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# Review

Jon Paul Sydnor, *Ramanuja and Schleiermacher: Toward a Constructive Comparative Theology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011. 226 pp. $45. ISBN 978-1608993086 (paperback)

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Comparative theology has emerged in recent decades as a distinctive turn in the history of Christianity's encounters with the religious other—a history marked in earlier times by the modalities of assimilation and triumphalism, if not outright violence, physical or epistemic. Its multiple strands are characterized by an affirmation, whether or not explicitly stated, that the other is somehow incorporated into the divine providential economy, so that it can play a catalytic role in stimulating intra-religious and inter-religious explorations. Jon Paul Sydnor attempts a constructive comparative theology along these lines by focusing on the notion of 'absolute dependence' in two theologians highly influential in their local contexts, Ramanauja (traditional dates 1017–1137 CE) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), and engages them in a mutual conversation which, as it unfolds under his meticulous attention and discernment over the areas of cosmology, anthropology and theology, draws out hitherto unarticulated aspects of each other's theological spaces and elaborates them along somewhat unexpected directions. He characterizes their theologies as 'rhizoids' (p. 31) which follow their internal developments, thereby acquiring distinctive configurations, and it is the task of the comparativist to seek out, through sensitivity to their internal logical of development, the resonances and parallels across the boundaries of these densely-woven webs of belief. Therefore, eschewing the project of compiling, in a quasi-algorithmic manner, a mere catalogue of similarities or differences or squeezing, in an act of textual imperialism, the distinctiveness of the thinkers into a common Procrustrean bed (which has often in the past turned out to be inflected by European presences), Sydnor states his conviction that constructive theology is practised at its best not when religions are left in isolation but when they are exposed to the challenge of other systems. This process of mutual interrogation, it is hoped, will draw out the surplus in each other's systems, generate new questions and provide a stimulus for deeper elucidations and richer articulations of their systems than would have been possible before the dialogical encounter.

A key difference that emerges between the conversation partners is that Ramanuja elaborates the notion of 'absolute dependence' through a Vedantic ontological apparatus of *jiva* (the embodied self), *Narayana* (the supreme personal Lord) and *samsara* (the phenomenal world from which liberation is sought), and his distinctive conception of the world as the 'body' of the divine, while Schleiermacher adopts an experiential approach, which Sydnor categorizes as phenomenological, to speak of the feeling (*Gefuhl*) of utter dependence on the divine which was exemplified uniquely by Christ. In the case of Ramanuja, the indissoluble ontological dependence of the *jiva* on the Lord is spelled out in terms of a relational unity within the monosubstantial, trimodal unity of the Lord, the finite selves and the physical reality of the world. For Schleiermacher, on the other hand, the starting point of the dogmatic formulation of Christianity is not speculative metaphysical doctrines but the pre-conceptual feeling of utter dependence on the Christian God of Love (though this God-consciousness, in sinful human beings, is often diminished by the pressures of world-consciousness and never as perfect and unvarying as in the case of Christ who gracefully bequeathed it to the world through his ministry). These considerations lead to this contrast between our thinkers: whereas Ramanuja speaks of the Lord in ontological terms as the substantial and the efficient cause of the phenomenal world, Schleiermacher phrases the crucial Christian doctrine of creation along the lines of preservation (which Christians can experience through the relation of dependence) and not of temporal origination (to which they can have no phenomenological access). However, as Sydnor cautions us, even this distinction, when carefully inspected, reveals certain overlaps across boundaries: Ramanuja too speaks of heartfelt devotional love of the Lord (which, when it takes the form of a steady meditative contemplation intent on the Lord, alone is liberative) and Schleiermacher, for all his concern that God-consciousness be not whittled away into abstract metaphysical abstractions, argues that Christian experience should be harmonized with an underlying metaphysic (which he believes is the task of a philosophically informed apologetics).

Having established that both thinkers argue for an ultimate convergence between phenomenology and metaphysics, though they seem to place differing degrees of emphasis on the two elements, Sydnor proceeds to raise two questions which demonstrate the fruitfulness of the comparative approach in suggesting further lines of development within each tradition. First, Ramanuja's doctrine of the Lord as the world's substantial cause could help Schleiermacher (and other Christian theologians generally) in formulating a doctrine of creation in terms of continuing preservation that does not lapse into a form of deism with its absentee God who has retired from the scene after an initial far-off originary moment. Second, equally crucially, given Ramanuja's view that the Lord surpasses all contexts of human causality (where substantial and efficient causes are distinct), Schleiermacher may challenge him to reconsider the Vedantic doctrine of *satkaryavada* with its implication that

the Lord—who is not subject to causal constraints— is not capable of producing the world from utter nothingness. All in all, such a mutual interrogation of the limits of each theological universe demonstrates that the distinction sometimes drawn between Christian thought as rooted in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and Vedantic systems as elaborations of emanationism needs careful examination—Ramanuja's view that the world and the Lord share the same substance does not amount to pantheism since he repeatedly affirms that the Lord is an ocean of auspicious qualities untouched by any empirical defects, and Schleiermacher himself, and some Christian theologians after him, have concluded that the affirmation of divine alterity does not logically necessitate the doctrine of creation out of utter nothingness.

Comparative theology, then, can play the critical role of de-familiarizing details of the theological landscape that might have been, prior to the symbiotic relationship which is sought be established between the dialogic partners, taken as unproblematic, and also lead constructively to intra-religious and inter-religious re-articulations and reformulations. One of Sydnor's basic points is that Ramanuja can assist Schleiermacher in explicating, without distortion or crude assimilation, the latter's position in ways that may have been unavailable to him in isolation from the initially alien context of Vedantic thought—and vice versa (p. 215).

A fundamental question mark, however, remains. It is inserted here neither against the methodological fruitfulness of comparative theology in fomenting richer patterns of inter-religious understanding, nor, more specifically, the attentive care with which Sydnor struggles with his dialogical partners, in the process introducing his distinctive concerns from his Calvinist standpoint. Sooner or later, comparative theology, to be genuinely critical and/or constructivist, has to grapple with the delicate, but ineliminable, question of truth-claims across theological boundaries. In the concluding sections of the book, Sydnor affirms that 'difference is becoming sacralized' (p. 217), a claim that may not be readily acceptable to Christian theologians such as Augustine, Calvin to Barth in our times, or Vedantic thinkers such as Samkara, Ramanuja and Madhva unless subsequent questions such as 'precisely what sort of difference?' or 'are divergent approaches to the divine scripturally sanctioned?' are highlighted and grappled with. That such concerns are not alien to the methodology of comparative theology but can emerge from within the conversation itself is evident from the fact that Schleiermacher, as Sydnor points out, regarded a number of metaphysical positions as consistent with the feeling of absolute dependence. Therefore, the difficult question raises its head, 'does the focal experience of God-consciousness point the way to Jesus Christ or to the Lord Narayana?', thereby drawing comparative theology, in its constructive moment, close to (negative and positive) apologetics from the sides of both theological partners.

Schleiermacher's conversation with Ramanuja can then throw the spotlight on an issue that may have remained 'unproblematized' before the

encounter: can any reasoned justification be offered for the claim that the members of the Sri–Vaisnava community, with their richly elaborated patterns of God-consciousness, should come to accept that the divine that they approach is properly conceptualized, in fact, as Jesus Christ? Of course, it might be retorted that the claim, as formulated in the above blunt manner, is unacceptably 'colonialist' and should be renounced in the context of contemporary inter-religious dialogue which should seek, it might be argued, to promote a sensitivity to the finely-textured nature of theological reasoning which cannot be extricated from their indigenous traditions. However, while comparative theology's attentiveness to context and emphasis on self-transformation are indeed an advance on earlier ill-informed and hermeneutically insensitive denunciations of the religious other, it has to face the difficult question of whether, in not sufficiently foregrounding the truth-question, it has in fact failed to emphasize what some traditions may regard as a vital aspect of their worldview.

In other words, the debate over whether or not Christian commitment requires some reasoned defence against the claims of alternative religious lifeworlds—or whether it is ultimately a 'groundless' choice for members of the Christian community who should not therefore seek to sing the Lord's song in alien lands—is not likely to abate in the foreseeable future. Ramanuja's dialogue with Schleiermacher helps us to see why this is so, and this must surely be regarded as a positive outcome of Sydnor's project.