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Divine Grace and Human Action
in the Thought of Rāmānuja

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By
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DIVINE GRACE AND HUMAN ACTION
IN THE THOUGHT OF RĀMĀNUJA

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
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And with equal certainty we know from Scripture that this Supreme Lord, when pleased by the faithful worship of his Devotees - which worship consists in daily repeated meditation on Him, assisted by the performance of all the practices prescribed for each caste and āsrāma - frees them from the influence of [avidyā] which consists of karman accumulated in the infinite progress of time and hence hard to overcome; allows them to attain to that supreme bliss which consists in the direct intuition of His own true nature: and after that does not turn them back into the miseries of Samsāra.

Śribhasya 4.4.22

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PREFACE

The incentive for this study of Rāmānuja's doctrine of grace was provided in courses with my advisor, Professor Klaus K. Klostermaier, whose teaching first aroused my interest in the history of religions as a whole, and in the theme of liberation within the context of Hinduism, in particular. What first attracted me to Rāmānuja's writings was the fact that among Hindu schools of thought, the Śrī Vaisṇavism which he represents, has the greatest similarity to Christian ideas. Because of the importance of the theme of grace in Rāmānuja's theism, as well as in most theistic religions, I saw his thought as a particularly suitable source for new perspectives on interreligious dialogue. This prompted me to carry out a study in which I compared Rāmānuja's doctrine of grace, with that of Saint Augustine. In the course of my research, I became aware that much still remains to be done in interpreting Rāmānuja's thought. I found that many secondary sources concern themselves mainly with his polemics with opposing religious philosophies, and that very few deal exclusively with specific areas of his theism, such as his doctrine of grace.

The importance of Rāmānuja's doctrine of grace lies in the fact that in his articulation of Vaisṇava Vedānta, he was the first to develop a coherent philosophical basis for the belief in liberation through grace, which belief

had always been an important aspect of Vaiṣṇavism. However, Rāmānuja does not present this doctrine systematically as such. It is dispersed throughout his writings, and receives the most extensive treatment in his Gītābhāṣya. No monograph has yet been published which brings together all the separate facets of Rāmānuja's thought concerning the functions of divine grace and human action in the process of liberation. Modern writers such as N. S. Anantharanga-
 char, Bharantan Kumarappa, K. D. Bharadwaj, P. N. Srinivasa-
 chari and M. Yamunacharya, have all commented on the subject of grace in the context of discussions on Rāmānuja's thought concerning prapatti or the path to liberation in general. Not only do these not treat the subject of grace comprehensively, but Anantharangachar and Srinivasa-
 chari also do not distinguish between Rāmānuja's thought on grace, and that of commentators who interpreted Vaiṣṇava Vedānta after Rāmānuja.

Grace continued to be a central concern for later commentators, all of whom claimed Rāmānuja as the authoritative source of their interpretations. However, a significant number of these commentators shifted away from Rāmānuja's emphasis on the importance of both grace and action, and some negated the usefulness of action altogether. Therefore, to do justice to Rāmānuja's doctrine, it must be examined first on the basis of what is stated in his own writings, apart from the interpretations of later commentators.

The purpose of this thesis is to present, on the basis of Rāmānuja's major writings, a survey of the main elements of his thought concerning the role of divine grace and the necessity for human action, in the process which leads to liberation. The first chapter provides a brief sketch of Rāmānuja's life and times, and of the sources of the religious philosophy which he articulates. This chapter also gives a review of his writings, and a statement of the basic elements of Viśiṣṭadvaita epistemology. The next three chapters explain the metaphysical principles of this system of thought. Chapter 2 deals with the nature of the Supreme Being as qualified by his modes and attributes. The third chapter describes the essential nature and capacities of the soul, and its condition of bondage in the world dominated by the law of karma and rebirth. In order to show the soul's position of dependence upon grace, chapter 4 discusses the relation between God and the soul.

Chapter 5 on the modes of grace, delineates the ways in which the Lord makes liberation possible. For the purpose of showing the relationship between human action and the operation of grace, chapter 6 describes the progressive disciplines of Karmayoga and Bhaktiyoga which constitute the path to release. Chapter 7 discusses the ambiguities of Rāmānuja's position with regard to points brought up by later disputes, on the subject of prapatti.

The format of this thesis is based on Kate L. Turabian's A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). A Manual of Style for Authors, Editors and Copywriters, 12th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), has been referred to with regard to the citation of references within the text. All references to the translations of Rāmānuja's works, are contained in the text, except in a few cases where translations have been given from sources other than those regularly used in the text. A list of the abbreviations used in the text, is given on page

CHAPTER I

Introduction

A. Preliminary Remarks

In this study I have attempted to interpret as intelligently and sympathetically as possible, a major thinker of a religion which is outside of my experience. Approaching this subject from the viewpoint of the Christian tradition requires constant vigilance against the tendency to superimpose Christian concepts upon Rāmānuja's thought. For this reason, many terms which are used to express the Christian notion of grace, have been avoided. At the same time, the use of familiar concepts and terms is unavoidable and necessary in any attempt to speak about and understand the concepts of other traditions. This is particularly true when English terminology is used to interpret Sanskrit sources. In many instances there is no direct translation for specific terms or concepts which arise from Hindu religion and culture. To use English terms which are roughly equivalent is in many cases misleading.

The general method with regard to translation will be as follows. In instances where a Sanskrit word can be translated with a word or a short phrase, the translation will

be given in the text. If a specific term is an integral part of a particular discussion, its meaning will naturally be incorporated into the text. In the case of terms for which there are no accurate or even nearly equivalent English words, translations are given in the Glossary. In such instances, only the Sanskrit term will be used in the text.

Apart from chapter 7, this thesis is confined to the discussion of Rāmānuja's major works, namely: the Śrībhāṣya, the Gītābhāṣya, the Vedārthasaṅgraha, the Vedāntadīpa and the Vedāntasāra. With the aid of secondary sources which attempt to interpret these works, I have tried to present as accurately as possible what the texts themselves say. Apart from a few isolated instances, no effort has been made here to interpret Rāmānuja's thought in the light of later commentators. One instance in which authoritative later commentators have been considered, is the chapter on prapatti, which attempts to deal with the ambiguities of Rāmānuja's position on points raised by later commentators. Here the two main sources referred to are Lokācārya's Mumukṣupadi and Satyavrata Singh's study of Vedānta Deśika. The Yatīndramatadīpikā of Śrīnivāsadāsa has been referred to in an attempt to clarify Rāmānuja's position on the arcā form of Brahman, as well as to explain certain terms which Rāmānuja uses but does not define.

Lokācārya's Tattvatrya has also been referred to on points of terminology.

B. Rāmānuja (1017 - 1137 A.D.)

1. Historical Context

In South India, the period from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries was one which saw the crystallization of the Tamil culture as well as the establishment of classical standards in the fine arts, religion and social institutions.¹ The predominant dynasty under which this culture flourished during the eleventh and twelfth centuries was that of the Colas, whose capital was at Gangaikondacholapuram. Other prominent dynasties in the Deccan with whom the Colas vied for power, were the Yadavas to the north, the Hoysalas of Mysore in the west, and the Kakatiyas to the east.

Rāmānuja's life spread over the reign of three Cola kings: Koluttuṅga I (A.D. 1070-1118), Vikrama Cola (A.D. 1118-1135), and Koluttuṅga II (A.D. 1123-46).² When Koluttuṅga I persecuted Rāmānuja, he fled to the kingdom of the Hoysala ruler, Viṣṇu Vardhana. The Colas were predominantly Śaivite, while the Hoysalas were known as patrons of Jainism. However, it was common for these rulers to patronize more than one religion. The same Cola king who persecuted Rāmānuja, is known to have made endowments

to the Vaiṣṇava temple at Śrīrangam.³ Viṣṇu Vardhana converted to Vaiṣṇavism, due to the influence of Rāmānuja, and built a Vaiṣṇava temple in Mysore.⁴

Religion was dominated, both in North and South India, by the rival sects of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism. Because of their influence, Buddhism and Jainism, though still in evidence, were on the wane. Both Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism were influenced by Tantric ideas and practices. In the case of Vaiṣṇavism, however, Tantric influence was stronger in North India, while in the south, the bhakti religion of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism became increasingly predominant.⁵ This sect worshipped Viṣṇu as the Supreme Lord, in conjunction with his Consort, Śrī.

Modern Vaiṣṇava Vedānta began with the Śrī Vaiṣṇava ācāryas (teachers) of Śrīrangam, who sought to give a theistic interpretation to Vedānta, through the synthesis of sectarian Vaiṣṇavism with Vedānta philosophy. This theistic emphasis was in opposition to the monism of Śankara's Advaita, which had placed Vedānta at the forefront of philosophy.⁶

The first ācārya was Nathamuni, a man learned in Vedānta, who collected the hymns of the Ālvārs and elevated them to the status of śruti.⁷ His successor was Yāmunācārya, whose writings are the earliest remaining systematic exposition of Vaiṣṇava Vedānta.⁸ The third

great ācārya was Rāmānuja, whose significant achievement was the systematic articulation of Vaiṣṇava Vedānta, based upon the foundation laid by his predecessors.

2. Rāmānuja's Life and Work

Rāmānuja is regarded by the Hindus as the leading exponent of theistic Vedānta. He was born in 1017 A.D. in Śrī Perumbūdūr, a town 26 miles from Madras in the northeastern part of the Tamil Country.⁹ He received his early training from Yādavaprakāśa, a teacher of Vedānta, who may have been a monist. Certain disagreements which arose between Rāmānuja and his teacher on points of doctrine, led eventually to Rāmānuja's break with Yādava and his association with the disciples of Yāmuna at the Viṣṇu temple in Kāncīpuram.

It is said that before this, Yāmuna had seen Rāmānuja and chosen him to be his successor. However, Yāmuna died without ever meeting Rāmānuja. At Yāmuna's death, Rāmānuja committed himself to taking up Yāmuna's unfinished work of converting the people to Vaiṣṇavism, and of writing a commentary on the Vedānta Sūtras according to Viśiṣṭādvaita. Following this, he studied with Yāmuna's disciple, Tirukacci Nambi, until his initiation into the Vaiṣṇava sect by Periya Nambi, an ācārya at Śrīrangam.

After separating from his wife to become a sannyāsin (ascetic), Rāmānuja began to gather his first disciples at Kāncī. Eventually he was called to Srīrangam by Yāmuna's disciples, to become their leading ācārya.

In the following years, Rāmānuja wrote his treatises on Vaiṣṇava Vedānta, carried on his functions as chief ācārya and overseer of the temple at Srīrangam, and travelled widely throughout India. Both in South India and elsewhere, he debated with leading teachers of Advaita Vedānta, propagated Srī Vaiṣṇavism, and attempted to reform temple worship by establishing the ritual system of Pāncarātra in Vaiṣṇava temples. During an unknown period of years, Rāmānuja lived in exile in Mysore, due to the persecution of the Saivite Cola King, Kulottunga I. He then returned to Srīrangam where he is said to have lived for 11 or 12 years until his death in 1137 A.D.

It is said that Rāmānuja ruled over 74 episcopal thrones, and numbered among his disciples, 700 ascetics, 12,000 monks, and 300 nuns. He is thought to have had 74 personal disciples whom he appointed as missionaries to spread the Srī Vaiṣṇava religion.¹⁰ The tradition's intellectual movement was carried on by scholars from among Rāmānuja's immediate disciples, and by his later successors, all of which claimed him as the authoritative

source of their interpretation of Vaisnava Vedānta.

Today, Vaisnavism is a living tradition which claims at least as many adherents as any other major religion in India. It is a rich composite of mythology and theology drawn from various traditions, the sources of which can be traced back as far as the Bhagavata religion of Vāsudeva of the second century B.C.¹¹ Vaisnavism has many sects and schools, but their common characteristics are bhakti, the worship of Viṣṇu as the Supreme Lord and Saviour, and the belief in salvation through grace.

C. The Sources of Rāmānuja's Thought

It is important to understand the thought of Rāmānuja in its proper perspective in relation to earlier exponents of Vedānta, the background of Śrī Vaisnavism, and the influence of his immediate predecessor. The school of Vaisnava Vedānta of which Rāmānuja became a member, and finally its first great systematic exponent, had its roots in the combined influences of the Pāñcarātra Āgamas, the popular religious literature of the Ālvārs, and Vedānta. From Pāñcarātra comes most of the ritual and the vyūha-doctrine, from the Ālvārs come deep bhakti and surrender to God, from Vedānta comes jñāna and a spiritualistic conception of mokṣa. All of these influences are

evident in Rāmānuja's Śrī Vaiṣṇavism.

Rāmānuja does not see himself as originating any new system of thought, but rather as giving the true interpretation of Vedānta, as understood by the ancient masters who interpreted the Vedānta Sūtras before the time of Śankara. Rāmānuja's concern is to establish that his interpretation is the correct one, and that it is in line with that of the ancient masters.¹² At the beginning of the Śrībhāṣya he states that he will follow Bodhāyana's interpretation of the Vedānta Sūtras (SBh 1.1.1, 3).¹³ In the Vedārthasaṃgraha he lists among others, Taṅka and Dramiḍa, two masters who are known to have written commentaries on the Chandogya Upaniṣad (Ved S para. 93, 250-51).¹⁴ Rāmānuja quotes from these sources repeatedly in his Vedārthasaṃgraha and Śrībhāṣya.

Rāmānuja himself acknowledges the foundation already laid by Yāmuna for his own articulation of Vedānta. At the beginning of the Vedārthasaṃgraha (para. 2, 183-84), he says that Yāmuna has already dispelled the erroneous teachings which are contrary to revelation.¹⁵ The erroneous teachings to which he refers are the Advaita Vedānta of Śankara and the Bhedābheda philosophies of Bhaṭṭa Bhāskara and Yādavaprakāśa.¹⁶ Rāmānuja considers all of these systems to have misinterpreted the Vedānta Sūtras. After a lengthy

argument against them in the Vedā̄rthasamgraha, he declares:

I have arrived at the conclusion that this is the doctrine of the scriptures after a painstaking study not only of the endless number of all the various śrutis, but also of the commentaries on them which have been accepted by judicious scholars (para. 83, 241).

In his own articulation of Vedā̄nta, Rāmānuja seeks to give a theistic interpretation of the two Mīmāṃsās of Karmakāṇḍa and Jñānakāṇḍa as constituting a single discipline of the worship of Brahman, and to bring about a synthesis between this interpretation and the popular bhakti religion of Vaiṣṇavism. Along with the Vedas, which are śruti, Rāmānuja uses smṛti liberally to substantiate his views. In keeping with the rule of Karma Mīmāṃsā Sūtras 1.1.3, he accepts smṛti as scripture, on the basis that it has been commissioned by Brahman to corroborate and clarify the Vedas. In this sense then, the smṛti to which Rāmānuja refers, is for him śruti. Where smṛti seems to contradict śruti, however, śruti must be taken as the final authority (SBh 2.1.1, 408-11). The smṛti to which Rāmānuja refers most often are the Bhagavadgītā and the Viṣṇu Purāṇa. Along with these, the influence of the Pāñcarātra Āgamas must also be taken into consideration.

The main emphasis of the Bhagavadgītā is upon a personal deity who can be attained through the devotion of bhakti, in conjunction with ritual action. This is also the emphasis of Viśiṣṭādvaita, which reacted against the

monism of Śankara and adhered instead, to a religion of devotion to a personal Brahman and worship through ritual action. The Bhagavadgītā therefore, is in line with Rāmānuja's concern to integrate the principles of Viśiṣṭādvaita into Vedānta. It is upon the foundation of the Bhagavadgītā and the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition of loving devotion, that Rāmānuja builds his theology of Brahman as the raksaka, the redeemer who liberates man by his grace.

The hymns of the Ālvārs, which were collected by Rāmānuja's disciples at his request, already show a knowledge of the Kṛṣṇa legends found in the Viṣṇu and Bhagavata Purānas. Both these hymns and the Purānas contributed to Rāmānuja's thought.¹⁷ Referring to the Matsya Purāna's four-fold classification of the Purānas, he says the Viṣṇu Purāna is of the highest, authoritative class, in accordance with which all other Puranas must be interpreted (Ved S para. 94, 251-53; para. 111, 264).¹⁸ He states that it gives information only on a certain aspect of the nature of Brahman, and that is his aspect of accessibility as represented by Viṣṇu. In this form he pervades the universe, which is his body, and he descends in the form of avatārs into the empirical realm for the benefit of all beings (Ved S para. 110-13, 262-66). This aspect of the nature of Brahman is all-important for Rāmānuja's doctrine of grace.

The influence of the Pāñcarātra doctrine upon Vaiṣṇavism before Rāmānuja, has already been stated. Yāmuna accepted the Pāñcarātra Āgamas as being the direct utterance of Brahman and wrote his Agamaprāmānya in their defence. Rāmānuja's view of the Pāñcarātra doctrines as given in the Śrībhāṣya, is in line with that of Yāmuna.¹⁹ After a lengthy argument in their favour, Rāmānuja concludes that the Pāñcarātra texts are of divine origin, and that they teach the nature of Brahman and how he may be attained, in accordance with the Vedas (SBh 2.2.40-43, 523-31). Though Rāmānuja does not quote the Pāñcarātra Samhitās explicitly, later discussions will show their influence upon his views of the five-fold form of Brahman, and of ritual worship.

It has already been stated that Yāmuna's writings comprise the earliest extant systematic exposition of Vaiṣṇava Vedānta. As such they are the earliest known record of the introduction of bhakti into Vedānta. In his works, Yāmuna also articulates the basic ontological principles of the personal nature of Brahman, and of the self-conscious nature of the ātman who is distinct from, as well as a part of Brahman (Ved S intro. 43-44).²⁰ In describing this relationship, he uses the analogy of the relation between the soul and the body. The relationship which this analogy expresses became the basis for Rāmānuja's

interpretation of divine grace in relation to human action.

D. The Writings Attributed to Rāmānuja

In his Yatiraja-Vaibhava, Rāmānuja's disciple Andhrapurna, attributes nine works to Rāmānuja.²¹ The same list is given in a verse of the Divya Sūri Carita, a poetic history of the Śrī Vaisṇava saints and teachers, which appears to be the work of another Rāmānuja's immediate disciples.²² The major works listed are the Śrībhāṣya, the Vedārthasamgraha, the Bhagavadgītābhāṣya, the Vedāntadīpa, and the Vedāntasāra. The shorter works are the Nityagrantha and three poetical works called the Śaranāgatigadya, the Śrīrangagadya and the Vaikunthagadya. These last three works are also referred to as the Gadyatraya.

The chief translations of these works which have been used for this study are as follows: Śrībhāṣya--The Vedānta-Sūtras, with the Commentary by Rāmānuja, by George Thibaut; The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja, by M. R. Sampatkumaran; Rāmānuja's Vedārthasamgraha, by J. A. B. van Buitenen; Vedānta Deepa of Rāmānuja, by K. Bhashyam; The Vedāntasāra of Bhagavad Rāmānuja, by V. Krishnamacharya and M. B. N. Ayyangar; Śrī Bhagavad-Rāmānuja's Śaranāgati Gadya, with the Commentary of Sudarśana Bhaṭṭa, by

K. Bhashyam.

In order to establish himself as an authority, a Vedānta ācārya must write commentaries on the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavadgītā, and the Vedānta Sūtras. Though Rāmānuja wrote no formal commentary on the Upaniṣads, the Vedārthasaṃgraha is considered to be his equivalent of an Upaniṣad Bhāṣya. It is intended to explain various topics which Rāmānuja feels must be understood in order to grasp the true meaning of the Upaniṣads. The meaning of the title of this work is "the summary of the meaning of the Vedas." The Vedārthasaṃgraha engages in polemics with Bhāskara, Yādavaprakāśa and the Advaitins. The topics which it discusses are ontology, the nature of ritual action as stated in the Karma Mīmāṃsā, the transcendent bodily form of Brahman, the divine origin of the Vedas, and the nature of bhakti.

The Bhagavadgītābhāṣya is the second in length of Rāmānuja's works. It is based on the interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā which Yāmuna gave in brief outline in his Gītārthasaṃgraha.²³ The doctrines of the Gītābhāṣya are essentially those of the Vedārthasaṃgraha and the Śrībhāṣya. However, its emphasis is upon the devotion of bhakti, and upon those facets of the nature of Brahman which bear most directly on his role as redeemer.