"God Is Infinite, and the Paths to God Are Infinite": A Reconstruction and Defense of Sri Ramakrishna's *Vijñāna*-Based Model of Religious Pluralism*

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Contemporary theologians have discussed a wide range of theories of religious pluralism, including John Hick's well-known quasi-Kantian theory, David Ray Griffin's Whiteheadian theory, Paul Knitter's soteriocentric theory, and S. Mark Heim's "multiple salvations" theory.[1] However, Sri Ramakrishna's pioneering teachings on religious pluralism have been largely ignored. The Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836–86) taught the harmony of all religions on the basis of his own richly varied spiritual experiences and his remarkably eclectic religious practices, both Hindu and non-Hindu. As Sri Ramakrishna put it, "With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions."[2] Of course, Sri Ramakrishna was a God-intoxicated mystic rather than a philosopher, so he did not present a systematic theory of religious pluralism. Not surprisingly, there has been a great deal of interpretive controversy regarding precisely *how* Sri Ramakrishna harmonized the various religions and spiritual philosophies. Three interpretations of his views on religious pluralism are especially prevalent. Frank Morales and Stephen Prothero, among others, have attributed to Sri Ramakrishna the view that

[1] See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 233–97; David Ray Griffin, ed., *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1–66; Paul Knitter, "Dialogue and Liberation," *Drew Gateway* 58, no. 1 (1987): 1–53; S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

[2] Mahendranath Gupta, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta: Śrīma-kathita* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2010), 151. For the English translation, see *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vedanta Center, 1992), 191. Hereafter, citations to *Kathāmṛta* will be given in parentheses in the body of the essay, first citing the page number of the Bengali original and then citing the page number of the English translation. I sometimes modify Nikhilananda's translation.

all religions are essentially the same and that their differences are negligible.[3] As Morales puts it, Sri Ramakrishna subscribed to a "radical universalism," the view that "all religions are the same, with the same purpose, goal, experientially tangible salvific state, and object of ultimate devotion."[4]

By contrast, numerous scholars have claimed that Sri Ramakrishna harmonized the world religions from the standpoint of a particular philosophical or religious sect. Swami Ghanananda, Swami Dhireshananda, and Swami Ashokananda have argued that Sri Ramakrishna harmonized the world religions on the philosophical basis of Advaita Vedānta, which accepts the ultimate reality of *nirguṇa* Brahman, the attributeless nondual Absolute.[5] For instance, according to Swami Dhireshananda, Sri Ramakrishna maintained that the common goal of all religions is the "direct spiritual experience of Vedāntic *nirguṇa* Brahman."[6] Meanwhile, Jeffrey Kripal claims that Sri Ramakrishna's ultimate standpoint was Śākta rather than Advaitic. According to Kripal, Sri Ramakrishna, like the Śākta poet Ramprasad, took the Goddess Kali to be "the actress behind the world's religious masks."[7]

A third group of scholars—including Satis Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Tapasyananda, and Jeffery Long—argues that Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism stems from his capacious and resolutely nonsectarian conception of God as the Infinite Reality that is both personal and impersonal, and both with and without form.[8] According to these scholars, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that the various religions are different paths to the realization of the Infinite Divine Reality in any of its innumerable aspects, both

[3] See Frank Morales, *Radical Universalism: Does Hinduism Teach That All Religions Are the Same?* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 2008); and Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

[4] Morales, *Radical Universalism*, 3.

[5] Swami Ghanananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Unique Message* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1969), 107–33; Swami Ashokananda, *A Call to the Eternal* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 125–51; Swami Omkarananda, "Brahma o Śakti abhed," *Udbodhan* 66, no. 5 (1964): 227–32, and "Nitya o Līlā," *Udbodhan* 66, no. 6 (1964): 287–96; Swami Dhireshananda, "Swami Vivekananda o Advaitavāda," *Udbodhan* 65, no. 2 (1962): 73–80 and 65, no. 3 (1962): 80–81, 138–44, and "Nānā Dṛṣṭite Sri Ramakrishna," *Udbodhan* 82, no. 5 (1980): 220–26.

[6] Swami Dhireshananda, "Swami Vivekananda o Advaitavāda," 144.

[7] Jeffrey Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 102–3.

[8] Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Ramakrishna's Thoughts on Man, World and God* (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2007), 135–50; Satis Chandra Chatterjee, "Vivekananda's Neo-Vedantism and Its Practical Application," in *Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 255–80, and "Sri Ramakrishna: A Life of Manifold Spiritual Realization," in *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Prophet of Harmony* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), 340–47; Swami Bhajanananda, *Harmony of Religions from the Standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2008); Jeffery Long, "Advaita and Dvaita: Bridging the Gap—the Ramakrishna Tradition's both/and Approach to the Dvaita/Advaita Debate," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 49–70, "(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together: Comparative Theology in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna," in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis Clooney (London: Continuum, 2010), 151–70, and *A Vision for Hinduism* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Ayon Maharaj, "Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (forthcoming).

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personal and impersonal. As Swami Tapasyananda puts it, Sri Ramakrishna taught that all religions lead to "the same Infinite Personal-Impersonal being, in spite of the different versions they give of it and the differing paths they prescribe to their aspirants."[9]

In this article, I will adopt and defend this third interpretive approach, since I believe it is much more plausible and nuanced than the other two approaches. Sectarian interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna's views tend to be Procrustean, since they fail to account for Sri Ramakrishna's nonsectarian acceptance of all religious paths and spiritual philosophies.[10] Hence, it is implausible to interpret Sri Ramakrishna's views on religious pluralism from a narrow sectarian standpoint, be it Advaitic, Śākta, or otherwise. It is equally implausible to interpret Sri Ramakrishna as a radical universalist in Morales's sense, since Sri Ramakrishna taught not that all religions are the "same" but that all religions are different paths to the shared goal of God-realization. Moreover, according to Sri Ramakrishna, every religious practitioner can realize God in the particular aspect he or she prefers. For instance, while the Advaitin aims to realize the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) aspect of the Infinite Reality, *bhaktas* strive to realize various personal (*saguṇa*) aspects and forms of the same Infinite Reality.

Section I provides a detailed reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism on the basis of his recorded Bengali teachings.[11] I argue that Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on the harmony of religions are based on his own direct spiritual experience of what he calls *vijñāna* (special knowledge), the knowledge of God as the Infinite Reality that is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and transcendent to it. On the basis of his experience of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna declares that God is infinite and illimitable and hence that there are correspondingly infinite ways of approaching and realizing God. According to Sri Ramakrishna, every religion is a salvifically effective means of attaining the common goal of God-realization, the direct spiritual experience of God in any of his innumerable aspects or forms.[12]

As Hick and many others have pointed out, any viable theory of religious pluralism has to confront head-on the thorny problem of conflicting religious truth claims. How are we to reconcile the various apparently conflicting claims made by the world religions regarding such matters as human

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[9] Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Ramakrishna's Thoughts on Man, World and God*, 147.

[10] I have argued elsewhere that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy is best understood as a nonsectarian Vedāntic philosophy rooted in the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā. See my article, "Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta."

[11] For an elaboration of the hermeneutic principles governing my reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views, see Part I of my article, "Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta."

[12] In this article, I sometimes refer to God as "he" for the sake of convenience, but of course God is equally "she" and "it." In fact, Sri Ramakrishna himself frequently referred to God as the "Divine Mother."

destiny, eschatology, and the nature of the ultimate reality? In Section II, I will reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's sophisticated and multifaceted answer to this very difficult question. Sri Ramakrishna reconciles religious claims about the nature of the ultimate reality on the basis of his distinctive ontology of the infinite and illimitable God: every religion captures a uniquely real aspect of the infinite impersonal-personal Supreme Reality. Regarding other types of religious truth claims, Sri Ramakrishna asserts that every religion has at least some errors but that these errors do not substantially diminish the salvific efficacy of religions.

In Section III, I will address some of the major criticisms leveled against Sri Ramakrishna's views on religious pluralism. While some scholars have accused Sri Ramakrishna of subscribing to a radical universalism that fails to honor the very real differences among religions, others have argued—on the contrary—that Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism privileges certain worldviews and spiritual paths over others and is therefore more inclusivist than pluralist. Drawing on my reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism in Sections I and II, I will argue that such criticisms stem from a misunderstanding and oversimplification of Sri Ramakrishna's views. In Section IV, I call for a broad cross-cultural approach to religious pluralism that takes into account both Western and non-Western pluralist theories. Sri Ramakrishna's unique and sophisticated views on religious pluralism, I suggest, deserve a prominent place in this nascent cross-cultural enterprise.

I. A RECONSTRUCTION OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S MODEL
    OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Crucially, Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on religious pluralism are based on his own unique and varied spiritual experiences. From 1855 to 1874, Sri Ramakrishna practiced numerous spiritual disciplines in a variety of traditions, including Tantra, Vaiṣṇavism, Advaita Vedānta, Islam, and Christianity. After first attaining a vision of Kālī by worshipping her as the Divine Mother, he went on to practice, and to attain perfection in, numerous other *bhāvas* (attitudes toward God), including *dāsyabhāva* (attitude of a servant), *vātsalyabhāva* (attitude of a parent), *sakhībhāva* (attitude of a friend), and *mādhuryabhāva* (attitude of a lover). In 1866, he practiced Islamic disciplines under the guidance of a Muslim guru named Govinda Roy—who was likely a Sufi—and attained the direct experience of God both with and without form.[13] Toward the end of 1874, Sri Ramakrishna attended Bible reading sessions and began to cultivate devotion toward Jesus, which culminated

[13] During Sri Ramakrishna's Islamic practice, passages from the Bengali translation of the Qu'ran were read out to him. He also practiced the disciplines prescribed in the Qu'ran and stopped worshipping Hindu deities during his Islamic practice. See Swami Saradananda,

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in an overwhelming vision of Jesus, who approached him and finally merged into him.[14]

In 1864, he engaged in Advaitic discipline under the guidance of the itinerant Advaitin monk Totapuri. Sri Ramakrishna quickly attained the highest knowledge of nondual Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, a trance state in which all consciousness of duality is transcended. After Totapuri left, Sri Ramakrishna remained in *nirvikalpa samādhi* for six months until he finally received a command from the Divine Mother to remain in "bhāvamukha," a threshold state of consciousness between the relative and the Absolute.[15] Accordingly, instead of leaving his body in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, he remained in the state of *bhāvamukha*, reveling in both the personal and impersonal aspects of God and thereby realizing the equal salvific efficacy of the paths of *bhakti* (devotion) and *jñāna* (knowledge).[16]

Sri Ramakrishna's unique state of *bhāvamukha* and his realization of God through various spiritual paths formed the experiential basis for his teachings in the last five years of his life. The most comprehensive and accurate record of these teachings is contained in the *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta* (hereafter *Kathāmṛta*), a Bengali diary kept by his intimate disciple Mahendranath Gupta, which was later translated into English as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. In the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly draws a distinction between "jñāna" (knowledge), the Advaitic realization of the impersonal Brahman, and "vijñāna" (special knowledge), a deeper and more intimate realization of God as the Infinite Reality that is both personal and impersonal, and much more besides:

The *jñānī* gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, "Not this, not this." Only then can he realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *vijñānī*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which

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Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga, vol. 1 (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2008), 175–77, and *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003), 318–19. For a detailed account of Sri Ramakrishna's Islamic *sādhana*, see Swami Prabhananda, *More about Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1993), 80–109.

[14] Sri Ramakrishna revered Jesus as an incarnation of God and he owned a copy of the Bible, which was read out to him on occasion—especially the teachings of Jesus contained in the synoptic gospels. In general, it can be said that the form of Christianity practiced by Sri Ramakrishna was based more on the spiritual and ethical teachings of Jesus than on Christian theological dogmas, although Sri Ramakrishna did accept the central theological doctrine of the divinity of Christ. For more details about Sri Ramakrishna's Christian practices, see Swami Prabhananda, *More about Ramakrishna*, 110–48.

[15] See Saradananda, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga*, 1:159–78; *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 303–21.

[16] See Swami Tapasyananda's excellent discussions of Sri Ramakrishna's state of *bhāvamukha* in *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990), 359–64, and *Sri Ramakrishna: Life and Teachings (An Interpretative Study)* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2008), 60–74.

is realized as Brahman through the eliminating process of "Not this, not this" is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* [without attributes] is also *saguṇa* [with attributes]. A man cannot live on the roof for a long time. He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in *samādhi* come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings. . . . This is known as *vijñāna*. (50–51/103–4)

The *jñānī* attains the Advaitic realization of the impersonal Brahman through the path of discrimination. The *vijñānī*, according to Sri Ramakrishna, first attains knowledge of the impersonal Brahman and then ascends to the deeper and more comprehensive insight that "the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*": God is at once the impersonal Brahman and the personal theistic God who both rules and pervades the universe. Instead of remaining merged in the impersonal Absolute, the *vijñānī* revels in various manifestations and aspects of God, both personal and impersonal.

Tellingly, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly declares himself to be a *vijñānī*: "I do not have the nature of a *jñānī*. . . . The Divine Mother has kept me in the state of a *bhakta*, a *vijñānī*" (391/393). Indeed, his teachings on the infinitude of God and the salvific efficacy of all religious paths are based directly on his own experience of *vijñāna*. According to Sri Ramakrishna, God is infinite and illimitable, and hence both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and transcendent to it. Sri Ramakrishna's startlingly expansive conception of God is best captured in his pithy teaching, "There is no limit to God" (tāhār iti nai) (997/920). Since God is infinite, we should never limit God to what our finite intellects can grasp of Him. Sri Ramakrishna elaborates on the illimitability of God as follows: "That Reality which is the *nitya* [eternal] is also the *līlā* [God's play]. . . . [E]verything is possible for God. He is formless, and again He assumes forms. He is the individual and He is the universe. He is Brahman and He is *Śakti* [the dynamic Lord who creates, maintains, and destroys the universe]. There is no limit to God. Nothing is impossible for Him" (997/920).

To the rational intellect, attributes such as personality and impersonality, form and formlessness, and immanence and transcendence seem to be contradictory, so it is difficult to grasp how God can possess all of these attributes at the same time. However, Sri Ramakrishna insists that the rational intellect can never grasp the supersensuous truths of the spiritual domain. Accordingly, he repeatedly emphasizes our inability to "comprehend the nature of God" (341/351) or to "understand God's ways" by means of the rhetorical question, "Can a one-seer pot hold ten seers of milk?" (229/257). By likening the finite mind to a "one-seer pot," Sri Ramakrishna points to the fundamental limitations of the rational intellect and its inherent inability to grasp spiritual realities. For Sri Ramakrishna, spiritual truths that might seem contradictory or illogical to the rational intellect are validated

on the experiential basis of *vijñāna*. Since God's infinite nature cannot be confined within the narrow walls of our rational understanding, we should humbly accept that "everything is possible for God."[17] Sri Ramakrishna conveys the infinitude and illimitability of God by comparing God to an infinite ocean that freezes into ice formations at certain places: "The *bhaktas*—the *vijñānīs*—accept both the Impersonal and the Personal God [*nirākār-sākār*], both God without form and God with form [*anūp-rūp*]. In a shoreless ocean—an infinite expanse of water—visible blocks of ice form here and there by intense cold. Similarly, under the cooling influence of *bhakti*, as it were, the Infinite appears before the worshipper as God with form. Again, with the rising of the sun of knowledge [*jñāna-sūrya*], those blocks of ice melt and only the infinite ocean remains" (861/802). Sri Ramakrishna explicitly frames this analogy from the standpoint of the *vijñānī*, who realizes that God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form. For Sri Ramakrishna, the infinite ocean corresponds to the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) aspect of the Infinite Reality realized by *jñānīs* in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, while the ice formations correspond to the various personal (*saguṇa*) aspects and forms of the same Infinite Reality, realized by *bhaktas*. Just as the liquid ocean and the ice formations are simply different states of the same water, the impersonal Brahman of the Advaitic *jñānīs* and the personal God of the *bhaktas* are both equally real, since they are different aspects or forms of one and the same impersonal-personal Infinite Reality.

Sri Ramakrishna also indicates the ontological parity of the personal God of the *bhaktas* and the impersonal Absolute of the *jñānīs* by insisting on the inseparability of what he calls "Brahman" and "Śakti": "When God is actionless [*niṣkriya*], I call God 'Brahman'; when God creates, preserves, and destroys, I call God 'Śakti'" (861/802). From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, "That which is Brahman is also Śakti" (jinī brahma, tinī śakti): in other words, the static impersonal Brahman and the dynamic Śakti are different—but equally real—aspects of one and the same Divine Reality (379/382).[18] As he puts it, "I have realized that Brahman and Śakti are inseparable [*abhed*], like water and its wetness, like fire and its power to

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[17] Sri Ramakrishna's thought here bears striking affinities with Acintyabhedābheda Vedānta, which holds that the paradoxical relationship of difference and nondifference between the Supreme Reality and the universe is incomprehensible ("acintya") to the finite rational intellect. For a summary of Acintyabhedābheda philosophy, see Radha Govinda Nath, "The Acintya-Bhedābhedha School," in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. 3, ed. Haridas Bhattacharya (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1953), 366–83.

[18] Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that both Brahman and Śakti are equally real finds an early precedent in Tāntrika philosophy, which maintains that Śiva and Śakti are both ontologically real and inseparable. For a discussion of this doctrine in Tāntrika philosophy, see Swami Pratyagatmananda, "Philosophy of the Tantras," in Bhattacharya, *The Cultural Heritage of India*, 3:437–48.

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burn. Brahman dwells in all beings as the *Vibhū* [the all-pervasive Consciousness]" (568/550). Clearly, the main point of his teaching that Brahman and Śakti are "inseparable" is to grant equal ontological status to both Brahman and Śakti.

On the basis of his own realization of both the impersonal and personal aspects of the Infinite Reality, Sri Ramakrishna teaches that various theistic and nontheistic spiritual philosophies are equally effective paths to realizing God: "The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*. . . . The *jñānī*'s path leads to Truth, as does the path that combines *jñāna* and *bhakti*. The *bhakta*'s path, too, leads to Truth. *Jñānayoga* is true, and *bhaktiyoga* is true. God can be realized through all paths" (51/103–4). Since the *vijñānī* has realized the truth of both the personal and impersonal aspects of God, the *vijñānī* affirms the equal salvific efficacy of both *bhaktiyoga* and *jñānayoga*. For Sri Ramakrishna, *jñānayoga* encompasses nontheistic spiritual philosophies such as Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,[19] while *bhaktiyoga* encompasses theistic religions such as Christianity, Islam, the Brāhmo Samāj, and the Hindu sects of Vaiṣṇavism and Śāktism (see 151/191). Hence, Sri Ramakrishna affirms a robust religious pluralism on the basis of his own spiritual experience of *vijñāna*.

Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism derives directly from his conception of God as infinite and illimitable. Since God is infinite, there must be correspondingly infinite ways of approaching and ultimately realizing God. As Sri Ramakrishna succinctly puts it, "God is infinite, and the paths to God are infinite" (tini ananta, patho ananta) (511/506). From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, the infinite impersonal-personal God is conceived and worshipped in different ways by people of various temperaments, preferences, and worldviews. Hence, a sincere practitioner of any religion can realize God in the particular form he or she prefers.

Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna goes even further by providing a divine rationale for the differences in the various world religions:

Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Śāktas, Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas, the Brahmajñānīs of the time of the rishis, and you, the Brahmajñānīs of modern times [i.e., the members of the Brāhmo Samāj], all seek the same object. A mother prepares dishes to suit the stomachs of her children. Suppose a mother has five children and a fish is bought for the family. She doesn't cook pilau or kalia for all of them. All have not the same power of digestion; so she prepares a simple stew for some. But she loves all her children equally. . . . Do you know what the truth is? God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries. All doctrines are so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself. [*deś-kal-pātra bhede iśvar nānā dharma korechen. kintu sab matī path, mat kichu iśvar noy.*] Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with whole-hearted devotion. (577/559)

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[19] For details on Sri Ramakrishna's Vedāntic interpretation of Buddhism, see Section III below.

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Just as a mother prepares fish in five different ways for her five children, God himself—in his infinite wisdom—has made different religions to suit people of differing temperaments, cultural preferences, and spiritual capacities. Just as all five children eat the same fish in a variety of forms, practitioners of various religions worship one and the same God in numerous forms and call Him by various names. Moreover, just as it would not make sense to claim that one particular fish preparation is objectively better than all the others, it is equally foolish to claim that one religion is superior to all others. Each child's hunger is fully appeased by eating the particular fish preparation he or she prefers. Similarly, all religions are effective paths to the common goal of realizing God in the particular form or aspect preferred by each religious practitioner.

Sri Ramakrishna sums up his teachings on religious pluralism in the striking statement: "All doctrines are so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself." Sri Ramakrishna suggests here that one of the main sources of religious conflict and fanaticism is the tendency to confuse means and end. Instead of practicing a particular religion as a means to the end of spiritual fulfillment, religious dogmatists tend to absolutize religious doctrine itself and thereby lose sight of the Divine Absolute that is the goal of all religions. From Sri Ramakrishna's mystical standpoint, since all religious doctrines are expressed in human language, they can never be fully adequate to the Divine Reality that lies beyond words and thought, but they can nonetheless serve as effective "paths" to the direct spiritual experience of the Divine Reality. Sri Ramakrishna sears this message into the minds of his visitors by means of an ingenious wordplay, repeatedly conjoining the rhyming Bengali monosyllables "mat" (doctrine or view) and "path" (path). As he puts it on several occasions, "mat path" (Every religious doctrine is a path) and "ananto path ananto mat" (Infinite are the paths and infinite the views) (111/158).

Sri Ramakrishna frequently recites his favorite parable of the chameleon in order to illustrate the harmony of religions from the standpoint of *vijñāna*:

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

In like manner, one who constantly thinks of God can know God's real nature; he alone knows that God reveals Himself to seekers in various forms and aspects.

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God is *saguṇa* as well as *nirguṇa*. Only the man who lives under the tree knows that the chameleon can appear in various colors, and he knows, further, that the animal at times has no color at all. It is the others who suffer from the agony of futile argument. (101/149–50)

Like the chameleon that appears in various colors and sometimes has no color at all, God assumes various forms for different types of spiritual aspirants.[20] While most people make the mistake of thinking that the chameleon only has the color that they see it as having, the man always sitting under the tree sees that the chameleon has various colors and hence that everyone is partially correct. The colorless chameleon corresponds to *nirguṇa* Brahman, while the chameleon with various colors corresponds to *saguṇa* Brahman, and it is clear that Sri Ramakrishna does not privilege *nirguṇa* Brahman. According to Sri Ramakrishna, *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* Brahman have equal ontological status. The man sitting under the tree represents the *vijñānī*—such as Sri Ramakrishna himself—who has realized both the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* aspects of God and hence affirms on the basis of his or her own spiritual experience that all religions are effective paths.[21]

Sri Ramakrishna's chameleon parable also helps clarify the common goal of God-realization to which all spiritual paths lead. While the Advaitin hegemonically imposes the goal of realizing *nirguṇa* Brahman onto all the world religions, Sri Ramakrishna's parable implies a very broad and nonhegemonic soteriological outlook: people of various temperaments can realize the Infinite God in any of his innumerable forms and aspects, all of which are real. Although different people see the chameleon in different colors, they all see one and the same chameleon.

Sri Ramakrishna's nonhegemonic outlook is also captured by the well-known parable of the blind men and the elephant, which he was fond of reciting. Just as each blind man touches a different part of the elephant and takes that part to represent the elephant as a whole, religious practitioners often make the mistake of assuming that the particular aspect of God they understand or value represents the *whole* of God (see 151/191).[22] From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, religious exclusivism and fanaticism stem from limiting God dogmatically to what one has understood or experienced of God. According to Sri Ramakrishna, "there is no limit to God," so we should never limit God to what our finite intellects can grasp

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[20] The limitation of this parable is that the chameleon can only be one color at a given time, while God can assume various forms and aspects *simultaneously*. The parable of the blind men and the elephant, which I will discuss below, makes clear that just as the various blind men touch different parts of the elephant at the same time, God assumes different forms simultaneously.

[21] See Swami Tapasyananda's helpful discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's chameleon parable from the standpoint of *vijñāna* in his book *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta*, 29–30.

[22] It is clear from Sri Ramakrishna's own explanation of the elephant parable and his other teachings about God that the elephant parable should not be taken to imply that God literally has parts.

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of Him (997/920). Moreover, just as the person with sight can see the elephant as a whole, the *vijñānī* sees that all religions are salvifically effective, since each of them—represented by the blind men—makes contact with a real aspect of God, though none of them captures the whole of God, who is infinite and illimitable.

Since both the person with sight in the elephant parable and the man living under the tree in the chameleon parable represent Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñānī*, one might be led to assume that the *vijñānī* realizes God in all his aspects. However, Sri Ramakrishna indicates that no one—not even the *vijñānī*—is capable of realizing the Infinite God in all his aspects:

People often think they have understood Brahman fully. Once an ant went to a hill of sugar. One grain filled its stomach. Taking another grain in its mouth it started homeward. On its way it thought, "Next time I will carry home the whole hill." That is the way shallow minds think. They don't know that Brahman is beyond words and thought. However great a man may be, how much can he know of Brahman? Śukadeva and sages like him may have been big ants; but even they could carry at the utmost eight or ten grains of sugar! (49/102)

Sri Ramakrishna makes clear here that the difference between an ordinary soul and a *vijñānī* is like the difference between a small ant and a big ant. While the ordinary soul is able, at best, to realize God in one particular aspect, the *vijñānī* realizes multiple aspects of God—both impersonal and personal—and so is in a unique position to affirm the equal salvific efficacy of theistic and nontheistic religions. Even a big ant, however, cannot carry the whole hill of sugar. That is, since God is infinite, even the *vijñānī* cannot realize the *whole* of God. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, sincere practitioners of all religious faiths can attain the goal of God-realization, even though they may end up realizing different aspects or forms of one and the same Infinite Reality.

Some important questions arise at this point. What counts as a "religion" in the first place for Sri Ramakrishna? When Sri Ramakrishna teaches that "all religions" are paths to God, what religions does he have in mind? Does Sri Ramakrishna affirm the equal salvific efficacy of all religions or does he claim that some religions have greater salvific efficacy than others? We can begin to address these questions by considering a relevant passage from the *Kathāmṛta*: "With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions [*āntarik hole sab dharmer bhitor diyai īśvarke pawa jai*]. The Vaiṣṇavas will realize God, and so will the Śāktas, the [Advaita] Vedāntins, and the Brāhmos [who worship the formless personal God]. Muslims and Christians will realize Him, too. All will certainly realize God if they are earnest and sincere" (151/191). It is highly significant that Sri Ramakrishna grants the status of "religion" (*dharma*) not only to major world religions such as Christianity and Islam but also to the modern religious movement of the Brāhmo Samāj. Clearly, Sri Ramakrishna's conception of religion is suffi-

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ciently dynamic and flexible to accommodate new religious movements and spiritual philosophies. This flexible attitude is entirely in keeping with his teaching that the "paths to God are infinite," which indicates that he has in mind not only the finite set of existing religious paths but also the innumerable religious paths that are to come.

Sri Ramakrishna typically uses the Bengali terms *dharma* and *mat* to refer to religious and spiritual paths. Although Sri Ramakrishna does not provide an explicit definition of religion anywhere in the *Kathāmṛta*, he does provide hints at various places that any religious or spiritual path must fulfill two conditions: first, it must have at its center some aspect or form of the Divine Reality, whether personal or impersonal; second, it must prescribe ethical and spiritual practices that bring us into contact with that Divine Reality. Sri Ramakrishna explicitly specifies this first condition of religion in numerous passages, such as this one: "But I find that all views point to the One. All views [*mat*]—the Śākta, the Vaiṣṇava, the Advaitic—have that One [*sei ek*] for their center. He who is impersonal is also personal, and it is He again who assumes various forms" (494/490). It is clear from this passage that Sri Ramakrishna's broad conception of religion encompasses not only theistic faiths such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity but also nontheistic spiritual philosophies such as Advaita Vedānta. For Sri Ramakrishna, every religion has one and the same God at its center, whether God is conceived as personal or impersonal. It is worth noting, then, that Sri Ramakrishna would not consider secular humanism or Marxism to be religions, since they do not meet this first condition.

As for the second condition, Sri Ramakrishna believed that while the specific ethical and spiritual practices prescribed by the various religions differ, all these religious practices have the common aim of diminishing egoism and selfishness in order to bring us closer to the Divine Reality. Accordingly, he frequently emphasizes the need to eliminate the selfish attitude of "'I' and 'mine'" (292/308) and to cultivate ethical virtues such as compassion and forbearance, which purify the mind (see 47/101). Exploiting the etymological affinity between *dharma* in the sense of "religion" and *dharma* in the sense of ethical action, Sri Ramakrishna defines "adharma" as "unrighteous actions" (asat karma) and "dharma" as "pious actions prescribed by religion" (vaidhī karma), such as "charity to the poor, feeding the Brahmins, and so on" (669/635). Clearly, then, any self-styled "religion" that prescribes unethical practices—such as violence, hatred, or excessive sense-indulgence—would not count as a "religion" (dharma) in Sri Ramakrishna's sense.[23] Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna condemns the

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[23] An anonymous referee asks whether Sri Ramakrishna would have taken the modern religiously inspired terrorist groups such as ISIS and Aum Shinrikyo to be genuine religions. I believe Sri Ramakrishna would not have accepted them as religions (*dharma*), since they prescribe unethical practices that violate the second condition that any religion must meet.

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immoral behavior of a monk who tries to give an Advaitic justification for breaking his monastic vow of celibacy:

Once a *sādhu* came to the Panchavati. He used to talk much on [Advaita] Vedānta before others. Later I came to know that he had illicit connection with a certain woman. After that, when I went to Panchavati, I found him sitting there. I asked him, "You talk so glibly of Vedānta; but what is all this they talk about you?" "What of that?" he replied, "I shall show you that there is no harm in it. If the whole world is unreal at all times, how can my fall alone be real?" I said in utter disgust, "I spit on such knowledge of Vedānta. It is not real Knowledge, but a mere sham, falsely professed by the worldly-minded, by wiseacres with gross worldly attachments."[24]

Sri Ramakrishna does not consider the pseudo-Vedānta practiced by this fallen monk to be a genuine religious path, since it sanctions unethical behavior that strengthens rather than diminishes egoism and selfishness.

Hence, when Sri Ramakrishna declares that "one can realize God through all religions," he does *not* mean that all self-styled religions are salvifically efficacious paths to God. Rather, he means that all genuine religions—a "genuine" religion defined as any religious path that meets the two conditions specified above—are paths to God. In numerous passages concerning the harmony of religions, Sri Ramakrishna specifically mentions Christianity, Islam, the theistic Hindu sects of Śāktism and Vaiṣṇavism, the nontheistic Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, and the Brāhmo Samāj (see 151/191 and 577/559). Although Sri Ramakrishna does not mention Buddhism in the context of the harmony of religions, he mentions on numerous occasions that Buddhism is a form of nontheistic *jñānayoga* akin to Advaita Vedānta (see 1028/947–48).[25] Hence, by dint of mentioning Advaita Vedānta in the passages concerning the harmony of religions, Sri Ramakrishna implies that Buddhism is also a salvifically efficacious religious path.

That Sri Ramakrishna grants maximal salvific efficacy to all of these religious paths is abundantly clear from the various analogies he invokes. For instance, in the passage cited above, Sri Ramakrishna likens the world religions to different preparations of fish, which are meant to suit different tastes and digestive capacities. Elsewhere, he likens the various religions to different means of climbing to the roof of a house: "God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole" (59–60/111). Sri Ramakrishna also frequently invokes the analogy of a lake called by various names:

It is not good to feel that one's own religion alone is true and all others are false. God is one only, and not two. Different people call on Him by different names: some as

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[24] Saradananda, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga*, 1:38; *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 428.
[25] See also my discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's interpretation of Buddhism in Section III.

Allah, some as God, and others as Krishna, Siva, and Brahman. It is like the water in a lake. Some drink it at one place and call it "*jal*," others at another place and call it "*pānī*," and still others at a third place and call it "water." The Hindus call it "*jal*," the Christians "water," and the Muslims "*pānī*." But it is one and the same thing. Views are but paths. Each religion is only a path leading to God, as rivers come from different directions and ultimately become one in the one ocean. (239/264–65)

The main point of all of these analogies is to illustrate the equal salvific efficacy of various religions. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, claiming that one's own religion is superior to other religions is as absurd as claiming that the fish preparation one prefers is somehow objectively superior to other fish preparations or that a bamboo pole is a superior means of reaching the roof compared to a staircase. The ontological justification for Sri Ramakrishna's analogies is furnished by the spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna*. A *vijñānī* such as Sri Ramakrishna realizes that both the personal and impersonal aspects of the Divine Reality are equally real and, thus, that both theistic and nontheistic religious paths have equal salvific efficacy.

In short, Sri Ramakrishna grants maximal salvific efficacy to Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, the Brāhmo Samāj, and (very likely) Buddhism. It is also worth noting that he mentions these religions by way of example, so his failure to mention other religions such as Judaism, Taoism, and Confucianism does not imply that he takes these religions to be less salvifically effective than the religions he does mention. On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna does explicitly claim that certain religious paths are less salvifically effective than other religious paths. For instance, while Sri Ramakrishna admits that "vāmācāra"—the path of "left-handed" Tantra, which involves sexual intercourse as part of its spiritual practice—is a genuine path to realizing God, he insists that *vāmācāra* is inferior to other religious paths. In response to Narendranath's question about the *vāmācāra* practices of certain sects such as Ghoṣpāṛā and Pañcanāmī, Sri Ramakrishna tells him:

You need not listen to these things. The *bhairavas* and the *bhairavīs* of the Tāntrika sect also follow this kind of discipline. . . . Let me tell you this. I regard woman as my mother; I regard myself as her son. This is a very pure attitude. There is no danger in it. . . . But to assume the attitude of a "hero" [*vīra*], to look on woman as one's mistress, is a very difficult discipline. Tarak's father performed spiritual practice with this attitude. In this form of *sādhana* one cannot always maintain the right attitude.

There are various paths to reach God. Each view is a path. It is like reaching the Kālī temple by different roads. But it must be said that some paths are clean and some dirty. It is good to travel on a clean path. (594/571–72)

While Sri Ramakrishna admits that there are sincere practitioners of *vāmācāra*, such as Tarak's father, who may be able to realize God through that path, he insists that *vāmācāra* is nonetheless a "dirty" path, since it involves sexual practices that can easily lead the spiritual aspirant to ruin.

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Sri Ramakrishna's stance toward *haṭhayoga*, a practice based on physical exercises, is similar to his stance toward *vāmācāra*: while he accepts *haṭha-yoga* as a path to God-realization, he claims that it is greatly inferior to the path of *rājayoga*, a practice based on meditation and devotion to God. Sri Ramakrishna states: "There are two kinds of Yoga: *haṭhayoga* and *rājayoga*. The *haṭhayogī* practises physical exercises. His goal is to acquire supernatural powers: longevity and the eight psychic powers. These are his aims. But the aim of *rājayoga* is the attainment of devotion, ecstatic love, knowledge, and dispassion. Of these two, *rājayoga* is the better" (214/244–45). Elsewhere, Sri Ramakrishna points out that one of the main problems with *haṭhayoga* is that it strengthens identification with the body, which is a serious hindrance to God-realization (604/579).

For Sri Ramakrishna, then, while Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, the Brāhmo Samāj, and (very likely) Buddhism have equal and maximal salvific efficacy, certain religious paths such as *vāmācāra* and *haṭhayoga* are less salvifically effective than other religious paths. Sri Ramakrishna judges the degree of salvific efficacy of various religious paths on the basis of a largely implicit criterion: the religious paths he deems to have maximal salvific efficacy are those that inculcate ethical and spiritual practices that diminish egoism, selfishness, and body consciousness, thereby bringing us closer to God. Conversely, religious paths that inculcate practices that run the risk of strengthening egoism and body consciousness are less salvifically effective paths.

We can further clarify Sri Ramakrishna's views on religious diversity by relating them to the now well-known threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, first developed by the Christian theologian Alan Race in 1983.[26] In a recent article, Perry Schmidt-Leukel provides very precise and rigorous definitions of these three positions:

(1) *Exclusivism:* Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by only one religion (which naturally will be one's own).

(2) *Inclusivism:* Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), but only one of these mediates it in a uniquely superior way (which again will naturally be one's own).

(3) *Pluralism:* Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), and there is none among them whose mediation of that knowledge is superior to all the rest.[27]

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[26] See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

[27] Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology—Clarified and Reaffirmed," in *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, ed. Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 20.

Sri Ramakrishna is clearly a religious pluralist in Schmidt-Leukel's sense because he grants maximal salvific efficacy to multiple religious paths, including Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. As Schmidt-Leukel emphasizes, one need not affirm the equal salvific efficacy of *all* religions in order to be a religious pluralist.[28] Hence, the fact that Sri Ramakrishna deems *vāmā-cāra* and Haṭha Yoga to be inferior religious paths is perfectly consistent with his pluralist position, which only affirms that more than one religion has maximal salvific efficacy.[29] Moreover, since Sri Ramakrishna nowhere indicates that Hinduism's mediation of salvific knowledge of God is superior in any way to that of non-Hindu religions, he is clearly not a religious inclusivist in Schmidt-Leukel's sense. Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism, I suggest, is best understood not as a "Hindu" model but as a higher-order meta-theory that affirms the salvific efficacy of all first-order religions. While Sri Ramakrishna was certainly a Hindu who held many traditional Hindu beliefs such as reincarnation, his teachings on religious pluralism are rooted not in a narrowly Hindu worldview but in the vast experiential standpoint of *vijñāna*, which encompasses all the world religions without being reducible to any one of them.

One of the distinguishing features of Sri Ramakrishna's particular model of religious pluralism is that it provides an ontological rationale for the robust *complementarity* of various religious conceptions of the Divine Reality. From the standpoint of *vijñāna*, since each religion captures a real and unique aspect of the infinite and illimitable God, each religion makes a uniquely valuable contribution to our understanding of God and spiritual

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[28] In fact, Schmidt-Leukel points out that Hick is a quintessential religious pluralist even though he denies salvific efficacy to violent religious sects. See Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism," 20 n. 31.

[29] An anonymous referee questions the general project of interpreting Sri Ramakrishna's thought in terms of the standard threefold typology and asks, "Why not stay faithful to the native categories used by Ramakrishna, instead of imposing Western categories upon him?" In response to this query, I would make three points. First, I believe that bringing the threefold typology to bear on Sri Ramakrishna's teachings is not mutually exclusive with trying to stay faithful to Sri Ramakrishna's "native categories." That is, throughout Section I, I do try to stay as faithful as possible to Sri Ramakrishna's "native categories" in my reconstruction of his views. However, I also argue that the threefold typology—particularly as formulated by Schmidt-Leukel—helps clarify Sri Ramakrishna's complex position on religious diversity. My aim in using the threefold typology vis-à-vis Sri Ramakrishna is in the service of exegesis rather than eisegesis. Second, I find the threefold typology quite helpful in distinguishing various competing perspectives on religious diversity. Although I do not have the space here to defend the cogency of the threefold typology, I refer the reader to Schmidt-Leukel's excellent article, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism," which not only makes a convincing case that the threefold typology is not fundamentally flawed but also defends the typology against numerous criticisms. Third, identifying Sri Ramakrishna's position as a form of religious pluralism facilitates cross-cultural dialogue by helping to locate his position vis-à-vis Western views on religious diversity. One of the reasons Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism has such profound contemporary relevance is that it belongs to the same family, as it were, as numerous Western theories of religious pluralism and hence can be brought into fruitful philosophical dialogue with these Western theories.

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life. Sri Ramakrishna's point is not just that we should tolerate all religions and spiritual paths because they are all effective paths to realizing God. Rather, he makes the much more radical claim that we can—and should—actively learn from religions and philosophical worldviews other than our own, because they can give us insights into God and spiritual life that can enrich and broaden our own religious outlook and practice.[30] Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna frequently reminded worshippers of the personal God that the impersonal aspect of God is also true.[31] Conversely, he would teach Advaitins that "Śakti," the personal aspect of God, is as real as the impersonal Brahman.[32] From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, the best way to overcome religious fanaticism and to enrich one's understanding of God is to expose oneself to religious points of view other than one's own.

Sri Ramakrishna illustrates the complementarity of different religious viewpoints in his parable of the washerman:

God assumes different forms and reveals Himself in different ways for the sake of His devotees. A man kept a solution of dye in a tub. Many people came to him to have their clothes dyed. He would ask a customer, "What colour should you like to have your cloth dyed?" If the customer wanted red, then the man would dip the cloth in the tub and say, "Here is your cloth dyed red." If another customer wanted his cloth dyed yellow, the man would dip his cloth in the same tub and say, "Here is your cloth dyed yellow." If a customer wanted his cloth dyed blue, the man would dip it in the same tub and say, "Here is your cloth dyed blue." Thus he would dye the clothes of his customers different colors, dipping them all in the same solution. One of the customers watched all this with amazement. The man asked him, "Well? What colour do you want for your cloth?" The customer said, "Brother, dye my cloth the colour of the dye in your tub." (928/858–59)

Like the parables of the chameleon and the blind men and the elephant, this parable teaches that God "assumes different forms and reveals Himself in different ways for the sake of His devotees." What is unique about the parable of the washerman is that it emphasizes the value of learning from numerous religious perspectives. While most customers ask the washer-man to dye their cloth in the color they prefer, one customer watches these other customers "with amazement," noticing that the tub contains an apparently magical universal dye that is all colors at once. Strikingly, instead of following other customers in asking for his cloth to be dyed in a particular color, this unusual customer asks for his cloth to be dyed in the universal color of the tub dye itself. At one level, of course, this unusual customer represents the *vijñānī* who revels in numerous forms and aspects of the Infinite Divine Reality. At another level, however, this unusual customer

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[30] For a thorough discussion of this robustly pluralistic dimension of Sri Ramakrishna's views, see Long, "(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together."

[31] See, e.g., Sri Ramakrishna's instruction to a Vaiṣṇava Goswami at 152/191.

[32] See Sri Ramakrishna's response to Hazra at 568/550.

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represents the ideally broad-minded spiritual aspirant who deepens and enriches his or her own conception of God by actively learning from a variety of religious standpoints. Instead of limiting God only to one particular aspect or form, this rare spiritual aspirant thinks of God as the infinite and illimitable Divine Reality that has innumerable forms and aspects.

In sum, Sri Ramakrishna's expansive ontology of the infinite and illimitable God provides the foundation for a maximally robust model of religious pluralism. On the basis of his own spiritual experience of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna taught that every genuine religion captures some real aspect of the Infinite Divine Reality and hence is an effective path to the goal of God-realization. Instead of stopping there, however, Sri Ramakrishna further affirmed the *harmony* of all religions: since the various religious conceptions of the ultimate reality are complementary rather than conflicting, all religious practitioners can enrich and broaden their understanding of God by learning from religious views other than their own.

II. SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF CONFLICTING RELIGIOUS TRUTH CLAIMS

As Hick and others have pointed out, the greatest challenge to any theory of religious pluralism is the fact that the truth claims of different religions often conflict with one another. For instance, Christianity maintains that Christ died on the cross, while Islam denies this. Hinduism and Buddhism accept the doctrine of reincarnation, while Semitic religions—at least in their orthodox forms—do not. Hinduism accepts multiple divine incarnations such as Rama and Krishna, while Christianity accepts Christ as the sole incarnation of God and Islam denies the very possibility of a divine incarnation.

Regarding such historical and metaphysical issues, some religions are surely right while other religions are surely wrong. If Christ did in fact die on the cross, then Christianity is right on this issue, while Islam is wrong. If souls do in fact reincarnate, then Hinduism and Buddhism are right, while orthodox Semitic religions are wrong. In light of the mutual incompatibility of numerous religious truth claims, is religious pluralism even a coherent possibility? Clearly, any theory of religious pluralism that straightforwardly affirms the truth of all the historical and metaphysical doctrines of the various religions would be incoherent, since it would be committed to the contradictory assertions that Christ did and did not die on the cross, that reincarnation is and is not true, and so on.

Sri Ramakrishna, I will argue, is not committed to such an incoherent position, since his model of religious pluralism affirms the *salvific efficacy* of all religions without maintaining that all the *doctrines* of the various religions are true. In order to reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's sophisticated and

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nuanced response to the problem of conflicting religious truth claims, I will employ Hick's helpful classification of three fundamental types of conflicting religious truth claims.[33] First, there are disagreements about past historical events "that are in principle accessible to human observation."[34] Second, there are disagreements about "trans-historical" matters—such as reincarnation and the possibility of God incarnating as a human being—which cannot be verified "by historical or other empirical evidence."[35] Third, there are disagreements about "ultimate questions," such as the nature of the ultimate reality.[36]

We can reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's stance on these different types of conflicting truth claims by examining his relevant teachings and his responses to questions posed by visitors at numerous points in the *Kathāmṛta*.[37] A prominent example of the first type of conflicting truth claim is the disagreement among different Hindu sects about whether the divine play ("*līlā*") between the *avatāra* Krishna and the "*gopīs*"—his female consorts headed by Rādhā—was an actual historical event. While the Vaiṣṇava sect takes Krishna's *gopī-līlā* to be a true historical event, other Hindu sects take the *gopī-līlā* to be a myth rather than a historical reality.

During Sri Ramakrishna's time, the Brāhmo Samāj held that God is personal but formless (*nirākāra*) and hence that God cannot incarnate as a human being such as Krishna. Sri Ramakrishna was well aware of the Brāhmo Samāj's skepticism toward Krishna and his *gopī-līlā*. While on a boat with followers of the Brāhmo Samāj, Sri Ramakrishna—with tears in his eyes—sang an ecstatic devotional song conveying Rādhā's love for her beloved Krishna and then told them: "Whether or not you accept the Rādhā-Krishna *līlā*, you should accept their attraction [*tān*] for each other. Try to create that same yearning in your heart for God. God can be realized when this yearning [*vyākulatā*] is present" (90/140). This remark about Krishna's *gopī-līlā* exemplifies Sri Ramakrishna's subtle stance on conflicting religious

[33] See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 362–63.

[34] Ibid., 363.

[35] Ibid., 365. A bit later, Hick clarifies that while he is aware that numerous people in Asia have claimed that there is a good deal of empirical evidence in favor of reincarnation, he does not believe that any such empirical evidence is sufficiently strong at this point in time to convince a skeptic. As Hick puts it on page 369, "We shall always hope for new evidence or new arguments which will make the truth plain to all; but in the meantime we should regard the matter as one about which it would be unwise to be unyieldingly dogmatic."

[36] Ibid., 363.

[37] Freda Matchett and Nalini Devdas claim that Sri Ramakrishna never intended his teachings on religious pluralism to be taken as a means of resolving conflicting religious truth claims. As Matchett puts it, "It is . . . unlikely that Ramakrishna ever intended '*Jata mat tato path*' to be taken as a solemn pronouncement about the truth claims of the world's great religions." See Freda Matchett, "The Teaching of Rāmakrishna in Relation to the Hindu Tradition and as Interpreted by Vivekānanda," *Religion* 11 (1981): 179. For a similar claim, see Nalini Devdas, *Sri Ramakrishna* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Science and Religion, 1966), 107. In contrast to Matchett and Devdas, I argue in Section II that Sri Ramakrishna explicitly addresses the problem of conflicting religious truth claims at various points in the *Kathāmṛta*.

truth claims about historical events in general. Instead of urging the Brāhmo followers to accept the historical reality of Krishna's *gopī-līlā*, Sri Ramakrishna encourages them to try to emulate Rādhā's extraordinary yearning (*vyākulatā*) for God, even if they do not take Rādhā or Krishna to be real historical personages. While acknowledging that Brāhmos and Vaiṣṇavas hold conflicting views on the historical reality of Krishna's *gopī-līlā*, Sri Ramakrishna insists that the Brāhmos can nonetheless learn a valuable spiritual lesson from the Vaiṣṇava doctrine.

Evidently, Sri Ramakrishna felt that belief in the historical reality of Krishna's *gopī-līlā* is not soteriologically vital. Hence, even if the *gopī-līlā* did take place in the historical past and the followers of the Brāhmo Samāj were mistaken in their rejection of the historical reality of the *gopī-līlā*, Sri Ramakrishna insists that this mistake would not diminish the salvific efficacy of the path adopted by the Brāhmos. Conversely, even if Vaiṣṇavas are mistaken in taking the *gopī-līlā* to be an actual historical reality, the Vaiṣṇava devotional faith and practice would not thereby be invalidated, since the Vaiṣṇavas would still be able to realize God by trying to cultivate the yearning for God exemplified in Rādhā's love for Krishna.

Sri Ramakrishna seems to hold a similar stance on conflicting truth claims about transhistorical matters. Although Sri Ramakrishna himself believes in the traditional Hindu doctrine of reincarnation, he maintains that belief in the truth of reincarnation is not soteriologically vital. When asked whether he believes in reincarnation, Sri Ramakrishna replies: "Yes, they say there is something like that. How can we understand the ways of God through our small intellects? Many people have spoken about reincarnation; therefore I cannot disbelieve it" (105/153). In fact, at numerous points in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the doctrine of reincarnation to explain spiritual truths and to resolve doubts in the minds of some of his visitors.[38] For instance, he remarks, "As long as you do not feel that God is the Master, you must come back to the world, you must be born again and again. There will be no rebirth when you can truly say, 'O God, Thou art the Master'" (291/308).[39]

The following exchange with a Vaiṣṇava devotee reveals Sri Ramakrishna's subtle stance on reincarnation:

VAIṢṆAVA: Sir, is a man born again?
MASTER: It is said in the Gītā that a man is reborn with those tendencies that are in his mind at the time of his death. King Bharata thought of his deer at the time of death and was reborn as a deer.
VAIṢṆAVA: I could believe in rebirth only if an eye-witness told me about it.

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[38] See, for instance, Sri Ramakrishna's appeal to the doctrine of reincarnation in his remark about the devotee Purna in the entry from July 15, 1885 (871/812–13) and in his remark about Ajāmila from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in the entry from March 11, 1883 (150–51/190).

[39] See also Sri Ramakrishna's references to reincarnation at 114/163, 547/533–34, and 1020/940.

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M A S T E R : I don't know about that, my dear sir. I cannot cure my own illness, and you ask me to tell you what happens after death! What you are talking about only shows your petty mind. Try to cultivate love of God. You are born as a human being only to attain divine love. You have come to the orchard to eat mangoes; what need is there of knowing how many thousands of branches and millions of leaves there are in the orchard? To bother about what happens after death! How silly! (907/841)

Knowing that his visitor is a Vaiṣṇava, Sri Ramakrishna responds to his query about reincarnation by appealing to the Bhagavad Gītā, a scripture revered by most Vaiṣṇavas. However, the Vaiṣṇava visitor is not satisfied with Sri Ramakrishna's appeal to scriptural authority and demands empirical proof of reincarnation. Noticing his visitor's skeptical attitude, Sri Ramakrishna quickly changes tack and tells him to "cultivate love of God" instead of indulging in fruitless speculation about "what happens after death." He responds to his householder disciple Mahendranath Gupta's query in a similar manner:

M. [G U P T A]: I haven't much faith in rebirth and inherited tendencies. Will that in any way injure my devotion to God?

M A S T E R : It is enough to believe that all is possible in God's creation. Never allow the thought to cross your mind that your ideas are the only true ones, and that those of others are false. Then God will explain everything. (232/259)

Sri Ramakrishna reassures Gupta that his skepticism about reincarnation will not injure his devotion to God, but he also warns him against becoming fanatical about his own "ideas." Sri Ramakrishna's overall position seems to be that while he personally believes in reincarnation and frequently appeals to the doctrine of reincarnation in his teachings on spiritual life, he never tries to compel skeptics to accept reincarnation and even reassures them that their lack of belief in reincarnation will not hinder their spiritual progress so long as they are sincere and humble.

Sri Ramakrishna adopts a similar stance on the transhistorical question of whether it is possible for God to incarnate as a human being. It is clear that Sri Ramakrishna unambiguously accepts the doctrine of avatārhood. He remarks for instance: "God has different forms, and He sports in different ways. He sports as Īśvara, deva, man, and the universe. In every age He descends to earth in human form as an Incarnation, to teach people love and devotion. There is the instance of Chaitanya. One can taste devotion and love of God only through His Incarnations. Infinite are the ways of God's play, but what I need is love and devotion. I want only the milk. The milk comes through the udder of the cow. The Incarnation is the udder" (228/257). Evidently, Sri Ramakrishna upholds the traditional Hindu view—adumbrated in chapter 4, verse 7 of the Gītā—that God incarnates as a human being in every age.[40]

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[40] As Angelika Malinar points out, while the word "avatāra" is not used either in 4.7 or anywhere else in the Gītā, 4.7 can nonetheless be "seen as foreshadowing fully elaborated avatāra doctrines." Angelika Malinar, *The Bhagavadgītā: Doctrines and Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.

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According to Sri Ramakrishna, ordinary people can learn to cultivate *bhakti* by witnessing the ideal *bhakti* of *avatāras* ("Incarnations") such as Chaitanya. Sri Ramakrishna also teaches that devotion toward an *avatāra* is sufficient for spiritual liberation. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, the *avatāra* holds "in His hand the key to others' liberation" (204/237). At another point in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna remarks: "To love an *avatāra*—that is enough. Ah, what ecstatic love the *gopīs* had for Krishna!" (347/356).

On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna points out that there are many spiritual aspirants who do not accept the doctrine of avatārhood, such as Advaita Vedāntins and those like Kabīr and followers of the Brāhmo Samāj who believe in the personal but formless God: "[Advaita] Vedānta does not recognize the Incarnation of God. According to it, Chaitanyadeva is only a bubble of the nondual Brahman. . . . The Incarnation of God is accepted by those who follow the path of *bhakti*" (292/308).[41] Are Advaitins and Brāhmos soteriologically handicapped because they reject the doctrine of avatārhood? Sri Ramakrishna answers with an emphatic "No": "The sum and substance of the whole matter is that a man must love God, must be restless [*vyākul*] for Him. It doesn't matter whether you believe in God with form or in God without form. You may or may not believe that God incarnates as a human being. But you will realize God if you have that yearning [*anurāg*]. Then God Himself will let you know what He is like" (450/449). Sri Ramakrishna places much greater emphasis on *vyākulatā*, intense restlessness for God, than on doctrinal religious beliefs, such as belief in avatārhood. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, while religions frequently conflict on points of doctrine, they all agree on the importance of *vyākulatā*. In theistic religions, this *vyākulatā* amounts to an intense love of God and an all-consuming desire to realize God directly. In Advaita Vedānta, *vyākulatā* takes the form of *mumukṣutva*, the intense longing for spiritual liberation. In Buddhism, *vyākulatā* appears in the form of *sammā saṅkappa* ("right resolve") and *sammā vāyāma* ("right effort"), the second and sixth components of the Noble Eightfold Path, which amount to an intense desire to achieve liberation from suffering through the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. In sum, although Sri Ramakrishna himself clearly accepted the doctrine of avatārhood and he recognized that belief in an *avatāra* is soteriologically vital in certain devotional traditions such as Vaiṣṇavism and Christianity, he nonetheless insisted that belief in the doctrine of avatārhood is not necessary for God-realization.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, religions make conflicting claims about both historical and transhistorical matters, and some religions are correct about such matters while others are mistaken. However, Sri Ramakrishna emphasizes that none of these historical and transhistorical matters are soteriologically vital, so even if some religions hold erroneous views on

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[41] See also Sri Ramakrishna's reference to Kabir's disparagement of Krishna at 345/354.

these matters, these errors do not diminish the salvific efficacy of these religions as paths to God-realization. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna points out that every religion has errors, so it is foolhardy to claim that one religion is superior to all the others:

Ah, that restlessness [*vyākulatā*] is the whole thing. Whatever path you follow—whether you are a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a Śākta, a Vaiṣṇava, or a Brāhmo—the vital point is restlessness. God is our Inner Guide [*Antaryāmī*]. It doesn't matter if you take a wrong path—only you must be restless for Him. God Himself will put you on the right path. Besides, there are errors in all paths. Everyone thinks his watch is right; but as a matter of fact no watch is absolutely right. But that doesn't hamper one's work. If a man is restless for God he gains the company of *sādhus* and as far as possible corrects his own watch with the *sādhu*'s help. (1123/673)

Sri Ramakrishna likens religious fanatics to people who think that their watch alone tells the correct time. According to Sri Ramakrishna, however, "no watch is absolutely right." That is, all religions have errors, but these errors do not diminish the soteriological efficacy of these religions as "paths" to God-realization. The essential attitude needed to make spiritual progress in any religion is "restlessness" for God (*vyākulatā*). If a religious practitioner has this *vyākulatā*, then even if he or she makes a mistake, God Himself will put the religious practitioner "on the right path."

Sri Ramakrishna illustrates this rather novel idea by means of an analogy:

All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself. Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with wholehearted devotion. Suppose there are errors in the religion that one has accepted; if one is sincere and earnest, then God Himself will correct those errors. Suppose a man has set out with a sincere desire to visit Jagannath at Puri and by mistake has gone north instead of south; then certainly someone meeting him on the way will tell him: "My good fellow, don't go that way. Go to the south." And the man will reach Jagannath sooner or later. If there are errors in other religions, that is none of our business. God, to whom the world belongs, takes care of that. Our duty is somehow to visit Jagannath. (577/559)

A man going on a pilgrimage to visit the Jagannath Temple in Puri might start out in the wrong direction, but he will eventually be guided in the right direction by a more experienced traveler. Similarly, if one sincerely aspires to realize God through a particular religion, the errors in that religion will not hinder one's spiritual progress, since one will eventually recognize them to be errors and modify one's religious beliefs and practices accordingly. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna adds that we should devote our full energy to practicing our own religion sincerely and wholeheartedly rather than wasting our time pointing out "errors in other religions." In short, regarding religious disagreements about historical and transhistorical matters, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that some religions are correct while others

are incorrect, but he hastens to add that all religions have errors and that these errors do not detract from their salvific efficacy.

Regarding apparently conflicting truth claims about the nature of the ultimate reality, Sri Ramakrishna's approach is somewhat different. As we have seen in Section I, Sri Ramakrishna's unique spiritual experience of *vijñāna* revealed to him that the infinite and illimitable God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and transcendent to it. Hence, from the standpoint of *vijñāna*, all religious conceptions of God are true, since they all capture real aspects of one and the same infinite impersonal-personal God. While different religious conceptions of the ultimate reality seem to conflict, they are in fact complementary. Theistic religions refer to the personal aspect of God under different names and forms, while nontheistic religions like Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta refer to the impersonal aspect of God as "Śūnyatā" or "Brahman." While Islam and Judaism emphasize the formless aspect of God, Christians and Hindu Vaiṣṇavas emphasize God's capacity to incarnate as a human being. Since Sri Ramakrishna's thesis of the infinite and illimitable God is based on the direct spiritual experience of *vijñāna* rather than on logical reasoning, it would be beside the point to fault him for failing to provide a rational explanation of how God can have apparently contradictory attributes—such as personality and impersonality—at the same time. For Sri Ramakrishna, what might appear to be contradictions to the rational intellect are reconciled on the lofty heights of suprarational spiritual experience.

Thus, according to Sri Ramakrishna, all religious conceptions of the ultimate reality are true, even though none of them captures the *whole* of the infinite and illimitable Divine Reality. Moreover, even if a particular religious conception of God is partial or one-sided, it can nonetheless serve as a salvifically effective path to God-realization. It is worth noting that Sri Ramakrishna's position on this issue does not commit him to religious relativism, since he explicitly acknowledges that some religions might have more sophisticated conceptions of God than others:

It is enough to have yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attracted to Him: Don't you know that God is the Inner Guide? He sees the longing of our heart and the yearning of our soul. Suppose a man has several sons. The older boys address him distinctly as "Baba" or "Papa," but the babies can at best call him "Ba" or "Pa." Now, will the father be angry with those who address him in this indistinct way? The father knows that they too are calling him, only they cannot pronounce his name well. All children are the same to the father. Likewise, the devotees call on God alone, though by different names. They call on one Person only. God is one, but His names are many. (60/112)

Taken out of context, Sri Ramakrishna's final statement that "God is one, but His names are many" could be taken to mean that religions differ only in the various names they ascribe to God. However, the context of this statement

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shows that Sri Ramakrishna's position is much more nuanced. Just as babies refer to their father as "Ba" or "Pa" while the older boys refer to him as "Baba" or "Papa," some religions may have less sophisticated conceptions of God than others. Significantly, however, Sri Ramakrishna warns against wasting our time trying to determine which religion is the most sophisticated in this regard. Rather, he insists that just as the father loves all his children equally, God loves equally the practitioners of all religions, in spite of their varying degrees of sophistication. Moreover, a given religion's doctrinal sophistication does not track its salvific efficacy. Therefore, religions that are less sophisticated than others at the level of doctrine may nonetheless be as salvifically effective as more doctrinally sophisticated religions.

For Sri Ramakrishna, the sheer diversity of religious truth claims about historical and transhistorical matters, as well as about the ultimate reality, far from undermining the possibility of religious pluralism, provides the basis for a robust religious pluralism. As he puts it, "God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries" (577/559). In other words, various religions—with their differing, and often conflicting, truth claims—appeal to people of various temperaments and cultures, but all religions are salvifically effective paths to the common goal of God-realization. If one finds the truth claims of a particular religion especially convincing or appealing, then one can realize God by practicing that religion. But one should never assume that other religions are not salvifically effective paths to God-realization because their truth claims differ from the truth claims of one's own religion.

III. ADDRESSING MAJOR OBJECTIONS TO SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S MODEL OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

We are now in a position to consider some of the most serious objections to Sri Ramakrishna's views on religious pluralism. Scholars such as Morales and Prothero question Sri Ramakrishna's assumption that all religions are paths to the same goal.[42] Morales argues, for instance, that the various religious conceptions of the Absolute are mutually exclusive, so the respective goals of all religions must also be mutually exclusive:

There are several radically distinct, and wholly irreconcilable, religiously inspired ideas about what constitutes the Absolute. Consequently, rather than attempting to artificially claim that there is only one mountain top toward which all religions aspire, it would be more truthful, and more in keeping with what the various religious traditions themselves actually say, to state that there are several different

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[42] See Morales, *Radical Universalism*, 28–29; Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 99, 194. For a similar criticism, see J. N. Mohanty, "Yato Mat Tato Path," in *Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Our Times: A Retrospect on His 175th Birth Anniversary* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2013), 121–26.

mountains—each representing a radically different idea of what is the Absolute. There is a Nirvana mountain, a Brahman mountain, an Allah mountain, a Jain mountain. Some mountains are monotheistic, some are polytheistic, henotheistic, pantheistic or panentheistic. Moreover, it is incumbent upon us all individually to choose for ourselves which of these many possibly correct Absolute-mountains we wish to scale. Only one of these mutually exclusive philosophical mountains, however, can be the correct one.[43]

According to Morales, different religious conceptions of the Absolute are "wholly irreconcilable," so it is simply false to claim that all religions aspire toward "only one mountain top." Moreover, Morales insists that only one of these "mutually exclusive" conceptions of the Absolute "can be the correct one." In other words, Morales defends the exclusivist view that if one religion is true, then all other religions must be false. First, it is worth noting that Sri Ramakrishna himself anticipated Morales's objection in his parables of the chameleon and of the blind men and the elephant. To him, religious exclusivists are like people quarrelling foolishly over the color of the chameleon or like blind men insisting that the part of the elephant they are touching is the whole of the elephant. Sri Ramakrishna was not so naïve or idealistic as to deny that many religious practitioners hold exclusivistic beliefs. Rather, on the basis of the vast spiritual experience of *vijñāna* and his own practice of a variety of Hindu and non-Hindu faiths, Sri Ramakrishna taught that the various religious conceptions of the ultimate reality are not, in fact, mutually exclusive since they correspond to different aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality.

Tellingly, Morales nowhere addresses Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *vijñāna* or his parables illustrating religious pluralism, which convey an expansive understanding of God as the infinite and illimitable impersonal-personal Divine Reality. As a result, Morales overlooks the nuances of Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism, which is far less hegemonic than Morales alleges. While Sri Ramakrishna maintains that all religions share the common goal of God-realization, his conception of God-realization is extraordinarily capacious. Indeed, his parables of the chameleon and the elephant suggest a very broad and nonhegemonic soteriological outlook: people of various temperaments can realize God in a variety of ways, since the infinite God has numerous forms and aspects, all of which are real. Although different people see the chameleon in different colors, they all see one and the same chameleon. Likewise, all the blind men touch different parts of one and the same elephant. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the goal of the Advaitic *jñānayogī* is to realize *nirguṇa* Brahman, "the Infinite, without form or shape and beyond mind and words" (181/218). Sri Ramakrishna insists, however, that the *bhakta* who worships the personal God can realize the same Infinite Reality as "eternally endowed with

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[43] Morales, *Radical Universalism*, 28.

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form and personality" (nitya sākāra) (152/191).[44] Elsewhere, Sri Ramakrishna points out that God-realization for *bhaktas* amounts to the *jīva*'s realization of its eternal divine relationship with the eternal personal God: "It can't be said that *bhaktas* need *nirvāṇa*. According to some schools there is an eternal Krishna and there are also His eternal devotees. Krishna is Spirit embodied, and His Abode also is Spirit embodied. Krishna is eternal and the devotees also are eternal" (834/779). From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, both the Advaitin and the *bhakta* attain the goal of God-realization, even though they end up realizing different aspects or forms of one and the same Infinite Reality. Since Morales ignores altogether the ontological framework of *vijñāna* within which Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on religious pluralism are embedded, he makes untenable generalizations about Sri Ramakrishna's views on the world religions that fail to do justice to their subtlety and sophistication.

Some scholars, including Ninian Smart and R. W. Neufeldt, claim that Buddhism in particular poses a serious problem for a Vedāntic model of religious pluralism such as Sri Ramakrishna's.[45] Although Smart lodges this objection against Swami Vivekananda's "Neo-Advaitic" harmonizing of religions, his objection is broad enough to apply to Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism as well. According to Smart, "the ultimate reality is presented in a substantialist way in Neo-Advaita: this does not seem to square with Theravādin *nirvāṇa* or with Mahāyāna *śūnyatā* (though the latter sometimes functions a bit like a ghost-substance)."[46] Smart rightly notes that a Vedāntic model of religious pluralism such as Sri Ramakrishna's presupposes a "substantialist" understanding of the ultimate reality as a positive entity or reality, whether that positive reality is conceived as a personal God (by theists) or as the impersonal Brahman (by Advaita Vedāntins).[47] According to Smart, however, since the Theravāda and Mahāyāna strains of Buddhism do not subscribe to a substantialist view of the ultimate reality, these Buddhistic schools cannot easily be accommodated within a Vedāntic model of religious pluralism.

The best way to begin to address Smart's objection is to consider Sri Ramakrishna's own statements about the Buddha. Regarding the Buddha, Sri Ramakrishna observes: "He was not an atheist. He simply could not express the Reality in words. Do you know what 'Buddha' means? By meditating on

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[44] It is worth noting that Sri Ramakrishna's statement about the *bhakta*'s realization of the "nitya sākāra" form of God suggests that Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi* is not necessary for spiritual salvation.

[45] See R. W. Neufeldt, "The Response of the Ramakrishna Mission," in *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. Harold Coward (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 73; Ninian Smart, "Models for Understanding the Relations between Religions," in *Ninian Smart on World Religions: Volume 2*, ed. John J. Shepherd (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 268, and "A Contemplation of Absolutes" in Shepherd, *Ninian Smart on World Religions: Volume 2*, 257.

[46] Smart, "Models for Understanding the Relations between Religions," 268.

[47] In his use of the term "substantialist," Smart does not mean to imply that the ultimate reality is conceived as a substance. I take it that Smart uses the term "substantialist" in a very broad sense to denote any conception of the ultimate reality as a positive entity or reality.

one's own *Bodha Svarūpa* [one's true nature as Pure Consciousness], one *becomes* that *Bodha Svarūpa*. . . . Why should Buddha be called an atheist? When one realizes one's *Svarūpa* [the true nature of one's Self], one attains a state that is something between *asti* [is] and *nāsti* [is-not]" (1028/947–48). Sri Ramakrishna explains the Buddha's enlightenment in Advaitic terms as the realization of his own true Self, which is of the nature of Pure Consciousness (*Bodha*). Of course, he was aware that the Buddha himself did not explain his enlightenment experience as the realization of the Supreme Ātman. Nonetheless, he implies that what the Buddha called "*nibbāna*" is a negative term denoting the realization of the ineffable Ātman.[48]

From Smart's perspective, Sri Ramakrishna unjustifiably Vedāntizes Buddhism by interpreting the Buddha's enlightenment experience in substantialist terms as the realization of one's "*Svarūpa*." According to Smart, the Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism deny such a substantialist understanding of the Buddha's enlightenment. Thus, it seems as if Sri Ramakrishna is only able to accommodate Buddhism within his model of religious pluralism by assimilating Buddhism to Advaita Vedānta. While Smart is correct that most Theravādins do take the Buddha to have denied the reality of the Vedāntic Ātman, there is lively scholarly controversy regarding whether the Buddha himself denied the reality of the Vedāntic Ātman. Numerous scholars, including C. A. F. Rhys Davids, Georg Grimm, Edward Conze, Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, I. B. Horner, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, have argued that the Buddha's teaching of *anattā* ("non-self"; Sanskrit, *anātman*) was meant to deny the reality of the empirical-personal self rather than of the impersonal Vedāntic Ātman.[49] As Bhattacharya puts it, "the Buddha does not deny the Upaniṣadic *ātman*; on the contrary, he indirectly affirms it, *in denying that which is falsely believed to be the ātman*."[50] These scholars find support for their interpretation of the Buddha's teachings in numerous passages from the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*.[51] For instance, in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Vacchagotta asks

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[48] See Sri Ramakrishna's similar remark about the Buddha at 430/430.

[49] See C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Outlines of Buddhism* (London: Methuen, 1934); Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 199–221; Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, *L'ātman-brahman dans le bouddhisme ancien* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1973); Georg Grimm, *The Doctrine of the Buddha* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958); Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 64; J. G. Jennings, *The Vedāntic Buddhism of the Buddha* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948); David and Nancy Reigle, "*Ātman/Anātman* in Buddhism and Its Implication for the Wisdom Tradition," in *Studies in the Wisdom Tradition* (Cotopaxi, CO: Eastern School Press, 2015); Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962), 129–34; Miri Albahari, "Against No-*Ātman* Theories of *Anattā*," *Asian Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2002): 5–20; David Reigle, "The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism," in Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, *The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism* (Cotopaxi, CO: Canon, 2015), ix–xviii; Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism* (Delhi: Pentagon, 2007); Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 57–61.

[50] Bhattacharya, *L'ātman-brahman dans le bouddhisme ancien*, 1; translation mine.

[51] An anonymous referee has pointed out that since the *Tipiṭaka* was "codified over 200 years after the Buddha's death . . . it is best not to imply that by careful reading of the Pāli Canon, we can understand with certainty what the historical Buddha believed." I agree that

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the Buddha, "Is there a self?" and the Buddha remains silent. Vacchagotta then asks the Buddha, "Then is there no self?" and the Buddha remains silent again.[52] The Buddha's telling silence on the question of whether a self exists could easily be taken to support Sri Ramakrishna's position that the Buddha realized his true essence as Pure Consciousness but "could not express the Reality in words." Moreover, in a well-known passage from the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the Buddha seems to describe *nirvāṇa* as an ineffable transempirical Reality: "Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded."[53] According to Schmidt-Leukel, "this passage does not only emphasise that 'there is' a transcendent reality. It also underlines its genuine transcendence in the most explicit way by distinguishing it ontologically from the major features of the saṃsāric world."[54] Such passages from the *Tipiṭaka* arguably lend support to Sri Ramakrishna's substantialist interpretation of the Buddha's enlightenment experience.

Moreover, Smart's assumption that Mahāyāna Buddhism interprets the Buddha's *anattā* doctrine in nonsubstantialist terms is also a highly tendentious one, since there are numerous interpretations of the Mahāyāna school, some of which are substantialist and others which are nonsubstantialist. In his classic 1955 study *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, T. R. V. Murti argues that Nāgārjuna's *Śūnyata* denotes a positive ineffable Reality that can neither be said to exist nor not to exist.[55] In support of his interpretation, Murti cites a striking passage from the Mahāyāna text, *Ratna-Kūṭa-Sūtra*: "'that ātman is' is one end; 'that ātman is not' is another; but the middle between the ātma and nairātmya views is the Inexpressible. . . . It is the reflective review of things."[56] This passage could easily be taken to support Sri Ramakrishna's view that the Buddha realized the ineffable Reality that is "between *asti* and *nāsti*." More recently, David Reigle has argued that major Mahāyāna thinkers such as Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, and Candrakīrti "thought that the Buddha's *anātman* teaching was directed against a permanent personal *ātman*" rather than against the Upaniṣadic Ātman.[57] Reigle further sug-

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we should reject the facile assumption that the teachings contained in the *Tipiṭaka* coincide exactly with the historical Buddha's teachings. Nonetheless, I believe that the *Tipiṭaka* is a valuable—though fallible—textual source that gives at least some insight into what the historical Buddha might have taught.

[52] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 2000), 1393–94.

[53] Frank Woodward, trans., *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 97–98.

[54] Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism*, 72.

[55] T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955), 329–31.

[56] Cited in Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 27–28.

[57] Reigle, "The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism," ix.

gests that the "Buddha Nature" (*Buddha-dhātu*) mentioned in the Mahāyāna *Tathāgatagarbhasūtras* bears a strong resemblance to the Vedāntic Ātman.[58]

Obviously, this is not the place to defend a Vedāntic or quasi-Vedāntic interpretation of Buddhism. For present purposes, I hope only to have established that the Vedāntic interpretation of the Buddha's teachings favored by Sri Ramakrishna continues to be supported by a number of scholars and is thus not wildly implausible or flagrantly eisegetic. While Smart is correct that a Vedāntic model of religious pluralism such as Sri Ramakrishna's cannot accommodate the nonsubstantialist understanding of the *anattā* doctrine championed by certain Buddhist schools such as Theravāda, this fact does not have the damaging consequences that Smart seems to think it does. Sri Ramakrishna does not so much "Vedāntize" Buddhism as endorse a substantialist interpretation of Buddhism that arguably finds support in numerous passages from the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* and certain Mahāyāna texts. Since both substantialist and nonsubstantialist interpretations of Buddhism are controversial, Sri Ramakrishna is perfectly entitled to take a stand on this issue and interpret Buddhism in substantialist terms.

In an interesting essay on religious pluralism in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and the Swamis of the Ramakrishna Mission, R.W. Neufeldt argues that Sri Ramakrishna's views on world religions are more inclusivist than pluralist because they presuppose *vijñāna* as the highest truth. According to Neufeldt, Sri Ramakrishna insists that all religions must accept the standpoint of *vijñāna*, the "belief-cum-experience that all is God."[59] All religions, as Neufeldt puts it, "must be informed by the belief that God is all, or all is God and must end in the direct vision or experience of this belief."[60] However, Neufeldt misunderstands how *vijñāna* informs Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on religious pluralism. On the basis of his own spiritual experience of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna realized that God is both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* and hence that all genuine religions and spiritual philosophies capture different aspects of one and the same Infinite Divine Reality. Hence, the spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* provided Sri Ramakrishna with a capacious philosophical framework for explaining how all religions are salvifically efficacious paths to the common goal of God-realization. Instead of taking *vijñāna* as the philosophical framework underlying Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism, Neufeldt makes the unjustified assumption that Sri Ramakrishna injects the "belief-cum-experience" of *vijñāna* into the *doctrinal content* of all religions.

Neufeldt's interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna suffers from three major flaws. First, no passages in the *Kathāmṛta* support Neufeldt's view that Sri Ramakrishna imposed the *vijñāna* doctrine that "God is all" onto all the world religions. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna taught that every religion is enti-

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[58] Ibid., xvi–xvii.
[59] Neufeldt, "The Response of the Ramakrishna Mission," 73.
[60] Ibid., 72. For a similar claim, see Devdas, *Sri Ramakrishna*, 113–14.

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tled to hold different views on the nature of God, since God Himself is infinite and illimitable. Second, Neufeldt is mistaken in assuming that Sri Ramakrishna takes the spiritual experience of *vijñāna* to be the salvific goal of all religions. As I have argued in Section I, Sri Ramakrishna's understanding of the shared goal of God-realization is maximally capacious: far from claiming that all religions must culminate in the spiritual experience of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna claims that God can be realized in numerous ways and in any of his innumerable aspects. For instance, while the Advaitin realizes the *nirguṇa* aspect of God in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, *bhaktas* realize various aspects and forms of the *saguṇa* aspect of God. Third, Neufeldt overlooks the many passages in the *Kathāmṛta* where Sri Ramakrishna indicates that the vast majority of people cannot attain the realization of *vijñāna*, since this rarefied experience is reserved only for "*īśvarakoṭis*," a spiritual elite consisting of incarnations of God and their inner circle. Hence, it would be implausible in the extreme to attribute to Sri Ramakrishna the view that such a rarefied state of *vijñāna* is the salvific goal of all religions. Contrary to Neufeldt, then, the standpoint of *vijñāna* allows Sri Ramakrishna to leave intact both the respective doctrinal beliefs and the respective salvific goals of the various religions.

Finally, I wish to consider the possible objection that there is a performative contradiction between Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralist position and his attempt to impose his pluralistic views onto others. This objection is invalid because Sri Ramakrishna never tried to compel anyone to accept his own doctrine of religious pluralism. Addressing religious exclusivists, Sri Ramakrishna remarks: "What I mean is that dogmatism is not good. It is not good to feel that my religion alone is true and other religions are false. The correct attitude is this: My religion is right, but I do not know whether other religions are right or wrong, true or false" (576–77/558). Since Sri Ramakrishna recognizes that exclusivist religious practitioners would likely be unsympathetic to a pluralist view, he provides an internal critique of the exclusivist position itself: he argues that it is unreasonable for exclusivists to assume that all religions other than their own are not salvifically efficacious. From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, one can only be in a position to judge the salvific efficacy of a religion after understanding it thoroughly and sincerely practicing it. Hence, the exclusivist's a priori rejection of the salvific efficacy of all religions other than his or her own amounts to sheer "dogmatism." Sri Ramakrishna encourages exclusivists to repudiate their "dogmatism" and to adopt instead the "correct attitude" of humility and agnosticism by suspending judgment about whether religions other than their own are salvifically efficacious.

As we have seen, however, Sri Ramakrishna himself did practice religions other than his own—including Christianity and Islam—and found them to be as salvifically efficacious as Hinduism. As he puts it, "I had to practice every religion [*sab dharma*] for a time—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, as

well as the paths of Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism, and [Advaita] Vedānta. I realized that there is only one God [*ek īśvar*] toward whom all are travelling; but the paths are different" (77/129). On the basis of his own direct spiritual experience of the "one God" through the practice of Hindu, Christian, and Islamic religious paths, Sri Ramakrishna feels justified in going beyond a position of mere agnosticism about other religions to the full-blown pluralist view that all genuine religions are different salvifically efficacious paths to God. Crucially, however, instead of trying to impose his own pluralist view onto those who are inclined to religious exclusivism, Sri Ramakrishna urges exclusivists to be agnostic about whether other religions are as salvifically efficacious as their own.

IV. TOWARD A CROSS-CULTURAL DISCOURSE
      ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

This article is the first of two chapters devoted to the issue of religious pluralism from a larger ongoing book project, tentatively titled "God's Infinitude: Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion." In the second chapter, I bring Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism into dialogue with the pluralist views of Hick. I argue that between 1970 and 1974, the early Hick espoused a Vedāntic theory of religious pluralism—based explicitly on Sri Aurobindo's "logic of the infinite"—that comes remarkably close to Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based model of religious pluralism.[61] According to the early Hick, each of the great world religions captures a real aspect of the Infinite Divine Reality, which is both personal and nonpersonal.[62] By 1976, Hick abandoned this Vedāntic line of thought in favor of his now well-known quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism, according to which the personal and nonpersonal ultimates of the various world religions are different phenomenal manifestations of the same unknowable "Real *an sich*."[63] However, as numerous critics have pointed out, Hick's quasi-Kantian model does violence to the self-understanding of most religious practitioners, who take their respective ultimates to be *literally* and not merely phenomenally true. Since Sri Ramakrishna grants robust ontological reality to the personal and nonpersonal ultimates of the various religions, I argue that Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism is more genuinely pluralistic than Hick's quasi-Kantian model. On this basis, I suggest that the Vedāntic road not taken by Hick is the road he *should* have taken—or, at the very least, more fully explored.

[61] See John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 128.
[62] See John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: One World, 1973), 139.
[63] See John Hick's 1976 conference paper, "Mystical Experience as Cognition," published in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 415–21.

Almost daily, we hear of atrocities committed in the name of religion in various parts of the world. In this contemporary climate, it is more necessary than ever for us to work collectively toward developing a strong foundation for interreligious dialogue and understanding. While the recent burgeoning interest in religious pluralism among theologians and philosophers of religion is no doubt a promising development, the vast majority of pluralist theories remain rooted in Christian theological paradigms. What is urgently needed now is a broader cross-cultural approach to religious pluralism that takes seriously the pluralist views developed in both Western and non-Western religious traditions. Sri Ramakrishna's timely and sophisticated teachings on the harmony of religions can play a crucial role in this cross-cultural endeavor.