

Edmund Weber: Nammalvar, God's Decoy. Anthropocentric and Theocentric Soteriology in the Hindu Religions of the Tamil Shivaishnavas. *Journal of Religious Culture / Journal für Religionskultur* No. 36b (2001)

Journal of Religious Culture

Journal für Religionskultur

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber

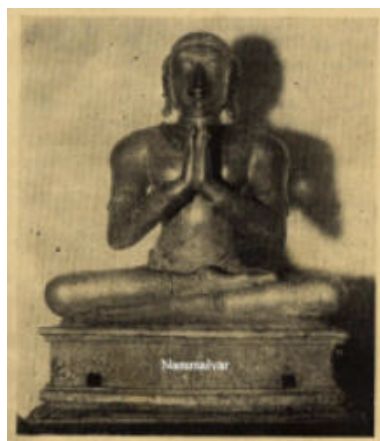
in Association with / in Zusammenarbeit mit Matthias Benad

Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik

Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935- © E.Weber

No. 36b (2001)



Nammalvar, God's Decoy

Anthropocentric and Theocentric Soteriology
in the Hindu Religions of the Tamil Shivaishnavas¹

By

Edmund Weber

The basic argument the canonical and apocryphic theologies of the South Indian Tamil Shivaishnavas grow worm over since centuries is the question: Has God set into motion the process of salvation in order to save mankind - the anthropocentric tradition is teaching -, or in order to save himself, the way a theocentric soteriology would teach. To answer this question we have to examine particularly the theocentric religion of salvation because it was

¹ This study is based on Patricia Y. Mumme's article: "Grace and Karma in Nammalvar's Salvation". *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 107.2 (1987) 257-66 [=Mu]. The source texts that have been quoted by Mumme will not be mentioned separately. Because of technical reasons diacritic signs are not marked.

I thank my academic assistant Dr. phil. Diana Dimitrova for her attending to the difficult English translation.

held apocryphic by the anthropocentric orthodoxy and has therefore to be reconstructed from sources that are all concealed anthropocentrically.

1. Anthropocentric Soteriology: The Salvation of Mankind

The orthodox theologies of the South Indian Shivaishnavas, both of the Vatakalai and of the Tenkalai, take for granted transmigration, samsara, and the necessity of human salvation, moksha. As long as there is no salvation the transmigrating souls have to suffer. The suffering of the souls stems from their eternal offences to God.² The suffering itself is God's punishment for that offences. The punishment is to be seen in the imprisonment in the samsara, in the continuation of reincarnations, which is kept into motion through the karmic deeds of the souls.

According to the Shivaishnavas, there is nothing in the soul which could make God to save it. However, the souls cannot achieve salvation by themselves, not even through great religious acts. There is definitely no self-salvation possible. Only God can bestow redemption. The reason that God actually redeems the souls is only his benevolent nature.

We see, the Shivaishnava soteriology is a purely anthropocentric one because it deals only with the salvation of the human beings. In the two Shivaishnava religions there is no dispute over the anthropocentricity of the soteriology. However, as soteriology, the Shivaishnava theology has to ask about the means for realisation of human salvation. Upon this issue there has been a dogmatic dispute that has persisted up to the present day.

The Vatakalai see as means of salvation the interaction of human and divine acting whereas the Tenkalai ascribe this function to God himself only.³

Normally, these soteriological differences are illustrated on the example of two behavioural patterns from the animal world. In the Vatakalai religion, the relationship between God and soul is compared with the manner a monkey mother carries her child: although she is carrying the young animal, it has to hold to her out of its own strength. Thus, the soul actively participates in the process of its own salvation. On the contrary, in the Tenkalai religion, the God's relationship to the souls is compared with the manner a cat mother carries her child: the cat seizes her little one on the neck and carries it to the destination without any co-operation on its side.⁴ Although the two images make the differences between the two religions clear, they also show their soteriological conformity: man is the goal of the salvation, not God.

Both theologies fight out their dispute over the right way and means for salvation of the souls on the example of the surprising conversion of the Tamil bard Nammalvar. The central theological issue that the Shivaishnava theologians discuss is whether the Lord bestowed salvation on Nammalvar because of his grace only or because of Nammalvar's previous good actions.

This anthropocentric dispute over salvation will be discussed in the following in order to understand the theocentric religion stemming from the same sources in a better way.

² Mu 268 f.

³ The acts of God are normally characterised as grace in scholarship. However, this is not correct. Grace implies that God gives up the enforcement of justice altogether. The Shivaishnavas presuppose that the Lord does not possess such power. He has to provide at least some achievements as a substitute in order to free men from the law of karma, from the samsara of justice which is valid unconditionally. In the prevailing theological systems the Lord is saviour of the men and not of himself. He pays himself to the almighty Yamaraj, the king of justice, the required ransom. In this way, in the salvation process, both the justice which is required by Yamaraj and the law of karma respectively, and the compassion of the Lord, which is inherent to him, remain preserved.

⁴ Mu 257

1.1. The Synergetic Soteriology of the Vatakalai Shrivaisnavas

Vedanta Deshika, the leading theologian of the Vatakalai Religion disputed with his Tenkalai colleagues about the true soteriology: When God is in his nature truly merciful, and there is no doubt about that, then he would want to save all souls. However, if he does not require for it any action from the souls, the way the Tenkalai teach, he should have saved all souls long ago.⁵ Otherwise he would be guilty of cruelty to the souls that still have to be saved, and of the unjustified preferential treatment of the other souls.⁶

It is obvious that, contrary to the Tenkalai, Vedanta Deshika measures God's behaviour according to the rules of justice. Therefore, he has to find a reason beyond God for the fact that only a part of the mankind has been saved so far.⁷ For this purpose, he brings forward the argument of the necessity of different time of salvation.

Accordingly, God is the one who can give salvation out of pure grace, which the souls have not deserved in the least as a consequence of their damnable behaviour. Applied to the individual, its realisation is connected with certain actions of the soul which help to remove God's resentment.⁸

Consequently, out of grace, God has bestowed on certain human actions the effect of reconciling the souls to him. These actions have got the capacity to erase all the insults to God, i.e. the karma that remains, and to give moksha. These privileged actions are bhaktiyoga and prapatti.⁹

The annihilation of all karma that has originated through the insult of God occurs when bhaktiyoga and prapatti are realised willfully and actually.¹⁰

The actions to which God has given a redemptive power are the fruits of previous good actions of the souls that they had accomplished at various periods of time. That is why also the ripening of this fruits occurs at various periods of time.

This time variety of the karma production of the different souls and the time variety of ripening of the accumulated karma fruits, in this case are the fruits bhakti and prapatti, is the reason why the individual souls are saved at various times, or not saved yet respectively: "The endless streams of karma belonging to these souls go about ripening at various times."¹¹

In order to achieve moksha in the end, soul and God must wait until a bhaktiyoga or prapatti fruit has been produced and comes to ripening. If this is happens, the forgiveness and salvation machinery, which has been established by God out of pure grace, is activated.¹²

By teaching the necessary cooperation of the souls regarding God's salvation work, Vedanta Deshika can solve the theological problem of the conflict between universal grace and universal mercy. God's grace is not unjust, even though not yet all souls have been saved up to this day, despite his universal grace.

⁵ Mu 263

⁶ Mu 263

⁷ Mu 265

⁸ Mu 263

⁹ Mu 264

¹⁰ Mu 264, note 33

¹¹ Mu 265

¹² Vedanta Deshika rejects the miscellaneous assignment of karmic fruit that causes bhakti. Though God bestows the fruit, he does so only according to the preceding human karma. "Unless Lord grants fruits according to karma, the fault of partiality will accrue to Him" [Mu 265]. God is a voluntary agent of karmic justice. In this way, he maintains the karmic order and enables the order of salvation. The omnipotence of the karmic religion is manifested here: God must respect it if he wants to save men from it. Even he is not able to change this law completely. The Christian God of salvation also paid tribute to the religion of justice: as the Son of God he sacrificed himself for the sins of mankind and put a treasury of rightful actions as a compensation for the punishment of their sins at their disposal. Similarly to the indo-genous ones, the Christian religions presupposed the karmic order and paid their tribute to it.

Consequently, the Vatakalai religion presupposes a double cooperation of the soul in the salvation process: first, the soul must perform good actions in the course of its rebirths that have bhakti or prapatti as their fruit. Second, it must enjoy this fruit willfully as soon as it becomes ripe, i.e. it must experience bhakti or prapatti, its so called prarabdha karma, as a self-realisation.

The basis of this synergism is God's unfathomable will to save the souls that have been cursed to an eternal samsara. As the human beings cannot do this on their own, they hurry to the gracious God for help.

This synergistic construction of the Vatakalai theology serves only one purpose: the salvation of men, consequently, it represents an anthropocentric soteriology.

1.2. The Anergetic Soteriology of the Tenkalai Shrivaisnavas

Contrary to the Vatakalai religion, the Tenkalai theologians completely deny that the souls cooperate in their salvation at all. Salvation is bestowed, actually imposed to them only through God's actions. This exclusive acting of God occurs through his glance. Where his glance falls, all evil disappears: "The place where the Lord's glance falls becomes devoid of faults."¹³ God's redemptive glance fell upon Nammalvar this time. According to the Tenkalai Nammalvar did not give any reason at all for this act of grace: "Thus it fell on this one soul who was shuttling back and forth in any and every kind of birth, indifferently taking up whatever body was dictated by his karma, no matter what jati nor varna ...".¹⁴ Therefore, God did not consider Nammalvar's actions in previous lives, and even not in the present life; nor did he take into consideration his caste, or whether he had stored bhakti in sanchita karma, or whether he was indifferent to the rebirths in samsara.

The Tenkalai scholars were aware of the fact that this kind of redemptive ideas was perceived as a very unusual, even paradoxical one by their fellow creatures. In order to intensify this soteriologically intended paradox, they used to tell that even the wives of the Lord thought that his behaviour was incomprehensible: "This special grace, which cannot be known or understood even by the Lord's consorts as He lies in their close embrace, is without any cause but His own will ...".¹⁵

In the case of Nammalvar whom the Tenkalai used as an example to introduce their salvation theory, not only the fruit of bhakti was missing but also the will and wish to love God. Further more, he was a convinced anti-bhakta as he had practised neither ascetic austerities nor social welfare work nor any other pious exercises.¹⁶

Though the Lord did not consider the karmic prerequisites when he was selecting Nammalvar, the Tenkalai did not reject the validity of the karmic predisposition for the Alvars's salvation.

The notion that a soul can carry out bhakti without any previous action was unthinkable even to them. The power of the karmic religion had also them under control.

In order to be able to justify the assertion that Nammalvar has become a bhakta without any participation on his side, they developed the doctrine of the substitutive karma of God. It follows that Nammalvar's unexplainable bhakti was neither created out of this self nor out of nothing. It was the result of a corresponding act of God: "Thus the Bhakti which Alvar received is the fruit of the labors of the Lord of all ...".¹⁷ Thus, God's actions are organised according to the karmic law. Obviously God produces good, i.e. bhakti causing deeds. However, he does not need these good deeds, they are so to say surplus good deeds.

13 Mu 260

14 Mu 260

15 Mu 260

16 Mu 261

17 Mu 261

Such deeds can be transferred to men in order to benefit them. In this way, the fruit of a deed does not have to be enjoyed by the doer himself, but can also be enjoyed by another.

God has allotted such a substitutive karma to Nammalvar so that he could experience its effect and feel nothing else but bhakti in himself. By effectuating the salvation of the soul through God's meritorious deeds the Tenkalai have satisfied the theological claims the all-pervading karmic religion is enforcing.

Through the doctrine of the treasury of God's surplus good deeds and their free transfer to other acting agents, i.e. the substitutive salvation, the absolute act of God's grace, the radical *sola gratia*, is secured: all salvation actions "came about from the Lord alone ... not on the basis of his [Nammalvar's, note of the author] good karma."¹⁸

In this way one questions not only the grounds for the objective possibility of bhakti through Nammalvar's previous life but also his independent and free consent to its realisation. Nammalvar defended himself against the realisation of bhakti that was imposed on him: "I never agreed to place him [God, note of the author] in my heart."¹⁹ The Alvar comments on his spiritual rape with bitter irony: "Me - the one who was made to consent."²⁰ The Tenkalai theologian Manavalamamuni interprets this phrase as a proof that Nammalvar contributed absolutely nothing to his salvation: "If he had previously given permission or consent, [Nammalvar] would not have said, 'I never agreed' or 'made to consent'."²¹

However, against the background of this radical *sola gratia* doctrine, bhakti acquires a completely new theological meaning. It is no more a *syn-ergos*, a cooperation, of men for the achievement of moksha. It is now an *an-ergos*, a non-deed. It is not an independent and autonomous product of the soul but a condition which has been implanted from without. It is the final blissful condition of the soul which consists in an ardent worship of the Lord: "You gave me a mind to approach and worship you."²² This implanted bhakti is not a means to salvation but salvation itself. Otherwise, the *sola gratia* principle would be destroyed. However, there is no trace of it in the Tenkalai doctrine.

Manavalamamuni summarised the entire soteriology of the Tenkalai in five statements: "1) The Alvar's excellence, 2) that the Lord's causeless grace is the basis for it, 3) the uniqueness of the bhakti that he had on account of [the fact that it was based on account only on the Lord's grace], 4) that it was not gained from [Nammalvar's] karma or jnana, 5) that there is no other cause for the Lord accepting him but that grace alone."²³

The last statement makes it clear that the Tenkalai wanted to understand their anergistic model of salvation as a strictly anthropocentric soteriology. Of course, bhakti is no more means to salvation. However, it is a condition worth aspiring after, even though man, in this case Nammalvar, does not wish for it in his blindness. Then, in retrospect, forced to his happiness, Nammalvar confessed with joy and gratefulness: "You destroyed my evil mind."²⁴

2. Theocentric Soteriology: Vishnu's Religion of Salvation

Studying the traditions of the two divers Shivaishnava soteriologies one can by means of the typology of religion discern a third indeed completely different religion. Through their

¹⁸ Mu 262

¹⁹ Mu 262

²⁰ Mu 262

²¹ Mu 262

²² Mu 262

²³ Mu 263

²⁴ Mu 262

interpretation, the two dominant theologies have changed the specificity of this religion, making it unrecognizable and turning it to its opposite.²⁵

However, we can identify theocentric motifs and reconstruct a corresponding soteriology through a typological differentiation of the Shrivaiishnava traditions, particularly from the Tenkalai religion, which has been understood anthropocentrically. This third Shrivaiishnava soteriology can be found in various exegeses, in narratives and parables of the Tenkalai tradition, specifically in the avatara doctrine, in the parable about the peasant and the doctrine of the decoy.

It is being transmitted in the Tenkalai soteriology²⁶ that God took various animal forms in order to reveal the Vedic truth and to resurrect it. As the souls did not react at this, the Lord took many times human form, accomplished marvels and revealed the shastras which taught the way to salvation. However, all these attempts of Vishnu proved to be a failure: "Still he saw that all these efforts to win these souls to himself had been in vain."²⁷ God completely failed: "they resisted all the Lord's attempts to convert them."²⁸ The transmitting Tenkalai orthodoxy gives the following reasons for it in a denunciatory intention: "attachment to the material world and their selfish desires."²⁹

The souls were interested in something else; they followed their own interests and loved their samsaric world. They missed nothing, nothing which could have forced them to accept God's urge to love and worship him. Only God felt that something was missing: the lovers of God. In this way, the sense of God's failed redemptive attempts becomes clear: unloved by the souls, through all these initiatives, God wanted to put to an end the suffering which he was experiencing through the souls' denial of love. Thus, a Tamil theology of suffering is to be detected behind God's desperate salvation story. It is also the background for the Christian parable of the Prodigal Son.

From the viewpoint of the orthodoxy, the conflict looks differently. According to it, man has been insulting God for ages and has therefore deserved the painfully experienced karmic effects of samsara. As the souls have become slaves to the material world, and, to their own harm, have followed only their egotistic interests, they are unable to save themselves from their misery. Out of his inherent grace, God takes the initiative and gives the unsaved soul the possibility of liberation.

On the contrary, the theocentric interpretation starts from the assumption that a man is free in his relationship to God, goes his own way and finds his happiness without God's grace and without bhakti. Hungry for love God can get hold of these souls that do not need his grace only through spell and enchantment. In the meantime it is assumed that violence and obvious compulsion are unthinkable as a means of influence. They would not be able to create bhakti, love of God.

Though Vishnu could not kindle bhakti in the souls with the Vedic, Upanishadic and Avatara religions, and among them are also the religions of Rama, Krishna and Buddha!, he did not give up, just the way a peasant does not give up when there is crop failure.³⁰ Because of its anthropocentric soteriology, the orthodox Tenkalai tradition refers to the Lord as "compassionate."³¹ Such a characterisation is correct only in the sense that,

²⁵ Such violent exegeses are usual in the history of religion. However, a religio-typological criticism should aim at revealing the specificity of the submerged experience of the holy in order to secure its freedom and wealth. The power of the ideology which propagates the necessity of human salvation and which is taught by the dominant theologies, is manifested also in the fact that it is taken by consideration even by the non-religious Western discipline of Indology. The reason is most probably the implicit, or explicit respectively, religious anthropocentrism, which is common to both.

²⁶ Mu 260

²⁷ Mu 260

²⁸ Mu 260

²⁹ Mu 260

³⁰ Mu 260

³¹ Mu 260

theocentrically, he has compassion for his own suffering, i.e. does not give up in his favour.³²

The point of comparing Vishnu with the peasant is to be seen only in the common characteristics not to give up their goal despite most difficult setbacks. Otherwise, Vishnu differs completely from the peasant in case of a failure. Whereas the peasant sticks to the same method of agriculture despite the crop failure, the Lord undertakes a completely new strategy in order to achieve success finally. He puts into action an enchanted decoy.³³ Just the way the hunter of birds and animals tame an animal of the same species in order to use it as a decoy and catch the victims, so does the Lord proceed with the unwilling soul: "Similarly, the Lord looked to someone suitable for this task – someone of the same kind to use as a decoy."³⁴

Vishnu chose Nammalvar for this purpose and provided the Shrivaisnavas with a special theological problem. Thus, Nammalvar is the least godless soul among the godless ones. He is a soul that is especially far away from God. According to the orthodox Tenkalai, even the worst karmic and samsaric conditions left his soul completely indifferent to God: "indifferently taking up what ever body was dictated by his karma."³⁵

The anthropocentric soteriology of the Shrivaisnavas discussed extensively the question about the possibility and reality of changing the relationship of the up to then extremely godless Nammalvar to the lord. This question, arising from the premise of the Shrivaisnava anthropocentric theology, asks, how is it possible that exactly the least pious one suddenly achieved extreme bhakti.³⁶

The anti-karmic theocentric soteriology solves this problem in a non-karmic way. In order to win the love of men, Vishnu took to the last resource, namely, magic. He put a spell on Nammalvar. He cast a love spell on him so that, against his will, Nammalvar became a bhakta, an ardent lover of Vishnu. As already mentioned, the magical cure that Vishnu used was his divine glance. This glance has its converting effect not through a divine substitution of karma, the way the anthropocentric Tenkalai soteriology teaches, but through the magic power inherent in it.

As a magician, God is not subjected to the karmic law and can do without the cooperation of the soul, which is postulated by the Vatakalai.

As a decoy, Nammalvar had the task to bring other men, who like himself did not feel and did not want to feel bhakti, in such a condition so that they could be successfully hunted by God. It is the task of a decoy to lure other innocent birds into the trap of the hunter. However, the sources do not elaborate on the specifics of the hunt.

Thereafter, Vishnu transformed him into a mediator of his magical grace. This is explained with a new picture: "He took and transformed his [this soul, note of the author] into a channel for the flood of His grace."³⁷ Now Nammalvar had to bring further to the other people, as a channel, the flood of magical power, grace, that has put a spell on and transformed him. In this way they could also be filled with this magical power and transformed to bhaktas. Thus, Vishnu's love magic did not cast a spell on Nammalvar in order to win at least one bhakta in this way but to reach the souls of other men through him, as a channel for the infusion of His grace, thought in liquid terms. However, this magical grace caused an extra-karmic bhakti that was much wanted by Vishnu.

32 The theocentric Shrivaisnava religion makes use of the dominant dogmatic language of the anthropocentric orthodoxy, i.e. of its opponents. As no theocentric orthodoxy was formed and therefore no proper conceptual terms could be developed, it was unavoidable to make use of an inadequate terminology in this period.

33 Mu 260

34 Mu 260

35 Mu 260

36 Mu 260

37 Mu 260

In order to achieve his own salvation, the love of man, God set into motion the archaic enchantment, illusory luring and mechanical infusion alone, and no longer karma or samsara, or the religion of Rama, Krishna or Buddha. The exclusion of meritorious religion, justice according to deeds and freedom of will was worth His dealing with men.

This decoy and channel soteriology is not based upon a thought of men's need for or interest in salvation. It is solely about God's own salvation, about the winning of the human love for God. As this God needs the winning of man's love, he abstains from revenge, punishment or blackmail in order to put an end to his suffering. With regard to the free and self-conscious godless ones, such measures could have had as a consequence only God's deeper fall into the horror of a not-being-loved one.

3. Conclusion

The logically clear theocentric enchantment, decoy and channel theology is constantly being blurred and deformed in its sources by the anthropocentric religion of justice according to the deeds. At least, one tries to force it into the corset of the anthropocentric karma-samsara religion.

Nevertheless, though fragmentarily, even in the Shrivaisnava tradition, the omnipotence of the karma-samsara religion is undermined by God himself for the sake of his own salvation. For this theocentric goal of salvation, God sacrifices man's freedom of will and the law of reprisal. According to theocentric fragments, the karma-samsara religion, including its liberal Tenkalai version, is not dismantled by men but by God himself.

The reconstruction of theocentric soteriology is based on literary fragments that are transmitted and distorted respectively by different kind of religion. A comprehensive study of the liturgy, folklore and other sources, as well as of the Shaiva tradition will be able to formulate a systematic soteriology of the theocentric religion of salvation in the land of the Tamils.