
3) REVELATION – THE EXCLUSIVE SOURCE OF SVĀMINĀRĀYAṆA HINDU THEOLOGY

Acknowledging the limited scope of human cognition impaired by our māyā-corrupted senses and mind is the first step in accepting revelation as the exclusive source of authentic theological knowledge. The divine, transcendental and unlimited nature of God means that he is hardly, if at all, accessible by human intelligence, imagination and ingenuity. So we need to be *told* what God is like. Indeed, *God* needs to tell us what he is like. Better still: God needs to *show* us who he is. And so he reveals himself.

For the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, this points to the three modes of revelation discernible within the tradition. They are:

- 1) Revelation as the self-manifestation of Parabrahman in the person of Svāminārāyaṇa
- 2) Revelation as Parabrahman being substantively present in and made known by the Brahmasvarūpa Guru
- 3) Revelation through Scripture, i.e. Svāminārāyaṇa's sermons documented in the Vacanāmṛut, and the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus' teachings, such as the Svāmīnī Vāto

As we expand upon each mode in turn, we shall also look to address some important questions and useful discussions that we can further develop in Part 3 concerning the themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology.

3.1) Revelation as Self-Manifestation

The actual appearance or 'self-manifestation' of Parabrahman on earth in an accessible, endearing human form is the most decisive, explicit and direct form of revelation possible. It allows God to not only tell us and show us what that ultimate reality is, but to present it in himself. This self-presenting to humanity of the God who cannot be seen or reached by human effort alone is thus a supreme act of God's loving and liberative grace. Svāminārāyaṇa iterates this repeatedly throughout his sermons, most often while explaining the purpose of this human manifestation in terms of granting ultimate liberation to countless souls. To cite a few brief statements:

That God himself... becomes like a human for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.37).

That God... becomes like a human, out of compassion, to liberate the jīvas (Vac. Pan.7).

Out of compassion, that very same God is manifest... for the purpose of granting ultimate liberation to jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.31).

It is that same supreme Puruṣottama Bhagavān who manifests on this earth out of compassion, for the purpose of granting liberation to the jīvas (Vac. Gaḍh. III.38).

Added to this is the distinctive, fundamental belief of the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya that this earthly manifestation of Parabrahman occurred in the person of Svāminārāyaṇa between 1781 and 1830 CE. The specificity of Parabrahman *as* Svāminārāyaṇa is what lends the concept of revelation its power and authority to the faithful of the tradition. For them, Parabrahman *is*

Svāminārāyaṇa; or, even more personally, Svāminārāyaṇa *is* Parabrahman. He appeared *himself* so that humans may identify who God is and begin to know and relate to him, even within their limited human capacity.

As we shall see in some detail towards the end of the chapter on Parabrahman, followers find instances of Svāminārāyaṇa referring to himself as this highest reality in several of his sermons (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9, Vac. Gaḍh. II.13, Vac. Gaḍh. III.38, Vac. Amd.6, Vac. Amd.7). At this point, it will suffice to quote just one statement cited from old manuscripts of the tradition, personalising the more general statements excerpted above. It reads, firstly using Svāminārāyaṇa's original north-Indian Hindi⁴³:

Dūsarā avatār hai so kārya-kāraṇ avatār huā hai, aur merā yah avatār hai so to jivoku brahmarūp karke ātyantik mukti dene ke vāste Aksarātīt Puruṣottam jo haṃ vah manuṣya jaisā banyā hu.

While other avatāras had manifested to fulfil a particular task, my manifestation is to make souls brahmarūpa ['like Brahman'] and grant them ultimate liberation. That is why I, Puruṣottama who transcends even Akṣara, have become like a human.⁴⁴

⁴³ In his later years, Svāminārāyaṇa's extensive stay in Gujarat meant he became well-versed in Gujarati, and thus delivered sermons (many of which are now documented in the Vacanāmṛut) to his local audience in Gujarati rather than Hindi or Sanskrit.

⁴⁴ Nandkishor Swami, *Ātyantika Kalyāṇa* (Bhuj, India: the author, 1958), p. 76.

See also a similar statement found in one of Svāminārāyaṇa's few extant letters, written to his lay and monastic devotees:

Kalyānke karne vāste merā avatār hai. Āj to mai avidyārūp je māyā hai, tiske nāške vāste pragat huā hū. Āj to merā prayojan ehi hai, jyo avidyāku nās karnā, jivku brahmarūp karnā. Is prayojan vāste me pragat huā hū. Jivuke mukti deneke vāste, manuṣya esā banyā hū (*Śrījīnī Prasādīnā Patro*, 7).

The unequivocal proclamation in this statement of the purpose and person of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa is something that will require a lot more elucidation, which we shall cover in its proper place in the chapters on Parabrahman, Akṣarabrahman and Mukti.

The striking but apparent contradiction of Parabrahman being beyond eyes, speech and mind, as described in the Upanisads and by Svāminārāyaṇa himself, suddenly becoming “pratyakṣa” (‘manifest before the eyes’), as Svāminārāyaṇa also claimed, was not lost on his followers. How could both be possible? Was indeed the one before the eyes that same imperceptible, transcendental Parabrahman? This appears to be the pointed question posed by Daharānanda Svāmī in Vac. Gaḍh. I.78. He asks:

God transcends Akṣara; he is beyond mind and speech; and he is imperceptible to all. Why, then, can everyone see him as manifest before the eyes?

Svāminārāyaṇa replies:

God – who transcends Akṣara, who is beyond mind and speech, and who is imperceptible – himself, out of compassion, resolves: ‘May all the enlightened and unenlightened people on Mr̥tyuloka behold me.’ Having resolved in this manner, God – whose will always prevails – becomes perceivable to all people on Mr̥tyuloka out of compassion (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

Svāminārāyaṇa thus confirms that the human manifestation of Parabrahman is indeed wholly real and transcendental, made possible only by his loving and gracious will.

A similar question initiates the discussion in Vac. Gaḍh. I.51. After establishing the māyic composition of human senses and the inner faculties (by which we think, reason, contemplate, identify, etc.), Pūrṇānanda Svāmī asks:

God, however, transcends māyā. How, then, can one cultivate the conviction of God through the māyic inner faculties? How also can one perceive God with one’s māyic eyes and other senses?

Svāminārāyaṇa first sought to clarify the question by asking:

Māyic objects can be realised by māyic means, and if one has realised God through the same māyic inner faculties and senses, then it implies that God must also be māyic. That is your question, is it not?

Pūrṇānanda Svāmī and the other paramhansas in the audience confirmed:

Yes Mahārāja, that is precisely our question. You have clarified it for us.

Svāminārāyaṇa then began a lengthy exposition of the impassable supremacy of Puruṣottama, the highest Being among all other realities and cosmic elements.

He then concluded:

It is this very God who, out of compassion for the liberation of the jīvas, gives darśana in a manifested form to all of the people on this earth.

Then moving to explain how it can be possible for humans to not only perceive that God but to hold a firm conviction of him, he states:

At that time, if a person realises this greatness of Puruṣottama Bhagavān by profound association with the Sant [i.e. Guru], then all of his senses and inner faculties become divine like Puruṣottama Bhagavān's senses and inner faculties. Then, through those senses and inner faculties, he can develop the conviction of that God.

To help his audience understand, Svāminārāyaṇa employs a useful analogy.

For example, a diamond can be cut only by a diamond; it can never be cut by anything else. Similarly, the conviction of God can only be cultivated through God. In the same way, the darśana of God is also possible only through God, but it is not possible through the māyic senses and inner faculties.

Svāminārāyaṇa's explanation here is relevant to our understanding of his conceptualisation of revelation because it confirms that, firstly, revelation leads to a resolute conviction or realisation of God, and, secondly, that such a realisation is only made possible by God himself or through the help of the Guru,

whom Svāminārāyaṇa refers to here and elsewhere as ‘the Sant’. This has important implications about the ontological position of the Guru within the five-reality system of the Svāminārāyaṇa School which we shall consider at length in the chapter on Akṣarabrahman. His role in leading devotees to a realisation of Parabrahman is something we shall turn to shortly in this chapter.

The striking revelation also worth noting from both these last sermons is the declaration of the utterly transcendental becoming wholly personal – he is *different yet among us* – which is something that makes this self-manifestation especially gracious and powerful for the followers of the tradition and, unsurprisingly, what permeates and guides the whole of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology. It is the self-expression of the supremely divine on māyic earth, the eternal in time, the universally pervasive in a particular human form.

The paradox, of course, is that in showing us what he is like, God has to become like us, partially concealing (not curtailing or abandoning) his divinity and presenting himself as human. As we shall see, this is the conscious and supremely gracious choice God makes in order for humans to be able to relate to him. It seems it is more important to God that humans can love him rather than be impressed by an exhibition of his lordly powers.

This brings us to an important aspect of what it means to know God and how it can be possible. At the heart of Svāminārāyaṇa’s conceptualisation of complete knowledge of God is the entering of the devotee into a direct and intimate

relationship with him, made possible now because of his self-manifestation (and, as we shall see, continued presence through the Guru). This is brought to light in an important epistemological and soteriological discussion that ensues between Svāminārāyaṇa and his senior paramahansas in Vac. Loyā.7. It is worth citing here in some detail to help also demonstrate the theological and dialogical nature of the Vacanāmṛut. The discussion is initiated by Mukṭānanda Svāmī citing from the Hiraṇyakeśīyaśākhāśruti⁴⁵ –

Ṛte jñānān na muktiḥ |

There is no liberation without jñāna

– and the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad –

Tam eva viditvā'timṛtyum eti nānyaḥ panthā vidyāte'yanāya ||

Only by knowing him does one pass beyond death; there is no other path for attaining [liberation] (SU 3.8).

Thereupon he asks:

These Vedic verses proclaim that the jīva attains liberation only when it realises the true 'jñāna' of God. If liberation can only be attained by 'jñāna', why do the scriptures also prescribe other spiritual endeavours for attaining liberation?

Hearing this question, Svāminārāyaṇa simply stated that "jñāna" means 'to know', to which Nityānanda Svāmī raises a doubt.

If jñāna means merely 'to know', then the whole world 'knows' God through the scriptures, yet everyone does not attain liberation.

Acknowledging the point, Svāminārāyaṇa raised a further question:

Just as one does not attain liberation by knowing the previously incarnated forms of God through the scriptures, do you think all

⁴⁵ This is a non-extant Vaiṣṇava text, but the phrase is attributed to it in the *Setumālā* commentary on the *Harivākyasudhāsindhu* at 115.7.

those who actually had the darśana of Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and the other avatāras of God with their own eyes attained liberation?

Muktānanda Svāmī replied:

Those who merely see the manifest form of God attain liberation only after several lives.

To this, Svāminārāyaṇa added:

Those who know God through the scriptures also receive liberation after several lives. Why? Because whom these people know through the scriptures is whom the other people see with their eyes; and whom the other people see with their eyes is whom these people know through the scriptures. Thus, the resulting fruits of both are equal, and both attain liberation after several lives.

Svāminārāyaṇa's point here is that mere information about God from the scriptures – even though they are considered revelatory – is inadequate to secure one's liberation because it is not constitutive of theological knowledge. He equates this sterile data to merely seeing God without a true and clear understanding of his glory. To reiterate his point, he continues with a series of rhetorical questions.

After all, is not hearing God with one's ears 'jñāna'? It is, but that can be said to be merely hearing God. Is not touching God with one's skin also 'jñāna'? It is, but that can be said to be merely touching God. Is not seeing God with one's eyes 'jñāna'? It is, but that is merely seeing God. Is not smelling God with one's nose 'jñāna' as well? It is, but that is merely smelling God. Does not describing God with one's tongue also constitute 'jñāna'? It does, but that is merely having described God. In this way, 'jñāna' can be received through the senses. It can also be received through the mind as well as directly from a spiritual experience of the jīva, which transcends both the senses and the mind.

In conclusion to this point, Svāminārāyaṇa explains:

To know God perfectly is to know the manifest form of God before the eyes through the senses, the inner faculties, and experience.

Only then can one be said to be a perfect jñānin. However, if any one of these three aspects is lacking, one cannot be said to have realised ultimate jñāna, nor can one thereby overcome [the cycle of] births and deaths.

Svāminārāyaṇa thus explains that God can indeed be (partially) known by the senses and the mind, but the ultimate realisation of God can only be complete when it climaxes in full experience within the soul. Nevertheless, all three ways of relating to God are essential. It is important to note here early on Svāminārāyaṇa's emphasis on the manifest, or "pratyakṣa", form of God – the 'one before the eyes' – for only such a form can be known by all three means, including directly through the senses. Furthermore, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on in the same sermon to frame this formulation of theological knowledge in terms of "serving", explaining that complete knowledge irrevocably manifests itself as a personal, devotional relationship with God.⁴⁶ This clearly distinguishes the mere accumulation of brute facts concerning God, that is, 'knowing *about* God', from '*knowing* God' personally, as one would another living being.

Faith is thus not simply an assent to a set of doctrines, but the entering into a devotional, liberating relationship with God which transforms the recipients of that revelation. In this sense, revelation can sometimes be difficult, because it calls upon the changing of the person in light of what has been revealed,

⁴⁶ We shall pick up on this important formulation in the next Part, drawing upon it several times: in the Introduction as a tool to explain why the study of all five eternal entities is a necessary part of the theological project in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology (chapter 5.1), in the chapter on Parabrahman to frame our exposition of God (6), and finally in the chapter on Mukti when elucidating the way to liberation (11.3).

especially her previously held notions about understanding and serving God.⁴⁷ Svāminārāyaṇa thus senses potential for resistance and rejection, making revelation all the more valuable and meaningful when it is willingly accepted. Equally, though, he sees no option but to share his vision of the truth about God's nature, so fundamental it is, he believes, to a devotee's spiritual existence and welfare.

To develop the conviction⁴⁸ of God is more difficult than anything else. Because this topic of conviction is extremely complicated, I am afraid of discussing it. I feel, 'Upon discussing this topic, what if someone were to take it wrongly⁴⁹? If, due to this discussion, any personal understanding that one may have firmly cultivated were to be broken, the person would be uprooted.' Yet, there is no alternative but to reveal this fact. If one does not know how to understand it correctly, many problems can arise. Yet, until one has not understood this fact, much deficiency will remain in one's conviction [of God]. That is why I wish to deliver this discourse (Vac. Loyā.18).

This apprehension also helps explain why Svāminārāyaṇa spoke of himself in varying ways, reportedly in accordance to the receptivity and spiritual maturity of his varying audiences.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See William J. Abraham, 'The Offense of Divine Revelation', *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (2002), 251-64 (p. 259).

⁴⁸ Svāminārāyaṇa frequently uses the terms 'niścaya' or 'niṣṭā', meaning 'conviction', when talking of one's beliefs about or in God. These words can be understood as referring to faith, but of a much stronger and resolute sort.

⁴⁹ This rather literal translation of 'koine avlu pade' has been chosen because it allows the broad, open-ended meaning of the original Gujarati that can incorporate such connotations as misunderstanding or even taking offence.

⁵⁰ Brahadarshandas offers an extensive analysis of these statements in his *Vacanāmṛt Rahasya*, II, pp. 257-333. To this, Shrutiprakashdas adds a useful historical perspective and contextualises several other sampradāyic sources in another in-depth interrogation in *Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāymā Avatār-Avatāri Nirūpan*, pp. 242-453.

This leads us to an associated discussion about the receptivity of revelation and understanding it now from the perspective of the individual soul.

3.1.1) Revelation as Unveiling of the Soul

Members of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith community will see the self-manifestation of Parabrahman on earth as a supremely significant, gracious and unprecedented⁵¹ event. Apart from being an objective occurrence, though, it is also a subjective experience for all those who encounter that revelation (in its various modes), even today. Seen from the perspective of the individual soul, we are offered an opportunity to understand ‘revelation’ anew from within a Hindu theistic context, especially if we are to take the basic meaning of *apokalypsis*, the Greek word usually translated for “revelation”, as the ‘removing of a veil so that something can be seen’.

The basic idea is this: if God is indeed hidden, as the term ‘unveiling’ would presuppose, it is not God who is doing the hiding under some intractable disguise or sheath of darkness. Rather, it is the *soul’s* veil of ignorance – *māyā* – which is obstructing or obscuring a full vision of Parabrahman. In other words, the veil that is removed in *apokalypsis* is not shrouding Parabrahman, but the individual

⁵¹ According to the Svāminārāyaṇa theological system, as we shall learn in the next Part, the *avatāras* are metaphysically *īśvara*, whereas Svāminārāyaṇa is believed to be Parabrahman, the *Avatārin* (or source of the *avatāras*). The ontological distinction and supremacy of the latter makes Parabrahman’s manifestation on earth all the more unique, significant, and powerfully liberative. Svāminārāyaṇa is recorded as revealing that this self-manifestation of Parabrahman has never occurred before in this *brahmāṇḍa* (planetary system), nor shall it ever occur again (SV 4.10, SV 4.13). Guṇātītānanda Svāmī and other ordained and lay disciples have also noted this revelation several times in their own works. See Shrutiprakashdas, *Svāminārāyaṇ Sampradāymā Avatār-Avatārī Nirūpan*, pp. 194-215.

ātman. In unveiling (or 'de-veiling') the soul of its ignorance, God is there to be seen, as he always was. The realisation thus takes the form of not God saying, 'Look, here I am!', but the soul discovering God: 'Oh, there you are!' That is why 'sākṣātkāra' or 'darśana' – the highest state of enlightenment, possible upon liberation from māyā – is, literally, the direct realisation or vision of God, as if 'before the eyes'. Svāminārāyaṇa describes this state as follows:

One who has attained God-realisation... experiences the following: Wherever he casts his eyes – among all the mobile and immobile forms – he sees the form of God as if it is before his eyes, the same form that constantly remains in Akṣaradhāma even after the dissolution of the body, the brahmāṇḍa and Prakṛti-Puruṣa. Other than that form, he does not perceive even an atom (Vac. Kār.7).

We have already seen above that it is by the gracious resolve of Parabrahman that he manifests on earth and makes himself perceptible to humans, notwithstanding their still-māyic senses. However, we also learned from Vac. Loyā.7 that the actual realisation of that Parabrahman – in all his transcendental glory – only occurs when that initial outer perception culminates in an internal liberative experience. It is how well one appropriates this grace of revelation bestowed by Parabrahman that determines the final outcome of realisation. In between these two points on the spiritual journey – from revelation to realisation – lies the process of religious praxis, or sādhanā (literally 'means').

A good example of the soul's need to properly appropriate the grace of God's revelation can be found in the eleventh canto of the Bhagavad-Gītā, often cited by Svāminārāyaṇa in the Vacanāmṛt (Vac. Kār.8, Vac. Pan.6, Vac. Var.18; especially Vac. Gaḍh. I.25 and Vac. Pan.4,).

When Arjuna prays Kṛṣṇa show him his divine, lordly form (11.4-5), Kṛṣṇa reveals his viśvarūpa (cosmic form). But even then, Arjuna is unable to see it with his own eyes. Kṛṣṇa states:

It is not possible to see me with these [māyic] eyes of yours. I therefore grant you divine eyes. [Now] see my yogic powers (11.8).

We see here two rounds of grace at play: firstly, the gracious revealing of the transcendental form; and secondly, the gracious granting of divine eyes by which to see that form which is otherwise “sudurdarśa” (11.52), very hard to see, and “durnirīksya” (11.17), difficult to discern. Arjuna, however, was unable to properly receive that grace and hence could not appreciate the divine form. He found the vision astounding and terrifying (11.20, 11.23, 11.24, 11.25, 11.35, 11.45). Unnerved and bewildered, he beseeches Kṛṣṇa once more, this time to retract the revelation and appear to him as he was (11.45-46). Kṛṣṇa does so, explaining that this vision is not attainable by mere scriptural study, nor by severe austerities, generous gifts, sacrificial rites, or any other means (11.48, 11.53). He explains:

O Arjuna the Oppressor! Only by singular devotion is it possible to thus perfectly see me, know me, and enter into me (11.54).

Here we must summon an important verse from the final canto of the Bhagavad-Gītā to make better sense of the method suggested by Kṛṣṇa. He explains how such devotion, of the very highest form, can be attained:

Brahmabhūta... mad-bhaktim labhate parām |

He who becomes like Brahman [i.e. brahmarūpa]... attains the highest devotion to me (18.54).

So why was Arjuna unable to enjoy the divine form so readily and graciously revealed to him? Because he was not ready to receive that type of grace. He was not yet brahmarūpa – spiritually pure and mature like Brahman – which is the prerequisite to offering devotion par excellence to Parabrahman. And only with such devotion, according to BG 11.54, is the perfect ‘vision’ or realisation of Parabrahman possible. In many ways, this is, as we shall learn, the core doctrine of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, that one must become like Brahman to perfectly realise and offer devotion to Parabrahman.

What Arjuna’s example shows is that even with the unmerited grace of God, his revelation cannot be fully appreciated without the necessary receptivity and spiritual maturity. Even while Parabrahman can be fully in sight, he cannot be seen if the māyic veil has not been removed. This leads to the interesting discussion of divine grace and the role of human effort in being ready or able to properly receive that grace, which we shall rightly reserve for the chapter on Mukti.

Sometimes, though, Parabrahman *is* described as “hidden”. For example, KaU

3.12 begins:

Eṣa sarveṣu bhūteṣu gūḍhotmā na prakāśate |

This hidden Self [Paramātman] in all these beings does not shine forth.

Even so, it goes on to explain how the individual soul can see that God by way of a focused, spiritually elevated mind. The verse is completed thus:

Drśyate tvagryayā buddhyā sūkṣmayā sūkṣmadarśibhiḥ |

It is seen by the pointed, subtle intellect of those discerning seers
(KaU 3.12).

Similarly at MuU 3.1.8, the verse opens with the familiar Upaniṣadic
proclamation that Parabrahman

cannot be grasped by the eyes, nor even by speech, nor by other
senses or by austerities or work,

but then is immediately qualified by saying that those who are of pure spirit
("viśuddhasattva") do indeed see him, by the grace of knowledge
("jñānaprasādena").

Other references to the covertness of God, such as being 'hidden within the cave
of the heart', can be found in several Upaniṣads (KaU 1.14, 2.20, 3.1, 4.6, 4.7, TU
2.1.1, MuU 2.1.10), but here too, even if God is "difficult to see" (durdarśa), he can
still be realised by those with a correct spiritual understanding
("adhyātmayogādhiḡamena").⁵² The paradox of God being so tantalisingly near
and yet beyond grasp is brought home especially in MuU 3.1.7. Parabrahman is
both "farther than the farthest" and "here at hand". The wise seers find him
hidden within the cave of their own souls. The Bhāṣyakāra makes the important
point that God resides equally in the hearts of all beings – indeed, he is pervasive
throughout creation – yet it is only the brahmajñānins who can see him, for they
are the "seers" ("paśyatsu").⁵³

⁵² KaU-SB 2.12, pp. 96-97.

⁵³ MuU-SB 3.1.7, p. 288. While this verse is directly denotative of Akṣarabrahman, it equally
applies to Parabrahman as well.

We shall be examining further on several sermons in which Svāminārāyaṇa brings together the correct seeing of both the transcendental form of Parabrahman, immanent throughout the universe, and the personal, human form before the eyes. Here, for the purpose of our discussion on revelation as the soul's discarding of its māyic vision, it is worth citing Vac. Pan.7. Svāminārāyaṇa begins:

One should realise the manifest form of God before the eyes to be exactly the same as the form of God resplendent with infinite lordly powers and divine light in Akṣaradhāma at the end of final dissolution. One who realises this is said to have known God perfectly.

Since not everyone has such a realisation of the manifest form of God, Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to explain why this is so, and how it can be resolved.

However, when an ignorant person looks at that manifest form of God before the eyes with a māyic vision, he perceives a human like himself. Just as he himself is born, becomes a child, becomes a youth, becomes old and dies, in the same way, he believes God to undergo the same process. But when one sincerely worships God having faith in the words of the Ekāntika Sant of God, one's māyic vision is resolved. Thereafter, one realises that same form of God as being the supreme conscious being [paramacaitanya], characterised by eternal existence, consciousness and bliss [saccidānandamāya].

Svāminārāyaṇa clearly distinguishes those who are ignorant, whose perception of God's fully divine reality is clouded by their māyic vision, and the devotees who have learned from the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru how to correctly see and serve that God. With the use of an extended analogy here and also in Vac. Amd.4,⁵⁴ Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to elaborate at great length the absolute divinity of the

⁵⁴ See section 6.5.2.2 where these analogies are discussed in detail.

revealed, self-manifested God while reiterating the erroneous perception of him as borne of the seer's own ignorance, as opposed to the correct and complete theological knowledge of a true devotee made possible by the Ekāntika Sant, or Brahmasvarūpa Guru.

This neatly leads us to the next mode of revelation: God revealed in and by the Guru.

3.2) Revelation in and by the Guru

A thorough study of the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto leads to a patent observation that Svāminārāyaṇa did not intend the words 'God manifest before your eyes' to be restricted to his own relatively short time on earth. Nor did he wish to limit the promise of final liberation to only those who had encountered revelation through his own self-manifestation of Parabrahman. For Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, revelation is not a one-off event, but a continuing occurrence. This is because Svāminārāyaṇa reveals the continuing substantive presence of Parabrahman through Akṣarabrahman, which presents itself on earth in human form as the Brahmasvarūpa Guru (referred to variously in the Vacanāmrut and Svāmīnī Vāto as the 'Sant', 'Sādhu', 'Bhakta' and 'Satpuruṣa', and often qualified with such terms as "Ekāntika" ("ultimate"), "great", "God's" or alongside the soteriological imperative). The reality of Akṣarabrahman in its various forms is a central aspect of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology, but one that may seem novel to even those familiar with the other

schools of Vedānta. We shall have ample opportunity to discuss this topic and question its assertions in the following chapters. Here, we can proceed to briefly introduce it in light of the doctrine of revelation, reserving the more detailed elucidation for its proper context.⁵⁵

If the self-manifestation on earth of Parabrahman himself is a supremely gracious and benevolent act of revelation, this revelatory grace is no more demonstrated and made available than through the Brahmasvarūpa Guru. This is seen to be active within the faith community in two highly related ways which are sometimes difficult to tell apart. Nevertheless, they can be explained in simple terms thus: Firstly, the Guru is the 'vessel' which perfectly holds the complete presence of Parabrahman and therefore through whom Parabrahman liberatively works and relates to humans. Because of this, the Guru is, secondly, by whom others can know God, i.e. relate to and serve him, as correctly and completely as possible. God is thus made known both *in* the Guru and *by* the Guru.

To briefly elaborate upon the first of the Guru's revelatory roles, we see numerous references in the Vacanāmṛt where Svāminārāyaṇa reveals Parabrahman living on and working through the Guru, and therefore making it possible to personally encounter God via 'the Sant'. For example, Svāminārāyaṇa states:

⁵⁵ See, for example, chapter 7.4.4.

Since it is God who sees through his [the Sant's] eyes.... Since it is God who walks through his legs,... Since it is God who resides in all of the senses and limbs of such a Sant... (Vac. Gaḍh. I.27),

it therefore follows that

When one has the darśana of such a Sant, one should realise, 'I have had the darśana of God himself' (Vac. Sār.10).

This striking proclamation by Svāminārāyaṇa confirms that even while the Guru neither is nor ever becomes God, God is substantively revealed in the Guru. Quite simply, according to Svāminārāyaṇa: to see the Guru is to see God; to relate to the Guru is to relate to God.

This revelatory presence is the reason why Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī repeatedly and emphatically reiterate in the Vacanāmṛt and Svāmīnī Vāto the need to know, serve, love, obey, trust and surrender to the Guru as one would to God (when he is not personally present on earth), the fruit of which is still realising God, overcoming māyā, and securing liberation. For example, in Vac. Var.10 Svāminārāyaṇa states:

One who aspires for liberation should recognise God through these characteristics and seek the refuge of that God.... However, when God is not manifest on this earth before the eyes, one should seek the refuge of the Sant who is absorbed with that God, because the jīva can also secure liberation through him.

This clearly evidences Svāminārāyaṇa's intention that the liberative work of God is to extend beyond his own self-manifestation on earth and continue by way of the Guru.

As another example, in Vac. Jet.1 Svāminārāyaṇa firstly describes the insurmountability of the binding forces of māyā. But then revealing “the means to transcend[ing] māyā”, he states:

When the jīva meets the manifest form of Śrī Puruṣottama Bhagavān – who is beyond māyā and who is the destroyer of māyā and all karmas – or the Sant who is absorbed with that God, then, by accepting their refuge, the jīva can transcend māyā.

What is important to note is that both God and Guru are invariably mentioned in tandem in these important soteriological statements. This liberative function of the Guru confirms his person as Akṣarabrahman and his direct, complete and substantive relationship with Parabrahman. Indeed, Svāminārāyaṇa explains in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27 that

such a Sant has a direct relationship [sāksāt saṃbandha] with God.

Guṇātītānanda Svāmī reinforces this relationship in his sermon at SV 5.392 when he states:

The association of the Sādhu is a direct relationship with God and leads to the bliss of God. Why? Because God fully resides in the Sādhu.

That it is possible to experience the bliss of God when associating with the Guru implies it is God who is granting the bliss through the Guru. This is an idea that can also be found in the Bhagavad-Gītā. The Bhāṣyakāra notes that while God is described in the final verse of the fourteenth canto as the “foundation of the highest, eternal bliss” (14.27), it is stated at 5.21:

Sa brahmayogayuktātmā sukham akṣayyam aśnute |

He who has joined his soul with Brahman [i.e. the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] enjoys undiminishing bliss.

The two statements find their internal coherency, according to the Bhāṣyakāra, in the proof that it is God who is granting the blissful experience to the soul through his presence in the Guru.⁵⁶

The same blissful, liberative experience is also reiterated in the Praśna Upaniṣad.

When asked by Satyakāma about the after-life upon meditating on 'Aum',

Pippalāda replies:

Etad vai satyakāma param cāparam ca brahma yad aumkāraḥ |
Tasmād vidvān etenaivā'yatanenaikataram anveti ||

That which is the sound of 'Aum', O Satyakāma, is verily the higher and lower Brahman. Therefore, with this support alone does the knower attain either (PU 5.2).

After showing that the dual classification of 'higher' and 'lower' Brahman confirms the ontological distinction between Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman, and the superiority of the former over the latter, the Bhāṣyakāra emphasises that this verse also enjoins the meditation of Parabrahman on par with that of Akṣarabrahman, since 'Aum' is *equally* denotative of both Parabrahman *and* Akṣarabrahman. Furthermore, because the fruit of such meditation is described as the attainment of "either" ("ekatara") of them, this is further evidence of Parabrahman's liberative presence in Akṣarabrahman. The meditation of

⁵⁶ BG-SB 5.21, pp. 126-27. Note the important observation from the BG-SB that 'Brahman' *never* refers to God anywhere in the Bhagavad-Gītā.

Akṣarabrahman leads to no lesser an experience or result than that of meditating on Parabrahman himself.⁵⁷

We therefore see similar calls to serving the Guru in order to attain God in final liberation. For example, Svāminārāyaṇa instructs at Vac. Gaḍh. III.26:

Those who are eager to secure their liberation should thus serve such a Sant.

Why? Because

such a Sant should not be thought to be like a human nor should he be thought to be like even a deva.... Such a Sant, even though he is human [in form], is worthy of being served like God.

Svāminārāyaṇa elaborates with examples in Vac. Var.5 on how to serve the Guru “like God” by instructing perfectly “equal service” of both, further establishing the revelation of God in the living Guru. Serving the Guru is thus serving God.

Such an instruction of “equal service” resonates with the famous declaration at the end of the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad:

Yasya deve parā bhaktir-yathā deve tathā gurau |
Tasyaite kathitā hyarthāḥ prakāśante mahātmanaḥ ||

All objectives declared [in the sacred texts] shine forth [i.e. become attainable] for the great soul who offers the highest devotion to God and, as he does to God, also to the Guru (SU 6.23).

Svāminārāyaṇa similarly explains:

Intense love for the Satpuruṣa is itself the means to realising one’s ātman, is itself also the means to realising the greatness of the

⁵⁷ PU-SB 5.2, pp. 214-16.

Satpuruṣa, and is itself also the means to having the direct realisation of God (Vac. Var.11).

Again, the remarkable and instructive revelation here is that devoutly relating to the Guru leads to the realisation of God.

Because Parabrahman is revealed *in* the living Guru, it seems natural that he should also be an authentic and vital source of theological knowledge. This is the second revelatory role of the Guru, *by* whom God is revealed or made known. The Guru leads the faithful to the realisation of God, without whom, such a realisation would remain elusive. Svāminārāyaṇa thus instructs that one should develop faith in Parabrahman – or ‘the conviction of God’ (“niṣṭā” or “niścaya”), as he often terms it – only by the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru. Indeed, he bases his very definition of niścaya around the Guru. After asking the question,

What is the conviction of God?

Svāminārāyaṇa goes on to say in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27:

The attributes of the Sant – being free of lust, avarice, egotism, taste, attachment, etc. – are described in the scriptures. The Sant who possesses these attributes has a direct relationship with God. Therefore, one should develop the conviction of God based on his words. In fact, to have firm faith in the words of the Sant is itself the conviction of God.

It is interesting to see here that the starting point is scripture, at least in identifying the spiritually pure Brahmaśvarūpa Guru. Svāminārāyaṇa seems to be suggesting that the Guru then takes over. One is properly convinced about the existence and nature of God only after having faith in the Guru, because, again, it is in the Guru that God himself chooses to be fully present and so by whom God

can be revealed. In fact, Svāminārāyaṇa goes as far as to omit the causal connection and equate the two: faith in the Guru *is* the conviction of God.

Of course, God is not restricted to the Guru and is still free to reveal himself independently, though, as shall be explained, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru remains his most accessible and endearing “medium” through which to personally interrelate with humans.

Nor, of course, does Svāminārāyaṇa mean to discount the role of scripture in revealing God, as we shall shortly learn. There, too, though, the role of the Guru in relation to scriptural revelation will become evident when Svāminārāyaṇa stresses the ‘reading’ of Scripture only through the Guru if one is to arrive at the most accurate understanding of God. If Svāminārāyaṇa is not elevating the Guru above scripture, he is surely positioning him as a living scripture of the most authoritative kind.

It comes as no surprise that the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā – themselves treaties richly steeped in the ancient Vedic tradition of guru-disciple learning – also emphasise the need of the Guru in order to avail of true theological knowledge, or, in other words, to realise God and be liberated. For example:

Only knowledge learned from the Guru leads one to the goal (CU 4.9.3).

Arise, awake, and understand [this liberative knowledge] having approached the best [teachers, i.e. the Guru] (KaU 3.14).

Some of these calls to imperatively seek the Guru also include vital hints about the essential credentials of such a bona fide spiritual teacher, as opposed to others of an “inferior” sort.

It [liberative knowledge] is difficult to grasp when taught by an inferior man, even though one may be highly contemplative. Yet there is no way to it without it being taught by the non-inferior [i.e. superior teacher, the Brahmasvarūpa Guru], [for] it is subtler than an atom [and] beyond the realm of reason. Nor can this knowledge be grasped by argumentation. Yet, Dearest [Naciketas], it is well known when taught by the other [the Brahmasvarūpa Guru] (KaU 2.8-9).

To realise that [higher knowledge], imperatively go, with sacrificial wood in hand, to only that guru who is Brahman, who is the knower of the true meaning of revealed texts, and who is firmly established [in God] (MuU 1.2.12).

Learn that [knowledge] by obeisance, inquiry, and service. Those enlightened [Gurus] who ‘see’ the truth will teach you that knowledge (BG 4.34).

While we shall be discussing these later in much more detail, it is important to note here that in all these verses, the Bhāṣyakāra stresses that they refer only to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, for only he is capable of making known God perfectly because of his own perfect, eternal and sublimely inherent God-realisation.

This returns us to the Upaniṣadic statement with which we began this discussion of “revelation”.

This Self [Paramātman]... is attained only by the one whom the Self chooses. To such a one, the Self reveals his own form (MuU 3.2.3 & KaU 2.23).

The Bhāṣyakāra explains that God is attainable by grace alone (“kṛpaikasādhya”), and only when and how he chooses to reveal himself. Apart from his self-manifestation on earth, one way that Parabrahman chooses to graciously reveal himself is by providing earnest seekers of the truth the association of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, within whom he substantively resides, who can then lead them to him. Therefore, when elaborating upon the “form of his [Paramātman’s] grace”, the Bhāṣyakāra states:

God, the ocean of grace that he is, grants that devotee access to the profound association of the Akṣarabrahman Guru... so that his devotee can easily realise him [Paramātman].⁵⁸

In conclusion to this section, we can end with a simple analogy to help summarise and further elucidate the unique revelatory dual-function of the Guru and his relationship with God. Consider a cup of water. The cup itself is not made of water, but as its container, it is normal to refer to it, especially when full, as ‘a cup of water’. Without dismissing the value of the cup itself, it is its contents to which attention is drawn. Similarly the Guru, though ‘composed of’ Akṣarabrahman, holds – is brimming with – the divine presence of Parabrahman. Only such a Brahmasvarūpa vessel could perfectly hold Parabrahman, and that, too, only by Parabrahman’s will, and so, it is the God within who ultimately becomes the focus of devotional attention. Nevertheless, the cup and contents never become one. In the same way, the Guru *never* becomes God; he forever remains ontologically distinct and infinitely subordinate to God.

⁵⁸ KaU-SB 2.23, p. 119.

This also means that earnest seekers can be liberated and can enjoy the limitless bliss of God by associating with the Guru, just as those who drink from the cup experience the contents, not the cup. The Guru becomes the indispensable means, or medium, by which to encounter God. Without the cup though, such an experience or encounter would hardly be possible, for how else would one partake of the water considering its fluidity? While water in its various forms may be available elsewhere – in freshwater lakes or even in the air as vapour – it is found in its fullest, most ‘handy’ form when contained in the cup. Here, too, the transcendental, all-pervasive God becomes available and readily accessible by his substantive presence in the Guru.

Consider further now a perfectly transparent cup. It not only holds the water but also reveals what it is holding. In a similar way, the eternally māyā-free, all-divine Guru makes God known through his own perfectly pure Akṣarabrahmic being.⁵⁹

3.3) Revelation through Scripture

The third mode in Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology by which God reveals himself is through teachings, which, for ease and consistency, we can refer to as ‘Scripture’. In this section, we can address the scope of Scripture within the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, pertaining to the Vacanāmṛt and the wider Vedic

⁵⁹ Like all analogies, the similarity breaks down when considering the wider, active role of the Guru. The Guru is not a passive vessel; as we shall see, he plays an important dynamic function in leading seekers to liberation and bestowing his brahmic qualities in making them brahmarūpa.

canon, its role as the cornerstone upon which all doctrines of the faith are articulated, and the sanctioned way to 'read' this primary source. First, then, what do the faithful of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition primarily mean when they speak of 'Scripture', and why is it so important to them?

Svāminārāyaṇa's manifestation on earth in human form allowed for him to teach his ideas about God, liberation, and the meaning of life. It is not difficult to appreciate the extraordinary religious significance of this event for members of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith. The sacred perennial wisdom of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā, and other canonical texts, which ancient seers had received by way of divine inspiration, was now available *in person*. Parabrahman was not inspiring those wise words remotely through some distant medium, but speaking them himself, here on earth, in human form. These 'immortal, immortalising words' were meticulously documented by some of Svāminārāyaṇa's most learned and closest disciples, themselves also advanced seekers of liberation, and the compilation later presented to him for personal authentication (see, for example, the mention in Vac. Loyā.7). This set of 274 sermons is the Vacanāmṛut ('the immortalising words'). Its abiding status in the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as the most authentic source of scriptural revelation lies in the distinctive belief that Svāminārāyaṇa, as the self-manifestation of Parabrahman, is both the source and subject of revelatory knowledge comprised within the Vacanāmṛut. For the Svāminārāyaṇa community this means, quite literally, it is *God talking about God* – "theology" (if essentially 'God-talk') in its fullest sense.

Equally, the Vacanāmrut attests to the self-manifestation of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa, but its faithful readers would see it as more than a witness to that revelation. As a receptacle of the spoken words of Svāminārāyaṇa, the Vacanāmrut is not a mere book. A footing for this belief can be found in an important sermon where Svāminārāyaṇa implicitly identifies himself as “the avatārin”, not a form of the past avatāras but “the cause of all of the avatāras.” In conclusion, he adds:

Although these talks are extremely subtle, even a person of average intelligence can understand them. It is as if these talks are personified [‘mūrtimān’] (Vac. Gaḍh. II.9).

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasis here seems to indicate that the sermons are not to be considered a dead letter, because they speak of a living God ‘manifest before the eyes’ in person, in human form (“mūrtimān”), rendering even the most abstract of ideas tangible and easier to grasp. Elsewhere he adds that “My words are my form”, implying that a proper engagement with these teachings can be evocative of relating to God in person, and should, in fact, lead to a personal encounter with his living form.

Of course, ‘revelation’ as the manifestation of Svāminārāyaṇa cannot itself be equated to the text of the Vacanāmrut.⁶⁰ It is Parabrahman self-revealed as Svāminārāyaṇa who lends the Vacanāmrut its authority and sanctity, not vice versa. And it is God who grants liberation, not a text. In this sense, it might be

⁶⁰ Emil Brunner speaks of the “fatal equation of revelation with the inspiration of the Scriptures”. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. by Olive Wyon (London: SCM Press, 1947), p. 7.

more accurate to say that the theological truths of the Svāminārāyaṇa faith are revealed not *in* the text but *through* the text, by Svāminārāyaṇa himself. If the Vacanāmṛut as a 'book' is holy, it is because of its divine author, or rather, orator.⁶¹

The above can also be applied to the sermons of Guṇātītānanda Svāmī compiled in the Svāmīnī Vāto and other teachings of the subsequent Brahmasvarūpa Gurus. The community of faithful recognises the authority that these texts already inherently hold on account of them being spoken by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman. This authority is not imposed upon them by any external source; their veradicality is intrinsically certified, i.e. they are 'svataḥ-pramāṇa'. This divine oratory is why other religious works – such as the biographical accounts of Svāminārāyaṇa and the Gurus, or the thousands of devotional songs of praise and moral teaching composed by Svāminārāyaṇa's disciples – while still rich in theological content, cannot, strictly speaking, be considered a direct source of theological knowledge on par with "revelation". They can certainly be useful tools that help one reflect upon and illumine revelation (as we shall see in the next chapter). But alone, they are not the foundation upon which the faith of the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition stands and grows. To reiterate, the revelatory value

⁶¹ Although the Vacanāmṛut comes to us in textual form, it is regarded and revered within the tradition for the *spoken* words of Svāminārāyaṇa it holds. Correspondingly, it receives its authority from *Svāminārāyaṇa* speaking and authenticating the words that are documented in it, not the transcribers or compilers of those words (even if they were assumed to be divinely inspired to complete their task as accurately as possible).

The Vacanāmṛut thus follows in the wider aural tradition of Hindu sacred literature, where revealed texts are śruti – heard, not read. 'Scripture', therefore, in Hinduism, is not necessarily something written. See Thomas B. Coburn, "'Scripture' in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 52.3 (1984), 435-59.

of the Vacanāmrut, Svāmīnī Vāto and Guru-teachings as authentic and authoritative sources of theological knowledge is undergirded by the self-manifestation of Parabrahman as Svāminārāyaṇa (the first mode of revelation we saw in this chapter) and his continued revelation in and by the Akṣarabrahman Guru (the second mode of revelation we saw). Thus, it is always Parabrahman who is revealing knowledge of himself, *through* the text of Scripture. It is in this sense that Scripture serves as “revelation”.

For the Svāminārāyaṇa Sampradāya, this extends the boundaries of scriptural revelation beyond the ancient canon of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā, Brahmasūtras, Purāṇas, etc. To be clear, though, Svāminārāyaṇa’s teachings in the Vacanāmrut represent for his devotees the most direct and authentic source possible of knowledge about God. What may have been germinal, scattered and abstract in other texts, has been able to be brought together more clearly and concretely than ever in the Vacanāmrut. To be even more explicit, for the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, the Vacanāmrut – personally delivered by the self-revealed Parabrahman and ‘heard’ (i.e. received) via the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus (as we shall shortly learn) – is *the* climactic primary revelatory text by which its theological doctrines are established and articulated.

This, however, in no way relegates the Vedic corpus to a secondary canonical tier; the revelatory status of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā and Brahmasūtras remains intact. The Vacanāmrut simply provides the proper perspective with which to correctly read them now. What may have been dim

and blurry before, is now bright and clear. With the Vacanāmrut, Svāminārāyaṇa has shone a new light onto the ancient teachings and brought them into sharper focus. The freshly illumined texts suddenly reveal meanings which appear as if anew. Of course, they have always been there, but this act of re-reading is the seeing of what was in sight but had been hitherto overlooked. So if we are to return to the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad-Gītā to read them in light of what is learned from the Vacanāmrut – for example, that Akṣarabrahman (or ‘Akṣara’ and ‘Brahman’) is an ontologically distinct entity apart from Parabrahman – it can lead to that ‘Aha!’ moment of insightful theological discovery, sometimes accompanied with an elated exclamation of “*Eureka!*” – ‘I found it!’

In this sense, the Vacanāmrut serves as a natural commentary on the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad-Gītā and Brahmasūtras, as it interprets, illuminates and sometimes expands upon many of the key themes and ideas latent within the ancient texts. As we shall see throughout the exposition in Part 3, the major themes of Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu theology find resonance and grounding in these classical, canonical sources.

This is also attested to in the Vacanāmrut when Svāminārāyaṇa presents his teachings as a distillation of the many Hindu texts. For example, he proclaims in Vac. Gaḍh. III.10:

From all the scriptures of the Vedas, Purāṇas, Itihāsa and Smṛti, I have gleaned the principle that jīva, māyā, īśvara, Brahman and Parameśvara are all eternal.

In another sermon, when addressing another point, he states even more emphatically:

In the four Vedas, the Purāṇas and the Itihāsa scriptures, there is but one central principle, and that is that only God and his Sant can grant liberation (Vac. Gaḍh. II.59).

When in Vac. Gaḍh. II.21 Svāminārāyaṇa similarly stressed “the manifest form of God before the eyes and the manifest form of the Sant before the eyes as being the only grantors of liberation”, he concluded:

This very fact is the essence of all of the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. II.21).

On the same topic again, Svāminārāyaṇa completed his address in Vac. Gaḍh.

II.28 with the following emphatic addendum:

What is this sermon like which I have delivered before you? Well, I have delivered it having heard and having extracted the essence from the Vedas, the Śāstras, the Purāṇas and all other words on this earth pertaining to liberation. This is the most profound and fundamental principle; it is the essence of all essences. For all those who have previously attained liberation, for all those who will attain it in the future, and for all those who are presently treading the path of liberation, this discourse is like a lifeline (Vac. Gaḍh. II.28).

Properly understood, then, it is not a question of whether the Vacanāmṛt supplants or supersedes other Hindu texts. For the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition’s faithful, it provides the vital light and perspective needed to understand them correctly and completely in consonance with the revelation of Svāminārāyaṇa himself.

Having thus understood Scripture, particularly the Vacanāmrut, as a mode of revelation within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition, we can now move on to understanding its primary position as a source of theological knowledge.

3.3.1) Primacy of Scripture

The priority and authority placed on the Vacanāmrut within the Svāminārāyaṇa tradition as a source of theological knowledge can also be traced to Svāminārāyaṇa's own emphasis on appealing to authentic texts whenever possible. He often corroborated important points within his sermons by citing widely accepted scriptures. In the sermons compiled within the Vacanāmrut, 98 scriptural references are directly quoted a total of 110 times, including 45 verses or verse-portions from the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa and 33 from the Bhagavad-Gītā. Other scriptures directly referenced include the Aitareya Upaniṣad, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, Subāla Upaniṣad, Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Taittirīya Āraṇyaka (Yajur Veda), Mahābhārata, Skanda Purāṇa, Hiranyakeśīyaśākhāśruti, Carpaṭapañjarī and Maṇiratnamālā. Indirectly, Svāminārāyaṇa refers to more than fifty works of religious and other significance, including some extremely remote texts, such as Sūryasiddhānta and Siddhāntaśiromaṇi.

When engaging his audience with theological questions, he would similarly insist that they, too, offer answers supported by scriptural testimony. For example, when asking in Vac. Gaḍh. I.69,

What exactly is dharma?

he follows up immediately by requesting the respondents to

Please base your reply on the scriptures.

Similarly in Vac. Gaḍh. I.71 he requests:

Therefore, please base your answer on the principles of the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. I.71).

When in reply to one of his questions the sādhus did not substantiate their answer, Svāminārāyaṇa quickly responded:

From what principle in the scriptures do you claim that...? Please quote any reference from the scriptures (Vac. Gaḍh. I.78).

At the heart of this insistence to root all reflection in Scripture lies the principle of scriptural revelation as the only authentic knowledge-source of all things Godly. Svāminārāyaṇa makes this explicit in Vac. Sār.13 when describing how to develop faith in God.

Whosoever develops faith in God does so only through the scriptures. Why? Because the scriptures describe the characteristics of God as well as the characteristics of the Sant. So, only faith developed through the scriptures remains steadfast. On the other hand, faith developed by one's own mind, without the help of the scriptures, eventually dissolves....

Only one who has faith in the scriptures is able to develop unshakeable faith in God, and only such a person attains liberation.

Svāminārāyaṇa goes on in Vac. Gaḍh. III.27 to assert Scripture as the ultimate source of all theological knowledge. In other words, all theological knowledge, wherever it exists, has its root in Scripture.

For Svāminārāyaṇa, then, scriptural testimony is the only knowledge-source (“pramāṇa”) among all the epistemological means whereby one can properly know the nature of the transcendental, otherwise imperceptible Parabrahman (and Akṣarabrahman).⁶² To this, there is a useful (though untraceable) Sanskrit verse which reads:

Anekaśāyocchedi paroṅśārthasya darśanam |
Sarvasya locanam śāstram yasya nāstyandha eva saḥ ||

Scriptures dispel all doubts and reveal intangible truths [literally, make visible that which is beyond the eyes]. They are the eyes of all. Without them, a person is indeed blind.

Here, though, we must pause to face a contention raised by the Bhāṣyakāra in his extensive commentary of BS 1.1.3. The sūtra itself –

Śāstrayonitvāt |

– affirms that Scripture is that by which one can know ‘Brahman’, which has already been identified as the subject of the Sūtrakāra’s inquiry (BS 1.1.1) and minimally referred to as the cause of the world’s origination, sustenance and dissolution (BS 1.1.2).

The objection takes this form: Upaniṣadic statements such as

Yato vāco nivartante aprāpya...

From where speech returns... having not attained it (TU 1.4.1 & TU 2.9.1);

Eṣa ta ātmā’ntaryāmyamṛto’dṛṣṭo draṣṭā’śrutaḥ śrotā...

⁶² We shall be considering in the following chapter the means of reason, praxis and tradition as, not *sources* of theology but, *tools* to illuminate and better receive revelation.

This Self, the immortal inner dweller, is the unseen seer, the unheard listener... (BU 3.7.23);

and

Yat tad adreśyam agrāhyam...

That which is unseeable, ungraspable... (MuU 1.1.6)⁶³

confirm that God is beyond the subject of speech and sound; he cannot be described nor can he be heard. He is therefore unknowable by scriptures, which, after all, are nothing but “a pile of words” [śabdarāśi eva śāstrāṇi].

To this the Bhāṣyakāra retorts that these are the ramblings of those who have not grasped the true import of the scriptures and rely solely on the imagined proficiency of their flawed reasoning. Statements such as the above serve simply to affirm the unlimited nature of God and the limited scope of human means. Indeed, it is by these very scriptures that this is established! How can those same scriptures, which you, too, cite, then become invalid? If you argue, on the basis of these statements, that God is not the subject of verbal testimony, then what will you make of other statements, in those same set of scriptures, which describe him as knowable through scriptures? Such statements include:

Tam tvaupaniṣadam puruṣam...

That Self extolled in the Upaniṣads... (BU 3.9.26);

Vedaiśca sarvair-aham eva vedyaḥ...

I alone am to be known by all of the Vedas... (BG 15.15).

⁶³ According to the Bhāṣyakāra, these last two statements refer in particular to Akṣarabrahman, but can also apply to Parabrahman.

They assure that, even with all their usual limitations and imperfections, words, when divinely spoken or inspired, can invaluablely serve as a reliable source of knowledge about God. As always, though, we must also accept that this revelation, even though adequate, is never exhaustive.

3.3.2) Essentiality of Guru in Receiving Scripture

As direct as the Vacanāmrut and the Svāmīnī Vāto are the words of Svāminārāyaṇa and Guṇātītānanda Svāmī, the inescapable fact remains that they still come to us as words, fraught with the potentiality of being misread (like other texts) by frail, imperfect human minds. Unlike ordinary texts, however, they are, according to the tradition, words spoken by Parabrahman and Akṣarabrahman – divine speakers – and so any interpretation of them must also be faithfully undertaken. Indeed, reading and interpreting the Vacanāmrut as the authentic, normative source of theological knowledge for the Svāminārāyaṇa Hindu community is an endeavour that must adhere to certain guidelines. The correct methodology of reading theological texts is a complex topic, though, deserving a lot more detail and discussion than is available here. Nevertheless, it is necessary to cover the most important guideline Svāminārāyaṇa repeatedly emphasised in the Vacanāmrut itself, that is, the ‘reading’ or ‘listening’ of Scripture from the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru.

Firstly, it is important to clarify that we are allowed here a broader meaning of the terms ‘reading’ and ‘listening’. It is, of course, highly desirable to hear first-hand the Guru reading and exegetically elaborating upon Scripture. But when

that is not possible, the practice of reading personally or even when listening to a text-based discourse from another expert, the exegetical import is always derived from the Guru. The final, decisive responsibility of valid interpretation is invariably deferred to the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, because it is only he, as (Akṣara)Brahman and being fully established in Parabrahman (“brahma niṣṭham”), who has the most direct and perfect realisation of scriptural truths (“śrotriyam”) and is thus the most qualified and able to convey them.⁶⁴ The Guru, to be precise, is not only a knower of the revealed truth (“jñānin”), but a direct *seer* (“tattvadarśin”) ⁶⁵ and embodiment of it. These attributes become all the more vital when one appreciates the multivalency of scriptural words, and thus the potentiality of their misreading, alongside the primacy of Scripture above all other sources of theological knowledge. Others, even erudite scholars but who are without a direct experience of God, would be prone to misinterpret or incompletely understand scriptural teachings, and would therefore not be able to fully and properly explain them as God intended them to be understood. This would mean that experts theologising upon primary and secondary texts can still be innovative and imaginative in their exegesis, insofar as it conforms to the overarching reading provided by the Guru. Anything contradictory to or divergent from the original revelation, however, would be deemed inauthentic.

⁶⁴ See MuU-SB 1.2.12, pp. 253-56 for an elaboration of the words and this point. See also BS-SB 1.1.3, pp. 22-24.

⁶⁵ See BG-SB 4.34, p. 110.

What is further clear from Svāminārāyaṇa's sermons is that, in his mind, the reading of Scripture is not a barren, academic activity. When Gopālānanda Svāmī asks in Vac. Var.11,

Why is it that despite reading the Śāstras, the Purāṇas, and other scriptures, the pundits of the world still do not understand the greatness of God and the Sant as it really is?

Svāminārāyaṇa explains that the fault lies in their lack of refuge in God. As a result, the pundits, as learned as they may be, are "overpowered" by their own "inner enemies" of "lust, anger, avarice, jealousy," etc., leading them to arrogantly misunderstand God and the Guru.

So, even though they read the Śāstras and Purāṇas, they fail to realise the greatness of God and his Sant as it really is.

To capitalise on its inherent liberative benefits, scriptural reading thus needs to be conducted with a firm grounding in faith. In the very next sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa warns against hearing the holy scriptures from faithless exponents. He likens someone who "does not have such firm faith coupled with the knowledge of God's greatness" to an "impotent", from whom no woman can ever beget a child. "Similarly," Svāminārāyaṇa explains,

no one attains liberation by hearing even holy scriptures such as the Gītā and the Śrīmad-Bhāgavata from one who does not have faith in God coupled with the knowledge of his greatness (Vac. Var.12).

It is thus the fertile intercourse of *faith* with scripture that bears the liberative and joyous understanding of God.

Going even further in Vac. Var.12, Svāminārāyaṇa warns that receiving the holy texts from faithless readers can not only be fruitless, but gravely dangerous to one's faith.

Just as death is assured to whoever drinks sweetened milk into which a snake's venom has fallen, similarly, no one can ever attain liberation by listening to the Gītā or the Śrīmad-Bhāgavata from a person who does not have faith in God coupled with the knowledge of his greatness. On the contrary, it can be detrimental.

The natural culmination of this instruction can be found in Vac. Loyā.11 where Svāminārāyaṇa states simply and concisely:

One should only hear the sacred scriptures from the Satpuruṣa, but never from an unholy person.

Svāminārāyaṇa emphasises even more clearly in Vac. Gaḍh. II.13 the essentiality of the Guru in helping access revelatory truths from the scriptures. After delivering an exceptionally important sermon on the nature of God, in particular alluding to himself as Parabrahman, Svāminārāyaṇa appends his address with the following reminder:

However, such discourses regarding the nature of God cannot be understood by oneself even from the scriptures. Even though these facts may be in the scriptures, it is only when the Satpuruṣa manifests on this earth, and one hears them being narrated by him, that one understands them. They cannot, however, be understood by one's intellect alone, even from the scriptures.

In another sermon, Svāminārāyaṇa adds categorically:

The words of the scriptures cannot be [fully] understood by anyone except an Ekāntika Bhakta.

"Which words?" he asks rhetorically, before elaborating:

Words such as 'God is formless', 'universally pervasive', 'luminous', and 'nirguṇa'. On hearing such descriptions, a fool concludes that the scriptures describe God as being formless. On the other hand, an Ekāntika Bhakta realises, 'When the scriptures describe God as being formless and nirguṇa, they are referring to the fact that he does not possess a māyic form or māyic attributes. In reality, his form is forever divine, and he possesses countless redemptive virtues' (Vac. Gaḍh. I.66).

Thus, in Svāminārāyaṇa's mind, the Vacanāmṛut or any other scriptural text is only correctly interpreted when it is read under the loving, faithful tutelage of the Guru. Reading from the Guru ensures that each detail is understood 'sampradāyically' (i.e. ecclesiastically), so to speak, in conformation with the norms, faith and history of the tradition.

In conclusion to this chapter, this is what can be succinctly said of 'revelation' in the Svāminārāyaṇa system: God, out of his loving grace, has chosen to be revealed in person as Svāminārāyaṇa, in and by the Brahmaśvarūpa Guru, and through Scripture, which most directly means the Vacanāmṛut when faithfully received via the Guru.