
13) WAY FORWARD

The end of a demanding project such as a doctoral thesis is understandably accompanied with a sense of quiet delight, maybe even relief. There is the real temptation to stop and indulge in some self-congratulatory back-patting. But even if we are to pause and recognise what has been achieved, it should only be to plan the journey ahead. Our work in theology is not complete, because our understanding of God can never be complete. Indeed, to know God at all is to understand his infinite, unfathomable greatness, and so too must our trek along the path of theological learning be unending.

This is the point, then, where we must pause to reflect upon the important question of what has been achieved thus far, to whom it is significant, and to where it can potentially lead us. It is to this that we now dedicate the final part of this thesis.

13.1) Why is this Study Significant and to Whom

On the basis of the extensive exposition in Parts 2 and 3, and the brief assessment and subsequent discussion of definitions in the first half of Part 4, we are in a position now to say at least this much: The Svāminārāyaṇa system of intellectual discourse stands the test of 'Hindu theology' set by Clooney and even the broader test of 'theology' set by Anselm.

So what?

The task we set ourselves at the outset was not one of facilely testing a Western notion or Christian discipline with Hindu data, i.e. jamming Hindu content into Christian boxes or retrospectively relabeling Hindu ideas with Christian terminology – ‘avatāra’ for ‘Incarnation’, ‘māyā’ for ‘sin’, ‘mukti’ for ‘salvation’, and so on. Nor was it an exercise in crudely transposing Christian ideas and language onto Hindu beliefs because, as we have seen, they differ in theologically significant ways. So the question remains: What has been achieved through this study and to whom is it significant?

The answer will come to us more fully, I believe, with the potential it holds for further constructive study, but immediately also, this current study holds much that is useful to a number of groups, including practitioners of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition, scholars within the tradition (i.e. potential Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theologians), scholars *of* the tradition from outside of it (theologians and others), scholars of other Hindu traditions (potential Hindu theologians), and theologians of other faiths. I consider each of these briefly in turn.

For practitioners of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community: Firstly, as we have previously acknowledged, theology is a discipline that does not operate in a vacuum. It addresses and is inseparably bound to an expectant community of faithful worshippers seeking greater understanding. In this sense, the current exposition of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu belief-system as an explicitly *theological* enterprise will be of considerable value. It elucidates in clear, simple terms the

core beliefs of the community in a way which, even if methodologically novel, is still immediately recognisable to them because of the exposition's firm grounding in its primary sampradāyic texts. Corroborating this elucidation by drawing on the wider corpus of authoritative, classical Hindu texts will provide the English-reading faithful with further clarity of and confidence in their system, as well as ample opportunities to pursue their own reflection, inquiries, and thoughtful discussions for their personal journeys toward faith-based understanding.

Moreover, in presenting a living Hindu theology which speaks to a community confessing a faith firmly rooted in ancient Hindu texts, yet who are living out their beliefs in the (post-)modern world, the project serves in making the community's faith relevant and communicable, especially in the West. While I suspect the tradition would not have been seeking any form of validation or legitimatisation in being labelled 'theology', some within the community will feel that this does in some way lend it extra credence or respectability, especially among those to whom they could not easily have explained their faith previously. Now they are able to speak of it to others – specifically, their Christian or Abrahamic others – in intelligible terms, using a somewhat common or analogous language of faith.

Of course, as mentioned in the Introduction, it is certainly not the case that there has been no prior communication of the tradition's beliefs or any previous defence of it in the face of opposition. This has been recurring since its origin in

the early 1800s. How else would the tradition have survived and flourished for so long. This communication, however, has happened in traditional ways, using traditional vocabulary and traditional tools and apparatus. The 'tradition' now inhabits a world far different from the one in which it was established, spreading outside of its native Gujarat in western India and surviving long since its inception over two hundred years ago. Today, Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism is considered one of the most transnationally diverse forms of Hinduism in the world, with large, active congregations growing in the United Kingdom, parts of mainland Europe, North America, and several nations of Africa as well as Asia-Pacific, not to mention all over India.⁵⁰² In all of these regions, practitioners face the inescapable reality of a religiously diverse social matrix. In fact, outside of India – and in some pockets, within India also – the Svāminārāyaṇa community lives as a minority Hindu faith, with its traditional forms of worship in non-traditional locations attracting the attention – sometimes positive interest, at other times suspicion or even hostility – of the dominant religious other. To counter common misconceptions borne of ignorance or misportrayal, the community has been forced in recent times to learn to articulate its beliefs and practices in a framework understandable to the dominant discourse, most commonly Christian, or else risk being misunderstood and misportrayed, since they would no longer be simply ignored. One hopeful outcome of this new theological vocabulary and framework is that it can serve as a useful

⁵⁰² See Raymond Brady Williams, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

communicative tool in fostering mutual understanding and harmonious coexistence, our differences notwithstanding.

For scholars within the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community: Like their practicing audience and readers, practitioner-scholars of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith will also benefit from all that has been outlined above. In addition, as individuals with a vocational aptitude and inclination to the study of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, some will now recognise themselves as ‘theologians’. They will thus be able – indeed, it will be their responsibility – to respond to the expectations of the community whose faith they elucidate, clarify, defend or even question in order to refine and consolidate. In much the same way in which I self-consciously located myself at the beginning of this project, I hope others living, thinking and practicing their faith in the West will also be cognisant of this responsibility. Experts need to articulate the faith of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community – one saddled by the concerns and challenges of modernity – in intelligible, relevant terms. This will entail these experts being theologians, not (just) pundits.

The hope is that this project now allows for this possibility by creating a space and framework for further reflection and to tackle many of the questions and topics mentioned further below. Indeed, we will even need to be self-reflective. What does it mean to be a *Hindu* theologian? In which significant ways does it differ to being a theologian of any other faith? Are all pundits who speak and

write in English 'theologians' by default? These and many other definitions and terms must not go without critical examination from within the tradition.

For scholars of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition: Of course, the study of Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism is not the exclusive preserve of members from within its faith community nor is it limited to the discipline of theology. The tradition has a long history of being open to and the subject of several studies from various fields. For scholars studying the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and community from other disciplines – such as anthropology, phenomenology, religion, South Asian studies, history, political science, etc. – now there is no excuse to ignore its fundamental theological underpinning. Appreciating or at least recognising this essential core, without indulging in lazy reductionism, one hopes that more nuanced and accurate understandings and presentations of Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism can prevail in the academy.

For scholars of other Hindu traditions: There is no reason why the benefits I have identified for Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism should not extend to other Hindu traditions. Indeed, the earnest desire is that, like their counterparts from the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, scholars in and of other strands of Hindu faith may now also be able to recognise and develop themselves as theologians (as opposed to traditional pundits or indologists, orientalist, philosophers, etc.) and identify the theological merit of their own traditions and texts. The result would be to broaden and enrich the field of Hindu theology as a whole. After all, since Hinduism is better understood as a family of religious traditions, Hindu theology,

too, can only flourish with the flourishing of its constituent traditions. To reiterate my concession from the outset: the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya is but one strand in the richly diverse tapestry that is Hinduism; this exposition is thus an example of a Hindu theology, of which there are many others, none definitive or representative of the whole.

The multiplicity of Hindu theologies is certainly not too unlike the many strands prevalent among the various denominations of the Christian faith, or any other faith for that matter. Like Christian theology, now Hindu theology, too, can – and should – be considered as a legitimate member of the theological guild. As José Ignacio Cabezón argues for Buddhist theology⁵⁰³, Hindu theology should also be seriously considered as deserving of a place *within* the field of Hindu Studies and *alongside* the field of, for example, academic Christian theology. For this, of course, more from the Hindu intelligentsia must self-consciously identify themselves as theologians and subscribe to the norms of open, honest and critical theological inquiry. Then, there can be no tenable reason why intellectual discourse that unapologetically locates itself within the Hindu tradition should not be considered a valid field of study at faculties of Theology and Divinity around the world (wherever they still exist).

For theologians of other religious traditions: If Hindu theology has been demonstrated to be functionally analogous to its counterparts in other religious

⁵⁰³ *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. by Roger Jackson and John Makransky. (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000), p. 26.

contexts, this opens up the conversation in which Hindu theology can be an active and important dialogue-partner, contributing new insights about ideas and methods in the broader field of theology. Indeed, as more and more Hindu theologians work hard to devise, improvise and extend new ways of discussing and configuring Western or Christian religious thinking, the time for theologians of all faiths and the discipline of theology as a whole is an exciting if not also a challenging one.

The promise lies in the opportunity of making faiths mutually intelligible, helping 'break down boundaries'⁵⁰⁴ and allowing "deep learning across religious borders"⁵⁰⁵. The challenge is whether Hindu theology will be allowed the institutional space and respect it needs and deserves to help achieve this.

13.2) Opportunities for New Scholarship

A distinguishing mark of good, substantial scholarship, I believe, is the potential it holds for subsequent scholarly work. Directly or indirectly, what new avenues of theological reflection, analysis and description can this study now open up? Into which directions can we expect to – need to – see this project being taken? We explore this briefly as way of further demonstrating the viability, validity,

⁵⁰⁴ See *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁵⁰⁵ This is the subtitle of one of Clooney's most recent works, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), suggested to him by John Makransky, himself a 'Buddhist theologian'.

and value of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, in particular, and Hindu theology, in general.

13.2.1) On the Svāminārāyaṇa Tradition

From the beginning, I have been at pains to stress that this thesis attempts, by all measures, a brief introduction to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. It is the necessary first step – quite often the hardest – in presenting a doctrinal account of a living Hindu tradition *qua* theology.

Precisely because this is the first time that a systematic exposition of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition is being presented in this way, it has needed to be sufficiently broad, providing an overview of all its major themes and how they function together. The mass of content, including the copious source material from foundational texts upon which the exposition is necessarily grounded, has sometimes precluded a certain depth of analysis, but, to be fair, the expectation of this hefty primary task could only have been to provide an overview and thereby lay the groundwork for subsequent theological reflection and analysis. This necessarily and largely descriptive enterprise thus serves as the first of many rounds of more critical theological work to follow.

Moreover, now that this vital account is in place, we are in a position to explore not only deeper but also wider and farther into this vast theological landscape. The exposition will hopefully function as an entranceway, opening up the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition to new voices and alternative discussions, perhaps

paralleling its Abrahamic counterparts. For example, could there now be scope for subsidiary disciplines within Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology – philosophical, philological, exegetical, practical? Fields and subjects such as Vacanāmṛt Studies, Vacanāmṛt Hermeneutics, Sampradāyic History, Pastoral Theology, Moral Theology, ‘Sampradāyology’, rituals, liturgy, devotional piety, and many others require attention. Certain, more specific concepts also have further scope for probing. For example, ‘time’: precisely how is it conceptualised within and/or apart from the universe and how does this impact God’s nature, role and functioning? Even within Systematic Theology, there are new and different ways in which to think and to configure that thinking, to plumb and push the depths of our theological understanding.

As we venture further out, the hope is that Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theologians and theologians interested in Svāminārāyaṇa Hinduism will also be able and willing to address secular concerns and concerns of modernity, such as science, law, art, politics, etc. (as we shall shortly consider below under ‘Hindu Theology’), where theology meets, intersects, collides and coalesces with other fields of study and interest.

In many ways, then, this is an exciting time for scholarship on the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition. Being over two hundred years old, it can neither be considered all that young, nor very old. Whichever the case, it is still being invigorated with fresh insights and new theological work from within the tradition, a prime example of which is the *magnum opus* that is the five-volume Svāminārāyaṇa-

Bhāṣya commentary on the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā.

Another recent addition is the Akṣara-Puruṣottama-Māhātmya, a 19,000-verse epic styled in the genre of a Pañcarātric text covering in detail the rituals, mantras, festivals, precepts, rules of temple worship, image worship, personal and collective devotion, etc. of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu faith.

A principal and perhaps urgent task is to now make these and other works accessible to Western, theological and other scholarly circles. But it will not be enough to simply translate them into English; they will require *academic* renderings which are faithful to the original spirit while intelligible in word and form to Western academics, possibly with the help of generous annotations, through a sharp knowledge of and careful sensitivity to theological, philosophical, philological, and other Western disciplines. In fact, one of the positive outcomes of this current project has been a refined theological translation of many excerpts from the Vacanāmṛut, Svāmīnī Vāto, and the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya commentaries. A future project could involve a translation of the complete set of commentaries, seeing as it is so fundamental to a proper understanding of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu doctrines and for which nothing in English is yet available.

Generally, much more work is needed in English to properly articulate the complex, sophisticated and exigent theological ideas of the tradition. As more experts develop, they will surely lead each other into finer debate and harder discussion, from which will gradually emerge more theological literature. As a

corollary, they may help develop the current vocabulary and conceptual apparatus of theology so that it can more easily, fully and accurately accommodate ideas from other, non-Christian traditions.

In all senses, then, this appears to be a promisingly and challengingly formative stage in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu scholarship, particularly when it is conducted in English.

13.2.1.1) Challenges to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu Theology

A useful and important stimulant for this formation is acknowledging and addressing the challenges that Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology currently faces or will soon face. Scholars of the tradition must not be afraid to accept these challenges and even ask difficult questions of themselves and their tradition, questions that bear upon the life of the faithful community and its place in an increasingly interconnected, interdependent world. With humility and courage, and through prayer and grace, as they think and work hard to articulate meaningful responses, the result will surely be a continuing clarification, enrichment, and fortification of the theology they hold true.

I foresee these challenges coming from three main corners.

From other Svāminārāyaṇa denominations: As I clearly and unapologetically declared at the outset, while I attempt to articulate Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology in this thesis, I write from within one of the many denominations of this

rapidly expanding Hindu tradition, specifically from within the Bocāsanavāsī Śrī Akṣara Puruṣottama Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā (often abbreviated to 'BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā' or simply 'BAPS') which espouses, to use its classical appellation, Brahma-Parabrahman-Darśana as the conclusive truth revealed by Svāminārāyaṇa. Scholars of other schools of thought within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya may beg to differ on this systemisation, on my interpretation and exegesis of Svāminārāyaṇa's teachings from the Vacanāmṛut, or even on the Bhāṣyakāra's rendering of Vedāntic texts. Can these positions be argued and defended theologically and respectfully using valid theological texts and accepted professional methods? Historically, the overarching rule prevailing within the BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa tradition seems to have been to never oppose the other, and simply convey one's own stance humbly yet unapologetically. It would nevertheless be interesting to see, for example, another denomination's interpretation of the Prasthānatrayī through the formulation of its own commentaries, perhaps contesting the Bhāṣyakāra's interpretations, and seeing how he and/or other scholars respond.

From other Hindu traditions and schools of Vedānta: Challenges, or at least questions, to Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology will also be posed from other Hindu traditions, many of which will already have established commentaries on the same Vedāntic texts. Again, with key interpretative differences that bear significantly upon a school's theology, respectful discussions on topics such as the nature of God, the soul, the world and liberation, and on the way to liberation, the role of religious authority, the sources of valid theological

knowledge, etc. will hopefully bear mutually fruitful results in refining ideas, arguments and methodology, even if without producing conclusive answers.

From the wider community of theologians and other scholars: In time, like Christian theology and other traditions before it, Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology will also be placed under examination from modern, post-Enlightenment scholarship. How, for example, will it hold up when seen through the lens of postmodernism? If, or when, the likes of Lindbeck, Wilhelm Frei, Hauerwas, or other proponents of post-liberal theology scrutinise its doctrines, premises, truth-claims, how will Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theologians respond? What may have seemed axiomatic to them will suddenly be viewed with suspicion and ambiguity. How will the foundational revelatory texts of the tradition, considered sacred and infallible to the community of faithful, fare when subjected to the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and other forms of literary criticism? How will the theologians continue to defend the role and legitimacy of religious authority, especially of a living guru, in an increasingly liberal, secular world?

Embarking even further outside the crucible of religion, the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, like other faiths, will also face questions from (atheistic) social and political scientists about the role and value of its religious position in postmodern society, including on important issues of public value and interest, such as social equality and justice, sexual orientation, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, bio-ethics, and many others. How and on what doctrines and texts will theologians draw upon to argue one way or the other? These are all

interesting prospects and, as of yet, part of unchartered territory. Nevertheless, scholars of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition will need to train and develop themselves to be able to, firstly, be conversant in these debates, and then, to respond eruditely, rigorously, and humbly. Others will equally have to be patient and generous as the scholarly community of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition learns to crawl before it can walk, let alone run, in meeting these new and formidable challenges.

13.2.2) In Hindu Theology and Other Disciplines

Many of the challenges and opportunities identified above are also relevant to most other Hindu traditions and thus applicable to Hindu theology as a whole. Hindu theologians of every tradition, therefore, are now charged with the responsibility and must be infused with the enthusiasm to define, uphold and develop this important category within the larger discipline of theology. As we have seen Clooney already urge, “since theology has communal roots, it must be the theologians of the Hindu tradition who must take the lead in maintaining and fostering Hindu theology.” He adds with further foresight: “It will be up to intellectuals writing today, who are willing to be called ‘Hindu theologians,’ to chart the course of the future of Hindu theology.”⁵⁰⁶

This call to action must be tempered, though, with Patil’s sagacious insight about “the challenge for potential Hindu theologians”, that is, “to maintain the integrity

⁵⁰⁶ Clooney, ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology”’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 463.

of tradition while attempting to recontextualize it in a context that is, in many ways, intellectually familiar but institutionally new. It is the challenge of forming tradition while continuing to be genuinely formed by it. Such work must have an authentic voice from Hindu tradition and also be a part of the discipline of theology; it must be the work of a Hindu scholar who is also a theologian; and it must serve both the interests of the tradition and the needs of the discipline.”⁵⁰⁷

Hindu scholars with a genuine concern for the intelligibility and credibility of the truth-claims of their tradition will have to be open, humble and brave enough to not only engage with their Christian colleagues but also learn from each other in this new, shared intellectual space of a common discipline. “It is here”, Patil adds, “that Hindu theology can be responsibly and rigorously recontextualized by (among others) those of us who are Hindu and interested in the practice of theology.”⁵⁰⁸

Patil cautions, however, that a lot more preparation and patience will be required of Hindu intellectuals because of the asymmetrical demands and contexts within which they find themselves. For example, he notes, “for Hindus, properly theological work must be preceded by a great deal of work in religious history, philology, and philosophy.”⁵⁰⁹ Nevertheless, in time and with persistent

⁵⁰⁷ Patil, ‘A Hindu Theologian’s Response’, in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 189.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 188.

hard work, Hindu theologians can more than hope to make valuable contributions to important debates in theology and theological disciplines.

More broadly, if the particular task of Hindu theology is to provide a relevant, coherent and timely articulation of Hindu faith, theologians of the various traditions must also venture, like their Abrahamic counterparts, to be informed by and, in turn, inform many other intellectual arenas and socio-cultural concerns. Of course, Hindu intellectuals – or ‘theologians’ if we can now retrospectively call them so – have a long and illustrious history of engaging with philosophy, the sciences and arts, society and culture. The challenge for the modern Hindu theologian is to now think and write in the *genre* of theology and the *context* of the modern/post-modern milieu, to be steeped in her own theological tradition while still being carefully receptive to the insights of other fields and respectfully contributing to them in return.

For example, in the overlapping area of Hindu theology and ecology or Hindu theology and social harmony, how can the decidedly Vaiṣṇava concept of śarīra-śarīri-saṃbandha, the body-soul relationship between God and the world, provide a useful model to understand and appreciate our relationship with nature, animals, and other humans? Seen through this panentheistic worldview, the incredible diversity of various species and communities is unified (though not homogenised) within God’s universal body. We are not just a part of his work; every one of us, even as individuals, is a vital limb or organ or cell

belonging to God, living in him and by him, the ontic ground (ādhāra) of all our shared existence.

Keeping with the theme of creation, I earlier suggested that Parabrahman can be justifiably conceived as creator of the world, even if the primordial matter from which it is composed has always existed, insofar as a sculptor creates a statue from a boulder of stone, a painter creates a masterpiece with paints, or a musician creates a symphony from musical notes. The stone, paints and notes all pre-exist, albeit indistinctively, but it is the creativity and mastery of the artiste that brings to life something wholly new from them yet not distinctly apart from what each was before. The creation is at once both new and the same (as in the satkāryavāda view of causality). Similarly, it can be said, God inspires from the pre-existent, indistinguishable Prakṛti innumerable masterpieces each with their own name and form and all still intrinsically māyic. While this analogy obviously provides much fodder for theological reflection – about creation as artistic expression and joyful play rather than prosaic manufacturing and laborious work, about the irreproachability of the creator and the purpose of creation, and so forth [see 10.2.1 for these discussions] – we also have opportunities to understand and explain the arts in a fresh, theological light. Like the beautiful natural world of God that brings joy to its admirers and reveals something about the artiste himself, art, music and literature, too, must be appreciated, cherished and protected as they invoke and perhaps are infused with the creative beauty and power of the ultimate creator. How also can the arts, of which Hinduism has been a most generous patron over the millennia, become a vehicle for theological

communication⁵¹⁰ and how can we use theological hermeneutics to (re)interpret the great works of religious art, music and literature past, present and forthcoming?

To provide a more contentious example, one more immediately and widely pertinent to public concern, we enter the vortex of politics. How or does indeed the conceptualisation of Parabrahman as Supreme Lord prove problematic for devotees who are also citizens of a democratic nation? Does living under the rule of a sovereign God call for the need to reconcile religious law and secular law? Do they ever collide? Are they incompatible? Or can one's commitment to God teach us about our duty to prime minister or president? More widely, how does Hindu theological thinking and belief underlie or impact political, social, cultural and economic discourse?

Another important and very interesting field of study is the interface of theology and anthropology. Understanding the human predicament from a Hindu perspective is imperative to more fully appreciating a faith community's behaviour, relationships (both within and outside of their group), and how they make sense of the world around them. For example, it would be necessary to have a good understanding of the ontological nature of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru's personhood and his liberative function for practitioners of the

⁵¹⁰ For example, in a recent message to the president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Pope Benedict XVI recalled this from a *motu proprio*: "The artist, like the Church, is a witness to the beauty of the faith." Online Source: <http://en.radiovaticana.va/articolo.asp?c=641038> [accessed 21 November 2012].

Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition before analysing their behaviour and actions – from their daily acts of personal worship at home and regular gatherings at a temple for collective worship, learning and celebration, to their on-going charity services in the wider community and the communication of their faith to religiously and culturally different others in a diasporic context. All these actions are guided and motivated by faith and understanding traced to revelatory texts. Any comprehensive study of these actions based on observations or ethnographical data alone would be abjectly deficient without some level of theological engagement with these texts.⁵¹¹

Theological anthropology (as opposed to theology and anthropology or the anthropology of theology/religion) is also a richly fertile area of inquiry needing to happen. As I briefly touched upon when exposing the jīva [section 8.1.1], how can the tripartite body-pure soul distinction help one reconcile a correct spiritual understanding of the self as ātman with physical well-being, healthy relationships, and human advancement? How does a better self-understanding lend itself to a more advanced God-realisation? And what implication does the (albeit limited) shared nature between soul and God – if both are sat-cit-ānanda – and their stark ontological difference – the former is irrevocably dependent

⁵¹¹ It would be apt to note here the chapter by Hañna Kim of Adelphi University on “Swaminarayan Bhakti Yoga and the Aksharbrahman Guru” in the forthcoming *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, edited by Ellen Goldberg and Mark Singleton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press). Relying on textual sources (with working notes I shared earlier from this thesis) as well as ethnographic material, the author “explores the role of Guru and his contribution to the making of a modern devotional community”, that is, seeing “what motivates Swaminarayan devotees to engage with their Guru in particular ways and how this relationship, informed by Swaminarayan bhakti, supports a multiplicity of ways for devotees to be actively religiously modern.”

upon the latter – hold for their relationship, for human life on earth, and for liberated reality upon death? All these questions, and their highly consequential answers, are predicated on a theological understanding of the nature and ultimate goal of humanity, human personhood, and human being.⁵¹²

Like these few, brief examples above, there are many more areas of learning and living which can be defined by and defining for a Hindu *Weltanschauungen*, be it social theory, history, the physical and natural sciences, or a plethora of other intellectual arenas. This reflexive viewing of Hindu theology through these ideas and theories and then looking back at them through the eyes of Hindu theology will surely prove mutually challenging and enriching. Encouragingly, we are already seeing the modest beginnings of this endeavour with excellent works of Hindu insight being produced by Hindu intellectuals willing to identify themselves as Hindu theologians.⁵¹³ They – we – may write and think with commitment to our respective traditions, but we inevitably enrich Hindu theology as a whole and, even more broadly, the discipline of theology. Writing in response to Clooney's earlier invitation in *Hindu God, Christian God* for Hindu intellectuals to engage with their Christian colleagues, Patil remarks: "For those

⁵¹² A good example of such a work would be David Kelsey's stupendous two-volume *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

⁵¹³ I have in mind here new works such as Jonathan Edelmann's daring *Hindu Theology and Biology: The Bhāgavata Purāna and Contemporary Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Tamal Krishna Goswami's posthumously published *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential Teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada* edited with Introduction and Conclusion by Graham M. Schweig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ravi Gupta's *The Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Vedānta of Jīva Gosvāmī: When Knowledge Meets Devotion* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2007); Kenneth Valpey's *Attending Kṛṣṇa's Image: Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Mūrti-Sevā as Devotional Truth* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2006); and several others.

of us who are Hindu and interested in practicing theology,... such a beginning must be celebrated, since for too long now the Hindu counterparts to Swinburne, von Balthasar, Rahner, and Barth have not received the attention that they so richly deserve.”⁵¹⁴

Like the challenge before theologians of all faiths, the work of Hindu theologians will be, while listening to the witness of tradition, to make Hindu concepts relevant to present-day situations and everyday aspects of life, as they speak to a community living in different times, places and circumstances to that of the original authors of their faith. Those willing to accept the tension of being creative and authentic, traditional but still relevant, will be able to bring home to new audiences the richness, profundity and exciting possibilities of Hindu theology. Again, this will demand, in no small amounts, courage and humility, patient labour and prayerful collaboration.

13.2.3) In Comparative Theology

So far, I have pointed out some of the new, difficult and exciting opportunities now available to scholars of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology and Hindu theology more generally, both in their respective fields as well as with several other disciplines. I wish now to draw attention to the specific sub-discipline of comparative theology. I believe this warrants special mention here for the important role it can play in theological learning and because of the sheer wealth

⁵¹⁴ Patil, 'A Hindu Theologian's Response', in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 186.

of interesting openings it now offers. If indeed Hindu traditions such as the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya are compatible with accepted Christian understandings of theology, making 'Hindu theology' a legitimate and worthwhile subject of study and interlocution among theologians of Christianity and maybe even of other faiths, then such Hindu traditions can immediately lend themselves to inter-theological analysis and constructive dialogue with these faiths. In this closing section to this final chapter, I briefly suggest a few of the topics awaiting those willing to engage in this challenging, fruitful and growing field.

I should begin by sharing a recurring observation I made when, during the course of my research for this doctoral study, I discussed matters of theology with scholars of my order in India, England and America. I saw it as an opportunity when explaining my project to them to also gently introduce them to the discipline of theology and certain key Christian doctrines. At first I was a little wary of how this would be received by these (mostly) senior monks of Indian origin. My caution, however, proved unfounded. I was pleasantly surprised at how immensely respectful and receptive my monastic elders and younger brothers were to Western theological ideas. I have always been impressed by their remarkable erudition in matters of our tradition and the broader expanse of Vedānta, Pañcarātra, Nyāya, Sanskrit grammar, Sanskrit literature, and a whole host of other decidedly Hindu-related topics, but their warm response to Christian ideas and theology was especially pleasing. I believe this bodes well for a future of open, committed learning within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition by

scholars who are confident in their own faith and yet eager and unafraid to learn yet more, if necessary, from other faiths as well. From my basic study of Christian theology, I can quite easily foresee scholars from both traditions reaching across and learning deeply from each other, as they tackle valuable points of convergence and divergence with respect, sensitivity, and academic vigour.

Of course, the project of comparative theology is not about facilely highlighting similarities. Points of fundamental and irreconcilable difference are just as important and can in fact be just as enlightening, if not more so. *Creatio ex materia* and *creatio ex nihilo* is one such example of a seemingly diametrically opposite doctrinal concept. Even so, this should not shut off the possibility of fruitful learning from each other. Returning to the analogy above of viewing creation as artistic expression or a divine act of joyful play, as God's *līlā*, there are useful reflections to be made for a Christian doctrine of creation. Meanwhile, Hindu theologians would need to consider the shortcomings or weaknesses, if any, of a theology wherein God is co-eternal with matter and who does not strictly 'create' other beings.

Christianity's long and, at times, tumultuous, doctrinal history also provides much to learn from for Hindu theologians. In an earlier study of St Athanasius's

De Incarnatione Verbi Dei,⁵¹⁵ I came across his famous proclamation, often conveniently paraphrased as:

God becomes like us that we might become like him (54).

This clearly resonates with the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu doctrine of Pragaṭa [see Chapter 6.5], that the supremely transcendental Parabrahman manifests on earth in human form, temporarily concealing his lordly powers, so that he may liberate countless souls from their ignorance and grant them an eternal place in his abode where they enjoy his infinite bliss in a form almost identical to his own. However, the Hindu theologian who is quick to tout the obvious similarity here would do well to first ask whether Parabrahman is said to be *assuming* a human form or body, as the Alexandrians believed, or simply *indwelling* a human body, as was the Antiochian view and which was ultimately denounced as heretical, especially after the Council of Chalcedon in 451?

Other early Christological debates on the nature, person and function of Christ can be deeply useful in better understanding and expositing the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. For example, is the Guru conceived as being monophysitic (having one nature; only divine) or dyophysitic (having two natures; divine *and* human)? Svāminārāyaṇa texts propound that he is solely divine. But then how would the Guru be able to fulfil his role as mediator between humans and God if he were not human as well? The answer would probably need to come from a proper understanding of the true nature of humans, who are ontologically distinct from

⁵¹⁵ This was for the Christianity paper of my M.St. in the Study of Religion at the University of Oxford in 2007. The title of the submitted essay was 'The Role of Imagery in St Athanasius's *The Incarnation of the Word of God*'.

their material bodies and actually the soul within, which is essentially pure and therefore inherently 'divine'. Nevertheless, this now raises further questions about the Guru. If he is of one nature only, what is one to make of his human form? Is his human nature concealed or *absorbed*? Or is it, as Eutyches of Constantinople believed of Jesus, that the human nature is *overcome* by divinity? Or if the Guru merely *appears* as human, that is, his human personhood is illusory, does that fall foul of Docetism, the unorthodox doctrine of the Gnostics who argued that Jesus's suffering and death on the cross were apparent, not real? Clearly, such cross-traditional interaction between Christology and 'Gurology', as I have come to term the study of the Guru, his person and function, would prove very interesting indeed.⁵¹⁶

In the introductory Part 1 of this thesis, I broached the issue of translatability in theology, how fraught with difficulty the task is of using words from one religious and theological tradition to describe concepts from another. Even here, there can be opportunities for mutual learning. For example, when describing 'mukti' or 'mokṣa' – from the Sanskrit verb-root 'muc' – I explained that it relates in theological terms to freedom, liberation or release from the captivity and oppression of māyā and the incessant cycle of births and deaths it enforces [Chapter 3.7]. Framed in these terms, it is not difficult to appreciate how mukti can also be meaningfully called 'salvation'. But how distinct is the concept of being 'saved' from being 'freed'? If the Hindu conceptualisation of the soul is that

⁵¹⁶ I am grateful to my discussions on this topic with Tushar Shah, a graduate student at Oxford, which offered new ideas and insights included here.

it is eternally and innately pure, with an unending opportunity for final fulfilment, how can that which is not damned be saved? For the Christian, can salvation also mean being liberated from the bondage of sin, from the clutches of death the enemy, with Christ as victor over forces that enslave humanity? How proper is it, then, to speak of the 'mukti' of the soul in Christian soteriology? Not discounting the many significant differences from a Christian understanding of what it means to be saved and how such a saving is achieved or received, this collation nevertheless offers another useful node for comparative theology to enrich and deepen our understanding of our own faith as well as of the other, *from* the other.

Here is another example of theological learning stemming from reflection upon correct terminology: In the chapter on Akṣarabrahman when discussing the four roles in which the one entity serves [see 7.4], I was tempted to use the Greek term 'homooúsios'. Can the Brahmasvarūpa Guru be said to be *homoousian* with the abode of Parabrahman, the exemplary sevaka in that abode, and the all-pervading Cidākāśa? They are all one in substance; Akṣarabrahman. But are they four 'persons'? Here is an inquiry in which a Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theologian would have much to gain from a study of Trinitarianism, Christology, Patristics, and other related Christian subjects. Conversely, I am sure a Christian theologian would also benefit from reading certain passages of the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā in light of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, as conceived within the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu system, and then returning to enjoy a deeper, personal encounter with Jesus.

I have also been fascinated and encouraged to see how well certain biblical and other Christian passages respond when subjected to reflection from Hindu texts and perspectives. As I briefly attempted earlier with Anselm's formula for theology, it would be interesting to explore other examples of Hindu commentary on Christian texts which are ripe with theological and devotional insight. One modern example that comes to mind is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. I recall when studying his ideas of 'cheap grace' and 'costly grace'⁵¹⁷ how amenable they appeared to key Hindu concepts of guru-centric obedience and even ascetic renunciation in line with Jesus's common call to leave everything and "Follow me!"⁵¹⁸

As with their other faith partners, Hindu theologians must also be open to *intra*-traditional discussion and learning from within the Hindu fold. Fruitful comparative reflection could quite likely result from dialogue between two (or more) schools of Hindu theology, say, Svāminārāyaṇa theology with Śrī Vaiṣṇava theology or Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology, or even Advaita theology or a Śaivite theology. In fact, I have consciously endeavoured to tackle certain debates from the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā also covered by Carman in *The Theology of Rāmānuja* and Clooney in *Theology After Vedānta* to allow careful readers of these works the opportunity to see how Svāminārāyaṇa Vedāntic

⁵¹⁷ This was another essay for the Christianity paper of my M.St. in the Study of Religion at the University of Oxford in 2007. The title of the essay was 'Renunciation in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*'.

⁵¹⁸ "Follow me" is the common challenge Jesus issued to his prospective disciples. To cite from Mark alone, we hear the call coming personally to Andrew and Simon Peter (1.17), James and John (1.20), Levi (2.14), the rich young man (10.21), and also generally to the Twelve (3.13) and the crowd near Caesarea Philippi (8.34).

theology differs from or is similar to the thought of Rāmānuja and the Advaita school.⁵¹⁹

Again, the objective would not be to simply check off points of convergence and divergence. It would be quite easy to find aspects of similitude in pairings of some theistic traditions, especially those with a devotional focus. Having a personal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent world-maker is one such obvious similarity, but such general observations are usually not very helpful. Some traditions may even share certain doctrines. The śārīra-śārīrin relationship found within the Viśiṣṭādvaita school of Vedānta, for example, is used almost identically in the Svāminārāyaṇa system, sometimes leading those without a complete understanding of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition to erroneously identify it as a 'modified' version of the Viśiṣṭādvaita School. A more careful and thorough study would reveal that even closely related Hindu systems can differ in some fundamental ways, not just in the details. Some of the distinctive features of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, for example, would include the following: its system of five eternal realities – jīva, Īśvara, māyā, (Akṣara)Brahman and Parabrahman; the continued substantive and liberative presence of Parabrahman on earth through Akṣarabrahman, i.e. the Brahmasvarūpa Guru; the avatāra-avatārin distinction made possible by Īśvaras, where Svāminārāyaṇa the iṣṭadeva is not one of the many avatāras of Viṣṇu but the ultimate source of them all, i.e. Parabrahman the Avatārin; a cosmological model comprising

⁵¹⁹ See also Chapter 7.1 for a detailed example of comparing Svāminārāyaṇa theological interpretations vis-à-vis those of the Kevalādvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, Svābhāvīkabhedābheda and Śuddhādvaita schools based on critical textual analyses.

innumerable brahmāṇḍas (worlds); and the possibility of jīvan-mukti, the highest state of blissful liberation experienced while still alive on earth; among others. Of these is the lynchpin concept of individual souls becoming brahmarūpa ('like Brahman') by way of their loving relationship with the Brahmasvarūpa Guru and thereby offering perfect upāsana (loving worship informed by correct theological knowledge) to Parabrahman, lending the system its classical name, **Brahma-Parabrahma-Darśana**. A detailed exposition of this system is what has dominated the central body of this study as we sought an answer, by way of analogy, to our opening question: What is Hindu theology?

To summarise in closing, this thesis has been an attempt by a practitioner-theologian to explain the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition in theological terms according to recognised scholarly standards and conventions. This will hopefully provide an entry-point into a wider theological study of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, and also, hopefully, access to more nuanced understandings of the tradition for scholars of religion, South Asian studies, anthropology, political science, and other disciplines. More broadly, the thesis has aimed to not just describe or justify Hindu theology; it has involved constructively and systematically *doing* theology as well. It has been a serious attempt to engage with Western theology from a Hindu standpoint using a Hindu example and working from within that tradition. This will inevitably push Hindu theology beyond its usual national and linguistic borders; the fact that it is in English and using terms previously reserved predominantly for Christian theology makes it immediately comparative and relevant. Yet it has also been an opportunity to compare ancient

Hindu ideas with contemporary Western understandings of theology – how and where they overlap and differ, and how this can enrich both – opening up, as Clooney too hopes, “more fruitful ways of understanding traditional Hindu thinking, and stimulate an exchange of ideas between India... and the contemporary scholarly world.”⁵²⁰ Indeed, I hope this project has proven that it is possible to usefully apply theological language and methods to articulate Hindu doctrines, thereby opening the door and widening the scope for Hindu theology to engage with theologians of other faith traditions and scholars of various disciplines.

To put this another way, this thesis has been a work of classical Hindu Vedānta, while also a work of contemporary Hindu theology. It has been not only a work of Hindu theology, it has also been a work of theology. While it has been a work from within a tradition, it has also been a work from within an academic discipline. While it has been written by a practitioner of that tradition, it has also been written by a scholar who self-consciously locates himself within that discipline. And while its intended audience includes members and scholars of that tradition, it is hoped that certain parts of it will appeal to those outside of it as well. As Patil reminds us: “It is in the interreligious space defined by shared concerns, methods and conclusions that the discipline of theology is located.”⁵²¹ And it is within this discipline that this project has been located.

⁵²⁰ Clooney, ‘Restoring “Hindu Theology”’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 470.

⁵²¹ Patil, ‘A Hindu Theologian’s Response’, in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 189.

As the project draws to an end now, one cannot help feel that, in fact, it signals just the beginning of what lies ahead. The onus must lie on the current and future generations of (Hindu) theologians, philosophers, historians, linguists, etc. to pick up the gauntlet and carry it forth into new, uncharted and exciting academic realms. Best wishes to us all!