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Reconstructing Advaita in John Thatamanil's *The Immanent Divine*: Some Questions

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THE publication of John Thatamanil's *The Immanent Divine* allows us to ask many questions about projects in comparative theology and where they could lead us. I hope that my response to this interesting work will have the value of probing a little more into the tasks of comparative theology. There is no doubt that *The Immanent Divine* is a remarkable effort. It is also a book which taxes the academic reader who is probably not a specialist in Tillich and Advaita and the various versions of process theology, especially the distinctive version of Robert Neville. I will break down my response to this wide-ranging effort into several topics.

Starting from Immanence, Not Scriptures

The philosophical project of thinking within immanence is not for the faint-hearted, and yet it seems to be a leading theme of our era, as the work of Deleuze and Guattari on one level, work on systems theory, and all of the work on globalization, demonstrate. We become open to the idea that in some way we are part of a network, of a series of nodal points forming a virtuality of some kind. We are not sure whether we live in the system or whether the system lives in us or whether anyone knows the difference anymore.

In a more theological key, are we part of Brahman or merely products of a polluted *Natura naturans*? Living on the boundaries, the postmodern theologian feels the need to

construct and reconstruct identities to find a more satisfying "position" in the flux. We see ourselves as caught up in planes of immanence. We are not so much the inheritors of Descartes as of Whitehead and Bergson and, perhaps, ultimately of the underground current that traces back to the "heretic" Spinoza. The Whitehead of the twenties could not have envisioned all of this.

In confronting recent thinking, do we simply cut ourselves loose from the scriptural traditions, which have grounded faith traditions, in favor of a more universalist philosophical tradition? It is worth mentioning that the approach taken by Thatamanil works from cosmology and not from texts.¹ What are the costs of this move? If there are any *mahavakyas* here, they would seem to come more from the insights of Neville rather than, say, from the Upanishads.

Leaving Tillich Behind

One's first impression in opening *The Immanent Divine* is a fairly obvious one. The choice of Tillich as a point of comparison puts us into the context of liberal Protestant theology, which is characterized by a desire to correlate some existential description of human experience with certain general theological concepts. The description that Thatamanil names "the human predicament" he later tries to capture by the bridge term "self-enclosed finitude", a finitude which, as we move toward

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the end of the book, he hopes to overcome by an appeal to themes of divine creativity using a version of process theology as a resource.

I suppose that much of my unease with the direction of the book stems from my reactions to Thatamanil's attempts at a theology which offers a way out of the predicament of Tillich's world of restless finitude and into a more restful and peaceful, even Confucian, view of human nature.

Many of the things that one may like about Tillich (themes of guilt, angst and human bewilderment) seem to be overridden here. It might seem, in fact, that Tillich as a theologian is stronger on existential/psychological description than he is on other tasks of theology, such as working from exegetical results or addressing traditional theological topics such as Trinity, the grace-nature question, the relationship of intellect to will, faith versus works, predestination, orthodoxy versus heresy, and so on. Tillich has a very strong immanent starting point which places him closer to Advaita from the very start.

One might well say that if we look at the polarities which govern Tillich's theology what we have is a kind of meeting between German Idealism (in the person of Tillich) and Advaita. It seems that a great deal of Tillich's early work on Schelling is still functioning in the structure of his systematics.

Christology

Thatamanil's choice to omit a treatment of Christology, while completely understandable, leaves a large gap on the Christian side of the equation. I suspect he may tackle this soon. The traditional understanding of following Jesus is also tied to many of the themes that are uncomfortable for Thatamanil, such as guilt, betrayal, fear and so on. The Biblical disciples did not lead a life of unbroken absorption in the Divine. Perhaps even Jesus had moments of feeling God-forsaken.

In a traditional theology of revelation, Jesus Christ is seen as not only the high point of what God wishes to reveal but also as the focus of religious faith and devotion. Such faith is often focused not just on the teaching of Jesus but on his role as redeemer and even martyr. In the

formula of one of the early Church Fathers, "One of the Trinity suffered."

Of course, Christian action in the world, to transform the oppression, is often understood as a witness unto death: a theme not prominent in *The Immanent Divine*. The author presumably wants his theology to allow for a *praxis* dimension; believers resist and try to overcome evil, even if one must, like Arjuna, be detached from the fruits of one's actions. The question is whether Neville's, and consequently Thatamanil's, version of human agency really motivates *praxis* and even self-sacrifice in the face of suffering.²

Agency and Immanence

The book also raises a complex question of what "immanence" really means or what "supernatural" means for agency. Let me note in passing that for Catholic theologians like Rahner, there is no pure nature seeking pure grace, or pure natural seeking a supernatural. Pure nature is a kind of hypothesis, a remainder concept, as Rahner says. At the same time, "original sin" points to a reality of the will divided against itself as well as the need for a poetics of the will of the kind Paul Ricoeur pointed to, not least in his small masterpiece "Fatherhood from Phantasm to Symbol", and in his Freud book. So my questions would be, what happens to the question of agency in this reconstructed Advaita? How do our moral choices shape meanings and create legacies in the world? We think of Bonhoeffer writing from prison or King writing from the Birmingham jail asking "How long should we wait?" What is the Divine Creativity asking us to do? And how can we be sure that doing it would really matter? Is it really that satisfying to abandon the idea of personal immortality and move to a position one might paraphrase as "I am a moment of the divine creativity and I tried to be a good moment in this endless flux"?

Creation, Fall and Salvation

As another technical point, I would note Thatamanil's critiques of Tillich, who, he says, nearly identifies Creation and the Fall (118). I am not sure that Thatamanil has completely

explicated how his theology extracts us from this dilemma. He says only that "we need to stress the integrity of creation" (190). The final part of the book may need to pick up this thread at more length.

A Catholic theological take on this would stress that, although we inherit the effects of original sin, the intellect is not completely clouded by this inheritance and so is capable of grasping certain eternal truths by the light of reason apart from revelation. Further, other religions are deemed to have a "ray of the truth" that enlightens all people and this ray of truth may be salvific, at least for some.

Estimates of the percentage of human beings who are actually saved have varied widely over the centuries from the standpoint of Catholic theology. In *The Immanent Divine* it appears that everyone is saved, since both Hindu karma and Christian sin are transformed and may in the end be merely manifestations of the more nebulous category of "alienation".

I do not believe that the author sufficiently addresses the issue of salvation/enlightenment. I am not completely clear on what one would have to do to be saved or "healed" in his theology.³ Neville's work proposes a few virtues that one might strive for, but is there more to Thatamanil's soteriology than going with the flow of divine creativity and assuming that the Divine will triumph? What happens to *metanoia* in this? What happens to karma? Andrew Fort and others seem to be telling us that, for Advaitins at least, enlightenment is rare among human beings and may take many lifetimes.

Generating Categories: The Price of Redescription

Thatamanil notes that Sankara (178), in focusing on cognitive factors, has no treatment of guilt and forgiveness. To make his project work, Thatamanil is forced to redescribe guilt and forgiveness in other categories notably "alienation." This brings us to the problem of which he is well aware, what are the so called "vague categories" which the comparativist is trying to use. If the categories are too vague, they fail to be useful. If they are too detailed or sharp, they work well with one religion and its

core metaphors but not with another. If the languages cannot be made to overlap in some way, no conversation is possible. It seems that the author's version of the human predicament is roughly similar to Robert Neville's.

One could, of course, look optimistically toward a "mutual transformation" of religious traditions and their categories; this seems to be the direction that Thatamanil wants to go. The meeting of two religions would produce a third that is in some way "bigger and better" than either taken alone. This whole effort proceeds from a laudable desire to bring the religions together for the sake of bringing humankind together.

However, it is possible that this effort could lead to a loss of identity rather than a new identity in this new world view. Does this proposal for an extensive use of process categories end up being a system in which the "simple" think in terms of pictures termed "mythological" while the cultured think in terms of "concrecence," or creativity, which fulfills a role homologous to that of the Hegelian *Geist*.⁴ This comes back to the issue mentioned earlier; the fear that we reduce everything to a bloodless ballet of categories in which bodies (individual persons) and their sufferings do not count for much. What happens to the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man which states "no one can cross from our side to yours or from your side to ours"? In one traditional Christian scheme, because the saintly person remains in heaven as an intercessor for the faithful, the individual is never merely a moment in the collective. In a system such as Neville's even God does not know what the future holds.⁵

Briefly, I wonder whether Thatamanil is not, in effect, homogenizing these religions in a huge metaphysical blender called "process" theology to make them more palatable and optimistic. Do religions reduce to metaphysical systems in which history is ultimately unimportant and there are no "dangerous memories" of the kind the Johann Baptist Metz evoked? Does cosmology trump history?⁶ This relates to Neville's issue of the overlapping of the times: past, present, and future. From the divine viewpoint, which is simultaneous to all times, it presumably all looks good.⁷ In a more traditional Christian view, the wicked are punished for their

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self-chosen refusal of God. In such a theology, there is reason for the evil-doer to fear the divine judgment precisely because the evil-doer's actions are so deeply damaging to the creatures God has created. Hinduism, from its traditional beliefs, is not afraid to speak of almost endless cycles of rebirth.

Sanctification, Heroic Death, and Providence

Thatamanil looks for a theology in which "a deeper level of sanctification" is possible. He is unhappy with the fact that even Christian saints are sometimes tormented by demons. There is a suggestion that the psyche of a Tillich, or of a Luther, or even of a Mother Teresa of Calcutta, is not one which he, or many others, would want to inhabit. Too much anxiety, doubt, guilt, despair...

Ultimately, we reach a fork in the road wherein we either incorporate a psychology of some kind, and try to blend it into a theology of grace, or we move from a focus on the soul to a focus on cosmology. The thought of a Divine Being who is endless creativity is meant to pull us both out of despair and out of the jaws of history, with its wars, mass graves, killing fields, Myanmar monks facing machine guns, and other horrors.⁸ But does it? This depends on whether we are willing to give up the idea of a personal immortality in favor of the idea that we are part of the cosmic process.⁹ The problem I have with moving from "immanence as enacted" to "immanence as ontologically given"¹⁰, is that it affects the way in which we would have to reframe other doctrines.¹¹

There is also a question about whether this cosmic process should rightly be called God or just Nature. This depends, I suppose, on the extent that one can believe that this process is benevolent, if still fairly impersonal. In other words, one has to articulate a theology of providence as distinguished from fate, destiny, or luck.

Whither ethics?

Should we evaluate a comparative theology based on its ability to ground an ethics of some sort? Does *The Immanent Divine* ground a strong ethics or a still more stoic world-denying

ethics despite its attempts to move in more of a praxis direction? These are a few questions that arise from reading Thatamanil's interesting work. I hope that at least one or two of them will prove fruitful for the author's ongoing and impressive project.¹²

Notes

¹ The use of texts in theology can be fairly open, as shown by the work of Peter Ochs, in *Textual Reasoning*, whose approach was influenced by C. S. Lewis and who tries to read in new ways what might seem like the self-referential world like that of the Talmud.

² For a quite critical reading of Neville's Christology from a more conservative Christian perspective see Stanley Grenz (2004).

³ Thatamanil (194) seems to be the key locus here. Neville's version of sin (not inevitable) is pronounced far superior to Tillich's. This is an interesting discussion, which, regrettably, the author moves through rapidly.

A Catholic theologian would add a discussion of the life of the virtues which, when cultivated, allow certain fairly stable powers of the soul (*habitus*) that make one become less prone to temptations: the familiar virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, and so on. The moral virtues are transformed by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. This traditional theology has a version of "deeper sanctification" which Tillich may in fact lack. It uses terms like "divinization" but always in the more restricted sense that creature and creature never become one. This is the classic theological point of Aquinas that between God and creatures there is no "real relation. Instead Aquinas used the language of participation. His concept of participation comes close to Sankara's notion of non-duality. Still, a change in the creature does not imply a change in God." These are subtle points which are often missed. For a compressed discussion of this, referencing the work of Sara Grant, see the article of David Burrell, "Analogy, Creation and Theological Language" (87) in Nieuwenhove and Wawrykow. I do not try to analyze Neville's two-author theory which tries to explain how divine and human action concur. (Thatamanil, 192).

⁴ This seems to be occurring in a recent "Whiteheadian" theology such as that of Harold Oliver (172).

⁵ This is because God is "...never only now. For ourselves who truly are temporal and who are existing now with a future still future, the future and God's special presence as redemptive or

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condemnatory, helpful or negligent, merciful or punitive remains other" (Neville, 211-12).

⁶ I have been influenced most recently by reading Robert Corrington's ecstatic naturalism wherein the world is a moving system of signs in which *Natura naturans* becomes *Natura naturata*, which then becomes *Natura naturans*. Corrington identifies himself as a Unitarian Universalist.

⁷ I am not sure what to make of the central thesis of Neville, namely, "God is eternal because within the unity of the creative acts all times are together; the eternality of those connections is what makes the temporal flow of time possible (181)." Or, "Time's flow is fully real only as the internal character of the eternal act in which all times are together in an infinite singular series of continuous transformations (172)."

⁸ When questioned about the lack of a sense of the tragic in his work, Neville replied, "We have our identity in God and in this light participate in the divine creative glory such that our own specific characteristics are trivial by comparison." (Chapman and Frankenberry, 318.)

⁹ For an interesting attempt to work this out within a process theology see the articles by Joseph A. Bracken and William Hasker.

¹⁰ Thatamanil, 206.

¹¹ In Neville's version (234) even if our lives are in many respects deficient, "we are in the end swept up in the infinite mercy that is God's glory." It would seem that everyone is saved (see also 230).

¹² I have not tried to incorporate elements of Prof. Thatamanil's extensive response to this paper or of the lively discussion which followed. His response is included elsewhere in this volume. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments on this essay.

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