

12 Harmonising the personal God with the impersonal *Brahman*

Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta in dialogue with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

Swami Medhananda

12.1 Introduction

The Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886) was raised in a Vaiṣṇava household and engaged in numerous Vaiṣṇava practices throughout his lifetime, such as adopting the attitudes of Hanumān and Rādhā. Through such practices, he claimed to have attained the spiritual realisation of Rāma, Sītā, Hanumān, Rādhā, and Kṛṣṇa. In light of Ramakrishna's strong Vaiṣṇava leanings, the question arises: what are the similarities and differences between Ramakrishna's teachings on God and traditional Vaiṣṇava conceptions of God?

According to the Vaiṣṇava theologians Rāmānuja and Madhva, *Brahman* is exclusively the personal God Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa endowed with all the omniattributes. On the other hand, the Advaita Vedāntin Śāṅkara conceives *Brahman* as ultimately only impersonal and non-dual pure consciousness. Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theologians in the tradition of Caitanya reconciled, to a certain extent, these conflicting views on ultimate reality by holding that the Supreme Reality is the personal God Kṛṣṇa whose “peripheral effulgence” (*prabhā* or *tanubhā*) is the impersonal *Brahman*. Although Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava thinkers, unlike Rāmānuja and Madhva, granted equal reality to the personal God and the impersonal Absolute, they nonetheless held that the *bhakta*'s spiritual realisation, and love, of Kṛṣṇa is of infinitely greater value than the *jñānī*'s realisation of the impersonal *Brahman*.

By contrast, Ramakrishna, on the basis of his own varied spiritual experiences, maintained that the impersonal non-dual *Brahman* and the personal Śakti are the static and dynamic aspects respectively of one and the same infinite Divine. Accordingly, Ramakrishna held that *jñānīs*,¹ *yogīs*,² and *bhaktas*³ all realise one and the same infinite Divine in different forms and aspects, none of which can be said to be superior to any of the others. Ramakrishna, this chapter contends, thereby went one step further than Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava thinkers by harmonising personalist and impersonalist conceptions of the ultimate reality without hierarchically subordinating the latter to the former.

12.2 Ramakrishna and Vaiṣṇavism

The Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886) was raised in a Vaiṣṇava household that worshipped Raghuvīr (Rāma) as the family deity. During his period of

intense spiritual practice, Ramakrishna engaged in numerous Vaiṣṇava practices, such as worshipping Kṛṣṇa and Rāmlāl (the infant form of Rāma) and adopting the attitudes of Hanumān and Rādhā. Through these practices, he claimed to have attained, on various occasions, the spiritual realisation of Rāma, Sītā, Hanumān, Rādhā, and Kṛṣṇa. Indeed, he even declared to his chief disciple Narendranāth Datta (later known as Swami Vivekananda) just days before passing away in August 1886: “He who was Rāma and He who was Kṛṣṇa is now, in this body, Ramakrishna” (Gupta, 1992, p. 72). Moreover, many of Ramakrishna’s teachings—as recorded in meticulous detail by Mahendranāth Gupta in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (*Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta*)—draw upon Vaiṣṇava themes, such as the need to cultivate longing for God, the love-play of the *gopīs* (milkmaids) with their beloved Kṛṣṇa, and the classification of six ways of communing with God.

The pervasive presence of Vaiṣṇava elements in Ramakrishna’s life and teachings has led at least one scholar—namely, Narasingha Sil (1997)—to argue that Ramakrishna was essentially a Vaiṣṇava in his spiritual and philosophical outlook. *Pace* Sil, I will contend that while Ramakrishna did frequently draw upon Vaiṣṇava themes and doctrines, he also quite consciously *broadened* them so as to make them less one-sided and sectarian and more universal.

On 3 July 1884, on the occasion of a Vaiṣṇava festival called the “*Punar yātrā*” (the return of Jagannāth’s chariot from the Guṇḍicā temple a week after Rathayātrā in Purī, Odisha), Ramakrishna visited the householder devotee Balarām Basu and his father, who was a staunch Vaiṣṇava. Knowing that Balaram’s father was very pious but somewhat sectarian in his Vaiṣṇava outlook, Ramakrishna encouraged him not to look down upon non-Vaiṣṇava traditions and to recognise that Vaiṣṇavas, Śāktas, and Advaita Vedāntins are all calling upon the same infinite divine Saccidānanda:

The *Bhaktamāl* is one of the Vaiṣṇava books. It is a fine book. It describes the lives of the various Vaiṣṇava devotees. But it is one-sided [*ekgh-eye*]. At one place the author found peace of mind only after compelling Bhagavatī, the Divine Mother, to accept the Vaiṣṇava *mantra* . . . I understand that the *Bhāgavata* [*Purāṇa*] also contains some statements like that. I hear that it is said there that trying to cross the ocean of the world without accepting Kṛṣṇa as the Ideal Deity is like trying to cross a great sea by holding the tail of a dog [cf. *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 6.9.22]. Each sect magnifies its own view.

The Śāktas, too, try to belittle the Vaiṣṇavas. The Vaiṣṇavas say that Kṛṣṇa alone is the Helmsman to take one across the ocean of the world. The Śāktas retort: “Oh, yes! We agree to that. Our Divine Mother is the Empress of the Universe. Why should She bother about a ferry-boat? Therefore She has engaged that fellow Kṛṣṇa for the purpose”. . . .

He is indeed a true person who has harmonized everything [*je samanvay koreche seī lok*]. Most people are one-sided. But I find that all point to the

One. All views—the Śākta, the Vaiṣṇava, the [Advaita] Vedānta—have that One for their centre. That Reality which is formless is also endowed with form, and that very Reality manifests in different forms:

The attributeless Brahman is my Father. God with attributes is my Mother.

Whom shall I blame? Whom shall I praise? The two pans of the scales are equally heavy.

He who is described in the Vedas is also described in the Tantras and the Purāṇas. All of them speak about the one Saccidānanda. The *nitya* [Eternal] and the *līlā* [God’s play] are the two aspects of the one Reality. It is described in the Vedas as “Om Saccidānanda Brahman,” in the Tantras as “Om Saccidānanda Śiva,” . . . and in the Purāṇas as “Om Saccidānanda Kṛṣṇa”. All the scriptures, the Vedas, the Purāṇas, and the Tantras, speak only of one Saccidānanda. It is stated in the Vaiṣṇava scripture that it is Kṛṣṇa Himself who has become Kālī.

(Gupta, 2010, pp. 493–494)

During Ramakrishna’s time, the various Hindu sects—especially the Śāktas, Vaiṣṇavas, and Advaita Vedāntins—would often quarrel with, and put down, one another, claiming that their particular conception of ultimate reality is higher or greater than those of others. Regarding Vaiṣṇavism in particular, he notes that certain Vaiṣṇava scriptures themselves are sometimes “one-sided” and sectarian, insisting that worship of Kṛṣṇa alone leads to salvation. The true spiritual aspirant, he suggests, should strive to “harmonise” all religious views by recognising that they all point to one and the same infinite Divine in different forms and aspects.

12.3 The hierarchical structure of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

To compare the views of Ramakrishna and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, we first need a basic understanding of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava doctrines concerning ultimate reality, differing grades of spiritual aspirants, and the nature of the final eschatological state. The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition of Vedānta holds that the Supreme Reality is the personal God Kṛṣṇa whose “peripheral effulgence” (*prabhā* or *tanubhā*) is the impersonal *Brahman* (Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, 1965, p. 1134).⁴ From an ontological standpoint, I take this to mean that the impersonal *Brahman*, as the mere effulgence of Kṛṣṇa, is as real as Kṛṣṇa but is nonetheless not on an equal ontological footing with Kṛṣṇa, since Kṛṣṇa alone has independent existence while the impersonal *Brahman* depends entirely for its existence on Kṛṣṇa.⁵ Moreover, from the standpoint of soteriological value, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas maintain that the spiritual knowledge and love of Kṛṣṇa is of infinitely greater soteriological value than the knowledge of the impersonal *Brahman*.

Accordingly, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theologians interpret the important verse 1.2.11 from the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* in a hierarchical manner:

That which the knowers of reality say is reality is nondual knowledge.
It is called *Brahman*, *Paramātmā*, and *Bhagavān*.

[*vadanti tat tattvavidas tattvaṃ yajjñānam advayam.*
brahmeti paramātmēti bhagavān iti śabdyate].

(Tapasyananda, 2003, p. 7)⁶

In his commentary on this verse, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theologian Viśvanātha Cakravartin claims that the non-dual Kṛṣṇa is experienced in different ways—and called by different names—by spiritual aspirants of varying calibres.⁷ Strikingly, Viśvanātha reverses the Advaitin Śaṅkara’s scheme by claiming that Advaitic *jñānīs* belong to the lowest order of “qualified aspirants” (*adhikāriṇi*), since they experience the divine reality—which they call “*Brahman*”—as “formless and devoid of the distinction between knower, the known, etc.”, and only as “consciousness in general” (*nirākāraṃ jñātr-jñeyādi-vibhāga-sūnyam cit-sāmānyam*) (Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, 1965, p. 133). *Yogīs*, according to Viśvanātha, are superior to the Advaitic *jñānīs*, because *yogīs* experience two or three “qualities” (*dharma*s) of the divine reality—which they call “*Paramātmā*”—such as the quality of being the “inner controller” (*antaryāmī*) of all beings (Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, 1965, pp. 133–134).

According to Viśvanātha, *bhaktas* belong to the highest rung of spiritual aspirants, since they enjoy the fullest and richest knowledge of the divine reality, whom they call “*Bhagavān*”. As Viśvanātha puts it, *bhaktas* alone have the “capacity to grasp that *Bhagavān* is the One who has unlimited qualities like form, beauty, playfulness, and an essence [*svarūpa*] that is incomprehensibly infinite and composed of consciousness and bliss” (*acintya-ananta-cid-ānandamaya-svarūpa-rūpa-guṇa-līlādi-anekadharmavattva asya grahaṇa-yogyatāyām*) (Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, 1965, p. 134). From Viśvanātha’s standpoint, since God is “incomprehensibly infinite” (*acintya-ananta*), He can be experienced in different ways by spiritual aspirants of varying calibres. Indeed, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava philosophers maintain that the Lord, by virtue of His *acintya-śakti*, is capable even of resolving what appear to be contradictions to the finite human intellect.⁸ Accordingly, Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa defines *acintya-śakti* as the “resolver of contradictions” (*virodha-bhañjikā*) (Vidyābhūṣaṇa, 1941, p. 19). For Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, while personal and impersonal conceptions of God seem to contradict each other, God is capable of being *both* personal (*saguṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*), even though the human intellect is unable to grasp how this is possible.⁹ It is clear, however, that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas do not grant equal value to the personal and impersonal aspects of the supreme reality: since the impersonal *Brahman* is the mere peripheral effulgence of the personal God Kṛṣṇa, *bhaktas* of Kṛṣṇa are far superior to Advaitic *jñānīs*.¹⁰ As Viśvanātha puts it, “the bliss of Kṛṣṇa’s love in Gokula is far superior to the paltry loveless happiness in *Brahman*” (*premarahitāt*

brahmasukha-anubhavāt premasahitaḥ vaikuṅṭhasukha-anubhavaḥ śreṣṭhaḥ) (Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, 1965, p. 1143; Thakura, 2004, p. 290). For Viśvanātha, then, the infinite impersonal *Brahman* is only a minor—and rather bland—aspect of the infinite personality of Kṛṣṇa himself. Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, as Kapoor (2008, p. 92) explains, hold that “Bhagavān [Kṛṣṇa] is the highest being (*pūrṇa-āvirbhāva*), in whom all the auspicious qualities are most perfectly manifested”, while “Brahman is the incomplete form (*asamyak-āvirbhāva*) of Bhagavān, in whom all the divine attributes and potencies lie in a dormant state”.¹¹

The Vaiṣṇava scripture *Brahmasaṃhitā* details an elaborate divine hierarchy, according to which Kṛṣṇa is the supreme Godhead while all other deities are progressively lower than, and subordinate to, him.¹² Jīva Gosvāmī, in his commentary on verse 46 of the *Brahmasaṃhitā*, describes Mahā-Viṣṇu as “the portion of a portion of Śrī Govinda” (*govindāṃśāṃśah*) (Nārāyaṇa Mahārāja, 2003, p. 350), and verses 44 and 45 of the *Brahmasaṃhitā* characterise Durgā and Śiva as servants of Kṛṣṇa (Nārāyaṇa Mahārāja, 2003, pp. 250–255). Verse 39 describes Rāma, Buddha, and other divine incarnations (*avatāras*) as partial manifestations of Kṛṣṇa (Nārāyaṇa Mahārāja, 2003, p. 228). The *Brahmasaṃhitā* upholds a correspondingly hierarchical view of salvation, according to which Goloka—where Kṛṣṇa, the cowherd boy of Vṛṇḍāvana, eternally dwells—is the highest transcendental abode. Below Goloka lies Vaikuṅṭha, the abode of Viṣṇu, below which is Maheśa or Kailāsa, the abode of Śiva, below which is *brahmapjyoti*, Kṛṣṇa’s peripheral effulgence as non-dual *Brahman* to which *jñānayoḡīs* aspire.

12.4 Ramakrishna’s Vijñāna Vedānta and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism: philosophical affinities

We can now examine Ramakrishna’s views on God and salvation and compare them with those of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. At the foundation of Ramakrishna’s spiritual philosophy is a highly expansive conception of God as the “infinite Divine” (*ananta*) whose inexhaustible plenitude is beyond our comprehension (Gupta, 2010, p. 181, 1992, p. 218). For Ramakrishna, God is “infinite” in the sense that he is illimitable and capable of having numerous forms and aspects that may appear to be contradictory to our finite rational intellects. As Ramakrishna puts it,

That Reality which is the *nitya* [Eternal] is also the *līlā* [the impermanent divine play of the universe]. . . . [E]verything is possible for God. He is formless, and again He assumes forms. He is the individual and He is the universe. He is Brahman, and He is Śakti. There is no limit to God. Nothing is impossible for Him.

(*jāhāri nitya tāhāri līlā. . . tāhāte sab sambhabe. sei tinī nirākār sākār. tinī svarāṭ virāṭ. tinī brahma, tinī śakti. tāṛ iti nai,—śeṣ nai; tāte sab sambhabe.*)
(Gupta, 2010, p. 997, 1992, p. 920)¹³

According to Ramakrishna, the infinite Divine is at once the attributeless non-dual *Brahman* realised by Advaita Vedāntins and Śakti, the personal God worshipped by *bhaktas*. To the rational intellect, such attributes as personality and impersonality and form and formlessness may seem to be contradictory. However, since God's infinite nature cannot be confined within the narrow walls of our finite human understanding, we should humbly accept that "everything is possible for God".

There are clearly some similarities between Ramakrishna's doctrine of the unthinkable infinitude of God and the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava doctrine of *acintya-śakti*, God's incomprehensible capacity to assume multiple forms and aspects that seem contradictory to the rational intellect. Ramakrishna also follows Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas in striving to harmonise personalist and impersonalist conceptions of the Supreme Reality. Ramakrishna refers to the supreme reality realised in *nirvikalpa samādhi* as "The Infinite, the formless and impersonal Brahman beyond speech and thought" (*ananta, vākya-maner atīt, arūp nirākār brahma*) (Gupta, 2010, p. 181, 1992, p. 218). At the same time, he also refers to the "Infinite Lord" (*ananta īśvar*) (Gupta, 2010, p. 101, 1992, p. 150) and his "infinite power" (*ananta-śakti*)¹⁴ (Gupta, 2010, p. 100, 1992, p. 149) and "infinite glories" (*ananta-aiśvarya*) (Gupta, 2010, p. 104, 1992, p. 152).

Ramakrishna reconciles the impersonalism of classical Advaita Vedānta and the personalism of devotional traditions by adopting an expansive view of God's infinitude rooted in the spiritual state of "*vijñāna*". As he puts it, the *vijñāni*¹⁵ first attains the knowledge of non-dual *Brahman* in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and then comes back to the world and "realizes that the Divine Reality which is *nirguṇa* [impersonal and without attributes] is also *sagūṇa* [personal and with attributes]" and that "Brahman has become all individual souls and everything in the universe" (Gupta, 2010, p. 51, 1992, p. 104). From the spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna*, Ramakrishna affirmed that one and the same infinite God reveals his impersonal aspect to *jñānīs* and his personal aspect to *bhaktas*. Hence, I have argued in detail elsewhere (Maharaj, 2018, pp. 13–150) that Ramakrishna's philosophy is best understood as "Vijñāna Vedānta", a new philosophical school of Vedānta—grounded in his expansive spiritual experience of *vijñāna*—that strives to harmonise the traditional Vedāntic schools, various spiritual paths within Hinduism, as well as the world's great religious faiths.

For Ramakrishna, then, God is infinite not only in his utterly ineffable transcendence but also in his capacity to *manifest* in infinite ways—for instance, as various forms of the personal God, as incarnations, and as the entire universe. As Ramakrishna puts it, the infinite Saccidānanda "assumes forms for the sake of His *bhaktas* [devotees]" (Gupta, 2010, p. 181, 1992, p. 217). Indeed, he emphasises that these divine forms worshipped by *bhaktas* are real manifestations of the infinite Divine Consciousness: "*Bhaktas* acquire a 'love body' [*bhāgavatī-tanu*], and with its help they see the Consciousness-form [*cinmay rūp*] of the Supreme Reality" (Gupta, 2010, p. 181, 1992, p. 217). For both Ramakrishna and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, then, the unthinkably infinite God appears to Advaitic *jñānīs* as the impersonal Absolute and to *bhaktas* as the personal God.

12.5 Going beyond hierarchies? Ramakrishna's philosophico-spiritual standpoint of *Vijñāna*

In spite of the deep affinities between Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta, there are also important differences. As we have seen, while Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas grant equal reality to Kṛṣṇa and the impersonal *Brahman*, they nonetheless hold that the relation between Kṛṣṇa and the impersonal *Brahman* is one of *asymmetrical ontological dependence*: Kṛṣṇa alone enjoys independent existence while the impersonal *Brahman* depends for its existence on Kṛṣṇa.¹⁶ Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas further claim that the realisation of the supreme person Kṛṣṇa is of an infinitely greater soteriological value than the realisation of the impersonal *Brahman* sought by Advaita Vedāntins.

In contrast to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, Ramakrishna grants not only equal reality but also equal ontological status and equal soteriological value to the impersonal and personal aspects of the infinite Divine. According to Ramakrishna, the relation between the impersonal *Brahman* and the personal God (Śakti) is one of *mutual ontological dependence*: the former depends for its existence on the latter, just as much as the latter depends for its existence on the former. As he puts it, “one cannot think of Brahman without Śakti, or of Śakti without Brahman. One cannot think of the *nitya* [Eternal] without the *līlā* [divine play], or of the *līlā* without the *nitya*” (Gupta, 2010, p. 85, 1992, p. 134). He conveys the mutual ontological dependence of *Brahman* and Śakti through some telling analogies: “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable [*abhed*], like water and its wetness, like fire and its power to burn” (Gupta, 2010, p. 568, 1992, p. 550). The concept of wetness is inherent in the concept of water, just as much as the concept of water is inherent in the concept of water's wetness. Likewise, fire's power to burn is inherent in the concept of fire, just as much as the concept of fire is inherent in fire's power to burn. For Ramakrishna, then, the impersonal non-dual *Brahman* and the personal, dynamic Śakti are ontologically inseparable, so neither can exist without the other.

Another crucial difference between Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism is that he grants *equal soteriological value* to the impersonal and personal aspects of the infinite Divine—as evidenced by one of his favourite teachings: “The Divine Reality who is called Brahman by the *jñānīs* is known as Ātman by the *yogīs* and as Bhagavān by the *bhaktas*” (Gupta, 2010, p. 83, 1992, p. 133). Since Ramakrishna was quite familiar with the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, this teaching may very well have been inspired by verse 1.2.11 of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, already quoted earlier. Significantly, he clarifies this teaching from the standpoint of *vijñāna*: while Advaitic *jñānīs* dismiss the world as perceived in the waking state as unreal and insist that God cannot be “a Person” (*vyakti*), *bhaktas* “accept the waking state as real” and see the universe as a real manifestation of “God's glory” (Gupta, 2010, p. 83, 1992, p. 133).¹⁷ He adds that the highest type of devotee, the “*uttam bhakta*”, sees that “God Himself has become the twenty-four cosmic principles—both the individual souls and the universe” (Gupta, 2010, p. 83, 1992, p. 133). This “*uttam bhakta*” is none other than the *vijñānī*, who realises that the infinite Divine is not only the impersonal *Brahman* but also the personal Śakti

pervading the entire universe. As Ramakrishna puts it, “When God is actionless [*niṣkriyā*], I call God ‘Brahman’; when God creates, preserves, and destroys, I call God ‘Śakti’” (Gupta, 2010, p. 861, 1992, p. 802).

The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Viśvanātha, we should recall, espouses the hierarchical view that *bhaktas* are superior to both *jñānīs* and *yogīs*, since *bhaktas* alone realise the personal Bhagavān in His infinite fullness while *jñānīs* and *yogīs* realise *Brahman* and *paramātmān* respectively, which are only minor aspects of Bhagavān. By contrast, Ramakrishna holds that the impersonal *Brahman-Ātmān* and the personal Śakti are complementary aspects of one and the same infinite Divine. Accordingly, Ramakrishna holds that *jñānīs*, *yogīs*, and *bhaktas* all realise the same infinite Divine in different aspects and forms, none of which can be said to be superior to, or richer or more complete than, any of the others. At the same time, he distinguishes two classes of *bhakta*. Ordinary *bhaktas* think of God as only personal. By contrast, *vijñānī bhaktas* (or *uttam bhaktas*), after having realised *both* the personal and impersonal aspects of the infinite Divine, enjoy the panentheistic realisation that God—in His Śakti aspect—has become the entire universe. Therefore, while Ramakrishna places ordinary *bhaktas* on the same footing as *jñānīs* and *yogīs*, he maintains that *vijñānīs* have a more expansive knowledge of the infinite Divine than *jñānīs*, *yogīs*, and ordinary *bhaktas* do.

Interestingly, then, while Ramakrishna and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism adopt a hierarchical view that privileges a certain class of *bhaktas* over other types of spiritual aspirants, they part ways in their understanding of what these highest *bhaktas* realise. For Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, the highest *bhakta* realises the personal God Kṛṣṇa, whose peripheral effulgence is the impersonal *Brahman*. For Ramakrishna, by contrast, the highest *vijñānī bhakta* realises God as the infinite Divine who is equally personal and impersonal but who is also beyond both personality and impersonality. As he puts it, “God is with form, without form, and much more besides” (*tini sākār, nirākār, ābār kato ki*) (Gupta, 2010, p. 602, 1992, p. 577). I take him to mean that God lovingly manifests his personal and impersonal aspects to us, but he also has other aspects that lie entirely beyond our ken. On the basis of *vijñāna*, then, Ramakrishna harmonises the impersonal and personal dimensions of the infinite divine without subordinating one to the other from either an ontological or a soteriological standpoint.

Ramakrishna also differs from Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas in upholding the non-hierarchical view that one and the same Saccidānanda (existence-knowledge-bliss Absolute)¹⁸ is described in the Vedas as “Om Saccidānanda Brahman”, in the Tantras as “Om Saccidānanda Śiva”, and in the Purāṇas as “Om Saccidānanda Kṛṣṇa” (Gupta, 2010, p. 494, 1992, p. 490). For Ramakrishna, no particular form of the personal God is higher or more complete than any of the other forms. By contrast, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, as we have seen, uphold the hierarchical view that Kṛṣṇa is the supreme God while other deities—such as Durgā, Śiva, and Viṣṇu—are inferior to Him in being a portion or servant of Him.

Ramakrishna’s teachings on the nature of postmortem salvation are grounded in his expansive, *vijñāna*-based conception of the impersonal–personal Divine. According to Ramakrishna, salvation takes two basic forms, each of which is

equally valuable from a soteriological standpoint: liberated souls can either merge their individuality in non-dual pure consciousness or dwell eternally in a higher *loka* (heaven), where they lovingly serve and worship the personal God. Ramakrishna makes clear that the kind of salvation they choose depends not on their level of spiritual fitness but on their innate temperament. As he puts it, “*Bhaktas* love to eat sugar, not to become sugar” (Gupta, 2010, p. 83, 1992, p. 133).

To emphasise the equal value of both these salvific ideals, Ramakrishna invokes the analogy of a limitless ocean:

Saccidānanda is like an infinite ocean. Intense cold freezes the water into ice, which floats on the ocean in blocks of various forms. Likewise, through the cooling influence of *bhakti*, one sees forms of God [*sākārmūrti*] in the Ocean of the Absolute. These forms are meant for the *bhaktas*, the lovers of God. But when the Sun of Knowledge [*jñāna-sūrya*] rises, the ice melts; it becomes the same water it was before. Water above and water below, everywhere nothing but water . . . But you may say that for certain devotees God assumes eternal forms [*nitya sākār*]. There are places in the ocean where the ice doesn’t melt at all. It assumes the form of quartz [*sphaṭiker ākār*].

(Gupta, 2010, p. 152, 1992, p. 191)

By likening the forms of the personal God to ice formations in the infinite ocean of the divine Saccidānanda, Ramakrishna conveys that these divine forms are no less real than the formless Absolute. At the same time, he notes that the ice “melts” when the “Sun of Knowledge” rises. By “Sun of Knowledge”, he clearly means the knowledge of the attributeless non-dual *Brahman*: upon the attainment of non-dual realisation, one no longer perceives any divine forms. If he stopped here, we might be led to assume that he supports the classical Advaitic view that ultimate salvation consists in non-dual realisation. Crucially, however, he goes on to remark that for certain *bhaktas*, the ice becomes “quartz” instead of melting. In other words, these *bhaktas* choose to remain in a loving relationship with an “eternal form” of the personal God. While Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas hold that Kṛṣṇa is the highest form of the personal God, Ramakrishna maintains that all forms of God are equally great—a parity conveyed by his likening the various forms of the personal God to different ice formations of the same ocean water.

From the standpoint of Śaṅkara’s classical Advaita Vedānta, devotion towards the personal God is at best a stepping stone towards non-dual realisation. On 23 May 1885, Mahimā Cakravartī, a householder with leanings towards Advaita Vedānta, asked Ramakrishna whether he subscribed to this classical Advaitic view:

MAHIMĀ: I have a question to ask, sir. A *bhakta* needs Nirvāṇa some time or other, doesn’t he?

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: It can’t be said that *bhaktas* need Nirvāṇa. There is a state in which the eternal Kṛṣṇa is with His eternal *bhaktas* [*nityakṛṣṇa tār*

nityabhakta]. Kṛṣṇa is Consciousness embodied, and His Abode also is Consciousness embodied [*cinmay śyām, cinmay dhām*]. Kṛṣṇa is eternal and the *bhaktas* also are eternal [*nityakṛṣṇa nityabhakta*]. Kṛṣṇa and His *bhaktas* are like the moon and the stars—always near each other. Further, I have told you that the *bhakta* who is born with an element of Viṣṇu cannot altogether get rid of *bhakti*.

(Gupta, 2010, p. 834, 1992, p. 779)

In this highly significant passage, Ramakrishna emphatically answers Mahimā’s question in the negative: it is not necessary for devotees to attain the Advaitic state of nirvāṇa, the total dissolution of individuality in non-dual pure consciousness. Rather, salvation for *bhaktas* consists in a state of eternal loving communion with the personal God. Ramakrishna’s specific reference to “the eternal Kṛṣṇa” and “His eternal *bhaktas*” suggests that he may have had in mind Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, according to which the highest salvation consists in residing eternally in the transcendental realm of Goloka, where liberated souls lovingly worship and serve Kṛṣṇa. In fact, all the devotional schools of Vedānta—including not only Acintyabhedābheda but also Vallabha’s Śuddhādvaita, Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita, Nimbārka’s Svābhāvika Bhedābheda, and Madhva’s Dvaita Vedānta—conceive the highest salvation not as the dissolution of one’s individuality in non-dual *Brahman* (as Advaita Vedāntins hold) but as the attainment of an eternal non-physical realm (*loka*) in which the individual soul lovingly worships and serves the personal God (Tapasyananda, 1990; Maharaj, 2020, p. 6). According to all of these devotional Vedāntic schools, this eternal *loka*, as well as God himself and all individual souls, are composed not of physical matter but of “*śuddha-sattva*”, which is non-physical and eternal (Tapasyananda, 1990). As Ramakrishna puts it, “Kṛṣṇa is Consciousness embodied, and His Abode also is Consciousness embodied”.

Ramakrishna, then, grants equal soteriological value to *both* the Advaitic ideal of merging one’s individuality in non-dual *Brahman* and the devotional ideal of eternal loving communion with the personal God in a transcendental realm.¹⁹ Moreover, he rejects the narrowness and sectarianism of all the traditional Vedāntic schools. Classical Advaita Vedāntins deny the possibility of eternally dwelling with the personal God in a higher *loka*, claiming instead that souls who attain such a *loka*—which they usually refer to as “*brahma-loka*”—cannot remain there eternally and, hence, must eventually go on to merge their individuality in non-dual *Brahman* to achieve liberation.²⁰ On the other hand, followers of devotional schools of Vedānta either deny outright the Advaitic ideal of salvation or—as in the case of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism—relegate it to an inferior form of salvation (Tapasyananda, 1990). In contrast to all of these traditional schools of Vedānta, Ramakrishna grants equal value to both the Advaitic and devotional ideals of salvation. Instead of hierarchically privileging one form of salvation over the other, he maintains that the form of salvation we choose depends on our individual temperament and preference—whether we prefer to “eat sugar” or “become sugar”.

12.6 Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based religious pluralism

Ramakrishna's expansive understanding of God and salvation is derived from his own diverse religious practices and spiritual experiences. He practised not only the theistic Hindu disciplines of Śākta Tantra and Vaiṣṇavism but also the nontheistic discipline of Advaita Vedānta, which holds that the impersonal non-dual *Brahman* alone is real. Even more remarkably, he also practised both Christianity and Islam and found them to be as salvifically efficacious as Hinduism. Through all of these different paths, he claimed to have realised various forms and aspects of one and the same infinite Divine, thereby obtaining direct experiential verification of the truth of religious pluralism.²¹

As mentioned earlier, Ramakrishna's spiritual journey culminated in the unique spiritual experience of *vijñāna*, his realisation that the "Divine Reality which is impersonal [*nirguṇa*] is also personal [*saguṇa*]" (Gupta, 2010, p. 51, 1992, p. 104). As a *vijñānī*, Ramakrishna affirmed that "[t]here is no limit to God": the Infinite God is both personal and impersonal, with and without form, immanent in the universe and beyond it (Gupta, 2010, p. 997, 1992, p. 920). From the spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna*, he taught that theistic and non-theistic spiritual philosophies are equally effective paths to realising God. As he put it, "God can be reached through any number of paths" (Gupta, 2010, p. 51, 1992, p. 104). His religious pluralism, then, derives directly from his *vijñāna*-based ontology of God as the impersonal–personal infinite Divine. As he succinctly puts it, "God is infinite, and the paths to God are infinite" (*tini ananta, patho ananta*) (Gupta, 2010, p. 511, 1992, p. 506). Since God is infinite, there are correspondingly infinite ways of approaching and ultimately realising God. From Ramakrishna's standpoint, God is conceived and worshipped in different ways by people of varying temperaments, preferences, and worldviews. Accordingly, a sincere practitioner of any religion can realise God in the particular form or aspect he or she prefers.

To illustrate the harmony of all religions,²² Ramakrishna would frequently recite the parable of the chameleon:

Once a man entered a forest and saw a small animal on a tree. He came back and told another man that he had seen a creature of a beautiful red color on a certain tree. The second man replied: "When I went into the forest, I also saw that animal. But why do you call it red? It is green". Another man who was present contradicted them both and insisted that it was yellow. Presently others arrived and contended that it was grey, violet, blue, and so forth and so on. At last they started quarrelling among themselves. To settle the dispute, they all went to the tree. They saw a man sitting under it. On being asked, he replied: "Yes, I live under this tree and I know the animal very well. All your descriptions are true. Sometimes it appears red, sometimes yellow, and at other times blue, violet, grey, and so forth. It is a chameleon. And sometimes it has no color at all. Now it has a color, and now it has none".

In like manner, one who constantly thinks of God can know God's real nature; he alone knows that God reveals Himself to seekers in various forms and aspects. God is personal [*saguṇa*] as well as impersonal [*nirguṇa*]. Only the man who lives under the tree knows that the chameleon can appear in various colors, and he knows, further, that the animal at times has no color at all. It is the others who suffer from the agony of futile argument.

(Gupta, 2010, p. 101, 1992, pp. 149–150)

Like the chameleon which appears in various colours and sometimes has no colour at all, God manifests in various forms and aspects to different spiritual aspirants. While most people make the mistake of thinking that the chameleon only has the colour which they see it as having, the man always sitting under the tree sees that the chameleon has various colours and, hence, that everyone is partially correct. The colourless chameleon corresponds to the impersonal *Brahman*, while the chameleon with various colours corresponds to the personal God or Śakti, and it is clear that Ramakrishna does not privilege the impersonal *Brahman* in any way. As we saw earlier in this section, he consistently maintains that the impersonal *Brahman* and the personal Śakti have equal ontological reality and soteriological value. It is also clear from this parable that all the various forms of the personal God—corresponding to the different colours of the chameleon—are equally great. Moreover, the man sitting under the tree represents the *vijñānī*, such as Ramakrishna himself, who has realised both the personal and impersonal aspects of God and hence affirms on the basis of his own spiritual experience that multiple religions are equally effective paths to salvation.

According to Ramakrishna, God has created different religious paths to suit differing temperaments:

Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Śāktas, Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas, the Brahmajñānīs of the time of the rishis [i.e., followers of the Upaniṣadic path of knowledge], and you, the Brahmajñānīs of modern times [i.e., followers of the Brāhmo Samāj], all seek the same object. . . . Do you know what the truth is? God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself. Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with wholehearted devotion.

(Gupta, 2010, p. 577, 1992, p. 559)

Many traditional Vedāntic schools—including Advaita Vedānta and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism—invoke *adhikāribheda*, the doctrine of differing spiritual competencies, to explain why different spiritual aspirants follow different religious paths. However, as we have seen, such appeals to differing competencies tend to be hierarchical. Ramakrishna, by contrast, holds the non-hierarchical view that different religious paths suit differing temperaments.²³

12.7 Conclusion: a preliminary case for Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta?

Our comparative study has revealed deep philosophical affinities between Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, especially with regard to God's unthinkable infinitude, the acceptance of the reality of both the personal God and non-dual pure consciousness, and the acceptance of the *bhakta's* ideal of eternal loving communion with the personal God in a transcendental *loka*. At the same time, I have argued that Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta, in contrast to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, (1) grants equal value to the personal God and Advaitic pure consciousness, (2) grants equal completeness and value to various forms of the personal God, including Kṛṣṇa, Kālī, Śiva, and so on, (3) grants equal salvific efficacy to the paths of knowledge (*jñāna*) and devotion (*bhakti*), (4) affirms that non-Hindu religions like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are as effective as Hinduism in leading to God-realisation, and (5) upholds the equal soteriological value of the classical Advaitic ideal of realising one's true nature as non-dual pure consciousness ("becoming sugar") and the devotional ideal of eternal loving communion with the personal God ("eating sugar").

Are there good reasons for preferring Ramakrishna's views on God, the harmony of religions, and the final eschatological state over the more hierarchical views of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism? By way of concluding this chapter, I will begin to defend an affirmative answer to this question. The philosopher John Hick (1989, p. 307) has argued that one criterion for determining whether a particular religious faith has salvific efficacy is its ability to produce saints, people who have completely eradicated egoism and selfishness and achieved spiritual fulfilment. On this criterion, Hick thinks there is some empirical evidence in favour of the religious pluralist view that all the major religious faiths are (roughly) equally effective in leading to salvation, since each of them "has produced its own harvest of saints", and "no one tradition stands out as more productive of sainthood than another" (Hick, 1989, p. 307).

If it were really the case that Kṛṣṇa is superior to the impersonal *Brahman* and to all other deities and that the practice of devotion towards Kṛṣṇa has greater salvific efficacy than all other spiritual paths, then we would expect the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition to produce noticeably more, or greater, saints than other religious traditions both within and outside of Hinduism. Indeed, perhaps some Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas might claim that their tradition *has* produced far more, or greater, saints than any other tradition. Such a claim, however, would be problematic for at least two reasons. First, how would one even go about trying to prove or verify such a claim? If one were to point to the sheer *quantity* of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava saints, I don't think it would be difficult for others to identify an equal, if not greater, number of saints in other religious traditions. On the other hand, if one were to argue that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism has produced *qualitatively greater* saints than any other religious tradition by pointing to their exceptionally saintly characteristics, others could identify just as many—if not more—saints with commensurately outstanding moral and spiritual qualities in other religious traditions. Second, I doubt that

the vast majority of people outside the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition would accept the claim that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism produces far more, or far greater, saints than any other religious tradition. Rather, I believe that most people would either accept Hick's claim that there is a rough parity in the number of saints produced by the great world religions or hold that it is not possible to answer, with any degree of confidence, the question whether one particular religious tradition produces more, or greater, saints than any other. Such people may find Ramakrishna's non-hierarchical views on God and the world's religious faiths to be more plausible—other things being equal—than the hierarchical views of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism.²⁴

Apart from the question of whether Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta or Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism is more plausible from the standpoint of truth, I think there is an additional *ethical* question to consider: how should we look upon followers of faiths other than our own? A danger in the hierarchical views of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism is that it may foster an attitude of superiority or condescension towards followers of non-Gauḍīya traditions, insofar as Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas take all deities and ultimates other than Kṛṣṇa to be inferior to Kṛṣṇa and think that the salvific goals of non-Gauḍīya traditions are inferior to the highest goal of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism—namely, dwelling eternally with Kṛṣṇa in Goloka.

For instance, during a morning walk in Los Angeles in 1973, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977), the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)—a modern spiritual movement in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition—made the following remarks about spiritual traditions other than his own:

In India, what is going on as “Hindu *dharma*,” it is a bogus thing. It has no meaning. Just like this Ramakrishna Mission, this Vivekananda, this Aurobindo, this Mahesh Yogi, so many others, all bogus. Anyone who is not going in terms of the Caitanya Mahāprabhu's cult or His teaching, he's a bogus [*sic*]. Anyone. Not only in India, all over the world. At the present moment, the real, transcendental spiritual life means to follow the cult of instructions of Caitanya Mahāprabhu. Otherwise, everyone is bogus. They're simply wasting their time. They have no knowledge of spiritual life.

(Prabhupāda, 1973)²⁵

Of course, Prabhupāda is not representative of all followers of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, and there are no doubt many Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas who hold more positive and generous views about other spiritual traditions. I refer to Prabhupāda because his views have been especially influential in the modern Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava context. While Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas need not share Prabhupāda's dismissive attitude towards other traditions, I would suggest that the hierarchical theological doctrines of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism *could lead* certain followers of this tradition—like Prabhupāda—to look upon other spiritual traditions as worthless or, at best, inferior to their own.

In our increasingly globalised world, most of us are confronted daily with practitioners of various faiths, and attitudes of superiority or condescension are typically not conducive to mutual respect, understanding, and openness in contexts

of interfaith dialogue and theological exchange. Arguably, Ramakrishna’s expansive and non-hierarchical conception of God as the impersonal–personal infinite Divine, as well as his pluralist doctrine that no one religious tradition has significantly greater salvific efficacy than all the others, provide the basis for a more generous, open, and welcoming attitude towards followers of faiths other than our own. Indeed, from Ramakrishna’s perspective, since God is infinite, the paths to God are commensurately infinite. Accordingly, we stand to learn a great deal about the infinite God and spiritual life from *all* of the world’s great spiritual traditions—provided we remain open and receptive to what they have to teach us.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to three peer reviewers for their helpful and constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this chapter. I am also grateful to Brahmacharin Nachiketa, who helped me with some portions of the chapter concerning Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology.

Notes

- 1 *Jñānīs*, for Ramakrishna, are followers of classical Advaitic Vedānta whose main spiritual practice is to discriminate constantly between the body–mind complex and their true nature as non-dual pure consciousness.
- 2 *Yogīs*, for Ramakrishna, are followers of Patañjali’s Yoga philosophy and kindred spiritual traditions whose primary practice is to meditate on their true nature as an eternal spiritual entity separate from nature.
- 3 *Bhaktas*, for Ramakrishna, are devotees of any form of the personal God.
- 4 For an English translation, see Cakravarti Thakura (2004, p. 289). Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas view *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* Ādi Līlā 1.3 as the foundational statement on the relationship between Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa and the impersonal non-dual *Brahman*: “*yad advaitam brahma upaniṣadi tad apy asya tanubhā*” “That nondual Brahman in the Upaniṣads is the mere peripheral effulgence of Kṛṣṇa” (Kavirāj, 2008, p. 2).
- 5 I am grateful to a peer reviewer for convincing me of this point. Jonathan Edelmann (2021), in his symposium response to my book *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*, argued that I was mistaken in claiming that Ramakrishna, in contrast to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, granted equal ontological status to non-dual *Brahman* and the personal God. According to Edelmann, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism does grant equal ontological status to Kṛṣṇa and the impersonal *Brahman* but does not accord equal soteriological value to both. In my response to Edelmann (Medhananda, 2021, p. 148), I agreed with him on this point and modified my position accordingly. However, as I will argue later in this chapter, I am now more inclined to defend my original position in *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality*: in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, the impersonal *Brahman* has inferior ontological status vis-à-vis Kṛṣṇa, since the former depends for its existence on the latter. Nonetheless, I agree with Edelmann that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas take *Brahman* and Kṛṣṇa to be *equally real*.
- 6 For a helpful discussion of Jīva Gosvāmī’s interpretation of this verse, see Chapter 11 of this volume.
- 7 The translations of passages from Viśvanātha’s commentary on *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 1.2.11 are my own, though I have consulted Jonathan Edelmann’s unpublished translation, “*Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (1.2.11) with Commentaries”.
- 8 For a more detailed discussion of the Gauḍīya concept of *acintya-śakti*, see Chapter 11 of this volume.
- 9 As Kapoor (2008, pp. 85–87) puts it, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava doctrine of *acintyatā* implies that God “transcends even the law of contradiction” and, hence, is both “*saviśeṣa*

- [with attributes] and *nirviśeṣa* [without attributes]”. For a similar interpretation of *acintyatā*, see Dasgupta (2000, p. 18). Jonathan Edelmann also made a similar point in correspondence.
- 10 In fact, Tapasyananda (2003, pp. 232–233) argues—I think convincingly—that the hierarchical interpretation of *Bhāgavata* (1.2.11) endorsed by Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas is eisegetic, since neither 1.2.11 nor any other verse in the *Bhāgavata* suggests a “hierarchical order of Bhagavan, Paramatman and *Brahman*”. Arguably, then, Ramakrishna’s non-hierarchical teaching that the same infinite Divine is called “*Brahman*”, “*Ātman*”, and “Bhagavān” by different spiritual aspirants—which I discuss later in this chapter—better captures the purport of *Bhāgavata* 1.2.11 than Viśvanātha’s hierarchical interpretation.
 - 11 See also *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, Madhya Līlā 19.153–154.
 - 12 In Chapter 11 of this volume, Alan C. Herbert and Ricardo Sousa Silvestre helpfully explain that the governing principle of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava hierarchy of deities is the amount of *śaktis* (powers, energies) a deity possesses. While all forms of Bhagavān possess a complete set of *śaktis*, all other deities possess an incomplete set of *śaktis* to varying degrees.
 - 13 It should be noted that Ramakrishna does not refer to God as male in gender; rather, the Bengali article he uses here and elsewhere is “*tinī*”, which could be either male or female. Hence, God could equally well be referred to as “she”.
 - 14 It should be noted that Ramakrishna most often uses the term “Śakti” as a noun to refer to the personal God who creates, preserves, and destroys the universe. However, he also sometimes uses the term “*śaktī*” as an adjective to refer to the “power” of the personal God—as in the phrase “*ananta-śaktī*” (“infinite power”).
 - 15 A *vijñānī* is one who has attained the state of *vijñāna*.
 - 16 Chapter 11 of this volume discusses this issue in much greater detail and depth.
 - 17 According to classical Advaita Vedānta, the sole reality is non-dual pure consciousness or *Brahman*, which is conceived as the “fourth state” (*turiya*), beyond the three states of waking (*jāgrati*), dream (*svapna*), and dreamless deep sleep (*susupti*)—all of which are conceived as states of ignorance. By contrast, Ramakrishna not only accepts the reality of non-dual pure consciousness but also accepts the reality of the waking, dream, and deep sleep states, which he conceives as real manifestations of Śakti (the personal God).
 - 18 “*Saccidānanda*” is a traditional Vedāntic term referring to the ultimate divine reality, though different schools of Vedānta have explained the three terms within this compound word—namely, *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*—in varying ways depending on their respective philosophical frameworks.
 - 19 In Medhananda (2023), I discuss Ramakrishna’s expansive views on eschatology in greater detail, bringing them into dialogue with the eschatological views of John Hick and S. Mark Heim.
 - 20 See, for instance, Śaṅkara’s commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 4.3.10.
 - 21 For details, see Maharaj (2018, pp. 17–19).
 - 22 It is important to note that Ramakrishna did not hold that *all* religious faiths have equal salvific efficacy (Maharaj, 2018, pp. 95–97). He maintained, rather, that at least all the major world religions have maximal salvific efficacy and that some religious faiths—such as *vāmācāra* (left-handed Tantra)—have *less* salvific efficacy than the major world religions. Moreover, he also did not consider all self-styled “religions” to be genuine religious paths. As I discuss in Maharaj (2018, pp. 93–95), any self-styled “religion” that prescribes unethical practices such as violence or killing would not count as a true religion and, therefore, Ramakrishna would reject it as a path to God-realisation.
 - 23 In chapters 3 and 4 of my book *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality* (Maharaj, 2018), I provide a much more in-depth discussion of the nuances of Ramakrishna’s doctrine of religious pluralism, including his response to the problem of conflicting religious truth-claims and the comparative advantages of Ramakrishna’s religious pluralism over John Hick’s quasi-Kantian pluralist position. I also address major objections to Ramakrishna’s religious pluralism in Maharaj (2018, pp. 109–116).
 - 24 Of course, the rub lies in the “other things being equal” clause in this sentence. Elsewhere (Maharaj [2018] and Medhananda [2021, 2023]), I have explained and defended

numerous other aspects of Ramakrishna's Vijnāna Vedānta, including his understanding of divine infinitude, his defense of the epistemic value of spiritual experience, his views on faith and reason, and his response to the problem of evil.

- 25 The audio recording of these remarks of Prabhupāda, which he made during a morning walk on 29 April 1973, is available online here: <https://prabhupadavani.org/transcriptions/730429mwla/>. It is also worth noting that Prabhupāda made very similar remarks about non-Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava traditions on numerous other occasions, which were all recorded as well.

Reference list

- Dasgupta, S. (2000). *A history of Indian philosophy* (Vol. 4). Motilal Banarsidass.
- Edelmann, J. (2021). Revisiting the questions of theological hierarchies in Rāmakṛṣṇa and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 25(1–2), 67–71. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-021-09290-y>
- Gupta, M. (1992). *The gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (S. Nikhilananda, Trans.). Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.
- Gupta, M. (2010). *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta: Śrīma-kathita*. Udbodhan.
- Hick, J. (1989). *An interpretation of religion: Human responses to the transcendent*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kapoor, O. B. L. (2008). *The philosophy and religion of Śrī Caitanya*. Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Kavirāj, K. (2008). *Śrīśrīcaitanyaacaritāmṛta*. Gita Press.
- Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī. (Ed.). (1965). *Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam. (Anekavyākhyāsama-lāṅkṛtam): Daśamaskandhaḥ*. Shri Bhāgavata Vidyapeetha.
- Maharaj, A. (2018). *Infinite paths to infinite reality: Sri Ramakrishna and cross-cultural philosophy of religion*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190868239.001.0001>
- Maharaj, A. (2020). *The Bloomsbury research handbook of Vedānta*. Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350063266>
- Medhananda, S. (2021). Continuing the philosophical conversation on Rāmakṛṣṇa: A response. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 25(1–2), 141–164. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-021-09300-z>
- Medhananda, S. (2023). Eating sugar, becoming sugar, both, or neither? Eschatology and religious pluralism in the thought of John Hick, Sri Ramakrishna, and S. Mark Heim. In S. Sugirtharajah (Ed.), *John Hick's religious pluralism in global perspective* (pp. 157–178). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11008-5_7
- Nārāyaṇa Mahārāja, B. (2003). *Śrī Brahma-Saṁhitā: Fifth chapter (with full commentary of Jīva Gosvāmī, further elaborations of Bhaktivinoda, and expanded commentary of Bhaktivedānta Nārāyaṇa Mahārāja)*. Gauḍīya Vedānta Publications.
- Prabhupāda. (1973). *Morning walk*. <https://prabhupadavani.org/transcriptions/730429mwla/>
- Sil, N. (1997). Is Ramakrishna a Vedantin, a Tantrika or a Vaishnava? An examination. *Asian Studies Review*, 21(2–3), 212–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03147539708713174>
- Tapasyananda, S. (1990). *Bhakti schools of Vedānta*. Sri Ramakrishna Math.
- Tapasyananda, S. (Trans.). (2003). *Srimad Bhagavata: The holy book of God* (Vol. 1–4). Sri Ramakrishna Math.
- Thakura, C. V. (2004). *Sārārtha Darśini: Tenth Canto commentaries, Srimad Bhagavatam* (B. Swami, Trans.). Mahanidhi Swami.
- Vidyābhūṣaṇa, B. (1941). *Prameyaratnāvalī*. Agrawal Press.