

ABSTRACT

IDENTIFYING AND LOCATING HINDU THEOLOGY IN THE SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA VEDĀNTA TRADITION

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In his chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Francis X. Clooney, SJ of Harvard Divinity School presents his case for “Restoring ‘Hindu Theology’ as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse”¹. Over the course of his reasoning, Clooney presents several ‘clues’ to determine whether or not a Hindu system could be regarded as ‘theological’. These clues include certain themes, modes of reasoning, styles, audience expectations, and judgements to be made by theologians. He concludes with a call to action, for those “who are willing to identify themselves as both ‘Hindus’ and ‘theologians’” to “test” his ideas.

This thesis is a direct response to this calling, to apply Clooney’s “clues” to the specific case of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and ascertain, in particular, its position as a theological system, and thus affirm the possibility and validity of “Hindu theology” in general.

Framed another way, our inquiry can be distilled to one clear-cut question – simple, powerful, and perhaps a little provocative: **What is Hindu theology?** This thesis is an attempt to answer this question analogously, by way of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition.

¹ Edited by Gavin Flood, (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing; 2003), pp. 447-77

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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I rely upon two sets of textual sources for this project. The primary sources from the Svāminārāyaṇa corpus primarily include the Vacanāmṛt and the Svāmīnī Vāto, both of which are in Gujarati. These will be closely substantiated with the three Sanskrit texts which comprise the Prasthānatrayī – the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads, and Bhagavad-Gītā – and their respective commentaries, as well as other treatises from the rich commentarial tradition of the Vedānta system. I also draw upon existing scholarship from within and on the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition (mainly found in Gujarati, with some works in Hindi and English), with other secondary sources including writings in English from the academic discipline of theology in general.

The thesis is sectioned into four broad parts, each being divided more finely into discrete chapters and sub-chapters.

² Edited by Gavin Flood, (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing; 2003), pp. 447-77.



This first, introductory part serves to explain the rationale and scheme of the thesis, including a detailed summary of Clooney's chapter and how it functions as the springboard for the exposition ahead and discussion thereafter.

Importantly, this thesis is as much about *doing* Hindu theology as it is about discussing or defining it. But before embarking upon any theologising within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, the sources and tools of Svāminārāyaṇa theology will need to be delineated. This is covered in Part 2.

With theology so rooted in revelation – indeed, it is what distinguishes it from philosophy and perhaps all other intellectual disciplines – the crux of this section will deal with the revelatory sources of theology within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition. It will begin with an understanding of revelation within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and how this relates to Parabrahman, the Guru, the soul, and 'Scripture', by which I refer to the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto, the principal theological texts of the tradition. I shall examine their determinant features as revelatory sources, including, importantly, how they must be read and interpreted. Additionally, I hope to touch upon the position and role of other tools of theology – reason, tradition, and praxis – especially in relation to the primacy of Scripture.

With tools in hand, the discussion will then be able to proceed to the heart of the thesis in the form of Part 3. After introducing the five eternal metaphysical entities of Svāminārāyaṇa Vedānta – Parabrahman, (Akṣara)Brahman, māyā, īśvara and jīva – each entity will be systematically expounded within its own chapter. This exposition will include, wherever relevant, the nature of each entity, its relationship with other entities, and important clarifications and related discussions – all along, keeping in mind (but not being bound by) Clooney's clues to Hindu theology.

In a discipline where deviation from sacred revelation renders any theologising unauthentic, all doctrines must conform to a valid interpretation of the canonical texts. Hence, it is both natural and necessary that this section be firmly grounded in the Vacanāmrut and the Svāmīnī Vāto as well as the Brahmasūtras, Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā with their respective commentaries. But while being a deep textual study, it shall operate at multiple levels, freely oscillating between philology, exegesis, and theology.

At a relevant juncture, I also engage with other Vedantic schools – Śaṅkara's Kevalādvaita, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita, Madhva's Dvaita, Nimbārka's Svābhāvika-Bhedābheda and Vallabha's Śuddhādvaita – though, to be clear, this project is neither intended to be polemical in style nor apologetic in genre.

Finally, in Part 4, I revert to the clues Clooney indicated in his chapter and relate them to the theological discussions from Parts 2 and 3. This will provide a measure of the relative success of this endeavour in testing his ideas. I then expand upon this test by engaging with a broader, more 'Christian' definition of

theology set by St Anselm of Canterbury, and read it alongside a Hindu verse from the Bhagavad-Gītā, seeing how it is demonstrated by the example of Arjuna, thereby suggesting a *Hindu* formulation of Hindu theology (and maybe even of theology).

But why or how is all this significant and to whom? This I will address in relation to practitioners of the Svāminārāyaṇa community, scholars within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, scholars studying the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and community from other disciplines (both from within and outside of the Svāminārāyaṇa community), theologians (both Hindu and non-Hindu) of other Hindu traditions, and theologians of other religious faiths.

Since this thesis is envisioned as creating an entry-point for further theological reflection and critical analysis, both within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition and beyond, the final portion of this Part will consider possible ways forward, or as Clooney puts it, to “chart the course of the future of Hindu theology.”³ A part of that future course will expectedly trace secular concerns and concerns of modernity – such as science, law, politics, art, etc. – where theology meets, intersects, collides and coalesces with other fields of study and interest. The hope would be that (Svāminārāyaṇa) Hindu theologians and theologians interested in (Svāminārāyaṇa) Hindu theology will be better placed to embark upon this journey – or journeys, rather – now that this vital theology of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition is in place. Characteristically, Clooney rests this responsibility squarely on the “intellectuals writing today who are willing to be called ‘Hindu theologians’”.⁴

Of course, one need not be humble to acknowledge here that there have already been great works of theological significance based on Hindu thought, though admittedly, virtually all have been produced by Western, non-Hindu theologians. Furthermore, new and credible, albeit only a few, Hindu scholars are beginning to engage in the theology of their own traditions. So what makes this a unique project is not that it is about Hindu theology or by a Hindu theologian, but that 1) it is self-consciously dealing with theology in a Hindu context *qua* ‘Hindu theology’; and 2) it is aiming to systematically affirm ‘Hindu theology’ as a category in Indian intellectual discourse by theologising within the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition, for which no such comprehensive theological study exists.

To summarise, this thesis is an attempt by a practitioner-theologian to explain the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition in theological terms according to recognised scholarly standards and conventions. This will 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,

³ Clooney, “Restoring ‘Hindu Theology’” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 463.

⁴ *ibid.*

South Asian studies, anthropology, political science, and other disciplines. More broadly, the thesis aims not just at describing or justifying Hindu theology; it involves constructively and systematically *doing* theology as well. It is 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 take Hindu theology beyond its usual national and linguistic borders; the fact that this is in English and uses terms previously reserved solely for Christian theology makes it immediately comparative and relevant. Yet it will also be an opportunity to compare ancient Hindu theology 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.”⁵

⁵ Clooney, “Restoring ‘Hindu Theology’” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 470.