

the
ADVAITA
worldview

**God, World,
and Humanity**

Anantanand Rambachan

THE ADVAITA WORLDVIEW

SUNY series in Religious Studies

Harold Coward, *editor*

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God, World, and Humanity

ANANTANAND RAMBACHAN

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS
Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, address
State University of New York Press
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2384

Production, Laurie Searl
Marketing, Susan M. Petrie

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rambachan, Anantanand, 1951–

The Advaita worldview : God, world, and humanity / Anantanand Rambachan.

p. cm. — (SUNY series in religious studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-6851-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-6852-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7914-6851-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7914-6852-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Advaita. 2. Philosophy, Hindu. I. Title. II. Series.

B132.A3R36 2006

181'.482—dc22

2005029977

matṛdevo bhava

pitṛdevo bhava

ācāryadevo bhava

atithidevo bhava

for my wife, Geeta

and our children

Ashesh, Akshar and Ishanaa

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Abbreviations

AU	Aitareya Upaniṣad
BG	Bhagavadgītā
BU	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
BS	Brahmasūtra
CU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
ĪU	Īśa Upaniṣad
KaU	Kaṭha Upaniṣad
KeU	Kena Upaniṣad
MāU	Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad
MU	Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad
PU	Praśna Upaniṣad
ŚvU	Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad
TU	Taittirīya Upaniṣad
US	Upadeśasāhasrī

The letters Bh added to the abbreviation of any text (as BSBh) indicate the commentary (*bhāṣya*) of Śaṅkara on the said text. Since the commentaries of Śaṅkara are often lengthy, I have included page numbers for easy location.

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Introduction

On the basis of a well-known principle of classification, the indigenous religious systems of India are divided into two broad categories: *āstika* (orthodox) and *nāstika* (heterodox). The criterion of orthodoxy is the acceptance of the Vedas as an authoritative source of knowledge. Among the systems that are regarded as orthodox, the Advaita tradition has perhaps exerted the most widespread influence. Advaita, in the words of Eliot Deutsch, “has been and continues to be, the most widely accepted system of thought among philosophers in India, and it is, we believe, one of the greatest philosophical achievements to be found in the East or in the West.”¹ It was also the first to be elaborately interpreted to the Western world. The foremost systematizer and exponent of Advaita is Śaṅkara, who interprets the Vedas, and especially the Upaniṣads, as affirming an ultimate ontological non-duality.²

The Advaita tradition has been the principal focus of my scholarly research and publication. In my first study on Advaita, I undertook a refutation of contemporary interpretations of the epistemology of Śaṅkara.³ Śaṅkara is widely represented in these studies as having accorded only a provisional validity to knowledge gained by inquiry into the words of the Vedas. According to this popular view, Śaṅkara did not see the Vedas as the unique and definitive source for the knowledge of *brahman*, but proposed personal experience (*anubhava*) as superior to the Vedas. The affirmations of the Vedas need to be verified by insight gained through individual experience and, consequently, enjoy only a secondary authority.

In *Accomplishing the Accomplished*, I argue that such interpretations misrepresent Śaṅkara’s epistemology in failing to apprehend the meaning that he ascribes to the Vedas as the definitive means of knowing *brahman*. In relation to the knowledge of *brahman*, Śaṅkara saw all other sources as subordinate to the Vedas and supported his view with detailed arguments. I presented Śaṅkara’s arguments as centered on three interrelated claims: (1) the Vedas as a logical means of knowledge, (2) the Vedas as an adequate means of knowledge, and (3) the Vedas as a fruitful means of knowledge.

In my second Advaita work, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas*, I undertook an exposition and critique of Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of the relationship between scripture and personal experience.⁴ Vivekananda is one of the most influential interpreters in the recent history of Hinduism. He champions the argument that the authoritative means of knowledge, in Advaita, is a special experience that reveals, beyond doubt, the truths of the universe and human existence. The teachings of the Vedas, according to Vivekananda, possess only hypothetical or provisional validity and need the verification that personal experience provides. He subordinates the scripture to experience. It is clear that the aforementioned interpretation of Śaṅkara's epistemology is deeply influenced by Vivekananda's formulation and presentation of Advaita.

In *Limits of Scripture*, I challenge the common identification of Vivekananda's interpretations with those of Śaṅkara and discuss significant divergences between both commentators. I assess the consistency and persuasiveness of his arguments, within the Advaita framework, for personal experience as superior to scripture, and offer a historical explanation for the increasing characterization of Advaita as mystical, and the secondary role attributed to scripture.

Some of the reviewers of my books expressed the need for me to construct my own position on the process of attaining liberating knowledge in Advaita. This was a fair challenge. Since my publications on Śaṅkara and Vivekananda were concerned primarily with clarifying and assessing their interpretations, these did not offer the scope for reconstruction. The present work is my attempt to respond to this invitation and to my desire to reconsider central facets of the Advaita worldview. The interpretations of the Advaita tradition that I offer, however, are not limited to explicating the relationship between scripture and personal experience. I extend the discussion to include, among other core issues, matters such as the nature of God, the God-world relationship, and the meaning of liberation.

Theological reconstruction is a process of exegesis and interpretation and there are at least two ways in which this will be evident in my analysis. One of the very important movements in recent Advaita scholarship is the effort to develop a more critical approach to the tradition and to distinguish the exposition of Śaṅkara from later exegetes. For too long, the views of Śaṅkara have been uncritically equated with those of his successors. This task involves the effort both to establish the authentic works of Śaṅkara, and to extricate his interpretations from those advanced by subsequent Advaitins.⁵ It will be evident, at various points in my discussion, that I continue this critical process.

Advaita scholarship and reflection, however, cannot limit itself to the clarification and exposition of Śaṅkara's understanding. His interpretations and assumptions must also be subject to the critical process in order for the tradition to be relevant and creative. It is wrong for persons committed to Advaita

to assume that Śāṅkara was not susceptible to the historical influences of his time, the presuppositions of his context, and his stage in life as a renunciant. The traditional reverence for Śāṅkara, and the deified position that he occupies in the Advaita lineage, ought not inhibit the kinds of questions that are addressed to his commentarial legacy. His monumental contribution can be gratefully acknowledged and critically appraised within the tradition.

The reader will discern this interpretative process at the many places in this work where I question Śāṅkara's reading of Upaniṣad texts or the inferences that he draws from these. The limits of history and context are evident, not only in the ways in which a particular text is read, but also in the ignored implications of texts and in the selection and overlooking of texts. Limits are also apparent in the issues that engage attention, in the kinds of questions asked, and in those that remain unasked. Let me illustrate this with a few examples. Śāṅkara confined eligibility for Vedic study to male members of the first three castes and approvingly cites traditional sources that prescribe cruel punishment for the violation of this exclusion. This is a matter that has received scant attention from Advaitins, and caste considerations continue to be significant in institutions supposedly founded by or associated with Śāṅkara. What is the significance of caste divisions in a tradition that proclaims the identity and sameness of the self in all beings? Should the Advaita tradition not take the lead in the repudiation of caste and gender inequities?

A part of the explanation for this inattentiveness to the need to reconcile theology and social reality is the failure, in traditional Advaita interpretation, to attribute positive value to the world and to life in the world. While arguing strongly for the origin of the world in *brahman* alone, Śāṅkara does not infer a value to the world from this fact. He speaks often of the world as a product of ignorance and in ways that are not always helpful in distinguishing between ignorance as misunderstanding of the nature of the world and ignorance as cause of the world. While refuting the subjectivism of Buddhist schools, Śāṅkara frequently uses examples that are more appropriate to the subjective idealist viewpoint. The result is a negativization of the world and an emphasis on renunciation. Overused examples, such as those that liken *brahman* to a magician and the world to a magical illusion, while helpful in certain respects, also trivialize creation and imply an intent to deceive. Hierarchical distinctions in *brahman*, such as higher (*parā*) and lower (*aparā*), and the association of the world with the lower *brahman* have the same effect. The negativization of desire and the assumption that desire signifies limitation have problematized *brahman's* role as creator in Advaita and made it more difficult to articulate a purposeful life in the world for the liberated person. All of these are problematic subjects that need to be reexamined and I believe, as will be evident in my discussion, that the Upaniṣads offer alternative ways of constructing the tradition. It is possible to propose an interpretation of the the nature of *brahman*, the *brahman*-world relationship, and the meaning of liberation in Advaita that sees the world as the intentional celebration of *brahman's* fullness, and