PART 1: INTRODUCTION

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1) Setting the Scene

1.1) Theme and Scheme

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, style, 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.

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

It is important to acknowledge that Clooney is not the first to propose or advocate the case for 'Hindu theology'. Julius Lipner wrote in 1986: "The time has come, I believe, to rehabilitate 'theology' as an apt description for a substantial part of the intellectual tradition of the Hindus." *The Face of Truth: A Study of Meaning and Metaphysics in the Vedāntic Theology of Rāmānuja* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. ix. More than a decade before him, John Carman had already written *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974). And while not explicitly a work of reflection and analysis, *Hindu Theology: Themes, Texts & Structures*, edited with an introduction and notes by José Pereira (Garden City: Image Books, 1976), provides an overview of Hindu theology and twenty six chapters summarising major and minor schools of Hindu thought. Most recently, Graham Schweig provides some historical background to the use of 'theology' in a non-Christian and Hindu context, in particular, and in a Vaiṣṇava context, most specifically, in *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential Teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada* by Tamal Krishna Goswami, edited with an introduction and conclusion by Graham M. Schweig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 205-07.

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.

To understand how this will be possible, I begin with an overview of Clooney's chapter, before going on to explain the scope and rationale of this project, as well as its sources, structure, and the methodology I adopt.

1.1.1) A Summary of Clooney's Chapter

In setting the framework for his argument, Clooney guides his chapter with two fundamental questions: 1) Can we identify a mode of discourse which can justly be called 'Hindu theology'? And 2) if we can, is it worthwhile to do so?

He opens by discussing the relationship and differences between philosophy and theology. After drawing upon the history of the heated debate between these two disciplines in Europe, and how this was carried over to the context of Indian thought, Clooney asserts that 'philosophy' alone seems "inadequate to the spiritual and religious values at stake" – no matter how deeply intertwined the latter may be with rigorous reasoning. Thus, "'theology' remains a most viable and useful term" *sui generis.*

But why is it important to defend reference to 'theology' in the Hindu context? Framed another way, why is 'theology' more useful than 'philosophy' in

identifying key aspects of Hindu thought? Clooney tackles his second question by

firstly distinguishing two types of reasoning – 'philosophical reasoning', which

disregards authoritative religious sources, and 'theological reasoning', which is

marked by attention to scripture and other religious authorities. It is the latter,

Clooney argues, which "most accurately describes some of the major trajectories

of Hindu thought." This makes 'theology' not a pejorative category or term, as

was the case in Enlightenment Europe, but a positively profitable one for

describing and understanding Hindu thought, alongside or opposed to 'religion',

'philosophy' and 'indology'.

Having thus proposed "an initial case" for why it is both possible and worthwhile

to interpret some strands of Hindu thought as 'theology', Clooney moves on to

the heart of the chapter, to present a number of considerations to help identify

what can justly be called 'theological' in the Hindu context.

Of course, Hindu texts which focus primarily on "a supreme, personal intelligent

being who is the world source and guarantor of the significance of human life" is

a legitimate starting point for identifying 'theology'. However, Clooney goes

further by presenting seven specific themes to help define Hindu theology more

widely and thoroughly. These are:

1. The nature of a sufficient world cause, world-maker

2. Whether God is one or many

3. Divine embodiment

4. The problem of evil

5. The nature and time of liberation

6. The appeal to revelation

7. 'Ignorance' as a theological category

While all these topics are *religiously* significant, having a basis in scriptural texts, they are also *practically* significant, being arguable even if rooted in faith.

It is this reasoned argumentation to which Clooney next turns. The "key" to theology, he maintains, "is the convergence of belief and reason", where reason is "focused – and constricted – by religious concerns." Citing the case of Vedānta, among other examples, he notes how 'manana' is proper theological reasoning because it is positioned between scripture ('śravaṇa') and religious practice ('nididhyāsana'). Crucially, he adds, only those systems of thought which demonstrate such argumentative possibility can be justifiably theological and complete, for "even theological positions are arguable positions."

The final set of clues Clooney delineates relate to issues of style, context, and community, what he calls "contextual factors". For example, commentary upon a text is an important clue to the presence of theological discourse within it, because it indicates that the text's ideas are worthy of further reflection, expansion and articulation, of intellectual respect.

He further proposes that Hindu theology is ordinarily – though not invariably – Sanskrit-language discourse, either composed in the Sanskrit language or in

languages deeply influenced by Sanskrit reasoning (such as Hindi and Gujarati). He of course acknowledges that "while in theory this need not be the case, it seems in fact to be so", citing the Tamil Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva texts as exceptions perhaps proving the rule.

Clooney also observes that since theology does not occur in isolation, but within a community of those who write it and those who read it, there are bilateral expectations that must also be considered. Only if a community accepts a text as explicating its beliefs or defending them against competing religious systems will the text be properly recognised as theological and its author as a theologian. Similarly, authors, in order to be recognised as theologians and their works as theological, must aim to intelligibly communicate or defend deeper matters of faith to a practicing religious community. Both -- communities expecting theology and authors seeking a theological audience -- find one another within larger faith communities. Here, Clooney iterates: "Of course, 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."

Clooney then goes on to share his thoughts on theology as a complex discourse, and suggests a few examples of theological and non-theological texts, mainly from the Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta systems.

In his final reflections, Clooney suggests that, while it is not the remit of this chapter to explain the word "Hindu", there is the possibility of appreciating it

anew in the light of theology, "as a plausible, arguable, and useful theological category with which one can usefully begin to understand the predominate Indian religious ways of believing and practising."

He then closes with a reiteration of his earlier concessions: "I admit that since we are speaking of *Hindu* theology and not just *theology*, the final test must occur in a communal context, among thinkers who are willing to identify themselves as both 'Hindus' and 'theologians.'"[2]

1.2) Scope and Rationale

From Clooney's insightful and cogent chapter, we are able to distil at least the following four broad topics:

- Themes of Hindu theology
- Mode of Hindu theology
- Sources of Hindu theology
- Contexts of Hindu theology

Clearly, these are the topics that need to be addressed within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition if we are to use it as a case study to test Clooney's ideas. However, this thesis is as much about *doing* Hindu theology as it is about determining or

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[2] Clooney reiterates his argument and hope for Hindu theology in his latest, seminal work on comparative theology, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford & Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). He writes: "Since we are speaking of *Hindu* theology and not a *theology of Hinduism*, the final test must occur in the Hindu context, if and when there are thinkers willing to identify themselves as both 'Hindus' and 'theologians.' They must decide whether to agree that there is Hindu theology; I hope they do." p. 79 (emphasis original).

discussing its traits. Indeed, what better proof could there be of the possibility of Hindu theology than actually theologising within a Hindu tradition using its own theological tools and parameters. The above topics thus become a framework or pointers for theologising rather than just distinguishing features of Hindu theology. That is, they tell us:

- WHAT to theologise

- HOW to theologise

- WITH WHAT to theologise   .

- WHERE to theologise

The aim, then, is to use the considerations outlined by Clooney – themes (WHAT), reasoned argumentation (HOW), sources (WITH WHAT), and contexts (WHERE) – to identify the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as a Hindu theological system, thus providing an *a posteriori* affirmation of Hindu theology in general.

This still leaves the important question of 'WHY theologise?'.

Of course, it is certainly not the case that the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition has hitherto not communicated its beliefs or provided any defence of it. 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 and surviving

long since its inception over two hundred years ago. Today, 'Swaminarayan

Hinduism', as it has been called, 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.[3] In all of

these regions, practitioners face the inescapable reality of a religiously diverse

social matrix. In fact, outside of India, the Svāminārāyaṇa community lives as a

minority Hindu faith in a setting which is essentially Judeo-Christian in culture if

not avowedly also in faith.[4]

Moreover, even within India, the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community finds itself

confessing a faith articulated in nineteenth-century texts (whose roots are traced

to far more ancient Hindu scriptures), yet living out those beliefs in the post-

modern world. Now, a new, *theological* framework or vocabulary is needed to

make this faith and practice intelligible to our religious and non-religious others.

Indeed, it is in this nexus of inter-religious, cross-cultural encounters – Hindu

and Christian, Indian and Western, traditional and post-modern – that this

project finds it impetus.

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[3]   See Raymond Brady Williams, *Swaminarayan Hinduism: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[4]   For example, speaking at Oxford University's Christ Church college at an event commemorating the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, British Prime Minister David Cameron stated on 16 December 2011: "We are a Christian country. And we should not be afraid to say so." He immediately added: "Let me be clear: I am not in any way saying that to have another faith – or no faith – is somehow wrong. I know and fully respect that many people in this country do not have a religion. And I am also incredibly proud that Britain is home to many different faith communities, who do so much to make our country stronger. But what I am saying is that the Bible has helped to give Britain a set of values and morals which make Britain what it is today." Online Source: http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/king-james-bible [accessed 27 November 2012].

1.3) Methodology

Alister McGrath writes in his popular introduction to Christian theology that "questions of method have dominated modern theology, not least on account of the challenge of the Enlightenment to establish reliable foundations of knowledge."[5] However, he quotes Jeffery Stout of Princeton University as he observes: "Preoccupation with methodology is like clearing your throat; it can go on for only so long before you lose your audience."[6] David Kelsey, in prefacing his stupendous two-volume *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, too bemoans "today's methodologically hyper-self-conscious world of technical academic theology".[7] He therefore confesses that identifying any methodological commitments to a complex theological project can be "largely retrospective", warning that "we should probably be sceptical of efforts to formulate the correct theological method in the abstract, prior to any effort to formulate and commend particular material theological proposals, as though a theological method should serve as an instructions booklet about how to assemble your very own Christian theological conceptual structure." Theology, he believes, "is too much of an art form to be regulated in that way." Besides, "the intellectual and imaginative challenges peculiar to different theological topics are so diverse that any set of methodological rules purporting to cover them all would have to be so general as

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[5] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th edn (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 112.

[6] Ibid.

[7] David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), I, p. 12.

to be useless."[8] Daniel Migliore similarly cites the "growing danger" that "the work of theology is being replaced by the work of *preparing* to do theology."[9]

This project is squarely committed to the *work* of theology. However, without indulging too far in any methodological technicalities, some basic notes on how I intend to go about this theological project are nonetheless necessary.

In attempting to identify and locate theology within a Hindu context, the task, as Clooney observes, "involves a reflection on Hindu intellectual discourses and an intelligent re-use of ideas rooted in Christian and Western intellectual sensitivities."[10] Specifically, I am adopting the style of 'Systematic Theology', to formulate a clear, orderly and coherent overview of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition's key doctrinal themes which can then be held up for testing against Clooney's clues.

I am aware that systematic theology has come some under suspicion in the postmodern era, specifically for its attempts to offer neat, doctrinal packages, often dismissed or derided as 'mere dogmatics'. The shift of authority from the theologian to the individual has especially raised questions about whether any useful, meaningful understanding of God can be systematised, that is, according

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[8]   Ibid.

[9]   Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), p. xiii. Emphasis added.

[10]   Clooney, 'Restoring "Hindu Theology"', in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 449.

to the critiques, boxed into categories with an arrogant sense of finality. After all, the Bible is not itself systematically structured. It is a diverse collection of writings and, even while believed to be God's inerrant Word, is not a mere handbook of doctrine and morals. As Princeton theologian Charles Hodge wrote, "The Bible is no more a system of theology than nature is a system of chemistry or of mechanics".[11] Like the Bible, neither the Vacanāmrut nor the Upaniṣads or Bhagavad-Gītā are organised according to doctrinal loci.

Nevertheless, as Migliore defends, "the effort of theology to be 'systematic' should be affirmed insofar as it expresses trust in the unity and faithfulness of God in all God's works. Because God is faithful, there are patterns and continuities in the acts of God attested in Scripture that give shape and coherence to theological reflection."[12] He goes on to engage David Tracy who argues that "fragments" rather than "totalities" best describe the form of our knowledge of God. Even so, a provisional "gathering of fragments" is still possible and necessary.[13] The corralling, organising and contextualising of key passages and discussions into as coherent an account as possible is the task of the systematic theologian.[14] Hodge explains: "This is not an easy task, or one of slight importance."[15]

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[11] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1940), I, p. 1.

[12] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 12.

[13] David Tracy, 'Form and Fragment: The Recovery of the Hidden and Incomprehensible God', *Reflections: Centre of Theological Inquiry*, 3 (Autumn 2000), 62-88 cited in Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 12.

[14] It shall become apparent that I do not see theology as an exclusive enterprise performed by a cadre of professional theologians in the academy or ministers in 'Church' (or pundits and

Many of my decisions in undertaking this important task have been guided by the appreciation that this is the very first such systematic theological account of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya and perhaps one of very few of a living Hindu tradition. By design, I have therefore kept the scope of the project broad so as to provide a thorough – though by no means exhaustive – overview of the Svāminārāyaṇa system as a useful example of Hindu theology at work. This has necessitated an exposition of all its main themes, as is the nature and demand of systematic theology, which has sometimes precluded an in-depth exploration of each of them in a single-volume work[16]. Nevertheless, I have attempted to demonstrate the possibility of deep theological reflection and analysis at various junctures, for example, in the technical, hermeneutical study of certain Upaniṣadic and Bhagavad-Gītā statements in relation to the ontological distinction of Akṣarabrahman from Parabrahman (see chapter 7.1). To employ a photographic analogy, I have used both a wide-angle lens to set the scene of the landscape and then also, at useful and interesting points in the expanse, shifted to a telephoto lens to zoom in on the finer details. This should provide an

priests in a temple) – although as a both a scholar and ordained monk I see the great worth of both these roles – but an *active* exercise for every member of a religious community in which they participate by reflecting upon and practicing their faith in search of greater understanding. Indeed, as we shall see in the very conclusion, from the example of Arjuna, this forms the defining characterisation of theology and thus Hindu theology. See also Nicholas M. Healy, 'What is Systematic Theology?', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 11 (2009), 24-39 on his three types of 'systematic theology': 1) 'official', produced by the institutional church; 2) 'ordinary' theological reflection, engaged in by virtually all believers; and 3) 'professional', performed by academics.

[15] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 2.

[16] I am, of course, thinking of the multi-volume works of Systematic Theology by Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Charles Hodgson, Robert Jenson, etc.

adequate 'lay of the land' while also demonstrating the scope of depth possible.
[17]

The expansive nature of this project has also led it to be largely descriptive in style. The deliberate intention has been to lay the ground work, ready for subsequent rounds of theologising and critical analysis. As Lipner too chose for his presentation of Rāmānuja's thought in *The Face of Truth*[18], I believe it was vital at this nascent stage of Svāminārāyaṇa studies to concentrate on carefully expounding the Svāminārāyaṇa system rather than critiquing it, though I hope this has not been at the expense of any academic rigour or clarity.

To help ensure a clear, concise and precise exposition, I have endeavoured (though admittedly not always with the same degree of success) towards simplicity and economy of expression without simplifying or abbreviating the ideas themselves. Nor have I felt the need to impress my readers with linguistic sophistication. Rather, the objective has always been a clear communication of theological concepts, which, I have been keenly aware of throughout, may already appear new and abstruse to those inhabiting a world which is markedly different linguistically, culturally, historically and religiously to that of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu tradition.

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[17] I am grateful to my communication with Graham Schweig which led to this analogy and the clarity it lends to the approach of this project.

[18] "It seemed to be more important at this relatively early stage of Rāmānuja studies to concentrate on critically expounding Rāmānuja's difficult thought than to give it a critique, and though I have made no concessions to rigour in analysis I have tried always to be clear." Lipner, *The Face of Truth*, p. xi.

As way of further testing for Hindu theology within the Svāminārāyaṇa system, I cite abundantly from the tradition's original primary sources. Though it may be the first time some will be encountering the Vacanāmrut and Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya, for example, this shall hopefully serve well in introducing their theological content and style as well as the potential for further theological study by serious scholars of Hindu theology.

To avoid becoming totally unwieldy, however, I have had to delimit the project in a number of ways. Reluctantly, for example, I have not been able to draw upon the Pañcarātra texts, which are a vast and rich corpus of source material for many of the beliefs and especially of the practices associated with Svāminārāyaṇa theology. Perhaps this can be the subject of a later project.

This project is also delimited by the immediate context of my writing and experience, about which I want to be clear. As an ordained monk of the Svāminārāyaṇa order, I do not pretend for a moment to represent all Hindu theologians or to articulate *the* comprehensive or definitive version of Hindu theology, as if one even exists. The Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya is but one strand in the richly diverse tapestry that is Hinduism. Furthermore, the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition itself comprises many denominations – fibres constituting that strand – each espousing its own version of the truth revealed by Svāminārāyaṇa[19]. I write

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[19] Svāminārāyaṇa was born on 3 April 1781 in northern India. After a childhood of prodigious learning and the passing of his parents, he left home at the age of 11 to travel alone as a child-yogi, wearing only a loin-cloth and carrying little besides a staff and gourd. His journey took him to the Himalayas, around India, into Nepal and Tibet, and through Myanmar (Burma) and

from within one of those denominations, the Bocāsanavāsī Śrī Akṣara

Puruṣottama Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā (commonly abbreviated to 'BAPS

Svāminārāyaṇa Sansthā' or sometimes simply 'BAPS')[20]. This exposition is thus

an example of *a* Hindu theology, of which there are many others, none definitive

or representative of the whole.

1.3.1) Terminology

A short note on terminology is also in order.

Clooney rightly observes in his notes that in presenting Hindu theology, one must

find a comfortable mode of commuting between Sanskrit (and other Indian

languages) and English. "This is not an endeavour", he warns, "for those who

think that no term in English can ever suitably represent a term from the

Sanskrit language."

Bangladesh. After seven years and 7,000 miles (12,000 kilometres), he settled in the west-Indian state of Gujarat. There, at the age of 21, he founded what came to be known as the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya. Over his 28-year ministry, he introduced many social and religious reforms and initiated 3,000 sadhus (ordained monks), 500 of whom were of the highest order, called 'paramhansas'. He also built six traditional temples and inspired many works of poetry and prose. He is reported to have been worshipped as God in his own lifetime. He passed away on 30 June 1830.

For a comprehensive biographical account of the life and work of Svāminārāyaṇa, see Harshad T. Dave's five-volume *Bhagvān Śrī Svāminārāyaṇ* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2005). For a concise introduction in Gujarati, see Sadhu Adarshjivandas's *Sarvāvatārī Bhagvān Svāminārāyaṇ: Jīvan ane Kārya* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2005), 240 pages, and in English, Sadhu Mukundcharandas's, *Bhagwan Swaminarayan: An Introduction* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2007), 106 pages. For a short summary, see Williams, *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, pp. 12-32.

[20] For a concise historical and photographic introduction, see the centennial commemorative publication *100 Years of BAPS: Foundation, Formation, Fruition* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2007), 188 pages, with text by Sadhu Amrutvijaydas.

Translating into any language, even from within a tradition, can be fraught with danger and difficulty. One need only look at the centuries of continuing efforts in faithfully transposing biblical ideas from Greek and Aramaic, and how it may have affected the concept of the 'virgin' birth, key eschatological themes such as the 'Kingdom' of God, etc., to appreciate this. How more, then, is this project littered with potential pitfalls when translating into a language which is so syntactically and culturally different from Gujarati and Sanskrit? It is also true that technical words hold not only intellectual content but emotional associations. Holding true to this 'idiom' of Hindu theology is especially difficult and important.

The challenge for me, then, was a delicate double-balancing act, of writing in a language that is familiar to theologians and scholars unfamiliar with Hindu theology, especially the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, while obviously remaining faithful to the concepts I was trying to present, *but* being careful also to not distort those concepts in an overzealous attempt to familiarise them in theological language. To be absolutely certain of avoiding such simplifications, I could have lazily resorted to using native Gujarati or Sanskrit terms, or coining new ones, but then those might not be easily understood by my readers. Then again, nor did I wish to make it so simplistically similar that it led to the false impression that 'Oh, that is just like what we find in Christianity.' I trust my

Christian readers will appreciate the many nuances of each faith and not make such facile connections.[21]

To restate this challenge: in using words that are familiar to communicate concepts which are not, the danger is that the reader will read her familiar understanding into a concept which is in fact different (though not always vastly so). So should the familiar word be used, and risk a misunderstanding? Or should one use a foreign word, and risk no understanding at all? To say that one needs to strike a balance is beside the point.

As is becoming common practice now, I use familiar words as a starting point, qualifying them sufficiently to lead the reader into understanding something which is analogous to what she might already know yet would require some reasonable modification. This careful reading and re-reading is itself a deeply inter-religious act of learning which Clooney proposes through his many works on comparative theology.[22] Parimal Patil, too, notes: "Explaining, in English, theological arguments formulated in technical philosophical Sanskrit (or Tamil and others) is already a deeply interreligious, comparative and dialogical task."[23]

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[21] Of course, there are a great many points that can serve as valuable nodes of comparative work – both similarities and differences – which I pick up on in the final part when I suggest ways forward from this preliminary work. See chapter 13.2.3.

[22] See especially his *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford & Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[23] Patil, 'A Hindu Theologian's Response', in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p 192.

Perhaps more than sheer etymological translatability, our challenge pertains to the doctrinal connotations of theological terms which have a first and predominantly Christian meaning. For example, how can 'soteriology', which generally presupposes original sin in Christianity, be legitimately used or adapted for Hindu theology when discussing mukti, where the soul is conceived as being inherently pure but in need of liberation from a false self-understanding?

This also raises the politically charged question of who *owns* theological words, such as 'God' and 'salvation'? Does salvation *have* to presuppose original sin? If not, what will the Christian be saved from? How distinct is the concept of being 'saved' from being 'freed'? Or can soteriology also mean being *liberated* from the bondage of sin, from the clutches of death the enemy, with Christ the victor over forces that enslave humanity? Conversely, if souls can be liberated from sin, can jīvas be *saved* from māyā? Can indeed doctrines be argued on words? For example, can that which is not hidden be revealed? If not, how accurate is 'revelation' in referring to scriptural descriptions about God in Hindu theology? Can that which is not damned be saved? If not, how proper is it to speak of the 'salvation' of the jīva?

Those who brazenly dismiss such debates as 'mere semantics' would do well to remember that theologians for centuries have fought zealously over meaning and interpretation, from the early ecumenical councils arguing the union of the two natures in Christ and his consubstantiality with God the Father, to disputes

among the Vedāntic schools arguing for which type of non-dualism is accurate – pure, qualified, singular, or none at all.

In an effort for increased accuracy and intelligibility, one alternative to using Sanskrit terms, such as 'mukti mīmāṃsā', could be to employ their Latin or Greek equivalents, such as līberātiō. Extending this to parallel various derivatives, we can have 'liberation' (for 'salvation'), 'liberatology' (for 'soteriology'), 'liberatological' (for 'soteriological'), 'liberative' or 'liberatific' (for 'salvific'), and 'liberator' (for 'saviour'). But this still does little to clarify the different and nuanced doctrinal meanings underlying such terms.

Another option could be to apply Greek suffixes to Sanskrit terms. Like Christology, could we have 'Brahmology' or 'Gurology'? When suggesting 'Buddhology' or 'Dharmology' for Buddhist theology, José Ignacio Cabezón observed that "new nomenclature…, besides being infelicitous, will become meaningful only through consensual use, which in any discipline is difficult to achieve."[24] A more prevalent practice has been to form adjectives and even adverbs from popular Sanskrit nouns, such as 'yogic' and 'yogically' from 'yoga'.[25]

What should be apparent is that there does not (yet) appear to be a consensus among scholars on the best or accepted way to proceed on this matter. Until

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[24] José Ignacio Cabezón, 'Buddhist Theology in the Academy', in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. by Roger Jackson and John Makransky (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000), p. 25.

[25] See Style Guide for further examples of such usage in this thesis.

there is, and possibly even thereafter, there will need to be a patient learning

process for both readers and writers. Readers will have to avoid, as far as

possible, (dis)colouring their understanding of new concepts with already

known ideas from their own faith. If I use 'salvation', for example, can I be sure

that the Christian will not assume that the Hindu soul is also born of original sin

which needs to be 'saved' rather than liberated? Equally for the writers, they will

be called to adopt new terms and ways to express their theological ideas, often

learning from other systems, all the while being true to the ideas themselves,

without compromising, as far as possible, their complexity, richness, profundity,

and subtle nuances.

In an effort to make Hindu theology intelligible and appreciable, I struggled, as

perhaps was inevitable, towards a 'happy middle' (not a compromise) between

the two extremes of stubborn adherence to native terminology and wilful

ascension to over-translation, happily and humbly appreciating the power and

limitation of words. More often than not, I had to concede to Patil's pragmatic

observation: "Hindu intellectuals will be forced, at least for the present, to

conform to the vocabulary and genre conventions of contemporary philosophical

theology."[26]

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[26] Patil, 'A Hindu Theologian's Response', in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 188.

1.4) Sources

For Clooney, so inextricably tied are theology and theological texts, he often moves from defining one to the other almost instinctively, as if both were one and the same project. Indeed, identifying Hindu texts of theological merit goes a long way in identifying Hindu systems of theological merit, since the latter is necessarily so firmly rooted in the former. With such a clear and strong emphasis on texts within theology in general, especially revelatory texts, this project for Hindu theology shall similarly be guided by and grounded in Hindu texts.

In particular, I rely upon two sets of textual sources for this project. The primary sources from the Svāminārāyaṇa corpus primarily include the Vacanāmrut 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.[27] 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.

Some further description is warranted to introduce the main primary texts.

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[27] The polysemantic nature of the Prasthānatrayī texts makes commentaries a necessary and integral part of Vedāntic literature. Traditionally, each of the Vedānta schools formulated their own interpretations in their commentaries to establish and validate their doctrines as being in consonance with the original revelatory sources.

Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya: This voluminous set of commentaries on the canonical

texts of Vedānta forms an important *magnum opus* of the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu

tradition. It provides a detailed *verbo in verbum* explication and elaboration of

the root text as well as a thorough elucidation and defence of the theological and

philosophical concepts interpreted to be embedded therein. Though published

very recently, between May 2009 and April 2012, the Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya is

very much composed in the genre of other Vedāntic schools' much older, classical

commentaries, that is, it is written in Sanskrit and is rich in ratiocination while

religiously protecting the revelatory status of its sources, foreseeing and

forestalling contestations by offering *prima facie* views before consummately

dismantling them and advancing the one, exegetically sound and conclusive

interpretation according to the Svāminārāyaṇa school of thought.

Comprising five volumes and spanning over two thousand pages, the

Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya commentates on the three foundational Vedāntic texts,

commonly referred to collectively as the 'Prasthānatrayī', i.e. the Brahmasūtras,

the ten principal Upaniṣads, and the Bhagavad-Gītā, as follows:

1. Brahmasūtra-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (462 pages)

2. Īśādyaṣṭopaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (476 pages)

   This contains a commentary on the following eight:

   o Īśā Upaniṣad

   o Kena Upaniṣad

   o Kaṭha Upaniṣad

   o Praśna Upaniṣad

- o Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad

- o Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad

- o Taittirīya Upaniṣad

- o Aitareya Upaniṣad

3. Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (389 pages)

4. Chāndogyopaniṣat-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (419 pages)

5. Śrīmad-Bhagavad-Gītā-Svāminārāyaṇa-Bhāṣya (404 pages)

The author, Bhadreśa Svāmī, is a scholar-sādhu of the BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa order with a string of academic qualifications and accolades to his name, including: Ṣaḍdarśanācārya (the equivalent of a Masters degree in each of the six orthodox schools of theistic Indian thought), Navyanyāyācārya (a Masters in neo-classical Indian logic), Vyākaraṇācārya (a Masters in classical Sanskrit grammar), a Ph.D. in Philosophy based on the Bhagavad-Gītā, and a D.Litt. in Vedānta. Most recently, he was conferred the title of 'Mahāmahopadhyāya' by Kavikulaguru Kālidāsa Saṃskṛta Viśvavidyālāya in recognition for his outstanding contributions to 'Indian Philosophy' by way of these commentaries. Throughout, I refer to him as the 'Bhāṣyakāra' (the 'commentator').

Vacanāmrut: The Vacanāmrut – literally, '(immortalising) ambrosia in the form of words' – is a collection of 274 discourses[28] delivered by Svāminārāyaṇa during

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[28] The version I am using is the original Gujarati text published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith, which itself is a letter-to-letter, printed version of the original manuscript, containing 262 discourses, published in 1928 under the auspices of Acharya Shripatiprasad of the Vartal diocese. A further eleven discourses accepted as canonical by the Ahmedabad diocese only are

the last ten years of his life, between 1819 and 1829 CE. These discourses were meticulously documented and compiled by four of his most learned and senior disciples – Gopālānanda Svāmī, Muktānanda Svāmī, Nityānanda Svāmī and Śukānanda Svāmī – and later presented to him for review and personal approval (see, for example, the mention in Vac. Loyā.7).

The text is divided into ten sections, based on the various villages and towns in which the discourses were delivered. The sections are chronological in order and are named as follows: Gaḍhaḍā I, Sāraṅgpur, Kāriyāṇī, Loyā, Pancāḷā, Gaḍhaḍā II, Vartāl, Amdāvād, and Gaḍhaḍā III. An additional section includes eleven discourses from Amdāvād, Aślālī and Jetalpur, and a letter dictated from Gaḍhaḍā containing a cosmological description of the world (therefore titled 'Bhūgoḷ-Khagoḷ'). Each individual discourse is also called a 'Vacanāmrut', and these are arranged chronologically and numbered sequentially within each section. Hence, 'Vacanāmrut Vartāl 11' (abbreviated to 'Vac. Var.11'), for example, is the eleventh recorded discourse delivered by Svāminārāyaṇa in the town of Vartāl.

Ingeniously, each Vacanāmrut opens with an introductory paragraph meticulously describing the setting of the assembly in which the discourse was delivered. Even at the risk of sounding repetitive, the compilers invariably recorded the date, the month, the year, the village, the location within the village, and a mention of the audience seated in the assembly. In many instances, they

appended as 'Additional Vacanāmruts'. To this is traditionally added the 'Bhūgoḷ-Khagoḷ' letter, thereby making 274 sermons in total.

also noted the time of day and described the clothes and adornments Svāminārāyaṇa was wearing. In some instances, they even describe the seat upon which he was seated and the direction in which he was facing. This does much to lend the text a sense of historical authenticity.

In literary style, the Vacanāmrut is highly dialogical and didactic, with most discourses taking the form of a question-and-answer session, where either Svāminārāyaṇa asks the questions or members of his audience do, sometimes at his urging. Even if he begins a sermon unprompted, he would sometimes question his own explanation to confirm if his audience had understood him correctly or to proleptically counter opposing views. More often, though, his aspiring seeker-followers, ranging from senior monks to lay farmers, would be braced with questions from their current readings of Hindu texts or their own personal application of those teachings. As Svāminārāyaṇa would answer, sometimes a series of follow-up questions or counter-questions would ensue as they probed for further clarity or refinement in their understanding of his teachings. This orality and reciprocal aurality between Svāminārāyaṇa and his disciples situates the Vacanāmrut in the ancient Upaniṣadic tradition of a guru-śiṣya dialogue.[29]

Svāminārāyaṇa spoke in the local language of Gujarati, presenting complex concepts in simple, lucid terms, drawing extensively on popular stories from the

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[29] See Sadhu Brahmadarshandas's *Vacanāmrut Rahasya* Vol. 1 (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith; 1999), 242 pages, for a detailed and insightful introduction to the Vacanāmrut.

Purāṇas and epics and employing analogies and day-to-day examples, perhaps in an attempt to make his teachings as accessible as possible to his wide-ranging audience. He also cited profusely from the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā, Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, and various other authoritative Hindu texts.

Most importantly, the Vacanāmrut is accepted within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as the primary revelatory text by which its doctrines are established and articulated. As we shall see in Part 2, this abiding status of the Vacanāmrut is predicated on the distinctive belief of the faith community that Svāminārāyana, as the self-manifestation of God, is both the source and subject of revelatory knowledge comprised within it.

Vedarasa: Svāminārāyaṇa also sent long, preceptive letters addressed to his paramhansas (Hindu monks of the highest order). Apart from high moral instruction for a monastic way of life, the letters also included considerable doctrinal elucidation. Some of these letters have been compiled and published under the title 'Vedarasa' (the 'essence of the Vedas').

Svāminī Vāto: Guṇātītānanda Svāmī (1785-1867 CE) was one Svāminārāyaṇa's most prominent ordained monks and, accordingly to some denominations within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, including the BAPS Svāminārāyaṇa order, was revealed by Svāminārāyaṇa as the personified human form of Akṣarabrahman on earth. He is thus the first spiritual successor of Svāminārāyaṇa and the first in the lineage of Brahmasvarūpa Gurus continuing to this today. He taught extensively

over his forty-year ministry, and many of these most important teachings were noted by followers who lived and travelled with him. In his lifetime, these notes were compiled and even discoursed upon after being reviewed by Guṇātītānanda Svāmī, thereby giving the compilation the status of an authentic text. It came to be known simply as "Svāmīnī Vāto", the 'talks of [Guṇātītānanda] Svāmī'. Eventually this was published, first in five chapters and later in seven chapters.[30]

The 'talks' themselves range from short, pithy sayings, some just one or a few lines long, to extensive explanations running over several pages. A key feature of the style of instruction is that it makes good use of parables and vivid imagery, drawing freely from quotidian occurrences and scriptural examples. The lucid, colloquial Gujarati language belies the sophisticated concepts it addresses and the practical guidance it provides in applying those concepts, an important emphasis of the teachings. It draws extensively from the Vacanāmrut and also cites several other Hindu texts. In elucidating, elaborating, and providing further insight upon many of the important teachings of the Vacanāmrut, the Svāmīnī Vāto thus serves within the tradition as a 'natural commentary' upon it.[31]

Apart from these textual sources, this thesis has gained immeasurably from the erudition of several scholars who have graciously taken the time to discuss my

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[30] I am using the most recent version of the Gujarati text published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith, which takes advantage of the latest research and a critical study of the original manuscripts.

[31] For a useful introduction to the Svāmīnī Vāto, see Sadhu Brahmadarshandas's *Brahmavidyānā Amūlya Grantho: Vacanāmrut ane Svāmīnī Vāto* (Ahmedabad: Swaminarayan Aksharpith; 2008), pp. 72-150.

work. They continue to be not only a source of profound knowledge and insight but also of invaluable encouragement and inspiration. Some of these scholars include Francis Clooney himself (Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology, Harvard Divinity School), Parimal Patil (Professor of Religion & Indian Philosophy and Chair of the Department of South Asian Studies; Harvard University), Raymond Brady Williams (LaFollette Distinguished Professor in the Humanities *emeritus*; Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana), Ravi Gupta (Associate Professor of Religious Studies; College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia), Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad (Professor and Associate Dean for Research, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; Lancaster University), Graham Schweig (Professor of Religion and Director of the Asian Studies; Christopher Newport University, Virginia), and Patrick Olivelle (Jacob and Frances Sanger Mossiker Chair in the Humanities, Department of Asian Studies; University of Texas at Austin). Deserving special mention here would be my academic guide and friend, Gavin Flood (Professor of Hindu Studies and Comparative Religion, University of Oxford; and Academic Director, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies).

1.5) Structure

I provide here an overview of how this project is intended to unfold.

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

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

As explained above, 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 Svāminī 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 part 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 Svāminārāyana 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 4 will consider possible ways forward, or as

Clooney puts it, to "chart the course of the future of Hindu theology."[32] 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

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[32] Clooney, 'Restoring "Hindu Theology"', in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 463.

tradition is in place. Characteristically, Clooney rests this responsibility squarely on the "intellectuals writing today who are willing to be called 'Hindu theologians'".[33]

1.6) Summary

In 2001, when concluding *Hindu God, Christian God*, Clooney had invited Hindu theologians to "enter this larger conversation" of theology as an "interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and again confessional" project and "do a favour to the rest of us and to themselves"[34]. To this, Patil had responded in his prolegomenon to the imagined *Christian God, Hindu God* that "although the invitation to participate in the project of 'comparative theology' is issued to all Hindu intellectuals, it is, in reality, directed toward those already capable of writing in the languages and style of the Euro-American academy. And since there are, in effect, no professional Hindu theologians, the invitation is directed more narrowly still to Hindu intellectuals in disciplines such as Anthropology, Area Studies, Indology, or History of Religions."[35] Of course, much has transpired over the recent years, and it is safe to believe that this larger conversation has indeed been made possible now.

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

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[33] ibid.

[34] Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 182.

[35] Patil, 'A Hindu Theologian's Response', in *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 188.

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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, 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."[36]

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[36] Clooney, 'Restoring "Hindu Theology"', in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, p. 470.