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Editor's Introduction

Gopal Gupta
University of Evansville

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Editor's Introduction

ŚAṄKARA (788-820) and Rāmānuja (1017-1137) have frequently emerged as the “go-to” thinkers for Christian-Hindu comparative theologians. And in the narrower field of Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparative study, Rāmānuja, the influential south Indian Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindu theologian, has been most popular, both historically and in recent years. In 2017, Vaiṣṇavas around the world celebrated the 1000th birth anniversary of Rāmānuja. This occasion gives us an opportunity to reflect on how Rāmānuja has been studied and drawn into comparative theological study since at least the 19th century. Based on the 2017 American Academy of Religion panel honoring Rāmānuja at his 1000th birth anniversary, this volume of the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* focuses on the Christian study of Rāmānuja and explores why Rāmānuja has consistently attracted Christian theological attention.

The first paper, “Rudolf Otto's Encounter with Rāmānuja as Model for Comparative Theology” by Hugh Nicholson, takes up one of the most famous historical instances of the serious Christian study of Rāmānuja, by the great theological and religion scholar, Rudolph Otto. Among his more noteworthy achievements, Rudolf Otto introduced Vaiṣṇava theism, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita in particular, to a broader theological audience. Nicholson argues that despite the well-known shortcomings of Otto's comparative work, Otto's encounter with Rāmānuja and Vaisnavism nevertheless anticipates two of the characteristic features of the contemporary practice of Comparative Theology. The first of these is this discipline's concern with problematizing the often

invidious representations of non-Christian traditions that have historically sustained notions of Christian uniqueness. The second is its skillful use of comparison to foreground features of the home tradition that might otherwise escape notice.

The second paper, “Thinking the Creator and Creature Together” by Martin Ganeri, shows how Christian theologians have tended to focus on Rāmānuja's doctrinal account of God instead of his account of language in general. The paper goes on to develop a theological dialogue between Rāmānuja and the Christian Scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas. Whereas Christian theology has tended generally to avoid language that identifies the world with God as being pantheistic and opposed to the doctrine of creation, an appropriation of Rāmānuja's account of language encourages the use of such unitive language as a powerful way of expressing the unique relation that is creation.

In the third paper, “Does God Have a Body? Rāmānuja's Challenge to the Christian Tradition,” Jon Paul Sydnor notes that contemporary Christian theology is pushing the analogy of being into new territory. Social Trinitarians assert that God is tripersonal, united by love. Process theologians assert that God is temporal, flowing with time. Yet the possibility of divine embodiment, within the Godhead itself, has received scant attention. Yet Rāmānuja and his tradition wholeheartedly endorsed divine embodiment, not just by way of positing an incarnation or avatar, but also by seeing embodiment as an ultimate attribute of the divine. As Christian theologians contemplate divine embodiment

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today, we may do so more fruitfully with the assistance of Rāmānuja's developed theological positions.

The fourth paper, "The God of Love and the Love of God: Thinking With Rāmānuja About Grace in Christianity," by Ankur Barua, examines Rāmānuja's exegetical-theological struggles with the question as to whether his doctrine that the Lord Visnu-Narayana is the inner controller of the finite self dissolves moral autonomy. That the 1000th year of Rāmānuja is also the 500th anniversary of the Reformation reminds us of one of the most vexed debates in Christian theology – whether divine grace infallibly moves the predetermined soul to perform virtuous action, or whether divine grace is rendered efficacious by free human response. The paper suggests that Christian systematic theologians can profitably explore Rāmānuja's integration of an emphasis on divine grace with an affirmation of human autonomy in his devotional universe.

The fifth paper, "Proper Acts: Rāmānuja and Luther on Works," by Rakesh Dass, also notes that 2017 offered a reason to celebrate and compare two great theologians, Śrī Rāmānujācārya and Luther. This paper observes that Luther's commentary on good works resonates with Rāmānuja's teachings on proper acts in three important ways. First, the idea of merit or reward-inspired actions preoccupied and shaped both Rāmānuja's and Luther's respective theologies. Second, their teachings on merit reflect a shared interest in placing the work of a gracious God at the center of soteriology. Third, their occupation with the idea of merit inspired them to differentiate good or proper acts from improper acts. This paper further explains that this convergence is more than an accident. Luther echoes Rāmānuja on works because both theologians faced a common

quandary – what should I do to be saved? – to which their responses were shaped by a shared set of theological commitments.

The sixth paper, "Why Rāmānuja? Some Reflections on Christian-Vaiṣṇava Comparative Theology," by Gopal Gupta, examines the very idea of developing a Christian-Hindu comparative theology by focusing on Rāmānuja in particular. This paper reflects on possible reasons--social, political, theological and philosophical—for Rāmānuja's central place in Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparative theology. The paper charts moments in Christian-Vaiṣṇava comparison that would have looked different had the comparison been done with Madhva rather than Rāmānuja.

The seventh paper, "*Rāmānuja at 1000: The Heritage and Promise of the Study of Rāmānuja in a Christian-Hindu Comparative Theology*," by Francis Clooney, is a response to the essays collected in this issue of the journal, based on the 2017 AAR panel honoring Rāmānuja at his 1000th birth anniversary. The response highlights key features of each essay as giving us insights into the theology of Rāmānuja and his place in the Western study of Hinduism. The response ends with some reflections on the future of Rāmānuja studies, suggesting the agenda before the next generations of scholars.

In the eighth paper, "*Expanding and Refining Christian Interpretations of Rāmānuja*," John Carman reflects on the development of scholarship on Rāmānuja in the past century. The paper highlights the Christian contributions to the study of Rāmānuja, and points out unresolved questions and possible lines of inquiry for future comparative studies. The paper reflects on the essays in this issue of the journal, showing ways in which these contemporary

writings relate with the rich history of Rāmānuja studies.

This issue also marks a transition for the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*. After sixteen years of service, Prof. Bradley Malkovsky has retired from being the Journal's editor. His untiring service, professional expertise and caring hand as the editor will be sorely missed by the Journal's editorial board, the Society for Hindu-

Christian Studies and the readers of this Journal. This volume features essays by Michelle Voss Roberts and Reid B. Locklin in appreciation for his service and scholarship. As past-editor, Brad continues to offer guidance to the incoming editor, and for this I am very grateful.

Gopal Gupta
University of Evansville