu schools of thought, making delving into Christianity and Islam as well, and he weaves themes from all of these traditions together in his thought in powerful and subtle ways. As a philosopher of religion, he confronts universal questions, most prominently the question of truth and religious diversity. And, as a theologian, he expresses a distinctively Hindu understanding of spiritual life that has had tremendous influence in the contemporary era.
Two trends in earlier scholarship on Sri Ramakrishna have militated against seeing him as an intellectual resource. One of these trends has been more predominant in the religious studies academy, while the other has been more predominant amongst scholars operating from within the Ramakrishna tradition. There are, of course, noteworthy exceptions to both trends, but these trends have tended to dominate and mold the discourse on Ramakrishna in a way that has led less to an emphasis on his teaching and more to an emphasis on his person.

The first of these trends, which has been widespread among scholars of Hinduism, has been to see Ramakrishna not as a highly original thinker with a distinctive perspective on philosophical or theological issues, but solely as a mystic. This Ramakrishna is interesting not so much for the content and the possibilities for further reflection offered by his teaching, as for the altered states of consciousness which he experienced during his lifetime, as recounted in primary Bengali textual sources such as Mahendranath Gupta’s Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta (a collection of dialogues) and Swami Saradananda’s Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga (a more fully biographical work).¹ Because of this strong emphasis on his many vivid and fascinating mystical experiences, Ramakrishna has been presented as a figure of interest mainly to psychologists and phenomenologists of religion rather than philosophers or theologians. To be sure, the point here is not that Sri Ramakrishna’s experiences are unimportant, or that the work that has been dedicated to interpreting them has been wasted. Far from it! But one-sided engagement with this facet of Ramakrishna—his psychological and phenomenological side—has been to the neglect of his philosophical and theological import.²

This trend of focusing on Ramakrishna as a figure of mainly psychological interest began early, with the work of William James, who treated Ramakrishna’s life as a particularly vivid case study in his exploration of the varieties of religious experience.³ Starting in the second half of the twentieth century, religion scholars began to study Sri Ramakrishna through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. The first to take this approach was Walter Neevel.⁴ Neevel was soon followed by Jeffrey Masson, and then by Malcolm McLean, Sudhir Kakar, Narasingha Sil, and, probably most famously, Jeffrey Kripal.⁵ Kripal’s work in particular was tremendously controversial within the Ramakrishna community, even prompting a rebuttal by two members of the Ramakrishna Order.⁶

The other trend, predominant less in the academy than in the Ramakrishna Order, has been to interpret Ramakrishna’s teachings primarily in terms of Advaita Vedānta, rather than as offering a distinct perspective which includes, though is not limited to, non-dualism. Scholars from within the Ramakrishna tradition who have tended to see Sri Ramakrishna as an Advaita Vedāntin, rather than as offering something new and distinct from classical Advaita, include Swami Prajñānānanda, Swami Omkārānanda, Swami Dhīreśānanda, and Dineś Bhaṭṭācārya.⁷ As with the approaches that tend to focus exclusively upon Ramakrishna’s experiences as psychological states, the point is not that an emphasis upon the non-dualistic dimensions of Sri Ramakrishna’s thought is fundamentally mistaken, but that it does not capture the totality of the rich worldview that he proposes.
Recent Developments

The trend of focusing upon Sri Ramakrishna’s experiences at the expense of looking at the significance of his teaching has, however, begun to shift in the twenty-first century. Recent studies on Sri Ramakrishna—most notably Swami Medhananda’s groundbreaking work, *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*—suggest that this modern Hindu sage has more to offer to the field of interreligious studies, and Hindu-Christian studies in particular, than was previously suspected. Medhananda’s work has demonstrated that Sri Ramakrishna—though, again, not a professional philosopher or scholar—was a thinker of depth and subtlety who expressed revolutionary insights into the nature of ultimate reality that have great potential to inform the contemporary discourse of religious—and, to speak even more broadly, of worldview—pluralism. Sri Ramakrishna’s affirmation that ultimate reality involves dimensions that are both personal and impersonal, that both have form and are formless, that none of the facets of the divine reality is to be subsumed under the others, and that each of these facets can serve as the basis for a path to spiritual liberation, provides the foundation for a non-reductionistic pluralism that is minimally distorting to the self-understandings of diverse traditions of thought and practice. This is highly significant in light of attempts to develop just such a pluralistic model in the wake of the pluralistic hypothesis of John Hick and of subsequent “post-Hick” pluralisms, such as those developed in the tradition of process thought rooted in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. This particular aspect of Ramakrishna’s thought, and the fact that, like traditonal Jain thinkers, Ramakrishna affirms an anekānta, or “non-one-sided” way of approaching ultimate reality, has been the central focus of my own contributions to this field.

The understanding that, according to Sri Ramakrishna, infinite reality has both a dimension that answers to descriptions of the nirguṇa Brahman of non-dualism and a dimension that answers to accounts, both Hindu and non-Hindu, of the personal Supreme Being of theistic religion (rather than relegating the Supreme Being to the realm of māyā, or mere appearance) is an understanding that has the capacity to enrich both interreligious and intercultural conversation, as well as the academic study of the stream of Hindu thought which he represents: a pluralistic stream of thought that draws upon not only Advaita Vedānta, but, quite prominently, Vaiṣṇava and Tāntric Hindu traditions.

In terms of Hindu-Christian studies in particular, this richer, more nuanced view of Sri Ramakrishna’s thought has resonances with, for example, both trinitarian theology and Christian thought on divine incarnation—or Christology—which might otherwise be missed; it affirms both complexity and unity as attributes of ultimate reality, as well as enabling divine incarnation to be seen as a real phenomenon, rather than an epiphenomenon of a universe whose very existence is ultimately due to a fundamental delusion. Again, to be sure, Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy does not reject classical non-dualism. Rather, it integrates and goes beyond it.

What are the points of contact between Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching, as it is becoming better understood, and Christian theology? How might these points of contact help chart
out a possible agenda for future Hindu-Christian studies?

**Anekānta–Vijñāna Vedānta**

Sri Ramakrishna’s thought has two dimensions that would seem to be of special interest to Christian thinkers: its *pluralistic* dimension and its *experiential* dimension. It is these respective dimensions that are invoked when the thought of Sri Ramakrishna is referred to as *Anekānta* and *Vijñāna Vedānta*. These designations are mutually compatible and, in fact, mutually supportive.

The term *anekānta* is drawn from Jain philosophy. Though there is no evidence that Jainism was a tradition with which Sri Ramakrishna engaged extensively, the use of this term to denote his teaching is intended to show that, regardless of any influence (or lack thereof) of Jainism on his thought, both Sri Ramakrishna and thinkers in the Jain tradition have perceived and described the same basic feature of ultimate reality: namely, its amenability to multiple interpretations, each of which has its own sphere of validity, and each of which can be effective as one proceeds along the spiritual path. In Ramakrishna’s words:

> He who is called Brahman by the jñānis [literally ‘knowers’; followers of jñāna yoga; adherents of Advaita Vedānta] is known as Ātman [Self] by the yogis [those who follow raja yoga, the path of meditation] and as Bhagavān [Lord; Blessed One] by the bhaktas [devotees; adherents of theistic religiosity, such as Vaiṣṇavas and Śāktas]. The same brāhmin is called priest, when worshipping in the temple, and cook, when preparing a meal in the kitchen.

The jñāni, sticking to the path of knowledge, always reasons about the Reality, saying, ‘Not this, not this.’ Brahman is neither ‘this’ nor ‘that’; It is neither the universe nor its living beings. Reasoning in this way, the mind becomes steady. Then it disappears and the aspirant goes into samādhi [a state of meditative absorption]. This is the Knowledge of Brahman. It is the unwavering conviction of the jñāni that Brahman alone is real and the world illusory. All these names and forms are illusory, like a dream. What Brahman is cannot be described. One cannot even say that Brahman is a Person. That is the opinion of the jñānis, the followers of [Advaita] Vedānta philosophy… But the bhaktas accept all the states of consciousness. They take the waking state to be real also. They don’t think the world to be illusory, like a dream. They say that the universe is a manifestation of God’s power and glory. God has created all these—sky, stars, moon, sun, mountains, ocean, men, animals. They constitute his glory. He is within us, in our hearts. Again, he is outside. The most advanced devotees say that He Himself has become all this—the twenty-four cosmic principles, the universe, and all living beings.¹²

Christian theologians and philosophers of religion seeking to develop a non-reductive way of thinking about religious pluralism could well see Ramakrishna as an intellectual resource.
Regarding the experiential dimension of Ramakrishna’s teaching, according to the analysis of Swami Medhananda, Ramakrishna propounded an internally consistent philosophy of religion rooted in his experience of vijñāna. Vĳñāna, as understood by Sri Ramakrishna, is an exceedingly rare state of consciousness, attained by only a few beings. In this state, one perceives directly that the infinite reality of Brahman encompasses facets or modes of being which traditional Hindu schools of thought have tended to see as mutually incompatible, such as form and formlessness, or personality and impersonality. In the words of Ramakrishna:

That which is realized as Brahman through the eliminating process of “Not this, not this” is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The vĳñāni sees that the Reality which is nirguna is also saguna…. Those who realize Brahman in samādhi… find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings…. This is known as vĳñāna.¹³

In some ways, Ramakrishna’s experience is evocative of the Zen tradition of Buddhism, which also teaches that there is a state beyond the realization of non-duality in which one returns to the realm of relative existence—“the universe and all its living beings.” This return to the relative realm, but with a new, enlightened understanding—the state of vĳñāna, as Ramakrishna describes it—brings to mind the famous Ten Ox-herding Pictures of the Zen Buddhist tradition. Also known as the “Ten Bulls,” these pictures were drawn and their accompanying inscriptions written by the twelfth century Chinese Zen master, Kakuan, “basing them on earlier Taoist bulls.”¹⁴ The pictures depict ten phases of non-dual awakening. The purely awakened state, where all duality disappears—which would correspond to the experience of Brahman in Advaita Vedānta and in the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna—is only the eighth, and not the tenth, of these phases. The tenth phase is depicted as a return to the village—to the world—with open hands, ready to serve.

According to Ramakrishna, the jñānī—the knower, or experiencer of non-dual realization—will inevitably return to consciousness of the realm of time, space, and causation. While this realm must be set aside in order to experience non-duality, it does not thereby permanently disappear. It is part of the totality of being and is thus essential to the process of experiencing non-duality fully. The realization of non-duality is not the end of the process, but rather it is, in a sense, the beginning.

How can you eliminate from the Reality the universe and its living beings? If you do that, it will lack its full weight. You cannot find out the total weight of the bel-fruit if you eliminate the seeds and shell. Brahman [the ultimate reality beyond time, space, and causation] and Šakti [the primordial power by which Brahman manifests as a world] are identical. It is the Primordial Power that has become the world and all living beings.¹⁵

The cosmos itself is the manifestation of Brahman. So long as this cosmos is viewed as other than Brahman, it is a distraction to be set
aside through the neti neti process of negation. But once the reality of Brahman is then thereby experienced, one returns to the cosmos and perceives it not as something other than Brahman, but as Brahman Itself. The realization of non-duality is thus not the end of the spiritual path. It is the peak of the mountain, but is penultimate to the return to the world, now transformed by this realization into a realm of joy and love.

This process brings to mind a conversation between a Zen tea master and Ronald Eyre, recounted in the world religions documentary, The Long Search:

Before you study Zen, a bowl is a bowl, and tea is tea [in the state of conventional dualistic consciousness]. While you’re studying Zen, a bowl is no longer a bowl, and tea is no longer tea [in the experience of non-dual realization]. And when you become enlightened, a bowl is again a bowl, and tea is tea [with the consciousness that has been transformed by this realization].

For Ramakrishna, vijñāna was not a theoretical concept. He claimed to have experienced this state personally, and to have had the direct experience of divine realization through the media of numerous religious systems, hence the link between vijñāna and pluralism. These included a variety of Hindu schools of thought, as well as Christianity and Islam.

‘I have practiced,’ said he, ‘all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. You must try all beliefs and traverse all the different ways once. Wherever I look, I see men quarreling in the name of religion…. But they never reflect that He who is called Krishna is also called Śiva, and bears the name of the Primal Energy, Jesus, and Āllāh as well—the same Rāma with a thousand names.’

Sri Ramakrishna’s distinctive philosophical perspective gives logical coherence to his deep pluralism. By viewing ultimate reality as containing within itself multiple facets which could each be experienced based on the consciousness of the individual practitioner, it becomes possible to see diverse religious paths not as contradictory to one another, but simply as focused upon different but equally valid and real aspects of the infinite.

**Why Vedānta?**

Ramakrishna affirms the anekānta nature of ultimate reality and the state of vijñāna as the mode of experience which confirms this understanding. But why should this teaching be referred to as a form of Vedānta? Of all the existing Hindu schools of thought, the one which is closest to Ramakrishna’s worldview, and to which he had extensive exposure as a priest of the Goddess Kālī, is Tantra, which similarly affirms the both-dual-and-non-dual nature of reality, and the experience in which all such concepts are transcended. As Medhananda has noted:
An important precedent for Sri Ramakrishna’s position is the philosophy of Tantra, which also grants equal ontological status to both the impersonal absolute (Śiva) and the dynamic Śakti.... Sri Ramakrishna’s ontological doctrine of the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti may derive, in part, from Tāntrika philosophy. There are striking affinities between Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy and the Tāntrika philosophy of Kaśmīri Śaivism in particular.\(^{18}\)

Swami Medhananda, though, has coined the term *Vijñāna Vedānta* to differentiate Sri Ramakrishna’s thought both from Tantra and the other forms of Vedānta, such as Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, to which it bears a number of striking resemblances, and Advaita Vedānta, with which it is often identified. This is because Medhananda sees Ramakrishna’s teaching as, in many ways, a return to the pre-systematic Vedānta of the earliest Vedāntic texts, before Vedānta became divided into branches based on its various interpretations, such as Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, and so on. He therefore calls Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching a “non-sectarian” Vedānta, akin to that of the *Brahma Sūtra* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

In light of Sri Ramakrishna’s catholic attitude and his unique syncretic method, a number of commentators—beginning with Sri Ramakrishna’s direct disciples, Swami Vivekananda and Śvāmī Turiyānanda, as well as Sri Aurobindo—have adopted a third approach to Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy that avoids the pitfalls of the other two interpretive approaches. At the end of the nineteenth century, Vivekananda suggested that the nonsectarian and harmonizing spirit of Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical teachings is best captured not by any particular philosophical school but by the original nonsectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which sought to harmonize a variety of apparently conflicting philosophical views. In a remarkable Bengali letter written in 1919, Śvāmī Turiyānanda pointed out the deep affinities between Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy and the nonsectarian Vedānta of the *Gītā* and claimed that Sri Ramakrishna accepted the validity of all spiritual philosophies and religious doctrines. In a similar vein, Sri Aurobindo declared in 1910 that the ‘teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda’ provide the basis for a ‘more perfect synthesis’ of the Upaniṣads than Śaṅkara’s world-denying philosophy of Advaita Vedānta.\(^{19}\)

Ultimately, due to its pluralistic, *anekānta* nature, the worldview of Ramakrishna as attested in his teachings, could be characterized as all of these things: Advaitic, Viśiṣṭādvaitic, Tāntric, and so on. It is all of these, because it bears dimensions of every one of them. This is not only due to “influences”—the fact that Ramakrishna was famously exposed to all of these schools of thought in his lifetime—but is also, indeed primarily, an effect of his experience of *vijñāna*, his realization that reality is indeed amenable to all of these interpretations.
The idea of a complex ultimate reality, one that is simultaneously one and many, with an aspect that is formless and another aspect that possesses form, is of course central to Christianity as well, in the form of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The complexity of God, as understood in Christian thought, is, among other things, a way of conceptualizing the central Christian teaching that God is love. Love is a fundamentally relational reality, an insight affirmed in the Hindu bhakti traditions no less than in Christianity. If God is love, it follows that God possesses a fundamentally relational nature. It is often affirmed that, within the Trinity, the Holy Spirit can be seen as the love between the Father and the Son. In the words of St. Augustine:

The Holy Spirit is a certain unutterable communion of the Father and the Son.... [B]oth the Father is a spirit and the Son a spirit, both the Father is holy and the Son is holy. In order, therefore, that the communion of both may be signified from a name which is suitable to both, the Holy Spirit is called the gift of both.... Therefore, the Holy Spirit, whatever it is, is something common both to the Father and the Son. But that communion itself is consubstantial and co-eternal; and if it may fitly be called friendship, let it be so called; but it is more aptly called love.\(^20\)

Humanity is invited to participate in this love through the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost upon the Christian community (and, in the thought of more progressive thinkers, upon all of humanity, or even all of creation).

From the perspective of Vijñāna Vedānta, the internal relationality of the ultimate reality is also affirmed. An important difference that might be perceived between the insights of the two traditions is that, whereas the Holy Spirit descends upon the world, according to Christianity, from a Vedāntic perspective, this “descent” would be seen, rather, as an awakening to an already present reality: the divine potential affirmed by those who stand in the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna, such as Swami Vivekananda, when he claims that “Each soul is potentially divine.”\(^21\) This internal relationality of the divine reality is an idea already present in ancient Hindu traditions, such as the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions, through the familial idea not of father and son, but of husband and wife, in the form of divine couples like Śiva and Śakti, or Narāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) and Lakṣmī. These divine couples, rather like the Christian trinity, are seen as composite divinities, who are ultimately not two, but one (as illustrated in the Śaiva image of Ardhanārīśvara, or Śiva and Śakti combined into one being, artistically depicted as half Śiva, half Śakti). This oneness, though, is not wholly undifferentiated, but can be conceptualized as an overriding or underlying reality of love.

This is just the beginning of a sketch of the kind of interreligious conversation which might be facilitated by an understanding that Ramakrishna’s teaching affirms internal relationality of the divine reality in ways both like and unlike the Christian affirmation of God as a Trinity.
Divine Incarnation: Another Point of Contact between Sri Ramakrishna and Christianity

Another point of contact between Vijñāna Vedānta and Christianity is the idea of the divine incarnation. Though there is no such thing as an official or formal doctrine to which all adherents of the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna must assent, it is widely believed, and was taught by the Master himself, that Sri Ramakrishna was an avatār, a divine incarnation. And, of course, affirmation of the divinity of Christ is constitutive of adherence to Christianity.

In a 2011 article in Prabuddha Bharata, Francis X. Clooney issued a challenge to thinkers in the tradition of Sri Ramakrishna to reflect further upon the meaning of divine incarnation in this tradition (work which I have personally begun and which I hope to turn into a book in the not-too-distant future). The question of the nature and meaning of divine incarnation in both traditions is an extremely rich field for potential exploration, not only in the realms of theology and philosophy of religion, but also in historical and textual-critical studies. An unpacking of how the concept of divine incarnation emerged and crystallized in the Christian tradition, and continues to be explored and re-articulated today, could be a deeply informative exercise for thinkers in Sri Ramakrishna’s tradition of Anekānta–Vijñāna Vedānta, as well as, of course, further exploration of the Vaiṣṇava sources for this doctrine, tracing back to Bhagavad Gītā 4:7-8.

Intriguingly, according to the Śrīśirāmakṛṣṇalilaprasāṅga, or Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play, of Swami Saradananda, a Christian devotee of Ramakrishna by the name of William once proclaimed to him—when the Master asked him, “What do you think of me?”—“You are Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the embodiment of Eternal Consciousness.” Ramakrishna also, of course, famously experienced a vision of Christ merging into him, and their becoming one. Ramakrishna is, in fact, frequently presented in both Saradananda’s text and in the Śrīśirāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta as asking people, “What do you think of me?” This is quite evocative of the question of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 16:13, “Who do people say that I am?” and in Matthew 16:15, “And you, who do you say that I am?” Jesus’ question, much like Ramakrishna’s, evokes the answer (from the apostle Peter, according to Matthew’s gospel), “You are the Christ, the son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

A question that is likely unanswerable through academic methodologies, but which, like a Zen koan, might have the potential to spark profound reflection on a great variety of issues by both Hindu and Christian thinkers is, “Is Sri Ramakrishna Jesus Christ?” Or, perhaps worded a bit less provocatively, “What would it mean if Sri Ramakrishna were Jesus Christ?” A panel, conference, or edited volume taking this question as its starting point would be a welcome development, as it would push the boundaries of both Hindu and Christian traditions in the direction of reflecting on the possibility that a transgression of these boundaries has already been committed by the divine reality itself. Contemporary identity politics in both traditions militate against the possibility of an event of this kind occurring in the near future, but perhaps this only underscores the need for it.

What would it mean if Sri Ramakrishna were Jesus Christ? The concern of many Hindus
at the raising of such a question is that it reflects a covert attempt to convert Hindus to Christianity; for it would suggest that Jesus Christ was himself an avatār, thus making his teachings authoritative for Hindus. No less terrifying for many Christians, though, is its implication that the long awaited Second Coming has already occurred, and that most Christians missed the event, not deigning to consider that the Lord may have returned as a “heathen” Hindu who worshiped a Mother Goddess and taught not Christian triumphalism, but the ultimate unity and harmony of all religions.

Conclusion

Worldview pluralism, the idea of the Trinity, and divine incarnation are just a handful of possible topics for future Hindu-Christian studies raised by the figure of Sri Ramakrishna and the new appreciation for his teaching—for his thought as a coherent system of thought—that is emerging, thanks to the work of Swami Medhananda, Arpita Mitra, and other scholars as well. It is my sincere hope that the panel of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies at which an earlier version of this paper was first presented, may mark just the beginning of a long and fruitful series of conversations in which the implications of the thought and life of Sri Ramakrishna can be unfolded in a way for which he no doubt would have had great appreciation: namely, an open-minded, open-hearted inter-religious dialogue.

Notes


2 It should also be noted that a substantial portion of this work has been carried out from ontologically materialist perspectives which at least implicitly rule out the possibility that Ramakrishna might actually have something relevant to say about philosophy, and have tended to pathologize his experiences rather than seeing them as potential sources of knowledge about the nature of reality.

3 See, for example, his famous 1901-02 Gifford Lectures, published as The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature.


9 I say “minimally distorting” rather than “not distorting at all” because, in the realm of linguistically conditioned concepts, the translation of thoughts and perceptions from one philosophical matrix to another will inevitably involve some distortion. Thus, for example, the fact that Sri Ramakrishna accepts the proposition that Jesus is divine does not mean that Jesus believes what Christians have long believed about Jesus. It means, however, that there is the prospect for a conversation between Christianity and the thought of Sri Ramakrishna that will not consist of a simple binary opposition between two unlike worldviews, but that there will be significant points of contact which could be capable of yielding deeper insight into the nature of ultimate reality for both Hindus and Christians. My claim that the pluralism of Ramakrishna is minimally distorting is a claim that his approach allows for a greater engagement with the claims of other worldviews in their fullness than would be the case with more conventional pluralisms or inclusivisms.


12 Swami Nikhilananda, trans., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center, 1942), 133.

13 Ibid., 103-104.


18 Maharaj, 61, n. 41.
19 Maharaj, 15-16.
23 The *Bhagavad Gītā* does not contain the word *avatāra* (or *avatār*, as this term is pronounced in contemporary Indic languages and in English). The seventh and eighth verses of the fourth chapter of this text, however, are widely taken to be the first clear reference to this concept in Hindu literature: “Whenever *dharma* declines and *adharma* arises, then, Arjuna, I manifest myself. To protect good and destroy evil and to re-establish the teaching of *dharma*, I appear in age after age.” (Translation is mine.)
24 Chetanananda, trans., *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 817.
26 See, for example, Arpita Mitra, “Ramakrishna and Vivekananda: Two Teachings or One?” in *Prabuddha Bharata: Awakened India*, published in two parts (January and February 2014), 65-78 and 194-259.
27 This panel was held as part of the online 2020 meeting of the American Academy of Religion.