1. Introduction

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Abstract
This chapter offers a broad introduction to the volume and a brief outline of each chapter.

1. The concept of God

Although the debates concerning concepts of God have regained considerable momentum in Western philosophy of religion since the 1960s, they mainly focus on concepts of God growing out of the Abrahamic religions and philosophical traditions informed by Western theology. The modus operandi of these debates is best described as being firmly based on the analysis of divine attributes.

On this approach, firstly, a concept of God is evaluated in relation to a variety of exegetically discovered or philosophically justified attributes apparently worthy of the divine, such as perfection, omniscience, omnipotence, eternity, and aseity. Hence, the question of what God is like is equivalent to asking: What attributes does God possess? A further equally important question naturally follows: For a divine attribute X, what does it mean to say that God possesses X? Different answers to either or both of these questions give rise to different concepts of God.[1]

Secondly, these attributes, taken individually or collectively, are assessed for their adequacy and consistency within a concept of God that can hold up to exegetical or philosophical scrutiny. In other words, we are faced with the further question: Is a specific concept of God coherent or consistent? Or equivalently: Is it possible that there is an entity that falls under such a concept of God? This question plays a role in the debate over the rationality of theistic belief: if (a specific concept of) God is an impossible concept, then it is a priori true that there is no entity which falls under it. It is also relevant to the more internal issue of determining the best or most reasonable philosophical concepts of God.[2]

Philosophers who have followed this strategy have typically been guided by the idea that God is a maximally great, excellent, or perfect being. Augustine (4th century) and Anselm (11th century) remain the paradigmatic examples of this approach. While Augustine saw God as that being than which nothing more excellent or exalted exists, Anselm saw God as that being than which nothing greater can be thought.[3] Some contemporary philosophers of religion would rather say that God is the greatest possible being. The notion of greatness, excellence, or perfection, with regard to knowledge, for instance, implies that it is better being

knowledgeable than not being knowledgeable. It thus follows that if God is the greatest possible being, God must also be the greatest possible knowledgeable being. As perfection, this amounts to saying that God is perfectly knowledgeable or omniscient. This approach is what is presently referred to as perfect being theology (PBT). See Weeb (2010) and Leftow (1998).

Some of these ideas on God's perfection eventually led to the concept of God that is associated with classical theism. The following are among the claims of classical theism: (i) Accepting that perfection is to lack nothing, then if God is perfect, he must be complete and self-sufficient. In other words, he must have no ontological source or support other than himself (this attribute is called aseity). (ii) God must also be simple, for whatever has parts must depend on them for its existence. (iii) God must be immaterial, for whatever is made of matter has parts. (iv) God must also be timeless, because whatever is temporal is limited in terms of past and future. (v) If personhood is taken as a standard of perfection, then God must have perfect intellect and perfect will. (vi) Having perfect intellect, God is perfectly rational and perfectly knowledgeable (omniscient), which includes infallible foreknowledge. (vii) Having perfect will, God has perfect power (omnipotence) and perfect goodness. (viii) Moreover, in accordance with classical theism, so far as the relation between God and the world is concerned, God is both the creator and maintainer of the world. (ix) However, since God is self-sufficient, he must additionally be transcendental to the world in the sense of being ontologically distinct from it.[4]

Pantheism, panentheism and, deism[5] represent an additional three broad theistic categories from which a number of alternative theories of God can be derived. Each of them potentially holds a distinct position on the above questions, which results in further concepts of God. Nevertheless, to some extent they all also incorporate the basic tenet of PBT, which is that God in one way or another comprises perfection or greatness. A good example of this is the pantheistic[6] appeal to a version of PBT contained in Cicero's account of the Stoic Zeno of Citium. Zeno, it is said, argued that the cosmos is rational, wise, and happy, among other things. On this, he is said to have stated: "That which is rational is better than that which is not rational. But nothing is better than the cosmos. Therefore, the cosmos is rational. One can prove in a similar manner that the cosmos is wise, happy and eternal […]". (On the Nature of the Gods, II, 21, cited in Leftow, 1998).

Perfect being theology, along with all its associated theories (including those briefly presented above),[7] is concerned with monotheistic concepts of God (rather than with the concept of *a* god, for example). Its association with monotheism is not partial or tentative; nor is monotheism relevant to only a select number of PBT theorists. Monotheistic concepts of God are central to traditional philosophical debates on the rationality of theism. When Western philosophers argue for or against the existence of God, or for or against the coherence of the concept of God, a monotheistic view is explicitly or implicitly presupposed.

2. Vaiṣṇavism

Although Western philosophy of religion has developed many useful exegetical and philosophical tools for evaluating Abrahamic conceptions of God as they apply to respective philosophical traditions, there is a growing awareness that such monotheistic Western approaches might conceal and prohibit a culturally sensitive and philosophically adequate appreciation of the numerous concepts of God found in religious traditions outside of the Abrahamic landscape. This awareness, which is part of the motivation beyond cross-cultural and global philosophy of religion,[8] requires and hence encourages new dialogue between Western philosophy of religion and non-Western traditions.

Vaiṣṇavism is commonly referred to as one of the great Hindu monotheistic traditions. The principal deity the tradition devotes itself to is, as the name suggests, Viṣṇu, though it also includes his different forms, such as Nārāyaṇa and Kṛṣṇa (the latter sometimes considered primary). Śaivism and Śāktism, respectively honouring the God Śiva and the Goddess in her various forms, including Durgā, Kālī, and Mahādevī, make up the two other larger monotheistic Hindu traditions. Although it has proved difficult to determine the origins and dates of honouring Gods or gods in India, whether in abstract form (in the Vedic sacrificial arenas) or in concrete form (in the Bhakti, or devotional, movements), formal worship of images (mostly of Viṣṇu) in temples began under the patronage of the Gupta kings who reigned over most of the subcontinent from the 2nd to 3rd century. From these roots, Vaiṣṇavism flourished, expanding into many sub-traditions that maintained an interest in certain core texts (Vedas, Upaniṣads, Purāṇas, epics, etc.), ideas, doctrines, and practices while propounding a variety of ontologies and concepts of God.[9]

In addition to often being considered monotheistic, concepts of God in Vaiṣṇavism are also frequently depicted through divine attributes, this sometimes resembling the general approach of classical theism and perfect being theology. While appealing to the Vedānta exegetical tradition (a philosophical Indian tradition, or *darśana*, closely related to Vaiṣṇavism) for justification or explanation, many Vaiṣṇavas have vigorously defended the thesis that *Brahman*, the ultimate, ubiquitous, and singular reality, which they identify with Viṣṇu, is *saguṇa*, with qualities.[10] And it seems that these Vaiṣṇava Vedāntins never tired of enumerating these qualities. Madhva (13th century), for example, states that "The creator must be omniscient, omnipotent, and capable of fulfilling whatever he wills. This is what being a '*Brahman*-with-qualities' means".[11] In his turn, Rāmānuja (11th century) writes:[12]

> […] all the perfect attributes which according to other contexts belong to Brahman — those myriads of immensurable, glorious and innumerable perfections like omniscience, omnipotence, universal sovereignty, his being unequalled and unsurpassed, having all desires materialised and his will always realised, and being all-illuminating, as well as his absolute freedom form evil […] All is known when the One is known: the One whose proper form is solely knowledge, bliss and perfection, whose greatness is immeasurable, who possesses boundless, unequalled and countless perfections, such as the power of having his will always be realised, and who is

> essentially not subject to mutability: that is the supreme Brahman himself […]. (*Vedārtha-Saṅgraha* 10 and 14).[13]

It then seems reasonable to ask: According to Vaiṣṇavism, what attributes does God possess? Given the plurality of Vaiṣṇava traditions, there will most likely be a range of answers for this question, which will amount to a number of distinct Vaiṣṇava concepts of God. In Rāmānuja's quotation above, for example, God is described as having the attributes of perfection, omniscience, omnipotence, universal sovereignty, greatness (being the greatest in some sense), and freedom from evil. What these attributes specifically mean has been the task of exegetical and philosophical analysis.

The emphasis on God's perfection in Rāmānuja's quotation is significant. Although we do not find in Rāmānuja the explicit inferential moves found in Anselm—for example, where one goes from God's greatness to the divine attributes he possesses—,Vaiṣṇavism extends explanatory strategies that strongly resemble perfect being theology. For instance, Vaiṣṇava Vedāntins often refer to the word "*brahman*" as meaning that which is greater than the greatest, or that which has total greatness as its essential nature.

To a lesser extent, interpretations of the word "*bhagavān*" have played similar roles. The *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* (in a statement supposedly spoken by the sage Parāśara) defines "*bhagavat*"—the Sanskrit stem of the nominative singular "*bhagavān*"—as follows:

> That essence of the supreme is defined by the term "*Bhagavat*". The word "*Bhagavat*" is the denomination of that primeval and eternal god […] "*Bhagavat*" expresses that supreme spirit, which is individual, almighty, and the cause of causes of all things. […] The dissyllable "*Bhaga*" indicates the six excellences [perfect attributes]: dominion, might, glory, splendour, wisdom, and dispassion. The purport of the letter "*va*" is that elemental spirit in which all beings exist, and which exists in all beings. And thus this great word *Bhagavān* is the name of Vāsudeva, who is one with the supreme *Brahma*, and of no one else. (*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 6.5.69-76).[14]

This *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* statement and its given meaning for "*bhagavat*" as the possessor of six qualities is cited and associated with God as the perfect being by Vaiṣṇavas including Rāmānuja and Jīva Gosvāmī, the latter a 16th century seminal thinker in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition.[15] On this understanding, we can infer that the general Vaiṣṇava expression of God is very close to Descartes' (17th century) famous PBT definition of God. In his fifth meditation, Descartes defines God as that who possesses all perfections (*habere omnes perfectiones*), or as the most perfect being (*ens summe perfectus*). We thus might ask: To what extent does Vaiṣṇavism resort to a version of PBT to construct its concept of God?

Vaiṣṇava references to omni-attributes seem to encourage comparisons with classical theism too. We can even find similarities between Vaiṣṇava stated attributes of God and some of the peculiar attributes God is said to possess in classical theism. Usually, we think of attributes as

distinct from the entity that possesses them. But if an entity has attributes distinct from itself, it then follows that it is dependent on them for its own nature and existence. So, if God is really self-sufficient, he cannot have attributes that he is dependent on. Hence, all God's attributes must be identical with God. Something similar could be observed in Madhva, for example. It could be argued that for Madhva there is a perfect unity between attribute and essential being in God: "The attributes and actions of Viṣṇu are one with his essential nature" (*Viṣṇu-Tattva-Nirṇaya* 457).[16]

It is, however, by no means uncontroversial to consider Vaiṣṇavism a kind of classical theism. For example, the relationship between God and the world in almost all variations of Vaiṣṇava theology looks very panentheistic, and the texts that they accept can be interpreted in this way too. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, for example, Kṛṣṇa is said to be identical with everything (7.19, 11.40). Rāmānuja is quite often referred to as a panentheist.[17] Long before contemporary panentheists, Rāmānuja used the body-soul analogy to describe the relationship between God and the world: his claiming that the world is the body of God. It thus might seem reasonable to ask: What are the similarities and differences between Vaiṣṇava concepts of God and concepts of God associated with more traditionally Western forms of theism, such as classical theism, pantheism, panentheism, etc.?

3. Concepts of God in Vaiṣṇavism: Philosophical perspectives

Such questions and ruminations might seem irresistible. However, there is a consensus among Hindu Studies scholars that using Western theological-philosophical categories to analyse Indian religious traditions such as Vaiṣṇavism might obfuscate some of their important and innate features. This could apply to the particular semantic—and philosophical—contexts within which terms like "perfection", "omniscience", "omnipotence", "eternity", etc. are understood. It could also apply to the claim that Vaiṣṇavism is monotheistic. Although we find evidence for monotheism in many Vaiṣṇava scriptural sources, such as *Bhavagad-Gītā*, *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa*, some Upaniṣads, and many Pāñcarātras and Āgamas, as well in the teachings of Vaiṣṇava *ācārya*s (spiritual preceptors),[18] Vaiṣṇavism engages with concepts of God within several different contexts.

First, Vaiṣṇavism supports the idea that the supreme personal God, Viṣṇu, manifests himself in different divine forms (usually referred to as *avatāra*s), such as Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, and locates these forms within an ontological hierarchy. Second, Vaiṣṇavism accepts other deities in the Hindu pantheon, including Brahma, Śiva, Durgā, Indra, Varuṇa, and the Goddess Lakṣmī, either placing them into a similar ontological hierarchy as the *avatāra*s or considering them to be great or ideal devotees. Third, the relation between Viṣṇu and some of the other Hindu deities, notoriously Śiva and Lakṣmī, is ambiguous. Sometimes these relationships are described in terms of identity and sometimes as difference. And fourth, the relation between Viṣṇu and his energies—the latter being types of entities that include deities (like the Goddess Lakṣmī), individual souls, and the world—, is a major theme which has

initiated its own set of controversies. While, for instance, Madhva emphasises a dualism whereby Viṣṇu differs from these energies (although he is their source), other Vaiṣṇavas, that include Rāmānuja, Nimbārka (proposed dates spanning 6th to 16th century) and Jīva argue, with slightly different implications, that in some sense Viṣṇu is both different (*bheda*) and non-different (*abheda*) from them.

Therefore, it seems legitimate to ask the following question: Is Vaiṣṇavism really a monotheistic tradition? Or to put it in conceptual terms: is a specific Vaiṣṇava concept of God monotheistic? If so, what kind of monotheism is at play here? Or, in other words, what is the meaning of the word "monotheistic" in the claim that a specific Vaishnava tradition is monotheistic? The same would apply to the claim that a specific Vaishnava tradition is panentheistic, henotheistic,[19] etc.

It is important to note that before we can philosophically address these questions, or any of the above raised questions for that matter, we need to first attend to the question of how to characterise Vaiṣṇava concepts of God. It seems that unless we have a minimally accurate characterisation of a specific Vaiṣṇava concept of God, no philosophical perspective on that concept of God will be possible. Thus, the following question seems to have priority: What is a specific Vaiṣṇava concept of God? Or, assuming that Vaiṣṇava concepts of God are open to a divine attribute approach, what attributes does God possess according to a particular Vaiṣṇava textual source or tradition?[20]

4. The volume

The general goal of this volume is to approach the concepts of God found in a number of the principal Vaiṣṇava traditions and texts in order to locate them within a global philosophical framework. The overall methodology is considerate of the progress made in contemporary philosophy of religion, especially in the analytic tradition, but is also aware of other methodologies. It is therefore sensitive towards the dangers of a Eurocentric analysis of non-Abrahamic religions. The goal is to promote the conceptual and philosophical richness of the Vaiṣṇava traditions and their texts.

The volume combines normative/critical and descriptive elements. Some chapters are philosophical in nature, thus belonging to the normative/critical side. Others are more descriptive, unpacking a specific Vaiṣṇava concept of God for future philosophical analysis and critique (since for these texts and traditions such analysis has hardly been attempted before). Thus, not only do the chapters of the volume present and represent a diversity of Vaiṣṇava texts and traditions, they also illuminate a variety of approaches to the concept of God. These approaches reflect the amount of philosophical and historical deliberation on the specific issues and divine attributes considered. Nevertheless, although the approaches might be diverse, all the chapters address the very same explanatory question that defines the overall volume: What is a particular Vaiṣṇava concept of God? Or more specifically: What attributes does God possess according to a particular Vaiṣṇava textual source or tradition?

Other related questions of interest addressed in the volume (from the point of view of certain textual sources and traditions in Vaiṣṇavism) are: What kind of monotheism (if any) is implied in a Vaiṣṇava concept of God? What is God's relationship to the world? What are the implications of God having a form, or possessing attributes such as beauty, perfection, immutability, immanence, transcendence, and incorporeality? How does any particular Vaiṣṇava concept of God relate to other Vaiṣṇava concepts of God, or to other conceptions of deity (such as Advaita Vedānta's monist concept of *Brahman*)? What is the internal structure of a Vaiṣṇava concept of God?

Combining normative/critical and descriptive approaches in the same volume seems pertinent for at least two reasons. First, comparative philosophy of religion is still a new field of investigation. One of its challenges has been to combine the rigor and method of philosophy, in particular analytical philosophy, with the depth that the study of world religious traditions, particularly Indian traditions, requires. A perhaps fair criticism sometimes raised against some fields within analytic philosophy is that there is a tendency to oversimplify the complex and nuanced subjects required by philosophical inquiry. Indian traditions in general and Vaiṣṇava traditions in particular are complex traditions. They are, for example, historically, culturally, and philologically connected with countless other traditions, the study of which requires specialised and competent knowledge. Mindful of all this, this volume deliberately pursues a mixed approach, containing contributions from the philosophers as well as from Indian studies scholars. Second, as shown above, the question of what is a specific Vaiṣṇava concept of God, which is at least partially descriptive, takes precedence over any other philosophical question. Thus, rather than being competing approaches, the normative/critical approach and the descriptive approach can be seen as complementary.

The volume is an initial exploration into Vaiṣṇava concepts of God and so is divided into two main sections that represent a snapshot of the variety of concepts of God applicable to Vaiṣṇavism. The chapters address four of the more famous texts that Vaiṣṇavas appeal to and a selection of eight of the better-known Vaiṣṇava traditions, both early and recent.

The first section, "God in Vaiṣṇava texts", looks at concepts of God found in four of the canonical Vaiṣṇava texts—the *Bhavagad-Gītā*, the *Bhagavata-Purāṇa*, the *Jayākhya-Saṃhitā* (as representative of the Pāñcarātras), and the *Mahābhārata*.

In Chapter 2, "The concept of God in the *Bhavagad-Gītā*: A panentheistic account", Ricardo Silvestre and Alan Herbert offer a reconstruction of the *Gītā*'s concept of God with a focus on the relationship between God and the world. They argue that the *Gītā* supports an unequivocal panentheism, characterized through the five following claims (which, they contend, can be read from the *Gītā*): the cosmos is in God, God is different from the cosmos, God is the source of the cosmos, God is the cosmos, and the cosmos is pervaded by God. To elucidate these claims, the authors lay down some ontological theses which, they argue, are supported by the *Gītā* and which determine the text's panentheism. To this end, they employ some key notions of contemporary metaphysics (such as ontological dependence, priority monism, and fundamentality) along with the Indic notion of *prakṛti*—considered as a

metaphysical primitive denoting the intimate relationship that exists between matter and conscious living beings on the one hand, and God on the other.

In the next chapter, "Beauty and form as a corollary of a perfect being: Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*", Edwin Bryant presents the notion of beauty as a necessary quality of God from within the contours of perfect being theology. The corollary of this notion in the Sanskritic literary context is that beauty is a quality of form, and that, therefore, to be beautiful, God must have a form. He then outlines the main objections to the notion of a God with form from anti-form theisms, considering both Greek derived and Indic arguments against the possibility of a bodied God. Finally, using the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*'s depiction of Kṛṣṇa as the ultimate Godhead, he considers whether this text has the philosophical resources to respond to these objections in terms of its presentation of the qualities and metaphysics of Kṛṣṇa's form.

Chapter 4 looks towards a concept of God in *Jayākhya-Saṃhitā*, one of the 'three gems' or revealed texts of the Pāñcarātras. In "The nature of God in the Pāñcarātra with specific reference to the *Jayākhya-Saṃhitā*", Gavin Flood notes that this text, and the Pāñcarātras in general, describe a transcendent God, as Nārāyaṇa, who has a number of cosmological emanations and is ultimately desireless. This is in contrast to the related Śaiva Tantra texts, wherein God, as Śiva, is described as having desires for certain outcomes. Raising questions about the nature of God in these texts, Flood determines that the Pāñcarātras are first and foremost about ritual as a performative theology, and that even though they do describe a concept of God, they ultimately leave it to Vedānta to properly articulate it. In this way, Flood locates the Pāñcarātra concept of God within the context of a rich history of the traditions and texts that surround it.

The section on Vaiṣṇava texts ends with Angelika Malinar's chapter "Supreme Self and Supreme Lord: Cosmological monotheism in the *Mahābhārata* epic". Focusing mainly on the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the Nārāyaṇīya sections of the *Mahābhārata*, she addresses matters such as the relation between God's incorporeal, transcendent being and his corporeal agency in the world, God's omnipotence and divine embodiments, and his being one and yet related to many. Her main focus, however, is on the issue of monotheism or, more specifically, on the question of what form of monotheism is present in the epic texts. In discussing the conceptual differences between the two *Mahābhārata* sections and the philosophical terminology that they employ, she argues that cosmological monotheism (a notion suggested by Jan Assmann) allows characterising the common conceptual framework of the kind of monotheism presented in the epic.

The second section of the volume, "God in Vaiṣṇava traditions", looks at concepts of God found in several Vaiṣṇava traditions and their respective key theologians. The Āḻvārs as well as five traditional Vaiṣṇava schools—the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition, the Madhva tradition, the Nimbārka tradition, the Puṣṭimārga tradition, and the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition—and two

contemporary ones—those founded by Ramakrishna and Swami Bhaktivedanta—are considered.

In chapter 6, "The Āḻvār concept of God and Tamil Vaiṣṇavism: 'If we examine, there is but one God!'", Suganya Anandakichenin examines the concepts of God found in the amalgamative literary work of the Āḻvārs (6th to 9th century). Considering their various backgrounds, personal choices, as well as the changing trends (inter alia) that determined how they conceived their God—a remote one, a local one, king-like, child-like, a lover, and so forth—, she analyses the different forms of God found in the Āḻvār's texts, and the qualities and deeds that are associated with them. Anandakichenin argues that these saint-poets were fiercely monotheistic, but with a difference—that they allowed for minor gods and the worship of devotees insofar as they seemingly form part of God.

In the next chapter, "Two conceptions of the relation between self and God: The debate between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja", Anand Jayprakash Vaidya compares Rāmānuja's and Śaṅkara's (8th century) concepts of God with respect to the relation between *Brahman* (God) and *ātman* (the individual self). His presentation of the disagreement that Rāmānuja has with Śaṅkara centres around an analytic examination of the famous Vedāntic maxim, *ātman* is *Brahman* (AB). After commenting on four possible interpretations of (AB), Vaidya reconstructs Rāmānuja's critique of Śaṅkara's views on (AB) and his adjectival modification theory of the relation between self and God, arguing that Rāmānuja's conception of the relation between self and God is philosophically more tenable than Śaṅkara's.

Chapter 8 focuses on Madhva's view on God. Gabriel Reis de Oliveira and Gustavo Moura's "In defence of divine transcendence: Madhva's critique of 'material panentheism'", reconstructs with the help of Western theological-philosophical categories, Madhva's critique of the view that *Brahman* transforms itself to become the material substance of the universe—a thesis defended by Nimbārka, Bhāskara, and Rāmānuja as exponents of Vedānta. The authors refer to this thesis as 'material panentheism'. Madhva was a strong promoter of the idea of divine perfection, which includes the notions of immutability and transcendence. Consequently, he perceived 'material panentheism' as a serious threat to God's perfection. Through an analysis of Madhva's arguments against this view, the authors argue that although initially appearing to be logically sound, on a deeper inspection, Madhva's criticisms do not fully demonstrate the flaws of 'material panentheism'.

In chapter 9, entitled "Non-theism and theism in the Nimbārka Sampradāya", Vijay Ramnarace deals with the reclusive Nimbārka and his traditional lineage's concept of God. He retraces the history behind the nuances of Nimbārka's philosophy and discusses how God appears in the tradition's various prescribed pathways of Vedānta, Yoga, Pāñcarātra, Sādhanā-Bhakti, and Parābhakti. He explores what he sees as the most remarkable contribution of the Nimbārka tradition: it was the first in history to use Vedāntic methods to demonstrate that Kṛṣṇa was God, and that it was not just Kṛṣṇa but Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa conjoined that constituted the concept of God—an idea adopted and adapted by the more popular Vaiṣṇava traditions in subsequent centuries. This is relevant, for pre-modern Vedāntic

authors had established Īśvara, as God, in terms of being an accepted symbol of a concept that is somehow beyond God, namely the non-theist (insofar as theistic creatorhood is denied) principle of *Brahman*. Ramnarace argues that the ubiquitous oversimplification of God being made synonymous with Kṛṣṇa hampers a comprehensive appreciation of Nimbārka's innovative utilisation of theism and non-theism, simply because he is identified as a Vaiṣṇava.

In chapter 10, entitled "Embodiment and abstraction: God in Vallabhācārya's Puṣṭimārga", Frederick M. Smith examines the concept of God found in Vallabhācārya (16th century) and his successors in the Puṣṭimārga tradition. He focuses on the Puṣṭimārga's emphasis on the personal aspect of God. Smith stresses the role played by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the Puṣṭimārga concept of God as well as his idiosyncratic attributes. Kṛṣṇa is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, but also the source of all other *avatāra*s; he can be contacted and interacted with actively; he is *parabrahman*, the "supreme reality", and his manifestation is the *akṣarabrahman*, the "undecaying reality". In this created world, it is his supreme knowledge (*jñāna*), power (*śakti*), and desire (*icchā*) that allows him to accept certain special *puṣṭi*, or vitally graced beings, into his orbit (*līlā*). Moreover, for the tradition, Kṛṣṇa as Śrīnāthjī forms part of a divine trinity that also includes the River Yamunā and Vallabhācārya himself, as the incarnated mouthpiece of the Lord.

The next chapter, "On *śakti*s and their divine possessor: Towards a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava concept of God", by Alan Herbert and Ricardo Silvestre, aims to reconstruct a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava ontology of *śakti* as an initial step towards unpacking the tradition's concept of God as the possessor of unlimited diverse *śakti*s, or as *śaktimān*. They focus on the 16th century Gauḍīya thinker Jīva Gosvāmī's seminal treatise *Ṣaṭ-sandarbha*. Although Jīva places the diverse *śakti*s of God, who he generally refers to as Bhagavān, into three overarching categories—intrinsic, extrinsic, and intermediary (between the other two)—the authors observe that the same *śakti*s that fall under these divisions also implicitly act as properties of God, relations of God, semi-autonomous agents, and products. They then unpack these ontological divisions of *śakti* and their different relations with Bhagavān towards developing a more complete understanding of the Gauḍīya concept of God as the possessor of *śakti*s.

Chapter 12 deals with the contemporary tradition associated with Ramakrishna (19th century). In this chapter, "Harmonising the personal God with the impersonal *Brahman*: Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta in dialogue with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism", Swami Medhananda looks to answer the question: what are the similarities and differences between Ramakrishna's teachings on God and the more traditional Vaiṣṇava conception of God represented by the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition? Starting from the claim that Gauḍīyas reconciled the conflicting views of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva on the nature of *Brahman* as personal vis-à-vis impersonal—by holding that the supreme reality is the personal God Kṛṣṇa whose "peripheral effulgence" (*prabhā* or *tanubhā*) is the impersonal *Brahman*—Medhananda argues that Ramakrishna went one crucial step further, offering a more satisfactory synthesis of the two views. The core of Medhananda's argument is Ramakrishna's claim that "*Brahman* and Śakti are inseparable" (*brahma śakti abhed*)—that

is, the impersonal *Brahman-ātman* and the personal Śakti are respectively the static and dynamic aspects of one and the same infinite divine reality.

The volume ends with the chapter entitled "The God of *yoga*: Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda and divine pedagogy addressing divine hiddenness". In the chapter, Kenneth Valpey and Shivanand Sharma consider the problem of divine hiddenness as an issue potentially if not explicitly addressed by the prominent 20th century proponent of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896-1977). In a four-part argument, Prabhupāda's identifying Krishna as the perfect teacher, particularly in his role as Arjuna's teacher in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, offers a way to resolve the issue of divine hiddenness by framing awareness of God's existence and understanding of divine attributes in terms of an educational process encapsulated by the word "*yoga*". This approach also appreciates the *bhakti-yoga* perspective whereby divine absence—as an inversion of divine hiddenness—is celebrated. In Swami Prabhupāda's thought, the adept possesses an acute sense of divine absence even while perceiving evidence of God's existence at every turn. Hence, instead of being a philosophical problem, divine hiddenness is a theological "solution".

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Notes

[1]Although it is common in the philosophical literature the use of the expression "concept of God" in the singular, we are departing from this and explicitly assuming the uncontentious fact that there is a multiplicity of concepts of God. Some have objected to this on the grounds of an alleged distinction between the concept of God and conceptions of God. The distinction however does not stand up to philosophical scrutiny. See Silvestre (2023).
[2]For comprehensive overviews of the contemporary Western debate over concepts of God, see Part I of Mann (2005), Part IV of Taliaferro; Draper; Quinn (2010), and Oppy (2014).
[3]On Christian Doctrine (I.7), and Proslogion (II), respectively.
[4]Other attributes associated with classical theism are: having no accidents, immutability, impassibility, necessity, beauty, holiness, and omnipresence.
[5]While pantheism maintains that the universe is identical with God, panentheism holds that the universe constitutes God, or is a proper part of God (which places panentheism somewhere between classical theism and pantheism). Deism, at least in one of its senses, denies that God is the maintainer of the world: although God creates the world, it exercises no providential control over what goes on in it.
[6]It should be noted that the status of pantheism as a type of theism is controversial. If theism is understood as the claim that there is a creator, providence, transcendent deity, and personal God, then pantheism is not theism; but if theism is the claim that there something which is divine, then pantheism is theism.
[7]Leftow (1998) contains a short but competent description of classical theism, pantheism, and panentheism within the context of PBT.
[8]See, for instance, Clayton (2006) and Nagasawa (2017).
[9]For a comprehensive overview of Vaiṣṇavism, see Clooney & Stewart (2004)
[10]The ultimacy of *saguṇa Brahman*, or an *absolute reality* that possesses qualities, is rejected by Advaita Vedāntins who, while interpreting the same Vedānta texts as Vaiṣṇavas, argue that *Brahman* is ultimately *nirguṇa*, i.e., that it does not possess qualities. It should be noted that they do not completely reject *Brahman* with qualities but instead place it on a valid but lower level in which it has a pedagogical purpose.
[11]*Viṣṇu-Tattva-Nirṇaya*, 461. Translation by Lott (1980, p. 142).

[12]For a fair account of the views on God in Rāmānuja's and Madhva's traditions see Lott (1980).
[13]Translation by Lott (1980, p. 132).
[14]Translation adapted from McComas Taylor (2021, pp. 467-468).
[15]For Rāmānuja, see *Śrī-Bhaṣya* 1.1.1 (Bādarāyaṇa et al., 1962, pp. 87), and for Jīva Gosvāmī, see *Bhagavat-Sandarbha* 3 (Gosvāmī & Haridāsaśāstrī, 1984).
[16]Translation by Eric Lott (1980, p. 149).
[17]See Bahua (2010), for example.
[18]The *Bhagavad-Gītā*, for example, states that God, Kṛṣṇa, who is also identified as the speaker of the text, is the great Lord of all the worlds (5.29), the supreme divine person (10.12), the God of the gods (10.14), and their origin (10.12, 11.38); no one is equal to or greater than him (11.38).
[19] Although it postulates a primary deity as the object of worship and devotion, Henotheism does not deny the existence of other deities.
[20]We are here relying on a general and common sense understanding of the distinction between texts and traditions. That there is such a distinction is shown by the fact that a Vaiṣṇava text like the *Bhavagad-Gītā* or the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, for example, is seminal to several different traditions, which invariably understand and interpret them in quite particular ways.