

## RĀMĀNUJA AND AL-GHAZĀLĪ

Monotheism and monistic theism are two very distinct and different terms. On the philosophical and theological level they could be called mutually contradictory. In the one, monotheism, there is an affirmation of one absolute being who is worthy to be called God or *Theos*, and everything else stands in relation to God as subordinate, separate and dependent—for its very existence. Monistic theism is, on the other hand, less clear on this issue. It does not make such a sharp distinction between Creator and creature. It rather speaks of the oneness of being, and then either denies being and reality to other things or subsumes all and everything that exists in one Being who is their ground and source. On the experiential level, however, these two diverse and different positions can meet and interact.

Although the differences between Islam and Hinduism are many and formidable, Islam representing a purely monotheistic vision and Hinduism being very monistic in its approach, however, the two traditions often came close to each other<sup>1</sup> in their mystical experiences; as a result, interaction and even crossfertilization sometimes took place. As an example, Ṣūfism, in general, exhibits a tendency to move from the absolute monotheism of Islam to a more monistic vision. This tendency manifests itself principally by an emphasis on the omnipresent and omnipotent being of God. This emphasis has sometimes led the Ṣūfi to deny his own being (*fanā*) and claim that only God is being and existent and no one else (*lā mawjūd ill-allāh*).

Professor Zaehner claims that monism was brought in to Islamic Ṣūfism by Abū Yazīd of Bisṭām who, in his turn, probably received it from his Indian master Abū Alī Sindī.<sup>2</sup> Although it is possible that

1. Alberuni, the first serious Muslim writer on Hinduism, has also observed this similarity between the Hindu and Ṣūfī viewpoints. See *Alberuni's India* translated by Edward C. Sachau (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), pp. 33-34.
2. R. C. Zaehner, "Abū Yazīd of Bisṭām: A Turning Point in Islamic Mysticism" in *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 1 (1957), p. 300; also see his *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Press, ed. 1969), Chap. V., "Vedānta in Muslim Dress," pp. 86-109.

some ideas of Abū Yazīd might have come to him from Hindu and Vedānta sources, nevertheless one may still argue that his position remains Islamic. There is a world of difference between the *advaita* philosophy of Śaṅkara and the monistic tendencies that can be perceived in the sayings attributed to Abū Yazīd. Śaṅkara's intuition is of a philosophical nature while Abū Yazīd remains totally within the confines of mystical experience without attempting in any way to philosophize. It is inconceivable, for example, that Abū Yazīd would ever speak of the attributeless (*nirguna*) God or would ever employ the word illusion (*māyā*) in the radical way in which Śaṅkara used it. The entire atmosphere of the two traditions, Muslim and Hindu, is so different that even where we observe a similarity of expression we cannot automatically assume that the ideas and concepts are identical. Abū Yazīd, however, is a relatively obscure figure within the history of Sūfism; we cannot rely too heavily on examples drawn from his work to pass our judgments on Sūfism.

In this paper we would prefer to concentrate on another well-known Muslim figure, viz., al-Ghazālī, and compare some of his ideas with those of Rāmānuja. Al-Ghazālī was a monotheist, but due to his Sūfī tendencies he showed an inclination to monistic conceptualization. Rāmānuja, on the other hand, belonged to a monistic Hindu tradition and by training to Vedānta philosophy but in his religious upbringing and spiritual expression he was a Vaiṣṇavite. Both Rāmānuja and Al-Ghazālī are very influential figures for their respective traditions. It is very unlikely that they actually met one another although they were contemporaries. Al-Ghazālī, though widely travelled, never reached India, whereas Rāmānuja never stepped out of India. Al-Ghazālī's dates are usually given as 1058 to 1111 A.D. while Rāmānuja's are traditionally 1027 to 1137 A. D. As both were prolific writers, this study is meant to be suggestive and introductory rather than exhaustive. The main purpose is merely to introduce those relevant ideas which will help us to see the similarities and differences between monotheism and monistic theism; the faith, belief and commitment of Rāmānuja and Al-Ghazālī in their respective traditions provide the key to an understanding of the various insights that will follow.

### Rāmānuja's Position

To use the word "monism" without qualification is, perhaps, misleading when discussing Rāmānuja. He is usually identified as the

foremost proponent of "qualified non-dualism" or "modified monism" (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*). However, the term "monistic theism" is employed here to denote *Viśiṣṭādvaita*. It seems that Rāmānuja's monism is basically modified by theism. This is not to in any way suggest that Śaṅkara's *advaita* was atheistic; rather for Śaṅkara, Brahman is the only being and all the rest is illusion (*māyā*). The human soul (*ātman*) is none other than Brahman when it strips itself of its ignorance (*avidyā*) and attains wisdom (*jñāna*).<sup>3</sup>

Rāmānuja conceived of reality in three parts: the Supreme God, the individual soul, and matter.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Śaṅkara, he believes that individual souls and matter are real and not illusory. They are in some degree independent, although not completely independent of Brahman. The problem of the intricate relationship between these realities then becomes one of the critical questions of Rāmānuja's philosophy. Rāmānuja struggles with two things: on the one hand, he wants to retain the otherness of Brahman, because theism and *bhakti* cannot survive if all the distinctions between Brahman and *ātman* are lost and a total and absolute identity is affirmed; yet, on the other hand, he also wants to be true to the dominating emphasis of Hinduism, namely, monism.

Rāmānuja accepts the notion of *satkāryavada*, according to which the effect is seen to pre-exist in its cause. For Rāmānuja this means that the effect is the same as the cause. Between cause and its effect there is oneness as far as the substance is concerned, and there is difference only as far as the qualities and the form are concerned.<sup>5</sup> Matter and soul are thus, for Rāmānuja the modes (*prakāra*) of Brahman. By this he means that Brahman is the one fundamental substance of which all individual things, although possessing some degree of substantiality in their own right, are attributes.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes the relationship between Brahman, human souls and matter is described in the metaphor of body and soul: soul and matter form the external body of Brahman while absolute Brahman is the soul.

3. See a detailed exposition of his position in S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927) vol. II, ch. VIII.

4. Vasudev Anant Sukhtankar, *The Teachings of Vedānta According to Rāmānuja* (Wien: Druck von Adolph Holzhausen, 1908), p. 20.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 26

6. Max Hunter Harrison, *Hindu Monism and Pluralism* (Humphrey Milford: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 219.

Hinduism in general does not teach the dogma of creation out of nothing ("creatio ex nihilo"). For Rāmānuja too, this also seems an inconceivable doctrine,<sup>7</sup> but unlike theistic Sāṃkhya and atheistic Yoga he does not accept that *prakṛti* existed eternally and independently of Brahman and was the source from which Brahman created the world. Such a view for Rāmānuja goes against the teachings of the *śruti* scriptures. Hence Rāmānuja believed that God must have created the world out of Himself. Human souls are also part of Brahman, although not as pieces (*khaṇḍa*) but in the same sense as the brightness of the luminous body is part of that body.<sup>8</sup> Again all created beings, according to him, be they matter or souls, are distinguishing attributes (*viśeṣaṇa*) of Brahman, and Brahman is the object of distinction (*viśiṣṭa*).

Rāmānuja believes that the human souls in their pristine purity possess all the auspicious qualities of Brahman. The difference between human souls and Brahman is that: (1) human souls have no influence whatsoever over the moments in this world, which belong exclusively to the domain of Brahman, (2) these souls are of atomic size whereas Brahman is all-pervading, and (3) while Brahman remains eternally free from contact with any evil, souls can be joined to evils. This human joining with bodies has arisen from beginningless *karma* which is also their punishment. Final release (*mokṣa*) or liberation means release from the effects of *karma* which can only come when the body is dead and the soul through meditation, devotion or *bhakti* has realized its true nature. Rāmānuja does not accept the idea of *jīvanmukti*.

In the state of release the soul regains its original qualities and powers. It becomes omniscient and can move at will. However, the consciousness of "I" continues even in a state of release; otherwise, for Rāmānuja, liberation will amount to the annihilation of the soul and there will be nothing desirable in release and none would strive for it.<sup>9</sup> The released souls in this pure state are not merged in Brahman, but enjoy communion with the blissful Brahman who has been

7. V. A. Sukhtankar, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

8. Rāmānuja's *Commentary on the Vedānta-Sūtras*, translated by George Thibaut, *The Sacred Books of the East*. (ed. F. Max Mueller), (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1904), vol. 48, *Vedānta Sūtras*, II, 3, 45, pp. 563-4.

9. *Ibid.*, *Vedānta-Sūtras*, I, I, I, pp. 69-70.

the sole object of their love. In the conclusion to his *Commentary on Vedānta-Sūtras*, Rāmānuja writes :

The released soul has freed itself from the bondage of *karma*, has its power of knowledge fully developed, and has all its being in the supremely blissful intuition of the highest Brahman, it evidently cannot desire anything else nor enter on any other form of activity and the idea of returning into the *Samsāra* therefore is altogether excluded. Nor indeed need we fear that the Supreme Lord when once taken to himself the Devotee whom he greatly loves will turn him back into the *Samsāra*, For He Himself has said, "To the wise man I am very dear, and dear he is to me. Noble indeed are these, but the wise man I regard as my very self." (*Bhagavad Gīta*, VII : 17-18).<sup>10</sup>

Rāmānuja's theism is thus enriched by his monistic perspective through which he learns to see himself as a divine mode. To put it simply, Rāmānuja believes that the human soul as well as the material world have emanated from God; God is the ground of their being. But once separation moved them from Brahman either through the act of creation or emanation, a return to the former condition is neither possible nor desirable. Yet a soul which is released from the bondage of *karma* can enjoy loving communion with its blissful source forever. Rāmānuja's monism thus consists in seeing all reality, whether God, human souls or matter as one, because everything emanates and originates and expands from a single source. Because of his Vaiṣṇavite theism, however, Rāmānuja tries to maintain a kind of diversity within the very notion of unity. Hinduism is celebrated for teaching the identity of each human soul with God; Rāmānuja's contribution was to establish individuality as a companion to this identity.

#### Al-Ghazālī's Position

Al-Ghazālī had a different problem. He was brought up in a monotheistic tradition. The very concept of monotheism (*tawḥīd*) in Islam affirms that the being worthy to be called divine and God is one and one only. There is none like unto Him. He is absolute and unique,

10. *Ibid.*, *Vedānta Sūtras*, IV, 4, 22, p. 771.

eternal and everlasting. He has created everything out of nothing, since nothing existed prior to Him or beside Him. God is the sole creator and master; everything other than Him is His creature, His subject and His slave. This was the theological version of *tawhīd*; al-Ghazālī, a Muslim, accepted it fully. Al-Ghazālī was a scholastic theologian and a lecturer on philosophy for some time. Then suddenly his interest in Ṣūfism was born. This interest emerged mainly because of a personal spiritual crisis in his life. He turned to Ṣūfism to find refuge and rest from excessive rationalism.

Ṣūfism is a way of devotion and piety. In its early stages it had very little concern with metaphysical ideas and philosophical notions. In fact it was a protest against rationalistic theology. Its emphasis rather was on devotion and total reliance on God on and seeing in Him the sole object of love and concern. Ṣūfīs went to the extent of denying the world of cause and effect (*dār al-ashbāb*). *Fanā* or passing away in this early period meant turning one's attention to God apart from everything else. Later, however, perhaps through the influence of Neo-Platonism, Vedānta, Gnosticism and other philosophical and esoteric doctrines, Ṣūfism itself began developing its own theories and metaphysical interpretations of its spiritual experiences. Its simple and practical approach become modified by intellectual theorization. Abū Yazīd explained his experience of *fanā* as an obliteration of one's self and one's individuality for the sake of experience of God. Junayd, a more sober and learned Ṣūfī master, taught that along with this experience of *fanā* one also receives a state of *baqā*, that is, one abides with God in a manner similar to the way in which one abides with God in the state of pre-existence as, for example, an idea of God. Junayd struggled to reconcile the spiritual notion of identity with God with the monotheistic notion of divine transcendence and otherness.

Al-Ghazālī, an intellectual and philosopher, also found this same problem hard to grapple with. His concept of *tawhīd* is similar to that of Junayd. He defines *tawhīd* as "the isolation of the eternal from the originated, turning away from the originated beings and turning towards the eternal (Lord), until one sees not even one's own self, not to say that of others."<sup>11</sup> In accordance with monotheism,

11. Al-Ghazālī, *Rawḍat al-Talibin wa 'umdat al-Salikin*, in the collection of *al-Rasa'il al-Fara'id*, Maktabat al-Jundi, Egypt, p. 123.

al-Ghazālī draws a sharp distinction between the eternal being, namely, God, and originated beings, that is, all created and appearing in time and space. Reality is recognized as dual; one is eternal, supreme and transcendent; the other originated, subject to the eternal and empirical. But in this very definition, al-Ghazālī added his Ṣūfīstic notion of monism, that is, that the act of *tawhīd* does not end by simple separation between God and no-God, but rather involves observing God only as truly existing and none else, not even one's own self.

Al-Ghazālī does not deny that the material world exists. On the contrary, he says that the material world is the handiwork of God and is beautiful. By reflecting on its beauty we can learn something of the beauty, goodness and greatness of its Creator.<sup>12</sup> However, he says that "when everything other than God exists through God, is supported by Him and cannot live by its own power, (we can conclude) that its own being is relative; and the one who is self-sufficient as well as sufficing for others, His existence is firm and real."<sup>13</sup> In his mystical experience, the Ṣūfī sees the whole phenomenal world passing away and becoming insignificant in the presence of God.

For al-Ghazālī both the material world as well as the human souls are created. Human souls are, however, a special creation of God. The material world belongs to the Act of creation (*ālam al-khalq*), while the human souls belong to the Word of creation (*ālam al-amr*). Everything that can be limited by space and quantity come under the act of creation. These are bodies and their accidents. The Word of creation includes those beings which are beyond sense perception and have no direction.<sup>14</sup> Human souls, thus, come into being through the direct command of God; they are not beginningless (*azalī* or *qadīm*) but they shall have no end and are in this sense eternal (*abadī*). Human souls, according to al-Ghazālī, will never be lost or perish. Since they partake in the nature of *amr*, the Word of the Spirit of God, they are immortal; yet being His creation they

12. Al-Ghazālī wrote a treatise on *al-Hikmah fī Makhlūqāt Allah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-96. See also Margaret Smith, *Al-Ghazālī the Mystic* (London: Luzac & Co., 1944), pp. 135-138.

13. Al-Ghazālī, *Rawḍat al-Tālibīn*, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

dre separate from Him and any idea of their final union or total merging in the source is unacceptable. "The Ṣūfī concept of union [*wiṣāl*]," al Ghazālī writes, "means the contemplation and vision of God in the heart in this world and through the outward eyes in the Hereafter. The meaning of union is not the union of the essence with the essence."<sup>15</sup> This vision of God, or Beatific Vision, is the highest good that man can attain. Al-Ghazālī calls it "happiness" [*sa āda*].

Al-Ghazālī's leanings, then, in the direction of monism are constantly checked and corrected by his orthodox monotheism. Muslim philosophers before al-Ghazālī had a tendency to divide man into two categories: one empirical and the other transcendental. According to al-Fārābī, for example, man is a composite of the material and the immaterial, the contingent and the eternal. But though a composite being, it is his intelligence alone which determines man's real being and perfection. The material body, in al-Fārābī's view, is a source of imperfection, and so no human being can achieve complete and enduring perfection unless he is completely liberated from the body. Indeed, he writes :

Man achieves happiness when his soul attains to that perfection of being when he is no more in need of matter for his subsistence, that is, when he becomes one of those beings which are absolutely incorporeal, namely, the substances which are completely free from matter [*al-mufāriqāt*] and continues in this condition for ever . . . .<sup>16</sup>

This view states with remarkable clarity that the happiness of man does not consist in becoming a perfect human being but rather in becoming a pure intelligence, a view, perhaps, closer to Śaṅkara's *jñānā*. After al-Fārābī, later Muslim philosophers like Ibn Tufail and Ibn Sīnā regarded this view as being very close to a mystical intuition. The mystical philosophy which emerged out of these notions is more monistic than monotheistic. Ibn Arabī is the best example of this kind of monistic Ṣūfism. Al-Ghazālī's position is that of a middle way, as we have tried to explain.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

16. Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīna al-Fāḍila*, ed., A. Nasri Nadir (Beirut : 1959), p. 85.



### Conclusion

The two positions, namely, that of Rāmānuja and of Al-Ghazālī resemble each other in that they both accept the eternity of the human soul, the reality of the material world as well as its separation from God. Both believe that an absolute union cannot be achieved between God and the human soul, and yet hold that the final goal of purified souls is communion with God. They differ from each other, however, in their conception of the origin of the human souls and the material world. For Rāmānuja, basing his belief on *sātkāryāvāda*, there is no essential difference between God, human souls and the material world. Rāmānuja accepts the reality of the material world and human body but understands all this as but a hindrance and punishment of *karma*. For al-Ghazālī, body and matter are the gifts of God and can help a person in his ascent to God although their misuse can also lead to destruction. For Rāmānuja, absolute union is not possible because once separate there can be no return to the original state. For al-Ghazālī, union is inconceivable because of essential differences.

These similarities and differences are not due to the monistic leanings of either stance, but rather to the theism which in al-Ghazālī's case is emphatically monotheistic while in the case of Rāmānuja, it is less clearly so. Rāmānuja qualifies his philosophical understanding of monism by his experience of religious theism; al-Ghazālī only accepts monism on the experiential level and having thus enriched himself returns to monotheism without compromising any philosophical and theological principles.

We can conclude, therefore, that despite philosophical and theological differences, monistic theism and monotheism do meet on the experiential level; thus the differences between Ṣūfism and Vedānta are not as pronounced as they might at first appear. This is revealed by the dynamic faith experiences of Rāmānuja and al-Ghazālī.