Theism for the Masses, Non-Dualism for the Monastic Elite: A Fresh Look at Sankara's Trans-Theistic Spirituality

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Sensitive and thoughtful Christians are today prone to anxious reflection on the fact that their tradition has spawned disquieting displays of exclusivism, intolerance, and—in the modern period—rigid fundamentalism. In such a mood, there is a tendency to look wistfully at the religions of the East, reputed to be peaceful reservoirs of tolerance and inclusivity. The Asian religions themselves, however, are not immune from strident revivalist and quasi-fundamentalist movements. Nor are their classical traditions entirely free from elements of narrowness or exclusivity, even when espousing metaphysical outlooks stunningly universalistic in tone.

This paper will consider a graphic example of the latter tendency in the thought of the great seventh-century Hindu philosopher Śaṅkara. This primary systematizer of Advaita (non-dualistic) Vedānta believed in the absolute oneness of all souls with the supreme Godhead, Brahman. This and other features of his philosophy, especially his doctrine of Māyā, are well known. Commonly ignored in philosophical treatments of Advaita, however, is his teaching that only male monastics of the elite Brahmin caste could study Vedānta, realize this truth, and thereby gain salvation.

Vedānta has been identified—and sometimes promoted—as the

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1. I think immediately of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan and the Arya Samaj and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in India.
fount of the Asian universalistic outlook. Beginning at the end of the last century, Svāmī Vivekānanda challenged the West with his forceful presentation of Upanisadic thought. Advaita, for him, was a liberal, universalistic philosophy holding answers to the problem of religious diversity and conflict. A way of thought able to accommodate both science and religious plurality, it could provide a rationale for being religious in the modern world. Vedānta would enable the West to overcome its religious provincialism and spiritual bankruptcy. At the same time, it would liberate the Hindu masses from their dualistic customs and superstitions, giving them a new dignity and fearlessness. Under the aegis of Advaita, Vivekānanda declared, India would become the spiritual leader of a unified world culture. Later, during the first half of the present century, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan presented Hindu non-dualism in a way that was more academically polished, but in real content much the same. The climax of human religious aspiration, the liberal vision of Advaita would be a basis of tolerance, accommodation of divergent worldviews, and world unity. It could supply Hinduism with a workable modern world view that would put the dogmatic, intolerant monotheisms of the West to shame.

The many exponents of this kind of thinking—most accurately termed “Neo-Vedānta”—look to Śaṅkara as the major classical exponent of their religious vision. Śaṅkara has therefore been presented as the primary thinker of the Hindu tradition, a philosopher of world standing offering solutions to both perennial spiritual dilemmas and contemporary world problems. No doubt, Śaṅkara remains one of the great thinkers of India and of the world. As with all creative thinkers, however, there are aspects of his thought that betray certain narrow emphases of his era and culture. In reflecting here on some of these, my aim is not to diminish Śaṅkara’s contribution. It is rather to understand more adequately the origins and underlying assumptions of this thought, sometimes so enthusiastically presented as a corrective to Western religious narrowness.

It is instructive to see the extent to which Śaṅkara was a man limited by his place and time. Since he is hailed as the source of a universalistic vision, it is particularly important to be aware that he was neither a liberal nor even truly tolerant in any modern sense of the word. Like other Indian philosophers, he engaged in a vigorous polemic against all views other than his own. And, particularly important for the present discussion, he was deeply conditioned by Hindu hierarchical social thinking. Indeed, his work gives ample
evidence that he embraced it wholeheartedly. Most accounts of Śaṅkara’s life hold that he belonged to a high-caste Brahmin community of Kerala, the Nambūdiri Brahmins. His profound metaphysical vision arose thus in the context of an ancient spiritual tradition that was conservative, elitist, and thoroughly stratified.

The complex, multi-levelled Hindu world that Śaṅkara assumed saw all beings on a vast transmigratory pilgrimage. Many thousands—even millions—of lives were required for the soul to complete its long journey. Eventually it would earn birth in the highest human estate. Having attained Brahmin-hood (brāhmaṇatva), the soul could then aspire to direct awareness of the supreme spiritual truth and, thence, final salvation (mokṣa). In this mythic view of the world, the Brahmin caste represented the “earthly Brahman” (bhu­masya brahma­ṇaḥ), a class of beings at the pinnacle of the transmigratory hierarchy, above even the gods. Religious maturity—one’s stage in the great cosmic pilgrimage—and social status were seamlessly interlocked. The result: a system, authored by an elite, in which social exclusivity exerted a controlling influence on soteriology.

We know Śaṅkara as a thinker who attempts to accommodate both theism and an impersonal, trans-theistic non-dualism. He accomplishes this by providing two interrelated but non-continuous views of the world. Ranked hierarchically, these two ways of thought (buddhi-dvaya) assume as their counter-parts two distinct and unequal spiritual paths (dve niṣṭhe) with two separate, and again unequal, spiritual goals. Graded linkages to the Hindu system of hereditary social class give these two spiritualities concrete sociological manifestations. Finally, the capstone of this socio-religious structure is formed by restrictions that deny access to salvation to all but those at its very highest level.

Levels of Being and World of Theism

Any reader of Śaṅkara quickly realizes that he has much to say about ordinary religious life and especially the personal God (Īśvara), the individual soul (jīva), and their relationship. He adapts such notions to his non-dualist scheme by his well-known strategy of dividing religious truth into two levels, the absolute and the

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3See ŚGBh, intro., Satapatha Brahmaṇa 2.2.2.6, 4.3.4.4., 12.4.4.6, Mānavadharma-śāstra 9.319.
provisional. Thus he distinguishes the para ("higher") and the aparā ("lower") Brahman. Of these two forms of Brahman, it is the lower that BS 1.1.2 describes as the source, the support, and the end of the world; it is the lower that is, in a word, the personal God. Īśvara, as the personal God is termed, is the transcendent, supreme Brahman appearing as if conditioned and personalized by virtue of its relation to māyā, the principle of phenomenality.

Although māyā is commonly translated as "illusion," Śaṅkara does not teach that the world is such. Within the higher and lower Brahman, he defines three levels of being of reality (sattā). These are: (1) the truly illusory (pratībhāṣika-sattā), (2) the empirical (vyāvahārika-sattā), and (3) the supreme (pāramārtha-sattā), the last identified with the para Brahman. The empirical (vyāvahārika) world, experienced intersubjectively and consistently through time, is much more than a bare illusion. While the few rare souls that attain direct intuitive realization of the supreme see the world to be false, it remains in place for all others.

Śaṅkara emphasizes repeatedly that as long as we have not attained the realization of the supreme Brahman, which dissolves all experience of duality, we cannot avoid recognizing the pragmatic truth of the empirical (vyāvahārika) world and all its relationships. The vyāvahārika realm, then, with its undeniable empirical reality, becomes the setting in Śaṅkara’s system for all the symbols, activities, and emotions of ordinary religion. Accepting, for practical purposes, the full functionality of the lower Brahman as supreme personal Deity, he writes of the religion of theism and bhakti (devotion) with serious respect, even reverence. It was not without reason that a Christian theologian such as Otto was able to recognize this great Advaitin’s relationship to the theistic worldview of the Gītā, the epics, and the Purāṇas as an “inner one.” Indeed, as P. Hacker has shown, it is almost certain that the sectarian background of Śaṅkara and his early followers was one stressing theistic worship of Viṣṇu.

Śaṅkara’s Devaluation of Devotional Theism

Why, then, is there such a long history of bitter opposition to Śaṅkara’s thought from the side of Hindu theism? Highly erudite

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4See his commentary on BU 3.5.1 and Eliot Deutsch, Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1969), chap. 3.
Advaitins will assert that the criticism of Advaita offered by the proponents of the various theistic forms of Vedānta results from a misunderstanding. There is, they will say, really no conflict between non-dualism and devotion. Only a more careful and open-minded consideration of Śaṃkara's thought is needed. Many articulate representatives of the Hindu tradition cherish this belief; even as sophisticated a philosopher-scholar as Radhakrisnan subscribes to it. He is convinced: “While S. [Śaṃkara] is an absolute non-dualist in his metaphysics, he had great faith in bhakti or devotion to a personal God.”

Proponents of the idea that Śaṃkara was adevotionalist as well as a non-dualist commonly seek support in the so-called “minor works” (prakaraṇas) and the many devotional hymns (stotras) attributed to him. Unfortunately, critical scholarship suggests that these works were almost certainly not written by Śaṃkara himself. An examination of Śaṃkara’s commentaries on the Upaniṣads, the BS, and the BhG, and his independent Upadesāsāhasrī—works which we are sure were written by him—reveals a rather different attitude toward theism and devotional religion.

The reason for theistic opposition to Advaita is, in fact, quite obvious: Advaita removes the sense of ultimacy from both the devotional experience and its object. It leaves bhakti religion in a precarious position, in danger of losing much of its compellingness. “The Lord’s being a Lord,” says Śaṃkara, “his omniscience, his omnipotence, etc. all depend on limitations caused by adjuncts which are products of ignorance.” This kind of thinking does not quite place Īśvara in the realm of maya, but it does effectively remove him from the sphere of final truth in a way that a true devotionalist could not tolerate.

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8See Radhakrishnan, Brahma Sūtra, pp. 37–38.
9Even as orthodox a Hindu scholar as the highly respected Mahamahopadhyaya Gopi Nath Kaviraj writes regarding the hymns: “No doubt, most of these stotras must have been written by the later Śaṃkarācāryas but all of them have been attributed to the first Śaṃkarācārya.” In reference to the treatises he says, “It is difficult to decide about the authorship and genuineness of these works” (translated from the Hindi by A. P. Mishra, The Development and Place of Bhakti in Śaṃkara Vedānta [Allahabad: The University of Allahabad, 1967], p. 128). Of the prakaraṇas, Hacker, Ingalls, and Mayeda recognize only the Upadesāsāhasrī as genuine (Karl H. Potter, ed., Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, III, pp. 116, 320.)
11BSSBh 2.2.14.
The Subordination of Bhakti

If the Lord himself suffers from penultimacy in Advaita, all the more does bhakti. Though the Advaitins themselves vary in the importance they place on devotional religion, all accept that it is but a preliminary step to the acquisition of liberating knowledge (jñāna). In this respect, it is a complement to, and on the same spiritual level as, karma-yoga, the yoga of dedicated action. Indeed, these two paths, which in practice are often mingled, form the Hindu counterpart of the traditional Christian “active life.” And like the medieval Christian monastic, Śaṅkara subordinates the active life to the contemplative. The way of pious action and devotion is the purgative way; it purifies the mind and prepares it for the final intuitive knowledge of the identity of jīva and Brahman.

Both karma and bhakti are therefore insufficient in themselves. The final gain from practicing them is the purity of mind that will eventually lead the seeker to the path of knowledge. If practitioners of karma and bhakti make the transition to jñāna, realization of Brahman may perhaps occur in this life. More likely, however, such individuals will have to wait for another birth or attain the requisite saving knowledge through the process known as krama-mukti (“gradual liberation”). The latter consists in the attainment after death of brahma-loka, the highest celestial realm from which there is not rebirth. Inhabitants of this heavenly paradise attain knowledge of the unconditioned Brahman, and hence mokṣa, when the whole universe, including brahma-loka, is dissolved at the end of the present cosmic cycle (kalpa).

Knowledge the Sole Means to Liberation

Śaṅkara thus envisions two distinct styles of spirituality, two ways of religious life that parallel his two levels of being. For reasons that will become apparent, he calls them the way of engagement (pravṛtti-dharma) and the way of cessation (nivṛtti-dharma). These paths are for him of unquestionable sanctity, for they were founded by the primal acts of the Creator. The way of engaged action and

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12See Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 2a2ae, q. 179–182.
13Krama-mukti is originally postulated as the state gained by those who are devoted to meditations on the conditioned Brahman through various symbols as described in the Upaniṣads. Śaṅkara discusses it in detail in his commentary on BS 4.3–4. See also BSSBh 4.3.10–11, 4.4.22, and 1.3.13; ŠGBh 8.23–27; and Potter, Advaita, pp. 26–27.
14ŠGBh, intro.
devotion corresponds to the metaphysical lower Brahman, the world of the merely empirical (vyāvahāra). The way to the supreme, Brahman, the pāramārthika realm, is the path of cessation, which leads to saving knowledge.

Śaṅkara never tires of repeating that the sole means to liberation is knowledge (jñāna): “The attainment of mokṣa is only from knowledge of reality.” Since the jīva’s identity with Brahman is an eternally accomplished fact (nitya-siddha), realization requires only the removal of the soul’s primal Ignorance (avidyā) through intuitive awakening. The way of knowledge, therefore, is the path to which all others lead.

The Seeker of Knowledge Rejects Devotion

An important part of the Advaitic spiritual practice—the jñāna-niṣṭhā (“discipline of standing firm in knowledge”)—is the effort to remove “contrary ideas” (viparīta-bhāvanā). These comprise all dualistic ways of thinking and perception that contradict scriptural teaching of the Self’s oneness and total inactivity. To succeed in the task of uprooting separative consciousness and immersing himself in the idea of oneness, the contemplative who has entered the path of knowledge must abstain from activities and modes of thought or feeling which reinforce dualism. The practitioner of jñāna-yoga is taught to regard the Self as an inactive witness. He should see “the whole world and all knowledge born of difference as mere ignorance, like night.”

Chapter 12 of the Gītā is entitled “The Yoga of Devotion” (bhakti-yoga). In verses 1–12, Kṛṣṇa clearly asserts the superiority of devotion to the way of meditation on the impersonal Absolute. Śaṅkara chooses not to take this teaching at its face value. To save embarrassment to his way of knowledge, he treats the Lord’s statement as mere hortatory praise. It is designed, he says, to inspire Ārjuna, who is not fit for the path of knowledge, to persist in the path of action and devotion. The superiority of “those who are identical with the Blessed Lord” (bhagavat-svarūpa) is so obvious, he feels, as to be beyond discussion. Then follows a crucial passage:

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15ŚGBh 2.20; see also ŚGBh 18.66.
16See, for example, ŚGBh 2.69, ŚGBh 5.1.
17ŚGBh 2.69.
18ŚGBh 12.4.
Here, having assumed a distinction between the Lord and the Self (ātmeśvara-bheda), the yoga which consists of concentrating the mind on the Lord in his universal form and performing works for the sake of the Lord is declared. The verse “If you are not able to do even this” [BhG 12.11] indicates that karma-yoga is the result of ignorance. So the Blessed Lord teaches that it should not be performed by those who meditate on the Imperishable and who see no distinction (abheda-darśin) [between the Lord and the Self]. Likewise, He teaches that meditation on the Imperishable should not be performed by the karma-yogins. . . . Those who meditate on the Imperishable are independent (svātantaṇyā) in the attainment of liberation, . . . [while] the others [the devotees] are dependent on another (pārațantrya), dependent on the Lord (īśvarādhinā) . . .

Because the Blessed Lord is exceedingly desirous of Ārjuna's well-being, He recommends to him only the yoga of action which is based on the cognition of distinction and unconnected with right knowledge. [But] no one who has definitively known himself to be the Lord would wish to become a subordinate (guna-bhava) of anyone. That would be a contradiction [of his knowledge].

Those who wish to portray Śaṅkara as a teacher and practitioner of bhakti invariably overlook this interesting paragraph. Its implications, however, are important and are worth some elaboration.

First, the paragraph clearly defines the mutually exclusive presuppositions of Śaṅkara’s two ways. Action-devotion is based on the idea of the distinction between the Lord and the Self (ātmeśvara-bheda). Further, it involves dependence upon an outside power (pārațantrya), the Lord, for salvation or deliverance. The path of knowledge, on the other hand, is founded upon the idea of the identity of the Lord and the Self, which Śaṅkara regards as true knowledge. Its followers do not think of themselves as dependent upon an external power for liberation, for they must dwell upon the idea that God is none other than the pratyag-ātman, the Self within.

Second, the fact that these paths have contradictory assumptions explains why persons are restricted to one or another of them. To follow both seriously and intently at the same time would be, for obvious reasons, psychologically impossible. “The Lord has declared two distinct paths,” Śaṅkara reminds us, “seeing the impos-

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19ŚGBh 12.12.
20The renunciate, especially the adept who has realized his identity with Brahman, may participate in activities associated with the lower path. If he follows Śaṃkara’s ideal, however, he does so in a detached way, merely for the sake of setting an example to others. See my further discussion below.
sibility of combining at once in a single person both knowledge, which depends on ideas of non-agency and unity, and action, which depends upon ideas of active agency and multiplicity.”

Third, the passage makes it clear that, for Śaṁkara and his school, the two paths are not of equal value. One way is for the “enlightened,” the other for the “unenlightened.” The mode of action-devotion is the effect of ignorance (ajñāna-kārya). It has no connection with right knowledge (samyag-darśananānvita). The aspirant on the higher path of jñāna is gripped by the truth “I am Brahman” (BU 1.4.10). Aspiring for total freedom (svātāntarya), he will find the ideas of duality and dependence—fundamental to theistic devotion—abhorrent. As Śaṁkara says at the beginning of his commentary on the Kena Upaniṣad: “He who, having been led to Brahman, is consecrated to sovereignty does not wish to bow to anybody.” Śaṁkara is saying, almost in so many words, that theism and devotion, based on the dualistic distinction of God and soul, are products of spiritual ignorance suitable only for the lesser aspirants.

The Problem of Adhikāra

The significance of Śaṁkara’s bi-level stratification of truth and spiritual discipline is intensified by the fact that, in classical Hinduism, entrance into a spiritual path is not entirely a matter of individual choice. Persons also—along with truths and yogas—are hierarchically graded. The tradition assumes that souls are all at different stages on their long transmigratory pilgrimage to the Absolute, and thus at different levels of spiritual capacity.

We encounter at this point in our investigation the concept of adhikāra (“eligibility”). While it plays a significant role in Hindu religious thought in general, the idea is especially important in Advaita Vedānta. Jñāna-yoga is a demanding contemplative discipline. Only certain persons are thought to be suited to it. In addition to important social qualifications, which will be considered below, a long process of moral and spiritual preparation, either in this life or in previous lives, is presupposed.

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21ŚGBh 2.10.
22“The Blessed Lord Nārāyaṇa, having divided the enlightened (vidvān) Śaṁkhyas from the unenlightened (avidvān) men of action, makes them take two paths,” ŚGBh 2.21; see also ŚGBh 3.4.
23na hi svārājiye ‘bhikṣito brahmatvam gamitah karācana namitum icchati.
24At the beginning of their works, authors of all Hindu religious treatises are required by tradition to state, among other things, the adhikārin, the type of person qualified to study the work.
At the beginning of the BSŚBh, Śaṅkara specifies the nature of the proper adhikārin for Vedāntic study. He outlines the “four-fold means” (sādhanacatuṣṭaya) that an individual must have to qualify for this discipline. The strict requirements include: (1) the capacity to discriminate between the eternal and the non-eternal; (2) indifference to the rewards of action in this world or the next; (3) the “six-fold endowment,” which includes equanimity, self-control, withdrawal from sensual pursuits, concentration, patience, and faith; and (4) the intense desire for liberation.25

Śaṅkara presents an even more detailed outline of prerequisites for the study of Advaita at Upadesasāhasrī 2.1.2. There he indicates that his teaching is truly intended only for the mendicant monk (parivrājika) who is a paramahamsa (“supreme swan”), a title reserved, at least in the later tradition, for the highest and most respected order of renunciates (sāmnyāsins).26 Those possessed of such qualifications, the highest aspirants (uttamadhi-karins), are utterly detached from the world and so able to contemplate their identity with the impersonal Brahman. Single-minded in their quest, they seek to remain aloof from everything in the realm of process and becoming, including both religious works and religious emotionalism. Only such individuals qualify for the path of knowledge, which forms the direct means to immortality. Other individuals, not possessed of such virtues, are eligible only for the paths of selfless action and devotion. According to Śaṅkara, Ārjuna was a seeker of this second sort. BhG 2.47 reads, “Your adhikāra is for action alone,”27 and Śaṅkara’s gloss has Kṛṣṇa saying directly to Ārjuna: “You are qualified for works alone, not for the path of knowledge.”

Social Dimensions

In the orthodox Hindu world religion and society are inextricably bound together. In addition to—or as an assumed objective index of—an individual’s spiritual maturity, the tradition takes into account his or her place in the social hierarchy, stage of life, and so on, when determining adhikāra. A person’s spiritual duties, style of worship, and so on are commonly, especially in more conservative circles, limited and channeled by social criteria. This being the case,

25BSŚBh 1.1.1; see also BSŚBh 3.4.27 and Vedāntasūtra 15–26.
26Mayeda, A Thousand Teachings, p. 211.
27karman evādhikāras te.
it is not surprising that Śaṅkara’s levels of truth and practice have concrete social correlates. The question for eligibility for the path of knowledge, in particular, has several important sociological valences.

**Limited Access to the Essential Vedic Revelation**

The first has to do with caste and gender restrictions on the study of the Veda, specifically its later portion, the Upaniṣads. According to the orthodox tradition, in which Śaṅkara firmly stands, only initiated (“twice-born”) adult males of the three upper classes are eligible for Vedic study. This restriction has implications of the highest consequence, because Vedic study, according to Advaita, is essential for Brahman-realization and the attainment of mokṣa. Saving knowledge of one’s identity with the Absolute is dependent on access to scripture. It is a realization mediated verbally, through one channel only: the words of Vedic revelation (śruti). Śaṅkara writes: “The relation of Brahman and Ātman, stated in the passage ‘That thou art,’ cannot be known without the aid of scripture.”

The “great sayings” (mahāvākyas) of the Upaniṣads, when heard (śruta) by the qualified pupil from the mouth of the competent teacher, are the necessary final catalysts of knowledge.

The highest yogic intuition (yogi-pratyakṣa), according to Advaita, cannot reveal Brahman directly. Prakāśātman, an important follower of Śaṅkara, declares that even the “divine eye” granted to Ārjuna in the eleventh chapter of the BhG had access, not to Brahman, but to sensible things. Indeed, even the gods themselves do not attain the final liberation without hearing the Upaniṣadātic sayings.

Classical Vedanta is a mīmāṃsā, an “inquiry” into the meaning of the Veda. As such, it is a sister system of the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā (the “Prior Inquiry”), the study of Vedic ritualism. Known also as the Uttara Mīmamsa (the “Subsequent Inquiry”), ancient Vedanta presupposed the completion of one’s education in the ritual texts. In the pre-Śaṅkara tradition the inquiry into Brahman required, therefore, not only access to the Veda, but a good knowledge of both the scripture and its ancillary texts, the Vedāṅgas. In practice this often excluded—not merely women and sudras—but all except the male

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28BSSBh 1.1.4, p. 11.
29BSSBh 2.1.3.
Brahmin. Although Śaṅkara denied the necessity of ritual study and performance, he was essentially a conservative and did little to alter the Brahmanical elitism of the Vedanta.31 Indeed, he added a restriction that made the tradition even more exclusive. For him, only a select few male Brahmins were eligible for the path of knowledge.

Brahman-knowledge Requires Śaṁnyāsa

Śaṅkara insisted that Vedantic study, and hence direct access to mokṣa, was available only to those who have entered the path of world renunciation (saṁnyāsa). In this, he opposed both the Vedic ritualists, who exalted the householder’s life-stage as the foundation of true religious existence, and the teachers of traditional Vedānta, who felt that the active and contemplative lives should be combined (jñāna-karma-samuccaya).

For Śaṅkara, in short, the yoga of knowledge and the path of world renunciation were one and the same. Knowledge, he says, is for “the Paramahāṁsa mendicants, whose life is focussed on Brahman only.”32 It involves a life of constant “abiding in Brahman” (brahma-saṁstha).33 This means, says the master, utter immersion (parisamāpti) in Brahman and the absence of all other activity. Those in the active life have scripturally ordained duties to perform; to omit them would be to incur sin. A life of total contemplative absorption is impossible for them. The mendicant, on the other hand, has formally renounced all such action. “The duties that he does have—tranquility, restraint, etc.—are conducive to abiding in Brahman, not opposed to it.”34

Although it implied the transcendence of all social ties, saṁnyāsa was itself a highly institutionalized state of life. It had to be entered through a prescribed rite, “according to rule” (yathā-viddhi), under the sponsorship of an established preceptor. While it pointed to a state beyond all social restriction, the institution as it developed in

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32ŚGBh 3.3.
33BSSBh 3.4.20. The term comes from CU 3.23.1: “He who dwells in Brahman attains immortality” (brāhma-saṁstho 'mṛtatvam eti).
34BSSBh 3.4.20. Śaṅkara reserves special praise for the naiṣṭhika-brahmacārin (“complete celibate”) who, like the great Advaitin himself, has renounced directly from the student stage and has never been entirely caught up in the illusions of the world (ŚGBh 2.72).
orthodox circles did not avoid the spirit of Brahmanical elitism. According to the tradition of which Śaṅkara was a preeminent spokesman, only male Brahmins were eligible for saṁnyāsa.35

In his commentary on BU 3.5.1 and 4.5.15, Śaṅkara states bluntly that only Brahmins, not Kṣatriyas or Vaisyas, are qualified for renunciation. The medieval exponents of religious law (dharma-ṣāstra), for the most part, concur in this opinion. A widely circulated verse from the Vaikānasadharmapraśna reads: “The four life-states are that of the student, the householder, the retiree, and the renunciate; Brahmins have four, Kṣatriyas have the first three, and Vaisyas the first two.”36 This issue was not without controversy, however, and indeed Śaṅkara’s own disciple Suresvara left a record of his disagreement with his master on this point.37 Nevertheless, Śaṅkara’s order of renunciates, the daśanāmīs, followed this rule strictly until the late medieval period, when certain orders admitted members of the warrior caste to defend the monks against militant Muslims.38 Even in the late 16th century, the great Advaitin Madhusūdana Sarasvatī was arguing strenuously and at length for the validity of this restriction.39 Of the ten daśanāmī orders, four are today still open to Brahmins only.40

This restrictive thinking is in fact the primary basis for Śaṅkara’s argument that Ārjuna is ineligible for renunciation. Lord Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā uses wide-ranging and carefully marshalled arguments to convince Ārjuna that he should remain in the tragic Bhārata war and fight. Śaṅkara by-passes most of these, reducing the remainder to what is little more than a narrow legalism. Renunciation by a member of the warrior caste, he insists, is prohibited (pratiṣiddha).

35See his commentary on BU 3.5.1 and BU 4.5.15. According to Upadeśasahasrī 2.1.2, the student of Advaita should be both a Brahmin and a paramahārīsa.


39See his Gūdhārtathādīpikā commentary BhG 3.20; 5.5–6; 18.56, 63, 66.

It is quite simply a violation of religious law. Only those of Brahmin ancestry are permitted to renounce the world and take up the contemplative life, and for Ārjuna as a Kṣatriya to do so would amount to embracing the prerogative of another caste (paradharma). The profound questions of metaphysics, morality, and human psychology raised by Kṛṣṇa, if not ignored here, become subsidiary. The critical point is that Ārjuna cannot drop out of the battle because he is not a Brahmin.41

Not much thought is required to see the results of such constraints. If mokṣa is attained only by knowledge, only saṁnyāsins are eligible for knowledge, and only male Brahmins are qualified for saṁnyāsa, then the circle of those who can acquire mokṣa in this life is very small indeed. It includes only the few male Brahmins who have attained utter indifference to the world and taken vows of renunciation. To my knowledge Śaṅkara never says this in so many words,42 and the restriction does not apply to krama-mukti, the “gradual” liberation through rebirth in brahma-loka described above. Moreover, Śaṅkara does concede there may be some exceptions to this rule.43 Nevertheless the implication is clear. Saving rare exceptions, liberation is available directly only to male Brahmins who have, through renunciation, taken to the path of knowledge. Those in the active life have two lesser options. One is to be satisfied with karma-mukti and a wait of countless thousands of years until the current world-cycle comes to an end. The other is to hope for rebirth as a male Brahmin.

41ŚGbh 2.10.
42Other writers, however, do. In the introduction to Bhaskara’s commentary on the Gītā, for example, we read:
“If women and the Śūdras were qualified for release, the caste eminence of the Brahmin would serve no purpose. . . . The Blessed dharma is only for Brahmins a way to release. The Śūdra, etc., cannot be elevated . . . nor can iron be made into gold by heating it some more . . . . Even the Kṣatriya and the Vaiśya do not have the same qualification for release as the Brahman. Therefore, only the Brahman has it” (trans. by van Buitenen, “Archaism,” p. 32).
43See his comments on, for example, BSSBh 3.4.36 and BhG 9.32. These exceptions appear to be only such as were necessitated by scriptural passages suggestive of the more liberal attitude of an earlier age, and which therefore called the later restrictions into question. The ŚGbh twice (at 2.10 and 3.20) discusses the case of Janaka, a King famed for his enlightenment. In both cases, however, Śaṅkara is noncommittal as to whether or not Janaka is truly a knower of Brahman. The traditional Advaitic explanation for the spiritual attainments of non-Brahmins who have either not renounced or not had access to the Veda is that such persons have done so in previous lives.
Śaṅkara’s Hierarchical Socio-Religious Vision

Śaṅkara’s bi-level metaphysic, with its ability to accommodate both theism and a trans-theistic Absolute, has rightly been regarded as an important contribution to world thought. Enthusiasts, however, should be aware of the elitist dimensions of this outlook. It is not so much a means of integrating both theistic and impersonalistic views of ultimacy, as a way of placing them in ranked juxtaposition. Śaṅkara does not encourage the theist to anticipate his or her eventual transition to the trans-theistic stance by consciously recognizing the provisionality of devotional worship. This would undermine the practice of bhakti. Nor—despite later developments in his own tradition—does he encourage the follower of the discipline of knowledge to think theistically, as if difference were real, for this would undermine the monk’s practice. In actuality, he presents two distinct ways of relating to ultimacy. These become continuous only for the enlightened being who looks back to see what the rest of the world is doing. Indeed, the whole doctrine is articulated from the point of view of the monk who has left the world of theistic religion behind. It allows him to understand bhakti and its function for others, but also teaches him to disdain it for himself.

The tradition itself, of course, regards this exclusivism as benevolently intended. If too many individuals were intensely seeking liberation, the Advaitin might say, the delusive energies which kept the universe in motion would begin to dissipate. What would happen to society if more than a small minority took to the path of knowledge? Even if it were socially workable, the radical liminality imposed by renunciation and non-dualistic modes of thought would be psychologically disastrous for most.

The authentic Śaṅkara Advaitin does not, and cannot, accept the validity of theism or devotional action for himself. They contradict the basic assumptions of his discipline. But he recognizes that they are good for others, those whose minds are more encumbered with worldly desires and distinctions, i.e., less “pure,” than his. Indeed, for the sake of setting an example to others and encouraging them in

44There is no denying that devotional and Tantric elements (stotras, pūjā, mantra, yantra, etc.) became incorporated into the discipline of the Śaṅkara mathas (monasteries), perhaps at a fairly early date. To what extent this is a valid expression of the Advaitic path, and to what extent it is a concession to the religious interests of the aspirants and the surrounding Hindu culture, is not clear. I tend to believe that the latter is the case.
their path, the enlightened sage may willingly fulfill certain outward religious observances associated with bhakti. He knows that, through their devotion, the less qualified aspirants will eventually attain fitness for knowledge and, at last, mokṣa. BhG 3.20–26 teaches the superior (śreṣṭha) persons who have attained perfection (saṃsiddhi) to engage in action for the well-being of the world (loka-saṃgraha) and to set an example for the ignorant (ajña). Śaṃkara comments:

He should not create confusion in the minds of the ignorant, the undiscriminating, who are attached to action. What, then, should he do? He should encourage them to enjoy, to do, all actions, the wise man himself performing in a disciplined way the very action [required] of the ignorant.⁴⁵

Peter Berger points out that the detached, “as if” observance of social and religious customs, “out of consideration for the weaker spirit of the masses that has a need of these,” is a common feature of world-relativizing mystical religion.⁴⁶ By way of illustration, he cites a passage from the, Theologia Germanica that parallels the attitude of the Advaitin almost exactly: “Perfect men accept the law along with such ignorant men as understand and know nothing other or better, and practice it with them, to the intent that thereby they may be kept from evil ways, or if it be possible, brought to something higher.”⁴⁷ The Advaitins’ idea of noblesse oblige likewise includes supporting others in their worship, even though it may be opposed to his understanding of the ultimate truth of non-duality.

The complexity of Advaitic thinking on devotional, theistic religion is suggested by the fact that Śaṃkara is regarded, not only as the originator of the Advaita system, but also as an important reformer of popular Hinduism. His distaste for the active life, we are told, did not prevent him from traveling widely to spread his views, correct religious abuses, and combat Buddhist, Jain, and other heresies. He is venerated as the founding teacher (sthāpanācārya) of the six schools of worship (saṃmata) recognized by the Śāmṭa Brahmans. Each school is connected with one of the six most popular

⁴⁵ŚGBh 3.25–26; see also ŚGBh 2.11.
Hindu deities, and devotion to the deities of course implies the whole complex of theistic Hindu worship, both in the home and in the temple.

Śaṅkara may himself have actually engaged in such missionary activities to uplift the masses. It does not seem necessary to doubt tradition on this score. The point is that, if he did, he would have done so knowing that he was speaking down to the ignorant, to those not prepared for the truth of Advaita. The way of action and devotion, the goal of auspicious rebirth or heavenly paradise—in short, the whole theistic outlook—was for him the proper religion of the masses. It was the way most suitable and beneficial for those in the earlier stages of the great transmigratory pilgrimage back to Brahmān, those—women, śūdras, and others—who did not have the proper adhikāra for higher things. The non-dualistic vision of identity with Brahmān was, in his mind, to be reserved for the monastic elite.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>BhG</td>
<td>Bhagavadgītā</td>
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<td>BS</td>
<td>Brahmasūtra</td>
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<tr>
<td>BSsBh</td>
<td>Brahmasūtra Śaṅkara Bhāsyā</td>
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<td>(Śaṅkara’s commentary on the BS)</td>
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<td>BU</td>
<td>Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad</td>
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<td>CU</td>
<td>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</td>
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<td>SGBh</td>
<td>Śaṅkara Gītābhāsyā (Śaṅkara’s commentary on the BhG)</td>
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<td>WZKSO</td>
<td>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde</td>
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48The Śaiva, the Vaiṣṇava, the Śākta (worship of the Goddess), the Saura (worship of the sun), the Gānapatya (worship of the elephant-faced Gaṇapati), and the Kaumāra (worship of Kumāra or Skanda, the son of Śiva).