GOD, CREATIVITY, MONISM, AND PLURALISM

The Mutual Relevance of Process Thought and Hinduism

Jeffery D. Long

Introduction

I think it would be fair to say that process thought has had to fight something of an uphill battle in its efforts to gain widespread acceptance in Christian theological discourse, and that it remains a novel system of ideas among both Jewish and Islamic thinkers. Other articles in this volume will no doubt attest to these facts–as, in a sense, does the volume itself, premised as it is on the understanding that process thought can benefit all of these religious traditions, but also on the assumption that a case yet needs to be made in order for this understanding to take root and flourish in these traditions.

The situation is somewhat different for Buddhism, and, as I shall argue in this essay, for Hinduism. Indeed, Whitehead himself perceives early in the development of his metaphysical system that it "seems to approximate more to some strains of Indian, or Chinese thought, than to western Asiatic, or European, thought."[1] This is not to say that process thinkers have no challenges to face in arguing for the relevance of this system to these traditions. But the challenges are different from those that arise in the case for process thought in the Abrahamic traditions.

In the case of the Indic religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and the complex of traditions that has come to be called by the singular title *Hinduism*, a great variety of issues arise when one engages particular systems in a dialogue with process thought, depending on the specific details of the systems in question. An Advaita Vedāntin will have a different set of agreements and disagreements with process thought than a Jain will. And both will engage with a different set of issues than, say, a Dvaita Vedāntin.

But, speaking generally, and more abstractly, the process thinker rooted in an Abrahamic religious tradition is likely to be struck by the broad agreement between the overarching worldview of Hinduism–by which I mean the nexus of views shared by various Hindu systems, despite other things on which they may disagree–and process thought. The challenge for the process thinker who is rooted in a Hindu school of thought is not to persuade her fellow Hindus of the usefulness of ideas like a deity who is immanent and subject to change–ideas already widespread in Hindu traditions.

---

[1] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Corrected Edition) (New York: The Free Press, 1978) (First published in 1929), p. 7.

The challenge for the Hindu process thinker, rather, is to identify specific Hindu concepts that correlate with process concepts, and to engage in the work of translating these process concepts into a Hindu idiom and vice versa. The aim of this translation work is to share ideas between Hinduism and process thought, and so to utilize process thought in the service of Hinduism while enriching process thought with Hindu insight.

As in the translation of languages, the translation of concepts from one system to another is rarely, if ever, a simple matter of one-to-one correlation. Inevitably, taking an idea from one system and correlating it with an idea from another, especially when the two systems of thought have arisen in very different cultural and linguistic settings, involves distortion.

But rather than being frustrated by this fact, or seeing it as a barrier to showing the mutual relevance of process thought and Hinduism, I think one should instead see it, in the spirit of Whitehead, as an occasion for 'creative transformation'–as a 'creative distortion'–in which a third, new, 'hybrid' system can arise: a Hindu process theology, which sheds new light on both Hinduism and process thought at the same time. By engaging skillfully with the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) differences between the ideas of these two systems, one may, in the process of seeking to correlate these ideas, spark new insight into both. Whitehead's concept of God, for example, is close, but not identical, to the Vedāntic concept of Īśvara. By correlating these two concepts, though–by bringing a little bit of Īśvara to God and a little bit of God to Īśvara–we can advance toward a deeper understanding of the divine actuality to which both concepts point beyond themselves. By building a third concept from the mutually compatible insights of both, the asymptotic progress of philosophy towards truth is advanced; and both systems of thought thereby benefit.

In this essay, the specific ways in which I shall argue that process thought can be of benefit to Hinduism are:
1. To aid in the recovery of the concept of *māyā* as 'creativity,' rather than as 'illusion,' as it has often been translated in academic scholarship.
2. To aid in the articulation of the doctrine of the *jīva*, or soul, by means of the process affirmation of ontological monism with structural dualism.
3. To aid in the articulation of the religious pluralism of the Ramakrishna tradition with the process concept of the three ultimate realities.

I will argue, furthermore, that Hinduism can also benefit process thought, by shedding light on specific process concepts and concerns. Specifically:
1. Hinduism sheds light on the process understanding of soul development by affirming that souls have, like God and the world, always existed.
2. The Hindu emphasis on the fundamental unity of existence complements the emphasis of process thought on change and difference.
3. Hinduism demonstrates that a non-omnipotent deity can be worshiped with intensity and devotion, contrary to the claims of classical theology.

Political Issues: Identity and Agenda

As a tradition practiced predominantly by a people who have, again and again, been subjugated by a succession of imperial powers–first by powers that professed an Islamic ideology, followed by powers that professed a Christian one[2]–Hinduism has suffered greatly from the distorted representations of imperialist (or rather, to use the terminology that has become standard in the academy, *orientalist*) scholarship.[3] Even the term *Hinduism* is a product of scholarly objectification of Indic traditions.

One who wishes to engage in a mutual translation of Hindu and process thought involving the kind of 'creative distortion' just described must therefore be cautious of the potential misuse of one's work, as well as being very open and candid about one's presuppositions and agenda. For this reason, I always make it a point to disclose my own identity and agenda in pursuing comparative theological work of this kind, in which I presume to creatively engage with the concepts of both process and Hindu systems of thought. Though I am not of Indian descent, I identify myself as Hindu– specifically, with the modern or 'Neo' Vedānta tradition associated pre-eminently with Sri Ramakrishna and Swāmī Vivekānanda. Though not all members of this tradition identify themselves as Hindu–particularly those who were not born Hindu–I am part of a subset of non-Indian adherents who do choose to self-identify as Hindu.

I identify myself as Hindu for several reasons. Generally speaking, I find that in order to communicate my beliefs and spiritual practices to others, a handy label–one of the big 'isms' from among the widely known world religions–is useful. Though raised a Roman Catholic Christian, my beliefs and practices differ sufficiently from those of the Catholic–or any Christian–tradition for a self-identification as Christian to be both distorting and deceptive. I could simply say that I practice Vedānta, as many adherents do, but this would inevitably involve having to explain what Vedānta is, which would itself inevitably involve the use of the term 'Hindu,' unless I wanted for some reason to conceal the cultural point of origin of this tradition.[4]

---

[2] My word choice–that these powers *professed* Islamic and Christian ideologies–is deliberate. I do not intend to imply that the religious self-understanding professed by these powers was *authentically* Islamic or Christian, but that this was how these powers understood themselves–or at least described themselves rhetorically. I differ from my Hindu nationalist co-religionists in wishing to see imperial activity as *incompatible* with an authentic Islamic or Christian self-understanding, and not as *intrinsic* to such a self-understanding. The suspicion of these two traditions runs deep among many Hindus.

[3] For detailed accounts of the unpleasant political ramifications of orientalist scholarship, see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Blackwell, 1994) and Sharada Sugirtharajah, *Imagining Hinduism* (Taylor and Francis, 2007). The term *orientalism* for Western imperial scholarship on the non-Western world was famously coined by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1979).

[4] Many adherents of modern Vedānta, or *Vedāntists*, are quite insistent that Vedānta is a universal philosophy, not confined to any particular religious tradition, including Hinduism. While, being a Vedāntist, I also hold this view–that the fundamental truths of Vedānta can be found anywhere–it is also empirically the case that the articulation of Vedānta is in a cultural idiom that is overwhelmingly

While it is true that identifying myself as Hindu also ends up involving some explanation, given the widespread idea that all Hindus are Indian, this is relatively easy to address simply by correcting this misperception and stating that I am Hindu because I find the philosophy of Hinduism to be compelling and its cultural, ritual expression attractive. I am sometimes asked why I did not become Buddhist–a religious identity that does not, in the minds of most, involve an ethnic identification. My short answer is the centrality of theism to my worldview, which is less prevalent in Buddhism.

In short, I believe in reincarnation, meditate daily, and perform *pūjā* to Hindu deities. I formally became a Hindu through a ceremony performed by a priest of the Ārya Samāj. I have a Hindu wife whom I married in a Hindu ceremony. I have a guru who is a member of an ancient order of Hindu monks. And, on one occasion, I was the officiating priest at a Hindu wedding. If I am not a Hindu, then, I ask, who is?

The purpose of all this self-disclosure is to allay the concerns of any Hindus who may be alarmed at the prospect of a Westerner presuming to do Hindu theology–to whom even the word *theology* sounds suspiciously Christian–and claiming that Hindu traditions might have something to learn from something as Western- and Christian-sounding as 'process theology.' I am therefore stating at the outset that this theological project is carried out in the service of Hinduism, by a thinker who identifies himself as Hindu, and not by a covert Christian missionary engaged in 'acculturation' in order to facilitate the conversion of Hindus to Christianity–a concern of many Hindus today.

In fact, I do not see process thought as a Christian metaphysical system, but as a secular philosophy. Its main founding figure, Alfred North Whitehead, was distinctly uncomfortable with organized religion.[5] Though Christian theologians have profitably engaged with this system of thought in order to articulate Christian concepts in ways more coherent with reason and experience than is classical, Greek-informed Christian thought, and though David Ray Griffin has said that process thought "can largely be regarded as one more attempt to explicate a biblical vision of reality," it is hardly an orthodox Christian theology–at least as Christianity is popularly conceived.[6]

---

and indisputably Hindu. We chant Sanskrit mantras, we read the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavadgītā*, as well as numerous other *sūtras* and *śāstras*, the order of our monks and nuns is based in India, and so on. To downplay all this in the name of promoting the universality of Vedānta philosophy strikes me as deceptive. My suspicion is that the urge to de-emphasize the specifically Hindu dimensions of Vedānta as a practice stems from the same urge that de-links yoga, in many Western settings, from its Indic roots, promoting it simply as a universal wellness practice. This is a holdover from old racist, imperialist attitudes that see Hinduism as too exotic to identify oneself with, but that also wish, at the same time, to appropriate aspects of the tradition that are found attractive.

[5] He says, for example, that "There is always in religion an element of brutality, and it is generally the work of sincere men trying to conserve a state of society." Lucien Price, *Dialogues with Alfred North Whitehead as Recorded by Lucien Price* (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 2001).

[6] David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 362.

Indeed, I suspect the affinities of process thought to Hinduism to be greater than its affinities with Christianity, at least as conventionally conceived. And as Griffin explains, the notion that process thought is an attempt to explicate a biblical vision of reality "plays no role in the attempt of process philosophy to make its case. That is, there is no claim that process philosophy is true *because* it is based on revealed ideas." Its claims, rather, "stand or fall…by their success in the interpretation of life."[7] And to assume that its historical connections to 'a biblical vision of reality' must make process thought inimical to Hinduism is of course to beg an important question, for it assumes that a biblical vision of reality is incompatible with Hinduism. But is this necessarily the case? In fact, as mentioned above, one of the central Vedāntic teachings to which I hope to show process thought can contribute is its doctrine of religious pluralism: that many paths, including biblically-based paths, contain truth and can lead, in practice, to God-realization (and must not, therefore, be fundamentally inimical to Hinduism).

Finally, my claim that process thought can not only be helpful to Hinduism, but that Hinduism can also be helpful to process thought, should allay Hindu concerns that I am embarking upon an imperialist project, or claiming that Hinduism needs process thought to 'rescue' it. I see Hinduism and process thought as *mutually* relevant.

Finding the Hindu Worldview: Discerning the Basic Vedāntic Model of Reality

The first difficulty one faces when seeking to correlate process and Hindu ideas is the internal variety that constitutes the family of religions and philosophies that goes by the name *Hinduism*. I briefly alluded earlier to the fact that the use of the term *Hinduism* to designate a unitary tradition is a product of scholarly objectification and reification of many diverse traditions in such a way as to create an artificial sense of unity–a sense that makes it easier to conceptualize and engage with these traditions, but that also lends itself to distortion and marginalization of particular Hindu voices.

It has also lent itself to a political program–*Hindutva* or Hindu nationalism–which asserts Hindu identity over and against other, minority–for the most part Muslim and Christian–identities in India in a politically divisive way akin to the rhetoric of the Christian Right in the United States. Scholars critical of this stance have pointed out the extent to which it marginalizes not only non-Hindus, but also identities that do not fit with its idea of Hinduism–Hindu identities with which it is, for a variety of reasons, uncomfortable.[8] In the name of combating this 'syndicated Hinduism,' and preserving the variety of the tradition, some scholars have gone so far as to eschew the use of the term *Hinduism*, claiming, in effect, that 'Hinduism does not exist.'[9]

---

[7] *Ibid*.
[8] Recovering the voices of these 'alternative Hinduisms' is a large part of the project of Wendy Doniger's most recent work, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
[9] A collection of essays that articulate this perspective is Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke, eds., *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2001).

But other scholars, myself among them, take the view that this is an extreme position. All ancient and widespread religious traditions are internally diverse, and all are, to some extent, scholarly constructs. If 'Hinduism does not exist,' then neither does Christianity or Islam. In fact, there are some common assumptions and shared texts and practices that can be seen to unite at least most Hindu traditions.[10]

The important thing to note in one's work, as I am doing right now, is that, when one speaks of *Hinduism* in the singular, it should always be understood that there are a great many voices in the Hindu conversation, and universal agreement on any given topic is rare. The generalizations that follow are just that–generalizations–and I make them in the full awareness that many Hindus would not agree with them, or even cast the issues in question in the particular way that I have. But I make them because they *do* represent a wide swath of Hindu traditions, as I have seen these represented in texts and lived in practice by the Hindus I have met.

The shared worldview and set of practices that gives cohesion to the collection of traditions called *Hinduism* can be called, broadly, either *Vedic* or *Vedāntic*. *Vedic* is a term that refers to the *Veda* (sometimes rendered in the plural as *Vedas*), the ancient collection of texts, of indeterminate date, that most Hindus regard as *śrūti*, or divinely revealed.[11] *Vedānta* is a term with a variety of meanings. Meaning, literally, 'the end of the *Veda*,' this term is sometimes used to refer to the last portion of the *Veda* to be composed: a set of texts more widely known as the *Upaniṣads*. But it is also taken to refer to the philosophy articulated in these texts, and conceived by its adherents as the 'end' or ultimate goal toward which earlier Vedic texts and prescribed practices point. And in the modern period, in the tradition of Ramakrishna and Vivekānanda, it is taken to be the universal philosophy that underlies all religions and philosophies, as well as modern science. For *Veda* originally means 'knowledge,' or 'wisdom,' and, as Swami Vivekananda writes, "All scriptures, all truths are Vedas in all times, in all countries, and these truths are to be *seen*, and any one may discover them."[12]

Broadly speaking, one could say that, in terms of praxis, Hinduism is Vedic, in the sense that what defines orthopraxis is a set of norms based, ultimately, on Vedic authority. The practices of the Brahmins, those tasked with preserving the Vedic way of life, and the Brahmanical literature, much of which consists of commentary on the *Vedas*, are the norm against which correct Hindu practice, or *dharma*, is measured.

---

[10] A volume of essays, some of which express this view, is J.E. Llewellyn, ed. *Defining Hinduism: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[11] Modern academic scholarship locates the *Ṛg Veda*, the earliest extant Vedic text, between 1500 and 1200 BCE. Traditional Hindu scholarship places it much earlier, sometimes as early as 6500 BCE. A possible 'middle path' is the idea that particular *Ṛg Vedic* concepts date to an earlier period, as the Hindu tradition suggests, but that the text took the specific form it now has around the time suggested by academic scholarship.

[12] Swāmī Vivekānanda, *Complete Works*, 7:9.

To be sure, much Hindu practice deviates from any kind of 'pure' Brahmanical or Vedic tradition that one could reconstruct from the most ancient layers of text. But the *idea* of the Veda is nevertheless a powerful one, in terms of which Hindus conceive practices ranging from the worship of the deities to the day-to-day rituals of home and family life.

The emphasis of the Vedic tradition, though, as I hope my language indicates, is *practice*. In terms of worldview–and the kinds of issues with which a process thinker might be engaged, it is more accurate to describe Hinduism as *Vedāntic*.

The Vedānta tradition, though it is closely related to, and arguably derived from, the Vedic, is yet distinct from it. The Vedic tradition, as represented by the orthodox Pūrva Mīmāṃsā system of Hindu thought, is largely agnostic regarding such issues as the existence of God or the afterlife. Its main concern is the correct performance of ritual and, by extension, correct behavior in general in one's daily life (concepts that are both encompassed by the term *dharma*). Even the existence of the Vedic deities, which, it might presumed, would be taken for granted in a system that is based on ritual offerings to such deities, is "purely hypothetical" in this system of thought.[13]

Vedānta, however, is a worldview, and the predominant one that unifies at least the mainstream of Hindu tradition. The textual sources that Vedānta regards as of the greatest importance are not the ritual injunction or *karma kāṇḍa* texts that I have called *Vedic*, but three sources called the *prasthāna traya*, or 'triple source': the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavadgītā*, and a set of aphorisms called the *Brahma* or *Vedānta Sūtras*.

It is difficult, but not impossible, to discern a singular, coherent worldview in this collection of texts, which I shall call here the basic Vedāntic model of reality. But it is also here that one immediately steps into an intra-Hindu controversy; for a variety of revered Vedāntic teachers, or *ācāryas*, have written authoritative commentaries and have established teaching lineages, or *sampradāyas*, in order to perpetuate their views of this model of reality. Though the teachings of these lineages overlap considerably, their differences are of great importance to their adherents.

The most famous of the Vedāntic *ācāryas* in the West, Śaṅkara (788-820 CE), developed an interpretation of Vedānta known as non-dualist, or *Advaita* Vedānta. On this interpretation of the Vedāntic texts, the sole reality is *Nirguṇa Brahman*: infinite being, consciousness, and bliss, with no limiting qualities, and utterly beyond time and space. The rest of existence, on this view, is a product of ignorance: a result of *māyā*, which is often translated as 'illusion,' and is superimposed on the reality of Brahman. Realizing the unreality of ego and the subject-object distinction–seeing that Brahman, the universal self, and *Ātman*, the individual self, are one–and perceiving Brahman as the sole reality is the condition for liberation, or *mokṣa*: freedom from the otherwise endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth into a state of limitation and suffering.

---

[13] Laurie Patton, personal communication.

Rāmānuja (1017-1137), on the other hand, developed the system of 'qualified non-dualism' or 'non-dualism-with-difference' (Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta), in which the distinctions between God, self, and world are real. In this system, Brahman is seen as an *organic* unity in which real internal differences and relations obtain, rather than the undifferentiated unity affirmed by Śaṅkara. For Rāmānuja, *mokṣa* does not arise from an abstract realization of an impersonal principle, as in the system of Śaṅkara, but from divine grace, experienced in the relationship of *bhakti*, or devotion: the fundamental religious emotion of Hinduism. One could argue that, as a metaphysical system, the Vedānta of Rāmānuja bears the closest resemblance to process thought of all Vedāntic systems, with its affirmation of an organic unity with real internal differences.

Mādhva (1238-1317) developed the system of Dvaita, or dualistic, Vedānta. This view identifies Brahman wholly with the personal God (Viṣṇu, the all-pervasive one), and firmly rejects any view, such as Advaita Vedānta, that conceives of ultimate reality in impersonal terms or sees phenomenal reality as an effect of *māyā*. Hard-core metaphysical realists, the adherents of Dvaita Vedānta see *māyāvāda*, the teaching of *māyā*, as inimical to *bhakti*. Advaita and Dvaita mark the opposite poles of Vedānta.

The problem for an interpreter of Vedānta is that verses supportive of all three of these views can be found throughout the *prasthāna traya*–the corpus of authoritative Vedāntic texts. As in traditions of scriptural interpretation globally, the adherents of a particular school of thought typically take those verses which uphold their particular interpretation to be literally true, explaining other verses as presenting analogies, or interpreting them using rules of grammar that will yield the desired meaning (which in some cases may actually be the opposite of what one would otherwise take the plain meaning to be). Śaṅkara insists, for example, that Brahman is *identical* with all of its predicates, whereas Rāmānuja claims that it *possesses* predicates as all subjects do.

All these forms of interpretation insist that one cannot simply pick up and read the *Upaniṣads* or the *Bhagavadgītā*, as a modern reader might be inclined to do, in order to get at their true meaning. One must inhabit a tradition of interpretation, and have a living guru to guide one's interpretation, in order to engage in a valid way with these texts. (My interpretation, for example, is situated in Ramakrishna's tradition.)

The three traditions that I have just mentioned are the best known and the most influential of the Vedānta traditions, at least in the pre-modern period. But they are not the only ones. A variety of Vedānta traditions exist and–significantly, I think–most of them try to carve out what one could call a 'middle path' between what could be seen as the extreme views of Śaṅkara and Mādhva: one of whom denies the ultimate reality of the world in favor of a unified absolute beyond time and space, and one of whom inveighs against any attempt to affirm an ultimate unity, making diversity the ultimate metaphysical principle. These 'intermediate' systems of Vedānta affirm both diversity and unity–or *Bhedābheda*, as one of them is called–or *Dvaitādvaita*: both duality and non-duality.

In the modern Vedānta of Ramakrishna, the various other systems of Vedānta–as well as the other world religions and philosophies, and modern science–all express parts of the truth, from particular frames of reference appropriate to the persons who adhere to them. This idea is sometimes analogized with Einstein's theory of relativity, as a kind of religious doctrine of relativity.[14] In affirming the validity of all frames of reference, Ramakrishna's Vedānta could also be seen as one of the 'intermediate' types of Vedānta, inasmuch as, like these other systems, it affirms both the unity emphasized by Advaita and the diversity emphasized by Dvaita. Each view has insight into truth.

Again, despite all of this diversity of interpretation, it is a possible–though not easy–task, to discern that a common structure of reality is affirmed by all the Vedāntic systems–the basic Vedāntic model of reality. This model of reality is characterized by ten categories that are shared across all of the schools of Vedānta. These categories are: *Brahman*, *Nirguṇa Brahman*, *Saguṇa Brahman*, *Īśvara*, *Jagat*, *Jīva*, *Prakṛti*, *Māyā*, *Karma*, and *Mokṣa*.[15] And although there are, as already indicated, differences amongst the schools of thought in terms of how they use these categories–the sharpest being between Advaita and Dvaita in regard to the nature of Brahman and the doctrine of *māyā*–there is also broad agreement on many issues.

Broad Correspondences: Process Thought and the Basic Vedāntic Model of Reality

What is the basic Vedāntic model of reality? And how does it correlate with process thought? The primary category of Vedānta is the category of *Brahman*. The first verse of the *Brahma Sūtras* is *athāto brahmajijñāsa*–"Therefore now [we begin] an inquiry into Brahman." This verse, as understood in all of the Vedāntic systems, essentially defines Vedānta as an inquiry into the nature of Brahman.

What is Brahman? Brahman could be defined as existence itself, the totality of Being. Also called 'the Real' (*sat*), Brahman is coextensive with reality as such. It is that which is real pre-eminently, and from which the existence of all other entities is derivative and in which they participate. It is that, by knowing which, all things are known.[16] It is also the ultimate object of religious aspiration, of the ancient Upaniṣadic prayer, "Lead me from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality."[17] It is eternal. "It is immortal; it is Brahman; it is the Whole."[18] As a word, *Brahman* literally means "the expansive" or "that which makes things great."

---

[14] Swāmī Ātmapriyānanda, "Ramakrishna and Relativity," in Swāmi Tapasyānanda, *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta* (Mylapore, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990)

[15] A host of terms–indeed, an entire linguistic structure–is shared across these systems. I have simply isolated these ten as particularly central to the metaphysical concerns that these systems share with process thought.

[16] *Chandogya Upaniṣad* 6:1.

[17] *Asato mā sad gamaya, tamaso mā jyotir gamaya, mṛtyor mā-amṛtaṃ gamaya*–

[18] *Bṛhadaraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2:5.

At this point, a process thinker might recall Whitehead's characterization of the ultimate reality as 'creativity,' to which I would argue *Brahman* corresponds. On Whitehead's account, this ultimate reality "is actual in virtue of its accidents. It is only then capable of characterization through its accidental embodiments, and apart from these accidents it is devoid of actuality."[19] It is an ultimate principle that takes on a concrete reality *as* the actual entities making up the world. Whitehead goes on to say that, "In monistic philosophies, Spinoza's or absolute idealism, this ultimate is God, who is also equivalently termed 'The Absolute.'" This is quite similar to Brahman's being the ultimate object of religious aspiration. But, Whitehead continues, "In such monistic schemes, the ultimate is *illegitimately* allowed a final, 'eminent' reality, beyond that ascribed to any of its accidents."[20] If anything, this would seem to point to a radical *disjuncture* between Vedānta and process thought; for what is Brahman but a supremely real reality, from which all other things are held to be derivative, and which is regarded as God? Is Vedānta not another form of monistic absolute idealism?

But we must recall here the various systems of interpretation that exist within the broad framework of Vedānta, as well as Whitehead's own distinction between the ultimate reality which he terms 'creativity' and God. For Whitehead, God is not creativity and creativity is not God. Creativity is, again, "an ultimate which is actual in virtue of its accidents." It is actual inasmuch as it is manifested in and as the realm of time and space. But God is creativity's "primordial, non-temporal accident."[21] God is, for Whitehead, *derivative from* creativity, the supreme embodiment of creativity, "a stable actuality whose mutual implication with the remainder of things secures an inevitable trend towards order."[22]

Vedānta, too, makes a distinction *internal to Brahman* between what Whitehead calls the ultimate principle of creativity and God. This distinction is associated most prominently with Śaṅkara, the first *ācārya* of the Advaita tradition. Śaṅkara draws a distinction between *Nirguṇa Brahman*, mentioned earlier–Brahman as it is in and of itself, with no limiting qualities–and *Saguṇa Brahman*, or Brahman *with* qualities. One could see *Nirguṇa Brahman* as equivalent to Whitehead's idea of creativity in its unmanifested, 'deficiently actual' state, and *Saguṇa Brahman* as creativity manifested as both God and the world of actual entities, which is how Śaṅkara sees it as well.

---

[19] Whitehead, p. 7.

[20] *Ibid*, emphasis mine.

[21] *Ibid*. Whitehead's use of the term 'non-temporal' here can lead to confusion, and is regarded by some process thinkers as unfortunate. He does not mean that God is outside of time and space (and so non-actual), but that there is no time in which God is not. Unlike other temporal entities, God has no beginning and no end. As we shall see, in Hinduism, there are many such 'non-temporal'–i.e. perpetually existing–entities–including the souls of all living things.

[22] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) (First published in 1933), p. 115.

Saguṇa Brahman, for Śaṅkara, is how *Nirguṇa Brahman* is perceived prior to one's attainment of true knowledge, or *jñāna*–the knowledge that leads to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. It is a product of ignorance, projected by us upon the true reality of Brahman. It is *māyā*–neither real nor unreal. It is not wholly real, because we do not perceive it as it truly is, as *Nirguṇa*, or without limiting qualities. But it is also not wholly unreal, for Brahman is its basis. *Saguṇa Brahman* essentially *is māyā*: *Nirguṇa Brahman* as seen through the obscuring veil of ignorance and illusion.

The chief difference between process thought and Advaita Vedānta, then, is not in the basic structure of reality that they posit–with an unmanifest ultimate reality that manifests in time and space as God and the world–but in the relative valuation that each places upon these manifest and unmanifest forms. In this sense, the philosophy of Śaṅkara *is* not unlike Western monistic philosophies–such as that of Spinoza, or of absolute idealism–which Whitehead mentions as contrasts with his own system in that, "One side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact ultimate."[23] The structure of reality posited by process thought and systems of absolute idealism, such as Advaita Vedānta, is basically the same. But which *dimension* of that structure is valued most– the eternal, abstract, and unmanifest or the temporal, actual, and manifest–is reversed.

If Advaita Vedānta were the only system of Vedānta, then there would appear to be a chasm between Vedānta and process thought similar to that which exists between process thought and the Western classical theologies and philosophies against which it is a reaction.

In India, however, the reaction against the concept of an impersonal, non-actual absolute occurred much more quickly than in the West: a mere two centuries after Śaṅkara, in the form of Rāmānuja's qualified non-dualism. As mentioned previously, for Rāmānuja, Brahman is an *organic* unity which encompasses both the relative and absolute 'poles' of existence, and which includes both God and the world of actual entities. Similarly, the various other 'intermediate' systems of Vedānta affirm that Brahman is *both* the abstract, ultimate ground of being–much like Whitehead's unmanifest creativity–*and* the totality of actual existence, including both God and the world. The basic Vedāntic model of reality, when one takes into account these various non-Advaitic perspectives, is therefore close to the worldview of process thought.

How does this work? Brahman/creativity is the basic nature of existence, with an unmanifest or abstract/*Nirguṇa* dimension and a manifest/*Saguṇa* dimension, the latter of which consists of God and the world–the totality of actual entities which are manifestations or concrescences of their unmanifest, atemporal substratum. Process thought and the mainstream of Vedānta are at one in affirming the reality of actual existence–of God and the world–and in rejecting the notion of absolute idealism (and of Advaita) that the abstract, unmanifest dimension of reality must be pre-eminent.

---

[23] Whitehead, 1978, p. 7.

To give Śaṅkara his due, however, it was he who first developed the idea of the twofold structure of Brahman accepted by most other systems of Vedānta–except for Dvaita. And the degree to which Saṅkara's insistence on the pre-eminent reality of the *Nirguṇa* dimension of Brahman necessarily issues in the claim that all actual existence is an illusion is debatable. *Māyā*, as mentioned previously, and as will be discussed in more detail below, does not only mean 'illusion,' but also means 'creativity.' It is thus synonymous with the nature of ultimate reality, on a process understanding. The other systems of Vedānta also accept the term *māyā*, but define it as God's creative power–an idea not at all incompatible with process thought, with the provision that all entities, and not only God, possess such power; for all actual entities participate in the nature of reality as creativity. God's creative power is pre-eminent, but not absolute. A modern exponent of Śaṅkara's philosophy, Anantanand Rambachan, has argued that to call the whole of actual existence *māyā* is not to say that it is not real, but only that its reality is dependent upon and derivative from that of *Nirguṇa* Brahman.[24] But this is also what Whitehead says, when he speaks of God and other actual entities as "derivative" from the principle of creativity, and even of God as a "derivative notion" and as creativity's "primordial non-temporal accident." So it is possible that Śaṅkara is not so out of step with other systems of Vedānta, or with process thought, as is so often supposed. If the pre-eminence of *Nirguṇa* Brahman is not temporal, but is a *logical* pre-eminence, then Advaita is not very different at all from these other systems. Śaṅkara, a central figure for Hindu philosophy, can therefore be seen as in the mainstream of Vedāntic thought.

The Vedāntic concepts that correlate with the process ideas of God and world are *Īśvara* and *Jagat*. Īśvara, 'the Lord'–usually visualized as either Viṣṇu or Śiva–plays much the same role in Vedānta that God does in process thought: as the supreme actuality that coordinates all other actual entities and constitutes them into a coherent universe. The *jagat*, or world, correlates with the process idea of the world made up of actual entities. Interestingly, the literal meaning of *jagat* is 'flow' or 'process.' So the world is understood in Hinduism as a flow of temporary events, in a state of constant flux, just as it is in process thought. Similarly, Īśvara and the jagat have both always existed. Although the entities that make up the jagat are individually of a momentary and impermanent character, the collective flow that they make up is ongoing. God is not the creator of the world *ex nihilo*, but co-exists with it perpetually in a state of mutual interaction, just like in process thought.

The world is understood in all systems of Vedānta as including both the souls of living beings, or *Jīvas*, and non-living matter, or *Prakṛti*. As will be discussed below, there is a strong dualism of soul and body in most Hindu traditions. But this has not given rise to the classic 'mind-body problem' as it is found in Western philosophy.

---

[24] See Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006).

This could be for a variety of reasons, but one factor is certainly the way matter is understood in Vedānta. For, unlike the West, where matter has been defined chiefly as 'dead' and unconscious–as 'stuff'–in Hindu thought, *prakṛti* is seen as an inherently dynamic reality, consisting of a constantly shifting interplay of three basic qualities, or *guṇas–sattva*, or lucidity, *rajas*, or dynamism, and *tamas*, or inertia. *Rajas* and *tamas* could be analogized with the Chinese concepts of *yang* and *yin*, respectively–positive, dynamic energy, and dark, inertial energy–with *sattva* as something like an equilibrium between them, with the stillness of *tamas* combined with the alert awareness of *rajas*. Indeed, in many texts, *prakṛti* is identified with *māyā* as the creative power that both conceals and reveals the true nature of reality. As the stuff of existence, it is identified, at least in Advaita Vedānta, with Brahman, which is seen as both the material and the efficient cause of the world–the material cause, in its role as matter, and the efficient cause, in its coordinating role as God.

As will be discussed below, the Vedāntic way of thinking about spirit and matter can be correlated with the process idea that actual entities arrange themselves into two types of structure. They can be personally ordered–in which case one entity succeeds another over the course of time, inheriting the collective knowledge and experience of its predecessors, and thus evolving into a conscious entity, or 'soul.' Or they can be ordered in an impersonal way, as non-internally related contemporaries–a grouping that Whitehead referred to as a "corpuscular society"–in which case they form, at a macroscopic level, the enduring material objects of day to day human experience.[25]

Central to Vedāntic soteriology–as well as to the soteriologies of both Jainism and Buddhism–are the concepts of *Karma*, rebirth, and *Mokṣa*, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Karma is the principle of action, according to which all actions lead to corresponding effects. Analogous to Newton's Third Law of Motion–"For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction"–but extended to the spiritual and moral as well as the physical realms, karma can be likened, in process thought, to the idea of the essential relatedness of the present to the totality of the past. Karma is basically the conditioning of the present moment by the decisions of the past. Like process thought, Hinduism teaches that we are all free in the present moment to choose how we will respond to our circumstances. But that freedom is also conditioned by those very circumstances, which are themselves an effect of all our past choices: our own, as well as those of all other entities. *Mokṣa*, or liberation, the ultimate salvific goal of all the systems of Vedānta, can be seen as a state of maximal freedom with respect to the past. The strategies for attaining it vary from system to system, with Advaita emphasizing a state in which we do not identify with our temporal, ever-changing subjectivity, but with Brahman, or creativity, itself. The theistic systems, on the other hand, affirm a state of ongoing participation in the life of the divine–a loving union with God.

---

[25] Whitehead, 1978, p. 35.

The Mutual Relevance of Process Thought and Hinduism

Having briefly delineated, then, the basic Vedāntic model of reality, and having brought it into conversation with process thought, we can now turn to the various ways in which process thought can benefit Hinduism, and Hinduism can also benefit process thought. To again review these, the various ways in which process thought can benefit Hinduism are:

1. To aid in the recovery of the concept of *māyā* as 'creativity,' rather than as 'illusion,' as it has often been translated in academic scholarship.
2. To aid in the articulation of the doctrine of the *jīva*, or soul, by means of the process affirmation of ontological monism with structural dualism.
3. To aid in the articulation of the religious pluralism of the Ramakrishna tradition with the process concept of the three ultimate realities.

The ways in which Hinduism can also benefit process thought, by shedding light on specific process concepts and concerns, are that:

1. Hinduism sheds light on the process understanding of soul development by affirming that souls have, like God and the world, always existed.
2. The Hindu emphasis on the fundamental unity of existence complements the emphasis of process thought on change and difference.
3. Hinduism demonstrates that a non-omnipotent deity can be worshiped with intensity and devotion, contrary to the claims of classical theology.

I shall now turn to each of these in succession.

Recovering Māyā as Creativity

As the foregoing discussion shows, it is Śaṅkara who introduces the important distinction between *Nirguṇa* and *Saguṇa*–or non-actualized and actualized–Brahman. While, like monistic philosophers in the West (to whom he is sometimes compared), Śaṅkara locates pre-eminence in the non-actualized aspect of the absolute–the reverse of Whitehead's valuation–the basic structure Śaṅkara establishes is not fundamentally different from that of process thought. Śaṅkara and Whitehead both see God not as identical to the absolute, but as derivative from it–and so as like the rest of the world, being subject to time, change and relationality. *Saguṇa* Brahman encompasses God and the world, which are organically related, as a soul is related to a body.[26]

It is also very significant that *māyā*, which makes Brahman appear, according to Śaṅkara, as the God-world complex (which I have elsewhere dubbed the *theocosm*),[27] can be translated as 'illusion,' but also as 'creativity'–an aspect of *māyā* that is given special emphasis in the Goddess-based, Tantric, Śākta traditions of Hinduism.

---

[26] Rāmānuja introduces this particular image to the tradition to illustrate the God-world relation.

[27] Jeffery D. Long, *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 84-85.

Process thought, very much like Tantric thought, accepts the basic structure of the relative and the absolute that Śaṅkara develops in Advaita, but reverses the relative value that Śaṅkara places on these. According to Tantra, it is only *through* the relative that the absolute can be realized. A process thinker might say it is only as actualized– i.e. "in virtue of its accidents"[28]–that creativity can known. From a Tantric point of view, both the relative and the absolute, the Many and the One, are to be affirmed:

> Like Advaita Vedānta, most schools of Tantra also maintain that the ultimate Reality is singular. However, they tend toward the view that the Many actually and not merely apparently evolves out of the One (while still being contained within the One as the eternal backdrop of cosmic existence). They reject any metaphysics of illusionism. This emanationism is technically known as *sat-kārya-vāda*, which denotes that the effect (*kārya*) is preexistent (*sat*) in the cause: the world could not come into existence if it did not already exist in potential form in the ultimate Being.[29]

The Śākta tradition distinguishes between two aspects of *māyā*: *vidyā māyā* and *avidyā māyā*, or the *māyā* of wisdom and the *māyā* of ignorance, respectively. These are not really two different aspects of *māyā*, much less two different *māyās*. Rather, they refer to two different ways in which living beings encounter and engage with the one *māyā*. *Avidyā māyā* corresponds to *māyā* as conventionally translated in academic scholarship on Hinduism–as illusion, which keeps us from seeing the true character of reality, which is, in turn, essentially relational and organically unified. *Vidyā māyā*, however, the *māyā* of wisdom, connects us more closely with the meaning of the word *māyā* as 'creative power.' *Vidyā māyā* is when we perceive reality in such a way that it does not conceal, but rather *reveals*, its true nature: again, as essentially relational and organically unified. The same experience can lead one person to despair, or to destructive self-indulgence, while it can lead another to greater insight and help her to advance on the path to enlightenment; for *māyā* both conceals and reveals the true nature of reality. For the Śākta tradition, *māyā* is the great Goddess–Mahādevī–who is also called Śakti, which also means, significantly, creative power.

One potential contribution of process thought–a very important one, I think–to Hinduism is for it to make common cause with the Śākta tradition, and to contribute to the larger project of the re-valuation of the natural world that is important not only to a sense of human well-being and wholeness, but also to combating the major ecological crisis that the sense of nature as 'mere' matter, or as subservient to the arbitrary whims of a wholly transcendent God, has facilitated. As Nicholas F. Gier writes of Śākta theology, "The worship of the Goddess appears to require that we view matter, as did the ancients and Indians today, as dynamic, organic, interrelated, and alive."[30]

---

[28] Whitehead, 1978, p. 7.

[29] Georg Feuerstein, *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1998), pp. 66-67.

[30] Nicholas F. Gier, *Spiritual Titanism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 136.

Articulating the Idea of the Jīva: Ontological Monism with Structural Dualism

But though the Tantric understanding of *māyā* and the Vedāntic view of *prakṛti* give reason for seeing the material world as a sacred space–the field of divine activity and the arena in which the search for enlightenment occurs–there is also, as mentioned earlier, a strong dualism of soul, or *jīva*, and body (*śarīra* or *deha*) in the mainstream Hindu traditions. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, God, in the form of Kṛṣṇa, argues that his good friend, the warrior Arjuna, should not fear death–his own or those of others–because it is only the body that dies, while the soul continues on, not at all diminished by the destruction of its bodily vehicle:

> Just as the embodied one experiences childhood, and youth, and old age, in this body, in the same way he enters other bodies. A wise man is not disturbed by this.
> Just as a man discards worn-out clothes and gets others that are new, so the embodied one discards worn-out bodies and enters others that are new.
> For death is certain for anyone who has been born, just as birth is certain for anyone who has died. Since this condition cannot be avoided, you should not mourn.[31]

This dualism would appear, particularly to thinkers from a Western background, to be at odds with a positive valuation of matter. However, as mentioned earlier, this dualism of soul and body, which forms the basis of the Hindu doctrine of rebirth, has not led to quite the same version of the 'mind-body' problem that has been a prominent part of philosophical discussion in the West on the nature of consciousness.

The basic problem with Cartesian dualism is the issue of how two completely unlike entities–one purely spiritual and conscious, and the other purely material and unconscious–can be associated with one another in such a way as to give rise to our conscious, embodied experience as we know it. Also embedded in this discussion is an assumption that unconscious matter precedes conscious spirit, thus giving rise to the question of how a conscious entity can evolve or arise from one that is not conscious– i.e. from 'dead matter.'

Again, this problem has not arisen in this particular way in Hinduism because *prakṛti* has always been seen as a dynamic reality, rather than a 'dead' one. In fact, the Western conception of 'dead' matter correlates more closely to the Hindu idea of the *tamasic*, or inertial, manifestation of *prakṛti* than it does to *prakṛti* as a whole.

One of the most ancient Hindu accounts of the division of soul and body is one that sees this division not in terms of a drastic binary split between a wholly spiritual entity and a wholly physical one, but one which views spirit as residing within a series of gradually more and more physical emanations or 'sheaths' (*kośas*). These sheaths or 'subtle bodies' exist in varying locations on a spectrum between what one could call purely physical and purely spiritual 'poles.'[32]

---

[31] *Bhagavadgītā* 2:13, 22, 27. George Thompson, trans. (New York: North Point Press, 2008), pp. 9-11.
[32] In Vedānta, the *kośas* are five sheaths made of food, breath, mind, consciousness, and bliss.

The implicit idea here seems to be one that process thought can tease out and make more explicit with its understanding of different orderings of actual entities.

That implicit idea is that of a deeper monism underlying the plurality of spirit and matter (and the various grades of subtle body between them). Particularly in the Advaita tradition, with its affirmation that Brahman is both the material and efficient cause of actual existence, one can see that, beyond the duality of soul and body, there is an underlying unity. But what is the relationship between the underlying unity and the evident duality? An Advaita Vedāntin might say the duality is an effect of *māyā*. But process thought can spell out this relationship more explicitly and in greater detail.

Process thought is basically monistic, in the sense that it affirms that there is but one type of metaphysical entity: the actual entity, which is a concrescence of possible qualities inherited either from the past or from the coordinating mind of God. But it also affirms, as mentioned earlier, that actual entities can arrange themselves in distinct ways. They can be personally ordered–in which case one entity succeeds another over the course of time, inheriting the collective knowledge and the past experiences of its predecessors, thereby evolving into a conscious entity, or 'soul.' But they can also be ordered in an impersonal way, as non-internally related contemporaries–a grouping that Whitehead referred to as a "corpuscular society"–in which case they form, at a macroscopic level, the enduring material objects of day to day human experience.[33]

David Ray Griffin aptly calls this view an ontological monism with a structural dualism. This view dispenses with the difficulties involved both in Cartesian dualism– with its problem of interaction between two completely disparate types of entity–and Western-style materialism, with its question of how a conscious entity can be derived from one that is not conscious. Instead, it affirms, at bottom, the existence of actual entities that have the character of units of experience, but arranged in such a way as to account for the duality of conscious and non-conscious beings that we encounter in our lived existence.[34]

Such a model can be of great use to Hindus in the encounter with contemporary Western thinking about mind-body issues. The *jīva* can be understood as a personally ordered society of actual entities whose interactions with other levels of reality can accounted for by the fact that those other levels, or 'strata,' are also made up of the same type of fundamentally relational entities. Physical objects can similarly be seen as corpuscular societies. And the idea of *kośas*, sheaths, or 'subtle bodies' (*sukṣma śarīra*), with intermediate degrees of 'spirituality' or 'physicality' can be accounted for in the same way. As Whitehead writes:

---

[33] Whitehead, 1978, p. 35.

[34] Griffin argues extensively for this model in David Ray Griffin, *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 96-149.

A society may be more or less corpuscular, according to the relative importance of the defining characteristics of the various enduring objects compared to that of the defining characteristic of the whole corpuscular nexus.[35]

Process Thought and Hindu Religious Pluralism

The third area in which process thought can be useful to Hinduism is in helping to articulate the idea–associated pre-eminently, though not exclusively, with the 'Neo' or modern Vedānta of Sri Ramakrishna and Swāmī Vivekānanda–of the harmony of religions. Also known as religious pluralism, this is the view that there are many true and effective paths to salvation–that there are many true religions, and that all of these can help one to reach *mokṣa*.

This is an idea that has received extensive criticism in the West, particularly in the forms it has taken in the work of Christian theologians and philosophers of religion such as John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Paul F. Knitter.

Process thinkers have weighed in on this issue a great deal–not as opponents to the essentially liberal and open-minded approach to religious difference that religious pluralism expresses, but as friendly critics, who see that expressions of pluralism often do not do justice to the rich diversity that actually obtains among the world's religious traditions.

Specifically, there is tendency to conceive of many religions as leading to the same basic goal, which is quite often presented as a non-dualistic realization of an impersonal ultimate reality, much like the goal of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. Other types of religious fulfillment, such as a loving union with a personal deity–as in the theistic traditions of Hinduism, as well as the Abrahamic religions–or the cultivation and affirmation of harmony with and within the cosmos–as in nature-based traditions such as Shinto, Neo-Paganism, or the various indigenous traditions found globally–are then subordinated to this goal. David Ray Griffin has called this approach to religious pluralism "identist" because they claim an identity of ultimate religious goals.[36]

Process thought, however, allows for the development of a non-reductive, or 'deep,' religious pluralism, in which the various ultimate goals of the different types of religious practice can co-exist in a coherent, systematic worldview, without their being reduced to one another. The impersonal ultimate reality of traditions like Buddhism, Daoism, and Advaita Vedānta can be well correlated with the unmanifest principle of creativity in process thought. The personal deity of theistic religions can be correlated with the God of process thought. And the cosmos of inter-relating beings found in the nature religions can be correlated with the relational world of actual entities. Religious pluralism is thus shown to be perfectly consistent with a process worldview.

---

[35] Whitehead, 1978, p. 35.

[36] David Ray Griffin, "Religious Pluralism: Generic, Identist, and Deep," in Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 3-38.

As we have seen, each of these three ultimate realities of process thought can also be correlated with fundamental structures of the basic Vedāntic model of reality. Unmanifest creativity is *Nirguṇa* Brahman. God is Īśvara, the coordinator of the world of finite beings. And the world of finite beings, the *jagat*, or flow of existence, is the world of actual entities.

By mapping process thought onto the basic structure of reality affirmed in the Vedānta traditions, one draws attention to its various dimensions: the impersonal, the personal, and the cosmic. Vedāntic religious pluralism can thus be demonstrated quite easily to be a logical entailment of the larger structure of reality that Vedānta affirms. The various paths to *mokṣa*, to maximal freedom with respect to the collective effects of the past, or *karma*, can each be seen to orient themselves around different structures of existence. The differences among these paths can therefore be accommodated with less distortion than if all are seen simply as paths to the realization of Brahman without qualities, or to loving union with God. Though there are certainly differences between *Nirguṇa* Brahman, Buddhist *śūnyatā*, and the Eternal Dao, or between Viṣṇu and Allah and Yahweh, the idea that these differences may be more of an effect of varied cultural expressions is more plausible than if both personal and impersonal forms had to be correlated with the one impersonal ultimate reality, or alternatively, with one personal God.

And yet, the saving experiences associated with all of these realities can still be seen to be experiences of the realization of Brahman, because, as we have seen, the category of Brahman encompasses *both* the personal and the impersonal, *both Nirguṇa* and *Saguṇa*. The idea is to maintain both poles of this both/and affirmation, reducing neither to the other, nor giving one pre-eminent reality over the other.

"There Never Was a Time When I Did Not Exist, Nor You"

Turning now to ways in which Hinduism can be of benefit to process thought, the first of these is with regard to the topic, discussed earlier, of the relationship of soul and body. We have already seen that process thought elucidates the Hindu view of the distinction between soul and body with its idea of the different types of structure that are formed by actual entities.

As Griffin argues, the Hindu doctrine of rebirth–or reincarnation–which I have mentioned earlier, but have not yet discussed in any depth, is wholly compatible with process thought.[37] For a Hindu process thinker, an important contribution of Hinduism to process thought regards the origin of souls–that, like God and the world, they simply have always existed–and that the reasons for their associating themselves with bodies, for rebirth, have to do with lessons they need to learn, with their search for that state of freedom from the conditioning of the past–from karma–that is their ultimate goal.

---

[37] Griffin 1997, pp. 184-208.

As Kṛṣṇa famously states in the *Bhagavadgītā*:

> …[I]n fact, there never was a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these other lords. And there never will be a time when we do not exist.[38]

Process thought is compatible with a wide array of views about the afterlife. The traditional Abrahamic idea of a heaven or hell, as well as the view that there is no conscious survival after the death of the body, can both be accommodated on a process understanding. In his process exploration of parapsychology, Griffin suggests that a variety of scenarios may actually be playing out in the world: that some souls have been reincarnated, while others may be consciously existing in a state of immortality, and that others have passed out of conscious existence completely at the time of death.

To be sure, Griffin's assessment is based on available (and quite controversial) evidence from the field of parapsychology, and not on the claims of a single religious tradition. But the highly detailed and elaborated views of the Indic traditions provide, I think, a good deal of food for thought for process philosophers and theologians with regard to the nature and purpose of conscious existence. If all the souls in the universe have, in fact, always existed, and will always exist, then the idea of souls as co-creators and co-participants in the life of the divine gains a certain degree of purchase.

In the Jain tradition, it is held that souls begin as barely conscious beings called *nigodas*, that are similar in some respects to actual entities at their most basic–centers of experience, but not necessarily with conscious awareness as we would recognize it. But at a certain point they begin to aspire instinctively to a higher order of experience. They therefore begin to associate with bodies, at first of a very simple kind, and then with gradually greater and greater levels of complexity, which thus enable them to maximize the intensity of experience of which they are capable. When they reach a point at which they are able to conceptualize the nature of existence and can begin to understand the true nature of reality, they develop the aspiration for *mokṣa*, or spiritual liberation–which, as maximal freedom, has all along been the impetus for the evolution they have undergone. Many contemporary Hindu thinkers correlate the process of biological evolution with this process of soul evolution, seeing the two as interrelated dimensions of a larger universal process of God-realization: of reality transforming itself in a creative way in order to realize its own true nature.

This is a conversation to which process thought can contribute and from which it can also learn, particularly with its concept of creativity as the fundamental character of being. The idea of a universal process of spiritual evolution, involving an ongoing engagement of souls with the material world as the field of soul development, fits very well with the Whiteheadian idea of the cosmos as a process of ongoing intensification of and sharing of experience among actual entities and between actual entities and the divine.

---

[38] *Bhagavadgītā* 2:12

The Fundamental Unity of Existence

As mentioned earlier, the chief distinction between process thought and absolute idealism is the value that process thought places on the realm of actuality–of change and difference–as opposed to the abstract, unmanifested absolute. To cite Whitehead once again, "One side makes process ultimate; the other side makes fact ultimate."[39]

The Vedāntic systems, however–with the exception of Dvaita–have tended to give emphasis to Brahman as the underlying unity of existence. Advaita does this, one could say, to the extreme. But the intermediate systems, such as Rāmānuja's, also give emphasis to this idea of a unity underlying plurality, and connecting diverse entities as elements in a pluralistic, yet ultimately singular, system.

This idea of an underlying unity is, I think, one that could have value for the process tradition. For though Whitehead does ascribe ultimate value to process, to the relative world of change, he also values the idea of unity, without which his system provides "absolutely no reason why the universe should not be steadily relapsing into lawless chaos."[40] It is of course for this reason that his system must include a supreme actuality–God–to ensure an underlying unity to existence: to ensure that the multitude of actual entities are coordinated in such a way as to constitute a universe. Whitehead does not name this unity, though he does speak of the necessity of what he calls "Law" or "a certain smoothness in the nature of things," apart from which "there can be knowledge, no useful method, not intelligent purpose."[41]

This notion of Law correlates well with the Hindu idea of *dharma*, mentioned earlier, which is definitive of correct moral behavior, but which also includes such ideas as cosmic order and the laws of nature. The existence of God ensures the basic stability of existence–the fact that things proceed in an orderly fashion, according to *dharma*.[42]

But what ensures the existence of God? A process thinker might reply that God, as conceived in process thought, is simply a logical necessity of the metaphysical system. But what is logical necessity but the interrelationship of ideas in a coherent, *unitary* system of thought? Logic, one could say, is a manifestation of unity, in the sense of an underlying, necessary interconnectedness of things. Unity *precedes* logic.

Brahman, one could then say, is not *logical*, but is logic itself: the transcendental condition for any system of thought or of any reality whatsoever. Brahman is Law. Brahman is *dharma*. Brahman is universal order: the meta-foundation of the system of reality that is described in process thought.

---

[39] Whitehead, 1978, p. 7.
[40] Whitehead 1967, p. 115.
[41] *Ibid*, p. 109.
[42] This is the main function of God as personified by Viṣṇu, the preserver of the cosmic order from the forces of chaos, or *adharma*, themselves personified as various demonic beings that Viṣṇu must combat.

No Omnipotent Deity: No Problem!

The God of Dvaita Vedānta, and of Hindu theism in general, is omniscient in the sense of knowing all actuality and all possibility, and is also supremely benevolent, being the pre-eminent locus of all good qualities (*guṇāśraya*).

But, while being supremely powerful, God is *not* understood in Dvaita Vedānta as being omnipotent in the sense to which process thinkers typically object. Mādhva is at one with process thought in affirming that God co-exists in the world with numerous other free beings–the *jīvas*, or living souls. Just as in process thought, the freedom of non-divine actual entities is not an illusion, or a gift that has been shared with them by an inherently omnipotent being, with which all the power ultimately resides. Actual entities simply *are* free. Because of its affirmation of divine non-omnipotence, Dvaita scholar Deepak Sarma describes this system as a 'mitigated monotheism.'[43]

It is also the case that God is generally known in Hindu texts and ritual systems through specific personifications, or 'deities'–the gods and goddesses of Hinduism– who are not typically presented as omnipotent. As Bimal Krishna Matilal explains:

> According to received doctrine, God is supposed to be omnipotent and he should also see that justice is done in the end. But Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* did not always claim to be omnipotent. Apart from certain inspired speeches (e.g. in the *Gītā*) he acknowledges his human limitations. He admitted before the hermit Utaṅka how powerless he was to stop the devastating war, and restore friendship between the two warring families. For as he said, the war was inevitable, and he had no power to stop the inevitable.
>
> Kṛṣṇa's own admission that he did not have any power to stop the battle or devastation either of the Kauravas or of the Yādavas (his own race) is an important evidence to show that the Hindu conception of God does not always include the attribute of omnipotence. I believe this constitutes an important difference between the Judaeo-Christian theoogy and Hindu theology. Words such as *Īśvara* or *Bhagavān* are often used to denote what is called "God" in the Western tradition, but these words do have a number of meanings in the Indian tradition. God in Hindu theology is not always a creator God–that is, he is not a Creator *ex nihilo*. Nor is the Hindu God always a personal being. In the case of Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, he is of course conceived as a personal being, in fact a human being with all possible human virtues and vices. Of course, it has been claimed that Kṛṣṇa (or Rāma) was mightier than anybody else, had intelligence superior to that of anybody else, but this is hardly equivalent to the claim of omnipotence or even omniscience.[44]

The greatest single obstacle to the widespread acceptance of process thought in the West has been precisely the idea of God as non-omnipotent, an idea that many believe renders God unworthy of worship. Yet this conception of God does not prevent Hindus from experiencing intense theistic devotion.

---

[43] Deepak Sarma, *An Introduction to Mādhva Vedānta* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 70-71.

[44] Jonardon Ganeri, ed., *Philosophy, Culture, and Religion: the Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 99-100.

As William James famously writes, it only takes one white crow to prove that not all crows are black. The fact that Hindus display intense devotion to forms of the divine that are, though supremely powerful, not omnipotent, proves, I think, that the problematic concept of an omnipotent deity that process thought rejects is not necessary to devotional practice. This, I think, is an important contribution of Hinduism to process thought in making its case for its understanding of God as one that can, indeed, have religious relevance.

Conclusion

I hope I have shown here that process thought and Hinduism have a number of affinities that can facilitate an easy exchange that can enrich and benefit both systems of thought. The basic Vedāntic model of reality is, in its essentials identical to the idea of process thought that reality is a manifestation of a principle of creativity. Within this manifestation, there is a divine, supremely powerful but not omnipotent, reality in charge of the coordination of the experiences of the actual entities that constitute the rest of existence. The actual entities, in turn, constitute two basic types of structure, each of which answers, broadly, to the accounts given in Hindu traditions of the soul, or *jīva*, and matter, or *prakṛti*. Distinctively Hindu concepts such as karma, rebirth, and liberation, can also be seen to be coherent with and interpretable in terms of the philosophy of process.

Process thought can benefit Hinduism by helping in the recovery of the concept of *māyā* as creativity, or creative power, rather than as a wholly negative concept of illusion. The interpretation of *māyā* as 'illusion,' both among Vedānta traditions and in outsider scholarship on Hinduism, has led to the marginalization of the Advaita of Śaṅkara, which can be read as saying something actually very close to process thought: that the changing, relative universe is *logically* derivative from the absolute principle of creativity, not that it is wholly unreal. And the recovery of creativity as a central Hindu concept can, in turn, facilitate a re-valuation of the natural world as a field of divine activity, rather than as 'mere' matter–the view that has facilitated the ecological disaster that humanity now faces, and that threatens India, in particular with many dire consequences, like the melting of the Himalayan glaciers that feed sacred rivers such as the Gāṅgā, and the immersion of other sacred sites, such as the Jagannāth temple in Pūri, under rising sea water.

Process thought can also help Hindu thinkers engage the mind-body issue with greater clarity and detail, with its account of soul and matter as differing structures of actual entities of the same, fundamental ontological type. This, too, ties in with the re-valuation of the material world of *prakṛti*, which is often identified with *māyā* in Hindu thought.

Finally, process thought can help with the articulation of a deep Hindu religious pluralism that can address the pressing issues of interreligious conflict and violence.

Hinduism can, in turn, enrich process thought, with its understanding of souls as having always existed, thus obviating the need for an account of the emergence of consciousness, and presenting a rich and complex model of reality that takes process ideas of the cosmos as an ongoing creative process to another level of detail, a cosmic narrative that intertwines both spiritual and biological evolution as different facets of the same essential dynamic movement toward greater and greater freedom.

The Hindu emphasis on the fundamental unity existence also addresses a trend in process thought to emphasize process and change over ultimate fact. Both of these philosophical tendencies–to emphasize either the one or the many, the absolute or the relative–should complement and balance one another, rather than either being taken to an extreme.

Finally, the fact that Hindus have long conceived the divine as non-omnipotent, while simultaneously cultivating intense theistic devotion, expressed through temples, music, dance, poetry, and a wide variety of other classical and folk arts, assists process thinkers in the Abrahamic traditions to advance their case that the concept of God is not diminished by a process understanding. Far from being unworthy of worship, such a God has inspired a whole civilization for millennia.

Clearly, I have only begun to scratch the surface of the potential interactions of process thought and Hinduism in this essay. Further development of Hindu process theologies will no doubt reveal even more points of contact, as well as potential areas of creative tension, between process thought and the rich, vast, and complex family of traditions that go by the name of *Hinduism*.

Select Bibliography

Process Thought
- Griffin, David Ray, *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997)
- Griffin, David Ray, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001)
- Griffin, David Ray, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)
- McDaniel, Jay and Donna Bowman, eds., *Handbook of Process Theology*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006)
- Price, Lucien, *Dialogues with Alfred North Whitehead as Recorded by Lucien Price* (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 2001)
- Whitehead, Alfred North, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Corrected Edition) (New York: The Free Press, 1978)
- Whitehead, Alfred North, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) (First published in 1933)

Hinduism

- *Bhagavadgītā*, George Thompson, trans. (New York: North Point Press, 2008)
- Doniger, Wendy, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009)
- Feuerstein, Georg, *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1998)
- Inden, Ronald, *Imagining India* (Blackwell, 1994)
- Ganeri, Jonardon, ed., *Philosophy, Culture, and Religion: the Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)
- Llewellyn, J.E. ed. *Defining Hinduism: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005)
- Rambachan, Anantanand, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006)
- Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1979)
- Sarma, Deepak, *An Introduction to Mādhva Vedānta* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2003
- Sontheimer, Gunther-Dietz and Hermann Kulke, eds., *Hinduism Reconsidered* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2001)
- Sugirtharajah, Sharada, *Imagining Hinduism* (Taylor and Francis, 2007)
- Tapasyānanda, Swāmī, *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta* (Mylapore, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990)
- Vivekānanda, Swāmī, *Complete Works* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1989)

Process Thought and Hinduism

- Gier, Nicholas F., *Spiritual Titanism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000)
- Langbauer, Delmar, *Sanatana Dharma and Modern Philosophy: A Study of Indian and Whiteheadian Thought* (Claremont, CA: Ph.D dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1970)
- Long, Jeffery D., *Plurality and Relativity: Whitehead, Jainism, and the Reconstruction of Religious Pluralism* (Chicago: Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2000)
- —— "Anekanta Vedanta: Toward a Deep Hindu Religious Pluralism" in David Ray Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)
- —— "A Whiteheadian Vedanta: Outline of a Hindu Process Theology) in in Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman, eds., *Handbook of Process Theology*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006)
- —— *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007)
- —— "Can a Hindu Pan-Inclusivism Also Be a Deep Hindu Pluralism? A Response to Matthew Lopresti," *Process Studies*, Vol. 36.1, Spring-Summer 2007
- —— "Truth, Diversity, and the Incomplete Project of Modern Hinduism," in Rita Sherma and Arvind Sharma, eds., *Hermeneutics and Hindu Thought: Toward a Fusion of Horizons* (Springer, 2008)
- Lopresti, Matthew S., "*Sanatana Dharma* as a Whiteheadian Religious Pluralism?" *Process Studies*, Vol. 36.1, Spring-Summer 2007
- Simmons, Ernest Lee, Jr. *Process Pluralism and Integral Nondualism: A Comarative Study of the Nature of the Divine in the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead and Sri Aurobindo Ghose* (Claremont, CA: Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1981)

Jeffery D. Long is Associate Professor of Religion and Asian Studies and the current Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Elizabethtown College and DANAM

(the Dharma Association of North America). The author of two books–*A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* and *Jainism: An Introduction* (both published by I.B. Tauris)–Long is an active member of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society and the Hindu American Religious Institute.