



RAMANUJA AND
SCHLEIERMACHER
*Toward a Constructive
Comparative Theology*

JON PAUL SYDNOR

With a Foreword by
Francis X. Clooney, SJ

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Ramanuja and Schleiermacher

*For Mom and Dad,
who always supported their errant son*

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Foreword

It is of course a pleasure for me to see Jon Paul Sydnor's *Ramanuja and Schleiermacher* in print. After all, the hope of any teacher is to see one's student find his own voice, become a teacher, and publish his own research. This Jon Paul has done in a very fine way.

But this book is a happy occasion also because it is a pleasure to see what Jon Paul has achieved in his research. This is a work of comparative theology thoroughly accomplished, without compromising intellectual responsibility or Christian commitment along the way. Comparative study is often thought of as merely wide-ranging, as less than theological. But Jon Paul has not taken up this comparative project because he is less interested in theology than his peers, or as if he had decided to survey religious topics neutrally rather than explore them with the eyes of faith.

As his introduction indicates, two separate courses—on Ramanuja, on Schleiermacher—continued to intrigue and nag him theologically long after the courses were done. Ramanuja and Schleiermacher would not stay neatly separated in his mind, and he found himself repeatedly returning to them in thinking through theological issues that arose in the course of his study. Comparative theological reflection thus became, he found, a primary way in which he was to be a theologian in his Calvinist heritage. When “absolute dependence” came to the fore as a topic to write a dissertation on, he knew that he would learn better how to understand Schleiermacher's celebrated view of the matter by bringing to bear on it the view of Ramanuja, a thinker who, though less well known in the West, has for a millennium remained one of Hinduism's greatest theologians.

Jon Paul recognized early on that this new venture could not possess in advance a predictable outcome. His own credibility, and respect for these two great thinkers, would rather require of him sensitivity and alertness to theological differences along the way, in a conversation that would have a dynamic and fruition unlike one that would stay safely in the realm of Schleiermacher studies or Ramanuja studies. At each point

in this book, therefore, Jon Paul has had to be triply alert: to what each author says on the dimension of absolute dependence under consideration, to ways in which they diverged, in disagreement or complementarity, and to his own resultant reformulation of what absolute dependence might mean, now, for us.

By the book's end, we know a great deal about Ramanuja and Schleiermacher, and that in itself is by no means a small accomplishment, since the explosion of theological learning in past decades has too often meant that authors and readers restrict themselves to narrow subspecialties, or instead strive for very general, all-purpose insights. Jon Paul has focused, and his efforts have paid off in depth and breadth of insight. If at first such a comparative conversation might seem odd or eccentric, Jon Paul has shown us how and why it is worthwhile to have read these authors together. For substantive theological reasons we are better off thinking about God, the world, human nature, and absolute dependence in light of both authors read together. Readers of this book will learn a great deal about dependence and the divine-human relationship, and about how two great theological traditions came to prize this idea and make it central to their theologies. Recently I published a book entitled *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God*. While my book appeared first, in 2008, it now seems an apt sequel to Jon Paul's substantive theological reflection: we learn absolute dependence across religious borders, and we enact what we learn in loving surrender, across those same borders.

At the end of the project, Jon Paul is still a theologian in the Calvinist tradition, and that is good, since almost always theologians do best when they are at home in a particular place, with a particular faith and particular community. Jon Paul did not lose his way in the wilds of comparison. Yet because of this continuing rootedness, his project more credibly opens the door to an almost infinite array of other such comparative conversations, other combinations of partners in dialogue chosen on the basis of opportunity and in light of specific issues that theologians need to address. In particular, we can only look forward to Jon Paul's next project on this solid foundation.

This is a fine example of comparative theology in action. If readers want to know how the discipline works when it works well, they can turn to *Ramanuja and Schleiermacher*.

Francis X. Clooney, SJ
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Acknowledgments

There are too many people for me to thank with regard to this book. Inevitably, in these acknowledgments i will overlook some. i beg the forgiveness of those whom i overlook.

First, i would like to thank my two primary readers, Terrence n. Tice and Francis X. Clooney. Terry guided me through the intricacies of Schleiermacher, while Frank served as my director and guided me through the intricacies of Ramanuja and the discipline of comparative theology itself. The book would not be what it is without their tutelage. Terry and Frank both are learned, demanding, and supportive; i could not have been blessed with better mentors. Any mistakes that you find simply reveal where i disregarded their advice!

i also thank Mark Heim and Michael Himes, who also served on my dissertation committee. i have studied theology of religions with Mark, and have looked to him for counsel both theological and personal. Michael Himes introduced me to Schleiermacher along with Charles Hefli g, whom i also thank. Their seminar on Schleiermacher, consisting of Michael, Charles, and PhD candidates Brian Flanagan, Karen Teel, and myself, was one of the formative intellectual experiences of my life.

i also express my gratitude to many professors at Princeton Theological Seminary who first introduced me to the blessings of reading and writing theology. in particular, i thank Mark Taylor, Daniel Migliore, Nancy Duff, and Wentzel van Huyssteen. Of enduring influence is Charles Ryerson, who introduced me to Hinduism and Buddhism, then sent me to india for a summer. i would not be where i am without him.

Over the years i have had innumerable profound conversations about religion with my fellow students. These have affected me deeply. i am grateful for conversation partners such as Kerry San Chirico, Chad Bauman, Kent Annan, Scotty utz, Mary Rodgers, Lisa Hickman, Scott Steinkerchner, Thomas Cattoi, Tracy Tiemeier, and Matthew Bagot. The world, theological and otherwise, is enriched by their presence.

My colleagues in the Religious Studies Department at Emmanuel College, where i teach world religions, have provided camaraderie, counsel, and a sympathetic ear as i laboriously revised my dissertation for publication. i thank them, as well as all the administration and faculty at Emmanuel. Emmanuel is an unusually supportive place, and i am proud to call it my academic home.

With this book i step into a living academic discipline, so i thank those who have gone before, publishing the interreligious books and articles that have shaped me. Although i cannot mention every theologian to whom i am indebted, i would like to briefly thank Francis X. Clooney, SJ, Mark Heim, Paul Knitter, John Thatamanil, John Cobb, Gavin D'Costa, John Hick, Charles Ryerson, and John Carman.

i express my deepest appreciation to the living Srivaisnava community for allowing me to study their preeminent theologian, Ramanuja. i hope that my admiration for Ramanuja shines through these pages. i consider him to be one of the greatest theologians, not just in indian history, but in world history.

Finally, i thank my family—first, my parents, who patiently watched their errant son find his way in life. i thank my children, Josiah, isaac, and Lydia, who have kept me from taking myself or my studies too seriously, while also reminding me of the importance of interreligious peace for our future. Most importantly, i thank my beloved wife, Abby, who has unwaveringly supported me as i took the long road to professional achievement. i love you all.

Ramanuja and Schleiermacher



Whichever devotee seeks to worship with faith whatever form of Mine, such as indra, although not knowing these divinities to be My forms, i consider his faith as being directed to My bodies or manifestations, and make his faith steadfast, i.e., make it free from obstacles.¹

it would be hard to find any person in whom one would not recognize any religious state of mind and heart whatsoever as being to a certain degree similar to one's own and whom one would discern to be completely incapable of stirring or being stirred by oneself.²

in TRODu CTiOn

Beginnings

in the fall of 2003 i was blessed to study two theologians concurrently: Sri Ramanuja of the Srivaisnava Hindu tradition and Friedrich Schleiermacher of the Reformed Christian tradition. i studied Sri Ramanuja with Francis X. Clooney, SJ, then of Boston College, now of Harvard Divinity School and current director of the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard. i studied Schleiermacher with Michael Himes and Charles Hefling of Boston College. Ramanuja and Schleiermacher in themselves, without reference to the other, are rigorous, original, profound thinkers, worthy of disciplined attention. Both adapt tradition to changed circumstances without sacrificing the substance and beauty of tradition. Both present comprehensive, coherent

1. Ramanuja, *Gita Bhasya*, §7.21, 261.

2. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, trans. Kelsey et al., §6.3.

theologies that thoroughly correspond to their own designated sources. And both theologians had and have a tremendous impact in the history of Hindu and Christian theology, respectively. For these reasons, study of either theologian is warranted and fruitful. Ramanuja and Schleiermacher are classics, insofar as each communicates a surplus of meaning. And the encounter of the human mind with a classic can be, at its best, a transformative experience.

But as that semester progressed and i meditated and brooded over the work of these two theologians, i increasingly noticed a striking aspect of my study. While both Ramanuja and Schleiermacher were instructive in themselves, my most productive insights into their theologies seemed to arise from comparison of both rather than solitary consideration of either. That is, i learned more from Ramanuja in relation to Schleiermacher than i did from Ramanuja alone, and i learned more from Schleiermacher in relation to Ramanuja than i did from Schleiermacher alone. Strangely, and almost mysteriously, as rigorously comprehensive as each theologian was, each became more in relation to the other.

Over the next several years i completed my coursework and comprehensive examinations and shelved my books by Ramanuja and Schleiermacher. But even as their books remained closed their influence persisted. Often, i asked myself how Ramanuja or Schleiermacher would address this question, or by what means they might reconcile this tension. And i always returned to the powerful way in which each informed the other. Sometimes, they debated with one another in my mind. Eventually, i resolved to better understand each theologian. But perhaps more importantly, i resolved to better understand the phenomenon of comparison that had occurred and was occurring in my education. Comparison was fruitful, but i didn't know why.

i was raised in the Presbyterian tradition, so i shared a common Calvinist heritage with Schleiermacher, who nevertheless wrote for the combined Calvinist and Lutheran traditions of the Prussian Union Church. My shared Calvinist heritage with Schleiermacher, and the transformation of my understanding of him through study of Ramanuja, caused me to ask the question: To what degree could Ramanuja change my understanding of my own tradition? Or even more pressingly, to what degree could Ramanuja change my understanding of myself? And by exactly what means does this transformation occur?

The essay that follows is an attempt to replicate and reflect upon my comparative theological experience in the fall of 2003. It will delineate the salient similarities and differences between Ramanuja and Schleiermacher on one shared theme—the doctrine of absolute dependence. The study will address where they agree, where they disagree, and why. This essay is not an attempt to juxtapose two theologians and marvel at their (often remarkable) similarities, despite their vast separation in space and time. It is not an attempt to prove a fundamental, universal human metaphysic through the similarities between these two theologians. Nor is it an attempt to establish their resonances as dependent upon a shared Indo-European culturo-linguistic heritage. Such a perhaps legitimate endeavor is best left to historians of religion. This essay is most certainly not an attempt to establish the superiority of Schleiermacher to Ramanuja, or of Christianity to Hinduism.

Instead, this essay will attempt to establish the fundamental interdependence, as a constructed opportunity, of two theologians through asserting that each is better understood in light of the other. By way of consequence, we will conclude that any constructive theology executed in the tradition of either theologian is better executed comparatively. Perhaps even more consequentially, we will conclude that religions think better when they think in community rather than isolation.

Texts

The approach utilized here will be primarily textual. It will compare three of Ramanuja's works—*Vedarthasamgraha*, *Sri Bhasya*, and *Gita Bhasya*—with Schleiermacher's *Der christliche Glaube*. The three texts by Ramanuja are chosen for several reasons. First, they are undisputed in authorship. While disagreement persists among Western scholars as to the authorship of Ramanuja's nine works, there is near-universal agreement that he authored the three texts in question. (Srivaisnavas themselves accept Ramanuja's authorship of all nine works.) Second, the three texts are theological in nature. The *Vedarthasamgraha* presents all of Ramanuja's thought in concise, systematic detail. The *Sri Bhasya* is a commentary on the *Brahma-Sutras* of Badarayana, which summarize the teachings of the *Upanisads*. And the *Gita Bhasya* is a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*. (Due to Vedanta's elevated doctrine of scripture, much Vedantic theology is exegetical theology.) The three texts selected—the *Vedarthasamgraha*,

Sri Bhasya, and *Gita Bhasya*—roughly equal Schleiermacher’s tome in length and content.

Each text by Ramanuja bears some introduction. The *Vedarthasamgraha* is often considered to be Ramanuja’s earliest work (it is referred to several times in the *Sri Bhasya*). As an offering to Srinivasa of Tirupati, a representation of Visnu, it is both an act of worship and theological masterpiece.³ *Vedarthasamgraha* means “summary of the meaning of the Veda.” The term “Veda” can have two references in the Hindu tradition. First, it can refer to the Veda proper, which is that portion of Hindu scripture concerned with the preservation of the cosmos through ritual worship. However, Ramanuja is certainly using a more expansive meaning of Veda, inclusive of all the most authoritative Hindu scripture, or *sruti* (“that which is heard”).⁴

indeed, when Ramanuja uses the term “Veda,” he is most often referring to the *upanisads*, a collection of religious poetry that is primarily concerned with knowledge of the Supreme rather than ritual proprieties. The *upanisads* generally address the relationship between Brahman and Atman. They ambiguously and paradoxically assert the identity of the two. Due to their use of ambiguity and paradox the *upanisads* allow multiple legitimate interpretations. They are considered to be the last portion of the Veda, when the Veda is more expansively conceived. They, along with the *Bhagavad-Gita* and *Brahma-Sutras*, compose the *prasthanatraya* (“triple canon” or “triple foundation”) of Vedanta.

Although the *Vedarthasamgraha* is a summary of the meaning of the Veda (for Vedanta, primarily the *upanisads*), it is not a commentary on them. Therefore, Ramanuja’s format is not constrained by any scriptural format, granting him more freedom in structuring his argument. For that reason, of Ramanuja’s works it is most similar to Schleiermacher’s *Glaubenslehre*. (The term *Glaubenslehre*, German for “faith-doctrine” (*doctrina fidei*), is often used to refer to Schleiermacher’s *Der christliche Glaube*.) Although the *Vedarthasamgraha* is not a commentary, it nev-

3. Raghavachar, *Introduction to the Vedarthasamgraha of Sree Ramanujacharya*, 2.

4. The Veda proper includes the *Rg Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. This Veda is composed of *mantras* and *brahmanas*. *Mantras* are words, phrases, or hymns of sacred significance and power. They are found primarily in the *Rk-samhita* and the *Atharva-samhita*, *samhita* simply being a division of the Veda. *Brahmanas* are liturgical texts that accompany the differing Vedas. Within the *Brahmanas*, the *vidhi* provide rules for the performance of the rites, while the *arthavada* are accompanying explanatory remarks. Each *Veda* has its own *Brahmana*.

ertheless shares a style similar to Ramanuja's other theological writings, since it remains a highly exegetical work rife with scriptural citations.⁵

The *Sri Bhasya* is Ramanuja's longest and most influential work. It is a commentary on the *Vedanta Sutras* (also known as the *Brahma Sutras*), which are a summary of the Upanisads, claiming to capture and communicate their essence. The *Vedanta Sutras* consist of brief, cryptic aphorisms that can easily be memorized. Their brevity allows for commentarial expansion. In adopting this project, Ramanuja once again found himself in the wake of the enormously influential Sankara, whose transtheistic interpretation of the *Vedanta Sutras* had gained tremendous influence by the time Ramanuja began to propagate his theistic Vedanta. Because Ramanuja himself believed the Upanisads to be authoritative scripture and the *Sutras* to authentically summarize the Upanisads, the necessity of providing an alternative, theistic, Srivaisnava interpretation was pressing. In effect, to comment on the *Sutras* was to provide a comprehensive commentary on ultimate reality itself. Ramanuja succeeded in doing so, partly by engaging in direct polemics with Sankara's Advaita Vedanta tradition. He argued that the path of knowledge (*jnana marga*) is insufficient to salvation, for it must be actualized by devotion (*bhakti marga*), which is enhanced through ritual activity (*karma marga*). Therefore, all Vedantin *margas* (paths to salvation) are components of one practice, which is ultimately salvific by grace.⁶

The *Gita Bhasya* is Ramanuja's second longest work. S. S. Raghavachar speculates that it was written after the *Vedarthasamgraha* and *Sri Bhasya*.⁷ Carman agrees that it is probably the last major work of Ramanuja, representing some of his most mature reflection. While the aphorisms of the *Sri Bhasya* allowed for more free exegesis on Ramanuja's part, the more detailed text of the *Bhagavad Gita* often restricted Ramanuja to paraphrase and amplification. Doctrinally, the *Gita Bhasya* is strikingly similar to the *Vedarthasamgraha* and *Sri Bhasya*. At the same time, it is highly dependent on the *Gitarthasamgraha* of Yamuna, Ramanuja's predecessor in the Srivaisnava movement. Its central theological themes include the assertion that *jnana yoga* and *karma yoga* serve only as preparatory stages

5. Carman, *The Theology of Ramanuja*, 50–52.

6. *ibid.*, 52–56.

7. Raghavachar, *Introduction to the Vedarthasamgraha of Sree Ramanujacharya*, 2.

to *bhakti yoga*,⁸ since they can at best result in the contemplation of the *atman*. *Bhakti yoga*, on the other hand, serves as the effective means by which Visnu/narayana can be attained. Additionally, Ramanuja insists that ritual acts are propitiations of Visnu/narayana, that the contemplation of the *atman* is ancillary to worship of Visnu, and that devotees can be divided into three groups: *aisvaryarthins* (those who seek lordship and power), *kaivalyarthins* (those who seek unitary solitude and meditative bliss), and *jnanins* (those who seek liberating knowledge). Of these three, according to Ramanuja, only *jnanins* can attain Visnu.⁹

The choice of Schleiermacher's *Der christliche Glaube* (*Christian Faith*) in relation to Ramanuja's three works was rather obvious. To begin, it is his definitive work of dogmatic Christian theology. That is, it is his systematic explication of the Christian consciousness of Evangelical Prussians in the early nineteenth century. It is not the "speculative" theology of the Scholastics, who reasoned until they had strayed from the original Christian impulse and found (or neglected to find) themselves in wandering mazes lost. It is not exegetical theology, which considers the Bible the one sure foundation of faith. Instead, Schleiermacher sought to assiduously, rationally, and systematically articulate what it felt like to be a Protestant Christian in his time and place.

Because it is comprehensive, *Der christliche Glaube* is able to stand on its own as a text. Schleiermacher himself insisted (perhaps against his own hermeneutical theory¹⁰) that the book was understandable in itself, without reference to his or anyone else's other works.¹¹ There is "theological" material in other works by Schleiermacher, including metaphysical speculation regarding God in, for example, *Dialectics: Or, the Art of Doing Philosophy*. But Schleiermacher relegated such metaphysical speculation

8. *Jnana yoga*, *karma yoga*, and *bhakti yoga* are the disciplines of knowledge, ritual activity, and devotion, respectively. These terms are used almost interchangeably with *jnana marga*, *karma marga*, and *bhakti marga*, where *marga* means "path."

9. Van Buitenen, *Ramanuja on the Bhagavadgita*, 12–17. As quoted in Carman, *The Theology of Ramanuja*, 60–61.

10. Schleiermacher, "Hermeneutics," 610–25. "One must first equate oneself with the author by objective and subjective reconstruction before applying the art [of interpretation] . . . (2) But both [objective and subjective reconstruction] can only be completely secured through a similarly complete exposition. For only from a reading of all of an author's works can one become familiar with his vocabulary, his character, and the circumstances of the language as the author used it."

11. Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre*, 74.

to the Christian practice of apologetics and excluded it from dogmatic theology. Perhaps most importantly, according to Schleiermacher it is dogmatic theology alone that serves the heart of Christian witness: preaching. For that reason, we may consider *Der christliche Glaube* (henceforth referred to by its nickname, the *Glaubenslehre*) to be Schleiermacher's definitive, comprehensive statement of dogmatic theology.

Although we will use three of Ramanuja's works in his dialogue with Schleiermacher, our primary work of comparison will be the *Vedarthasamgraha*. Like the *Glaubenslehre*, it is not a commentary and therefore is more freely structured than the *Sri Bhasya* and *Gita Bhasya*. Therefore, of Ramanuja's works it most resembles a Western Christian "systematic" theology in terms of content as well as genre. Simply stated, it most resembles the *Glaubenslehre*. For this reason the *Vedarthasamgraha* and *Glaubenslehre* especially seem to be on speaking terms.

Ramanuja's Intellectual Context

Ramanuja is considered to be one of the greatest theologians¹² of the Hindu Vedanta tradition. Specifically, Ramanuja is considered to be the greatest exponent of Visistadvaita (Qualified non-Dualism), ranking him with Sankara, the greatest exponent of Advaita (non-Dualism), and Madhva, the greatest exponent of Dvaita (Dualism). Although Ramanuja considered himself a revivalist rather than an innovator, he is nonetheless often referred as the founder of the Visistadvaita tradition.

Visistadvaita (Qualified non-Dualism) is that theistic, Vaisnavite (devoted to Visnu) sub-tradition of Vedanta which asserts that reality is both truly plural, having been granted reality through the creative/sustaining activity of Visnu, and truly unitary, being only modes of the one Visnu. The term "Visistadvaita" only came into currency after Ramanuja's death, so references to Visistadvaita during his own life are anachronistic. Visistadvaita is the intellectual flower of Srivaisnavism, one of four

12. The terms "theologian" and "theology," in reference to Ramanuja, are used advisedly but confidently. This chapter will define Hindu theology as a form of Hindu reasoning that is marked by attention to scripture and other religious authorities, received and reviewed in a critical fashion. It is to be distinguished from expressions of piety that are relatively immune to critical examination (such as devotional poetry), and Hindu reasoning that is only indirectly connected with religious truth claims or religious practices (Hindu philosophy). See Clooney, "Restoring 'Hindu Theology' as a Category in Indian Intellectual Discourse," 447-77.

major Vaisnava *sampradayas* (traditions). All forms of Vaisnavism are ultimately monotheistic and claim divine ultimacy for Visnu. Srivaisnavas are distinct in assigning soteriological importance and ultimacy to his consort Sri (Lakshmi) as well. For that reason it is sometimes referred to as Srisampradaya (“the tradition of Sri”). According to the Srivaisnavas, in this divine couple alone may salvation be found.¹³

Within Vaisnava traditions the ultimate has many names such as Brahman, isvara (Lord), and, of course, Visnu. But there is also one auspicious name. This name is used efficaciously and affectively in cultic ritual. For Srivaisnavas, the supreme name of God is *narayana*. This name refers not to an abstraction beyond name and form, but to a personal deity characterized by perfect name and form. In order to establish the ultimacy of *narayana*, Ramanuja must assert *narayana*’s supremacy over other personal gods such as Brahma (not to be confused with the ultimate Brahman) or Siva. He does this through the citation of scriptural evidence and linguistic reasoning.

Perhaps more importantly, because certain *upanisads* assign ultimacy to Brahman, Ramanuja must establish the identity of Brahman and *narayana*. He argues for this identity, once again, through scriptural and logical approaches. Henceforth, concludes Ramanuja, Srivaisnavas may confidently maintain that whenever the *upanisads* assign ultimacy to Brahman, they are in fact assigning ultimacy to *narayana*, for *narayana* is Brahman and Brahman is *narayana*. Nevertheless, the greatest soteriological efficacy is assigned to the name *narayana*. When a Srivaisnava wishes to make the most precise, powerful, and effective reference to the ultimate, that Srivaisnava will refer to *narayana*. A vague reference such as Brahman, or even a more specific reference such as Visnu, would lack the full, cultic specificity of the sacred name.¹⁴

Throughout this essay, I will refer to Ramanuja’s concept of the ultimate as Brahman, Visnu, and *narayana*. Although the supreme name is *narayana*, the designation that will preponderate in this study will be Brahman. This preponderance reflects the preponderance in Ramanuja’s own works, which most frequently utilize the term “Brahman” due to its prevalence in *upanisadic* texts. Ramanuja may also have preferred to reserve the more powerful name “*narayana*” for cultic use, rather than

13. Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*, 29.

14. Carman, *Theology of Ramanuja*, 158–66.

dilute it through extensive theological reference. In any event, the reader must keep in mind that Ramanuja's "Brahman" refers not to Sankara's impersonal absolute, but to Narayana, that personal deity who is an ocean of auspicious attributes.

As a South Indian Vaisnava (worshiper of Visnu), Ramanuja inherited a theistic and devotional religious tradition. Within his time and place, his own devotionalism was placed into conflict with the transtheistic and meditative purport of the Advaita Vedanta tradition of Sankara. This tradition had come to dominate the intellectually elite circles Ramanuja was attempting to influence. Sankara provided a comprehensive and influential analysis of the major texts of Vedanta, writing commentaries on the *Vedanta Sutras* (also known as the *Brahma Sutras*) and *Bhagavad Gita*, and consistently referring to the *Upanisads* throughout his works. As such, he derived authority for his interpretation from the three classics of the Vedanta tradition. Sankara concluded that Brahman, as the ground of the universe, is nondifferentiated and the sole ultimate reality. Therefore, all difference within the cosmos and among human beings is finally illusory. Indeed, the human soul, or *atman*, is in essence identical with Brahman. The great *Upanisadic* saying, "*tat tvam asi*," or "you are that," means that every individual is ultimately the perfectly existing, perfecting conscious, perfectly blissful, and perfectly unitary Brahman. To achieve release, or *moksa*, is to recognize the delusive nature of difference and accept one's own (and all others') divine, monistic essence. This recognition could be achieved through a trained intuition grounded in proper birth, proper gender, proper ethic, and proper instruction.

This meditative interpretation provided by Sankara resonated with the renunciant strand of South Asian religious sensibility. This strand distrusted corrupting material reality and posited an ultimate unity to all existence. The Advaita Vedanta of Sankara was comprehensive, grounded in the Veda, poetically articulated, and intuitively attractive. For those reasons, over time it came to be the dominant intellectual tradition within Vedanta.

Problematically for the Srivaisnavas, Sankara exalted meditation over devotion and contemplation over worship. He denigrated theistic Vedanta as a penultimate path for mediocre minds and inferior castes who were not yet capable of the rigorous practice and realization required for true salvation. To worship was to concede a certain spiritual inadequacy and to admit one's unreadiness for *moksa* (release). While useful,

worship was useful only at a lower level of human spiritual attainment. Most dangerously, all these claims were grounded in the u panisads, the supremely authoritative scriptures of the Vedanta tradition. Clearly, a theistic devotionalist such as Ramanuja would have to respond to such powerful and influential claims, or else risk a crisis of confidence for his entire tradition.

in order to understand the urgency of the situation, we must first understand the extent to which Srivaisnavas were devoted to Visnu. And to understand such devotionalism we must first gain some knowledge of those devotional poets known as Alvars. Srivaisnavism was deeply influenced by the devotional poems of the Alvars (“those immersed”), twelve South indian saints who composed songs in praise of Mal or Tirumal (“Holy Mal,” or “Mal with Tiru” [Sri]). Tirumal is a South indian deity who eventually came to be identified with Visnu.¹⁵ Although their compositions cannot be precisely dated, the Alvars were possibly active from the eighth to the twelfth centuries CE, although it is possible their activity began earlier.¹⁶ They succeeded in establishing vernacular Tamil as an influential religious language, and their powerful devotion reinforced worship as the proper form of human religiosity. Some Alvars relied on secular love poetry to evoke the intensity of a devotee’s relationship with Mal. All wrote with a passion that was entirely and ultimately relational, and all wrote in a folk style accessible to the laity, thereby increasing their own sphere of influence. Eventually, their brand of devotionalism came to be Sanskritized in the anonymous *Bhagavata Purana*, through which they influenced much of the Hindu tradition.¹⁷

Given the devotionalism of the Alvars and their profound influence on the Srivaisnava tradition, and the transtheistic, meditative interpretation of the supremely authoritative u panisads offered by Sankara, we may discern the tension within which Ramanuja found himself. His tradition worshiped Visnu, but Advaita Vedanta dismissed worship as inferior and penultimate. His tradition fervently sought relationship with the ultimate, but Advaita Vedanta asserted that all relationality, as predicated upon difference, was illusory. And his tradition, although well aware of Sanskrit scripture, had arisen from the Tamil vernacular. For much of indian intel-

15. Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti*, 285–88.

16. Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*, 5.

17. Hardy, “Alvars,” 2079–80.