

***Reflection: 2***

**RELEVANCE OF ADVAITA VEDANTA IN  
CHRISTIAN AND SCIENTIFIC AGE**

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**1. Introduction**

It has become commonplace to refer to the world as a global village. Given that metaphor, the desirability, even the urgency, of inter-religious understanding hardly requires defending. I would like to endorse the proposal of the late Ninian Smart, Keith Ward, and others that a central goal of dialogue ought to be articulating a global theology based on the premise that various religious traditions are the common property of our species. Such an enterprise would not conduce to a blended religion or a bland amalgam of faith clichés but rather to a strategy of addressing large problems in a coherent fashion.

Finding conversation partners among western theisms is rather straightforward. Things get more complicated, however, when turning eastward, where one encounters assumptions and discourses that appear incommensurable with one's own. Is, for example, Brahman symmetrical with or a placeholder for or typological equivalent of the western deity?

In this article I make that turn and attempt to place Vedanta, in its Advaita form (AV) in conversation with Christian theology. I am especially interested in discovering a common point of departure for challenging dualisms that support, among other things, violence, oppression, and environmental degradation.

**2. An Unpromising Partner**

At first glance AV would seem to be an unpromising interlocutor. For starters, it is non-theistic or, if you will, super-theistic.<sup>1</sup> The notion of the

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth W. Morgan, ed., *The Religion of the Hindus*, New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1953, 238.

self's or soul's participation in the (dualistic) Beatific Vision finds no resonance in AV. Its slogan is *tat tvam asi*: that you are.

A more promising candidate would be the Qualified Non-Dualism of the twelfth century CE Tamil theologian Ramanuja, whom Arvind Sharma calls “the great theist.”<sup>2</sup> He was a vigorous opponent of AV's uncompromising monism and for him God is a distinct personality and the supreme object of love and devotion (*bhakti*).<sup>3</sup> Salvation is the self's (*Atman*) release from limitation; it retains “a permanent intuition of God”<sup>4</sup> and perpetually adores him. Brahman has an abstract, qualityless aspect as the supreme soul (*nirguna*) but is at the same time a personal being (*saguṇa*).<sup>5</sup> There is room in Ramanuja's system for speaking of divine love<sup>6</sup> and grace.<sup>7</sup>

In developing a Christian discourse that is open both to the one Spirit's working in other traditions and to the construction of a global theology, however, one must attend not merely to easier cases but also to more difficult ones. Thus, for the present inquiry I propose to explore theological *contact points* with the Vedanta in its relentlessly monistic form. Yet, despite its initially daunting prospects, such an experiment in what Keith Ward calls comparative theology might offer hope for increased human understanding.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Two Scriptural Traditions

AV and Christianity are both scriptural traditions. Both would endorse the notion that “in the beginning was the word.” But in the Hindu reading, speech, language itself, the truth about all things, existed before the foundation of the world. In the wholly mythic Hindu narrative, this word is “spoken with” the world. No Moses acted as intermediary. In fact, it is this authorless feature that guarantees the word's authenticity,

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<sup>2</sup>Arvind Sharma, *Classical Hindu Thought*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 46.

<sup>3</sup>*New Dimensions in Vedanta Philosophy*, Part II, Shahibaz Amdavad: Swaminarayan Mudran Mandii, 1981, 60.

<sup>4</sup>S. Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, ed., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, 508.

<sup>5</sup>*New Dimensions in Vedanta Philosophy*, Part II, 160.

<sup>6</sup>*New Dimensions in Vedanta Philosophy*, Part II, 160.

<sup>7</sup>Nancy Auer Falk, *Living Hinduisms*, Belmont: Thompson Wadsworth, 2006, 71.

<sup>8</sup>Keith Ward, *Religion and Human Nature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, 9.

infallibility, and authority.<sup>9</sup> How is this primordial word, then, introduced into time and space? The myth tells us that it was *heard* by ancient wise ones (*rsis*) – need I say male? – and eventually reduced to writing. The artefact of this scribal activity is Vedic sacred literature (the Vedas), the core of which, the *Rg Veda*, dates from 1500 BCE. This collection offers hymns, liturgical chants, sacrificial instructions, magical spells and incantations. The Vedas also contain the idea of caste (*varna*). This literature is labelled “*Sruti*” (that which is heard).

There is a second category of sacred writings, non-vedic and called “*smṛiti*” (that which is remembered). It includes the famous Laws of Manu (ca. 200 BCE) and the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which includes the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The foundation of Vedanta, however, is laid in the *Upaniṣads* (ca. 500 BCE), understood to be the end of the Vedas. Implying “sitting near (one’s guru) attentively,” they are philosophical works that present key concepts that are in play in Hindu thought:

- Brahman: Ultimate Reality, Pure Consciousness, Truth-Awareness-Bliss (*sat, cit, Ananda*).
- Atman: soul; one’s imperishable inner self inseparable from Brahman.
- *Maya*: ignorance; the universe tricking us into regarding it as permanent.
- Yoga: path, discipline that leads to enlightenment.
- *Moksa* or nirvana: release from endless re-births (*samsara*), absorption into Brahman.<sup>10</sup>

The following short citations would give a taste of the *Upanisads*:

Soundless, formless, intangible, undying, tasteless, odourless, without beginning, without end, eternal, immutable, beyond nature, is the Self. Knowing him as such, one is freed from death.

Brahman alone is – nothing else is. He who sees the manifold universe, and not the one reality, goes evermore from death to death.

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<sup>9</sup>Eliot Deutsch and J. A. B. Van Buitenen, eds., *A Source Book of Advaita Vedanta*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971, 5.

<sup>10</sup>This can be understood monistically, as by Sankara, or dualistically, as by the thirteenth century philosopher Madhava, also a Vedanta figure. This shows that fundamental Hindu texts, like Christian ones, are multivalent and polysemic.

This vast universe is a wheel. Upon it are all creatures that are subject to birth, death and rebirth. Round and round it turns, and never stops. It is the wheel of Brahman.

He from whom proceed all works, all desires, all odours, all tastes; who pervades all, who is beyond the senses, and in whom there is fullness of joy forever – he, the heart-enshrined Self, is verily Brahman.<sup>11</sup>

The essential, eternal identity of the individual self and the universal Self is both the content of salvation and the fundamental tenet of AV. Realizing (experiencing) this identification liberates one from the *karma-samsara* trap. One escapes from the wheel.

#### 4. The Great Sankara and Shared Perceptions

The most formidable thinker in the AV tradition and one of the most celebrated figures in the history of Indian philosophy is Sankara (788-820 CE).<sup>12</sup> As a young man he embraced the life of a wandering ascetic (*sannyasin*, renunciant). During his travels he wrote many scriptural commentaries and attracted disciples because of his austerity and intellectual acuity. He debated advocates of positions other than his undeviating monism and felt, like Luther, that he was not an innovator but a restorer of pure scriptural teaching that had been distorted over time. In addition to establishing the pre-eminence of his philosophical system, he established several ashrams along Buddhist lines throughout the subcontinent.

As Luther battled opponents left and right, Sankara the polemicist contended both with materialism and Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>13</sup> No writing of Sankara's materialist conversation partner, Lokayata, has survived, but he is said to have held that "consciousness emerges through specific combinations of inanimate, primary (or gross) elements."<sup>14</sup> For Sankara, this gets things precisely backward. There is nothing that does not find its substrate in Brahman. The world of matter is not necessary in

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<sup>11</sup>*Chandogya Upanisad*. This *Upaniṣad* teaches that creation is not *ex nihilo*; the phenomenal world is non-different from its cause.

<sup>12</sup>So honoured is he that many believe he was an *avatara* of Siva. See Natalia Isayeva, *Sankara and Indian Philosophy*, Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993, 2.

<sup>13</sup>Gaudapada, Sankara's most influential teacher, was himself influenced by Buddhism. See Isayeva, *Sankara and Indian Philosophy*, 10.

<sup>14</sup>Isayeva, *Sankara and Indian Philosophy*, 110.

relationship to Brahman but is strictly his “play” (*lila*), making what is sensually apprehensible only relatively real.

Ontological or metaphysical points of departure for Christians and Hindus are different. One recalls William Temple’s famous observation that Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions. But at least two lines of convergence can be traced. One is the assertion that there is a spiritual dimension to All-That-Is and that it is of fundamental importance. Christians would join Vedantins in decrying any Marxist or scientific reductionism. With Paul we anticipate a kingdom uninheritable by flesh and blood and inhabitable only by spiritual bodies.

Another shared sensibility is that the world is deceptive and can lure the un-alert astray. For Sankara, it presents itself as permanent and dualistic in nature, which is an illusion (he uses the common Hindu term *maya*) and, unless they awaken to reality-as-one, they cannot escape into *moksa*.<sup>15</sup> Sankara does not work with the concept of sin, original or otherwise, but his anthropology assumes, with much of Eastern thought, an “original ignorance (*avidya*),” the antidote for which is *jnana yoga*, the path of meditation leading to insight.<sup>16</sup> Sankara seems to be the originator of the widely cited metaphor for the mistaken assessment of the world produced by *avidya*: a piece of rope lying in the road is perceived as a snake; nonetheless it remains rope.

## 5. World and God

Christian theology’s robust understanding of the universe as proceeding from the plenitude of the Trinity’s love and, therefore, of intrinsic worth stands in contrast to Sankara’s strong emphasis on the incommensurability of Brahman and the world. For Christians, the world and God are related to each other dialectically, as Creator and creation. For AV, any distinction between Brahman and the world is illusory and false.<sup>17</sup> There is only Brahman; there cannot be more than a single ontic reality. The frames of reference for the two positions seem wildly divergent. One encourages a positive valuing of the world, the other, a

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<sup>15</sup>In AV, deep sleep is a metaphor for *moksa*, the pure consciousness that is atman and Brahman.

<sup>16</sup>Isayeva, *Sankara and Indian Philosophy*, 229. Sankara offers no explanation of why humans are afflicted with congenital *avidya*.

<sup>17</sup>“The Hymn of Creation” in the *Rg Veda* is monistic. See Deutsch, *A Source Book of Advaita Vedanta*, 8.

negative, renunciatory attitude. Yet a common frame of reference might derive from an understanding of the world as dependent on and derived from Brahman/God. If it is play, at least it is *divine* play. The world is, in a sense, deified in AV; Brahman can be understood as its “soul.”<sup>18</sup> I think, then, an AV perspective is not automatically excluded from a conversation about Earth as God’s embodiment and Christ as its logos/atman against the horizon of ecological responsibility. We need partnership to overcome the dualism that allows nature to be set over against humanity and endorses nature’s ravaging.<sup>19</sup> If, with George Lindbeck, we reckon that each religious tradition is a language, let it not be said that AV and Christianity speak utter differently about utterly different things.

By engaging AV with a view to constructing a global theology, we would not be encountering ideas that have been the exclusive property of the East. Of the pre-Socratics Parmenides is an outstanding exponent of monistic thinking, and the neo-Platonic Plotinus argued that the world is a work of art expressing the creativity of the divine Being. Accordingly, our sense of individuality and separation from other beings is illusory. Plato himself believed that the soul was pre-existent and immortal. Spinoza held that reality is all one substance; God and nature are two ways of referring to the same thing. The German idealists could be cited. Fichte argued that ultimate reality is a universal moral or spirit order and Brahman is echoed in Hegel’s universal Spirit moving through all things. Perhaps the figure closest to Sankara in the West is Meister Eckhart.<sup>20</sup> His key idea was that one can separate oneself from one’s adventitious qualities and attributes to discover God deeply in the essential self. Further, closer to our own day, the physicist Ernst Mach thought that a monistic account of the world was the only true one.

Mention of Mach points to ground that both Christianity and AV could possibly occupy together. Both traditions have a stake in rebutting the claims of a scientific epistemology that disallows the realm of spirit altogether. At the same time, both have to take science seriously to be intellectually credible. Whether or not string theory will remain

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<sup>18</sup>Ward, *Religion and Human Nature*, 15.

<sup>19</sup>A Christian thinker, S. J. Samartha notes that AV “has a grand vision of the unity of humans, nature and God” that has social ramifications. See K. P. Aleaz, *Christian Responses to Indian Philosophy*, Kolkata: Punthi Purnak, 2005, 120.

<sup>20</sup>Isayeva, *Sankara and Indian Philosophy*, 117.

dominant in physics, as it is at the moment, it seems clear that the quantum world is much more hospitable to a monistic account than was Newton's. Phillip Clayton, the late Arthur Peacocke, and Ian Barbour have done helpful work in this area.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In advocating for dialogue toward increased theological convergence and prophetic univocity among the traditions, I note that Sankara flourished in a decidedly *dialogical* (and polemical) context. I mentioned above his opposition to the materialism of Lokayata. He also offered an alternative to the old played-out Brahminism of his day, and was thereby instrumental in helping Hinduism revive itself in a time of Buddhist ascendancy.<sup>22</sup> In Vedanta we have a system engaged with a "heterodox" tradition that itself was a critique of the inherited priestly sacrificial cult.<sup>23</sup>

Sheila Greeve Devaney reminds us that religious traditions are internally plural, historically conditioned, and they possess shifting, porous borders with one another.<sup>24</sup> For example, Vivekananda (d. 1902) rejected Sankara's support of the caste system (*varna*) which one would expect to be undercut by the egalitarian derivation of all beings from God.<sup>25</sup> This suppleness is an asset in dialogue in a post-modern context in which both AV and Christianity claim to speak of a Reality that transcends the purely subjective and linguistic. But to do business with one another and embrace the potential of boundaries that leak, each will have to abandon its hegemonic claim of universal validity. Christianity's

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<sup>21</sup>Barbour thinks the (monistic) Process style of theological reasoning is compatible with recent neuroscience. *Nature, Human Nature and God*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002, 96.

<sup>22</sup>F. Samuael Brainard, *Reality and Mystical Experience*, University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2000, 156.

<sup>23</sup>Many scholars think that Vedanta and Mahayana are indistinguishable from each other in their main concepts. Sankara, however, rejected the no-self (*anatta*) and emptiness (*sunya*) dogmas as unvedic. But with regard to spiritual truth, both teach a "higher" knowledge for elites and a "lower" one of images and devotional practices for the masses.

<sup>24</sup>Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Historicism*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, 149.

<sup>25</sup>An excellent resource is *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*, published by the Center for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, British Columbia.

one-wayism is well known. For its part, AV has touted itself as “perennial philosophy,” the unassailable truth behind all particular systems and traditions. Yet, this is a reasonable price to pay to forge a partnership with others who, with due modesty, might inquire together whether there is yet more light to break forth.