

Foreword

IT IS OF COURSE a pleasure for me to see Jon Paul Sydnor's *Ramanuja and Schleiermacher* in print. After all, the hope of any teacher is to see one's student find his own voice, become a teacher, and publish his own research. This Jon Paul has done in a very fine way.

But this book is a happy occasion also because it is a pleasure to see what Jon Paul has achieved in his research. This is a work of comparative theology thoroughly accomplished, without compromising intellectual responsibility or Christian commitment along the way. Comparative study is often thought of as merely wide-ranging, as less than theological. But Jon Paul has not taken up this comparative project because he is less interested in theology than his peers, or as if he had decided to survey religious topics neutrally rather than explore them with the eyes of faith.

As his introduction indicates, two separate courses—on Ramanuja, on Schleiermacher—continued to intrigue and nag him theologically long after the courses were done. Ramanuja and Schleiermacher would not stay neatly separated in his mind, and he found himself repeatedly returning to them in thinking through theological issues that arose in the course of his study. Comparative theological reflection thus became, he found, a primary way in which he was to be a theologian in his Calvinist heritage. When “absolute dependence” came to the fore as a topic to write a dissertation on, he knew that he would learn better how to understand Schleiermacher's celebrated view of the matter by bringing to bear on it the view of Ramanuja, a thinker who, though less well known in the West, has for a millennium remained one of Hinduism's greatest theologians.

Jon Paul recognized early on that this new venture could not possess in advance a predictable outcome. His own credibility, and respect for these two great thinkers, would rather require of him sensitivity and alertness to theological differences along the way, in a conversation that would have a dynamic and fruition unlike one that would stay safely in the realm of Schleiermacher studies or Ramanuja studies. At each point

in this book, therefore, Jon Paul has had to be triply alert: to what each author says on the dimension of absolute dependence under consideration, to ways in which they diverged, in disagreement or complementarity, and to his own resultant reformulation of what absolute dependence might mean, now, for us.

By the book's end, we know a great deal about Ramanuja and Schleiermacher, and that in itself is by no means a small accomplishment, since the explosion of theological learning in past decades has too often meant that authors and readers restrict themselves to narrow subspecialties, or instead strive for very general, all-purpose insights. Jon Paul has focused, and his efforts have paid off in depth and breadth of insight. If at first such a comparative conversation might seem odd or eccentric, Jon Paul has shown us how and why it is worthwhile to have read these authors together. For substantive theological reasons we are better off thinking about God, the world, human nature, and absolute dependence in light of both authors read together. Readers of this book will learn a great deal about dependence and the divine-human relationship, and about how two great theological traditions came to prize this idea and make it central to their theologies. Recently I published a book entitled *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God*. While my book appeared first, in 2008, it now seems an apt sequel to Jon Paul's substantive theological reflection: we learn absolute dependence across religious borders, and we enact what we learn in loving surrender, across those same borders.

At the end of the project, Jon Paul is still a theologian in the Calvinist tradition, and that is good, since almost always theologians do best when they are at home in a particular place, with a particular faith and particular community. Jon Paul did not lose his way in the wilds of comparison. Yet because of this continuing rootedness, his project more credibly opens the door to an almost infinite array of other such comparative conversations, other combinations of partners in dialogue chosen on the basis of opportunity and in light of specific issues that theologians need to address. In particular, we can only look forward to Jon Paul's next project on this solid foundation.

This is a fine example of comparative theology in action. If readers want to know how the discipline works when it works well, they can turn to *Ramanuja and Schleiermacher*.

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