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LIFE DIVINE IN THE THEISTIC THEOLOGIES OF HINDUISM

(This study aims at exposing the patterns of Divine life visualized in the two major theistic theological traditions of Hinduism, namely, the "Qualified Non-dualism" of Ramanuja and the "Dualism" of Madhva. Ed.)

Introduction

Ramanuja's philosophical theological position is known as Qualified (or modified Non-dualism (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*). This is the view that ultimate reality (the personal God Brahman) is a unity but within the unity there are qualifications or distinctions. God (Brahman) is qualified by the plurality of souls (atmans) and the phenomenal world which together constitute the body (*śarīra*) of God. There is identity as well as difference between God, the souls, and the world.

Rāmānuja based his argument for the relationship of God on one side and the souls and the world on the other on the analogy of the soul-body relationship (*śarīratmasambandha*). The non-duality of Brahman in the Upanishads refers to the oneness of God, the souls, and the world which is similar to the oneness of man as a soul-body unity. Though inseparable in their unity, the soul and body are distinct. Likewise, God, souls, and the world are inseparable and yet distinct aspects in the one reality. Moreover, the body is not only subservient to the soul and co-ordinated to it, but it is also animated or directed by the soul. In a similar manner, God is the supreme soul present in human souls and in the world as the *Antaryāmin*, the inner controller or regulator of the souls and the universe from within.

The Dvaita (dualism) of Madhva refers to the fundamental difference between God, the Supreme Being (*paramātman*) who is *Svatantra* or independent reality, and the *Paratantra* or dependent realities, the souls and the world. Each soul is distinct from every other and from God. Madhva held that God the supreme Lord is different from the soul because He is the object of its obedience, like a subject who obeys a king differs from the ruler. The world is an emanation from God and exists eternally as a distinct entity but not as an independent principle as is the case with Rāmānuja.

It appears that Madhva's concern to formulate a system of doctrine that would undergird Bhakti devotion to the personal God led to his extreme position that there are five real and eternal distinctions (*pañcābheda*): (a) between God and the individual soul; (b) between God and matter; (c) between soul and matter; (d) between one soul and another; (e) between one particle of matter and another. Madhva cites support for his dualistic position from the *Brahma Sūtra*: ". . . various creations exist in God."¹

Obviously Madhva's Dvaita (dualism) is not only a rejection of Shankara's Advaita Vedānta but also Rāmānuja's viśiṣṭadvaita Vedānta. Dvaita Vedānta refers to itself as Sad-Vaiṣṇavism in contradistinction to the Śrī-Vaiṣṇavism of Rāmānuja. "Rāmānuja's harmonization of monism with theistic devotion veered too far in the direction of monism to be acceptable" to Bhakti dualists.² Madhva opposed Rāmānuja's doctrine that God has the souls and the world for his body as this view blurred the essential otherness of God and detracted from God's independent greatness and majesty.

Theistic Vedānta Versus Non-Dualistic Vedānta

Rāmānuja and Madhva reinterpreted Upanishadic doctrines of Brahman and Atman to show that God is a "person". Their aim was to bring God closer to man by personalizing Him, and thus to make God more relevant for the average Hindu Bhakta who would be repelled by non-personal views of God. One of Rāmānuja's polemical objectives was to establish that the Supreme Brahman (the one ultimate reality of Vedānta) is not the non-personal Godhead but is the personal God whose proper name is *Nārāyaṇa* (or *Viṣṇu*). Vaiṣṇava Bhakti religion was complete in the time of Rāmānuja but it lacked support from the Upanishads, one of the basic scriptures of Hinduism.

Rāmānuja and Madhva justified a theistic religious view for the Vaiṣṇava Bhakti community against Shankara's Advaita Vedānta because they thought that it ultimately rendered bhakti-adoration and worship pointless. The chief concern of Madhva was to refute Advaita Vedānta which was viewed as dangerously incompatible with Vaiṣṇavite devotionism. Devotion to a personal God is undermined if the Atman (Divine Soul

1. *Brahma Sūtra* 2.1.28 SBE 34.352.

2. Solid discussions of Madhva's philosophy: T.P. Ramachandran, *Dvaita Vedānta* and K. Narain, *An Outline of Madhva Philosophy*.

or Real Self) is identical with Brahman (the Absolute Godhead) and the personal God as creator of the universe and the object of devotional love is on a secondary level of spiritual reality. Bhakti requires a distinction between the worshipper as lover and the personal God as the Beloved, that is, a distinction between subject and object.

B. Kumarappa regards Rāmānuja's work as the 'loftiest philosophical expression' of Indian theism and a significant contribution to universal theistic metaphysics that is based on experience and is "not willing to dismiss the world of values as illusory."³ R. Otto regarded Rāmānuja's debate with Shankara as one in which the outcome was fraught with fundamental religious significance. Sankara and Rāmānuja were representatives of two important poles of religious experience, namely the impersonal or featureless Absolute Godhead versus the personal Lord, "the feeling, willing, loving and Beloved God of the heart."⁴ Rāmānuja passionately waged "a battle for God, for a real God . . . not one of philosophical speculation, but has the heart and feelings and desire need him: A God of personal commitment, love, adoration, and self-surrender."⁵

The Personal God and Scripture

Rāmānuja's and Madhva's case for the personal God rests primarily on the authoritative supremacy of scripture (śruti), viz., the Vedas and the Upanishads. For Madhva, scripture reveals the existence and nature of God as the absolutely independent Being who is free from all imperfections and possesses unlimited attributes.⁶ In the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, Rāmānuja states that the Epics and the Purānas corroborate the Vedas: "Since the Vedas are endless and difficult to understand, the great seers have been ordered by the Supreme person to transmit the sense of the Veda in every age in order to help all the worlds, and they have composed the Dharmaśāstras, Epics, and Purānas."⁷ Scripture is the sole source of the knowledge of God as infinite consciousness, bliss, and Supreme Cause.

Since the scriptures were regarded as divine in origin and thus authoritative, Rāmānuja tried to conform his interpretation to the content of the

3. Bharatan Kumarappa, *Hindu Conception of the Deity*, p. xix.

4. Rudolf Otto, *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared And Contrasted*, pp. 117-118.

5. Otto, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

6. For Madhva's view that God is known in scripture, see K. Narain, *op. cit.* p. 121.

7. *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, para. 138, p. 294.

texts. In contrast to Sankara who selected a few non-dualistic statements in the Upanishads as expressing the real intention of the scriptures and then interpreted all other passages in the light of non-dualism, Rāmānuja repudiated this principle of interpretation, holding that all passages of scripture (Sruti) are equally authoritative. He rejected Sankara's distinction between the primary and secondary senses of expressions, and indicated that this distinction was an arbitrary one not present in the scriptures, and that Sankara's authority was no surer than reason. Thus Rāmānuja's position is equally as vulnerable as Sankara's, for it is difficult to demonstrate that scripture is self-validating, and so, in the last analysis, the authority of scripture is contingent on reason.

Rāmānuja and Madhva on God as the Supreme Person

Both Rāmānuja and Madhva view God as eminently personal, being modeled from concepts of the human person raised to the superlative degree. Rāmānuja's favorite term for God is the Highest Person (*puruṣottama*). The Highest or Supreme Person possesses all auspicious qualities (*Kalyāṇaguṇa*) and is entirely devoid of imperfections (*dosa*). God, according to Madhva, is *sa-guṇa* (possessed of attributes); God is replete with all excellences (*sarva-guṇa-pūrṇa*), such as the qualities of omnipotence, omnipresence, and perfect bliss. In his Commentary on the Vedānta Sūtras, Madhva states that "the excellent qualities of the Lord cannot be one by one described; for they are innumerable. Hence He is called *Brahman* which means absolutely perfect, so that all his qualities may be collectively denoted."⁸ "In fact, the supreme Being is described as infinite (*ananta*) precisely on account of its immensity of glorious and real *guṇas*, excellences (*Bhāgavatam*, I Skānda, 18-19; also *Tattvodyota* 5-25-6)."⁹ In one sense the personality of God is the sum total of all his qualities. Rāmānuja held that God's essential nature (*svarūpa*) is distinct from all entities other than Himself by virtue of his opposition to evil. That the Supreme Person is free from and essentially opposed to evil reveals a basic distinction between God and the individual soul. Closely related in meaning to *Puruṣottama* is the term *paramātmā*, the Supreme Self. Rāmānuja prefers *Puruṣottama* to *paramātmā* as a name for God, partly because of the close association between the terms *Puruṣottama* and *Nārāyaṇa* in the scriptures favoured by Vaiṣṇava Bhakti.

8. *Vedānta-sūtras with the Commentary of Sri Madwāchārya* (S. Subba Rao, trans.) 1.2.12.

9. S S. Raghavachar, *Dvaita Vedānta*, p. 52.

Rāmānuja affirmed that the Supreme Person is the Personal Spirit (or Self, *ātmā*) who is superior to all other personal spirits (*Purusas*) and to their material bodies. This ontological superiority is expressed not only by emphasizing the difference in their status but also by the fact that God is the in-dwelling Self (*antaryāmin*) of all beings. The fundamental distinction between the Supreme Person and other beings is that God is the cause of creation. God is also distinct from all other entities because of his perfection: ". . . He is utterly preeminent (*atyanta-utkarṣa*) by virtue of being the antithesis of everything defiling and being of an entirely auspicious nature."¹⁰ "He who knows that I am the Supreme Person of an entirely distinct nature (*viṣṭiyam*) because my nature is eternal – in contrast to both kinds of (souls or purusas, namely, the liberated and the bound)."¹¹ Thus the supremacy of the personal God over finite persons lies in that he is eternal in a more significant sense than souls and that he pervades and supports finite persons.

In contrast to Sankara's Advaita Vedānta which restricts name and form (*nāmarūpa*) to the phenomenal realm and affirms that the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) is beyond all name and form, Rāmānuja and Madhva held that the Supreme God possessed many significant or specific divine names, such as *Viṣṇu*, *Nārāyaṇa*, *Bhagavān*. "He is known through the Upanishads by different terms, such as "the Self of all," "the Supreme Reality," and "Being."¹² He is the Lord (*Bhagavān*), *Nārāyaṇa*." The supreme personal or proper name of God is *Nārāyaṇa*, which is considered as a synonym for the common name of *Viṣṇu*. Rāmānuja declared that ". . . *Vāsudeva* . . . is the ultimate and most significant meaning of all words (*sarva-śabda-aycyatvam*) by having everything as his body and as his modes."¹³ *Bhagavān* or the Supreme Lord worthy of worship is a specific personal name of *Viṣṇu* both in his supreme state and in his incarnations (*avatāra*).

In addition to the specific names of God are many other important names of varying degree of generality. The most important of the general names in the Vedantic tradition is *Brahman*. Madhva held that *Brahman* is existence-consciousness-bliss (*sat-chit-ānanda*) incarnate, that is, God is of the essence of self-revealing consciousness and bliss. Rāmānuja equates

10. J.A.B. Van Buitenen, *Rāmānuja on the Bhagavad-Gītā (Gītā-Bhāṣya)*, 15.

11. Van Buitenen, *op. cit.*, 15. 17–19.

12. *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, 13, p. 70.

13. *Gītā-Bhāṣya* 8, intro. p. 70.

Brahman with the Supreme Person (*Purusottama*). In all contexts the term *Brahman* is applied to whatever possesses the quality of greatness (*brhattva*), but its primary and most significant meaning is that Being whose greatness is of matchless excellence, both in his essential nature and in his other qualities. It is only the Lord of all (*Sarveśvara*) who is such a Being. Therefore, the word *Brahman* is primarily used only to signify him."¹⁴ The general term for Lord in Rāmānuja's and Madhva's thought is *Īśvara*, often used in compound terms such as *Sarveśvara* (Lord of all) and *Sarveśvareśvara* (Lord of all lords). The term *Īśvara* is commonly used in various Indian schools to refer to the supreme personal spirit. In his Commentary on the Vedānta Sūtra Madhva mentions that "... the term *Brahman* primarily denotes Visnu only ..."¹⁵

M. Hiriyana remarks that Rāmānuja held that all names (with some exceptions are God's names, so that every word becomes a symbol of God finally points to him "This deeper significance of words, described as *vedānta-vyutpatti*, is what only the enlightened comprehend. According to it no word ceases to signify after denoting its usual meaning, but extends its function till it reaches the Supreme. Yāmūnācārya, Rāmānuja's teacher, stated that one should "dwell on the truth contained in the holy name *Nārāyaṇa*, as it contains the sum of all divine wisdom. That signifies "we are in him and he is in us. He is in us implies the bond between him and souls, the bond by which he is bound by his grace to save us. We are in Him implies that we can freely and wholly trust Him for all our welfare."¹⁶

Rāmānuja's and Madhva's conception of God is consonant with other theistic religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Sikhism, in affirming that God possesses superlative personal qualities, but the Vaisnava view is unique in maintaining that God is not formless but possessed of a personal form (the most beautiful form). Rāmānuja contends that the Supreme Person in his transcendent or celestial bodily form (*divya-rūpa*) possesses a heavenly body (*aprakṛta divya mangala vigraha*) full of beauty and tenderness (*saundarya* and *lāvanya*), sweetness and charm (*mādhurya* and *gāmhīrya*). Moreover, God dwells in his own citadel *Vaikuṅṭha* and is waited upon by celestial ministers and attendants. Madhva also emphasizes that God is infinite beauty. However, God's 'form' is

14. *Shrī-Bhāṣya* 1.1.1., p. 2; Thibaut, p. 4.

15. *Vedānta-sūtras with the Commentary of Śrī Madwācārya* 1.1.1.

16. M. Hiriyana, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 401; M. Yāmūnācārya, *Rāmānuja's Teachings in His Own Words*, p. 6.

entirely spiritual with no material adjunct.¹⁷ Madhva extols the intoxicating beauty of God in his great hymn, *Dvādaśastotra*.

God's essential sovereignty, according to Rāmānuja, is expressed by the divine epithet "Lord of all lords" (*Sarveśvareśvaraḥ*). It emphasizes not only the metaphysical supremacy of God over all other beings but also his active Lordship. This name of God is grounded in a theistic interpretation of the *Brahman* of the Upanishads as the personal overlord of all lesser lords. Rāmānuja holds that there is a scale of created beings, and that the most exalted gods are far below the Supreme Person, being finite selves subject to the law of karma. In the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, Rāmānuja asserts God's supremacy (*paratva*) over other deities, notably *Brahma*, the fashioner of the cosmos, and *Śiva* (viewed sometimes as the Destroyer of the Universe): "*Brahma* and *Śiva* are . . . his creaturely manifestations (*vibhūti*s) because they have the same status as such gods as Indra." "The creator and the destroyer are *vibhūti*s of (*Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa*). The *Vibhūti* comprises *Brahma*, *Viṣṇu*, and *Śiva* together as; a class . . . Thus it is said that God exists by his own will and for his own sport (*svatīlāya*), within the *vibhūti*."¹⁸

Scholars have applied the Western terms 'theism' and 'monotheism' to the complex view of the Godhead in Vaisnavism, but these terms fail to express the polytheistic dimension of Rāmānuja's and Madhva's thought. Since the Vaisnava understanding of the Godhead incorporates the dominant affirmation that the Supreme Person is basically one along with a plethora of minor deities subordinate to the one, I am coining the term 'mono-polytheism' to describe the complexity of the Vaisnava understanding of the Godhead. The term 'mono-polytheism' may also be superior to another scholarly term 'high-god,' which intimates a clearcut division between the one supreme reality and the subservient minor gods. 'Mono-polytheism' combines both the notion of the one Supreme Person and the notion of the subordinate gods who have distinct personalities (or jurisdictional powers) *who are simultaneously integral components of the Godhead*. The terms 'theism' and 'monotheism' should be reserved for the unique view of God who is without partners found in such Religions of History as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

17. S. S. Raghavachar, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

18. *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, para. 112.

The Personal God And The Mother Goddess

Rāmānuja and Madhva hold that Visnu lives in his heavenly realm with his consort, Laksmī, a superhuman personality who is distinct yet dependent on her Lord. The Supreme Person, *Nārāyaṇa*, is ever united with his consort *Śrī*,* and with the goddesses *Bhūmī* and *Nīlā*. *Śrī*, (*Lakṣmī*) has the distinction of bearing the *mahisi* (queen or chief consort), and is described as being “of matchless glory with respect to her essential nature, beautiful form, qualities, manifestations (*vibhāva*), dominion (*aiśvarya*), gracious conduct (*śīla*), and so on, qualities that are pleasing and appropriate to him.”¹⁹ *Śrī* is part of the personal God though inseparable from her Lord. She always carries out the wishes of the Supreme Person and also acts as the mediatrix of salvation, bestowing God’s grace upon the devotee.

Madhva declared that Laksmi is “the Great Mother of the world”²⁰ who issued forth from Visnu and that God created, sustains, and destroys the world order through her. Rāmānuja views *Śrī* as the *Śakti* (the dynamic, creative power of God); she is not the sole creative cause as that would detract from God’s power. That Rāmānuja regarded the divine consort *Śrī* as *Śakti* and that there is no division of functions between God and his beloved may be glimpsed in one of his favorite passages in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*: “This goddess *Śrī*, who is the mother of the universe, is eternal and is inseparable (*anapayini*) from *Visnu*. Just as *Visnu* is omnipresent (*sarvagata*), so likewise is she.” “When he is (in the form of) a man, she also becomes a human being. She makes her own body according with that of *Visnu*.”²¹ Madhva disagreed that Laksmi possesses a physical form. However, Madhva believed that God has two sons by *Laksmī*, *Brahma*, the creator, and *Vāyu*, the savior of mankind.

The Personal God of Grace

Rāmānuja and Madhva not only stress that the personal God is a God of Grace (*prasāda*) but also stress God’s capacity to deliver man through his Grace. Divine Grace is an ever-existent reality and is indistinguishable from God’s essence. God’s Grace is a continuously operative factor in the

* As a consequence of *Śrī* being the chief consort of God, Rāmānuja’s Vaishnavism is also known as *Śrī Vaishnavism*.

19. *Ibid.*, para. 127.

20. *Vedānta-sūtras with the Commentary of Śrī Madwāchārya* 1.1.1.

21. *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, para. 133.

spiritual life of man from the beginning and Grace is the ultimate factor that brings about liberation. One of Madhva's favorite quotes is: "without Nārāyana's *prasāda*, *moksa* is not possible."²² (also: . . . released (self) . . . has attained to his essential state as pure spirit, through the grace of the Supreme Lord.)²³ Salvation occurs only when God so wishes yet Grace is achieved through human endeavor in terms of spiritual aspiration and effort. Bhakti is the final point of human effort that confers Grace. The two constituents of Bhakti are knowledge of the greatness and truth of God and love towards him. When the soul worships God, He gives it knowledge about himself which qualifies the soul to receive divine Grace. Though knowledge is important as a means to the attainment of God's Grace, it does not have the ultimate position granted to it in other thought systems. The love required by Bhakti must fulfil the condition of steadfastness and must be surpassing in its intensity all other forms of love. It is the height of Bhakti-love that invokes the Grace effective for *moksa*.

There are various forms of Divine Grace corresponding to the efforts made by three types of Vaisnava devotees. The lowest form of Grace (*adhama*), which is acquired through *karma*, leads to *svarga* and not *moksa*. The second or middle form of Grace (*madhyama*) is invoked by hearing (*śravaṇa*) about the real nature of God and this leads to *janaloka* (earth). The third and supreme form of grace renders the soul from the bondage of reincarnation. The soul leaves the body and the world at death and lives forever in heaven (*Vaikunṭha*) enjoying the presence of God and the eternal bliss of communion with him. Thus, it is only the supreme Grace of God that is the ultimate instrument in the attainment of *moksa*.

The Supreme Person as Accessible to Man Through His Various Forms

Rāmānuja's thought is characterized by the classic theological polarity of God's inaccessibility on one hand and his accessibility to man on the other. The tension in God between his supremacy and his nearness and openness to men in redeeming them: constituted a paradox for Rāmānuja that was a source of continuing wonder that the Lord who is the Supreme Person would condescend to dwell intimately with finite men. God's saving action is not so much a corollary of the doctrine of God as Savior (*Raksaka*) and as the Supreme Master and Owner (*Śeṣi*) but is a mysterious act in which God breaks his inaccessibility to man. God makes himself accessible

22. *Brahma-sūtra Bhāṣhya* 1.1.1.

23. *Vedānta-sūtras with the Commentary of Śrī Madwāchārya* 1.3.19.

to man in order to become a Refuge (*āśraya*) for them. There are four divine attributes that Rāmānuja employs in referring to God making himself accessible as a Refuge : mercy or compassion (*dayā* or *kāruṇya*), generosity (*audārya*), gracious condescension (*sauśīlya*), and protecting and forgiving love (*vātsalya*). God's intention to save men and his willingness to take the initiative in the soteriological process are captured by the concept of God's mercy or compassion. The meaning of God's mercy (*dayā*) is twofold : (1) inability to endure the suffering (*asahisnuta*) of others (*para-duhka*) and disregard of one's own advantages (*svārtha-nirapekṣa*) ; (2) God's attempt to increase the superlative (*niratiśaya*) happiness of men, not for his own sake but for their own welfare.

God has two different ways of relating to man's spiritual life. As the presider over the operations of the law of karma, God does not interfere with the moral decisions and religious activities of man. But in certain exceptional cases God causes men to perform good and bad actions, particularly when the individuals already have strong disposition in one direction or another. God encourages them to go further in the direction they have already chosen as a special means of rewarding outstanding goodness or punishing evil conduct. In the second relationship to man's spiritual life, God actively intervenes in human lives and in world affairs. God's accessibility to his followers is best seen through incarnations.

The Supreme Person manifests himself in various ways or forms to be accessible and to help men to reach him. Following the Bhagavāta doctrine of *Vyūha* Rāmānuja believed in the five-fold form or manifestation of God. (1) *parā*, the transcendental form of God who rules everything from without; (2) *vyūha*, the operative form of God known as *Vāsudeva*, *Sanakarasaṇa*, *Pradyumna*, and *Aniruddha*; (3) *vibhāva*, the incarnate form of the *avatāra*; (4) *antaryāmin*, the pervasive form of God in the heart; (5) *arcāvatāra*, the image form of God in the temples and homes.

Madhva concurs with Ramanuja in affirming the forms of *parā* and the four *vyūhas*, viz., *Vāsudeva*, *Pradyumna*, *Anirudha*, and *Sankarsana*, which respectively, refer to the functions of salvation, creation, maintenance, and dissolution of the world. Corresponding to Rāmānuja's *antaryāmin* is Madhvas' *bimba-rūpa*, the immanent principle of God reflected in the souls that guides everything. The soul (*jīva*) is an eternal and absolutely real reflection (image) of God (*Visnu*), and so is called *svarūpopādhika-pratibimba* (or *nirupādhika-pratibimba*).²⁴ "To reflect on the nature of the soul

24. *Brahma-sūtra Bhāṣya* 2.2.10

(*jīva*) is to be irresistibly drawn to *Īśvara* (God), who surpasses it immeasurably, who sustains it and imparts to it partial affinity of nature. The *pratibimba* (soul) carries an intimation of the original *bimba*, even as *Hanumān* carried the message of his master, *Śrī Rāma*.²⁵ Madhva disagrees with Rāmānuja on *arcāvataṛa*, for he does not view images (icons) as manifestations of God. God has no gross or material form, for such a form would be subject to change and imperfection. Existence (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ānanda*) alone constitute his body or form.

The famous *avatār* doctrine refers to the periodic descent of God from his celestial realm to manifest himself in the phenomenal world. Rāmānuja never discusses the precise number of divine incarnations, but the two most prominent ones, according to him and Madhva, are *Rāma* and *Krishna*. *Krishna* is adored by Madhva but not in the pastoral form.

The *avatāra* doctrine in Rāmānuja's theology serves the following divine purposes: (1) God became incarnate for the purpose of salvation which consists of eternal communion with him; (2) God in his kindness and grace takes human form to rescue his devotees and destroy their enemies whenever *dharma* (righteousness) is declining. God incarnates himself to save eminent *Vaisnavas* by allowing them to behold his essential nature, his deeds, and to listen to his teachings; (3) God becomes incarnate to grant the requests of his worshippers for worldly items as well as the supreme good of salvation. Rāmānuja, in his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, states: "He has granted them whatever they prayed for, whether meritorious action, wealth, physical pleasure, or deliverance, according to their desire."²⁶ Related to the third purpose is the view that God assumes a suitable divine form for the satisfaction of his worshippers: "In order to favor his worshippers (*upāsakas*), the supremely compassionate Lord, solely by his own will, causes this same form, which is definitely part of his own inherent nature, to assume that particular generic structure, such as that of a typically divine or human body, which will be a shape (*ākāra*) suited to their particular understanding."²⁷ Thus the personal God steps down from his throne to reach the soul struggling in *samsāra* and becomes one like him (*sajātya*), suffers with him, endures pain with him and leads him by the hand like a friend or comrade, or like a lover or guide.

25. S.S. Raghavarchar, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

26. *Gītā-Bhāṣya*, p. 79.

27. *Śrī-Bhāṣya* 1.1.21.

The personal God, according to Madhva, assumes the visible *avatār* form to perform specific functions in the world, but God is not invested with a material form. Madhva held that whenever *Visnu* becomes incarnate, he always has his son *Vāyu* as his friend and helper.²⁸ As God cannot be approached directly, *Vāyu* is the exclusive mediator between God and man to obtain saving knowledge and release. *Vāyu* not only incites souls to seek salvation, but he is also the vehicle of God's grace, breathing his life-giving power into those whom he saves. It is important to note that salvation can only be achieved through *Vāyu* through Madhva.²⁹ *Vāyu* has been incarnated three times as *Hanumān*, the helper of Rāma, as Bhīma, and as Madhva himself. *Marimānjari* and *Madhvavijaya* (2.24) state that Madhva is an incarnation of *Vāyu* for the purpose of destroying Advaita Vedānta.

Rāmānuja believed that another important way in which God is accessible to his devotees is as *antaryāmin*, "the controller within," or the "inner ruler." John Carman remarks that the name of *antaryāmi* (*n*) is Rāmānuja's "favorite name for God in his nature of the Self within the body."³⁰ Rāmānuja discusses God as *antaryāmin* as it appears in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* 3.7: "He who is dwelling in the earth is within the earth, whom the earth does not know, whose body the earth is, who rules the earth within, He is thy Self, the Ruler within, the immortal." God as the Inner Controller is the active agent in the life of every person, but the Vaisnava devotee is not content with the metaphysical knowledge that all creatures are under divine jurisdiction, and instead wishes to be perpetually conscious that his actions are not his own doing. *Antaryāmin* is also the pervasive form of God dwelling in the heart of all men to aid in meditation. God is the "means for bringing about the meditation and the goal of meditation, He himself is the highest object to be attained."³¹ God's most intimate control over the finite self is thus both an expression of his supremacy over that self and of his will to prepare that self for a state of uninterrupted communion with him, a communion of which there may be foretaste in this life for one whose devotion is animated or encouraged by the indwelling ruler."³²

28. Worship of *Vāyu* was prominent in Indo-Iranian religion. In the *Rig Veda*, *Vāyu*, the God of Wind and Warfare, pervades the atmospheric real and is associated with 'breath' probably indicating a macro-microcosmic correspondence of universal wind and vital breath (*prāṇa*). Later *Vāyu* is viewed as 'spirit' indwelling in all life.

29. C.N. Krishnaswami Aiyer, *Śrī Madhva and Madhvaism*, p. 68.

30. John Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja*, p. 136.

31. *Śrī-Bhāṣya* 1.4.1, p. 194; Thibaut, p. 356.

32. Carman, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

Rāmānuja's paraphrase of *Bhagavad-Gītā* 4.11 which mentions that God manifests himself to men in other shapes than those of the *avatāra* suggests that he viewed consecrated images (icons) as divine manifestations for the benefit of worshippers: "Although my nature is beyond the grasp of speech and thought even for yogis, I adapt Myself to those who follow my ways, in such a way that they may not only see me but may enjoy me with all their senses."³³ *Arcāvatāra* is the image (*pratika*) from in temples and homes of worshippers which God assumes in accordance with the wishes of his devotees. God not only pervades the image but makes it his special vehicle in order to be within easy reach of the follower. Rāmānuja states that "by meditation on *pratika* (an image of God) we understand a meditation in which something that is not *Brahman* is viewed under the aspect of *Brahman*."³⁴ Worship directed to the image of God is carried to the Supreme Person.

The Vaiṣṇava Saṃpradāya and the Ācārya

From the 11th century onwards Vaiṣṇavism generated a series of worshipping communities known as *Saṃpradāyas*; the leading ones are *Sanakadi* founded by Nimbāditya, *Śrī* founded by Rāmānuja, *Brahma* founded by Madhva, and *Rudra* celebrated by Vallabha. The term *Saṃpradāya* has been translated as "sect," "lineage," "religious system" Max Weber explains it is "Communities into which one is not born — hence 'open-door castes'—but to which one belongs by virtue of common religious aspiration and common sacred paths."³⁵ Joachim Wach regards the *Saṃpradāya* as a specifically religious "group with special concepts, forms of worship, and adherence to exclusive leadership exercised by an outstanding religious personality or by his physical or spiritual descendant."³⁶ It is interesting to observe at this point that Madhva's *Brahma-saṃpradāya* claims that its doctrine was revealed by *Brahma* from whom Madhva was the sixth teacher in spiritual descent. The *Saṃpradāya* are somewhat exclusive but not mutually hostile worshipping communities differentiated by "the preferences (*ruchi*) of particular teachers in laying emphasis on particular points, but form theoretically one body of *Viṣṇu* worshippers, insisting on *bhakti* in distinction"³⁷ to the nondualistic Vedānta. Wach mentions that the

33. *Gītā-Bhāṣya* 4.11, p. 39.

34. *Śrī-Bhāṣya* 4.1.4.

35. Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, p. 23.

36. Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion*.

37. George Grierson, "Bhakti Marga", *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. II, p. 541.

'*Bhaktimāla*, the *acta sanctorum* of Hinduism associated with the *saṃpradāya*, enumerates as the essentials of religion not only *bhakti* (faith), *bhakta* (devotee), *bhagavanta* (the adorable), but also the *guru* (teacher).

It is tempting to speculate that Rāmānuja's and Madhva's case for the personal God may have been a contributing factor to the cohesive unity and extension of their respective *Sampradāya*. But an even greater contribution may have been their role as *Sampradāya*-organizers and *ācāryas* who serve as *Bhakti*-exemplars and mediators of the Personal God in providing additional means of Grace.

Rāmānuja's great intellectual achievement and contribution to the *Śrī-saṃpradāya* was the completion of a theological-philosophical system (Qualified Non-dualism) that was inaugurated by his predecessors, Nāthamuni and Yāmuna. Since Rāmānuja composed the authoratative commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras*, he became the chief teacher (*ācārya*) of the *Śrī-saṃpradāya*. Those Vaiṣṇava *bhaktas* who accepted Rāmānuja as their *ācārya* believed that he fulfilled the prophecy of Nammālvār by bringing to an end *Kali Yuga* (the present evil age). "Though outwardly the old evil age continued, his followers believed that he was ushering in the new age, which was only a return to the golden age of righteousness (*Satya-yuga*)."³⁸

The steps that Rāmānuja took to popularize his teachings indicate that he was a practical organizer of a worshipping community as well as a brilliant philosopher-theologian. Rāmānuja articulated the *Śrī Vaiṣṇava* position, both in the written and the spoken word, in such a creative manner that it became known throughout India. After completing the *Śrībhāṣya*, Ramanuja went on tour to spread his teachings. He won many theological-philosophical debates and established monasteries that advocated his position. It is noteworthy that he made *Tirupati*, one of the great shrines of Hinduism today, a permanent center of *Śrī Vaiṣṇavism*. He also converted the Hoysala ruler, Bitti Viṣṇuvārdhana, from Jainism to Qualified Non-dualism and persuaded many persons to surrender their belief in *Advaita Vedānta* and to adopt his teachings. Consequently, Rāmānuja enlarged the *Śrī-Saṃpradāya*, spreading it from a few temples to every part of South India.

The organizing genius of Rāmānuja led him to assign his disciples to different tasks which took into account their talents and the needs of the

38. Carman, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

Śrī-saṃpradāya. Upon his return to Śrīrangam at the end of the (Saiṣite) Cola persecution, Rāmānuja divided the *Śrī* community into a number of *maṭṭ* (monastery) over each of which he appointed a local *ācārya* (leader). He appointed seventy-four *ācāryas* (leaders) whose task was to spread "Qualified Non-dualism" in the homes, villages, and public places of worship in their centers.

As a saintly leader, Rāmānuja was also viewed as the mediator of salvation, particularly by the *Tengalais* School of *Śrī Vaiṣṇavism*, since by his own faith and act of surrender he secured the redemption of his followers. The temple priests at *Śrīrangam* bestowed upon Rāmānuja the title of *Uḍayavar*, a Tamil term indicating that he was the steward entrusted with the management of God's eternal realm and earthly wealth. Thus Rāmānuja was considered to be not only the steward of the temple but the guardian of the state of eternal bliss of which the temple was an earthly symbol. This was his highest priestly function in the eyes of his followers: mediating salvation to those who depended on him."³⁹ Rāmānuja permitted his own image to be placed in *Śrī Vaiṣṇava* temples where he was also worshipped as the reincarnation of Lakṣmaṇa, the brother of God Rāmā. "No *Vaiṣṇava* temple is considered perfect without his image, no festival proper without the celebration of his greatness, and no ceremonial occasion adequately solemn without the invocation of his blessing and favor. What he was in life, he has been in death – a prince of devotees (*Yatirājā*) – ever standing in the presence of his Lord and contemplating him."⁴⁰

A sharp contrast may be drawn in Indian religions between esoteric traditions of a few elite spiritual *gurus* (including Advaita Vedānta) and Rāmānuja's broadly based worshipping community (*saṃpradāya*). The *Śrī-saṃpradāya* has its entrance requirements, but in principle they are those of single-minded devotion, not of caste, and the transmission of esoteric teachings has been expanded to include a wider community. As *Bhakti* has a tendency to transcend caste barriers at some points, Rāmānuja is noted for his excellence of heart and sympathy in allowing lower castes to become a part of the *Śrī Vaiṣṇava* community. He allowed lower castes a place in *Vaiṣṇavism* by permitting them to wear sect-marks, *Vaiṣṇava* dress, to participate occasionally in temple festivals, and to study the *Prabandham* (Vedic chants). Even though some of Rāmānuja's writings

39. *Ibid.*

40. V. Rangacharya, "Historical Evolution of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism in South India," *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. IV, p. 177.

reveal a Brahmanic exclusiveness which was inconsistent with his liberality, Rāmānuja contributed to the "democratization of Vaiṣṇavism."

Perhaps it was Rāmānuja's disclosure of God's amazing love and accessibility in a dramatic act that established the foundations for a wider worshipping community. This dramatic act consisted of his shouting the secret of salvation from a temple tower, after his teacher *Tirukottiyūr Nambi* had finally disclosed to him the secret on condition that he did not reveal it. His teacher berated him, "Didn't you know that the penalty for such is to go to Hell?" Rāmānuja cheerfully replied, "Certainly I knew, but I alone shall suffer, while all those who heard me now share your secret and will be saved." His teacher was so moved by Rāmānuja's compassion that he embraced and acknowledged him the leader of the community with the divine title of "Our Lord" (*Emberumānār*). Carman remarks that "the story clearly captures a concern of Rāmānuja's that was to fill the rest of his life : to spread this *darśana* (religious perspective or teaching) which until now had been the carefully guarded property of a small group of devotees, to spread it both to the communities of devotees at other *Vaiṣṇava* temples and to the all-Indian scholarly community of students of the Sanskrit scriptures."⁴¹

Rāmānuja (or Madhva) is an excellent illustration of Max Weber's thesis that "not new doctrines but the universality of the *guru* (*orācārya*) authority symbolized the restoration of Hinduism. Quite apart from the *krishna* or *Rāma*-cult which it embodied, it was a 'redeemer' religiosity in a special sense . . . All sect founders were deified and their successors became and are objects of worship. . . . ('Redeemer religiosity') offered the masses the corporal living savior, the helper-in-need, confession . . . and above all, an object of worship in the form of a dignity-bearing *guru* (*ācārya*) – be it through the designation of successors, be it hereditary. . . . Personal *guru* (*ācārya*) power was particularly strong in general in the *Vishnu* sect. . . . It corresponds to the character of *Vishnuite* religion, which, on the one hand, demands adoration of authority, on the other, the continual incitement to pietistic revivals. . . . holiness was available only through guidance of the Vedic-cultured *guru* (*ācārya*) The unconditional dependence on the *guru* (*ācārya*) was held to be indispensable for lay salvation; only from him, not from books, could one win knowledge. . . . Adoration of the living savior was the last word of Hindu religious development."⁴²

41. Carman, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

42. Max Weber, "The Orthodox Restoration in India," *The Religion of India*, pp. 311-324.