



Reviews

INDIAN THOUGHT AND WESTERN THEISM. THE VEDĀNTA OF RĀMĀNUJA
by Martin Ganeri, *Routledge*, New York and London, 2015, pp. 176, £85.00,
hbk

Martin Ganeri OP's book breaks new ground lucidly, convincingly and with enormous erudition. It genuinely advances a number of different fields of study all at the same time: three, no less. This is no small achievement. However, that achievement might be missed as the book's title hides its glowing light under a bushel! I would suggest: *The Recovery of Scholasticism: Rāmānuja, Aquinas, and Scholastic 'Theism'*.

First, Ganeri's work makes a serious incursion into the field of comparative philosophy and theology by carrying out a sophisticated analysis of the 'theism' of Thomas Aquinas (1224/5 – 1274 CE) and the Vedāntin philosopher and theologian, Rāmānuja (traditional dates 1017–1137 CE). Second, Ganeri frames this investigation in the context of a challenge against prevailing studies of Rāmānuja that have been carried out in the field of 'philosophy' and its offspring, 'philosophy of religion'. Both have tended to read Rāmānuja in the context of the Enlightenment horizon of 'philosophy'. This means that Rāmānuja has been rendered as an Indian philosopher who seems to echo many of the themes of modern philosophy in his theism, most particularly process philosophy and certain forms of personalist philosophy. This has been the project of both western and Indian philosophers in recent times. An entire chapter is devoted to these misunderstandings of Rāmānuja.

Ganeri questions this approach by suggesting that Rāmānuja's 'theism' is better interpreted through the lens of scholastic philosophy and theology, where theism arises out of exegetical commentary on authoritative sacred texts and the rigorous employment of reason to harmonize tensions arising out of these texts. Since modern western theism, generated by Enlightenment presuppositions, had an investment in the occlusion of Scholasticism it failed to read Rāmānuja as the Vedāntin tradition actually requires. Thomist Scholasticism provides the best lens for the full recovery of Rāmānuja. Thus, Ganeri argues, both Rāmānuja and Aquinas have much in common in contrast to modern theism that is predominantly rationalist. Hence, Ganeri's second advance adds to the first: comparative philosophy and theology are better done within Scholasticism that more fruitfully echoes both Eastern and Western intellectual and religious concerns as well as method. In this respect, Ganeri's achievement might be compared to scholars like David Burrell, who have shown how Thomism is a helpful and illuminating companion in his engagement

with Judaism and Islam. In some ways this is entirely natural given the pervasive influence of Aristotle on key philosophers within all three traditions. While Aristotle was not read by Ganeri's Hindu thinkers, Ganeri shows that Aristotle's logic and rigour find remarkable parallels in Vedāntin philosophy. This comparison with Aquinas used to be limited to Śaṅkara, until Ganeri's new book. Although the 'father' of comparative theology, Francis X. Clooney SJ, deals with Hinduism – and Ganeri is indebted to him – Clooney predominantly uses poetic, narrative, and other literary/ theological tropes to explore both religions rather than Scholasticism. Ganeri's employment of Scholasticism in relation to Hinduism is a recovery of a trope that had previously been used with very fruitful results, but was eclipsed with the demise of Scholasticism around the turn of the century. This takes us to Ganeri's third achievement.

Ganeri's recovery of Thomism for the purpose of engagement with Hinduism has long and established precedence. Ganeri presents a detailed outline of these pioneers starting with Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) in the sixteenth century, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), and then in the enormously fertile (Jesuit) Calcutta School of Indology comprising of Pierre Johanns (1885-1955), Georges Dandoy (1882-1962), Robert Antoine (1914-81), Pierre Fallon (1912-85), Richard de Smet (1916-98) and latterly Sr Sara Grant (a pupil of de Smet). Ganeri's outline of their work shows that they systematically misunderstood Rāmānuja and instead saw Śaṅkara as the natural dialogue partner to Aquinas. This position was established by the work of Johanns. He charged Rāmānuja with pantheism based on the assumption that Rāmānuja's fundamental paradigm for reality is the relationship of a subject and its attributes which together form a substantial unity. This resulted in the view that the world inheres in the substance of Brahman as its attributes or modes. This also led to an evolutionary view of Brahman whereby the attributes undergo real transformations. For Thomists committed to the simplicity of God, Rāmānuja's view was construed as diametrically opposite in its commitment to composite parts. It also meant that Rāmānuja subscribed to a type of atheism because of the eternal existence of the world. Johanns found in Śaṅkara a more convivial partner to Aquinas, committed as was to preserve divine simplicity, transcendence, and mystery. De Smet advanced in viewing Rāmānuja as panentheist, and Grant is the first to question the reading of Rāmānuja inherited in this tradition. She saw Rāmānuja's account as reacting to the later Advāitic doctrine of the illusory nature of the world rather than to Śaṅkara himself. Ganeri's own re-reading of Rāmānuja goes the final step by rehabilitating Rāmānuja as a far more convivial and illuminating partner than Śaṅkara, without denying serious differences, to Thomas' view of God and the world.

Ganeri argues, with ample textual evidence, that Rāmānuja's primary paradigm is not in the subject-attributes model, but in the embodiment

relation which is best characterised as two-substance dualism. Ganeri's achievements in this argument are also indebted to the pioneering work of another Roman Catholic scholar of Rāmānuja, Julius Lipner. Ganeri drives home that Rāmānuja is best related to Aquinas' account of mixed relations and also allows us to see Rāmānuja as affirming a form of *creatio ex nihilo*. Through this close exegesis of Rāmānuja, Ganeri argues that both Rāmānuja and Aquinas employ complex discourses that seek to hold polarised tensions such as keeping together unitive and differentiating language in a *sui generis* causal relation between the world and ultimate reality, in keeping intact the immutability of God while affirming this reality's creation of the world. This argument will surely require serious attention to Rāmānuja and to Scholasticism in any subsequent scholarship assessing Rāmānuja.

This is a demanding and important book. Read it.

GAVIN D'COSTA

THE LOST KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST : CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITIES, CHRISTIAN COSMOLOGY AND THE ARTS by Dominic White OP, *Liturgical Press, Minnesota, pp. x + 222, 2015, \$23.00, pbk*

This is a book of unusual originality and daring. The average reader of *New Blackfriars* might be tempted to ask, 'But shamans, astrology and liturgical dance - is it just batty?' Those who persevere with an open mind may have a surprise. Fr White's ambition is to rediscover an ancient Christian world-view, which was largely forgotten around the end of the middle ages. He is a Classical historian, trained in the Dominican tradition, an experienced organist, choirmaster and composer, the founder of a dance project, a pastor and university chaplain. All the elements of his wide experience are woven into this powerful and challenging account. His text is supported by pictures, videos and music available on a linked website.

This is an exercise in the kind of interreligious dialogue to which recent popes have called us, a dialogue which listens and learns before it distinguishes and criticises. Such a dialogue, because it is open to truth, can help us see deeper into our own tradition. Fr White's specific encounter is with the various forms of 'New Age'. He carefully describes the evolution from the mass peace and drugs movements of the 1960s to the more individualistic, yet more ecological, spiritualities popular today. He asks why people are attracted to these rather than to Christianity, even while they often admire both Jesus and the social conscience of church-goers.

He next pieces together from a combination of apocryphal, patristic and archaeological sources the cosmic understanding of the early