

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta

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Abstract The philosophical teachings of the nineteenth-century Bengali mystic Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa have been a source of lively interpretive controversy. Numerous commentators have interpreted Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's views in terms of a particular philosophical sect, such as Tantra, Advaita, or Viśiṣṭādvaita. Militating against this sectarian approach, this article argues that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy is best characterized as “Vijñāna Vedānta,” a resolutely nonsectarian philosophy—rooted in the spiritual experience of what Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa calls “*vijñāna*”—that harmonizes various apparently conflicting religious faiths, sectarian philosophies, and spiritual disciplines. From Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's expansive spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna*, God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and beyond it. Part One of this article outlines five interpretive principles that should govern any attempt to determine Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views on the basis of his recorded teachings. With this hermeneutic groundwork in place, Part Two reconstructs from Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings the six main tenets of his Vijñāna Vedānta. This article demonstrates that the concept of *vijñāna* provides the unifying framework for interpreting and synthesizing Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views on the scope of reason, the nature of God, the relationship between Brahman and Śakti, the ontological status of the universe, the different stages in spiritual experience, and the harmony of religious and spiritual paths. Part Three begins to explore how Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on religious pluralism can be brought into dialogue with John Hick's influential theory of religious pluralism.

Keywords Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa · Vedānta · God · philosophy · religious pluralism · John Hick

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Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa (1836–86), the nineteenth-century Bengali mystic, is widely known as a teacher of the harmony of all religions and spiritual paths.¹ In fact, however, his remarkably eclectic teachings—which were meticulously recorded by his intimate disciple Mahendranāth Gupta in *Śrīśrīrāmākṛṣṇakathāmṛta* (hereafter *Kathāmṛta*)—encompass a wide range of spiritual and philosophical themes. Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s philosophical teachings in particular have been a source of lively dialogue and debate among devotees and scholars throughout the world. His teachings on God, the soul and the universe, the meaning and purpose of human existence, and the various kinds of spiritual experience draw upon numerous Hindu philosophical sects,² including Tantra, Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, and Bengal Vaiṣṇavism.

Not surprisingly, it has proven extraordinarily difficult to determine Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s own philosophical views. Commentators from the late nineteenth century up to the present have adopted three main interpretive approaches to Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s philosophical teachings. Many have interpreted his philosophical views in terms of a particular philosophical sect. For instance, commentators such as Svāmī Dhīreśānanda (1962, 1980), Svāmī Oṃkārananda (1964a,b), Svāmī Prajñānānanda (1976–82), Dinesh Bhattacharya (1987), and Arpita Mitra (2014) argue that Advaita Vedānta was Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s ultimate standpoint. By contrast, Gupta (2010: 698), the author of *Kathāmṛta*, claims that Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s philosophy comes closest to Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita.³ Meanwhile, scholars such as Heinrich Zimmer (1951: 560–602) and Walter Neevel (1976) have suggested that Tāntrika philosophy provides the master framework for making sense of Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s philosophical teachings.⁴

Rejecting all such efforts to “classify” Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa as the “flag bearer” of a particular sectarian school, Narasingha P. Sil (1997: 212) argues that Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s philosophical views are unsystematic and even inconsistent, so the very attempt to derive *any* coherent philosophical position from his teachings is

¹ This article, in slightly modified form, is the first chapter of a book manuscript in progress, tentatively titled *God’s Infinitude: Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*.

² Throughout this article, I use the words “sect” and “sectarian” in a strictly non-normative sense. The words “sect” and “sectarian” correspond roughly to the Sanskrit words “*sampradāya*” and “*sāmpradāyika*” respectively.

³ Hereafter, whenever I refer to the *Kathāmṛta*, I will make parenthetical citations in the body of the essay, first citing the page number of the Bengali original (Mahendranāth Gupta, *Śrīśrīrāmākṛṣṇa-kathāmṛta* [2010]) and then citing the page number of the English translation, whenever available (*The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, trans. Svāmī Nikhilānanda [1992]). I sometimes modify Nikhilānanda’s translation of *Kathāmṛta*. All translations of passages from Bengali secondary sources are my own. For a helpful discussion of the Viśiṣṭādvaitic elements in Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s teachings, see Prabhānanda (2012).

⁴ Matchett agrees with Neevel that Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa “can be understood much more appropriately in Tantric terms than in Śaṅkara’s,” but she departs from Neevel in claiming that Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s philosophy represents a combination of Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Vedānta (1981: 176). Dhīreśānanda (1980: 221–22) argues that Svāmī Sāradānanda’s biography of Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa, *Līlāprasaṅga* (2008), champions a “Śāktādvaitic” interpretation of Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s life and teachings. By contrast, both Neevel and Matchett claim that Sāradānanda’s *Līlāprasaṅga* endorses an Advaitic interpretation of Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s life and teachings. It would take an entirely different paper to adjudicate this scholarly controversy concerning how best to interpret Sāradānanda’s philosophical views on Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa.

doomed to fail.⁵ As Sil puts it, there is no “consistency in Ramakrishna’s devotionalism or spirituality because he was so enchantingly freewheeling in his god-consciousness” (1997: 212).⁶ Sil, in my opinion, too hastily assumes that there is no consistency or coherence in Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s philosophical views. On the other hand, sectarian attempts to pigeonhole Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s teachings into one particular philosophical school have tended to be Procrustean. Indeed, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa consciously borrowed ideas from a variety of philosophical sects and often warned against sectarian bigotry and fanaticism, so it is highly unlikely that he himself would have belonged exclusively to a particular sect.

In light of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s catholic attitude and his unique syncretic method, a number of commentators—beginning with Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s direct disciples, Svāmī Vivekānanda and Svāmī Turīyānanda, as well as Śrī Aurobindo—have adopted a third approach to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s philosophical teachings that avoids the pitfalls of the other two interpretive approaches. At the end of the nineteenth century, Vivekānanda suggested that the nonsectarian and harmonizing spirit of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s philosophical teachings is best captured not by any particular philosophical school, but by the original nonsectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which also sought to harmonize various philosophical views ranging from Dvaita to Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita.⁷ In a remarkable letter written in 1919, Turīyānanda (2005: 254–55) pointed out deep affinities between Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s philosophy and the nonsectarian Vedānta of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and claimed that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa accepted the validity of all spiritual philosophies and religious doctrines.⁸ In a similar vein, Śrī Aurobindo declared in 1910 that the “teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda” provide the basis for a “more perfect synthesis” of the Upaniṣads than Śaṅkara’s world-negating philosophy of Advaita Vedānta (1998: 10–11).

Following their lead, a number of more recent commentators have interpreted Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s philosophy as a harmonizing, nonsectarian form of Vedānta, which they characterize variously as “Samanvayī Vedānta” (Chatterjee 1985: 104–52),⁹ “Samanvayī Advaita” (Śraddhānanda 1994: 128–41), “Neo-Advaita” (Chatterjee 1985: 149–52), “Neo-Vedānta” (Tapasyānanda 1990: 9–33, especially 23–33; Long 2008), and “Integral Vedānta” (Bhajananda 2010: especially 27–28). Joining forces with these commentators, I will make the case that a nonsectarian Vedāntic

⁵ Sil’s views on this issue are based largely on his earlier psychobiographical studies of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, especially his book *Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa* (1991). Psychoanalytic studies of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s life—such as Sil’s book and Kripal’s *Kālī’s Child* (1995)—are based on highly speculative psychoanalytic and psychological hypotheses that are difficult, if not impossible, to verify. For a thorough criticism of Kripal’s psychoanalytic approach to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa and the problematic ethnocentric assumptions at its basis, see Tyagananda and Vrajaprana’s *Interpreting Ramakrishna* (2010). In this paper, I focus on Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s recorded philosophical teachings, which can—and should—be studied apart from psychoanalytic speculations about Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa.

⁶ Also see Sil (2009).

⁷ See, for instance, Vivekananda (2006–7, 3: 233). For a detailed discussion of Vivekānanda’s understanding of nonsectarian Vedānta vis-à-vis Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, see Maharaj (Forthcoming-a).

⁸ For an English translation of the letter, see Turīyananda (2000: 195–98).

⁹ Mumukshananda (2000) also uses the term “Samanvayī Vedānta.”

framework is best equipped to honor the catholicity, sophistication, and overall consistency and coherence of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings. However, I believe it is misleading to label Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy as "Neo-Vedānta," both because the label lacks philosophical specificity and because it wrongly implies that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy is new-fangled.

In this essay, I argue that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy is best characterized as "Vijñāna Vedānta," a nonsectarian philosophy—rooted in the spiritual experience of what Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa calls "vijñāna"—that accommodates and harmonizes various apparently conflicting religious faiths, sectarian philosophies, and spiritual disciplines. In the *Kathāmṛta*, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly contrasts "jñāna," the Advaitic realization of the impersonal Ātman, with "vijñāna," a vaster, richer, and more intimate realization of God as at once personal and impersonal, at once with and without form, at once immanent in the universe and beyond it. I will argue that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's unique concept of *vijñāna*—which he himself traces to the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—provides the unifying basis for many of his philosophical teachings.

Since Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings are contained primarily in the *Kathāmṛta*, we must first address the fundamental hermeneutic question of how best to interpret the teachings contained in the *Kathāmṛta*. Accordingly, in Part One, I outline five higher-order interpretive principles that should govern any attempt to establish Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views on the basis of the teachings in the *Kathāmṛta*. With this hermeneutic groundwork in place, Part Two attempts to reconstruct from Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings the six main tenets of his Vijñāna Vedānta. I hope to demonstrate that the concept of *vijñāna* provides the unifying framework for interpreting and synthesizing Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views on the scope of reason, the nature of God, the relationship between Brahman and Śakti, the ontological status of the universe, the different stages in spiritual experience, and the harmony of religions and spiritual paths. I will also indicate briefly the scriptural basis of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vijñāna Vedānta by tracing each of its six tenets to passages from the Upaniṣads or the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In Part Three, I will gesture toward two of the far-reaching implications of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta. First, Vijñāna Vedānta provides a powerful hermeneutic framework for reinterpreting the ancient Hindu scriptures—especially the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Brahmasūtras*—in a harmonizing and nonsectarian spirit. Second, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta motivates a robust model of religious pluralism that has a number of advantages over John Hick's influential theory of religious pluralism.

Five Interpretive Principles for Reconstructing Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Philosophical Views from the *Kathāmṛta*

While many scholars have interpreted Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views from various perspectives, they have rarely articulated the hermeneutic assumptions underlying their respective interpretations. As a result, commentators have tended to take Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings out of the context in which they occur in the

Kathāmṛta, without reflecting on the numerous interpretive challenges involved in gleaning Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views from conversations held in Bengali between himself and his numerous visitors and devotees. Before attempting to interpret Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views, it is essential to establish higher-order interpretive principles that will allow us both to determine accurately what he intended to convey through a particular teaching and to distinguish his own views from views to which he refers but to which he does not necessarily subscribe. Accordingly, I will now elaborate five fundamental interpretive principles that will help us to determine Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views on the basis of the *Kathāmṛta*.¹⁰

Interpretive Principle 1: Instead of appealing to external philosophical doctrines or frameworks, we should strive to understand Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings on their own terms.

In accordance with the principle of interpretive charity, we should at least provisionally assume that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings are self-contained—that is, that they contain all the concepts necessary to understand them. Hence, in order to avoid eisegesis, we should—whenever possible—refrain from invoking philosophical doctrines or concepts to which Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa himself did not appeal. If a commentator *does* appeal to external doctrines or frameworks to explain Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views, then the burden is on the commentator to justify the use of these external concepts and to prove that these external concepts actually capture Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's own intentions.

Admittedly, virtually all commentators on Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings claim to interpret his teachings on their own terms, so it might seem as if 'Interpretive Principle 1' need not be explicitly stated. Unfortunately, however, many commentators have routinely violated this principle by lapsing into the eisegetic practice of reading their own assumptions and conceptual frameworks into Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings. The eisegetic tendency of some Advaitic commentators has been especially egregious. Commentators such as Oṃkārananda (1964a: 229–31), Prajñānānanda (1976–82, 1: 159–69, 3: 244–60, 4: 225–48), and Bhattacharya (1987: 605) repeatedly invoke Advaitic concepts and analogies—like the rope-snake analogy and the distinction between *vyāvahārika* and *pāramārthika* levels of reality—in order to explain Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings, even though Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa himself never employed these Advaitic concepts.

It is worth noting that 'Interpretive Principle 1' does not prohibit us from engaging in the comparative project of finding parallels between Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views and any number of existing philosophies, both Eastern and Western. For instance, Debabrata Sen Sarma (2011) and Svāmī Tadananda (2011) have fruitfully compared Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings with the philosophy of Kaśmīri Śaivism, while Jeffery D. Long (2008, 2010, 2005) has demonstrated remarkable affinities between Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy and both

¹⁰ In light of space limitations, I cannot provide a full justification of these interpretive principles here, but in the course of my elaboration, I will try to provide at least a partial justification of each of them. At a general level, I will only point out that all of these principles stem from my fundamental interpretive aim to avoid eisegesis with regard to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings.

the Jain *anekānta* doctrine and Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. 'Interpretive Principle 1' entails only that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings should be understood on their own terms *before* they are brought into dialogue with other philosophies.

Interpretive Principle 2: Any adequate interpretation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings must take into account Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's avowed nonsectarianism, his catholic acceptance of all sectarian views and religious faiths as valid spiritual paths.

At various places in the *Kathāmṛta*, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa expresses his acceptance of all sects and spiritual paths. For instance, he declares: "I have practised all the disciplines; I accept all paths. I respect the Śāktas, the Vaiṣṇavas, and also the Vedāntins. Therefore people of all sects come here. And every one of them thinks that I belong to his school. I also respect the modern *brahmajñānīs*" (552/538). Here, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa explicitly indicates his acceptance of "all paths," including the Tāntrika Śāktas who worship Kālī, the Vaiṣṇavas who worship Kṛṣṇa, the "modern *brahmajñānīs*"—by which he means the followers of the Brāhmo Samāj—who accept the personal but formless God, and the Advaita Vedāntins, who accept only the impersonal Brahman.¹¹ Indeed, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa cannily anticipates later attempts by various commentators to pigeonhole him into a particular sect: as he puts it, every follower of a sect who visits him "thinks that I belong to his school." It is precisely because Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa did not affiliate himself exclusively with any particular sect that he was able to accept *all* sects and make everyone feel as if he belonged to their sect alone.

Accordingly, 'Interpretive Principle 2' rules out any attempt to pigeonhole Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa into a particular exclusivistic sect—be it Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Vaiṣṇavism, or Tantra—since any such sectarian interpretation would fail to account for Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's uncompromisingly nonsectarian attitude. As Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa puts it, "He is indeed a real man who has harmonized everything. Most people are one-sided. But I find that all opinions point to the One. All views—the Śākta, the Vaiṣṇava, the Vedānta—have that One for their center. He who is formless is also with form, and it is He who appears in different forms" (494/490). Similarly, he declares on another occasion that "Śāṅkara's Advaitic explanation of Vedānta is true and so is the Viśiṣṭādvaitic interpretation of Rāmānuja" (778/733). It is clear from such statements that an essential aspect of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical outlook is his conscious harmonization of various sectarian views on the basis of a maximally capacious understanding of God as both personal and impersonal, both with and without form. In light of this fact, any interpretation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings that fails to take into account his nonsectarian outlook is seriously deficient.

Interpretive Principle 3: Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's nonsectarian attitude allows him to borrow ideas from various sects without committing himself exclusively to any sect in particular.

¹¹ It should be noted that when Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa refers to "Vedāntins" in the *Kathāmṛta*, he usually refers to followers of Advaita Vedānta, who take the universe to be unreal.

A major difficulty in interpreting Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings is his eclectic method of borrowing concepts and terms from a variety of philosophical sects, including Tantra, Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Vaiṣṇavism, and the Brāhmo Samāj. For instance, when explaining his teaching that the universe is a real manifestation of God, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa often explicitly appeals to Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaitic position that "Brahman, or the Absolute, is qualified by the universe and its living beings" (778/733). Gupta infers from such statements that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa was, in fact, a Viśiṣṭādvaitin: "Ṭhākur [Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa] does not say that this universe is unreal like a dream. He says, 'If we say so, then the weight of the bel-fruit will fall short.' His view is not the doctrine of *māyā* [of Advaita Vedānta], but the doctrine of Viśiṣṭādvaita" (698).¹² Noticing certain fundamental differences between Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's views and those of Śaṅkara, Gupta concludes that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa was a Viśiṣṭādvaitin.

By contrast, some commentators have claimed that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa was an Advaitin, partly on the basis of his teachings on *nirvikalpa samādhi*. For instance, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa states, "On attaining the knowledge of Brahman and communing with It in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, one realizes Brahman, the Infinite, without form or shape and beyond mind and words" (181/218).¹³ According to Oṃkārananda (1964a: 230), since "Śakti does not exist" in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's acceptance of the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* implies his acceptance of the Advaitic view that Śakti is unreal from the ultimate standpoint. Meanwhile, Neevel emphasizes Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti and the reality of the universe as a manifestation of God, on the basis of which he concludes that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa accepted a "basically tantric framework of concepts and values" (1976: 78).¹⁴

However, all such sectarian interpretations of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views are based on the simplistic hermeneutic assumption that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's

¹² Nikhilānanda omits this passage from his translation of the *Kathāmrta*.

¹³ Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa seemed to understand Advaita Vedānta as a philosophy that maintains the illusoriness of the universe—without granting even *vyāvahārika* reality to the empirical world—and that virtually equates *brahmajñāna* with *nirvikalpa samādhi*. I will indicate briefly five main sources for Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's particular understanding of Advaita. First, and most importantly, his teachings on Advaita derive from his own Advaitic practices and his repeated experience of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Second, his Advaita *guru* Totāpurī taught Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa an Advaitic doctrine—closer to Gauḍapāda than to Śaṅkara—that emphasizes the dreamlike nature of the world, the need for constant meditation on the Ātman, and the importance of *nirvikalpa samādhi* for the attainment of *brahmajñāna*. See, for instance, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's references to Totāpurī's Advaitic teachings in the *Kathāmrta* entries from October 30, 1885 and April 17, 1886. Third, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa owned a copy of the Advaitic book, *Aṣṭāvakra Saṃhitā* (Nityaswarupananda 2008), which strongly emphasizes the path of *vicāra* and the illusoriness of the world. Fourth, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa also owned a copy of Bipin Bihārī Ghoṣāl's *Mukti ebong tāhār Sādhan* (1987), an eclectic Bengali compilation of passages from Upaniṣadic, Tāntrika, Vaiṣṇava, and Advaitic texts, including *Ātmabodha*, *Jīvanmuktigītā*, *Pañcadaśī*, *Yogavāsīṣṭha*, and *Vedāntasāra*. Fifth, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's knowledge of Advaita was likely enriched by his conversations with the numerous Advaita *paṇḍitas* he encountered in Dakshineswar over the course of several decades.

¹⁴ Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's knowledge of Tantra and Śāktism derived primarily from his own varied spiritual experiences, especially his realization of *vijñāna*, which revealed to him the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti and the universe as a manifestation of Śakti. However, he also learned Tāntrika principles from his Tantra *guru*, the Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī, and from Ghoṣāl's *Mukti ebong tāhār Sādhan*, which includes numerous passages from Tāntrika texts such as *Mahānirvāṇatantra*, *Kulārnavatantra*, and *Śivasamhitā*.

approving reference to a doctrine or spiritual experience of a particular philosophical school makes him a card-carrying member of that school. In fact, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa's method of borrowing concepts and doctrines from various sects is much more nuanced and dialectical than sectarian commentators assume: he identifies—and accepts—what he takes to be the *spiritual core* of a given philosophical sect without necessarily accepting all the specific doctrines of that sect.¹⁵ Following Advaita, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa conceives the “eternal” (*nitya*) aspect of the Ultimate Reality as the Advaitic *nirguṇa* Brahman, which is realized in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Following Viśiṣṭādvaita, he accepts the reality of God's “*līlā*,” God's sportive manifestation as the individual soul and the universe. Following Tantra, he emphasizes the reality and importance of Śakti and its inseparability from *nirguṇa* Brahman. Following Acintyabhedābheda, he teaches that the relationship between Brahman and Śakti is inconceivable by the rational intellect. Following Vaiṣṇavism, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa teaches the equal validity of various attitudes toward—and forms of union with—God, including the attitudes of servant (*dāśya*), friend (*sakhyā*), parent (*vātsalya*), and lover (*mādhurya*).

Hence, instead of trying to pigeonhole Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa's views into a particular sectarian framework, we should try to honor his unique nonsectarian method of embracing the spiritual core of various philosophical sects while rejecting the doctrinal narrowness and bigotry sometimes exhibited by followers of these sects.

Interpretive Principle 4: The context of Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings often provides crucial insight into their meaning and status.

Many commentators have tended to strip Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings of their context, ignoring the unique dialogic situation in which they were given. Three aspects of the context of his philosophical teachings are especially important. First, it is often helpful to know the viewpoint of the interlocutor to whom Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa gives a particular teaching. In Part Two, I will point to instances in the *Kathāmṛta* where a particular teaching becomes clearer when one understands the standpoint of the person with whom Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa is speaking—whether, for instance, he is an Advaitin, a Vaiṣṇava Gosvāmin, or a follower of the Brāhmo Samāj.

Second, it is important to determine whether something the interlocutor said or asked prompted Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa to give the teaching. For instance, in the entry from September 21, 1884, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa points out that after Pratapchandra Hazra once dismissed Śakti as a lower reality than Brahman, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa responded that

¹⁵ An anonymous referee has asked me to clarify this claim. Since the various philosophical schools to which Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa refers—such as Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Tantra, and Vaiṣṇavism—make conflicting truth-claims, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa could not possibly have subscribed to the doctrines of all of these schools. At the same time, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa repeatedly affirmed the truth of all these schools and all spiritual paths in general. I believe ‘Interpretive Principle 3’ is the most plausible way to reconcile these two apparently conflicting aspects of Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa's stance toward the various philosophical schools. According to this principle, while Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa clearly recognized the mutual exclusivity of the philosophical schools at the level of *doctrine*, he nonetheless tried to harmonize them at the level of *spiritual experience*. As I indicate in the remainder of the paragraph, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa believed that each philosophical school is based on a unique spiritual truth and that the core spiritual truths of all these schools are complementary rather than conflicting.

“Brahman and Śakti are inseparable,” thus strongly suggesting that the primary thrust of this teaching is to assert the reality of Śakti (568/550).

Third, the verbal cues Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa uses to frame many of his teachings help us to determine whether the teaching represents his own view or the view of another person or sect which he may or may not accept. For instance, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa almost invariably prefaces his teachings on Advaita by adding a verbal cue such as “Vedāntavādīs say...” or “Jñānīs say...,” thereby indicating that these teachings do not necessarily represent his own view. In fact, the verbal cues used in certain contexts sometimes indicate that he *contrasts* the Advaitic standpoint with his own standpoint. In the entry from October 26, 1884, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa states, “In the light of Vedāntic reasoning, the world is illusory, unreal as a dream. The Supreme Soul is the witness—the witness of the three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep” (691/651). Shortly thereafter, he asserts, “But for my part I accept everything: *turīya* and also the three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep. I accept all three states. I accept all—Brahman and also *māyā*, the universe, and its living beings” (691/652). Notice that the thrice-repeated verbal cue “I accept...” clearly indicates that this teaching—and not the Advaitic view he previously stated—represents the view he actually holds.

Verbal cues such as this one—which appear frequently in the *Kathāmṛta*—are extremely important in helping us to determine Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's own philosophical views. If a verbal cue such as “But for my part...” (691/652), “This is my final and most mature opinion” (*eṭi pākā mat*) (228/257), “the teachings of this place” (*ekhānkār mat*) (568/550), “Do you know my attitude?” (577/559), or “I have come to the final realization that...” (*śeṣ ei bujhechi*) (594/638) frames a particular teaching, then we can be certain that the teaching represents Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's own view.

Interpretive Principle 5: Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's various philosophical teachings should be synthesized on the basis of a foundational concept or framework taught and accepted by Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa himself.

Many commentators have attempted to establish the consistency of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views by invoking an external philosophical framework, be it Tāntrika, Advaitic, Viśiṣṭādvaitic, or Vaiṣṇava.¹⁶ However, this eisegetic interpretive method clearly violates ‘Interpretive Principle 1,’ which prohibits any appeal to an external framework in order to explain Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical teachings. A more promising and noneisegetic means of establishing the consistency and coherence of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophical views is to find a foundational concept or framework *internal* to his teachings that lends philosophical coherence to all of his apparently disparate teachings. In accordance with ‘Interpretive Principle 5,’ I will argue in the next section that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on *vijñāna* provide precisely such an immanent and nonsectarian framework for showing how his various philosophical teachings are interconnected and coherent.

¹⁶ See Dhīreśānanda (1962, 1980), Omkārananda (1964a,b), Zimmer (1951), Neevel (1976), Prajñānānanda (1976–82), Matchett (1981), Bhattacharya (1987), Gupta (2010, 1992), and Mitra (2014).

The Central Tenets of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vijñāna Vedānta

Crucially, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's syncretic philosophical teachings are based on his own unique and richly varied spiritual experiences. From 1855 to 1874, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa 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 worshiping her as the Divine Mother, he went on to practice, and to attain perfection in, numerous other *bhāvas* ("attitudes toward God"), including *dāsyabhāva*, *vātsalyabhāva*, *sakhībhāva*, and *mādhuryabhāva*. In 1866, he also practiced Islamic *sādhana* under the guidance of a Muslim *guru* named Govinda Roy—who was likely a Šūfī—and realized God after three days of practice.¹⁷ Toward the end of 1874, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa was instructed in the Bible and soon had an overwhelming vision of Jesus, who approached him and finally merged into him.¹⁸

In 1864, he engaged in Advaitic discipline under the guidance of the itinerant Advaitin monk Totāpurī, and he quickly attained the highest knowledge of nondual Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, a state in which all consciousness of duality is transcended. After Totāpurī left, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa 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 (Sāradānanda 2008, 1: chapters 15–16, 2003: 303–21). 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 validity of the paths of *bhakti* and *jñāna*.¹⁹

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's unique state of *bhāvamukha* and his realization of God through various spiritual paths formed the experiential basis for the teachings he gave in the last five years of his life, which we find in the *Kathāmṛta*. As we will see, his numerous teachings on *vijñāna* draw out the philosophical implications of his own spiritual experience of *bhāvamukha*. Tellingly, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa indicates that his notion of *vijñāna* can be found in Vedāntic scriptures such as the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* (985/910). Pursuing Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's hint, I will argue that his philosophy of *vijñāna* is best understood in terms of the nonsectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Accordingly, in the course of this section, I will not only outline the six

¹⁷ During Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Islamic practice, passages from the Bengali translation of the Qurān were read out to him. He also practiced the disciplines prescribed in the Qurān and stopped worshiping Hindu deities during his Islamic practice. See Sāradānanda (2008, 1: 175–77). For the English translation, see Saradananda (2003: 318–19). For an extensive account of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Islamic *sādhana*, see Prabhananda (1993: 80–109).

¹⁸ See Sāradānanda's account of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's *sādhana* period in the second volume of *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇātilāprasāṅga* (2008, 2003: 144–364). Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa 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 Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa was based more on the spiritual and ethical teachings of Jesus than on theological dogmas. For more details about Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Christian practices, see Prabhananda (1993: 110–48).

¹⁹ See Tapasyānanda's excellent discussions of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's state of *bhāvamukha* in his *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta* (1990: 359–64) and *Sri Ramakrishna: Life and Teachings* (2008: 60–74).

fundamental tenets of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta, but also indicate briefly their scriptural basis in the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Vijñāna Vedānta 1: After attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, ordinary people leave their body within twenty-one days, but certain divinely commissioned people known as *īśvarakoṭis* are able to return from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and attain *vijñāna*—a spiritual state even greater than *brahmajñāna*—in which perfect *jñāna* and perfect *bhakti* are combined.

At numerous points in the *Kathāmṛta*, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa distinguishes two categories of *jīva*: while “*jīvakoṭis*” are “ordinary people” (*sādhāran lok*), “*īśvarakoṭis*” belong to a spiritual elite consisting only in “incarnations of God and those born as a part of one of these incarnations” (*avatār vā avatārer aṁśa*) (800/749). According to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, *īśvarakoṭis* are capable of a much greater spiritual attainment than *jīvakoṭis*:

When the *kuṇḍalinī* rises to the *sahasrāra* and the mind goes into *samādhi*, the aspirant loses all consciousness of the outer world. He can no longer retain his body. If milk is poured into his mouth, it runs out again. In that state, death occurs within twenty-one days....But the *īśvarakoṭis*, such as the incarnations of God, can come down from this state of *samādhi*. They can descend from this exalted state because they like to live in the company of devotees and enjoy the love of God. God retains in them the “ego of knowledge” [*vidyār āmi*] or the “ego of devotion” [*bhakter āmi*] so that they may teach people. Their minds move between the sixth and the seventh planes. They run a boat race back and forth, as it were, between these two planes (505/500).

While ordinary *jīvas* leave their body within twenty-one days of attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, *īśvarakoṭis* are able to “come down” from the state of *samādhi* in order to help others, shuttling back and forth between the relative and absolute planes of consciousness.²⁰ Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on the unique spiritual state of the *īśvarakoṭis* are clearly based on his own experience of remaining in *nirvikalpa samādhi* for six months and then returning to the relative plane after receiving the divine command to “remain in *bhāvamukha*.” In the *Kathāmṛta*, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa renames the *īśvarakoṭi*'s state of *bhāvamukha* as “*vijñāna*,” a state “beyond even *brahmajñāna*” (266/287).²¹

²⁰ Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teaching that ordinary souls leave their body in *samādhi* within twenty-one days seems to be based on his own six-month immersion in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, during which time his body was kept alive by a *sādhu* who occasionally forced milk down his throat. He also indicates, however, that he learned a similar teaching from a *brahmacārī*: “A *brahmacārī* once said to me, ‘One who goes beyond Kedar cannot keep his body alive.’ Likewise, a man cannot preserve his body after attaining *brahmajñāna*. The body drops off in twenty-one days” (346/354). Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on *īśvarakoṭis* are not so easy to trace historically. As far as I am aware, the term “*īśvarakoṭi*” is not found in any of the major Hindu scriptures or philosophical schools. Śāradānanda suggests that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's concept of the *īśvarakoṭi* resembles the Sāṃkhyan concept of the *prakṛtilīna puruṣa* and the Vedāntic concept of the *adhikārika*. See Śāradānanda (2008, 1: 71–73, 2003: 617–19).

²¹ See Tapasyānanda's (1990: 359–64) helpful discussion of the connection between *vijñāna* and *bhāvamukha*.

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa frequently explains the difference between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* by means of the metaphor of the staircase and the roof:

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 [*kintu vijñānī jini viśeṣarūpe tāhār saṅge ālāp koren tini āro kichu darśan koren*]. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brickdust. That which 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* is also *saguṇa*. 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).

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa describes the *jñānī* in Advaitic terms as one who attains *brahmajñāna* by reasoning that Brahman alone is real and the universe is unreal. The *vijñānī*, however, goes beyond even *brahmajñāna* to attain the “more intimate” realization that Brahman “has become the universe and its living beings.” As Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa puts it elsewhere, while the *jñānī* dismisses the universe as a “framework of illusion” (*dhokār tātī*), the *vijñānī* embraces the universe as a “mansion of mirth” (*majār kuṭi*) (479/478). The Advaitic *jñānī* realizes that *nirguṇa* Brahman alone is real, while the *vijñānī* attains the greater realization that the “Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*.”

That Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa considers the *vijñānī* to be superior to the *jñānī* is clear from the fact that he repeatedly contrasts the spiritual selfishness of *jñānīs* with the spiritual compassion of *vijñānīs*. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa likens *jñānīs*, who seek only their own salvation, to “a hollow piece of driftwood” that “sinks if even a bird sits on it” (482/479). By contrast, *vijñānīs* like Nārada, who strive to help others achieve spiritual enlightenment, “are like a huge log that not only can float across to the other shore, but can carry many animals and other creatures as well” (482/479). Tellingly, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa 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).

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa explains that the “superior devotee” (*uttama bhakta*)—another name for the *vijñānī*—“sees that God alone has become everything,” and he then immediately adds, “Read the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata*, and the Vedānta, and you will understand all this” (985/910).²² Here, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa himself hints that his teachings on *vijñāna* can be found in the Vedāntic scriptures. Indeed, Śrī Aurobindo has made a convincing case that the *Bhagavad Gītā* employs the term “*vijñāna*” in a manner that comes remarkably close to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s use of the term (Maharaj

²² Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa uses the terms “*īśvarakoṭi*,” “*vijñānī*,” and “*uttam bhakta*” interchangeably throughout the *Kathāmṛta*. That these three terms are synonymous is clear from the fact that he employs the same staircase-roof analogy to explain the spiritual state of all three.

2015). For instance, in his discussion of *Bhagavad Gītā* 7.2—which begins, “I will speak to you of *jñāna* and *vijñāna*”—Śrī Aurobindo interprets “*jñāna*” as the “essential” knowledge of the impersonal Ātman, “the one immutable Self and silent Spirit,” while he interprets “*vijñāna*” as the “comprehensive” or “integral” realization that “the Divine Being is all” (1997: 264, 266).

In the remainder of this section, I will attempt to demonstrate that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's concept of *vijñāna*, when understood in all its ramifications, provides the master framework within which all of his major philosophical teachings should be understood. In particular, I will argue that the five remaining tenets of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's spiritual philosophy—‘Vijñāna Vedānta 2’ through ‘Vijñāna Vedānta 6’—all derive from the unique standpoint of *vijñāna* embodied in ‘Vijñāna Vedānta 1.’

Vijñāna Vedānta 2: Since the rational intellect is inherently limited, spiritual experience is the only reliable basis for arriving at supersensuous spiritual truths. On the suprarational basis of *vijñāna*, we can affirm truths about God and spiritual experience that appear to be contradictory or illogical to the rational intellect.

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly teaches that the rational intellect can never grasp the supersensuous truths of the spiritual domain. He has two favorite analogies to illustrate this teaching. At several places in the *Kathāmṛta*, he points to 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,” Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa points to the fundamental limitations of the rational intellect and its inherent inability to grasp spiritual realities.

Similarly Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa often teaches: “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?” (907/841). It is significant that this teaching was almost invariably given as a rebuke to visitors who asked particular questions about supersensuous matters, such as “Sir, is a man born again?” (907/841), “Sir, what do you think of Theosophy and spiritualism? Are these true?” (879/819), and “Sir, if God alone does everything, how is it that man is punished for his sins?” (976/901). In the entry from July 3, 1884, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa clarifies that his mango-orchard analogy is meant to encourage us to strive to realize God through spiritual practice instead of engaging in “futile reasoning” about unanswerable metaphysical questions (501/496).

In fact, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa explicitly approves of two spiritually beneficial forms of reasoning. First, he strongly encourages people to practice what he calls “*sadasadvicāra*,” reasoning “about the true and the false, about what is permanent and what is transitory” (501/496). Second, in a fascinating exchange between himself and Narendra (who would go on to become Svāmī Vivekānanda), Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa enthusiastically embraces a form of philosophical reasoning that acknowledges its own constitutive limitations:

Narendra said to M. [Gupta] that he had been reading a book by Hamilton, who wrote: “A learned ignorance is the end of philosophy and the beginning of religion.”

MASTER [Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa] (to M.): “What does that mean?”

Narendra explained the sentence in Bengali. The Master beamed with joy and said in English, “Thank you! Thank you!” (255/278).

Narendra, a student of Western philosophy at Scottish Church College, paraphrases the Scottish philosopher William Hamilton’s statement in *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, “A learned ignorance is thus the end of philosophy, as it is the beginning of theology” (1859: 25). According to Hamilton, philosophical reasoning should terminate in epistemic humility, an acknowledgment of the inherent limitations of reason. Interestingly, several sentences before making this statement, Hamilton remarks that philosophy has two main tasks: first, to admit “the weakness of our discursive intellect,” and second, to demonstrate “that the limits of thought are not to be assumed as the limits of possibility” (1859: 25).

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s enthusiastic approval of Hamilton’s statement about “learned ignorance” and his own frequent teachings on the limitations of the rational intellect suggest that he shares Hamilton’s metaphilosophical pessimism about reason. Indeed, it is precisely the point of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s “one-seer pot” analogy to illustrate what Hamilton calls the “weakness of our discursive intellect.” Moreover, in an entry from October 22, 1885, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa gently chides Mahendralal Sarkar for assuming—contrary to Hamilton—that the limits of thought *are* the limits of possibility: “It is not mentioned in his [Sarkar’s] ‘science’ that God can take human form; so how can he believe it?” (934/864). In a Hamiltonian vein, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa points out here that our inability to understand how God can incarnate as a human being, far from casting doubt on the possibility of *avatāra*-hood, only attests to the limitations of thought itself.

As his explicit approval of Hamilton’s statement indicates, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa believes that intellectual reasoning can be spiritually beneficial if it humbly acknowledges its own limitations and thereby opens itself to faith in spiritual realities that lie beyond the reach of the intellect:

It is very difficult to understand that God can be a finite human being and at the same time the all-pervading Soul of the universe. The *līlā* belongs to the same Reality to which the *nitya* belongs [*jārī nitya, tāhārī līlā*]. How can we say emphatically with our small intelligence that God cannot assume a human form? Can we ever understand all these ideas with our little intellect? Can a one-seer pot hold four seers of milk? Therefore one should trust in the words of holy men and great souls, those who have realized God (934/864).

According to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, since we cannot rationally comprehend how God can be both *nitya* and *līlā*, both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa*, we should have faith in the testimony of “great souls” who have directly confirmed these spiritual truths through suprarational experience. In other words, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s Hamiltonian pessimism about reason goes hand in hand with ‘Vijñāna Vedānta 1’: Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa—unlike Hamilton—bases his positive assertions about the nature of

God and spiritual experience on his own spiritual experience of *vijñāna*. In light of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's principled pessimism about reason, it would be beside the point to object that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings about God and spiritual experience are illogical or contradictory. For Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, spiritual truths that might seem contradictory or illogical to the rational intellect are validated on the experiential basis of *vijñāna*.

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's insistence on the inability of the intellect to grasp spiritual truths finds scriptural support in many of the Upaniṣads. For instance, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.9.1 declares that Brahman is "that from which speech, along with mind, turn back, having failed to reach it" (Gambhīrānanda 1989, 1: 386).²³ Just as Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa teaches that supersensuous truths can be understood only through direct spiritual experience and not through intellectual reasoning, *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.23 declares: "This Ātman cannot be known through much study, nor through the intellect, nor through much hearing. It can be known through the Ātman alone to which the aspirant prays; the Ātman of that seeker reveals Its true nature" (Gambhīrānanda 1989, 1: 157). Moreover, the Upaniṣads, when characterizing the nature of Brahman, often revel in the language of paradox. The fifth *mantra* of the *Īśā Upaniṣad*, for instance, make a number of paradoxical assertions about the Ātman which defy rational explanation: "That moves, That does not move; That is far off, That is very near; That is inside all this, and That is also outside all this" (Gambhīrānanda 1989, 1: 12).

All the remaining tenets of Vijñāna Vedānta—namely, 'Vijñāna Vedānta 3' through 'Vijñāna Vedānta 6'—should be understood from the spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* and not from the limited standpoint of the rational intellect.

Vijñāna Vedānta 3: God is infinite and illimitable. Hence, God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and transcendent to it, and infinitely more besides.

At the foundation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's spiritual philosophy is a startlingly expansive conception of God, which is best captured in his pithy teaching, "There is no limit to God" (*tāhār iti nai*) (997/920). Since God is infinite and illimitable, we should never limit God to what our finite intellects can grasp of God. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa elaborates the limitlessness of God as follows: "That Reality which is the *nitya* is also the *līlā*....Everything 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. There is no limit to God. Nothing is impossible for him" (*jāhāri nitya tāhāri līlā....tāhāte sab sambhabe | sei tinī nirākār sākār | tinī svarāṭ virāṭ | tinī brahma, tinī śakti | tāhār iti nai,—śeṣ nai; tāhāte sab sambhabe*) (997/920). To the rational intellect, such contradictory attributes as personality and impersonality, form and formlessness cannot possibly belong to God at the same time. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that 'Vijñāna Vedānta 3' follows from 'Vijñāna Vedānta 2': 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."

²³ I have sometimes modified Gambhīrānanda's translations of Upaniṣadic passages.

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa explicitly teaches the infinitude and illimitability of God from the spiritual standpoint of *viññāna*: “The *viññānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*....The *viññānī* sees that the Reality which is Brahman is also *Bhagavān*; That which is beyond the three *guṇas* is also *Bhagavān* endowed with the six divine attributes” (*viññānī dekhe, jini nirguṇ, tinī saguṇ | ...viññānī dekhe, jinī brahma, tinī bhagavān; jinī guṇātīta, tinī ṣaḍaiśvarya-pūrṇa bhagavān*) (51/104). While the ordinary *jīva* is usually only capable of realizing God in a single limited aspect, the *viññānī* realizes God in multiple aspects or forms, so a *viññānī* alone—like Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa himself—can authoritatively declare, on the basis of direct spiritual experience, that God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent and transcendent.

Hence, it is from the standpoint of *viññāna* that we have to understand Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s numerous teachings on the infinite and illimitable nature of God. Interestingly, one of the most frequent ways he teaches the infinitude of God is to employ relative-correlative grammatical clauses—which the Bengali language inherited from Sanskrit—such as “*jini saguṇ, tinī nirguṇ*” (That which is *saguṇa* is also *nirguṇa*) (246/271), “*jinī brahma, tinī bhagavān*” (That which is Brahman is also *Bhagavān*) (51/104), “*jinī brahma, tinī śaktī*” (That which is Brahman is also Śakti) (379/382), “*jinī nirākār, tinī sākār*” (That which is with form is also without form) (364/370), “*jārī rūp, tinī arūp*” (That which has form is also without form) (246/271), and “*jārī nitya, tāhārī līlā*” (The *līlā* belongs to That to which the *nitya* belongs) (380/382). I believe there are two main reasons why Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa so frequently employs this relative-correlative grammatical structure. First, the relative-correlative grammatical structure helps convey the infinitude of God by ascribing certain attributes to the grammatical subject without explicitly naming or rigidly defining the grammatical subject. For instance, the grammar of the statement, “*jini saguṇ, tinī nirguṇ,*” implies a grammatical subject to which the attributes of *saguṇatva* and *nirguṇatva* apply but which is not *exhausted* by these attributes, thereby indicating that God is both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* and yet remains beyond both *saguṇatva* and *nirguṇatva*. Accordingly, at various points in the *Kathāmṛta*, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa declares that God is “*sākār, nirākār,* and much more besides [*ābār kato ki*]” (602/577).

Second, the open-endedness of the relative-correlative construction allows Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa to ascribe various attributes to God without committing himself to any narrow or sectarian doctrine about the nature of God. As ‘Vijñāna Vedānta 2’ indicates, while we can never rationally comprehend *how* God can be, say, both personal and impersonal or both with and without form, the *viññānī* attains a *direct suprarational experience* of the truth of these various aspects or attributes of God. By employing relative-correlative clauses to describe God, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa is able to affirm the reality of numerous aspects and attributes of God without attempting the impossible task of providing a rational explanation of how God can have these seemingly contradictory aspects and attributes.

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa frequently conveys the infinitude and illimitability of God by comparing God to an infinite ocean that freezes into ice 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 [*arūp-rūp*]. In a shoreless ocean—an infinite expanse of water—visible blocks of ice are formed here and there by intense cold. Similarly, under the cooling influence of *bhakti*, as it were, the Infinite appears before the worshiper as God with form. Again, with the rising of the sun of knowledge [*jñān-sūrya*], those blocks of ice melt and only the infinite ocean remains (861/802).

Superficially, this analogy might seem to support the Advaitic view that *saguṇa* Brahman is ontologically inferior to *nirguṇa* Brahman. Oṃkārananda, for instance, argues that since the ice “melts” with the rising of the “sun of knowledge,” Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's analogy indicates that *saguṇa* Brahman has only “relative or *vyāvahārika* reality” (1964b: 293). However, Oṃkārananda's Advaitic interpretation of this analogy ignores the fact that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa explicitly frames this analogy not from the Advaitic standpoint of the *jñānī*, but from the vaster standpoint of the *vijñānī*, who realizes that God is *both* personal and impersonal, *both* with and without form. By means of this analogy of the infinite ocean, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa teaches that the personal God of the *bhaktas* and the impersonal Brahman of the *jñānīs* are both equally real, since they are simply different aspects or forms of one and the same impersonal-personal Infinite Reality.

In his explanation of this analogy of the ocean on December 27, 1883, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa makes absolutely clear that *saguṇa* Brahman and *nirguṇa* Brahman are on an ontological par: “One who follows the path of knowledge [*jñān*]*—the path of discrimination—does not see the form of God anymore. To him, everything is formless. With the rising of the sun of Knowledge, the ice form melts into the formless ocean. But mark this, form and formlessness belong to one and the same Reality [jārī nirākār, tāri sākār]*” (364/370). For Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, the infinite ocean corresponds to the *nirguṇa* aspect of the Infinite Reality realized by *jñānīs* in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, while the ice formations correspond to the *saguṇa* and *sākāra* aspects of the same Infinite Reality, realized by *bhaktas*. Oṃkārananda clearly lapses into eisegesis by imposing the Advaitic *vyāvahārika-pāramārthika* framework onto Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's analogy, since the very point of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's analogy is to teach, on the contrary, that *saguṇa* Brahman and *nirguṇa* Brahman are equally real.

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa also indicates the ontological parity of the personal God of the *bhaktas* and the impersonal Absolute of the *jñānīs* by means of his favorite teaching, “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable” (*brahma o śakti abhed*). At numerous places in the *Kathāmṛta*, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa explicitly identifies the doctrine that “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable” as his own view—“the teachings of this place”—and contrasts it with the Advaitic position that Śakti is unreal. For instance, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa remarks:

Once, while listening to the various incidents of the life of Caitanya, Hazra said that these were manifestations of Śakti, and that Brahman, the all-pervasive Spirit [*Vibhū*], had nothing to do with them. But can there be Śakti without Brahman? Hazra wants to nullify the teachings of this place [*ekhānkār mat*]. I have realized that Brahman and Śakti are inseparable, like water and its

wetness, like fire and its power to burn. Brahman dwells in all beings as the *Vibhū*, the all-pervasive Consciousness... (568/550).

Three features of this passage are worth noting. First, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa ascribes to Hazra the position that Śakti is a lower reality than the pure all-pervasive Consciousness. Second, he explicitly contrasts Hazra's position with his *own* view—"the teachings of this place"—that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable." Third, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa indicates that the insight that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable" is based on his own spiritual experience of *vijñāna*, his direct realization that "Brahman dwells in all beings."

Similarly, in the entry from October 27, 1882, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa contrasts the Advaitic "*jñāni*'s" view that "Śakti is unreal, like a dream" with his own view that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable" (84/134). Clearly, the main point of his teaching that Brahman and Śakti are "inseparable" is to grant equal ontological status to both Brahman and Śakti. From Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's standpoint of *vijñāna*, "That which is Brahman is also Śakti" (*jinī brahma, tinī śakti*): in other words, the static Brahman and the dynamic Śakti are different—but equally real—aspects of one and the same Divine Reality (379/382). As he puts it, "When God is actionless [*niṣkriya*], I call God 'Brahman'; when God creates, preserves, and destroys, I call God 'Śakti' " (861/802).

Tellingly, all of the analogies Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa employs to illustrate the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti also indicate their ontological parity. For instance, he compares the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti to fire and its power to burn (55/108), milk and its whiteness (84/134), the sun and its rays (84/134), a gem and its brightness (254/277), water and its wetness (269/290), a snake and its wriggling motion (269/290), and still water and agitated water (254/277). In his explanation of these analogies, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly emphasizes their bidirectionality. For instance, he explains his favorite analogy of fire and its power to burn as follows: "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable, like fire and its power to burn. When we talk of fire, we automatically mean also its power to burn. Again, the fire's power to burn implies the fire itself. If you accept the one, you must accept the other" (55/108). Notice that he insists here on the analogy's bidirectionality: the concept of fire entails its power to burn, and the fire's power to burn entails the concept of fire. Like fire and its power to burn, Brahman and Śakti mutually entail each other.

The bidirectionality of all these analogies clearly rules out an Advaitic interpretation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teaching on the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti. According to Advaita, Śakti is ontologically dependent on *nirguṇa* Brahman, but *nirguṇa* Brahman is not ontologically dependent on Śakti, since Śakti is ultimately unreal. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, by contrast, teaches the mutual ontological dependence of Brahman and Śakti.²⁴ As he puts it, "One cannot think of Brahman without Śakti or of Śakti without Brahman. One cannot think of the *nitya* without the *līlā* or of the *līlā* without the *nitya*" (85/134).

²⁴ A major problem with Omkārānanda's (1964a: 230–31) interpretation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teaching that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable" is that he fails to acknowledge the mutual ontological dependence of Brahman and Śakti.

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa points out that his teachings on the infinitude of God are corroborated by the Vedas: “The Vedas teach that God is both with and without form, both personal and impersonal” (152/191). Pursuing Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's hint, both Vivekananda (2006–7, 2: 144–54, 309–27) and Śrī Aurobindo (2003, 2001) have shown that many of the Upaniṣads—such as *Īśā*, *Kena*, and *Chāndogya*—teach that God is both personal and impersonal. Similarly, George Thibaut (1890: cii–cxvi) argues that the Upaniṣads treat *nirguṇa* Brahman and *saguṇa* Brahman as equally real and hence do not support Śaṅkara's thesis that *saguṇa* Brahman is a “lower” reality. More recently, Jaideva Singh has argued that the Upaniṣads accept the reality of both *nirguṇa* Brahman, “about which we can speak only in negative terms,” and *saguṇa* Brahman, “the dynamic, creative Brahman known as Sacchidānanda” (1985: 6). Śrī Aurobindo has made a similar argument with regard to the *Bhagavad Gītā*: God, according to Kṛṣṇa, is the infinite “*Puruṣottama*” who is both personal and impersonal, both immanent in the universe and transcendent to it.²⁵

Vijñāna Vedānta 4: There are two levels of Advaitic realization: while the *jñānī* realizes the acosmic nondual Reality of *nirguṇa* Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī* returns from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and attains the richer, world-affirming nondualistic realization that God has become everything.

According to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, the aim of the *jñānī* is to attain *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Like a “salt doll” melting into the ocean, the “I” of the *jñānī* in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* merges into nondual Brahman and subject-object duality is entirely transcended (50/103). Hence, from the *jñānī*'s standpoint, “Brahman alone is the reality and all else is unreal” (84/133). The *jñānī*'s realization of nondual Brahman is clearly acosmic, since *jīva*, *jagat*, and *īśvara* (or *saguṇa* Brahman)—all of which imply duality—are not perceived.

The *vijñānī*, however, returns to the relative plane after the attainment of *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi* and sees the universe anew as a “mansion of mirth”:

Who is the best devotee of God [*uttama bhakta*]? It is he who sees, after the realization of Brahman, that God alone has become all living beings, the universe, and the twenty-four cosmic principles. One must reason at first, saying “Not this, not this,” and reach the roof. After that, one realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof—namely, brick, lime, and brickdust. The *bhakta* realizes that it is Brahman alone that has become all these: the living beings, the universe, and so on. Mere dry reasoning—I spit on it! I have no use for it! (The Master spits on the ground.) Why should I make myself dry through mere reasoning?...*Caitanya* is awakened after *advaita-jñāna*. Then one perceives that God alone exists in all beings as Consciousness. After this realization comes *ānanda* [bliss]. *Advaita*, *caitanya*, *nityānanda* (247/271–72).

²⁵ See Śrī Aurobindo's interpretation of the term “*Puruṣottama*” in chapter 15 of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in his *Essays on the Gita* (1997: 435–49).

Whereas the *jñānī* attains “*advaitajñāna*” in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *viññānī*—the “*uttama bhakta*”—goes on to attain the even greater realization that Consciousness (“*caitanya*”) pervades the entire universe, which in turn results in “*nityānanda*,” a state of divine bliss in which one sees and experiences nothing but God.

Interestingly, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa elsewhere clarifies that the *viññānī*'s realization of God in everything is a distinct form of Advaitic realization: “The *bhakta* also has a realization of oneness [*ekākār jñān*]; he sees that there is nothing but God. Instead of saying that the world is unreal like a dream, he says that God has become everything” (740/700). After attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *viññānī* returns to the relative plane and realizes that God is not only *nirguṇa* but also *saguṇa* and that God, in the form of Śakti, has become *jīva*, *jagat*, and the twenty-four cosmic principles. At one point, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa invokes the analogy of wax to explain his own vision of the universe from the standpoint of *viññāna*: “Do you know what I see right now? I see that it is God Himself who has become all this...I had a similar vision once before, when I saw houses, gardens, roads, men, cattle—all made of one substance; it was as if they were all made of wax [*sab momer*]” (1022/941–42). The analogy of wax aptly captures the fact that the *viññānī* realizes not only that Brahman is *immanent* in all creation, but that all names and forms are themselves nothing but the same Brahman.

It is also obvious from Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's question, “Why should I make myself dry through mere reasoning?,” that he prefers the *viññānī*'s richer, world-affirming Advaitic realization to the “dry” *jñānī*'s world-negating Advaitic realization. According to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, the world-negating outlook of Advaita Vedānta stems from an intermediate stage of spiritual realization, which is surpassed by the *viññānī*'s world-affirming realization that God alone exists and that everything in the universe is God sporting in various forms.

As numerous commentators have noted, there are many passages in the Upaniṣads that lend strong support to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on the world-affirming Advaitic realization of the *viññānī*. For instance, both Śraddhānanda (1994: 135–41) and Chatterjee (1985: 112–13) have pointed out that “*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*” (All this is indeed Brahman), the well-known statement from *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.1, is much more convincingly interpreted from Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's standpoint of *viññāna* than from Śaṅkara's world-negating Advaitic standpoint. As Chatterjee points out, Advaitins deny the reality of the universe, so they have to maintain that “there is no all but only Brahman” (1985: 112), thereby distorting the natural meaning of the Upaniṣadic statement.²⁶ By contrast, from Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's perspective, “*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*” means that everything in the universe actually is “Brahman in different forms” (Chatterjee 1985: 112).

Similarly, Śrī Aurobindo argues that the *Bhagavad Gītā*, far from dismissing the world as unreal, in fact teaches “real Advaita,” the “utmost undividing Monism” which “sees the one as the one even in the multiplicities of Nature” (1997: 448), as in 7.19, which declares that “Vāsudeva is everything” (*vāsudevaḥ sarvaṃ*). Śrī Aurobindo's conception of the “real Advaita” of the *Gītā* bears obvious affinities

²⁶ See also Śaṅkara's interpretation of “*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*” in *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 1.3.1.

with—and indeed is partly indebted to—Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on the world-affirming Advaitic realization of the *vijñānī* (Maharaj 2015).

Vijñāna Vedānta 5: The *vijñānī*, who accepts the reality of both the *nitya* and the *līlā*, is able to adopt various attitudes toward—and attain various forms of union with—God on different planes of consciousness, all of which are true.

According to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, the Advaitic *jñānī* only accepts the reality of the “*nitya*”—that is, *nirguna* Brahman—and therefore dismisses the “*līlā*”—God's sportive manifestation as *jīva* and *jagat*—as unreal. *Jñānīs*, as he puts it, “arrive at the *nitya*, the indivisible *Saccidānanda*, through the process of ‘*neti, neti.*’ They reason in this manner: ‘Brahman is not the *jīvas*, nor the *jagat*, nor the twenty-four cosmic principles’ ” (479/476). By contrast, the *vijñānīs*, “after attaining the *nitya*, realize that Brahman has become all this—the *jīvas*, the *jagat*, and the twenty-four cosmic principles’ ” (479/477). Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa describes the unique state of the *vijñānī* as follows: “The *vijñānī* always sees God....He sees God even with his eyes open. Sometimes he comes down to the *līlā* from the *nitya*, and sometimes he goes up to the *nitya* from the *līlā*” (479/477). While the *jñānī* realizes the *nitya* only in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī* has the more comprehensive realization that both the *nitya* and the *līlā* are real aspects of God, so the *vijñānī* comes down from the plane of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and sees that it is God alone who is sporting in the form of *jīva* and *jagat*.

Shortly thereafter, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa makes clear that he prefers the *vijñānī*'s many-sided and all-embracing attitude to the *jñānī*'s one-sided acceptance of the *nitya* alone: “A mere *jñānī* trembles with fear....A mere *jñānī* is one-sided and monotonous [*ekgheye*]. He always reasons, ‘It is not this, not this. The world is like a dream.’ But I have raised both my hands. Therefore I accept everything.... I am not afraid of anything. I accept both the *nitya* and the *līlā*” (482/479). Explicitly adopting the standpoint of the *vijñānī*, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa accepts the reality of both the *nitya* and the *līlā* and is hence able to move fearlessly from the *nitya* to the *līlā* as well as from the *līlā* to the *nitya*. Elsewhere, he declares unequivocally that “the *līlā* is real” and that “it is good to remain on the plane of the *līlā* after reaching the *nitya*” (205/238). Employing the analogy of a flute, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa states that while the *jñānī* produces “only a monotone on his flute,” the *vijñānī* creates “waves of melodies in different *rāgas* and *rāginīs*.” He then explains that the *vijñānī* is able to enjoy various relationships with God: “Why should I produce only a monotone when I have an instrument with seven holes? Why should I say nothing but, ‘I am He, I am He’? I want to play various melodies on my instrument with seven holes. Why should I say only, ‘Brahman! Brahman!’? I want to call on God through all the moods—through *śānta*, *dāsya*, *sakhya*, *vātsalya*, and *madhura*. I want to make merry with God. I want to sport with God” (1098–99/1009–10).

From the subjective standpoint, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa explains that the *vijñānī* or *īśvarakoṭi*, in contrast to the ordinary *jīva*, is able to commune with God on various planes of consciousness: “The gross, the subtle, the causal, and the great cause [*sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, *kāraṇa*, *mahākāraṇa*]. Entering the *mahākāraṇa*, one becomes silent; one cannot utter a word. But an *īśvarakoṭi*, after attaining the *mahākāraṇa*, can return again. Incarnations of God, and others like them, belong to the class of

the *īśvarakoṭis*. They climb up, and they can also come down” (581–82/562). The *mahākāraṇa* plane of consciousness clearly corresponds to the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, from which the ordinary *jīva* is unable to return to the relative plane. By contrast, the *īśvarakoṭi* can descend from the *mahākāraṇa* plane to the *sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, and *kāraṇa* planes, thereby communing with God on all planes of consciousness. The *jñānī* accepts the *mahākāraṇa* plane alone as real and dismisses the *sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, and *kāraṇa* planes as unreal. The *vijñānī* or *īśvarakoṭi*, however, accepts all four planes of consciousness as true, since the *sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, and *kāraṇa* planes belong to the realm of God’s *līlā*, which is also real.

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa frequently refers to Hanumān as a *vijñānī* or *īśvarakoṭi* who revels in various attitudes toward his chosen deity Rāma, depending on his state of consciousness:

God keeps in many people the “ego of a *jñānī*” or the “ego of a *bhakta*” even after they have attained *brahmajñāna*. Hanumān, after realizing God in both His personal and His impersonal aspects, cherished toward God the attitude of a servant, a devotee. He said to Rāma: “O Rāma, sometimes I think that You are the Whole and I am a part of You. Sometimes I think that You are the Master and I am Your servant. And sometimes, Rāma, when I contemplate the Absolute, I see that I am You and You are I” (483/480).

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa paraphrases here a well-known Sanskrit verse: “When I identify with the body, I say, ‘I am Your servant.’ When I identify with the *jīvātman*, I say, ‘I am a part of You.’ And when I identify with the Supreme Ātman, I say, ‘I am You’ ” (*dehabuddhyā dāso ’ham, jīvabuddhyā tvadaṃśakah; ātmabuddhyā tvamevāham iti me niścita matih*). It might be tempting to interpret this verse in terms of Sāṅkara Advaita: while the attitudes of the *bhakta* are valid from the *vyāvahārika* standpoint—so long as one ignorantly identifies with the body or *jīvātman*—only the *jñānī*’s attitude of absolute identity with God is valid from the *pāramārthika* standpoint, since it is based on the knowledge of one’s true nature as the nondual Ātman. However, the contexts in which Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa invokes Hanumān’s statement to Rāma clearly rule out this Advaitic interpretation. Crucially, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa refers to Hanumān repeatedly as an “*īśvarakoṭi*” who has attained the state of *vijñāna* after attaining Advaitic *brahmajñāna*.²⁷ Hence, from Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s perspective, Hanumān’s remark to Rāma embodies not the one-sided attitude of the *jñānī*, but the all-embracing attitude of the *vijñānī*, who is able to descend from the *nitya* to the *līlā* and ascend from the *līlā* to the *nitya* at will. Indeed, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa himself declares that the *vijñānī*’s ability to enjoy and commune with God in various ways is the summit of spiritual realization: “I have come to the final realization that God is the Whole and I am a part of Him, that God is the Master and I am His servant. Furthermore, I think every now and then that He is I and I am He” (594/638).

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s acceptance of various relationships with God as equally valid finds support in the Upaniṣads, which express the relation between the *jīva* and

²⁷ See Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s references to Hanumān as an “*īśvarakoṭi*” or a “*vijñānī*” in the *Kathāmṛta* entries from August 3, 1884, December 14, 1884, March 1, 1885, April 12, 1885, April 24, 1885, July 15, 1885, and October 18, 1885.

Brahman in numerous ways, without favoring one particular relationship as the only ultimately valid one. For instance, while *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 2.5 characterizes *jīvas* as “children of immortality” (*amṛtasya putrāḥ*) (n.d.: 1199), *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.7.15 describes Brahman as the “*antaryāmi*” inhabiting “all beings,” which constitute the “body” (*śarīram*) of Brahman (Mādhavānanda 2009: 352). *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* employs two striking analogies to explain the relationship between the *jīvas* and Brahman: according to 2.1.1, *jīvas* emerge from *akṣara* Brahman like “sparks” (*visphuliṅgāḥ*) from a fire (Gambhīrānanda 1989, 2: 107), while according to 3.1.1, the *jīva* and Brahman are likened to “two birds that are intimately akin” (*dvā suparnā sayujā sakhāyā*) (137). By contrast, the well-known *mahāvākyas* from *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7 (*tat tvam asi*) and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10 (*ahaṃ brahmāsmi*) seem to express the absolute identity of the *jīva* and Brahman (Gambhīrānanda 2006: 468; Mādhavānanda 2009: 100).

Śrī Aurobindo argues that the *Bhagavad Gītā* also teaches numerous modes of uniting with Brahman, all of which are true and salvific. For Śrī Aurobindo, “The liberation of the Gita...is all kinds of union at once”—including *sāyujya*, *sālokya*, *sādrśya*, and *sāmīpya*—since we can achieve absolute Advaitic identity with the *nirguṇa* aspect of God, but we can also attain various forms of union with God's other aspects, *saguṇa* and otherwise (1997: 398). As Śrī Aurobindo puts it, “the Gita envelops” all these forms of union with God “in its catholic integrality and fuses them all into one greatest and richest divine freedom and perfection” (1997: 398).

Vijñāna Vedānta 6: Various religious faiths and spiritual philosophies are equally valid paths to realizing God.²⁸

It is well known that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa taught the harmony of all religions and spiritual paths: “One should not think, ‘My religion alone is the right path and other religions are false.’ God can be realized by means of all paths. It is enough to have sincere yearning for God. Infinite are the paths and infinite the opinions [*ananta path ananta matī*]” (111/158). It is much more difficult, however, to determine precisely *how* Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa harmonized the various religions and spiritual doctrines. In interpreting Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's doctrine of the harmony of religions, we should strive to avoid two dangers. On the one hand, if we interpret the common goal of all religions in a narrow or sectarian manner, then we run the risk of forcing all the world religions and spiritual doctrines into a single hegemonic framework that fails to honor the distinctiveness of each religion. On the other hand, if we interpret Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's harmonizing of religions too vaguely or loosely, then we run the risk of reducing his doctrine to a feel-good piety devoid of philosophical substance.²⁹

Dhīreśānanda, for instance, falls prey to the former danger in his attempt to explain Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's harmonizing of religions in terms of Advaita Vedānta. According to Dhīreśānanda, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa maintained that the common goal of all

²⁸ For a much more elaborate discussion of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's views on religious pluralism, see my article, “‘God Is Infinite, and the Paths to God Are Infinite’: A Reconstruction and Defense of Sri Ramakrishna's *Vijñāna*-Based Model of Religious Pluralism” (Forthcoming-b).

²⁹ For a helpful discussion of the dangers of religious relativism, see the introductory section of Long's article, “(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together” (2010).

religions is the “spiritual realization of *nirguṇa* Brahman” (1962: 144). However, as Neevel (1976: 96) rightly points out, such a narrowly Advaitic interpretation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s harmonizing of religions fails to take at face value those religious traditions—including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and many sects of Hinduism—that accept the ultimate reality of a personal God. For the Advaitin, religions based on belief in a personal God are, at best, true only from the *vyāvahārika* (empirical) standpoint, but these religions can nonetheless be useful in preparing the spiritual aspirant for the rigors of Advaitic spiritual practice. However, in contrast to this rather condescending Advaitic view, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa clearly accepted both theistic and nontheistic spiritual doctrines as *equally* valid paths to realizing God (Neevel 1976: 96). Moreover, the context in which Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa teaches the harmony of all religions at various points in the *Kathāmṛta* does not bear out an Advaitic interpretation, since Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa nowhere suggests that the personal God accepted by many of the world religions is ultimately unreal or that the final goal of all religions is the realization of *nirguṇa* Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*.

In fact, I would suggest that the nonsectarian framework of Vijñāna Vedānta outlined in this section provides a much more catholic and universal basis for harmonizing the world’s religions and spiritual paths. Tellingly, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa himself teaches the harmony of religions on the basis of *vijñāna*: “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 *bhaktā*’s path, too, leads to truth. *Jñānayoga* is true, and *bhaktiyoga* is true. God can be realized through all paths” (51/103–4). Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa indicates here that we should understand the harmony of all religions from the standpoint of *vijñāna* rather than from the standpoint of any particular sectarian philosophy, Advaitic or otherwise. In particular, he points out that the *vijñānī* realizes the truth of both the personal (*saguṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*) aspects of God, so the *vijñānī* can affirm the equal validity of all world religions on the basis of direct spiritual experience.

In other words, ‘Vijñāna Vedānta 6’ follows directly from ‘Vijñāna Vedānta 3.’ The equal validity of all religions and spiritual paths derives from Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s conception of God as infinite and illimitable. Since God is infinite—both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent and transcendent—there must be correspondingly infinite ways of approaching and ultimately realizing God. As Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa succinctly puts it, “God is infinite, and the paths to God are infinite” (*tini ananta, patho ananta*) (511/506). From Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s standpoint of *vijñāna*, the infinite impersonal-personal God is conceived and worshiped 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.

Accordingly, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa maintains that every religion or spiritual philosophy is a means to the end of God-realization, so we should follow the spiritual path that suits us without fanatically insisting that our path is the only correct one: “Whatever path you follow—whether you are a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a Śākta, a Vaiṣṇava, or a Brāhmo—the vital point is sincere longing for God. God is our Inner Guide. 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 own watch is right; but as a matter of fact no watch is absolutely right. But that doesn't hamper one's work" (1123/673). From Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's standpoint, every religion and spiritual philosophy captures at least one true *aspect* of the Infinite Divine Reality, but no religion or philosophy captures the *whole* of the Infinite Reality. Hence, he likens religious faiths and spiritual philosophies to watches that are not perfectly accurate but are nonetheless accurate enough to serve one's purposes. While no religion or philosophy can give us a perfect conception of God or of spiritual reality, all religions and philosophies can serve as effective means to the spiritual realization of God.

Indeed, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's favorite parable of the chameleon teaches the harmony of religious faiths and spiritual paths from the nonsectarian 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 grey, violet, blue, and so forth and so on. At last they started quarreling 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, grey, 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. 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. 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 Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa does not privilege the colorless aspect of the chameleon in any way. Hence, this parable definitely rules out the Advaitic interpretation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's harmonizing of religions, since Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa grants equal ontological status to both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* Brahman. Clearly, the man sitting under the tree

represents the *vijñānī* who has realized both the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* aspects of God and hence affirms on the basis of his own spiritual experience that all religions are salvifically efficacious.³⁰

Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's chameleon parable also helps clarify the common goal of God-realization to which all spiritual paths lead. The Advaitin, as we have seen, hegemonically imposes the goal of realizing *nirguṇa* Brahman onto all the world religions. By contrast, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's parable implies 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*. The Advaitin, through the practice of *jñānayoga*, realizes the Infinite Reality as *nirguṇa*. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa adds, however, that the *bhakta*, who believes in the personal God, can realize the same Infinite Reality as "eternally endowed with form and personality" (*nitya sākār*) (152/191).³¹ From Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa'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.

From the standpoint of *vijñāna*, we can also understand the harmony of religions in a maximally robust manner. 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 life. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's point is not just that we should tolerate all religions and spiritual paths because they are all valid paths to realizing God. Rather, he is making 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 spiritual outlook and practice.³²

There are numerous scriptural sources for Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on religious pluralism. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's idea that all religions and spiritual philosophies concern one and the same God—but in different forms and called by different names—can be traced as far back to the well-known *mantra* from *R̥g Veda* 1.64.46, "*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*" (Truth is one; sages speak of it variously). Moreover, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teaching that numerous spiritual doctrines and paths are equally valid means of realizing God finds support in verses in the *Bhagavad Gītā* such as 13.24, "Some realize the Ātman within themselves through *dhyānayoga*; others through *sāṃkhyayoga*, and still others through *karmayoga*." What is perhaps unprecedented is Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's own practice of both Hindu and non-Hindu faiths, on the experiential basis of which he proclaimed the harmony of all the world religions.

³⁰ See Tapasyānanda's excellent discussion of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's chameleon parable from the standpoint of *vijñāna* on pages 29–30 of his *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta* (1990). Similarly, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's other favorite parable of the blind men who touch different parts of the same elephant also has the standpoint of the *vijñānī* built into it. The man who sees that the blind men are all touching various parts of the elephant represents the *vijñānī* who appreciates the truth of all religious views.

³¹ It is worth noting that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's statement about the *bhakta*'s realization of the "*nitya sākār*" form of God suggests that Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi* is not necessary for spiritual salvation.

³² For a good discussion of religious pluralism from the standpoint of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, see Long (2010).

The Implications of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vijñāna Vedānta for Scriptural Hermeneutics and Discourse on Religious Pluralism

It is worth exploring briefly some of the important implications of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta. Traditional commentators such as Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja often engaged in the eisegetic practice of imposing their own sectarian philosophical views onto the scriptures. By contrast, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's life and teachings can help motivate a noneisegetic hermeneutic approach that strives to recover the original nonsectarian Vedāntic philosophy embodied in the ancient Hindu scriptures, especially the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Brahma-sūtras*. Adopting Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's broad nonsectarian standpoint, both Svāmī Vivekānanda and Śrī Aurobindo have argued that the scriptures, far from promulgating a narrow sectarian view, teach a maximally expansive conception of God—as both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent and transcendent—and declare that numerous spiritual practices are equally valid paths to realizing God. Since I have already explored elsewhere some of the implications of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's views for scriptural hermeneutics (Maharaj 2015, forthcoming-a), I will focus here instead on the equally significant implications of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vijñāna Vedānta for contemporary discourse on religious pluralism.

Since the British philosopher John Hick first presented his groundbreaking theory of religious pluralism several decades ago, religious pluralism has become one of the central issues in Western philosophy of religion (1990: 109–19, 1989: 233–376). Strangely, however, philosophers of religion rarely discuss Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's views on religious pluralism. By way of concluding, I will briefly suggest how Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings can be brought into dialogue with Hick's highly influential theory of religious pluralism.³³

Hick bases his theory of religious pluralism on the conviction that all the major world religions are soteriologically efficacious, since they are all equally capable of effecting the “transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness” (1989: 14). He also acknowledges, however, that the conceptions of God or Ultimate Reality found in the various world religions are often mutually contradictory. To account for this fact, Hick appeals to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant's distinction between the noumenon, reality as it is “in itself” (*an sich*) apart from how we perceive it, and the phenomenon, reality as perceived through the filter, as it were, of the human cognitive apparatus. In Kantian fashion, Hick posits an unknowable “Real *an sich*” and distinguishes it from the “Real as humanly-thought-and-experienced” (1989: 239–40). According to Hick, the conceptions of God or Ultimate Reality found in all the great world religions are simply different ways of humanly conceiving one and the same noumenal Real, which is strictly unknowable and ineffable. Since the “divine *personae* and *impersonae*” of all the world religions are phenomenally true but noumenally false,

³³ Since the writing of this article, I have expanded this brief comparative discussion of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa and Hick into the fourth chapter of my book manuscript in progress, *God's Infinitude: Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*.

the religious practices based on these various phenomenal conceptions of the Real are all equally capable of leading to salvific transformation (Hick 1989: 246).

However, as numerous scholars have pointed out, Hick fails to take the truth-claims of the various world religions at face value, since he only grants phenomenal validity to their conceptions of Ultimate Reality, whereas most religious practitioners take the fundamental truth-claims of their respective religions to be *literally* or *ultimately* true.³⁴ As George I. Mavrodes puts it, “Hick’s view suggests that almost all of the world’s religious believers are wildly mistaken about the objects of their worship and adoration” (Hick 2001: 69n6).

While Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa no doubt shares Hick’s conviction that all the world religions are soteriologically effective, I think he would reject Hick’s Kantian distinction between the unknowable “Real *an sich*” and various phenomenal conceptions of the Real. Hick’s Kantianism compels him to assert that none of the world religions say anything true about the Ultimate Reality as such. By contrast, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa claims—from the standpoint of Vijñāna Vedānta—that all the world religions and spiritual philosophies capture *real aspects* of one and the same infinite and illimitable God, but none of them gives a complete account of the *whole* of God. According to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, “everything is possible for God,” so God *actually assumes* the various personal forms worshiped by practitioners of the theistic world religions, while God reveals His impersonal aspect to practitioners of nontheistic spiritual philosophies such as Advaita Vedānta and Madhyamaka Buddhism. Hence, by taking at face value the truth-claims of the various world religions, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa is able to harmonize the world religions in a much less hegemonic manner than Hick.

Moreover, while Hick (2001: 16) admits that his conception of the ineffable “Real *an sich*” is only a tentative “hypothesis” which he postulates in order to account for the soteriological efficacy of all the world religions,³⁵ Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa teaches the infinitude and illimitability of God on the basis of his own practice of both Hindu and non-Hindu religions and his direct experience of *vijñāna*, the spiritual realization of God as both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, and infinitely more besides. For Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, the infinitude of God and the equal validity of all religions and spiritual paths are not intellectual postulates but self-evident truths rooted in spiritual conviction.

More generally, I hope to have made a case that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa’s subtle and sophisticated philosophical views—whether or not one agrees with them—deserve a prominent place in contemporary discussions of key issues in theology and the philosophy of religion, including the nature of God, the scope of reason, the epistemology of mystical experience, and theories of religious pluralism.

³⁴ See the objections to Hick’s theory collected in John Hick’s *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (2001), especially the objections of Alvin Plantinga (55), William Alston (28), and George I. Mavrodes (64–67).

³⁵ Also see Mavrodes’ objection to Hick’s postulation of the ineffable Real on pages 64–67 in Hick 2001.

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