Review Essay[*]

Is All Hindu Theology Comparative Theology?

Catherine Cornille
Boston College; email: catherine.cornille@bc.edu

The Hindu tradition consists of a collection of ancient and new spiritual lineages (sampradāyas), each with their own teachings, loosely connected through recognition of a set of common sacred texts. One of the larger and growing Hindu lineages is the Swaminarayan tradition, founded by Sahajānanda Swami (1781–1830) who adopted the name Swaminarayan, and is himself worshiped as the highest reality (Parabrahman) within the tradition. It is estimated to have over twenty million followers, and it has been constructing majestic Hindu temples throughout the world. In the course of the time, the movement has split over such perennial questions as leadership (hereditary versus elected), the admission of women to ascetic life, and interpretation of the teachings of the founder. The largest group or denomination is the Bochanawasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (of BAPS), to which the author of this book belongs as an ordained monk.

In the introduction to the book, Swami Paramtattvadas develops his understanding of theology by drawing on methodological reflections of Christian theologians (Alister McGrath, Jeffrey Stout, David Kelsey), or Christian theologians involved in the study of Hinduism (Francis Clooney, Julius Lipner). Why, one may wonder, would a Hindu theologian need to lean on Christian and Western conceptions of theology to develop a Hindu theology? Could he not have drawn from classical Hindu models such as Śankara, Rāmānuja, Vedantadeśika, or Rupa Goswami? Theology seems to be regarded as a typically Western or even

[*] Swami Paramtattvadas, *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 353 pp., £23.99 pb. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

HTR 112:1 (2019) 126–132

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000378 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christian enterprise. Quoting Clooney, Paramtattvadas states that "attempting to identify and locate theology within a Hindu context 'involves a reflection on Hindu intellectual discourses and an intelligent re-use of ideas rooted in Christian and Western intellectual sensitivities'" (p. 6). But Hindu thinkers throughout history have developed their own forms of philosophical reflection on the meaning and coherence of their own religious teachings. As such, Hindu theology may build on its own rich theological and intellectual tradition without necessary reference to Western intellectual sensitivities. And in fact, Paramtattvadas draws very little from Christian and Western theological and philosophical categories in developing a systematic theological account of the basic teachings of the Swaminarayan tradition.

The book provides a clear and coherent exposition of the principal teachings of the tradition. Each of the chapters focuses on one of the five eternal entities of Swaminarayan teaching: Parabrahman, Aksharabrahman, jīva, īśvara, and māyā. The author demonstrates an impressive command of the texts and the materials, both those deriving from within the Swaminaryan tradition, but also the broader Hindu textual tradition. He provides a complete set of textual references for each of the theological ideas elaborated. The book thus represents an invaluable resource for those belonging to the tradition. And for outsiders, it offers a very helpful introduction. It offers a powerful example of how a scholar of a relatively young tradition attempts to develop a systematic theological self-understanding from a wide variety of texts, sermons, and lectures. The author succeeds in offering a remarkably clear and comprehensive overview of the central teachings of the tradition. It might, however, not always be accessible without some background knowledge of Hindu texts and traditions.

Like many other Hindu traditions, the Swaminarayan tradition is strongly centered on the worship of the guru. For Paramtattvadas, "the central doctrine of Swaminarayan Hindu theology [is] to offer devotion to Parabrahman having become brahmarūpa" (p. 173). Swaminarayan is himself regarded as the full and sole manifestation or form of the highest reality, Parabrahman. However, one of the unique theological features of the tradition is the recognition of a second ultimate reality, Aksharabrahman, which is the source of the succession of living gurus (Brahmasvarūpa gurus) in the tradition. Liberation can only be attained through the grace of the guru, and the goal of religious practice thus consists of "realizing oneself as brahmarūpa/aksararūpa by spiritually and lovingly associating with the same Aksarabrahman Guru" (p. 304). The difference between Parabrahman and Aksharabrahman seems to be one of the most challenging theological conundrums in the tradition. The author himself raises the pointed question: "So why the need to introduce another entity distinct from Parabrahman?" (p. 165). Paramtattvadas ultimately relies solely on scriptural authority to explain the difference between these two highest realities. From the outside, it would seem as though its main function lies in maintaining the uniqueness of Swaminarayan himself as the sole incarnation of the highest reality while also granting spiritual authority to other

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000378 Published online by Cambridge University Press

gurus in the lineage. The devotee is prohibited from ever questioning or criticizing the guru, and only complete surrender and obedience will lead to ultimate liberation.

The Swaminarayan notion of the soul or jīva is that of an eternally pure and distinct entity that is dependent on God but gifted with free will. Through proper faith and practice, the soul may attain the state of liberation after death or in this life. Paramtattvadas refers to the latter idea of jīvan-mukti as a "striking revelation" (280), even though it is a rather common Hindu idea. Other teachings that are similar to the broader Hindu tradition are its conception of cyclical time, its notion of māyā as ignorance and as creative matter, its emphasis on desire as the cause of evil and transmigration, and its notion of liberation as a state of eternal bliss. Paramtattvadas also offers an analysis of Swaminarayan eschatology and a detailed account of the processes of creation or origination, sustenance, and dissolution, all willed by Parabrahman in endless continuation.

A more distinctive aspect of Swaminarayan theology is its notion of īśvara. The term does refer to the traditional personal gods of Hinduism (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Surya, etc.), but they are closer to sentient beings than to Parabrahman. They are "ontologically distinct from all other entities and hold a place metaphysically higher than that of jīvas yet, like them, are still bound within māyā and infinitely inferior to Parabrahman and Aksarabrahman" (p. 234). Their role in the process of salvation or liberation is entirely overshadowed by the importance of Parabrahman, Aksharabrahman and the living gurus.

The Swaminarayan tradition can be situated within the devotional or Bhakti tradition of Hinduism. The tradition rejects the idea of the non-duality of reality and of the illusory nature of the world of differences. It may be seen to come closest to the tradition of qualified non-duality or Viśistādvaita, although Paramtattvadas states that "those without a complete understanding of the Swaminarayan Hindu tradition [are led] to erroneously identify it as a 'modified' version of Viśistādvaita Vedanta" (p. 319). It emphasizes the distinction between souls, the radical dependency of the soul on God, and the ultimate goal as one of eternal relationship between the soul and God. However, it also differs from this tradition of qualified non-duality through its conception of two ultimate realities and its focus on Swaminarayan as avatārin.

Swami Paramatattvadas generally writes from within the tradition, developing arguments based on scriptural authority, and using various texts to reinforce one another. Occasionally, however, he seems to distance himself from the community, or at least offer a more descriptive and less apologetic account of the tradition, as when he states that "those of the Swaminarayan religious community confess their faith in Swaminarayan as being the human form of Parabrahman manifest on earth during the relatively recent and short period of time between 1781 and 1830 CE" (p. 156). Elsewhere, he states that "members and proponents of Swaminarayan Hinduism will feel that theological inquiries such as these prove the tradition as being both distinctive from other Vedic schools yet still authentic within the Vedanta tradition as a whole" (p. 171). This occasional distancing of himself from

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000378 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the tradition may be a way to suggest a certain scientific objectivity, or a way to draw in non-believers. It certainly differs in tone from the rest of the work, which is clearly more confessional.

In the foreword to the book, Gavin Flood refers to it as "a welcome contribution to Hindu theology and to the emerging discussion of Comparative Theology" (p. xiii). Comparative theology is a relatively new theological discipline, which involves an attempt to deepen religious self-understanding through engagement with another religious tradition. In addition to this confessional approach, comparative theology has also at times been used to refer to the attempt to develop a theological synthesis or a theological view based on teachings derived from different religious traditions. Engagement in constructive theological dialogue with another tradition presupposes some type of implicit or explicit conception of the epistemological status of the other tradition in relation to one's own. Exclusivist views of religious truth as being manifest only in one's own tradition will lead to at most apologetic attempts to demonstrate the superiority of one's own tradition, while the recognition of autonomous truth in other religions may lead to genuinely new theological insights through engagement with the other. There is little explicit reflection on the status of other religions in this book. The status of Swaminarayan as the unique manifestation of Paramatman may be seen to suggest a type of exclusivism. Paramtattvadas reiterates throughout the book that "perfectly knowing the manifest form of God is foundational, central and apical to Swaminarayan Hindu theology," and this manifest nature of God is embodied in Swaminarayan himself. Thus, all other traditions, both within and beyond Hinduism, may be seen as redundant. This is also reflected in the statements that "Swaminarayan clearly distinguishes between those who are ignorant, whose perception of God's fully divine reality is clouded by their mayic vision, and the devotees who have learned from the Brahmasvarūpa Guru how to correctly see and serve that God" (p. 38). On the other hand, Paramtattvadas also points out that revelation in the Swaminarayan tradition is not a "one-off event, but a continuing occurrence" and that "Swaminarayan did not intend the words 'manifest form of God before your eyes' to be restricted to his own relatively short time on earth" (p. 38). Thus, the tradition recognizes some form of continuing revelation. However, this seems to be focused primarily on the Brahmasvarūpa Gurus, or the lineage of gurus within the tradition who are regarded as incarnations of Aksharabrahman. There is no mention of revelation or religious truth outside of the tradition or the sampradaya. To be sure, the ancient revealed texts of Hinduism, in particular the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita, are regarded as authoritative and repeatedly quoted. But Swaminarayan is seen to provide the ultimate interpretation of these texts, and his own words become the new highest truth. It is thus not clear what the status would be of other religions from a Swaminarayan perspective, and why or how one would engage these traditions in a constructive way.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000378 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The process of learning in comparative theology may take different forms. One may learn simply by juxtaposing similar texts or practices in different religions and considering how one tradition reinforces the truth of another. One may use teachings of another tradition as a catalyst to rediscover elements in one's own religious tradition. One may reinterpret one's own tradition using the categories and philosophical framework of another tradition. One may appropriate new teachings and practices that are not in contradiction with one's own basic teachings but that may come to enrich one's tradition. One may redress certain former prejudices or misconceptions of the other in ways that may shift one's self-understanding. And finally, one may also learn through gaining a new or renewed appreciation of the truth of one's own tradition through considering it in light of another. These six types of learning may appear in one tradition, as theologians focus on different traditions and topics on the basis of their own theological predispositions. But one or the other type of learning may also fit more naturally with the self-understanding of a particular tradition. At the end of the book, Swami Paramtattvadas offers some examples of what the Swaminarayan tradition might be able to learn from Christianity. He focuses in particular on categories that have been used in Christian theology to make sense of the divine and human nature of Christ. In discussing the four roles of Aksharabrahman, he "was tempted to use the Greek term 'homoousios' (of the same substance) for thinking the relationship between Aksharabrahman, the Brahmaswarūpa Guru, "Parabrahman, the exemplary sevaka in that abode, and the all-pervading Cidakasa" (p. 318). The process of learning he envisions thus involves mainly an interpretation or reinterpretation of Swaminarayan beliefs through Christian theological and philosophical categories. Paramtattvadas also mentions the possibility of developing a Swaminarayan commentary on certain Christian texts, based primarily on similar or analogous religious and theological themes.

Paramtattvadas also mentions areas in which he believes Christianity might be able to learn from the Swaminarayan tradition. He expresses the hope that "a Christian theologian would also profit from reading certain passages of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita in light of the Brahmasvarūpa Guru, as conceived within the Swaminarayan Hindu system" (p. 318). The Swaminarayan tradition indeed sheds new light on some of these classical Hindu texts. It is not entirely clear what Pramtattvadas has in mind when he mentions the possibility of Christians learning from the Swaminarayan tradition. There are indeed certain elements that are structurally or functionally quite similar to the Christian tradition. Both traditions emphasize the unique divine nature and salvific function of the founder. And both traditions focus on love of and surrender to the founder as the means to salvation or liberation. However, there are also obvious incompatibilities between the two traditions. The unique salvific function of Swaminarayan clashes directly with the unique salvific role of Jesus Christ. And the notion of two ultimate realities does not seem to accord with Christian monotheism. The area that might be more fruitful from a Christian perspective would be the Swaminarayan notion

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000378 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the three bodies of the *jīva*, the gross body, the subtle body, and the causal body (p. 214 ff.). These may be brought into fruitful theological dialogue with the traditional Christian distinction between *sarx* and *soma*. Though the causal body is associated with the process of reincarnation in the Hindu tradition, it may also be used to make some sense of the resurrected body in Christianity. This would require some degree of adjustment, but it opens the door to new dimensions of Christian anthropology. Each tradition is ultimately responsible for determining whether another tradition may offer interesting religious ideas that may shed new light on their own tradition. While comparative theologians tend to focus mainly on more ancient and large religious traditions, there is no reason why one may not engage a newer religious tradition in constructive theological effort. Some of its history may shed new light on elements of its own formation history.

Unlike Flood, I would not characterize *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* as a work of comparative theology. Though Paramtattvadas may occasionally use categories derived from other religions to explain the basic beliefs of the Swaminarayan tradition, it is primarily a work of Hindu theology. Taking up Francis Clooney's challenge to develop an indigenous Hindu theology does not automatically render the work an example of comparative theology. The references to Christian theology and to other traditions of Hinduism occupy only four or five pages of the work. In offering up a work of Hindu theology, Paramtattvadas certainly has created the possibility for further comparative theological engagement, both on the side of the Swaminarayan tradition and on the side of other religious traditions, both within and beyond Hinduism.

A work of Hindu theology that more clearly represents an example of comparative theology is Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad's *Divine Self, Human Self* (Bloomsbury, 2013). Here, he engages in a comparative study of Śankara's and Rāmānuja's interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā, bringing them also into dialogue with Thomas Aquinas, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, Jaques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, etc. He defines comparative theology as "offering systematic re/constructions of two interacting, contesting, complementing, and contrasting ways of tackling fundamental questions of existence" (p. xiii). Though this work tends to drown in the jargon of contemporary Western philosophy at times, it does attempt to create conceptual and theological bridges between the traditions. The type of learning in evidence in this work involves at times reinterpretation and at times reaffirmation of the truth or validity of the Hindu notions of agency and personhood by comparison with Christian categories. But the other tradition is directly engaged throughout Chakravarthi's work.

Though *An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hindu Theology* is not a work of comparative theology, it represents a very important contribution to Hindu thought. The vitality of a tradition may be seen to lie in the willingness and ability of its own intellectuals to reflect creatively on the meaning of the tradition in light of both past and present theological ideas and thus to move the tradition forward. In that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000378 Published online by Cambridge University Press

regard, Swami Paramtattvadas has done his own tradition a great service, while also offering scholars of Hinduism and theologians from other traditions a reliable and promising source for further theological engagement.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816018000378 Published online by Cambridge University Press