



## Rāmakṛṣṇa: Saint, Mystic—Philosopher?

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Accepted: 25 February 2021 / Published online: 12 April 2021

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Rāmakṛṣṇa was a figure of singular importance, not only religiously, but also for social and political reasons, for middle-class Bengal in the nineteenth century. Ayon Maharaj refers to him as Sri Ramakrishna (somewhat analogous to calling Thomas Aquinas, Saint Thomas) throughout his book, *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality: Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (2018; henceforth, *IPIR*). His charisma as a holy man and mystic attracted many followers, among others a group of young men, notably Svāmī Vivekānanda, who went on to play a key role in the development of a form of Hinduism with a social message that sought to come to terms with modernity in dialogue with Western influences. His legacy lives on through the Ramakrishna Mission with its headquarters at the Belur Math in West Bengal and its centers of social and educational mission throughout India and in many other parts of the world. So Rāmakṛṣṇa deserves serious study.

Indeed, many books have been written on the mystic and holy man, but very few have professed to analyze Rāmakṛṣṇa as a thinker. It is the latter task that Maharaj undertakes in this book. Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings and narrations of his experiences, perceived as authoritatively recorded in the *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta* (Gupta 1974), which we shall refer to, in abbreviated form, as the *Kathāmṛta*, are often described as “philosophical” by Maharaj who seems to regard his own task as no more than spelling out this intellectual content by engaging with a variety of Hindu and Western thinkers.

Under the comprehensive chapter headings given, Maharaj writes with great clarity, force, and incisiveness, unfolding a philosophical standpoint that calls for serious consideration. But if there is a philosopher to be found, it is to Maharaj that

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the finger points, not to Rāmakṛṣṇa, at least to my mind. In the numerous extracts from Rāmakṛṣṇa's sayings taken from the *Kathāmṛta*, I could find no evidence for Rāmakṛṣṇa the philosopher. Rather, he comes across as a highly perceptive observer of human nature, kindly and exceptional in that he is recorded as having undergone a range of extraordinary para-empirical ("mystical") experiences. From the quoted extracts, these experiences are described by Rāmakṛṣṇa in homely but assertive fashion, with hardly any attempt to systematize them or make them rationally coherent—the task, it would be generally agreed, that falls to the philosopher. It is Maharaj who pursues this aim. And so the question arises: How does Maharaj set about this task? In his hands, do Rāmakṛṣṇa's views emerge as philosophically cogent, tractable, and, indeed, where applicable, morally acceptable?

Maharaj produces a very interesting and intellectually weighty synthesis—but there are problems nonetheless, both philosophical and moral. Whether these are to be attributed to Maharaj's *guru* (Maharaj is described in this book as an ordained *brahmacārin*, or celibate of the Ramakrishna Order) or to Maharaj himself is, based on the evidence given, a conundrum I could not resolve. But let us review some of the philosophical issues that arise.

Maharaj says: "I characterize Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy as 'Vijñāna Vedānta,' a nonsectarian philosophy—rooted in the mystical experience of what he calls *vijñāna*—that accommodates and harmonizes various apparently conflicting religious faiths, sectarian philosophies, and spiritual disciplines" (*IPIR* 16). An ambitious claim! Under the various chapter headings covering "Divine Infinity" and the "Overcoming of Conceptual Idolatry," religious pluralism, mystical experience, and the problem of evil, we have in the quotation above Maharaj's grand synthetic plan. *En passant*, various thinkers and standpoints are engaged with: Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja, Śrī Aurobindo, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Jehangir Chubb, Evan Fales, Jerome Gellman, Benedikt Paul Göcke, John Hick, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Luc Marion, Robert Oakes, Duns Scotus, Ninian Smart, W. T. Stace, Michael Stoeber, Richard Swinburne, Teresa of Ávila, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, perennialist and constructivist views of mysticism, skeptical theism, saint-/soul-making theodicies, and quite a few others besides.

But how does Maharaj describe Rāmakṛṣṇa's experience of *vijñāna* on which he bases his whole interpretation of Rāmakṛṣṇa's viewpoint? He affirms that *vijñāna* is "intimate knowledge"—"a vaster, richer, and more intimate realization of God as the Infinite Reality that is both personal *and* impersonal, with *and* without form, immanent in the universe *and* beyond it" (16; emphasis added). "Sri Ramakrishna," Maharaj continues, "grants *equal* ontological status to the impersonal and personal aspects of the Infinite Reality" (61; emphasis in the original). Maharaj justifies his claim about this comprehensive experience by arguing that the Infinite Reality allegedly encountered by Rāmakṛṣṇa mystically can be all these things precisely because it is infinite. Citing Göcke's work, he argues that the Infinite/God transcends the law of contradiction. Other mystics who claim to experience one or other aspect of the Infinite Reality as definitive are mistaken. Only Rāmakṛṣṇa, who has experienced these otherwise contradictory-seeming properties in the same Reality, is correct. For Maharaj, the law of contradiction becomes a convenient fiction with reference to this Reality.

But to my mind, there is no way we can be sure that Rāmakṛṣṇa has actually experienced a Supreme Being, let alone a Supreme Being that in itself harmonizes what we would regard as contradictory qualities, an experience which in Maharaj's words "grants *equal* ontological status to the impersonal and personal aspects of the Infinite Reality." In fact, from the discussions that follow about Rāmakṛṣṇa's alleged experience of this Reality, I think what Maharaj wants to be asking is: Does this experience grant equal *epistemological* status to these apparently contradictory qualities, and if it does, what are the implications for its veridicality? Two or more qualities can have equal ontological status, but this does not necessarily imply that they have equal epistemological status for their experiencer (one or more may be experienced as illusory or less real), and it is the epistemological point, it seems, that Maharaj seeks to establish. This piggy-back question, with its implications, is not explicitly taken up.

It appears implicitly, however, in Maharaj's seminal discussion of Rāmakṛṣṇa's claim that his (*vijñāna*) experience of the Infinite Reality is "self-authenticating."<sup>1</sup> I have read this section carefully twice: it does no more than argue that this is a rational claim on Rāmakṛṣṇa's part. But even if this claim were to be reckoned as rational—and I am not convinced that it can be (part of Maharaj's argument is that Teresa of Ávila insists that such self-authenticating experience "itself involves an epistemically unique feeling of 'certitude'—granted to the mystic by God Himself—which *guarantees* the veridicality of her experience"; *IPIR* 206; underline emphasis added)—it still remains a claim, a claim whose certainty is explained as one of the "secrets of God's omnipotence" (*IPIR* 206, citing Teresa herself in translation). This is hardly a *philosophical* endorsement for what in the end is but a claim.

Since Rāmakṛṣṇa's experiencing mind is, presumably, finite, how can *we* be sure that a finite mind has really experienced Infinite Reality and not some very great and grand and mighty, but still finite, entity (in which case, the law of contradiction would, no doubt, apply), or perhaps some delusion or flight of the imagination? After all, the experiencer by definition occupies a different order of being from the Experienced. Such a claim may well be spiritually impressive, but it has no philosophical legs.

The argument is not helped by Maharaj tending to slide from claim to assertion. Thus, we are told that Rāmakṛṣṇa "*claimed* to have realized different forms and aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality by means of...diverse paths" (*IPIR* 144; emphasis added). Then, soon after, we are informed (there is an almost imperceptible—almost!—change of register here) that Rāmakṛṣṇa "who has experienced *multiple* aspects of God, occupies a unique epistemic vantage point from which he is able to harmonize conflicting religious truth-claims about the nature of the ultimate reality" (*IPIR* 144; underline emphasis added). The slide from claim to assertion elides the important philosophical issue we have mentioned.

<sup>1</sup> See *IPIR* Chapter 6, Section II, pages 201–11.

A caveat here: In footnote 18 on page 17 of *IPIR*, Maharaj writes:

When I refer to the mystical experiences Sri Ramakrishna claimed to have had, I often leave out qualifying phrases such as “claimed to have” or “reportedly.” However, it should be kept in mind throughout this book that these qualifying phrases are always implied. I am not dogmatically asserting the veridicality of Sri Ramakrishna’s reported mystical experiences.

We have reference here to a very important omission in what is an extraordinary footnote—which indeed fails to meet our criticism. Look again at the texts I have just quoted from Maharaj. In the first text, Maharaj clearly states Rāmākṛṣṇa “claimed to have realized different forms and aspects,” etc. This is clear: it is a claim. But in the succeeding text, Maharaj says, “Ramakrishna...who has experienced *multiple* aspects of God, occupies [= does occupy] a unique epistemic vantage point,” etc. Here Maharaj is making an assertion. How is the reader to follow the footnote and insert the supposedly understood “claimed” in the assertion? To do so would change the semantics of the statement and nullify the putative assertion that Rāmākṛṣṇa *does* occupy a unique vantage point from which he is able to harmonize conflicting religious truth-claims about the nature of the ultimate reality. For such a statement is not equivalent to a claim. Maharaj has indeed shifted from claim to assertion. Further, it is not for the reader to strive to clarify or make good the argument. This is the author’s job. If Maharaj states clearly in the premise that a claim is being made, he must state equally clearly in the conclusion that this is still a claim. But to do this here would change the sense of the conclusion that Maharaj (seemingly) wants to affirm. For both reasons then, the criticism stands.

We may also ask, is Rāmākṛṣṇa’s *vijñāna* experience as comprehensive as all that or does Maharaj’s interpretation of it seek to make it so in procrustean fashion? Consider Rāmākṛṣṇa’s reference to Buddhism. Rāmākṛṣṇa is quoted as saying that the Buddha “was not an atheist. He simply could not express the Reality in words.... By meditating on one’s own *bodha svarūpa* [Maharaj adds in square brackets: ‘one’s true nature as Pure Consciousness’], one *becomes* that *bodha svarūpa*....” (*IPIR* 111–12; emphasis in the original). Maharaj concludes: “Sri Ramakrishna explains the Buddha’s enlightenment in Advaitic terms as the realization of his own true Self, which is of the nature of Pure Consciousness.... Sri Ramakrishna implies that what the Buddha called ‘*nibbāna*’ is a negative term denoting the realization of the ineffable Ātman” (*IPIR* 112). This is not going to please many Theravāda Buddhists (not to mention Mahāyānists) who, theoretically at least, do not subscribe to the existence of some Advaitic Absolute as defining the experience/state of *nibbāna* (or *nirvāṇa*). But it seems clear that Maharaj wishes to justify Rāmākṛṣṇa’s pronouncement. So he says: “Numerous scholars have argued that the Buddha’s teaching of *anattā* (‘nonself’; Sanskrit, *anātman*) was meant to deny the reality of the empirical-personal self rather than of the impersonal Vedāntic Ātman” (*IPIR* 112).

This too is an extraordinary statement to make. To justify it, in a footnote Maharaj references a number of scholars supposedly endorsing his claim. I could not check them all (*IPIR* 112fn48). But I did check one, namely, “Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (1962), 129–34.” The extract referred to in the footnote is

part of a section in which Conze discusses what he calls the “Personalists” in Buddhism, or the *pudgalavādins* (1962: 122–23), who for a start he describes from the Buddhist standpoint as “outsiders in our midst,’ or ‘heretics’ as we would put it” (*IPIR* 123). This is hardly a good start from the viewpoint of Maharaj’s interpretation. If Maharaj is interpreting Rāmākṛṣṇa aright, then according to Conze, his *guru* is endorsing what heretical Buddhists would say! At most, suggests Conze in the extract referred to by Maharaj, “the helpless animosity they [the Personalists] aroused among their brethren, seem[s] to suggest that they fulfilled a useful function” (1962: 129), in that, as the Buddhist thinker Candrakīrti maintained, “under certain circumstances it *may* be useful to teach that there is a self” (*IPIR* 130; emphasis added). This is miles away from the Buddhists in general implicitly affirming that *nibbāna* points to the existence of a Vedāntic (Advaitic) Ātman, as Maharaj would have it. It is “remarkable” Conze goes on to say, “that there is not one canonical passage in which the existence of such a true Self is ever clearly stated. To some extent it may be that the Pudgalavādin theory was so universally rejected because it was based on a *fundamental misconception* of the purpose and function of Buddhist philosophy” (1962: 131; emphasis added).

Conze writes with great subtlety about how the various Buddhist traditions, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna, grappled with the idea of having to eliminate, in accordance with orthodox teaching, the natural urge to hold on to some continuous or permanent, usually individual, person or self, but, as our quotations from Conze indicate, he is clear that affirming non-self was the orthodox aim. To say, then, that Conze argues here that the Buddha’s teaching of non-self “was meant to deny the reality of the empirical-personal self rather than of the impersonal Vedāntic Ātman,” to quote Maharaj again, makes a travesty of the thrust of Conze’s discussion. To pursue this matter would be fruitless. The point is not whether Conze provides a correct understanding of Buddhist thought here. The point is that he cannot in this reference be adduced in defense of Maharaj’s interpretation of Rāmākṛṣṇa. If this is the case for one adduced reference, what might it be for the others?

In fact, it is irksome to be told again and again, after one view or other of Rāmākṛṣṇa’s has been compared to that of someone else, that it is Rāmākṛṣṇa who comes out on top. The views of John Hick, Ron Neufeldt, Ninian Smart, and others are compared, where relevant, to Rāmākṛṣṇa’s, acknowledged as “enriching” or “enhancing” our understanding of Rāmākṛṣṇa’s position, but invariably rejected as deficient in contrast to the master’s. Must Rāmākṛṣṇa always reign supreme—in the cogency of every view, the insight of every argument, the comprehensiveness of every stance? It is here that philosophy gives way to a kind of theological reverence. I am happy to make room for faith, but faith is not philosophy.

And now to one of the main concerns of the book: Rāmākṛṣṇa’s understanding of “the problem of evil” (see especially Part Four). As the reader will be aware, this is not only a philosophical issue, it also has profound moral connotations. For Maharaj, Rāmākṛṣṇa’s theodicy triumphs over every other. But it is here that I find a great moral objection embedded in Maharaj’s interpretation. For Maharaj, Rāmākṛṣṇa is a

*hard* theological determinist, since he maintains that theological determinism is incompatible with free will. Free will, according to Sri Ramakrishna, is actually a “false appearance.”...Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God is the ultimate causal source of all our beliefs and desires....According to Sri Ramakrishna, God Himself, in His infinite wisdom, has endowed ordinary unenlightened people with the *illusion* of free will; otherwise, they would have engaged in “more and more sinful actions” (*IPIR* 265–67, citing Rāmākṛṣṇa [Gupta 1974: 328]; emphasis in the original).

Again, for Rāmākṛṣṇa, “God *determines* everything we do” (*IPIR* 294; emphasis added).

Morally, there is a problem here. For whatever benign reason, we have a deceiving God—a sower of confusion—who deludes us into thinking that we are free and who yet allows the law of *karma* to operate by bestowing retribution and reward, albeit with a view to “saint-making.” If we are not free to act as we do, why are we allowed to suffer the recompense of *karma* from life to life? On the other hand, how can we become truly *saintly* when there is no freedom of action? In this context, how can we “all look forward to the infinite *reward* of eternal salvation” (*IPIR* 297; emphasis added)? This is to turn the sense of such words on its head. Maharaj affirms,

Since Sri Ramakrishna’s saint-making theodicy presupposes the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, it [saint-making] is a live possibility even in the cases of Bambi [the baby deer]....and [Genghis] Khan’s victims. Sri Ramakrishna would view their suffering as the *karmic* consequence of their own past actions in that life or in a previous life” (*IPIR* 290; emphasis in the original).

This observation would also apply, no doubt, in the case of the victims of the Holocaust, including the children. But how could *they* be responsible for the horrors they suffered and how could this unconscionable experience contribute to their saint-making, even if the concept of past and future lives were to come into play? Further, would this not encourage the perpetrators of these crimes to say: “Don’t look at us! We’re but the instruments of a just *karma*!” Morally, I find all this utterly objectionable.

The thing is that it is not even *philosophically necessary* for Maharaj to impute this consequence to Rāmākṛṣṇa’s belief in the law of *karma*. For many Hindu thinkers who accept *karma* have pointed out that karmic consequences are imputable to *the series of transient selves* that come into being in conjunction with an impersonal *karma*-storing subtle body (*liṅga śarīra*) specific to each series that is itself particularly associated with an impervious metaphysical Self (whether this be one or many—in Rāmākṛṣṇa’s case the [one] absolute Ātman). So, it would not be *you*—this particular transient personality—that performed the actions of the past on which karmic consequences now fall; it would be some *other* (past) transient self or selves in the series to which you happen to belong. This raises other moral questions, to be sure, but at least it absolves individuals in the here and now from being subjected to such statements as: “*their* suffering [is] the *karmic* consequence of *their own* past actions in...[this] life or in a previous one” (*IPIR* 290; emphasis

added). In terms of personal identity, these past actions belong to other selves. With horrors like the Holocaust in mind, this would allow the innocent to remain truly innocent, and the guilty, truly guilty (though how this could be explained in terms of Rāmākṛṣṇa's alleged belief in moral determinism is a separate problem). But Maharaj nowhere goes into the question of the metaphysics of the empirical self in Hindu thought and its consequences for belief in *karma* and saint-making with particular reference to Rāmākṛṣṇa.

On a lesser scale, perhaps one should point out that the concepts of “*avatāra*” and “incarnation” have been conflated<sup>2</sup> and that “refute,” which the *Oxford English Dictionary* assures us means “*prove to be wrong*,” is misused for “repudiate” (“*deny the truth or validity of*”), while the Index remains incomplete.

But on the larger issues, this is a richly thought-provoking work, written with a philosophical acumen that demands response and calls for appreciation and further discussion in equal measure. As a philosophical interpretation of Rāmākṛṣṇa's words, Maharaj's is a landmark attempt, giving its subject the serious intellectual attention it deserves, which will encourage, I hope, similar studies on what remains a topic of global historical importance.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare pages 77, 101, 140, and so on, in *IPIR*—some of us have pointed to significant differences between these concepts.