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**PART 3: THEMES OF  
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## 5) INTRODUCTION

This Part represents the heart of the thesis in that it is where, by way of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, an example of Hindu theology can be presented. It offers an opportunity to not just *discuss* possible traits of Hindu theology, but to *demonstrate* them – that is, to actually theologise within a living Hindu tradition using its own sources and tools (as identified in Part 2). This Part thus provides an exposition – by no means exhaustive, though nonetheless thorough – of the major theological themes of the Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta tradition.

While expounding on the theology of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, it is important to allow Clooney's clues and categories to recede into the background, not so far that they are totally out of sight, but far enough to make possible a clear and broad view of Svāminārāyaṇa theology on its own terms; in other words, for Svāminārāyaṇa theology to present itself clearly and precisely. As clarified earlier, the project is not to 'fit' Hindu theology into certain boxes (as Clooney himself surely did not intend), but to discover what *a* Hindu theology may comprise allowing us to further build on the salient features of Hindu theology in general. This will facilitate in the final Part a more fruitful return to the features originally proposed by Clooney, leading us to a clearer picture of Hindu theology more broadly.

### 5.1) Five Eternal Entities of Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta

A discussion of any classical Hindu school of thought invariably begins with an inquiry (mīmāṃsā) into, or discussion of, its basic entities or realities (tattvas):

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How many metaphysical entities does it accept as real and which ones? The answer to this fundamental question more often than not reveals much about the school's basic premises and beliefs. For example, within Śaṅkara's absolute monism, the singular attribute-less (nirguṇa) entity of Brahman necessarily requires the visible world to be unreal and illusory, whereas Rāmānuja's acceptance of both cit (sentient) and acit (non-sentient) entities as well, allows for both the world to be real and the non-identity between individual souls and God.

Subsequent and related questions for each entity include inquiries into its essential nature, characteristics, role, relationships, etc. These questions and their answers will occupy the discussion of the following chapters within this Part.

But first it will be necessary to identify these basic entities within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. They are the following five:

1. Parabrahman (or Puruṣottama)
2. Brahman (also Akṣara or Akṣarabrahman)
3. māyā
4. Īśvara
5. jīva

Svāminārāyaṇa explicitly lists these in two sermons of the Vacanāmṛut:

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Puruṣottama Bhagavān, Akṣarabrahman, māyā, īśvara and jīva – these five entities are eternal (Vac. Gaḍh. I.7).

From all the Vedas, Purāṇas, Itihāsa and Smṛti scriptures, I have gleaned the principle that jīva, māyā, īśvara, Brahman and Parameśvara are all eternal (Vac. Gaḍh. III.10).

To further emphasise that all five of these entities are indeed real (satya), that is, that they truly exist and are not illusory, Svāminārāyaṇa writes in one of his doctrinal letters:

Some claim that jīvas and māyā are imaginary [kalpita]. But O Paramahansas! The jīva is real, māyā is real, īśvara is real, Brahman is real, Parabrahman is real (Vedarasa, p. 177).

He similarly reiterates in Vac. Gaḍh. I.39 and Vac. Gaḍh. I.42 in response, more explicitly than above, to claims from the Advaitins that “Brahman alone exists and all else besides – jīva, īśvara, māyā, etc. – is unreal [mithyā]”. Rather, Svāminārāyaṇa explains, along with the highest two entities, even jīva, īśvara and māyā are real but not illusory.

The Bhāṣyakāra also mentions the five entities are real and eternal in several of his comments on the Upaniṣads. For example, in elaborating on KeU 2.4,

Pratibodhaviditam matam amrutatvam vindate |

He who realises the highest teachings attains immortality,

he qualifies the highest teachings as being from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru who precisely explicates, among other things, “the form of the five eternal entities –

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jīva, īśvara, māyā, Brahman, and Parabrahman.” Only such transcendental speech (parāvāṇi) from the Guru can lead to a disciple’s liberation, he adds.<sup>78</sup>

Among the several short phrases of the salutatory śānti-mantra of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, we find the pledge:

Satyam vadiṣyāmi |

I shall proclaim the truth (TU 1.1.1).

Here, ‘satyavacana’ – words of truth – is explained as those words which reveal what is real (satya), that is, “the eternal forms of the five entities – jīva, īśvara, māyā, Brahman, and Parabrahman”<sup>79</sup>.

Further along in the same Upaniṣad, the term ‘satya’ appears again. Here, too, it is reiterated as explaining “the eternal forms and [mutual] distinction of the five entities – jīva, īśvara, māyā, Brahman, and Parabrahman”<sup>80</sup>.

For anyone familiar with other Vedānta schools, what is immediately striking is that there are *five* tattvas in the Svāminārāyaṇa system, in contrast to, say, Śāṅkara’s one (Brahman), Madhva’s two (svatantra-tattva and asvatantra-tattva), and Rāmānuja’s three (īśvara, cit and acit) – and this is indeed a distinguishing feature of the tradition. It also raises a number of important and sometimes difficult questions of the system. For example:

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<sup>78</sup> KeU-SB 2.4, p. 47.

<sup>79</sup> TU-SB 1.1.1, p. 330.

<sup>80</sup> TU-SB 1.9.1, p. 350.

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- a) Is the 'Brahman' of the Svāminārāyaṇa School the same 'highest reality' as that of the other schools?
  - b) If so, then what/who is 'Parabrahman'?
  - c) If not – and 'Parabrahman' is the name simply applied to what others call Brahman – then what/who is this other 'Brahman'?
  - d) Are there *two* 'highest realities' in the Svāminārāyaṇa School? Clearly not, for this, by definition of the superlative, is implausible. But then how are 'Brahman' and 'Parabrahman' related? Indeed, how are the two distinct?
  - e) Furthermore, what is the difference between 'īśvara' and 'Parabrahman'? Is not 'īśvara' God and divine? If not, how do(es) it/he/she/they relate to both God and individual souls (jīvas)?
  - f) What role do the two seemingly superfluous entities of 'Brahman' and 'īśvara' play, within creation and for God and individual souls?

All of these and many others questions will be addressed in the proceeding chapters as and when each of the entities are discussed. However, to assist in a primary understanding of the five entities as we begin and progress through this detailed exposition, the succinct overview below (provided in reverse order) will hopefully prove useful.

- Jīvas are distinct, individual souls, atomic in subtlety and innumerable in quantity. Each one is bound by māyā which shrouds the jīva's

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radiant self essentially characterised by existence (sat), consciousness (cit) and bliss (ānanda).

- Īśvaras are higher beings endowed with special powers for fulfilling various functions within a particular brahmāṇḍa ('universe'), of which there are countless millions. But like the jīvas, īśvaras, too, are shrouded by māyā.
- Māyā is an instrument of God that constitutes the base substance from which this material world is formed. It is also the cause of ignorance for jīvas and īśvaras.
- To transcend this ignorance, jīvas and īśvaras must seek Brahman, also called Akṣara or Akṣarabrahman, who is forever untouched by māyā. It takes the form of the abode of Parabrahman, and also appears in human form as his ideal devotee, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. Brahman in this form leads jīvas and īśvaras to the highest elevated state (brahmarūpa or akṣararūpa) wherein they experience the undisturbed bliss of Parabrahman. It also has an all-pervading form, known as Cidākāśa.
- Parabrahman, or Puruṣottama, is God Supreme; the one and unparalleled cause, controller and support of the entire world; omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and omnibenevolent. Eternally human in form yet fully divine, he manifests on earth with Brahman to release aspirants from their ignorance and elevate them to an enlightened state, finally granting them an eternal place in his transcendental abode, Akṣaradhāma.

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By enumerating these entities as being explicitly five – and five only – confirms that all matter, whether material or spiritual, will be subsumed within one of these five categories. In other words, there is nothing that is not one of the five, but the five categories themselves are reducible no further. Moreover, everything can be only one of the five but never a hybrid of any two or more of them, since all five of the entities are ontologically and eternally distinct from one another. That one entity can never become any other entity, and that none is ever destroyed (because it is endless), means that there will always be five categories, hence, again, explaining them as ‘the five eternal entities’.

Being eternal, of course, must mean that each entity is not only without end (ananta), but also without beginning (anādi), i.e. that it has always existed and will forever continue to exist; there never has been and never will be a time when it does not exist. A term closely related to this concept and confirming that the entities are truly real (satya) is trikālābādhita – meaning literally that they are unaffected by ‘the three times’, the past, the present and the future.<sup>81</sup> It is in this sense that all five entities are said to be eternal (nitya).

However, the permanence of all five is not the same, and it will be useful in this discussion of ‘eternal’ entities to briefly touch upon the three types of permanence in Hindu metaphysics.

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<sup>81</sup> The chapter on Parabrahman, in particular, contains a brief discussion about his relationship with ‘time’.

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The first type is *kūṭastha nityatā*, or 'immutable permanence'. Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, īśvaras and jīvas are all permanent in their being and immutably so; they never undergo any modifications in their essential nature or form.<sup>82</sup> *Māyā*, however, does metamorphose into the myriad forms of the material world, yet all the while still being essentially *māyā* itself. This is called '*pariṇāmī nityatā*', or mutating permanence. Finally, not immediately relevant here but useful for later, is '*pravāha nityatā*', or flowing permanence. This relates, for example, to the incessant cycle of creation, from origination through to sustenance and dissolution and back again to origination, meaning that the world will permanently be in some state of this process of creation although any one state is not permanent.<sup>83</sup>

In this way, the immutability of Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, īśvaras and jīvas groups them against the mutability of *māyā*.

The same entities are also contrasted by nature of their sentiency. Of the five, Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, īśvaras and jīvas are *caitanya* (sentient or spiritual), whereas *māyā* is essentially *jaḍa* (non-sentient or material)<sup>84</sup>.

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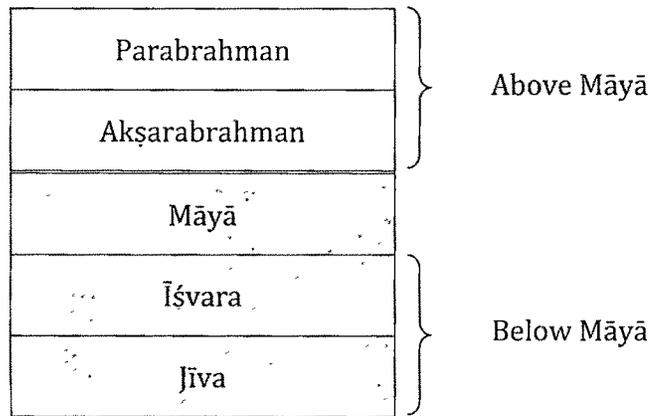
<sup>82</sup> Even so, the immutability of Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman differs to that of the īśvaras and jīvas, as we shall see in their respective chapters.

<sup>83</sup> Another example of *pravāha nityatā*, using a contemporary analogy, is that of a prime minister or president. The position is permanent, but its occupancy 'flows' from one person to another.

<sup>84</sup> *Māyā* can also be described as '*jaḍacidātmikā*', but its sentiency is only by way of association with jīvas and īśvaras. See Chapter 10.1.2.

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A further straightforward categorisation of the entities also useful to emphasise at the outset is their ontological position to māyā. As is apparent from the sequence in which they are usually listed, Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman are 'above' or transcending māyā, whereas Īśvaras and jīvas are 'below' or within it.



The meaning and significance of these characteristics will become more apparent as each entity is discussed in the subsequent chapters of this Part.

What needs to be clarified first, however, is how expounding upon all five entities can still be relevant to a project attempting to present an example of Hindu theology.

The answer is two-fold.

Firstly, all five entities are revealed and explicated alongside God in the theological texts of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, hence making their study both

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unavoidable in and immediately relevant to a discussion of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

Secondly, and the reason why all five entities are discussed in Svāminārāyaṇa theological texts, is because they are related to – in fact, a necessary part of – the study of God. Most obviously, a study of Parabrahman is the study of the nature of God, but alongside that, the other four entities are inextricably tied to God and the ultimate goal of human life. The five entities thus involve:

- Parabrahman – the study of the form, nature, function, significance, etc. of God
- Akṣarabrahman – the study of God’s abode, and how to become eligible to experience God therein after death and also now
- māyā – the study of God’s creation and its function as ignorance, which needs to be transcended
- īśvara – the study of other divinities and their role in God’s creation
- jīva – the study of individual souls and their relationship with God

This composite approach to the study of God is made all the more necessary by Svāminārāyaṇa’s own definition of ‘jñāna’, or theological knowledge. In concluding an important epistemological discussion in Vac. Loyā.7, he offers a

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summary of what constitutes 'knowing God' or the 'knowledge of God' and the characteristics of one who has such knowledge. He explains:

A jñānin is one who precisely knows God through the senses, mind, and experience.... Such a jñānin is one who singularly serves God manifest before the eyes – who eternally has a form – realising him as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa and Akṣara, and as being the cause and support of all. Such understanding constitutes jñāna, and such jñāna leads to ultimate liberation.

Here we find associated with the definition of jñāna (true knowledge of God) all four of the other entities: knowing God as transcending Prakṛti-Puruṣa (i.e. māyā) and Akṣara necessitates the knowledge of these two entities; and those who must serve God with this knowledge points to the jīvas and īśvaras who have not yet been liberated. In all, if theology is, in its most basic and literal sense, the study of God, then for a complete and correct understanding of God, the study of all five metaphysical entities is an essential part of the theological project within the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition.

How exactly and to what extent these themes are helpful in understanding, describing and affirming Hindu theology in general is something that will be addressed in the final Part as we return to correspond with and re-examine Clooney's original, proposed clues.

In turn now, the following chapters will expound on each of the five metaphysical entities of the Svāminārāyaṇa School – Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman, jīva, īśvara and māyā – ending with an inquiry into the nature and way of liberation (mukti). Like all intricate theological systems, the deeply interwoven themes of

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Svāminārāyaṇa theology mean that each theme will require an understanding of the others, and so each will almost always remain a little incomplete until the final theme is fully unravelled, calling for a patient, assiduous, and often reflexive reading of the text.<sup>85</sup> As Keith Ward recognises at the very beginning of his series on the key theological issues within the world's major religions: "There is no one proper starting-point in theology, since every question leads on to every other.... Only when the study is complete will one be able to check back to see if such a preliminary analysis was correct."<sup>86</sup>

This exposition will be grounded in śāstric revelation, i.e. statements from the Vacanāmṛut, the primary theological text of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, and, wherever relevant, supported by Svāminārāyaṇa commentaries on the Prasthānatrayī (the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads, and Bhagavad-Gītā). After setting the framework, I have aimed to allow the theological texts to 'do the talking', applying exegesis, elaboration, clarification and connection only where necessary or useful. Also, in this necessarily limited exposition, I have tried to resist the temptation to be exhaustive in covering all of the aspects of all of the themes – though I hope it is no less thorough and nothing essential is missing – or even presenting all of the supporting statements from all of the textual sources; only the most relevant, useful and interesting have been cited to help elucidate the point. Mindful of the fact that this is still only the first such attempt

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<sup>85</sup> Gavin Flood likened this expository project to the assembling of an orange peel rather than the unfolding of a flat piece of paper. 'It will all come together in the end,' he reassured.

<sup>86</sup> Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 1.

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at presenting Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology to a western academic audience, I have endeavoured to keep the presentation as simple and lucid as possible, without, of course, simplifying the complex themes themselves.