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Review of Indian Thought and Western Theism: The Vedanta of Ramanuja

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2016

Book Review: *Indian Thought and Western Theism: the Vedānta of Rāmānuja*

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intentioned book is read widely, prompting both Christians and Hindus to engage intentionally and with hope in the important work of dialogue.

Francis X. Clooney, SJ
Harvard University

Indian Thought and Western Theism: the Vedānta of Rāmānuja. Martin Ganeri. London: Routledge, 2015, x + 176 pp.

MARTIN Ganeri's *Indian Thought and Western Theism* is an ambitious study of the theology of Thomas Aquinas (~13th CE) and the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta of Rāmānuja (~12th CE). While the main goal of this work is to illustrate the affinity between Thomism and Rāmānuja's Vedānta it also questions certain long-held claims of compatibility between the latter and certain forms of Western theism such as Process thought. The emphasis of the study is two-fold. First, the parallels between scholasticism and Rāmānuja's Vedānta are illustrated by noting the similarities in methodology of scholasticism and Vedānta (Chapter 2) and reading the *Summa Theologica* and the *Śrī Bhāṣya* together (Chapters 3-4). This is indeed novel, as earlier Indologists had denied commonality between these two theologies (Chapter 1). Second, the comparison drawn between Rāmānuja's Vedānta and Process thought by Viśiṣṭādvaita scholars is reevaluated (Chapter 5).

Ganeri demonstrates the strong parallels in the method and concepts utilized by Aquinas and Rāmānuja though they engage with different texts and contexts. Applying Jose Cabezón's enumeration of characteristics that define the scholastic mode of inquiry, he argues that the methodology of Rāmānuja qualifies as scholasticism much more than prior designations such as philosophy, theology, or philosophy of religion (pp 37-41). Ganeri then

brings the two theologians into conversation with an in- depth analysis of their discussions on ultimate reality and its connection to the world. For instance, early Indologists rejected Rāmānuja's view of Brahman as a differentiated (*viśiṣṭa*) complex possessed of many essential attributes as contrary to the Thomist doctrine of the divine simplicity of God. Furthermore, since Rāmānuja claims that Brahman as the material cause of the world undergoes real transformation, this was also seen as a contradiction to Aquinas's doctrine of the absolute independence of God. Ganeri digs deeper to show that though this may be true superficially both thinkers work with certain polarity discourses that when adequately understood reveal that both Aquinas and Rāmānuja are working towards similar views in regard to divinity. Whilst it is not possible to duplicate Ganeri's sophisticated analyses of Rāmānuja and Aquinas as it concerns the nature of the ultimate reality and its relationship to the world, a cursory discussion of the two issues is provided below.

For Rāmānuja, though Brahman is a complex reality he is also indivisible, suggesting immutability and a non-composite nature. The self-body relation affirms the complexity of Brahman but also upholds the immutability of Brahman even though the world evolves from him. According to Ganeri, we cannot therefore,

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write-off Rāmānuja's Brahman as simply complex contra Aquinas, without qualifying that statement further. Additionally, he argues that Rāmānuja's characterization of Brahman as possessing dual qualities (*ubhayalingatva*) that is, the absence of all imperfections and the possession of a host of infinite perfections renders Brahman analogous to Aquinas' view of God as immutably perfect and absolutely independent (p 75). For even if certain essential qualities or perfections are predicated of Brahman, the way in which he experiences these is much different from how the finite self experiences them due to the fullness of Brahman's unconditioned existence. For Rāmānuja, such fullness of Brahman's unconditioned existence is radically different from every other type of existence.

Ganeri also highlights Aquinas' discussion of divinity, which employs the polarity of the two aspects of divine nature namely, divine simplicity and divine perfection. According to Ganeri, Aquinas' doctrine of divine simplicity functions to exclude a composite nature that may suggest distinctions such as dependence and limitation. While the doctrine of divine simplicity excludes complexity that is characteristic of effected entities, the doctrine of perfection affirms the fullness of existence of God which only manifests finitely in beings (p 134). For Aquinas, divine perfection entails that the nature of perfections found in effected beings is different due to their precedence in God, as he is the first cause of all. Due to God's simplicity his perfections do not manifest in the same way as they do in created beings. In a similar manner, Ganeri sees conceptual parallels in the relationship between ultimate reality and the world as understood by the two thinkers. For Rāmānuja, the embodiment relationship

maintains the dependence of the world on Brahman but at the same time leaves him untouched by its vicissitudes. According to Ganeri, Aquinas' discussion of God as the first or universal cause coupled with that of divine agency that is operational in the actual production of things unites and at the same time differentiates God from the world (pp 138; 144-148).

As the second focus of his book, Ganeri also reassesses the resemblance between Rāmānuja and forms of Western theism such as Process thought and Personalist thought articulated by scholars of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. Scholars who advocated the similarity between Rāmānuja's causal Brahman and effected Brahman to Whitehead's notion of primordial and consequential states of God, see both systems of thought as contrary to the Advaita concept of a static ultimate reality. However, such an evaluation of similarity between Process thought and Viśiṣṭādvaita was possibly a polemic move by Viśiṣṭādvaita scholars to garner respectability in order to counter Advaita Vedānta. Ganeri claims that positing such a likeness is superficial because Whitehead's primordial deity is a "set of possibilities...non-conscious...only achieving consciousness in its consequent state" (p 153). This is not the case with Brahman even during dissolution (*pralaya*). Ganeri also disproves the similarity between Hartshorne's embodiment model and Rāmānuja's, which has been invoked by Viśiṣṭādvaita scholars as comparable (pp 155-160).

Indian Thought and Western Theism is a serious scholarly work that pays close attention to primary texts as it presents the theology of Aquinas in the language of Rāmānuja and vice

versa. Ganeri's fluency in the both religious traditions is outstanding.

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***Divine Self, Human Self: The Philosophy of Being in Two Gītā Commentaries.*
Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad. NY and London: Bloomsbury, 2013, x + 148pp.**

A survey of scholarly writings on the Gītā over the last two hundred years, from the perspective of Hindu-Christian encounters, indicates two broad strands: one, a textual exploration of the commentaries on the Gītā by Vedantic exegetes such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, and the other, a more comparative analysis of the presence of themes such as 'monotheism', 'pantheism', and 'grace' in the verses of the Gītā. Chakravarti Ram-Prasad highlights the interlocking between these two strands, as he skilfully engages Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja in conversations over classical Vedantic themes of selfhood, being, and agency, while also offering nuanced reflections on these conversations from the standpoints of some Christian understandings of the divine.

The polyvalences of the key Sanskrit terms such as *ātman*, *puruṣa*, and *Brahman* were systematised by Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja into two distinctive exegetical-soteriological visions. The differences between the two commentators were developed in some of the latter traditions into a diametrical opposition between, on the one hand, a doctrine of world illusionism (often pejoratively labelled as *māyāvāda*), in which the worship of Kṛṣṇa is merely a penultimate stage towards the realisation of non-duality (*advaita*), and, on the other hand, a devotional praxis of intense love (*bhakti*) of the supremely personal Kṛṣṇa. Ram-Prasad complicates this opposition by pointing out that for Śaṅkara too, the meditative worship of Kṛṣṇa is a significant moment in an individual's spiritual progression

away from immersion in physicality, though the endpoint of this journey is the intuitive realisation of one's non-duality with the non-agentive, transpersonal Brahman. That is, the correct practice of devotion to Kṛṣṇa, who is the universal self, can orient an individual towards the Advaitic end. Rāmānuja interweaves these themes of self-realisation and devotion into a theological system in which the finite self, which is substantially real, is yet dependent at all times on the transcendently perfect Kṛṣṇa. While Śaṅkara operates with an equivalence between mutability and metaphysical unreality, so that both the physical body and the individual self, because they are changeable, are ultimately unreal, Rāmānuja regards all aspects of our embodied selfhood as metaphysically real because they are encompassed by Kṛṣṇa. However, worldly human beings forget that they are metaphysically distinct from their materiality, and that the transcendental source of their existence is Kṛṣṇa, and continue to be subject to various ills till they begin to return to Kṛṣṇa by developing devotional love towards him. Thus, both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja view devotional love of Kṛṣṇa as integral aspects of an individual's spiritual perfection, though this fulfilment is understood in divergent ways – for Śaṅkara, the non-duality of the finite self with the transpersonal hyper-essence, Brahman, whereas for Rāmānuja, the passionate devotion of the 'knowers of Brahman' (*jñānins*) towards Kṛṣṇa, the supreme agent in all human