

Anantanand Rambachan
St. Olaf College, Minnesota

THE VALUE OF THE WORLD AS THE MYSTERY OF GOD IN ADVAITA VEDANTA

For many reasons, there is an urgent need to re-examine and evaluate the ways in which the *Advaita Vedānta* tradition of Hinduism has understood and presented the relationship between God and the world. In an attempt to affirm God as an absolute and limitless reality, some interpreters of this tradition deny the reality of the world. The existence and diversity of the world is sometimes compared to a sense-illusion which we conjure and experience because of ignorance (*avidyā*). The most famous of these examples likens the world to a snake that is mistakenly perceived in place of a rope. The implication here is that when the rope is properly known, the illusion of the snake will vanish. Similarly, it is argued that when we come to know God, the world will cease to have any reality. A contemporary Hindu writer clearly formulates this interpretation.

Just as things and events seen in a dream vanish altogether and become meaningless when one wakes up, so does the universe with all its contents disappear when one finds the Real Self. One then becomes perfectly awakened to what really exists, the Absolute. Compared with that, the universe is no more than a dream. So long as one sees in a dream, the dream objects are intensely real. So also is the universe with all its contents to one under the spell of *avidyā* (ignorance). On awakening to Absolute Reality, however, all these have no value, no meaning, no existence.¹

This denial of meaning and existence for the world, in its relationship to God, has serious implications for the conduct of our lives. It can and often leads to a position which undermines and devalues human action which reflects any positive concern for the world. This position

1. Swami Nirvedananda. *Hinduism at a Glance* (Calcutta : Ramakrishna Mission, 1979), p. 172.

also finds it difficult to grant any intrinsic significance or value for human relationships. These are sometimes seen as having no more worth than those in a dream. Perhaps a parable from the Hindu teacher, Rāmakṛṣṇa, best illustrates the attitude which this view of the world can prescribe for us.

There was a farmer who lived in the countryside. He was a real *jñani* (wise person). He was married and after many years a son was born to him, whom he named Haru. The parents loved the boy dearly. This was natural, since he was the one precious gem of the family. On account of his religious nature, the farmer was loved by the villagers. One day he was working in the field when a neighbour came and told him that Haru had an attack of cholera. The farmer at once returned home and arranged for the treatment of the boy. But Haru died. The other members of the family were grief-stricken, but the farmer acted as if nothing had happened. He consoled his family and told them that grieving was futile. Then he went back to his field. On returning home, he found his wife weeping even more bitterly. She said to him: 'How heartless you are! You haven't shed one tear for the child.' The farmer replied quietly: 'Shall I tell you why I haven't wept? I dreamt I had become a king; I was the father of eight sons and very happy with them. Then I woke up. Now I am greatly perplexed. Should I weep for those eight sons or for this one Haru'?'²

In accordance with views like these, human existence itself is conceived of as constituting a form of bondage from which release must be sought. We accomplish life's purpose when we are liberated from life. Such attitudes do not find it possible to affirm anything that is intrinsically positive about human life in the world. On the contrary, the world is seen as the arena of falsehood, since it presents a deceptive appearance. At best, it is a moral gymnasium from which we are to eventually graduate. The liberated person is celebrated as one who cultivates a perfect indifference to all worldly concerns and complete detachment in human relationships. To be affected or moved by anything in the world is to acknowledge and grant a reality in the world; it is to treat as real, that which is unreal. Such interpretations of the world naturally provide a justification

2. *The Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1980), pp. 52-54.

for world-renunciation rather than world-affirmation, and these positions have been most strongly advocated in the monastic strands of Hinduism.

Taken to their extremes, these positions make it difficult to take the world seriously or to speak meaningfully about the relationship between God and the world. For these reasons, there has not been any systematic attempts to work out the implications of such a view of reality for life in the world. General values have always been indicated, but serious philosophical investigation is yet to be attempted. Where the reality of the world is denied, its concerns do not become important. For the majority of Hindus who cannot or choose not to become renunciants, the tradition has not really defined a spirituality which is reconciled with life in the world. The life of the renunciant is still seen as the best model of spirituality. Yet such a definition is vital and challenging if Hinduism is to become meaningful to the circumstances of the lives of the majority of its adherents.

Is it possible to formulate an understanding of the world and its relationship to God in the *Advaita* (non-dual) tradition which can affirm its value and the value of life in it? Can such an understanding give meaning to human relationships and provide the basis for a life of involvement, compassion and concern? I think that such an understanding is possible within the resources of *Advaita* and fully consistent with it. I hope to show that in addition to affirming the world and its diversity, one can positively celebrate its existence.

The *Advaita* tradition generally uses as its starting point the existence of God before all created realities. The unity, oneness and indivisible nature of God is emphasized. The *Upaniṣads*, which are regarded as the revealed sources of the Hindu outlook, testify, in numerous passages, to this truth.

In the beginning this was but the absolute Self alone. There was nothing else whatsoever that winked. It thought: "Let me create the worlds."³

In the beginning, my dear, this was Being only, – one, without a second. Some say that, in the beginning, this was Non-being,

3. *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 1.i.1 in *Eight Upaniṣads with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, 2nd ed., tran. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965-66). *Iśā, Kena, Katha and Taittirīya* are in vol. 1, and *Aitareya, Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍūkya and Kārikā, and Praśna* are in vol. 2.

only one, without a second. From that Non-being sprang Being:

"But how could it be so, my dear?" - said he; - "How could Being be born from Non-being? - in fact this was Being only, in the beginning, one without a second."⁴

In texts such as these, we find a clear concern to refute the origin of the world in anything but God. Doctrines of pre-existent matter and material monism are dismissed. Passages in the *Upaniṣads* dealing with the creation of the world then often describe an urge on the part of God to create. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* describes it as a wish to be many, to be born.⁵ The same *Upaniṣad* also gives us a sequence in which the world emerges from God.

From that Brahman, which is the Self, was produced space. From space emerged air. From air was born fire. From fire was created water. From water sprang up earth. From earth were born the herbs. From the herbs was produced food. From food was born man.⁶

In describing the emergence of the world from God, the *Upaniṣads* employ various analogies. It is in trying to explain this relationship between God and the world that the *Advaita* tradition, following the *Upaniṣads*, makes claims which are perhaps unique. In an often quoted text, the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* offers three suggestions.

As a spider spreads out and withdraws (its thread), as on the earth grow the herbs (and trees), and as from the living person issues out hair on the body, so out of the immutable does the universe emerge here.⁷

While the analogies provided in this verse complement, enrich and correct each other, they also imply two very important aspects of the relationship between God and the world. Firstly, God is the intelligent or efficient cause for the creation of the world (*nimitta kāraṇa*). Secondly, the analogies suggest that God is the material basis or cause as well (*upādāna*

4. *The Chāndogyaopaniṣad: with the Commentary of Śaṅkara*, trans. Ganganatha Jha (Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1942) VI. ii. 1-2.

5. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II. vi. 1. See also *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI. ii. 3.

6. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II. i. 1.

7. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, I. i. 7. See also II. i. 1, where creation is likened to sparks emerging from a fire.

kāraṇa). Like the spider projecting its web, but unlike a bird building its nest, God creates without the aid of anything extraneous. Following the *Upaniṣads*, the *Advaita* tradition has not employed the language of *creatio ex nihilo* to describe the emergence of the world from God.

In the *Advaita* view, this doctrine, in its usual formulation, contradicts the rational principle that nothing can be created from nothing. It also affirms a radical dualism which sharply separates creator from creation. It is a dualism which seems to compromise the limitless nature of God and implies a spatial restriction. It also makes God into an object among many other objects in space, rather than placing space and all objects in God.

If the language of *creatio ex nihilo* is not employed to explain the creation of the world from God, and if we affirm God to be the material cause of creation, are we not left with a doctrine of pantheism? Pantheism, in the sense of a total equation of God with the world, has never been advocated by Śaṅkara, the principal exponent of the *Advaita* tradition. Śaṅkara has clearly argued that the world, with the characteristics of change, insentience, limitation and materiality is different from God (*brahman*).⁸ His contention is that one cannot meaningfully speak of a relationship between cause and effect unless some difference exists.⁹ The common factor in God and the world is the existence (*sattā*) in both. In the midst of all changing phenomena there is an immutable reality that constitutes the essence of all things. In the words of Śaṅkara, "the characteristic of existence, belonging to *brahman*, is seen to inhere in all things, counting from space."¹⁰

In numerous passages, the *Upaniṣads* testify to the transcendent nature of God as a reality far exceeding the universe. "It is that from which all words turn back, along with the mind, having failed to reach." (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 2.4) "The eye does not go there, nor speech, nor mind. We do not therefore know It, nor do we know any process of instructing about It. That which the mind cannot think, but by which the mind is enabled to think, know that alone to be *brahman*." (*Kena Upaniṣad*, 1. 3-5)

8. See the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Śaṅkarācārya, 3rd ed., trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Calcutta : Advaita Ashrama, 1977), II i. 5, pp. 311-312.

9. *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II. ii. 44, p. 442.

10. *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II. I. 6, p. 313.

If the *Advaita* tradition of Hinduism refuses to completely equate God with the world, it does not go to the other extreme and assert the world to be a totally separate and distinct reality from God. God, being the efficient cause and ultimate source of the world, the latter has no existence apart from God. Objects made of clay do not exist separately from clay, the world cannot have a distinct and independent existence from God. The infinite cause underlies and runs through all the finite effects and these cannot be considered as standing outside of it. As interpenetrated by God at every point, the world cannot be said to have an independent reality. If *Advaita* asserts the world to have an existence and reality which is distinct from God, it returns to the same position which it wanted to avoid when it denied a pre-existent matter before creation. It posits a reality different from God, and in doing so, compromises God's infinity.

The *Advaita* tradition, therefore, neither equates God with the world, nor, on the other hand, does it assert the world to possess a reality which is independent from God. Avoiding both positions, it admits that the world, in its relationship to God is a mystery and indefinable (*anirvacaniya*). Without undergoing any change or losing anything of itself, God is both the cause and source of the world. It has its existence in God, without in any way limiting God. We may view the world in *Advaita* as the mysterious self-manifestation of God. It is not the infinite plus something else, but the infinite inexplicably appearing as the finite.

While Śaṅkara frankly admits the world to be an insoluble mystery in its relationship to God, he does not describe it as being unreal or a sheer illusion. It is not often remembered that Śaṅkara argued strongly against the subjective idealists who reduce the world to a mere idea of the perceiving individual and who deny the world any existence outside of the mind. He challenges the claim that what appears to be outside the mind is an illusion.

For external things are perceived as a matter of fact. It is wrong to say that external things do not exist merely on the ground that cognition is seen to have the likeness of an object, because the very likeness of an object is not possible unless the object itself be there and also because the object is cognized outside.¹¹

11. *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II. ii. 28, p. 420.

Perhaps even more important is the fact that he objects to the equating of waking and dream experiences. Dream perceptions are contradicted in the waking-state, whereas the experiences of the latter are not negated under any condition.

One who cannot speak of the waking experience as naturally baseless, just because this would contradict experience, wants to speak of them as such on the strength of their similarity with dream experiences. But anything that cannot be characteristic of something in its own right, cannot certainly be so because of a similarity with another.¹²

What Śāṅkara does deny is the independent reality of the world and it is most significant that this is questioned only in relation to God. Illuminating in this context is Śāṅkara's hierarchial differentiation of various existences or realities.¹³ This threefold division is as follows:

- (a) Illusory reality (*prātibhāsika satta*).
Optical and other sensory illusions belong to this category.
- (b) Pragmatic reality (*vyavahārika satta*).
The world and its objects experienced during the waking state belongs to this category.
- (c) Absolute reality (*paramārthika satta*).
God alone belongs to this category.

It is clear from this that the reality of the world is not equated with that of God, but is neither unreal nor illusory.

To argue that the reality of the world is lesser than that of God and that it is grounded through and through in an ultimate reality is not to deny it all meaning and value. It is unfortunate that some interpreters of the Hindu tradition have used the world's dependent status to explain it away. It must be remembered that the world is deceptive and false only when we attribute to it an independent reality. This is indeed a false reality. When, however, the world is seen as the mysterious and indefinable creation of God, rooted in God and pervaded through and through by God, it is no longer deceptive, but a celebrative expression of God's unlimited nature. It is an undiminished overflow of the fullness of

12. *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II. ii. 29, pp. 423-24.

13. Jacob Kattackal, *Religion and Ethics in Advaita* (Freiburg : Herder, 1980), pp. 78-79.

God's being. It is God's celebration of God's existence. It is not at all necessary, as some have felt, to deny all reality to the world, in order to affirm the oneness and indivisible nature of God. We do not need to deny the many in order to preserve the one, if we positively view the many as a celebration of the one. The precise mystery is that God is the creator and source of the world, undiminished by it and no less God without it. One does not need to deny the world in order to affirm God if one sees that the world emerges from God, is sustained by God, and returns to God, without limiting God in any way. This is the mystery in which the *Bhagavadgītā* rejoices.

By Me all this universe is pervaded through My unmanifested form. All things abide in Me, but I do not abide in them.

And yet the beings do not dwell in Me. Behold My divine mystery!

My spirit which is the source of all beings sustains the beings but does not abide in them.¹⁴

The value of the world is derived from it being an expression of God, although, as a finite process, it can never fully express God. From the human standpoint, the world cannot be described as non-purposive. Its value is inestimable because it affords an opportunity for knowing God. The meaning of human existence and, by implication, the world, lies in the fact that it provides the conditions under which God can be known. It is also the general Hindu position that only through birth as a human being is spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) possible.

The relationship between God and the world in Hinduism is deepened and intensified by the fact that human beings also share and celebrate the mystery of God's nature. As the all-pervasive reality, and as the axis of the universe which intersects all things, God, in *Advaita*, exists at the deepest levels of the human personality as the Self (*ātman*).

I am the Self seated in the heart of all creatures. I am the beginning, the middle and the very end of all beings. (*Bhagavadgītā* 10:20)

14. *The Bhagavadgītā*, trans. S. Radhakrishnan. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), 9:4-5. The purpose of these two verses is not to deny God's existence in all things, but to emphasize God's transcendence and the fact that the existence of the world in God implies no limitations on the divine.

The Lord abides in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna. (*Bhagavad-gītā* 18:61)

The *ātman* is conceived as the unchanging substratum of all other changing factors in the human personality and it is here that beings have their true existence and identity. The *ātman* participates in the fullness, timelessness, and all-pervading nature of God.

Weapons do not cleave this self; fire does not burn it; water does not make it wet; nor does wind make it dry . . . It is eternal, all pervading unchanging and immovable. (*Bhagavadgītā* 2: 23-24)

Sustaining all physical and mental processes, it remains undiminished by any of these. It is through this unity with God's being that humanity also celebrates the mystery of God's relationship with the world. God's mystery is also the human mystery and God's celebration, the human celebration. The equal presence of God in all things unifies creation and through God every living being shares that unity. This *Advaita* perspective can be seen as requiring the overcoming of separateness, brokenness and alienation.

That requirement, however, is much more challenging and radical than it appears. It demands more than a new vision of the world, for, as a vision alone, it can and has often remained a passive attitude. It may be interpreted as a call to creatively transform and translate a belief in the unity of all beings through God into a selfless and compassionate way of living. Since the world is now seen as the arena of God's expression, it is not a call to be other-worldly, but a call to non-egotistic action in the world. It has the potential for a love which seeks to realize itself in a concrete way through action.

The unifying presence of God in all human beings is also an affirmation of the worth of all, and a challenge to structures of human inequality and injustice. It is in this context that the search for justice, peace and an equitable way of sharing the resources of our world can become important in *Advaita*, as the practical expression of ultimate truths about God, The world and ourselves. We may celebrate creation through values and relationships which reflect and are in harmony with God's indwelling presence everywhere. The values of love and compassion best reflect the truth of God's relationship with the world and living beings.

The *Advaita* proposition about the essential unity of all existence in and through God does not only have implications for relationships with other human beings. Relationships with the animal and natural world would have to be transformed. Reckless and insensitive exploitation of these become a intolerable. It requires the development of a sense of identity and empathy with the natural world. The selfish abuse of creation is partially due to an alienation from the rest of the universe. It is an alienation which has its roots in a fragmented and broken view of creation and not in its wholeness, unity and integrity.

The *Advaita* emphasis on spiritual liberation in life adds to the significance of the world in its relationship to God. The possibility of liberation in life (*jivan mukta*) is a clear declaration that existence and action in the world is compatible with spiritual wisdom (*jñāna*). Śaṅkara argues that liberation (*mokṣa*) does not at all mean the disappearance of the world. If this was so, he contends, the world would have vanished after the first person became liberated.

Now if it be said that this existing universe of manifestations, consisting of the body etc., is to be annihilated, this task is impossible for any person, and hence the instruction about extirpation is meaningless. Moreover, (even supposing that such a thing is possible, then) the universe, including the earth etc., having been annihilated by the first person who got liberation, the present universe should have devoid of the earth etc.¹⁵

The state of release is not at all characterized by an annihilation of plurality, but in the absence of ignorance about it. It may be thought of as a state in which the world is seen in its true relationship to God.

That *mokṣa* involves a transformation of one's attitude to the world and not a rejection of it is reinforced by Śaṅkara's support for the liberated person dedicating himself or herself to work for the well-being of others, even though this individual may have nothing personal to accomplish. In other words, freedom from selfishness places one in an ideal position to set and example of right action. It also lifts one near to a level of action corresponding to the motive of God for acting in world. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, the incarnation (*avatāra*) Kṛṣṇa describes the nature of his activity in the world.

15. *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* III. ii. 21, p. 620.

There is not for me any work in the three worlds which has to be done, nor anything to be obtained which has not been obtained: yet I am engaged in work. For, if ever I did not engage in work unwearied men in every way follow my path. If I should cease to work, these worlds would fall in ruin, and I should be the creator of disordered life and destroy the people.¹⁶

Kṛṣṇa points here to a way of acting in the world which is not characterized by the motive of personal selfish accomplishment.

In this discussion, I have attempted to establish that here are resources in the *Advaita* tradition of Hinduism for an affirmative view of life in the world. The world can be seen as the expression of God's plenitude, not to be completely equated with God, or to be seen as utterly distinct from God. It is admittedly mysterious and indefinable in its relationship to God, but not unreal or non-existent. It owes its reality to God and its existence at every moment is due to it being grounded in God. Apart from God, it ceases to be. From the vantage point of the liberated, the world is reinterpreted, but not denied.

There is a false and deceptive character to the world, but this obtains only when one wrongly attributes to it an independent reality and ultimate value in itself. Seen as the mystery of God, it no longer misleads, but becomes an expression of God's fullness. Many interpretations emphasize the deceptive character of the world, without noting the new meaning the world can have when placed in its proper relationship to God.

Through a unity with God, which is affirmed in *Advaita*, human beings can share in creation as the celebration of God's existence. As a wider level, there is a participation in the unity of all existence through God. One celebrates and participates not by spurning the world, but by entering into relationships and affirming the values that express a recognition of this vision of a unified existence. It is liberation in life, and not from life. The *Advaita* understanding of God need not be seen as undermining the meaning and value of the world, but rather heightening its significance. In affirming God, the world does not have to be denied.

16. *Bhagavadgītā*, 3:22-24. See Śaṅkara's commentary on this section in, *The Bhagavadgītā : with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. A.M. Sastry (Madras : Samata Books, 1979).