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The Logistics of Faith and Reason in Anselm and Ādi Śaṅkara: A Hindu-Christian Comparative Theological Inquiry

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of faith and reason in the works of St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), an 11th-century Benedictine monk, Archbishop, philosopher, and theologian and Ādi Śaṅkara, an eminent 8th-century CE pedagogue and systematic theologian in the Hindu world. As such, it seeks to uncover and define the contours of Hindu-Christian studies in terms of its *raison d'être* for engagement, which consequently effects its *modus operandi*. Understanding the role of faith and reason enables us to see how the academic study of comparative theology (CT) and interreligious dialogue (IRD) proceeds compared to Hindu theological inquiries. In this paper, first, I examine the definition of “faith seeking understanding” in the works of St. Anselm. Then, I explore the understanding of faith and reason in the writings of Ādi Śaṅkara. Their perspectives have significant implications for CT and IRD, as Anselm’s framework emphasizes rationality apart from scriptures, is theistic and dualistic, whereas Śaṅkara’s non-dual understanding of faith and reason challenges Western theological assumptions of faith and knowledge by cultivating an attitude of receptivity. Engaging Śaṅkara’s paradigm offers an alternate universal epistemological model, enriching Hindu-Christian dialogue by transcending doctrinal assent to a transformative, experiential, understanding of liberation.

Keywords

St. Anselm of Canterbury, Śrī Ādi Śaṅkara, faith seeking understanding, faith and reason, *fides quaerens intellectum*, śraddhā, pramāṇa, comparative theology, interreligious dialogue, interfaith dialogue

Introduction

The discipline of comparative theology (henceforth CT), alongside its related fields such as theology of religions (TOR) and interreligious dialogue (IRD), has become widely prominent in contemporary academic discourse, attracting scholars from Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and other religious traditions. Despite its growing appeal, the discipline's Christian roots remain evident, alongside unresolved ambiguities in demarcating confessional theology from religious studies, as well as ongoing critical reflection on its theological underpinnings, and its methodological foundations. Central to these concerns is the articulation of the discipline's *raison d'être* in engaging the religious Other, a foundational question which shapes its *modus operandi* and scholarly practices.

Francis X. Clooney, the father of comparative theology, answers this foundational question by arguing for theology as an “interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and confessional enterprise.”¹ Clooney's approach in comparative theology involves a method that combines elements of confession, interreligious engagements, comparison, and dialogics.² His method involves comparing and contrasting “texts, images, practices, doctrines, and individuals” from two or more religious traditions.³ The ultimate aim is to assist interlocutors in understanding their faith regarding the various religious traditions in diverse contexts. The fruits, or insights, derived from such a comparison are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition. As per this definition, interlocutors and comparativists are not compelled to give up their faith or assimilate into the other; rather, “faith” serves as a platform to engage with individuals of

1 Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries Between Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

2 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 7–12.

3 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 7–12.

different faiths. Comparative engagements provide an opportunity to rethink and reshape one's worldview. It is a pragmatic approach to religious diversity, where we examine the world through the lens of our faith and remain open to reinterpreting and understanding the truths of our religion in light of another.⁴ CT is an intentional and focused study that pays careful attention to the specific characteristics of different traditions as they are brought together and analyzed with respect and patience, offering significant benefits to all parties.⁵

Further, Clooney makes a distinction between CT, TOR, IRD, and dialogical theology, while defining the discipline of CT as:

comparative and theological beginning to end-marks acts of *faith seeking understanding* which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, *venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions*. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.⁶

Given the emphasis of “faith seeking understanding” on the comparative theological enterprise, this paper examines the role of faith and reason in the works of St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), an 11th-century Benedictine monk, Archbishop, philosopher, and theologian and Ādi Śaṅkara, an eminent 8th-century CE pedagogue and systematic theologian in the Hindu world. As such, it seeks to uncover and define the contours of Hindu-Christian studies in terms of its purpose for engagement, which consequently effects its *modus operandi*. Understanding the role of faith and reason enables us to see how the academic study of CT and dialogue IRD proceeds compared to Hindu theological inquiries.

First, I examine the definition of “faith seeking understanding” in the works of St. Anselm. Then, I explore the understanding of faith and reason in the writings of Ādi Śaṅkara. Their perspectives have significant implications for CT and IRD, as Anselm's framework emphasizes rationality apart from scriptures, is theistic and dualistic, whereas Śaṅkara's non-dual understanding of faith and reason challenges Western theological assumptions of faith and knowledge. Engaging Śaṅkara's paradigm offers an alternate universal epistemological model, enriching Hindu-Christian

4 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 69.

5 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 69.

6 Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10–11, emphasis mine.

dialogue by transcending doctrinal assent to a transformative, experiential, understanding of liberation that cultivates an attitude of receptivity.

Part I: “Faith seeking Understanding”

St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), an 11th-century Benedictine monk, Archbishop, philosopher, and theologian is renowned for his ontological argument and is widely recognized as the “Father of Scholasticism.”⁷ It was Anselm who popularized the phrase “faith seeking understanding” (Latin, *fides quaerens intellectum*). While he is widely recognized for this saying, Anselm borrows the concept of “faith seeking understanding” from Augustine of Hippo (354–430). However, Anselm’s understanding of the term differs from that of Augustine. In Augustine’s viewpoint, the relationship between faith and understanding is rooted in the Bible, specifically in the book of Isaiah 7:9, which states, “Unless you believe, you will not understand.” He acknowledged that faith is a prerequisite for theological comprehension.⁸ For Augustine, faith meant a dialectical assenting relationship to Christian doctrine revealed *by and within* the Church. He described faith as agreeing with the Church and its pronouncements, as conveyed by the apostles through the canonical Scriptural texts, creedal statements, and the content of Christian revelation.⁹ Anselm is renowned for expanding upon this previous formulation by creating a framework for theological engagement that continues to be utilized in various disciplines even today, including CT and IRD.¹⁰ Anselm builds upon Augustine’s initial concept to elaborate and analyze the interplay of faith and understanding. In contrast to Augustine, who prioritizes the Scriptures and the traditional authority of the Church, Anselm’s approach diverges by placing greater importance on independent

7 Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, eds. *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford University Press, 1998), xii.

8 Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004)

9 Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, eds., *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* (Fortress Press, 2011), 11–13.

10 Schüssler Fiorenza and Galvin, *Systematic Theology*, 11–13.

reasoning “apart from Scriptures,” as noted below. In *On the Incarnation of the World*, he writes:

And perhaps some will deign to read two short works of mine, namely, the *Monologion* [M] and the *Proslogion* [P]. I composed these works especially to show that compelling arguments apart from the authority of Scripture can establish things that we by faith hold about the divine nature and the divine persons besides the incarnation.¹¹

Anselm’s *Monologion* (M) serves as the starting point for rational inquiry into the significance of the Divine Essence and the Trinity, which was composed after years of teaching and deliberating on these matters with his pupil monks at Bec.¹² Toivo J. Holopainen agrees with Gene Fendt that the purpose of the *Monologion* (M) and the *Proslogion* (P) treatises is to prove through reason the substance of faith.¹³ This is understandable, given that Anselm’s primary goal as monk and abbot of Bec in Normandy was to provide the community with rigorous spiritual and intellectual formation, a commitment clearly demonstrated in his major works.¹⁴ Although most scholars agree that Anselm employs argumentation as a theological tool in his M and P, it is worth mentioning that he also makes good use of devotion and contemplation—influenced by the tradition of *Lectio Divina*—in his works via meditations and prayers.¹⁵ Building on Gene Fendt, Holopainen contends that the two works have a “common objective and a common methodology” of “argument and devotion.”¹⁶ Anselm points to this approach in his preface, describing the M as a “soliloquy” that explores “what he [the devotee] does not yet know” through quiet argumentation and the P as an *allocutio* that was written, “to elevate one’s mind toward contemplating God and seeking to understand what he believes.”¹⁷

We also see a continuity between Anselm’s concept of faith and Augustine’s understanding of assent to what the apostolic Church considers

11 *On the Origin of the World*, 6 in Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 246.

12 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, x.

13 Toivo J. Holopainen, “The *Proslogion* in Relation to the *Monologion*,” *The Heythrop Journal* 50, no. 4 (July 2009): 590–602.

14 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, vii.

15 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, xxi–xiv.

16 Holopainen, *The Proslogion in Relation to the Monologion*, 591.

17 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 83.

sacred regarding revelation and Scripture.¹⁸ This is reflected in Anselm's theologizing, as we can see in the quote below:

- 75. One must have hope in the supreme essence
- 76. One must believe in the supreme essence
- 77. One must have faith in Father, in Son and in their Spirit,
equally in each individual and in all three together
- 78. Dead faith and live faith.¹⁹

Like Augustine, Anselm considers faith a prerequisite for any theological endeavor while emphasizing the need for rational inquiry apart from the Scriptures. The Christian faith is neither inherently antithetical to tradition nor does it conflict with it. Additionally, I observe that Anselm does not provide a precise definition of faith in his writings. I suggest that this may be because he considers faith a foundational element of the Christian framework—an accepted starting point for contemplation without needing to be debated or analyzed. For example, he writes:

Indeed, no Christian ought to argue how things that the Catholic Church sincerely believes and verbally professes are not so, but by always adhering to the same faith without hesitation, by loving it, and by humbly living according to it, a Christian ought to argue how they are, inasmuch as one can look for reasons. If one can understand, one should thank God; if one cannot, one should bow one's head in veneration rather than sound off trumpets.²⁰

My examination of Anselm's corpus of works indicates that his writings consistently reflect a Christian worldview and an unwavering commitment to the Church's orthodoxy. In fact, the purpose of writing *On the Incarnation of the Word* was to defend himself against Roscelin's unorthodox interpretations of the Trinity—an interpretation Roscelin claimed to derive from Anselm's own teachings.²¹ An unmistakable Christian theme runs through Anselm's works, which can be discerned from both their titles and from the central arguments they advance. Works such as *On Truth*, *Free Will*, *On the Fall of the Devil*, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, *Why God Became Man*, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*, and *De Concordia* (*The Compatibility of God's Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Grace with Human*

18 Fiorenza and Galvin, *Systematic Theology*, 13.

19 M: 75–78 in Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 10.

20 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 235.

21 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, viii.

Freedom) exemplify this orientation. Though he was intrigued by the “nature and working of language,” even his *De Grammatico* (*Dialogue on Literacy and the Literate*) is not about grammar or logic *per se* but about how semantical structures relate to the “persons of the Trinity” in terms of substance.²²

Anselm’s starting point in analyzing the content of Christian revelation and dogmatic truths is faith rather than doubt or a hermeneutic of suspicion. His step-by-step methodical technique uses dialogue to arrive at certain conclusions while never letting go of one’s devotional mood throughout the process. Within this schema, faith is indispensable. “For a Christian ought to progress through faith to understanding, not reach faith through understanding—or, if he cannot understand, leave faith behind. Now, if he can achieve understanding, he rejoices; but if he cannot, he stands in awe of what he cannot grasp.”²³ Faith then is the substratum, as it were, for theologizing for Anselm as he confessed in his P1, “For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that ‘unless I believe, I shall not understand’ [Isaiah 7: 9].”²⁴ In my reading, faith, generates a feedback loop that impacts the interlocutor and is deemed active faith if it is based on love that yields good works.²⁵ Furthermore, according to Anselm, faith is a “spiritual discipline” characterized by an “obedient will” rather than just an “epistemic attitude.”²⁶ Faith as a spiritual discipline involves contemplating the Scriptures and humbly adhering to the Lord’s commandments and testimonies found in the Scriptures.²⁷ Faith produces wisdom, purifies the heart, and, in turn, leads one to the experiential knowledge of the truths of “doctrine.”²⁸ Anselm writes:

[T]hose who have not believed will not understand. For those who have not believed will not find by experience, and those who have not found by experience will not know. For example, the more experience transcends hearing about things, the more the knowledge of those experiencing things surpasses the knowledge of those hearing about them.²⁹

22 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, xiv, xv, 435.

23 Sandra Visser and Thomas Williams, *Anselm: Great Medieval Thinkers* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.

24 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 87.

25 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 79.

26 Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 20.

27 Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 20.

28 Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 20.

29 Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 236–237.

Anselm employs metaphors of “spiritual wings” and a “ladder” to describe those who attempt to advance intellectually without the aid of faith and their subsequent failure. According to Anselm, faith is not vacuous or meaningless but serves as a protective shield, safeguarding from mistakes and enhancing one’s capacity for logical understanding. He writes:

And not only is the mind without faith and obedience to the commandments of God prevented from rising to understand higher things, but the mind’s endowed understanding is also sometimes taken away, and faith itself subverted, when upright conscience is neglected.³⁰

I began to wonder if perhaps it might be possible to find one single argument that for its proof required no other save itself, and that by itself would suffice to prove that God really exists, that He is the supreme good needing no other and is He whom all things have need of for their being and well-being, and also to prove whatever we believe about the Divine Being.³¹

In the M, Anselm examines the concepts that, by pure reasoning alone, may guide one to the Trinity. The content of this work is heavily influenced by Augustine’s *De Trinitate* (*On the Trinity*), in which Anselm incorporates several “psychological” concepts such as “memory, will, understanding, mind, knowledge, and love.”³² In contrast to dialogues in catechism, which are predetermined, structured responses, Anselm’s dialogues are more akin to the Socratic dialogue style employed by Plato, characterized by genuine discourse. Students and teachers collaboratively deduce that truth, which can manifest in acts and declarations, pertains to things being in accordance with how they should be.³³ Yet, it is essential to note that Augustine, rather than Plato, serves as Anselm’s primary inspiration.³⁴

I argue that the methodological freedom exhibited in Anselm’s model represents a remarkable step towards the utility of reason and rational philosophy to answer theological questions, even if it remains constrained by Christian presuppositions. It should be noted that Anselm has faced criticism for attempting to supplant faith with reason. However, I contend that his

30 Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 237.

31 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 82.

32 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, xi.

33 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, xv. Works such as “On Truth,” “Free Will,” “On the Fall of the Devil,” and “*De Grammatico*,” are presented as dialogues between a student and a teacher.

34 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, xv.

aim is not to substitute faith with reason but to intellectually analyze the Christian faith. I emphasize that he persists in this endeavor despite opponents who consider faith to be incompatible with reason. “The first book contains the objections of unbelievers who reject the Christian faith because they think it militates against reason, and the answers given by the faithful.”³⁵ Thus, Anselm seeks to reconcile faith and reason by presenting arguments raised by nonbelievers who refuse to accept the Christian faith for various reasons. I further observe that, despite his strong emphasis on rational inquiry, Anselm does not provide an explicit definition of reason, leaving it as an operative principle within his theological method.

John F. Rico notes that Anselm does not define “*fides ratio*” (faith reason) because it is not a “term that forms a link in his chains of argumentation, but rather names the very principle by which those chains are made and given structure. It is left to Anselm’s readers to express what that principle is and to succeed in rightly expressing it surely requires thinking [in terms of defining] as Anselm did.”³⁶ To understand the term “*fides ratio*,” Rico turns to Augustine who has influenced Anselm the most. He notes how in Augustine’s work, *ratio* is understood as “a movement of the mind, capable of distinguishing and connecting those things which are learned.”³⁷ *Ratio* is not “static” but “dynamic” and through its “dynamism the mind ‘distinguishes and connects what it learns.’”³⁸ Rico further notes that Augustine defines *fides*, a noun as if it were a verb as “to believe what you do not see” (*quod non vides credere*). Furthermore, he asserts that the act of believing (*credere*) might be understood as nothing more than “thinking with assent” (*cum assensione cogitare*).³⁹ Thinking is crucial to faith; therefore, faith is inherently a cognitive process, an act of thinking. From an Augustinian perspective, faith may be defined as “thinking with assent what is not seen.” So, instead of stating that Anselm holds a perspective on the connection between faith and reason, it is more accurate to state that he holds a perspective on “the rationale behind faith.”

The “rational basis of faith” suggests something external: arguments in support of doctrinal formulations that have an apologetic or protreptic purpose. “The logic of faith” suggests something internal: the rational coherence of the doctrines of faith, the way they “all hang together” logically. Anselm’s *ratio fidei* means both these things

35 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 261.

36 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 77.

37 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 78.

38 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 78.

39 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 78.

at once; it refers to the intrinsically rational character of Christian doctrines in virtue of which they form a coherent and rationally defensible system.⁴⁰

This means that “reason has role to play *prior to faith* and *within* the realm of faith and that *faith transcends reason*.”⁴¹ There is a “proper ordering” in the “rational dynamic” of faith seeking understanding so that if one operates contrary to this order, then no progress is made in understanding, and errors occur.⁴² “There is no room for doubt about what I say: One who has not believed will not understand. For one who has not believed will not experience, and one who has not experienced will not know.”⁴³ Rico finds additional components in the role of reason and faith that may appear discordant at first glance, but they make sense in light of Anselm’s Benedictine monastic context.⁴⁴ Rico names these elements as:

[T]he intellectual communality inherent in Anselm’s example of meditating, the concomitance of prayer and philosophy in the dynamic of faith seeking understanding, the proper ordering of that dynamic, the beauty of reasoning, the obligation to seek understanding, fraternal concern with carrying out that obligation in the properly ordered way.⁴⁵

In the pattern exemplified in the M, Rico notes the first additional element as “intellectual communality.” The M is *An Example of Meditating on the Reason of Faith* and the example is meant to be shared with other Benedictine confreres attesting to its communal dimension.⁴⁶ Although the reflection on dogmatic truths is done apart from Scriptures, the “necessity of reason” and the “clarity of truth” “can be shared, for they are the common property of all.”⁴⁷ The communal relationships between “teacher and student, between author and reader, between Anselm and his brother monks” are supported by “plain style, unsophisticated arguments, and straightforward disputation.”⁴⁸

The second element is the simultaneous occurrence of prayer and philosophy within the dynamic of faith seeking understanding. Rico notes

40 Visser and Williams, *Anselm*, 13–14.

41 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 79, emphasis mine.

42 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 84.

43 Davies and Evans, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 46.

44 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 81.

45 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 86.

46 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 80.

47 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 87.

48 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 81.

that the telos of the seeker is the “seeing” “not of the bodily eye, but of the soul; it is the immediate beholding of the divine.”⁴⁹ This goal is met through a life of active prayer that operates on the basic principle of love, constantly longing, seeking, and desiring God. It is not a sterile seeking but fecund in its desire to know its beloved, the object and subject of one’s love.

The third element in Anselm’s dynamic of faith seeking understanding has to do with proper order. Faith orders understanding, understanding shapes experience, and experience leads to knowing. Faith precedes understanding while leading the seeker through longing and love to analyze faith, and finally faith transcends reason.

The fourth aspect has to do with beauty and its relationship to reason. Anselm says the solution to the dialogue’s central topic is attractive and compelling because of the “beauty of its *reasoning*.”⁵⁰ In another context, Anselm objects to Boso’s request, stating that the “subject matter is not merely precious but ... beautiful in its reasoning beyond the understanding of men.”⁵¹ Anselm’s method of faith seeking understanding is elegant and alluring due to its aesthetics of rationality that surpass human comprehension. Applying logic and rationality not only resolves disagreements but also possesses a profound beauty, a quality inherent in the thinking process.

The fifth element is the obligation to share with the community the necessity of reason and the importance of maintaining the right order in the seeking process. Faith’s reason involves all these things: a duty, or obligation, to seek understanding; a fitting ordering of that understanding to faith and seeing; and a beauty that goes beyond human comprehension. All of this needs to be done while respecting individual freedom.⁵²

Finally, the sixth element pertains to genuine fraternal concern. Anselm cautions that those who fail to fulfill their obligation of performing faith seeking understanding in a proper order end up erring and failing to ascend through the intellect. The dynamic in the ordering is both constructive and destructive.⁵³ It is important to note that Anselm fully understood the limitations of logic and its inability to fully penetrate the mystery of God.

49 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 83.

50 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 85; Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo (CDH)*, I:1, in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. Davies and Evans, 245.

51 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 85; Anselm, *CDH* I:1, in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. Davies and Evans, 245.

52 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 88.

53 Rico, *The Reason of Faith*, 86.

According to him, logic may provide support and justify “necessary reasons” that facilitate comprehension of the existence of God, the incarnation, and other related truths.⁵⁴

Part II: Desire, Faith, Reason, and Knowledge in the Works of Śrī Ādi Śaṅkara

The opening verse of the *Upadeśasāhasrī*, or *A Thousand Teachings* ascribed to Śrī Ādi Śaṅkara, an eminent 8th-century CE pedagogue and systematic theologian renowned for his scholarly accomplishments and exegetical writings, commences with the verse “We shall now explain a method of teaching the means to liberation for the benefit of those aspirants after liberation who are desirous (of this teaching) and are possessed of faith (in it).”⁵⁵ Before elucidating the pedagogical approach to impart the knowledge and techniques necessary for attaining liberation (*mokṣa*), Ādi Śaṅkara (henceforth Śaṅkara) clearly notes that this instruction is not intended for random persons but for those individuals who “desire” liberation and have “faith” in the teachings. What does Śaṅkara mean by those “desirous of this teaching” and possessing of “faith in it”?

Desire in the context of Śaṅkara’s teachings is a dual-edged phenomenon that operates in two areas. On the one hand, it is the desire for liberation (*mokṣa*); on the other, it is the renunciation of sensory, material, and worldly desires. “*Mumukṣutva* or yearning for freedom is the desire to free oneself, by realizing one’s true nature, from all bondages from that of egoism to that of the body—bondages superimposed by Ignorance” (VC 27).⁵⁶ The intense longing for freedom from the superimposition of ignorance (*avidyā*) and the constraints of the ego combined with the awareness that the temporal is “evanescent,” bringing about pain and suffering, becomes a motivational fire on the path to liberation (US 52).⁵⁷ While positive desire means a craving for release from ignorance and knowing one’s true nature as *sat-cit-ānanda* (being-consciousness-infinite), negatively, it means abandoning

54 Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Random House, 1955), 130.

55 Swāmi Jagadānanda, *Upadeśasāhasrī Gadyapadyabhāgadvayam: A Thousand Teachings in Two Parts, Prose and Poetry of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, translated into English with Explanatory Notes* (Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1949), 2.

56 VC refers to *Vivekachudamani*. See, Swami Madhavananda, *Vivekachudamani of Śrī Shankaracharya: Text with English Translation, Notes and an Index* (Prabuddha Bharat Press, 1921), 11.

57 US refers to *Upadeśasāhasrī*, See, Jagadānanda, *Upadeśasāhasrī*, 207.

the world and all it has to offer—the desire for temporary goods, children, wealth, the precise techniques of achieving goals in life, and even the desire for the next world, the heavens (US 1.2).⁵⁸ Such aspirants have developed a form of “indifference” (*vairāgya*) which should not be confused with nihilism, having chosen the life of a wandering ascetic monk.⁵⁹ They exhibit qualities of compassion, “self-control,” and a “tranquil” body-mind-sense complex which are external manifestations of an internalized, transformed desire that is flipped from the external world of sense objects to an internal desire, a drive to know the Self (US 1.3).⁶⁰ Indeed, as it is said in the Bṛhadāraṇya Upaniṣad 4.4.5:

You are what your deep, driving desire is.
As your desire is, so is your will.
As your will is, so is our deed.
As your deed is, so is your destiny.⁶¹

The world-famous comparative religion scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) argues that the Sanskrit term *śraddhā*, often translated as “faith” in modern times, has been pointed out by “scrupulous and sensitive scholars” *not* to have conveyed its exact Sanskrit meaning in English.⁶² For one, *śraddhā* is not belief, and although Sanskrit contains words that can convey the English meaning of “belief,” from a Hindu theo/alogical perspective, the focus is not on belief but on knowledge.⁶³ Knowing, Smith beautifully articulates is not:

“[K]nowing that” . . . , but an immediate knowing of: a direct knowledge of reality with a capital R, a transcendental knowledge of ultimate truth (Brahman). *Such knowledge should not be said to lead to salvation as much as to constitute salvation.* It not merely transcends but negates lower truths of discursive reasoning and propositional

58 Jagadānanda, *Upadeśasāhasrī*, 2.

59 Jagadānanda, *Upadeśasāhasrī*, 2.

60 Jagadānanda, *Upadeśasāhasrī*, 3, 206–207. I borrow the term “body-mind-sense complex” from Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati, world renowned 20th Century saint, mystic, and scholar of Advaita Vedanta who established the Arsha Vidya Gurulukam. Pujya Swamiji used the term “body-mind-sense complex” to describe the seamless, non-hierarchical self.

61 Eknath Easwaran and Michael N. Nagger, *The Upanishads: The Classics of Indian Spirituality* (Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, 1987), 67.

62 Wilfred Cantrell Smith, *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them* (One World Publications, 1979), 60. Smith mentions several terms that may be correlated to the Western category of faith such as *viśvāsa*, *āstikya*, *prapatti*, *āstha*, *bhāva*, *niṣṭhā*.

63 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 54.

knowledge. In this monistic, ecstatic knowing, knower and known are fused (rather are no longer falsely separated) to say nothing of there being left far behind the subject-predicate analysis of our piecemeal objective knowledge of disparate parts of the workaday world. *This supreme kind of knowledge is a far cry from “belief,” and perhaps no one has ever thought of translating it so.*⁶⁴

Śraddhā, in its essence, is not equivalent to belief. Here, I explore a general concept of *śraddhā* while examining *śraddhā* through a Śāṅkaran lens because Śāṅkara remains the most influential Hindu systematic theologian from the classical period. The Sanskrit term *śraddhā* is a compound of two words: *Śrat*, meaning “truth, faithfulness,” and *dha*, meaning “to place.” The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad shows that faith is established in the heart and becomes the basis of making sacrificial offerings.

“On what is the sacrifice founded?”

“On the sacrificial gift.”

“On what is the sacrificial gift founded?”

“On faith, for a man gives a sacrificial gift only when he has faith. So the sacrificial gift is founded on faith.”

“On what is faith founded?”

“On the heart, for one recognizes faith with the heart. So faith is founded on the heart” (BU 3.9.26).⁶⁵

However, the term *śraddhā* does not define the specific object upon which one places one’s heart, thereby challenging the Western tendency to conceptualize faith in terms of belief in a particular object.⁶⁶ As noted by Smith, *śraddhā* encompasses a range of meanings, including “ritual *śraddhā*, intellectual *śraddhā*, moral *śraddhā*, and so on.”⁶⁷ This suggests that *śraddhā* reflects a broader “attitude or an initial act” that enables individuals to engage in different relational contexts with different religious objects.⁶⁸ Thus, Smith notes, *śraddhā* lends itself to various contexts and Hindu schools, and what unites them is the human capacity to “respond, involve and engage.”⁶⁹

64 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 54–55, emphasis mine.

65 BU refers to *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. See, Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 99.

66 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 61.

67 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 61.

68 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 62.

69 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 61–62.

He further asserts that the Hindu religious life, no matter its form, “begins with faith, and faith, in its turn, is one’s finding within that life (one’s being found by) something to which one gives one’s heart.”⁷⁰

The absence of *śraddhā* is not disbelief. Instead, it is a state characterized by hesitation, irresolution, and an “ego-diffused” attitude.⁷¹ *Aśraddhā* (the opposite of faith) reflects a lack of engagement, manifesting in actions performed with reluctance, murmuring, or complaints.⁷² It suggests a lack of care, which renders rituals, moral actions, or truth claims futile and unworthy of engagement.

Smith also identifies the other dimensions of *śraddhā*, such as desire, confidence, trust, and its close link with bhakti (devotion), where the two terms overlap, highlighting the deep connection between faith and devotional love.⁷³ These dimensions underscore the multifaceted nature of *śraddhā*, which has both an adverbial or adjectival quality—an intrinsic way of engaging with the world.⁷⁴

Śraddhā, then, denotes a way of doing things in the religious life: the way a ritualist performs a rite, the way a moralist carries out an obligation or a set of injunctions, the way one listens to the Gītā, the way an intellectualist relates his mind and himself to the truth, the way a bhakti-devotee worships, and so on.⁷⁵

These observations are broad general comments related to *śraddhā*. Seshagiri Rao asserts that in the Brahmaṇas, *śraddhā* may be broadly characterized as “ritualistic,” in the Upaniṣads as “gnostic,” and in the Bhagavad Gītā “devotional.”⁷⁶

Śāṅkara, in his works, uses the term *āstikyabuddhi* for faith.⁷⁷ *Āstikyabuddhi* is a compound of two Sanskrit words: *Asti*, meaning “is” or “it is,” and *buddhi*, meaning “awareness, perception, and discernment.”⁷⁸ The term *asti* and its opposite, *nasti* (it is not), denotes a person’s acceptance or rejection of

70 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 62.

71 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 63, 234.

72 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 64.

73 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 64.

74 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 64.

75 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 64.

76 Seshagiri Rao, “*The Concept of Śraddha*,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1966), 288.

77 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 59.

78 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 58–59.

the authority of the Vedas.⁷⁹ The *astika* affirms the existence of a reality beyond mere appearances, a profound truth that transcends the immediate, the tangible, and the mundane, as reported by sages.⁸⁰ The *nāstika*, on the other hand, either rejects such a reality or has a different understanding of ultimate reality than what is described in the Vedas. The root meaning of the term *buddhi* is “to be awake.” Thus, *āstikyabuddhi* is “awareness to transcendence—an awareness that leads to “resolve, decision, and engagement.”⁸¹

The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, *Crest-Jewel of Discernment*, which is traditionally but wrongly attributed to Śaṅkara, outlines six key qualities for renunciants on their path to liberation: *śama* (tranquility), *dama* (self-control), *uparati* (renunciation), *titikṣā* (endurance), *śraddhā*, and *samādhāna* (intellectual alertness) (VC 22–26).⁸² In this text, faith is defined as: “Acceptance by firm judgment of the mind as true of what the scriptures and the Guru instruct, is called by the sages *śraddhā* or faith, by means of which the Reality is perceived.”⁸³ Acceptance, as discussed here, refers to discerning judgment and should not be mistaken for blind acceptance. It implies that the mind must reach a “perfect state of assured reliance on the truth of instructions received, without which a whole-hearted, one-pointed practice of those instructions is not possible.”⁸⁴

In his commentary on the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Śaṅkara defines *śraddhā* as “judgment that affirms Vedic teachings with regard to ritual action towards invisible ends and with regard to deities and so on. *Āśraddhā* is a judgment contrary to this” (BU 1.5.3)⁸⁵ “*Śraddhā* is a feeling of respect for the object of one’s meditation; it is a judgment that affirms Vedic teachings” and “*Śraddhā* is a calmness of mind which must precede the effort to accomplish any of the aims of man [human]; it is a judgment that affirms Vedic teachings.”⁸⁶ In all three verses, we see *śraddhā* functions as a judgment, a

79 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 58–59.

80 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 58.

81 Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 58–59.

82 Madhavananda, *Vivekachudamani of Sri Shankaracharya*, 9–11.

83 Madhavananda, *Vivekachudamani of Sri Shankaracharya*, 10.

84 Madhavananda, *Vivekachudamani of Sri Shankaracharya*, 10.

85 Swami Madhavananda, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad: With the Commentary of Shankaracharya* (Advaita Ashrama, 1950), 214–215; Yoshitsugu Sawai, “The Nature of Faith in the Śaṅkaran Vedānta Tradition,” *Numen* 34, no. 1 (June 1987): 18–44.

86 Sawai, “The Nature of Faith in the Śaṅkaran Vedānta Tradition,” 21.

reasoned trust that recognizes the authority and reliability of the Vedic teachings and the spiritual teacher.

The *Praśna Upaniṣad*, which derives its name from the six questions (*praśna*) posed by six disciples to the sage Pippalāda, the triad of *tapas* (austerity), *brahmacarya* (the disciplines associated with those who are dedicated to *brahman*), and *śraddhā* (reverence) feature in the dialogues between the teacher and his disciples (1.2, 1.10, 1.15, 5.3).⁸⁷ These virtues are underscored as essential qualifications and prerequisites for pupils seeking higher knowledge and spiritual understanding.⁸⁸ In the opening verses of the *Praśna Upaniṣad*, six disciples—already steadfast and established in *saguṇa brahman*, *brahman* with form, approach the sage in a manner that is humble and fitting, with sacrificial fuel (*samit*) in hand, signifying their acceptance of the teacher’s guidance and their willingness to serve him (1.1).⁸⁹ The seer responds to the aspirants, “Live here for another year practicing austerity, chastity, and faith. Ask all the questions you want, and, if I know, I will answer them all” (PU 1.2).⁹⁰

In his commentary (*bhāṣya*), Śaṅkara notes the seer’s acknowledgment of the aspirant’s prior practice of austerities (*tapas*) but instructs them to remain for another year, focusing on *brahmacarya* and faith, following which they could ask questions. The Gurus’s response, “If we know, we shall, indeed, explain all to you,” indicates his dual virtues of knowledge and humility—while stressing that disciples should cultivate faith and self-control before grasping higher knowledge.⁹¹ From a Śaṅkara standpoint, disciples cannot fully comprehend the teachers’ teachings or the Vedic scriptures without faith.

The *Praśna Upaniṣad* further differentiates between two paths of liberation. Those seeking liberation through austerity, self-control, faith, and knowledge follow the northern route, which leads to immortality and fearlessness, which is the path of the sun (PU 1.9–1.10).⁹² In contrast, the southern route associated with the moon involves karma and the performance of “sacrificial and pious acts,” ultimately returning individuals to the cycle of rebirth.⁹³ Even mighty sages desiring children take the

87 Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads*, 456.

88 Swami Nikhilandanda, *The Upanishads: Śvetāśvatara, Praśna, and Māndūkya with Gaudapāda’s Kārikā* (Harper & Brothers, 1952), 149.

89 Nikhilandanda, *The Upanishads*, 153.

90 PU refers to *Praśna Upaniṣad*. See, Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads*, 459.

91 Nikhilandanda, *The Upanishads*, 154.

92 Nikhilandanda, *The Upanishads*, 158–159.

93 Nikhilandanda, *The Upanishads*, 158–159.

southern route.⁹⁴ Moreover, those naturally inclined toward austerity, self-control, and faith attain a level of greatness on Earth due to their meditation on the first phoneme of the mantra Om, which is both the higher and lower *brahman* in their past lives (PU 5.3).⁹⁵ This illustrates that although reverential faith precedes the pursuit of truth, faith is not abandoned in favor of intellectual knowledge; instead, faith persists through one's spiritual practice, leading to liberation.

Faith is indispensable for those pursuing liberative knowledge. The Bhagavad Gītā 4.39 states, "The faith-filled [yogin] intent on That, [with] senses restrained, attains knowledge. Having attained knowledge, he [s/he/they] will quickly attain supreme peace."⁹⁶ One who is possessed of *śraddhā*, i.e., faithful, obtains liberation. Liberation, however, is not incompatible with reason and logic. According to the Śāṅkaran framework, the quest for liberation (*mokṣa*) is grounded in a rational process, where sound reasoning and logical inquiry are used to discover Ultimate Reality. The teachings of the scriptures serve as a foundation for this process, which is led by the Guru's wisdom. Rather than being obstacles, reason and logic are essential tools for dispelling ignorance and revealing the true nature of the self, which is identical to *brahman*. However, their role is limited since reason cannot establish the existence of *brahman*.⁹⁷ At the most, reason can reflect upon, clarify, and defend what is already known through revelation. Although *brahman* exists independently of the Upaniṣads, and is known primarily and decisively through Vedic revelation, reason is secondary and supportive.⁹⁸ This position aligns with the Mīmāṃsikas in its critique of inductive proofs of *brahman*'s existence and its resistance to the Nyāyayikas claims that reason alone can certify that *brahman* exists.⁹⁹

This viewpoint is articulated in Bādarāyaṇa's Uttara Mīmāṃsā Sūtras (1.1.2), which Vedāntins interpret not as endorsing induction but as subordinating it to scripture.¹⁰⁰ Śāṅkara makes this explicit by rejecting the Nyāya argument that the ordered nature of the world permits a rational inference to a world-maker. Instead, he insists that "the realization of Brahman is achieved only by deliberation on the [Vedic and Upanisadic]

94 Nikhilandanda, *The Upanishads*, 158–159.

95 Nikhilandanda, *The Upanishads*, 188–189.

96 Georg Feuerstein and Brenda Feuerstein, *The Bhagavad-Gītā: A New Translation* (Shambhala Publications, Inc, 2011), 145.

97 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*.

98 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 52.

99 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 52.

100 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 52.

texts and their meanings and not by other means of knowledge, such as induction.”¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, the rationality of religious knowledge is not denied. Once *brahman* is known through the Upaniṣads, reasoning has a legitimate role in that it can eliminate misconceptions, reinforce scriptural teachings, and expand understanding in ways that do not contradict revelation.¹⁰² Religious truth is therefore not discovered by reason and supplemented by scripture, but found in scripture and confirmed by reason.¹⁰³

Crucially, knowledge of *brahman* in Vedānta is not merely theoretical but transformative and liberative and “ought not be confused with a merely correct induction.”¹⁰⁴ For this reason, independent reasoning is not encouraged as it might falsely suggest certainty about *brahman* apart from *śraddhā* and textual commitment.¹⁰⁵ Arguments “put forward by intellectuals such as logicians” remain perpetually open to debate and cannot provide the certainty required for liberation.¹⁰⁶ Thus, a careful balance is maintained, in that while scripture alone is the authoritative source of certain knowledge of *brahman*, reason—excerpted within a disciplined exegetical framework plays an indispensable but subordinate role. Reason operates properly only within scripturally formed thinking and cannot function as a universal, autonomous bridge to religious truth.¹⁰⁷ *Brahman* is known not outside the texts, but through and after them, in the act of informed, reflective reading guided by tradition.¹⁰⁸

Śaṅkara’s *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* states: “Thus, the seeker of the Supreme Reality, the *Ātman*, must engage in reasoning, after first approaching a Guru who is the supreme knower of Brahman, a veritable ocean of compassion” (VC 6–7).¹⁰⁹ This emphasizes the importance of reasoning and logic in the Śaṅkaran framework as well as the need for the wise counsel of a knowledgeable and compassionate Guru. The Śaṅkaran epistemological framework consists of three core components: the subject or an agent of knowledge (*pramātṛ*), the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), and the object of knowledge (*prameya*).¹¹⁰ Within this framework, six valid means of knowing,

101 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 52.

102 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 54.

103 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 54.

104 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 55.

105 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 55.

106 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 56.

107 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 56–57.

108 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 57.

109 Madhavananda, *Vivekachudamani of Sri Shankaracharya*, 6–7.

110 Eliot Deutsch and Rohit Dalvi, *The Essential Vedanta: A New Source Book of Advaita*

or *pramāṇas*, are recognized: *pratyakṣa* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *upamāna* (comparison), *anupalabdhi* (non-cognition), *arthāpatti* (postulation), *śabda* (verbal testimony).¹¹¹ Each of these *pramāṇas* is essential to understanding the essence of *brahman* or the Self, allowing the seeker to approach this knowledge with the highest reverence.

A *pramāṇa* is a valid means of knowledge, providing well-established, non-negatable knowledge.¹¹² Through *pramāṇas*, one validates what one knows by removing false assumptions or misconceptions that lack a solid basis. *Pramāṇas* serve as the proof of valid knowledge. The six valid means of knowing are as follows:

1. *Pratyakṣa*: This is the primary means of knowing through perception. Humans have five sensory organs (hearing, tasting, seeing, smelling, and touching) by which they perceive reality.¹¹³ This *pramāṇa* is further divided into *sākṣiṇ pratyakṣa*, or “witness perception,” which involves an inward sense of reality, such as the perception of time, space, or even emotions like pain and pleasure. For Śaṅkara, class, quality, and action are characteristics of objects that can be apprehended through sensory perception (Ke UP Bh 1.3).¹¹⁴ However, since *brahman* has no attributes, so it is neither a class nor has qualities, so is beyond the reach of the senses. *Brahman* is not an object to be cognized with the five senses but is perception itself—the substratum on which cognition is based, hence the cognizer of all experiences. According to Śaṅkara, this makes *brahman* difficult to prove through sensory evidence. He anticipates that some may question the existence of *brahman* but responds by emphasizing the authority of traditional scriptures (*āgama*), which, he argues, provide a more suitable and trustworthy means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) in such matters.¹¹⁵
2. *Anumāna*: Inference, a mediate form of knowledge, is based on logical reasoning from observed phenomena.¹¹⁶ For example, one might infer that it has rained because the road is wet. *Anumāna* relies on what is known as “universal concomitance” (*vyāpti*), which means that two

Vedanta (World Wisdom, Inc., 2004), 396.

111 Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedanta*, 397.

112 Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedanta*, 371.

113 Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedanta*, 4.

114 Ke UP Bh. refers to *Kena Upaniṣad Bhāṣya*. See, J.G. Suthren Hirst, *Samkara's Advaita Vedanta: A Way of Teaching* (Routledge, 2005), 50.

115 Hirst, *Samkara's Advaita Vedanta*, 50.

116 Hirst, *Samkara's Advaita Vedanta*, 50.

phenomena are observed to occur together consistently.¹¹⁷ A stock example is the coexistence of smoke and fire, which allows one to infer the presence of fire from the observation of smoke. Regarding *brahman*, this *pramāṇa* also falls short since it inherently depends on sense perception and empirical evidence. Since *bhahman* is not an object, it transcends sensory experiences and cannot be inferred through sensory data.

3. *Arthāpatti*: Postulation or presumption involves multi-step reasoning. For example, if Devadutta is observed not eating during the day but is found to be increasing in weight when put on a weighing scale, one may postulate that he must be eating at night.
4. *Upamāna*: This is the method of knowledge gained through analogy or comparison. When confronted with something unknown, we compare it to something familiar to make sense of it. However, there is not anything in class, quality, or action that may be compared or analogized with *brahman*.
5. *Anupalabdhi*: Non-cognition, or the apprehension of absence, is the knowledge of non-existence through an object's non-perception. For example, a jar's absence is implied if it is not visible in a particular area. However, it is crucial to note that this is not about absolute absence but about the absence of a particular object in a given context. For instance, one may know that a flower does not exist in one's hand, though the concept or image of the flower remains in one's mind.
6. *Śabda*: Verbal testimony, whether oral or written, is a valid means of knowledge when it comes from an authentic and trustworthy source. The teachings of the *śruti* (Vedic scriptures) and *smṛti* (such as the Puraṇas and Itihāsas) are considered valid, provided they align with the *śruti*. According to Śaṅkara, the perfect knowledge of *brahman*, the objective reality in its true nature, can only be obtained through the Upaniṣads.

Each *pramāṇa* is self-sufficient in its own domain, and no *pramāṇa* can negate or displace another. Swamini Svātmanvidyananda Saraswati, a world-renowned Vedāntist from the Śāṅkaran lineage, argues that the proof of each *pramāṇa* lies in its operation. Just as the proof of a successful eye surgery

117 Hirst, *Samkara's Advaita Vedanta*, 50.

is evidenced by the act of seeing, so also the proof of each *pramāṇa* is evident in its application. Validation of each *pramāṇa* requires engaging, practicing, and observing its operation. Yet, each *pramāṇa* is insufficient to validate *brahman*.

[T]here are six *pramāṇas*;
they relate to something that is called /the domain/
of phenomenal practice, and cannot be applied to *ātman* [*brahman*]
(SSS 12.85–86).¹¹⁸

Then how can one know *brahman*? Scriptures (*śruti* texts) serve as an efficient *pramāṇa* a legitimate source of knowledge about *brahman*. The *śruti* texts are reliable and are supported by the doctrine of *apauruṣeyatva*. As per this doctrine, the Upaniṣads are infallible because they are eternal without human or divine authorship.¹¹⁹ Their effectiveness stems from their capacity to offer liberation to individuals. As such, scriptures function as an effective *pramāṇa*—a valid means of knowledge with its unique domain. Śaṅkara notes that dismissing scripture as false merely because it discusses phenomena beyond sense perception or inference is unjustifiably constraining what can be known.¹²⁰ It entails dismissing a legitimate *pramāṇa* and ignoring its demonstrated outcomes. However, Śaṅkara, recognizes that every *pramāṇa*, including scriptural testimony functions, within a distinct domain. For instance, scriptures would lack authority, if it said that fire is cold because fire’s nature as being hot is known and understood by sense perception.¹²¹ Scripture cannot contradict the legitimate roles of sense perception and inference within their domains. Nevertheless, since the proper subject of scripture is *brahman*, the ultimate source of all existence, scripture provides a context within which sense perception, inference, and even itself function. Thus far, I have examined the role of faith, reason and logic within the schema of liberation. I now briefly discuss liberation from Śaṅkara’s standpoint.

Śaṅkara bravely proposed that no human action, including the rituals prescribed by the Vedas can lead one to liberation. Liberation is not dependent on *doing* but on *knowing*. J.G. Suthren Hirst observes that, “(i) Action, for Śaṅkara, involves option, knowledge does not; (ii) knowledge of *brahman* is not knowledge of an object but the state in which all objectivizing

118 SSS is an abbreviation of *Sarva Siddhānta Saṅgrahaḥ*. See, M. Rangacarya, *Sarvasiddhantasahgraha* (Madras, India: 1909).

119 Hirst, *Samkara's Advaita Vedanta*, 51.

120 Hirst, *Samkara's Advaita Vedanta*, 52.

121 Hirst, *Samkara's Advaita Vedanta*, 52.

superimpositions have been removed.”¹²² Liberation entails knowing oneself as non-different from *brahman*. *Brahman* is being, consciousness, infinity (*sat-cit-ānanda*), and liberation entails the removal of “the world of name, form and action, the world of means and ends, [and] the world of ritual.”¹²³ Śaṅkara argues that liberation is achievable in this life, as one who realizes the self as *brahman*. This realization cannot be negated by future knowledge. For such individuals, grief and delusion dissolve. The paradox in this tradition is that the seeker is simultaneously the sought, the problem and the solution. One does not need to search for the solution outside; rather, the solution lies within oneself. The realization of *brahman* is not an external acquisition but an internal recognition of one’s true nature as *sat-cit-ānanda*.

Convergences and Divergences

In the writings of Anselm and Śaṅkara, faith serves as a prerequisite for theological exploration based on the scriptures of their respective traditions. Both figures suggest a faith-filled commitment to the scriptural repertoire handed down by the tradition. In both works, faith initiates and works actively in conjunction with reason, logic, and scriptural authority. The interplay of faith and reason leads to liberation, in the case of Śaṅkara and in the case of Anselm, into deeper dogmatic truths, as established by the Church. Rather than advocating for a passive acceptance of Christian dogmas, Anselm invites believers to use logical inquiry to deepen their faith, reinforcing that faith and reason are not antithetical but complementary, highlighting a rationally coherent theological framework. While Anselm’s notion of faith invites rational reflection apart from scriptures, Śaṅkara’s *śraddhā* entails a deep inquiry into the true nature of the self that is based on philosophical and rational inquiry enshrined in scriptures. The pursuit of liberation coupled with *śraddhā*—a trust in the teachings of the scriptures and the guru, not as blind belief but as reasoned conviction leads to the dispelling of ignorance (*avidyā*). Śaṅkara’s epistemology, structured around the six *pramāṇas* (means of knowledge), highlights the limitations of sensory, inferential cognition, and rationality in grasping the ultimate reality, positioning *śabda* (scriptural testimony) as the most authoritative means for knowing *brahman*.

Both Anselm and Śaṅkara seek logical proofs to understand the nature of God and Ultimate Reality. Both theologians imply that faith has

122 Hirst, *Samkara’s Advaita Vedanta*, 40.

123 Hirst, *Samkara’s Advaita Vedanta*, 140.

intellectual, experiential, and transformative dimensions. Both theologians understand the limitations of reason in grasping divine truths and mysteries while granting their scriptural traditions higher authority. While Śaṅkara upholds scriptural testimony and the means of knowledge delineated in them (*pramāṇas*) as the most authoritative means to know *brahman*, Anselm boldly steps outside of canonical authority to seek rational proof for divine truths. While Anselm's concept of faith is primarily theologically linked to belief in God's existence and doctrines of the Church, Śaṅkara's *śraddhā* is an attitude of receptivity and not doctrinal assent. Śaṅkara's concept of faith, as per world renowned scholar-practitioner of Advaita Vedānta Swamini Svatmavidyananda Saraswati, may be called "faith pending understanding."¹²⁴

Implications for Comparative Theology

Anselm's integration of faith and reason raises critical questions. His emphasis on faith as the starting point for theological exploration presupposes Christian belief, potentially restricting its applicability in interfaith, comparative theological engagements, or secular discourse. One could contend that this method runs the risk of circular reasoning, wherein faith validates reason, which in turn reinforces faith, thereby restraining one from going beyond the theological limits of one's tradition. Furthermore, Anselm's model does not fully address the epistemological tension between reason and revelation in understanding divine mysteries. There is also an emphasis on rationality to prove divine truths. Nevertheless, his contributions significantly influenced medieval scholasticism, shaping theological discussions far beyond his era, and his framework of faith and reason is still being used for interreligious and comparative theological engagements.

On the other hand, Śaṅkara's model of faith and reason challenges conventional Western theological paradigms not just by opposing duality with non-duality, but by reconfiguring the relationship between knowing, being, and liberation. For Śaṅkara, knowledge is not an instrument leading to liberation, but is the essence of liberation itself. For Anselm, faith precedes and guides reason, while reason strives to render intelligible what has already been affirmed through doctrinal assent. Even at its most high, reason remains confined within a subject-object epistemology in which God is the object of belief and rational inquiry. As a result, knowledge of God is

124 Swamini Svatmavidyananda Saraswati, *Vedanta Satsangh* (India, 2019).

mediated through propositions, concepts, and the requirements of logical coherence.

Śaṅkara's challenges to this model lie in his non-dual epistemology. In Advaita Vedānta, the knower (*pramāṭr*), the means of knowing (*pramāṇa*), and the object known (*prameya*) ultimately converge in the realization of *brahman*. No matter how rigorously one employs a valid means of knowledge—perception, inference, comparison, postulation, or testimony—*brahman*, being without attributes, class, or qualification (*nirguṇa*), cannot be objectified. Hence, liberation cannot be achieved through conceptual mastery, rational demonstration, or doctrinal assent. Faith and reason function as provisional and preparatory supports, both of which are finally sublated in liberating knowledge (*mokṣa*), understood as the recognition of *brahman* as one's own true nature.

This epistemological shift exposes a limitation in Anselm's approach to faith. Although Anselm acknowledges the limits of reason and emphasizes humility before divine mystery, faith remains bound to belief and mediated understanding. Śaṅkara avoids this limitation by relocating the locus of truth from external assent to inward realization. The truth of *brahman* is simultaneously the truth of the self that exists independently of scripture, even though it is validated by the guru and communally supported through practices such as chanting and meditation. These supports do not function authoritatively in the sense of enforcing belief; instead, they cultivate what may be described as "receptivity."

Śaṅkara's concept of *śraddhā* is an attitude of receptivity rather than faith in propositional beliefs. It is a disciplined, oriented openness that allows ignorance (*avidyā*) to fall away, which I argue is a broader understanding of faith that integrates reason, experience, and scriptural engagement. Receptivity is central to Śaṅkara's alternative model. Whereas Anselm's reason actively seeks understanding within the bounds set by faith, Śaṅkara emphasizes a mode of knowing that culminates not in intellectual grasping but in receptive recognition. Liberation occurs not through the accumulation of theological propositions but through the removal of ignorance that obscures what is already present. This receptive orientation enables Śaṅkara to avoid the exclusivity implicit in doctrinal assent while preserving the integrity of religious tradition and practice. This receptivity culminates in the knowledge of *brahman*, which is an expansive sense of "I," a truth that extends beyond its texts, a truth that is reasonable, world-encompassing, and open to inquiry. This truth is the "ultimate unity" of all reality, a unity that

transcends socio-political, historical, religious, and institutional boundaries.¹²⁵

It is precisely here that a close reading of Śaṅkara enriches Hindu-Christian dialogue. Because *brahman* is fully present in all phenomena and in all sentient beings without discrimination, transcending boundaries, the epistemological model Śaṅkara articulates is universal rather than confessional. Although the path is historically and socially mediated through the Vedas, the guru-disciple relationship, and communal life, the goal of liberation is not particularized. Both the modes of knowing and the goal of liberation, as revealed by the Vedas, remain available to all, irrespective of religious affiliation.

In contrast to Anselm's framework, which ultimately presupposes ecclesial authority and doctrinal belief, Śaṅkara offers what I would like to describe as a naturally occurring cosmological theology grounded in shared human capacities for receptivity, self-knowledge, and transformation. In this way, Śaṅkara's non-dual paradigm challenges Western theological assumptions by dissolving the dualism between faith and knowledge and proposing a universal epistemological vision in which liberation is realized—not imposed—through transformative self-recognition.

Given that CT, as it is often practiced today, is disconnected from meditative discipline and has risked becoming a largely intellectual exercise, the following point cannot be emphasized strongly enough. In both Anselm and Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, devotional reflection constitutes the setting in which rational and logical argumentation properly unfolds. For Anselm, reading is a communal contemplative practice in which reasoning functions as a shared good. His texts invite the reader, especially the Benedictine confrere, into a common rational dynamic, one that deepens faith through disciplined contemplation. Meditative reading is thus not ancillary to theological reasoning but its very condition, enabling participation in a shared movement of faith seeking understanding.

Similarly, for Śaṅkara, critical enquiry is neither a detached intellectual exercise nor a form of speculative abstraction. Rather, it is ordered toward the establishment of a unitive realization of *brahman*. This process is the pedagogical triad of *śravaṇa-manana-nididhyāsana*, articulated in Vedic Scriptures. *Śravaṇa*, the attentive hearing of scriptural teaching, aided by a guru and sustained through dialogical engagement; *manana*, the reflective and critical contemplation of what has been heard; and *nididhyāsana*, the

125 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 19.

realization achieved through meditation of truths.¹²⁶ In both traditions, scriptures are understood within the context of meditative reading, in which rational reflection emerges, unfolds, and blossoms. Far from opposing reason and contemplation, Anselm and Śaṅkara each model a mode of reading in which intellect and devotion mutually intensify, directing the seeker/adept toward their respective soteriological ends. Ultimately, I think, there is no hierarchy of goals, yet one does not fail to notice that Śaṅkara's view resonates with Christian mystical traditions, where faith is seen as transformative knowledge rather than mere assent to doctrines. By engaging Śaṅkara's thought, comparative theology can explore alternative paradigms of faith that move beyond Western epistemic frameworks, fostering a richer interreligious dialogue between people and traditions.

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126 William M. Indich, *Consciousness in Advaita Vedanta* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Ltd, 1995), 10–11.