VEDĀNTA, THEOLOGY, AND MODERNITY: THEOLOGY'S NEW CONVERSATION WITH THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

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IT HAS recently been suggested by Joseph A. DiNoia that the new theological conversation with the world religions has broad implications even for areas of theology not usually connected with that conversation.[1] In particular, he suggests how this new conversation may be of assistance in the reconstitution of the tradition of "philosophical theology," a tradition relying on the possibility of "referential arguments and arguments to support predictions" (406). The present essay seeks to affirm his thesis and to extend it by reference to a particular example from the Indian theological tradition. I will argue first that the Hindu Vedānta theology, as represented here by the nondualist (*advaita*) school of Śaṅkara (8th century C.E.), is an ally that supports a theological critique of some major features of modern thought and shows a way to re-establish referentiality. I will also suggest that attention to Vedānta challenges theology to review and rethink its own intersection with modernity, to critique the theological variation on the "orientalist" confinement of the non-Western world, and, finally, to view in a new light that "postmodern" deconstructionist thought which has often been thought to be alien to Christian theology.

This appreciation and extension of DiNoia's insight requires first a review of his assessment of the current situation. He begins by recollecting the traditional and normative practice of religious groups, Christian and non-Christian, to support beliefs by appeals to the nature of the world about them and to insist that attention to the data yielded by that appeal confirms the community's beliefs (404-5). Arguments about the existence of God, DiNoia continues, entail this kind of reference and can be divided into references of three kinds: to "regular or persistent features of the natural order," to "extraordinary or unusual facts or events, whether straightforwardly miraculous or simply nonregular," and to "certain features of the subjective states of human beings" (407).

DiNoia then recounts the crisis regarding the use and possibility of this referential argumentation, a crisis several centuries in the making,

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[1] "Philosophical Theology in the Perspective of Religious Diversity," *TS* 49 (1988) 401–16.

and the gradually diminished use of these three kinds of reference. As part of the effort to specify the "kernel of natural religion," arguments regarding the natural order were gradually severed from "the doctrinal schemes of Christianity and other theistic religious traditions" and became self-standing efforts at apologetics aimed at sceptical outsiders (408-9). It was, above all, Kant who subjected these arguments to a devastating critique, in order to show their inadequacy in getting beyond the structure of human knowing to judgments about the world as it objectively is. In response, theology on the whole turned away from natural-order arguments.

Subsequently, however, it also turned away from the historical as well, "in the face of the combined challenge of Feuerbach, Marx, Darwin, and the historical-critical study of the Bible" (410). It was left with the experiential alone as its ground for argumentation. But this version of natural theology too, "rooted exclusively in some account of the transcendent dynamism or structure of human subjectivity" (410), came under criticism from Feuerbach (again) and Freud, and lost much of its vigor—although even today the appeal to the experiential is still the basis for a great deal of theology. Theological argument in this century has increasingly taken a linguistic or narrative form and in effect become self-enclosed within language, its system of rules and meanings. Even figures such as Karl Barth secured the divine identity "by basing it radically in the divine act of revelation and the narrative it engenders" (410).

DiNoia argues that "it is crucial to the postmodern project in theology to recover the broadest possible context for theological affirmation" (411), to "locate Christian worship, nurture, practice, and belief on the widest possible conceptual map" (413), and so to "break through the constraints imposed on Christian theology in the course of its long dialogue with the modern Western philosophical tradition" (414), to reassert the possibility that "primary doctrines can be supported by arguments to establish a reference to the entity or state at the center of the community's pattern of life and arguments to explicate the force of its predictions" (414). He uses Aquinas as an example of a thinker whose work, though from the premodern period and in need of supplement on various levels, remains an enduring resource for this retrieval.

According to DiNoia, it is in this project of reconstruction and retrieval that the world religions can become valued partners to the Christian theologian. Like Christianity, many of these religions defend universal truth claims and appeal to the nature of the world, the events of history, and subjective experience in support of these claims. The proposed conversation with them is therefore likely to be of a different sort from

that of theology with modern thought. It encourages a retrieval and rejuvenation of strategies and topics appropriate to Christian theology's tradition, including the possibility of objective claims and referential arguments. DiNoia suggests that "An important outcome of this shift in conversation partners [from the modern West to the world's religions] will be the recovery, after centuries of accommodation to the challenges of skeptical Western philosophers, of a broadly realist construal of the force of at least some elements in the typical discourse of the major religious traditions. ... Rather than be ruled by philosophical theories about the structure of Christian discourse and the topics which it addresses, the encounter with other religions invites the Christian theologian to develop the agenda for his/her inquiries with a view to the internal requirements of Christian discourse as a form of discourse exhibiting certain structural features—among them a fairly straightforward claim to the existential force (in the logical sense) and truth of primary doctrines which convey beliefs" (402, 411).

In what follows I accept DiNoia's version of the modern predicament as my starting point, and on that basis I explore how India's Vedānta theology sheds new light on the predicament and potential "remedies" for it. I will first describe certain aspects of the Vedānta system and show its appropriateness to the present discussion. I will then comment on the need to retrieve Vedānta itself from what has been its distorted, "orientalist" reception in the modern West. Finally, I will suggest how a retrieval of its full theological richness also widens the conversation DiNoia has in mind, by drawing "postmodern deconstructionism" into the discussion.

THE VEDĀNTA THEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Whether one deals, as I will here, with the nondualist Vedānta system of Śaṅkara (8th century C.E.), or with one of the other, later, more evidently theistic systems such as Rāmānuja's (11th century C.E.),[2] Vedānta is an excellent conversation partner for the project DiNoia proposes. All the Vedānta schools traced their roots to the Upaniṣads, ritual-mystical-philosophical texts which date from as early as the eighth or ninth century B.C.E.[3] Vedānta was in part intended to systematize the

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[2] For a standard review of the Vedānta, see M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin) 336–413. On Śaṅkara's Vedānta one can still consult usefully Paul Deussen's *The System of the Vedānta*, as translated by Charles Johnston (reprint, New York: Dover, 1973), and also Hajime Nakamura's *A History of the Vedānta Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983).

[3] Throughout I will generally use the past tense to refer to the Vedānta positions, since I am dealing with ancient material. However, a number of the Vedānta schools are still productive, in Sanskrit and other languages.

diverse speculations of the Upaniṣads and establish their legitimacy as orthodox, revealed texts. It did this in opposition both to those who claimed that only the earlier, ritual portions of the Veda (hymns and rubrics) were important and binding, and to those who claimed that the Upaniṣads—along with the earlier ritual texts—were mere texts, devoid of authoritative information about reality, righteousness, and the path to salvation. With much of the Christian tradition, Vedānta held that there are religious truth claims in the Upaniṣads which are not reducible to ritual or social directives, that these are of universal significance, and that they may be defended by reasonable argument and appeals to the nature of the world.

The vehicle of Vedānta's legitimation of the Upaniṣads was the submission of those texts to the principles of interpretation and organization worked out in the school of ritual theology known as Mīmāṁsā. In response to the Buddhist critique of the notion and authority of scripture in general, the Mīmāṁsā thinkers had, from before the 2nd century B.C.E., analyzed and reorganized the (preupaniṣadic) hymns and rubrics of the Vedic scriptures[4] into an organic unity intelligible according to a basic set of rules of derivation and transformation, thought to be capable of explaining every complexity of the system. The distinctive Mīmāṁsā— and then Vedānta—position on scripture and ritual was the conscious combination of a radical demythologization *with* the maintenance of the received scriptural/ritual system according to such rules.

To divert the Buddhist critique of the "unseen," Mīmāṁsā downplayed the referential value of scriptural statements regarding the "super-natural"—the gods, heaven, the transcendent results of sacrifices, the creation of the cosmos, etc.—and located the meaning of such statements in their contribution to the wholeness and performability of the textual/ritual wholes to which they belonged. Thus, scripture tells us that there are gods, and so we can invoke them; we desire to be happy, heaven is a place of happiness, and so we are encouraged to perform sacrifices in order to gain heaven, etc. Mīmāṁsā rethought the notion of religious efficacy and the value of religious action by elaborating a ritual model for the "new," according to which the world is made up of strictly "worldly" elements which are rearranged in significant, new structures according to scriptural prescriptions. In other words, scripture and ritual, and the human life ordered to these, refer to a reality that is not simply "there" but is constituted from and subsists in these articulated signifiers. According to Mīmāṁsā, to ask about religion and its details as these might be known outside the textually shaped world is to fall into the

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[4] Throughout I will refer simply to "scripture" or "scriptures" for the set of texts (as an oral or written canon) considered sacred by the Mīmāṁsā and Vedānta thinkers.

error of a misplaced and deracinated objectivity, from which one can escape only by retrieving the grammar of a scripturally based world.

So too, the Buddhist critique of the authority of the authors of scriptural texts—what experience did they have, such that we should neglect our experience and pay attention to theirs?—was diverted by an elaboration of an "intratextual" process of explaining scriptural texts, whereby the rules of reading imbedded in the grammar and literary genres of the texts themselves were thought to be sufficient to communicate their meaning, without the need for any appeal to the intent of the alleged authors, who subsequently were declared to be the expositors rather than the authors of the texts. While not going so far as to say that texts have no meaning, Mīmāṁsā insisted that the texts themselves and the world ritually constituted in accord with these texts are the origin and final locus of their meaning, not something outside themselves. So too, rituals are systems of meaning which are not reducible to what they mean to their performers, who remain encompassed parts of a larger whole.[5]

Like their counterparts in other religions, but perhaps more consciously so because of the problematic posed by Buddhism in Mīmāṁsā's formative period, the Mīmāṁsā thinkers thus deliberately "read" the world out of scripture as a system of language and ritual rules, explaining it first by direct appeals to scripture and then by an elaboration of that initial reference through a reason imbued with a scriptural perspective. The distinctive Mīmāṁsā contribution here was the view that just as the scriptural/ritual domain is a reorganized portion of a larger, ordinary world, that larger world itself is properly understood only from the perspective of that internal and privileged domain; the world is the set of "raw materials" always available to contribute to that new arrangement. The "natural" is never simply a given, but requires transformation according to scripture's directives.[6]

Vedānta adopted the Mīmāṁsā tenets regarding interpretation, the limits placed on authorship, the interconnection of text, performance, and world. The feature of Vedānta which differentiates it from Mīmāṁsā was its claim that *brahman*, the "absolute reality" of which the major Upaniṣadic texts speak and which is the object of salvific knowledge, is

[5] On the problem of meaning in the Hindu ritual context, see Frits Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26 (1979) 2–22; Hans H. Penner, "Language, Ritual and Meaning," *Numen* 32 (1985) 1–16; Francis X. Clooney, "Why the Veda Has No Author," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (1987) 659–84.

[6] For helpful insights into the function of sacred scripture in shaping a community's world view, see Jonathan Z. Smith's "Sacred Persistence," in his *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982).

a truly extratextual reality. It is *not* constituted by texts, but is truly referred to, "heard," in the texts.[7] The Upaniṣads tell us about a reality which in theory can be known apart from scripture.

The extratextual, referential signification of the scriptural texts was not allowed to warrant speculation about *brahman* such as would develop apart from the exegesis of texts. This is so because Vedānta maintained, *mutatis mutandis*, Mīmāṁsā's performative understanding of scripture. Instead of scripture as the source for the detail and obligation of ritual performance, the Upaniṣads as scripture were now understood to motivate meditation and to provide its content. Meditation on scriptural texts was understood to be a transformative process which would turn the novice meditator (who knows the Sanskrit language and its texts) into a skilled and purified "reader" (or, "hearer") who knows how to "read" reality out of the Upaniṣads, and who therefore attains to an unencumbered view of *brahman*. Although *brahman* can be known outside the text, the knowing is still through the text; it is possible only for the person who has mastered the text and been transformed by it. When the text has been "performed" in meditation, and the reader/meditator transformed by the process, then *brahman* becomes accessible as an extratextual reality.

In fact, the essential Vedānta positions on *brahman* and the scriptures are fashioned precisely to preclude the emergence of a discourse which is merely *about brahman*. For example, the most important of these positions in Śaṅkara's Vedānta is that *brahman* is knowable in two ways: as *nirguṇa*, devoid of all qualifications (even such as would distinguish the human knower from *brahman*), and as *saguṇa*, possessed (serially or all at once) of the set of qualifications mentioned in the Upaniṣads: *brahman* is all-knowing, all-powerful, the fulness of being, perfect bliss, etc. The *nirguṇa*, which is ultimate perfect and unsurpassable knowledge, is known only through the process of understanding, and then passing beyond, each of the numerous *guṇas* of *brahman* given in the Upaniṣads. In arguing for a radical distinction, a "gap" between the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa*, Śaṅkara is not seeking to make the final, best notional distinction, but rather to point out and insure attention to the *active* nature of the transition that has to be made if one is to know *brahman* properly, fully. Through an exploration of each of the various Upaniṣadic qualifications of *brahman*, one is readied to "encounter" *brahman* beyond ordinary, notional understandings. The insistence that the *nirguṇa* is radically different from the *saguṇa*, and alone is real, was stated to insure

[7] The operative metaphors in Advaita Vedānta are those of hearing, not seeing; knowledge, too, is the result of hearing and understanding, and its object is not something "there," to be seen.

meditation's efficacy and irreplaceability, not to invite the gnostic to a quicker, less textually encumbered state of knowledge, free from scripture. The pairing and distinguishing of the *nirguṇa* and the *saguṇa* insured that one can attain to a *brahman* beyond the text, to which the texts refer, *and* that one is to achieve this through the texts and not apart from them.

The practical methods of exegesis served to balance the *nirguṇa* and the *saguṇa*, *brahman* as extratextual and *brahman* as accessible (in practice) only through the texts. Considerable concern was devoted to negotiating the "competing claims" of texts in regard to one another, the implied or necessitated limits of their denotations vis-à-vis what other texts had to say about *brahman*. The most refined Vedānta reasoning came to fruition in rules guiding the reading of texts and the way in which meaning leads one beyond text to the "real."

THEOLOGICAL ORIENTALISM

I have thus far presented prominent features of the Vedānta theological system, hoping to show that there is much in the Vedānta material that reflects, though with nuance, issues that are key to the Christian theological project. However, my presentation is something of a minority opinion when it comes to the nature of the Vedānta which is to be considered by theologians; for Vedānta, probably the Indian system most frequently considered for theological purposes, has usually been presented as a monistic, mystical, or philosophical system which raises for the theologian the issues of nondualism, the impersonality of the divine, the reality of the world, etc.

I believe that this common view misconstrues the Vedānta material. The technicalities of Vedānta interpretation cannot be argued here, but I do wish to argue that if, as I suggest, Vedānta has been misconstrued as a monistic philosophy or a mysticism by Western theologians, this is in part because even if they are aware of the problems for theology latent in the context of modern thought, they have nevertheless tended to view India (and other cultures) through the eyes of modern Western thinking. The theology of religions and the related disciplines of missiology etc. have accepted modernity's selective, reductive portrayals of the non-Christian world, portrayals that in effect submit it to the same distortions that have restricted the Christian theological tradition. The modern, Western misreading of Vedānta deprives it of its theological nature and understands it through categories alien to it; this misreading is what I will call "theological orientalism."

A brief detour into a consideration of how the West[8] has viewed the "East" is required to explain and locate "theological orientalism." The complex assimilative and distortive process known as "orientalism"[9] has, over the past several centuries, assumed that the thought of the modern West is the privileged frame within which one can interpret the thought of India (or of any other culture), and that the Western scholar is better able to understand non-Westerners than they do themselves, as he or she identifies according to the categories of some modern discipline what is of enduring value in non-Western thought. This attitude of confident superiority mixes the (notionally distinct but in practice convergent) tendencies of Greek philosophy, the Christian missionary imperative, and Europe's expansive colonial mentality during recent centuries.

From the superior position of interpreter the Western thinker "mines" India for data in support of either of two goals. First, information is sought which reveals the true essence of India, particularly as India is differentiated from its "other," the West. Thus, the exaggerated importance given to the mystical and spiritual side of Indian culture mirrors age-old Western expectations about India that can be traced back through the Middle Ages to the ancient world; this in turn allows for a nice contrast with the modern West's view of itself as material, active, engaged in the world, etc. Interest in India as a "mystical east" in recent times has also provided an alternative to a suffocating rationality, and when the "experiential" becomes the most prominent measure of religion in the West, India is recast as a place of pure experience, insights that reach beyond mere reason, as the home of people who care little about the world as we in the modern West have to deal with it. Unfortunately for those who yearn for a better, more spiritual India as a place of theological refreshment, all of these portrayals constitute a circular process in which the India we seek is the one we create: one interprets India selectively, translates only certain kinds of texts, reads only modern Indian authors whose works correspond to Western tastes, all in order to find in India what the West needs—India becomes the place of the natural, or the Spirit, or the mystical, because that is what we were looking for. By contrast, a return to a system such as the Advaita Vedānta, as it is presented to us in its texts and commentarial tradition, serves as a

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[8] "The West" is of course only a shorthand indication of a general attitude which requires specification, exception, etc., lest the vice of "orientalism" be compounded by a hypothetical "occidentalism."

[9] See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); on India in particular, see Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India," *Modern Asian Studies* 20 (1986) 401–46. On the general issue of the reception of India in the West, see Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University, 1984), and Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988).

corrective to this circular process.

The second, related mode of the orientalist recovery of India has been to abstract from Indian culture (and from its Sanskrit texts) particular ideas which seem particularly timely or relevant to the top intellectual issues of the West at any given moment. Thus, in the 18th century much study of India was motivated by the quest for the roots of Indo-European language and culture; during the 19th century and even until today much has been made of the philosophical genius of Vedānta and how closely it approximates one or another Western philosophical system, such as Hegelian or Bradleyan idealism; classical Indian logic (*nyāya*) has been admired in recent times as kindred to British analytic philosophy, etc. Today's interest in hermeneutics has meant, predictably, that much of the attention paid to Vedānta and its Mīmāṁsā predecessor now focuses on their language theory—in abstraction, though, from the concrete exegetical projects of either school.[10]

Much interesting material has surfaced through such investigations, but they are inevitably distorted; regarding our example, they have neglected the full project of Vedānta as a scripturally based, realistic theology working within the grammatical/ritual paradigm articulated in Mīmāṁsā. Reduced to its philosophy or hermeneutics (which are indeed parts, but only parts, of its system), Vedānta's larger claim—that its view of the world, rooted and articulated in the scriptures, is the correct view, confirmed by experience, conformable to reason, and defensible by argument—has been overlooked.[11]

An example of where the distortion of Vedānta has made a difference pertains to the *nirguṇa/saguṇa* distinction mentioned above. Although, as we have seen, the distinction functions within the context of scriptural meditation, it has often been portrayed as "really" a philosophical one, constituting a hierarchy of knowledge, distinguishing true knowledge

[10] See, e.g., regarding Mīmāṁsā, Othmar Gachter, *Hermeneutics and Language in Pūrva Mīmāṁsā* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), and Francis X. D'Sa, *Śabdaprāmāṇyam in Śabara and Kumārila* (Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, University of Vienna, 1980). Regarding Vedānta, the best place to start is Wilhelm Halbfass, "Human Reason and Vedic Revelation in the Philosophy of Śaṅkara," in his *Studies in Kumārila and Śaṅkara* (Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik 9; Reinbeck: Verlag für Orientalistische Fachpublikation, 1983). As the essay's title indicates, Halbfass explicitly addresses larger theological issues regarding the Vedānta perspective.

[11] The large irony, of course, is that when theology thus separates its encounter with the world religions from its argument with modernity, and thus looks at the religions through modernity's lenses, it then will inevitably notice that the study of religions seems to undercut theology in a very modern fashion. This is due not to the nature of the material studied but because "world religions" are in important ways constructs of the same modern thought that is problematic for the theologian. The solution, however, is not to ignore the religions but to become more critical of the lens of modern thought.

from false; those who are truly enlightened know the *nirguṇa*, while those who know *brahman* merely as endowed with qualities remain in ignorance. Accordingly, philosophical discourse, which naturally operates on the "higher" level, abstracts the essential truth and reference to *brahman* as *nirguṇa* from the Upaniṣads and then thinks about it.

The result is that the Vedānta position, when it finally passes from the domain of its Indological interpreters to that of a Christian theological audience, appears as one more system which separates true knowledge from ritual, scripture, the spiritual life and its roots in faith, etc., thus posing dichotomies the Christian theologian cannot easily accept. The refined, carefully articulated roots of the *nirguṇa* strategy as a defense of scripture and meditation are lost sight of, and the incorrect impression is given that there is no analogue here to Christianity as a positive religion with texts and rites contributing to an environment within which knowledge—wisdom—grows.

Since Śaṅkara does use the terminology of ignorance, levels of knowledge, etc., the philosophical level of interpretation cannot be completely discarded, for this too would be a reduction of the system to a neat package. Nor do I wish to argue that the *nirguṇa/saguṇa* doctrine can be borrowed in any simple, immediate fashion to constitute a Christian doctrine of God, since a careful process of comparison and contrast is required first. Nevertheless, it makes most sense, I suggest, to think of Vedānta as a theology and to see the required differentiations as those occurring within a theological realm, not between theology and something outside it. To converse with the Vedānta thinkers is to converse with fellow theologians.

Once we begin to liberate Vedānta from its orientalist prison, however, a larger revision will begin to take place. Vedānta and its Mīmāṁsā predecessor will no longer be able to be fixed without remainder in that premodern period where Christian theology flourished most broadly and comfortably, for we will gradually discover that there really is no "medieval" India, nor a "reformation," nor an "enlightenment," nor a "modern" period, as we know these; India's history has different markers. But there is still, I wish to argue, theology. Vedānta is neither something totally different from Christian theology nor precisely what Christian theology may have been in an earlier age; it is instead a coherent, world-explaining theological whole which partially fits our expectations.

The differently developed problematic of Indian thought suggests that Vedānta incorporated attitudes toward texts and "philosophical thinking" which cut across the array of Europe's premodern, modern, and even postmodern categories. What is "modern" may come to be seen as part of India's "premodern" past, and what in the West is "postmodern"

may be recognized as a regular part of India's theological tradition, and our "time line" of premodern, modern, and postmodern will be largely confused. We will be compelled to look anew at the story of modern Western thought and religion's and theology's places in it as we have heard these explained up to now.

The required project of revision is too large for even an introductory sketch here, and it is certainly too large for this author to undertake alone. I will limit myself here to several suggestions regarding a particularly fruitful and telling example, as to how "ancient" Vedānta converges with that postmodernist thought known as "deconstructionism," and how it approaches the problem of modernity from the other end of the time line, *from* the postmodernist end.[12]

VEDĀNTA AND DECONSTRUCTIONISM

The following provisional account suggests two ways in which Vedānta intersects with deconstructionism. First, using an essay of Roland Barthes, I will highlight the view that texts are not merely quantified bearers of their authors' intentions, nor simply materials for readers' consumption; rather, they require engagement in the construction of their meaning(s). Vedānta's use of the Upaniṣads is better understood when the Upaniṣads and the commentaries on them are seen as constituting a "Text" in Barthes's sense, and not as a series of "works"; so too, the Vedānta example sheds useful light on the possible theological use of Barthes's distinction. Second, using an essay of Jacques Derrida, I will highlight the view that texts are permanent, irreplaceable loci bearing a surfeit of meaning not liable to final definition; this set of textual meanings serves to establish for philosophical thinking boundaries which it cannot permanently transgress and understand. Derrida's strategy echoes, though without any historical connection, the Vedānta concern to subordinate the independent functioning of reason to scripture, and suggests a way of understanding how a scripture-based theology does respond to philosophy's tendency toward total understanding.

In a brief, rich essay entitled "From Work to Text,"[13] Barthes begins by pointing to an important transition taking place in contemporary thought, manifest in various fields and disciplines: "the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down ... to the benefit of a new object and a new language, neither of which is in the domain of those branches of knowledge that one calmly sought to confront" (73). He discusses major features

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[12] It is important to admit the tentative and experimental nature of my proposal; the response of those whose specialty is deconstructionism will be most welcome.

[13] Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in Josué V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1979) 73–81.

of this ongoing, still incomplete transformation, by describing the shift, in the new interdisciplinary context, from the production of the "work" as a defined product of research, literature, and communication, to the more disparate and differently assessed phenomenon of the "Text."[14]

He begins by suggesting that "the Text must not be thought of as a defined object . . . [it] is a methodological field . . . the Text reveals itself, articulates itself according to or against certain rules . . . *the Text is experienced only in an activity, a production*" (74–75). Contrariwise, the "work" is "concrete, occupying a portion of book-space. . . . While the work is held in the hand, the Text is held in language: it exists only as discourse" (75–76). Analogously, I suggest, the Upaniṣadic texts are understood by Vedānta as directives for the activity of meditation, active reading. They are continually decomposed and rewoven according to rules (inherent in them and articulated by the Mīmāṁsā and Vedānta thinkers) which locate, relocate, and dislocate parts of any given Upaniṣad into functional wholes appropriate to a particular meditation. Their primary, performative "usability" precludes their transformation into literary/religious works (merely) available for use within one limited, defined field of established meaning. The reader who looks to Vedānta simply for an explanation of what is in the Upaniṣads is inevitably disappointed; the Upaniṣads qua works disappear into the Vedānta inquiry, are not visibly legible at all. The modern reader who merely reads an Upaniṣad labeled by this or that name reads it as a "work" and not as "Text."

Barthes explains further that

whereas the Text is approached and experienced in relation to the sign, the work closes itself on a signified. . . . The Text . . . practices the infinite deferral of the signified: the Text is *dilatory*; its field is that of the signifier. . . . The engendering of the perpetual signifier within the field of the Text should not be identified with an organic process of maturation or a hermeneutic process of deepening, but rather with a serial movement of dislocations, overlappings, and variations . . . like language, it is structured but decentered, without closure. . . (75–76).

We have seen that the Vedānta theologians insist that *brahman*, though accessible only in texts, is nevertheless a reality outside texts, and that they likewise argue for a process of maturation in the reader, whereby the hearing/reading becomes understanding. Thus it is clear that they do not adhere to the exact position espoused by Barthes. Nevertheless, Barthes's language of deferral and dislocation illuminates for us the functioning of the *saguṇa/nirguṇa* distinction described earlier.

[14] Of the seven differences between "work" and "text" that he points to, I will introduce here only the first, third, fifth, and sixth.

Multiple language acts in multiple texts, in their reference to the *guṇas* of *brahman*, signify a *brahman* which is ultimately *nirguṇa*, unsignifiable; *brahman* is repeatedly deferred within the system of *guṇas* that are always approaching a definition of *brahman*. It is that unsignifiability, *nirguṇa-tva*, which makes the system of Upaniṣadic signs endlessly alive and rich, as each *guṇa* necessarily fails, and must be allowed to fail, in achieving a proper signification of its *nirguṇa* object which eludes location at the center of signification. Finally, although the Text cannot be read as representing a process or product of maturation, the intelligibility of reading lies in the effect of the "dislocations, overlappings, and variations" on the reader, who emerges differently after dealing with the text. While it would be inappropriate to label Barthes's reader a "meditator," the notion of a person who is transformed by submission to the action of the Text is not entirely inappropriate.

Third, Barthes argues that there is a deconstruction of controlled, linear reading when the Text overtakes the work and undermines its "authority": "the work is caught up in a process of filiation. Three things are postulated here: a *determination* of the work by the outside world (by race, then by history), a *consecution* of works among themselves, and an *allocation* of the work to its author. . . . The Text, on the other hand, is read without the father's signature" (78). Vedānta, which accepts the Mīmāṁsā view that texts have no authors, shares with Barthes the denial of filiation and of the concomitant shortcuts and privileges that come with the appeal to the author. The intratextual rules of meaning, by which a "text" is not subordinated to that to which it refers, allow it to "mean," without this being given in advance, or being allowed to eventuate in its replacement with a text-independent, exterior intelligibility.

Finally, whereas the work is an object of consumption, Barthes's

Text (if only because of its frequent "unreadability") decants the work from its consumption and gathers it up as play, task, production, and activity . . . the reader himself plays twice over: playing the Text as one plays a game, he searches for a practice that will re-produce the Text; but, to keep that practice from being reduced to a passive, inner mimesis (the Text being precisely what resists such a reduction), he also *plays* the Text in the musical sense of the term (79).

The rules learned by the Vedānta theologian transform "him" (as was usually the case) from passive consumer and abstracter of interesting and useful data into a participant who masters and performs the Text in order to reach *brahman* through it. Mastery of Vedānta's commentarial game is the acquisition of mastery over the elusive Upaniṣads and skill in the meditational project, in order to enact the text and bring it to completion. Learning *to use* texts and by them to be liberated through encounter with *brahman* is the true Vedānta performance; it is part of

Vedānta's project to prevent mere learnedness—what in India and the West is called "punditry"—from replacing that performative ability.

I have thus far suggested that Vedānta's use of the Upaniṣads and construction of a scripturally defined world is better understood if we realize that the Vedānta theologians are constituting the Upaniṣads as a "Text" and not as (merely) given, informative "works." Likewise, Vedānta's insistence that textual meditation leads one ultimately to hear *nirguṇa brahman* indicates how Barthes's system need not remain entirely foreign to theology's goals.

Vedānta's understanding of scripture as Text serves also to limit the role of the independent inquiry of reason, to "marginate" it; in this it shares a common goal with the deconstructionist project and, I believe, something of theology's struggle to confine reason within the boundaries of scriptural revelation. An essay by Jacques Derrida affords us an example for illustrating this point.

In "Tympan," his preface to *Margins of Philosophy*,[15] Derrida asks whether and how one can conceive of and express limits to philosophy. Philosophy, he says, is "doubtless the only discourse that has even intended to receive its name only from itself" (x); it resists any effort to indicate what is beyond the limits of philosophy. Although the ideas of the "limit" and the "other" are not foreign to philosophy (xiii)—which relishes the chance to reflect on its many "others"—philosophy "has always intended, from its point of view, to maintain its relation with the nonphilosophical, that is the antiphilosophical, with the practices and knowledge, empirical or not, that constitute its other" (xii). Through a focus on Being and the concomitant claim that it among all is the one that best understands Being, philosophy boldly proceeds "*to insist* upon thinking *its other*, its proper other"; but "in thinking it *as such*, in recognizing it, one misses it" (xi). The major means of philosophy's strategy of maintaining its position of control are two. First, there is *hierarchy*, by which "the particular sciences and regional ontologies are subordinated to general ontology, and then to fundamental ontology" (xix), all of this with all other disciplines under philosophical jurisdiction. Second, there is *envelopment*, whereby "the whole is implied, in the speculative mode of reflection and expression, in each part. Homogeneous, concentric, and circulating indefinitely, the movement of the whole is remarked in the partial determinations of the system or encyclopedia, without the status of that remark, and the partitioning of the part, giving rise to any general deformation of the space" (xx).

Is there, Derrida asks, a place beyond philosophy, a real margin which

[15] Jacques Derrida, "Tympan," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987) ix–xxix.

limits its ability to explain and define all else? "Under what conditions," he asks, "could one *mark*, for a philosopheme in general, a *limit*, a margin that it could not infinitely reappropriate, *conceive* as its own, in advance engendering and interning the process of its expropriation . . . proceeding to its inversion by itself?" (xv). The ten essays in *Margins* constitute a series of efforts to discover that uncomfortable, unaccounted-for, and "différant" place where philosophy meets a boundary which eludes its definitions:

these ten writings *in fact* ask the question of the margin. . . . They interrogate philosophy beyond its meaning, treating it not only as a discourse but as a determined text inscribed in a general text, enclosed within the representation of its own margin. Which compels us not only to reckon with the entire logic of the margin, but also to take an entirely other reckoning: which is doubtless to recall that beyond the philosophical text there is not a blank, virgin, empty margin, but another text, a weave of differences of forces without any present center of reference . . . and also to recall that the *written* text of philosophy (this time in its books) overflowers and cracks its meaning (xxiii).

Christopher Norris summarizes the project of *Margins* as highlighting and questioning philosophy's "refusal to countenance a writing that allows full play to the disseminating powers of language, the undecidability of terms . . . that suspend philosophy's most crucial working distinctions."[16]

This retrieval of the larger, "general text" beyond philosophy,[17] which cannot be entirely, finally thought by philosophy, occurs in a return to specific texts and to a reading of texts that is a permanent project which never finishes by abstracting from texts a single main idea or authorial intention; it constantly allows interpretations to be read and measured against new interpretations and other voices within the text's stubborn plurality of meaning. Philosophy's own words and materials, as written, become the occasion for a persistent questioning of its self-confident assurance that it can explain everything.

Vedānta's project, though different on numerous points, converges with Derrida's in an interesting way. Both, despite quite differently

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[16] Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987) 80.

[17] In his *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1986), Rudolphe Gasché explains that the notion of "general text" does *not* mean that there is nothing but language, or even that there are no extratextual referents, but only that meaning is never finally exhausted by reference: "What Derrida calls the general text is characterized, if not constituted, by reference, but that does not imply that the term refers to a referent that would come to stop and thus exhaust its reference . . . the general text *is about*, yet without a decidable referent that could saturate, in the last instance, its referral to Otherness" (280–81).

articulated agendas, are efforts to break the hold of an abstracting and theorizing mode of thought which excludes alterity and to give precedence to what eludes verbalization and definition, be it the *nirguṇa* or the *différant*. The Vedānta insists that reason does have its legitimate role, but that full understanding requires a return to the text, even if (or, because) the text is never finished with saying what *brahman* is. Vedānta (to its own satisfaction, at least) confounded the Buddhists by an insistence on the given textuality of knowledge and on the elusive, deferred limits where thought defers and is unable to give meaning: it does not find categories in which to explain *brahman*, although it is always on the verge of this explanation, as an understanding of the *saguṇa* approaches the *nirguṇa*. Vedānta "philosophy," to the extent that there is such a thing, is consciously marginalized from the start, prevented from making final claims, because it never succeeds in getting out of the scriptures.[18]

Hence the kind of modern philosophy that has confronted the West's theology over the past several centuries has not (yet) emerged in the Vedānta tradition (nor, I think, in India as a whole). Though often pointed out as a weakness in the Vedānta tradition—when, that is, Vedānta has not been turned into philosophy from the start—this lack of philosophy can be understood as a sign of Vedānta' success in *looking ahead* and pre-empting some of the problems that plague Western theology; philosophy was not allowed to become the arbiter of what counts for understanding. Today Derrida is in a sense *looking back* on a strong philosophical tradition and seeking, in the written, a way to frustrate philosophy's comfortable, all-encompassing claims. Though weaknesses may surface in the deconstructionist position too, Derrida nevertheless shares the discomfort DiNoia and many others have with modernity's comprehensive explanation of the world and reduction of the world to that explanation; he shares with Vedānta the effort to discover the margins of philosophy in the text.

Before one can accept these proposed correlations between Vedānta and deconstructionism, they will, or course, require amplification by a more thorough consideration of the early Vedānta texts and of the works of Barthes, Derrida, and others. One will have to combine "skill" in Vedānta with "skill" in deconstructionism, to be able to decide which of their shared features are really important. In this, however, one will have to gain a certain distance from the perspective of modernity, in order to

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[18] The primary source for our information on reason and its limits in Vedānta is section 2.1–2.2 in the basic Vedānta text, the *Uttara Mīmāṃsā Sūtras*. In that section the Vedānta positions are subjected to reasonable investigation, and other positions refuted reasonably, without reliance on scripture. See Halbfass, "Human Reason" (n. 10 above), for an introduction to Śaṅkara's view of reason and revelation.

see that Vedānta is not mystical monism and that deconstructionism is not literary nihilism—though to the modern mind monism and nihilism may seem reasonable labels for the two.

Then the Christian theologian's task begins; she or he can then attempt to discern the main features of this new conversation which introduces Vedānta into theology's conversation with modernity, and deconstructionism into a conversation with traditional theology that is not formulated entirely according to modernity's agenda. So too, it may turn out that deconstructionism is an important means by which to shape a more fruitful Christian-Vedānta theological discussion; deconstruction's strategies for the reading of texts may help to highlight some important features of the Vedānta project of exegetical theology and thereby show how something as apparently specific and nonphilosophical as a "comparative exegetics" can serve as a ground for the new conversation. The recovery of scriptural/textual particularity, including both its commentarial procedures and its particular mode of external reference, may help to reverse the tendency in modern thought away from these, and in this way contribute to DiNoia's project of sketching the basis for a "postmodern" Christian theology.

CONCLUSION

DiNoia has invited us to enter the new conversation with the world's religions more vigorously, with the realization that this conversation will change what we are able or motivated to say in our older conversation with modernity. My role in this essay has been to introduce by example the voice of India's Vedānta into this conversation, to see what happens when DiNoia's proposal is implemented. Christian theologians will, I hope, begin to recognize and welcome Vedānta's concern about referentiality and the value of texts, and likewise its efforts to construct from its Mīmāṁsā heritage a relational, textual paradigm for articulating performative meaning *out of* the sacred Text. Rather than arguing out the problem of referentiality entirely on the uneasy terrain of philosophical theology, Vedānta rephrases the "in" and "out" of referentiality by rereading the world within the borders of Mīmāṁsā's textual, scriptural/ritual frame.

Vedānta's immediate contribution to the situation DiNoia describes is thus to encourage a reconnection of systematic theology with contemporary exegesis regarding conclusions and methods. In a historical retrieval we need to trace more thoroughly the impact of the medieval shift from grammar to science as the paradigm for theology and to ask again what difference this has made. We need also to pay more attention to the rabbinic tradition of interpretation, which did not make the same