

Theology and hermeneutics in Shaṅkara and Rāmānuja

with special reference to *tat tvam asi*

Alan Humm
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The primary goal of this study is to examine and compare Shaṅkara and Rāmānuja as interpreters of the Vedic texts that they commonly held to be holy. Although an attempt will be made to review their respective philosophical/theological positions on the subjects at hand, this paper does not purport to contain a full, or even satisfactory, treatment of either of these systems.

We will look closely at the way these two theologians approach a well known story from the Chandogya Upaniṣad VI and in particular at the leitmotiv “That thou art” (*tat tvam asi*) recurring throughout that text. Since this is a key text in understanding the Vedic ontology of the self, it is not surprising that Shaṅkara and Rāmānuja interpret it differently. This will lead us to an overview of our two subjects’ hermeneutical methods with a special interest in how they respond to ‘hostile’ *Shruti* (scripture texts), and finally to a few concluding remarks on the uneasy marriage of hermeneutics and systematic theology generally.

Shaṅkara

Advaita, or ‘monism’, is the overarching principle upon which the theology of Shaṅkara is founded. It is a form of transcendentalism which posits that Brahman is the only thing that truly exists. All differentiation in the world as we experience it is a result of *māyā*. *Māyā*, in turn, (at the risk of tautology) is the supreme delusion which causes us to

experience the world as complex, in fact to experience the world at all. On more than one occasion¹ Shāṅkara illustrates *māyā* by the analogy of a man who seeing a rope mistakenly takes it for a snake. Once conditions have changed (a lamp is lit or some such thing) he sees his mistake and is no longer afraid. While he still believes it to be a snake, however, the snake does exist in his mind even though from the point of view of ‘objective’ reality it has always been a rope. So, says Shāṅkara, the world and all that goes with it (including the supernatural world) exists only in the mind of the beholders. The only ‘objective’ reality is that of Brahman. While the snake story describes the personal delusion of a single individual, *māyā* is a universal principle/force that creates collective delusion. What makes *māyā* possible on a case by case basis is *avidyā* ([spiritual] ignorance). *Avidyā* is the personal realization of *māyā*. In the realm of *māyā*, all the living are subject to the laws of *karma* and rebirth. Even good *karma* is inescapable—once you have earned it you have to accept its fruits. For Shāṅkara, this is perhaps the most powerful form of *māyā*.²

All living things are emanations of Brahman. As such, in its most fundamental nature (Shāṅkara would say its *true* nature) every ‘self’, or *ātman*, is identical with Brahman. This identity is so absolute that only *māyā* separates the *ātman* from the Absolute. If a person is able to escape the delusion of *māyā* completely, all that is left is Brahman, and s/he is not only freed from the cycle of death and rebirth, but with the passing of the current body returns to Brahman. Once an individual has returned to the source in this complete sense, s/he no longer exists at all in any separate form (separateness being entirely derived from *māyā*).

¹ e.g. *Aparokshanubhuti* 70; *Atmabodha* 27.

A liberated one who has attained knowledge of Self relinquishes his previous limiting proclivities and realizing that he is nothing but being-consciousness-bliss, becomes Brahman.³ (Atmabodha 49) [tr. Lata82:182]

Since everything but Brahman is delusion, then, naturally enough, the way of escape (*mokṣa*) is ‘knowledge’. This ‘knowledge’, however, is no mere acceptance of a doctrine—it must be accompanied by an inner renunciation of all desire (this being the real power that *karma* holds over all sentient beings). But once the aspirant has truly attained this ‘knowledge’, *māyā* and *karma* can no longer have any power over him. S/he is permanently free, and only awaits full union with the Absolute. This liberation is, however, so difficult that only the smallest number actually attain it in any given period.

Rāmānuja

While it is clear that Rāmānuja is working in the same general theological environment as was Shāṅkara, there are a number of important differences. His theology is usually called *viśiṣṭādvaita* (‘qualified monism’, or ‘the non-duality of the differenced’ [Welbon88]) in self-conscious distinction from Shāṅkara’s *advaita*.⁴ As the name suggests, whereas Rāmānuja accepted the unity of the Absolute, and the proposition that the universe is an emanation of it, he also believed that each *ātman* is eternally distinct, not only from every other *ātman* but also even from Brahman. Individuals are not independent

² Shāṅkara would assert that *karma* is very real in terms of the cosmos and those caught up in it, but since the cosmos itself is illusion, so also are the laws that govern it.

³ I have modified Lata’s rendering to retain the force of *sat-cit-ananda* as a single theological concept. Lata translates “being, consciousness, and bliss”. As a non-Sanskritist, I realize that I may be in over my head here. I would have preferred ‘enlightenment’ over the more standard ‘knowledge’ because, in terms of its connotations in English, it seems closer to what I perceive Shāṅkara to mean. I suspect, however, that this would cause problems when we discuss Rāmānuja, who seems to understand Shāṅkara’s ‘knowledge’ in its natural sense.

⁴ The more literal translation of *advaita* is actually ‘second-less’ [Welbon88] rather than ‘monism’ as given above.

of God,⁵ they are, in fact part of God, but the nature of Brahman is such that it can have internal differentiation without losing internal unity. A choice text, frequently used by Rāmānuja, for illustrating God’s diversity in unity is Chandogya Up. 6.2.1-3:

“In the beginning, my dear, this [universe] was Being only, —one only without a second.... It had this thought ‘Would that I were many; fain would I procreate!’”
[tr. Zaehner66:105]⁶

Rāmānuja would maintain that even once God has become ‘many’ he remains, on another level, ‘one only without a second.’ This ‘dynamic tension’ is central to all of his theology. We will see this worked out in terms of the inner soul’s relationship with Brahman presently when we examine Rāmānuja’s treatment of the *tat tvam asi*.

Māyā, so crucial to Shāṅkara’s system, appears in Rāmānuja to be little more than a function of bad *karma*. It is deception that arises from not correctly apprehending spiritual reality. Since it is a result, rather than a cause, it is best overcome by right action, resulting in good *karma*. Chief among these actions are offering outward devotion to God (sacrifices, etc.), performance of family duty, meditation on scripture, and yoga. This is not a path to *mokṣa*, but serves rather as an acceptable path for those for whom *mokṣa* is not a practical reality in this life (e.g. those without access to a spiritual guide, women, etc.). Good *karma* so obtained will allow an aspirant to find a more suitable opportunity for spiritual attainment in his or her next life. Tied in with this was the belief that the phenomenal world is not as insidious as Shāṅkara had posited. The experience of the

⁵ As, the *dvaitins*, or dualists, held.

⁶ Quoted by Rāmānuja in e.g. *ShBh* 1.1.5, *VedS* 11. For citations in Rāmānuja’s *Vedārtha-Samgraha* (*VedS*) I have followed the paragraph divisions and numberings supplied by van Buitenen [Buitenen56] (not used by all editions) even when using another translation.

blessings of good *karma* is good—not something necessarily to be avoided—although to be sure the bliss of enlightenment is far better.

The means of the attainment of *mokṣa* also differed from that of Shāṅkara. For Rāmānuja, the goal of *mokṣa* was not the dissolution of the self into Brahman. Since the *ātman* was eternal, dissolution was not possible. Rather, when escaping the round of rebirth, the soul, maintaining its selfhood, enters into perfect, intimate, and eternal communion with God. Consonant with the goal, it is not surprising that it is not knowledge, not even mystical knowledge, that qualifies the aspirant for release, but deep continued devotion to Viṣṇu.⁷ It is God’s gracious response to the devotees’ unflinching love that ultimately leads to release. Liberation is therefore a gift of Brahman rather than a metaphysical realization as with the *advaitins*. He continues to perform his duties, just as if he were trying to gain good *karma* except that they are performed instead out of love for God and so do not generate *karma*—rather the favor of God. Failure to fulfill one’s duties, however, can undermine the process by engendering bad *karma*.

Shruti

Shāṅkara and Rāmānuja had one important belief in common. They both believed that the *Shruti* (i.e. the Vedas foremost, followed by the *Brahma Sūtras*, which were believed

⁷ By way of conjecture, there may be an underlying, although not overtly argued tension between the two theologians arising from the fact that Shāṅkara was a devotee of Shiva while Rāmānuja was devoted to Viṣṇu. On paper the discussion centers around neither Shiva nor Viṣṇu by name – usually Brahman is the name used – but it is not without significance, psychologically if nothing else, that Viṣṇu is a much more approachable deity than Shiva the destroyer. This may be reflected in Shāṅkara’s depersonalized, and Rāmānuja’s immanent Brahman. Rāmānuja argues that Viṣṇu, under the Vedic name ‘Narayana’ is supreme (see e.g. ShBh 1.1.21 and note the quotation of Maha Up. 1: “Indeed then there was only Narayana, not Brahma or Ishana (Shiva).” [Carman74]. Conversely, in a story told about Shāṅkara he is forbidden by Vaiṣṇavite priests to enter a temple (being a Shaivite). Shāṅkara argues that it is all one God, and, upon finally gaining entrance, finds that the image of Viṣṇu has been transformed, and is now half Shiva! [Lata82:21] The apocryphalness of the story should not keep us from noticing the underlying tension to which it bears witness—nor the reconciliatory stand that Shāṅkara is portrayed as taking.

to authoritatively interpret the Vedas, and the Bhagavad Gita) were a sure source of reliable information about truth. Indeed, when it came to acquiring information about Brahman, *Shruti* was the only reliable source of information.

If one established something by subtle reasoning, another may prove just the opposite by arguments still more subtle, for one may go on arguing and arguing.... Therefore, O dearest one: this wisdom that originates from the Vedas, leads to sound knowledge when imparted ... by a teacher who is versed in the Vedas.... (Kat. Up. . 2.8f) [Lata82:77; Gambhira65, v.I:140].

This is because God is so foreign to human experience that the normal means of collecting evidence (e.g. perception, inference, etc. [Lata82:74]) cannot be held to apply in the area of metaphysics.

The Vedas were not believed to be of human origin. Rāmānuja asserts that they have existed in the mind of Brahman from eternity past. Each time he creates the world he teaches them first to Brahma and then the ‘seers’ remember them whole and pass them down [Lipner86:8]

The super-human origin and the eternity of the Veda mean that intelligent agents having received in their minds an impression due to previous recitations of Veda in a fixed order of words, chapters and so on, remember and again recite it in that very same order of succession. This holds good both with regard to us men and to the highest Lord of all ... [who is however] not dependent on an impression previously made. (ShBh 1.3.31) [Thibaut04R:334]⁸

As such they serve as an external referent pointing to the real nature of Brahman. Shāṅkara and Rāmānuja are also agreed that the study of the scriptures is an important, if not essential, preparation of the devotee for *mokṣa*.

⁸ There is an interesting parallel between the preexistent Vedas and the Rabbinic notion of the Torah existing before creation, and even aiding in the creation of the world. In Rabbinic thought this serves to divorce the Scripture from all taint of human intervention, even Moses’. The same can be said of Rāmānuja’s use of this concept with the added function of allowing the Veda to be the same in every *kalpa* [creation cycle].

Tat tvam asi

Chandogya Up. 6.8-14 contains a leitmotiv the interpretation of which became crucial to both theologians in setting out their respective systems. It first appears in ChUp 6.8.7 where Uddalaka Aruni instructs his learned but unwise son:

This finest essence,—the whole universe has it as its Self: That is the Real: That is the Self: *That you are*, Shvetaketu! [tr. Zaehner66:109; italics mine]

The same passage is repeated eight times verbatim and a ninth time with a different first phrase.⁹ The key phrase—“That you are” (*tat tvam asi*) recurs continuously throughout most of the writings of both authors. But the passage is not without problems for either Shāṅkara or Rāmānuja and it is to see how they deal with these problems which is the primary focus of this paper.

Shāṅkara

In the vast majority of citations and usages of *tat tvam asi* in Shāṅkara’s works (including those of challenged authorship) it functions almost exclusively as a proof text for the unity of the self and Brahman.¹⁰ Whatever hermeneutical problems Shāṅkara may have perceived in the text, they did not keep him from using it regularly. He clearly regarded it as friendly, even central, to his theology. Nevertheless, he raises the issue in several places¹¹ of how the *ātman* with all its encumbering imperfections can be equal with the perfect Brahman.

⁹ 6.8.7, 6.9.4, 6.10.3, 6.11.3, 6.12.3, 6.13.3, 6.14.3, 6.15.3 and 6.16.3.

¹⁰ It becomes one of the “four great Vedic statements” in advaitic teaching [Nikhilan64:47].

¹¹ e.g. UpSah 18.170ff, TatBod 10, DOV 34, VivCh 242ff.

In their literal, superficial meaning, *Brahman* and *Ātman* have opposite attributes.... Their identity is established only when they are understood in their true significance, and not in a superficial sense.

Brahman may refer to God, the ruler of *Māyā* and creator of the universe. The *Ātman* may refer to the individual soul, associated with the five coverings which are effects of *Māyā*. Thus regarded, they possess opposite attributes. But this apparent opposition is caused by *Māyā* and her effects. It is not real, therefore, but superimposed. (VivCh 242f) [tr. Prabhava78:72f]

Shāṅkara tackles this by using a grammatical method¹² in which a substantive qualified by an adjective, or by another substantive with the verb ‘to be’ (e.g. *x* is *y*), is said to be modified by losing part of its normal referent in order to be harmonized with its modifier. He illustrates this principle in UpSah 18.170ff by pointing out that in the phrase “the black horse”, both ‘black’ and ‘horse’ have their referents modified in order to conform to each other. ‘Horse’ is modified by the elimination of all non-black ones. ‘Black’ is modified by the elimination of all non-horse examples of blackness [Alston67:95]. In this light, the interpreter must modify the meanings of *twam* (you) and *tat* (that) in *tat tvam asi*.

The word *twam* comes to mean one free from pain¹³ because of its being brought into apposition with the word *tat* which means one eternally void of pain. Similarly, used in apposition with the word *twam*, meaning the innermost self, the word *tat* [loses those meanings incompatible with *twam*]....

Without giving up their own meanings, the words *twam* and *tat* convey a qualified¹⁴ meaning resulting in the knowledge of the Self-Brahman. (UpSah 18.171 & 173)¹⁵

¹² first developed by a Buddhist logician Dinnaga [Alston67:95].

¹³ In the context (166ff), Shāṅkara has posited that pain is an attribute associated only with the self under the sway of *Māyā*, and can never be an attribute of Brahman.

¹⁴ ‘Qualified’ translates *vishīṣṭā*—the word chosen by Rāmānuja centuries later to denote his branch of advaitism.

¹⁵ This translation is a concoction put together from those of Alston [Alston67:95f] and Jagadananda [Jagadana70:255].

Note that Shāṅkara has not really explained the qualification of *tat* (it would have been surprising if he had).¹⁶ For him to bring it to its fullest conclusion, he would have to have made room for a Brahman which can be modified by the exclusion of *nontwamness*. This would, however, permit a duality in which the *twam*-Brahman and the *nontwam*-Brahman could be distinguished (this was not a problem for *twam* since the nonbrahman-*twam* is *Māyā*). This might begin to look like an exercise in the nonsensical, except that it starts to come very close to Rāmānuja's understanding of a qualified Brahman.¹⁷

Rāmānuja

From the outset, the same thing said of Shāṅkara, above, can also be said of Rāmānuja—that most of his uses of *tat tvam asi* are in the midst of arguments where it is brought in as a proof text rather than being separately analyzed. But on a case by case basis this is probably less true of Rāmānuja. This is partly because he is more self-conscious about his hermeneutic than his illustrious predecessor. It is also partly because the text is not quite as friendly, on the surface at least, to his theological system as it was to Shāṅkara's. It remains a central text for him, nevertheless, and he uses it frequently.

One of Rāmānuja's theological premises is that while Brahman is completely one, he is simultaneously 'qualified' (*viShiṣṭā*). This means that the apparent differences experienced in the world—both among different entities and between those entities and

¹⁶ The *Tattva Bodha*, presumably not written by Shāṅkara, but probably indicative of the thought of the early Shāṅkara school, expands this. We are told that the literal meaning of *tat* is "the Isvara having omniscience, etc." while the modified meaning is "pure awareness free of all conditionings" (TatBod 10) [tr. Chayanya81:48].

¹⁷ We know that Rāmānuja was familiar with Shāṅkara even in his formative years. Tradition has it (and on this point there is little reason to doubt) that he studied with an *advaitin* scholar Yadavaprakasha [Lata80:49ff]. It would be interesting to know whether his willingness to take this where Shāṅkara would not might have contributed to his own theological inclinations.

Brahman—accurately reflect reality (in contrast to Shāṅkara who believed that they are an illusion). At the same time he asserted the complete unity of all things in God. *Tat twam asi* becomes a crucial text for him, not only in his polemics against the *advaitins* (who, one would suppose, are trying to use it against him), and the dualist schools (against whom he uses it), but most importantly in the formation and presentation of his own thought. His approach to interpreting this passage is not only hermeneutically interesting but serves as one of the foundation stones of his entire system. Two concepts need to be addressed in order to understand how Rāmānuja uses this passage: *modality* and *co-predication*.¹⁸

Rāmānuja believed that substantives which by their nature are dependent on other substantives¹⁹ for their existence in present form are in a ‘modal’ relationship. The dependent substantive is the ‘mode’ and the substantive depended upon is the ‘mode possessor’. The prime example of this, used by Rāmānuja, is the conjunction of the body with the *ātman*. Without its relation with the *ātman* the body is simply matter, but when they are together, it is a ‘man’ or a ‘fish’, etc. The mode possessor is also affected by the relationship in that (in this example) the *ātman*, when it is in the body of a fish *becomes* a fish. When in a later life it enters the body of a man it *becomes* a man. The quality ‘man’ although properly a description of phenomenal characteristics and therefore more natural

¹⁸ This is my own attempt at translating *sāmānādhikaraṇya*. Thibaut uses ‘co-ordination’ [Thibaut04R], Raghavachar translates ‘co-ordinate predication’ [Raghavac56], Lipner gives ‘correlative predication’ [Lipner86] while van Buitenen simply transliterates the term (a characteristic weakness of his translation of *Vedarthasamgraha*) [Buitenen56]. At the risk of muddying the waters still further, mine has the advantage of being *one* word whose meaning can be accurately found by looking it up (or at least the ‘predication’ half) in a dictionary. Of course I only know this to be accurate when used as a technical term by Rāmānuja. It is not necessarily an adequate translation for the word in other contexts. For its use and signification in Rāmānuja’s writings, see the discussion below:12.

¹⁹ ‘Substantive’ is used here in a very loose sense. It is not intended to suggest only lifeless objects (the *ātman* and even God are substantives).

to the body, is applied to the *ātman* as well when they are conjoined. In fact it is not properly applied even to the body after death because of the body's modal dependency on the *ātman*. The body is the mode in this case and not the other way around because the *ātman*, now entering the body of a god becomes a god, but the body of a man can be only human. When the mode possessor in some way gives life to the mode it is said to 'ensoul' it.

The whole world, both ubiquitously and specifically, is ensouled by Brahman. Consequently when the *ātman* is in the body of a fish it ensouls the fish and becomes 'fish', but at the same time it is in turn ensouled by Brahman. In this conjunction, Brahman also becomes 'fish' at the locus of that conjunction. He is of course also 'man', 'god', and 'rock', etc. at other simultaneous conjunctions as well as being Brahman unto himself. Language, according to Rāmānuja, reflects reality in portraying this. When we use a word like 'fish' we are referring not only to the body but also to the animating *ātman* and, although we do not think of it this way, we refer also to the Brahman that animates the *ātman* [Lipner86:40f]. The meanings of words are differentiated from each other by the distinguishing characteristics of the things they describe, but the levels of modality are never-the-less present in the words as well as their referents.

In this matter ordinary people, while putting language to use, imagine that the denotation of terms is exhausted by their reference to the various empirical objects they signify. But this is just a part of the range of the denotation that really belongs to terms. This restriction of the denotative significance is due to the fact that the principal part of the objective meaning of the term, namely the highest Self, transcends ordinary modes of cognition like perception. (VedS 21) [tr. Raghavac56:19]

But

All these texts²⁰ declare that the world inclusive of intelligent souls is the body of the highest Self, and the latter the Self of everything. Hence those words also that denote intelligent souls designate the highest Self as having intelligent souls for his body and constituting the Self of them; in the same way as words denoting non-sentient masses of matter, such as the bodies of gods, men, &c., designate the individual souls to which those bodies belong. For the body stands towards the embodied soul in the relation of a mode; and as words denoting a mode accomplish their full function only in denoting the thing to which the mode belongs, we must admit an analogous comprehensiveness of meaning for those words which denote a body. (ShBh 1.1.13) [tr. Thibaut04R:227].

Co-predication is Rāmānuja's name for the grammatical construct in which a substantive is modified by another substantive or an adjective (encountered earlier when we discussed Shāṅkara, p. 8, above) [Lipner86:29ff]. He differs from Shāṅkara on the function of co-predication, whose understanding of it tends to subtract meaning. He prefers a definition which adds the meanings of co-predicated words.

The reference to the identity of the pure substratum, through the rejection of the natural significance of the co-ordinate terms is not the meaning of [co-predication].²¹ The experts on such matters define it thus: 'The qualification of a single entity²² by several terms which are applied to that entity on different grounds is [co-predication].' (VedS 26) [tr. Raghavac56:24]

As used by Rāmānuja, co-predication becomes the *Shruti*'s grammatical method of describing modality [Buitenen56:65].

It should at this point begin to be clear how he is going to approach the interpretation of *tat tvam asi*. Rather than permitting the meanings of either *tat* or *tvam* to be circumscribed, he points out that the individual is ensouled by Brahman and as such, in

²⁰ E.g. TaiUp 2.6, ChUp 6.8.7, Taitt.Ar 3.24, BrhUp 3.7.3-22, SubaUp 7.

²¹ I suspect that this is an attack on Shāṅkara's use of co-predication. Note that I have substituted 'co-predication' for Raghavachar's 'co-ordinate predication' here and below for the sake of consistency (see note 18 above).

²² again slightly altered, based on a conglomeration of translations. Raghavachar translates "The signification of an identical entity...."

this context *twam* is the mode of *tat*. Since they are co-predicated here then they must be understood either as substantives added to one another or as both predicating a third understood subject. Rāmānuja takes it in the second fashion with Brahman as the third subject:

It follows that both words *tat* and *twam*, [co-predicated],²³ denote that one Brahman. The word *tat* refers to Brahman as the One who is the cause of the world, the abode of all perfections, the immaculate and untransmutable One; whereas *twam* refers to that same Brahman under the aspect of inner Ruler of the individual soul as being modified by the embodied soul. So it is said that the words *tat* and *twam* both apply to the same Brahman but under different aspects. And in this manner all the various perfections of Brahman, e.g. that he is the perfect, untransformed abode of all beautiful qualities and the universal cause, are preserved and no one is sublated. (VedS 20) [tr. Buitenen56:196]

This last comment regarding the preservation of the perfections of Brahman appears to be in response to the Shāṅkara school's treatment of this same passage using Shāṅkara's version of the same grammatical tool (see note 16 above). It will be recalled that in the *Tattva Bodha*, the term *tat*, referring to Brahman, is said to be limited by conjunction with *twam* such that it no longer refers to a Brahman who is omniscient, etc., but only to "pure awareness free of all conditionings" (TatBod 10) [tr. Chaitanya81:48]. Not surprisingly, Rāmānuja thinks that his approach yields a stronger interpretation of the scripture.

Hostile *Shruti*

In spite of the problems presented by *tat tvam asi*, both authors view it as a tool in their hands against the outer forces of ignorance and unbelief. Both feel the need to explain it, but neither has to "explain it away". The Vedas, however, do contain passages that tended to make both theologians uncomfortable. We have already noted that *Shruti* was

²³ replacing van Buitenen's "coordinated in a *sāmānādhikaraṇya* construction" for the purposes of consistency.

believed to be incontrovertibly holy. Neither writer was free to simply ignore a group of texts simply because it did not agree with his philosophical system. Both authors did indeed develop methods for treating passages like this, but, not surprisingly, their methods were very different.

Shāṅkara's method was quite effective. He believed that, whereas all scripture was divinely given for leading people into truth, not all of it was intended for the same audience. The doctrine of absolute monism was not only difficult to understand, but it directed the devotee towards a goal which only the tiniest minority could attain in any given period. Consequently, there are portions of the scripture which are not directed toward the enlightened, but rather toward the vast majority of humankind.

These passages tend to enjoin devotion and laud the advantages of a life well lived in light of the rewards available to the righteous (e.g. IshaUp 2, ChUp 8). Shāṅkara saw these passages as providing paths for the spiritually dull, which, if followed, would in time, and through various lives, bring them toward true knowledge. Included in this group would be passages where Brahman is pictured as immanent in ways that cannot be theologically harmonized with monism [Raghavac82:55f]. This puts him in the position of being able to pick which passages he wants to assert as normative, and which should be rejected as propaedeutic religion [Buitenen56:57f].

The decision as to which passages to assert and which to reject, or, if possible, be taken figuratively, is similar to the hermeneutical rule developed in early Protestantism known as *regula fidei*.

... the texts calling Brahman a [water] bank, and so on, are not to be taken literally,... on the other hand, the texts denying all plurality must be accepted as they stand.... (BrSuBh 3.2.37) [tr. Thibaut04S, v. 2:180]

Rāmānuja, too, uses a sort of *regula fidei*, although perhaps not as freely. He openly recommends it for the weighing of *purāṇas*.

.... Thus the (*Viṣṇupurāṇa*) exhibits itself as meant solely for the declaration of the determinate identity of the supreme Brahman.

All other *purāṇas* with other aims must be interpreted consistently with this *purāṇa*. That they have other aims is discerned in the manner of their commencement. Whatever is found in them, altogether inconsistent with this *purāṇa* must be set aside as being of the nature of *tamas* [darkness]. (VedS 112f) [tr. Raghavac56:158]

When dealing with *sārutī*, however, he is constrained to integrate even more difficult passages. But this integration consists of interpreting the passages such that they come in line with the central texts as he understands them. In *Vedartha-Samgraha* he criticizes his fictional *advaitin* opponent for trying to dismiss SvetUp 3.9-11 as propaedeutic [Buitenen56:58] and concludes:

The proper approach to the whole situation would be to discern and extract a reconciling principle, when there are two (seemingly) contradictory pronouncements, possessing equal authority as sacred texts. (VedS 87) [tr. Raghavac56:92]

The tools that Rāmānuja usually uses to find this “reconciling principle” are the ones that we have already seen in the concepts of modality, Brahman as ensouler, and co-predication.²⁴ His method, when he encounters a scripture that is problematic because, for example, Brahman is said to be something not appropriate, is to first look through the glasses of modality (both from Brahman’s viewpoint, and also from the world’s

²⁴ It may be possible to trace Rāmānuja’s penchant for reconciliation of conflicting texts as over against sublation to his connection with Yamuna (his grand-initiator and predecessor as Shri Vaiṣṇava *acarya*). If Neevel is correct in his proposal that Yamuna’s life work was to attempt “to maintain the full harmony and compatibility between Vedānta and Pancaratra” [Neevel77:12], then his successor, while restricting himself to the standard *Shruti* may have learned well the lesson of harmonization.

viewpoint). Because of the nature of the topics he tends to discuss, he is usually able to find an acceptable solution using one of these methods. Only if this fails does he resort to metaphor (still a long way from sublation). This is particularly the case of extreme anthropomorphism [Lipner86:36] as in TaitUp 2.5:

The pleasant is its head, enjoyment its right side, delight its left side, bliss its [*ātman*],²⁵ Brahman its tail and seat. [tr. Zaehner66:139]

Rāmānuja comments:

For as the Self [*ātman*] cannot really possess a head, wings, and tail, its having joy for its head, and so on can only be meant in a metaphorical sense, for the sake of easier comprehension. (ShBh 3.3.15) [tr. Thibaut04R:639]

Of course, the metaphor here is so obvious, it would be very hard to take it any other way.

Contrasting Similarities

Because the Vedas are not themselves a system, but are rather a collection of religious texts from various sources and representing various concerns, no unified system emerges from them in the natural sense. For the medieval Indian systematic theologians, however, and not least for Shāṅkara and Rāmānuja, such a coherent theological system was precisely the order of the day. The *Śruti* were believed not to be even of inspired human origin (the Christian concept of scripture) but to be directly from Brahman, co-existing with him, and eternally containing the coherent theological truths of the universe. Any systematic and complete statement of truth had to come out of *Śruti*. In light of their view of scripture, and the need for systematic theology, it is not surprising that the theologians of the day

²⁵ Zaehner translates *ātman* as ‘trunk’ here. Rāmānuja has ‘self’ in mind.

were required on occasion to hermeneutically ‘persuade’ the more obstinate passages to fit their systems.

There is nothing unusual in this—it has always been the burden of systematic theologians in any faith that is circumscribed by earlier authoritative teaching. The closer their systems were to the greatest number of texts (and both Shāṅkara and Rāmānuja were well supported by at least one or two well represented veins of Vedic theology) the fewer texts required subtle interpretations. But there was no getting around that there would be some.

From the point of view of scripture-based theology, it is probably the case that Rāmānuja was more successful. There are a couple of reasons for this. The first is that he was fundamentally conservative. He tries to follow as closely as possible the traditional interpretation as set forth in the sutras [Carman74:53f]. Unlike Shāṅkara, he starts from the premise that *all Shruti* is completely reliable and serviceable for the gleaning of truth as long as it is interpreted correctly. Second, his system is more flexible in the sense that it allows for the simultaneous assertion of ‘truths’ that seem to be incompatible on the surface. This, it should be noted, may have been a necessary outcome of his view of scripture.

Shāṅkara, on the other hand provides a much tighter theological system. Starting with a single unifying concept, derived, no doubt, from *Shruti*, he goes back, to the *Shruti* to find its depth. Since he believes that portions of the scripture are propaedeutic, there is no problem when not all texts describe his system perfectly.

If the internal meaning of individual passages is to be sought, there are strengths and weakness in both approaches. When Shāṅkara rejects a passage, he is free to interpret it in what ever way it may require, since at that point he has nothing invested in it. On the other

hand, neither does he have much interest in it, and, with some exceptions, it is frequently passed over in favor of greener pastures. For Rāmānuja, on the other hand, all pastures are green (to continue the metaphor), and the more difficult the passage the more work it is likely to require (although it is instructive here that he never wrote a full commentary on any portion of the Vedas). He is also likely to be more sympathetic to the text.

Nevertheless, because each text must be incorporated into his theology, there is no room for a passage whose interpretation unalterably violates the continuity of scripture. In such a case it must be brought into harmony, even if this means losing its most natural signification.

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