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Book Review: *Divine Self, Human Self: The Philosophy of Being in Two Gītā Commentaries*

Ankur Barua
University of Cambridge

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versa. Ganeri's fluency in the both religious traditions is outstanding.

Sucharita Adluri
Cleveland State University

***Divine Self, Human Self: The Philosophy of Being in Two Gītā Commentaries.*
Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad. NY and London: Bloomsbury, 2013, x + 148pp.**

A survey of scholarly writings on the Gītā over the last two hundred years, from the perspective of Hindu-Christian encounters, indicates two broad strands: one, a textual exploration of the commentaries on the Gītā by Vedantic exegetes such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, and the other, a more comparative analysis of the presence of themes such as 'monotheism', 'pantheism', and 'grace' in the verses of the Gītā. Chakravarti Ram-Prasad highlights the interlocking between these two strands, as he skilfully engages Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja in conversations over classical Vedantic themes of selfhood, being, and agency, while also offering nuanced reflections on these conversations from the standpoints of some Christian understandings of the divine.

The polyvalences of the key Sanskrit terms such as *ātman*, *puruṣa*, and *Brahman* were systematised by Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja into two distinctive exegetical-soteriological visions. The differences between the two commentators were developed in some of the latter traditions into a diametrical opposition between, on the one hand, a doctrine of world illusionism (often pejoratively labelled as *māyāvāda*), in which the worship of Kṛṣṇa is merely a penultimate stage towards the realisation of non-duality (*advaita*), and, on the other hand, a devotional praxis of intense love (*bhakti*) of the supremely personal Kṛṣṇa. Ram-Prasad complicates this opposition by pointing out that for Śaṅkara too, the meditative worship of Kṛṣṇa is a significant moment in an individual's spiritual progression

away from immersion in physicality, though the endpoint of this journey is the intuitive realisation of one's non-duality with the non-agentive, transpersonal Brahman. That is, the correct practice of devotion to Kṛṣṇa, who is the universal self, can orient an individual towards the Advaitic end. Rāmānuja interweaves these themes of self-realisation and devotion into a theological system in which the finite self, which is substantially real, is yet dependent at all times on the transcendently perfect Kṛṣṇa. While Śaṅkara operates with an equivalence between mutability and metaphysical unreality, so that both the physical body and the individual self, because they are changeable, are ultimately unreal, Rāmānuja regards all aspects of our embodied selfhood as metaphysically real because they are encompassed by Kṛṣṇa. However, worldly human beings forget that they are metaphysically distinct from their materiality, and that the transcendental source of their existence is Kṛṣṇa, and continue to be subject to various ills till they begin to return to Kṛṣṇa by developing devotional love towards him. Thus, both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja view devotional love of Kṛṣṇa as integral aspects of an individual's spiritual perfection, though this fulfilment is understood in divergent ways – for Śaṅkara, the non-duality of the finite self with the transpersonal hyper-essence, Brahman, whereas for Rāmānuja, the passionate devotion of the 'knowers of Brahman' (*jñānins*) towards Kṛṣṇa, the supreme agent in all human

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embodied action. Therefore, rather than speaking of a 'gnostic' Śaṅkara and a 'devotional' Rāmānuja, we should highlight the interplay between, and the relative positioning of, knowledge of the divine and devotion to the divine in their conceptual-soteriological systems.

These exegetical and hermeneutic explorations are interwoven with interventions into some recent debates in Christian doctrine over ways of naming God. The key term is 'onto-theology', understood as a theological system in which God is *a* being, even if *a* supremely transcendental being, alongside finite beings, and is accessible through human cognitive powers. Given the Heideggerian critiques of onto-theological systems, some Christian thinkers have abandoned the vocabulary of being in speaking of the divine, and sought to revitalise some the medieval apophatic strands which refer to the divine as the hyper-essence or as beyond being and beyond thought. Ram-Prasad indicates that the commentaries of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja employ the language of being without, however, reducing the divine reality to *a* cosmic being standing over and against the finite world. Thus, for Śaṅkara, Brahman is the hyper-ground of the empirical world, not in the sense that Brahman can be classified as another being over and above finite entities, but in that Brahman is non-dual with them and is their transcendental source of being. Further, Brahman itself cannot be conceptualised through the categories of human reasoning, and it can only be indicated, but not described, through the negative way of excluding from it all empirical characterisations. For Rāmānuja too, while the Lord Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is described in richly evocative personal terms, the Lord remains

transcendent (*para*) to worldly imperfections, and also to ordinary human cognitive modes, and is accessible through the Lord's gift of the Vedic scriptural revelation. While all linguistic terms ultimately refer to the Lord, as the Lord supports the world as the divine body, the Lord's transcendence cannot be circumscribed through the categories of understanding.

Ram-Prasad's exercise in comparative theology helps us to understand that both Vedantic commentators on the Gītā and Christian theologians are engaged, from within their distinctive scriptural universes, in the attempt to speak of divine alterity without conceptualising the transcendent as merely a superhuman being. A fundamental divergence across these scriptural-theological horizons is that Vedantic thinkers operate with the doctrine that the world is an 'effect' which has emerged from its transcendental 'cause', Brahman (*satkāryavāda*), and affirm a deep continuum of being between the divine and the human, whereas Christian orthodoxy views the world as created out of utter nothingness. This divergence produces somewhat opposite tensions in these theological systems. While Vedantic theologians are able to articulate rich metaphorical images of the divine presence 'in' human existence, they are sometimes charged as having absorbed, in a 'pantheistic' manner, the world into the divine. Christian theologians, on the other hand, wrestle with the problem of elaborating theological visions in which the distinction between God and the world is not misunderstood in terms of a spatial difference such that God becomes another being standing 'out there' above the world. The key problem, then, is the vexed question of simultaneously affirming divine transcendence and divine immanence. Ram-Prasad is a skilful guide

through this theological terrain, indicating to us several trajectories that can be fruitfully explored by scholars in the field of Hindu-Christian studies as they seek to learn from

Hindu and Christian texts about ways of speaking about the divine.

Ankur Barua

University of Cambridge

***Against Dogmatism: Dwelling in Faith and Doubt.* Madhuri M. Yadlapati. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013, 204 pp.**

IN her first book-length work, philosopher of religion Madhuri Yadlapati injects an important and well-argued message into popular debates about religion. She takes on two sets of opinions that, though opposed on the question of religion's value, share a common reduction of religion to belief. On one side sit dogmatic fundamentalists; on the other, religion's atheist critics, who delight in exposing the absurdity and violence of religious belief.

The book's ideal readers roam somewhere in the middle: people who may have a benign attitude toward religion but unreflectively define it in terms of intellectual assent. One need not look far to find examples of this kind of thinking. After this summer's attack in Nice, for example, Newt Gingrich proposed that Muslims be given a religious test, and that anyone professing "belief in Sharia" be deported. The theory developed in this book elucidates the common category mistake in Gingrich's rhetoric, which conflates faith as a way of being in the world with belief in propositional statements.

Drawing examples from Christianity and India's other religions, *Against Dogmatism* launches interventions from three primary directions. Yadlapati first focuses on definitions of faith, then shifts to theological treatments of doubt, and finally considers how to relate the two.

Part One puts flesh on the currently-emaciated bones of faith as a category. Chapter 1 refutes an understanding of faith as knowledge. Yadlapati points to Christian "mystics" and each of the five pillars of Islam to emphasize the importance of humility in relation to knowledge of God. Faith, here, is a posture of trust. Friedrich Schleiermacher formalizes this posture as the consciousness of absolute dependence. Yadlapati also finds an expression of trust in Hindu puja, which evokes a sense of "belonging to a larger world" (32). Chapter 2 contests faith as knowledge from another angle, this time highlighting faith as a sense of responsibility in the world. Hindu dharma, Muslim notions of the human being as God's caliph on earth, Jewish views of covenant, and the ethics of C. S. Lewis in the Narnia tales each manifest this variation on a life of faith.

Part Two takes aim at the word often treated as faith's opposite: doubt. Chapter three introduces the "Protestant principle," which relativizes all human discourse in view of divine revelation, as found in Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich. Amid their differing stances toward human culture and knowledge, each finds a way to affirm faith alongside lack of certitude. Chapter four turns to Hindu traditions of transcendence through reaching the limits of understanding. This rich survey deftly traces its theme through the intuitive realization of the