

A Convergence of Faith: The Concept of Relation in the Work of Sara Grant, RSCJ, By Stephanie Petersen-Corigliano

Is the radical non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta fundamentally at odds with Christian monotheistic belief? Sara Grant, R.S.C.J., argues that it is not. However, unlike her religious and monastic contemporaries at work in India such as Henri Le Saux and Bede Griffiths, she does not rely on a mystical convergence to unsay the dichotomies between traditions. Rather, she argues that Advaita's foremost proponent, Sankaracarya, developed a philosophy that was wholly dependent on the concept of relation. Her analysis of this concept in the work of Sankara is one of Grant's unique contributions to the study of Indian philosophy. Grant further contends that an analogous concept is at work in the theology of Thomas Aquinas and that this pivotal concept has similarly received undue attention. In the work of her dissertation, Grant forges an early scholarly effort at inter-religious dialogue and comparative theology.¹

This essay lifts up the work of Sara Grant, R.S.C.J., marking a point of convergence between the Hindu Advaita Vedanta tradition and Catholic Christianity that is distinctive from the universalizing trends that were common to the inculturation movement in India during the twentieth century. I will initially outline Grant's study and then highlight some of the potentials and problems of her work. Subsequently, I set up a second conversation between Grant's work and the more recent scholarship of Mayra Rivera Rivera, thus bridging the gap between an early proponent of relational theology and a contemporary feminist perspective on the concept of relation within Christian theology.

Ashram Context

In the second half of the 20th century, Catholic ashrams began to operate throughout India. In India, an ashram is a kind of spiritual retreat center that can be open to both ordained and lay practitioners and is typically organized around a central guru, or authoritative teacher.² Catholic ashrams were designed as a form of inculturation, initially intended to communicate Christian beliefs to Hindus by adapting many of Hinduism's "cultural" practices. However, the deep encounter with Hinduism actually transformed many of the Christian ashram participants, and many of these people became important figures in twentieth century inter-religious and ecumenical dialogues in India. A few leaders within this movement have received significant attention, owing largely to their written work or to scholarly studies conducted by their followers.³ Although women both led ashrams and participated in the integral workings of ashram life, their legacy in the inculturation movement in India is mostly neglected.

Grant was an important twentieth century leader within the Christian ashram movement in India. She was born on December 19th, 1922 to a Scottish Catholic family. The eldest of five children, she joined the Society of the Sacred Heart at age 19 and studied philosophy and theology at Oxford University. In 1956 she received notification that she was to go to India to teach philosophy at Sophia College in Bombay. The diverse student body of Sophia College challenged Grant to discover the language and philosophical underpinnings of her new Indian context. Importantly, Grant approached her role as a Christian teacher of Hindu and Muslim students with sensitivity to their cultural context. She felt that for her to explicitly encourage her students to convert would be to alienate them from their families and communities, thus severely limiting their access to education, marriage, and even employment. She discerned that her role was not explicitly to evangelize, but rather, in Grant's own words, "...to seek to establish and foster that relationship between the creature and Creator which would allow the Creator to deal freely with his creatures."⁴ Thus, the question of how to navigate Christian life and teaching in a pluralistic context was at the forefront of Grant's work in India from the very beginning.

Concurrent with her new teaching position, Grant studied for a doctorate in Indian philosophy. Her dissertation, *Sankaracarya's Concept of Relation*, focused on the concept of relation in the 9th century Advaita Vedanta scholar Adi Sankaracarya compared with the

Christian 12th century scholar Thomas Aquinas.⁵ It is this scholarly undertaking which provides the foundation for my study of the Grant's life and work.

Grant's Theology of Relation

Grant explicitly describes the incarnation of Jesus Christ as a *means*.⁶ Like Thomas Aquinas, she emphasizes the Godhead, or mystery and transcendence of God as the "proper object of devotion." During her noviceship, she became concerned that the Church was in danger from the "tendency to equate the following of Christ with a *dualistic imitation from without* rather than *an entry into his very life and consciousness of being "from" and "to" the Father.*"⁷ She proposes that the way to reconcile the dualism of imitation is to partake consciously in a more integrated, non-dual practice of participation in the life of Christ that focuses on the transcendence of God. While Grant notes that her personal struggle to reconcile perceived dualisms began early in her spiritual life, it was her encounter with Sankara that crystallized her understanding of non-dualism in Christianity. Grant found the cosmological theme of relation in Sankara to be compatible with Aquinas's understanding of the Creator/creation relationship as non-reciprocal.⁸ Thus in Aquinas (and in Grant), creation is related to the creator as fundamentally dependent, and without this dependence, it cannot be properly understood or integrated into religious praxis.

Sankara's "tadatmaya" and the misappropriation of "maya"

Sankara's commentary on the *Mundakopanisad* states, "That very entity, the supreme Self, which this one, the man of knowledge, seeks to reach, by that fact of hankering is attainable: but not through any other spiritual effort, for it is by its very nature ever attained."⁹ Sankara suggests here that knowledge of the supreme Self acknowledges unity with that supreme Self. Further, he maintains that unity is ever existent as "hankering;" a kind of inner spark of unity that persistently contrasts essence with appearance.

Grant's dissertation delves into a careful study of the common terms used to indicate relation in the work of Sankara. This work will be valued by specialists in the field of Advaita. The contribution I am highlighting in this essay centers on "tadatmya," or identity. This term is used in the work of Sankara to indicate the specific relationship that exists between Brahman and the phenomenal world.¹⁰ Grant writes:

The identity he [Sankara] predicates between *Atman-Brahman* and *sarvam idam* [every thing] does not involve the metaphysical destruction of either side of the equation. Yet neither can we interpret this 'identity' as a simple parity of equals...we are faced with the delicate necessity of simultaneously respecting both the demands of the multiplicity of ordinary *vyavaharika* [phenomenal] experience and the inviolability of the *ekam eva advitiam* [radical nonduality].¹¹

Grant suggests that, for Sankara, the relationship between Brahman and Atman, the Self and self, is basically one of cause and effect. However, in light of Advaita's theory of radical non-dualism, the cause and effect are both dependent and identical. The cause is both the creation of the effect, and it is the effect. How can this be? In short, Sankara argues that name and form (*namarupa*) are the limiting adjuncts (*upadhis*) of the Brahman. Thus, name and form give the appearance of objective existence within a multitude of subjects. Grant explains that names and forms "are the objective correlatives of conceptual thinking, the 'objects' of the *vyavaharika* [appearance] level of thinking."¹² Just as clay formed into a cup is named "cup," but in essence it is still clay (were it to be broken it would no longer be a cup), all things in the world receive their objective identity in relation to their function.¹³

The dissolution of the world of names and forms is, therefore, not physical destruction, but rather an ontological shift in perception. It represents the metaphysical transcendence of the

ultimate, unchanging reality in contrast with the ever-changing reality of the physical world. Thus, the relationship between the ultimate reality and the phenomenal world is a metaphysical question that contrasts appearance with essence and, as such, marks a temporal dichotomy between change and permanence, creation and creator.

A very large body of work is attributed to Sankara, much of which was not authored by Sankara himself. Collective scholarly opinion has largely agreed upon certain core texts, while a second grouping of texts remains debated. This ambiguity of authorship accounts for some common disputes and errors of interpretation, especially in the case of early western translations. One such key concept is Sankara's definition of "reality," as in our day-to-day lived existence. Much of western scholarship until the mid-1960s and still today most popular interpretations of Advaita explain Sankara's view of the world as "*maya*," or illusion. In fact, this term is rarely found in the work that is verified as Sankara's. Rather, Sankara uses the terms, "*ajnana*," or "*avidya*," which suggest a lack of knowledge, or ignorance. Thus, Sankara did not necessarily maintain that the apparent world is an illusion; instead, he suggested that it is commonly perceived through ignorance. For Sankara the fundamental theological task is to attain correct perception of the true nature of reality, that is, non-duality.¹⁴

Sankara suggests that there are two levels of knowledge of Brahman, that which is attained through scripture and that which is attained through experience/intuition (*anubhava*). Knowledge attained through the senses is wholly dependent on Brahman, and yet it risks being mistaken for a complete, independent source. This is the common error of *ajnana*, accepting the temporal as the eternal, or the small, separate self for the ultimate Self.¹⁵

It is interesting that *anubhava*, broadly translated as experience or intuition, is considered separately from sense knowledge. It points to the existence of an immanent and universal quality that can be discerned by the individual but is never conditioned (changed) by individual experience. As such, "the self immanent in creation is identical with the Supreme Self."¹⁶ The process of knowing is subsequently compared to the discovery of a grain of rice that is extracted from beneath many husks. Sankara speaks of human sheaths, like rice husks, that must be shed. Beginning with the outermost level of experience he describes a food sheath, then the mental sheath, the intelligent sheath, and finally the bliss sheath, which resides in the heart, the closest proximity to the self. These layers of experience represent the removal of attachment and ignorance.

To summarize, Grant emphasizes two important points regarding *tadatmya*. First, as stated previously, *tadatmya* indicates a dependent identity; it is the "inner-cause," which allows any perceived effects (differences) to exist. On this point, Grant quotes Sankara:

Although one and the same Self is hidden in all beings, movable as well as immovable, yet owing to the gradual rise of excellence of the minds which form the limiting adjuncts (of the Self) scripture declares that the Self, although eternal, unchanging and uniform, reveals itself in a graduated series of beings and so appears in forms of various dignity and power.¹⁷

As such, Brahman can be perceived within apparent differences through a careful discernment of *anubhava*/experience and confirmed by scripture. The second summary point is that Brahman is non-dual. This is the paradoxical status of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta: Brahman is unchanging and the cause of a mutable creation, yet Brahman and creation are essentially identical. For Grant, this is the point of comparison between Sankara and Thomas Aquinas; specifically, it is, "the concept of non-reciprocal relation."¹⁸ This also leads to Grant's thesis, that the Self as an eternal subject (self) within creation is ultimately revealed through the action of relating.

“Non-reciprocal relation” in Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas posits relation as essentially “reference to another.” Relation itself is neither a subject nor an object. Grant quotes from Aquinas: “Relation according to its essential concept is not a thing but simply refers to another, and therefore, according to its essential concept, does not posit any (reality) in its subject.”¹⁹

Grant further details several specific aspects of Aquinas’ philosophy of relation. In brief, relation requires two terms and is either *real* or *logical*, necessary or non-necessary. *Real* relation can be either subsistent or non-subsistent. The former has an identical (subsistent) foundation for both subject and term, and the only solid example of a *real*, subsistent relation is the Trinitarian mystery. Thus, according to Grant, Aquinas understood “*real*, subsistent relation” to actually describe unity, or a lack of fundamental difference that co-exists with the appearance of difference or function. Similarly, in her analysis of Sankara, Grant writes, “in *real* relations the foundation is always in the subject.”²⁰ In Aquinas, the non-subsistent, *real* relation is considered accidental, which seems to indicate action, or is primarily descriptive of the subject but does not show a foundational unity.

For both Aquinas and Sankara, non-subsistent relations allow for difference between subject and term (although Sankara would not use this terminology, he accounts for difference in a similar way). Aquinas further qualifies some non-subsistent relations as *logical*, thus marking the distinction between two subjects with a point of conceptual difference. Lastly, for a relation to be considered necessary, according to Aquinas, one subject in the relationship must be dependent upon the relationship for its very existence. Non-necessary relations may be descriptive but do not show causal influence. The necessary relation forms the basis for Aquinas’s “non-reciprocal relation,” since without relation to its creator, creation would cease to exist.

“Non-reciprocal relation” denotes a particular influence resulting from the relation. In a helpful example, Grant examines the statement, “The signal was seen by the driver.” Grant writes, “the relation is true [logical] but not *real* on the part of the signal, and both true [logical] and *real* on the part of the driver, since the relation is non-reciprocal.”²¹ In this way, Grant explains that the relation of creatures to God is not *real*, but it is true, since creation is dependent upon God’s action. Further, the signal is clearly an example of a non-subsistent relation, while the Creator/creation example allows for the possibility of subsistent relation insofar as the creation has the potential to participate in the Trinitarian mystery.

In Grant’s reading of Aquinas, God’s causation is not immediately self-evident, but it is discoverable through reason. She reflects, “[it is discoverable] precisely because the creature is not self-explanatory but essentially relative, and this relative character stands more and more clearly revealed as intelligence penetrates more deeply into its radical inability to account for its own emergence into or continuance in being.”²²

Thus in the creature’s inability to account for its existence, its relation to the Creator is revealed, to recall Sankara’s earlier term, as an internal “hankering.” The relation between God and creation is real, yet the subsistence of this relation is dependent upon correct perception.

The link between Sankara and Aquinas is strongest with regards to the concept of the subject’s relation to the creator. However, both depict a kind of internal spark that refers to the idea that the creator is existent within the apparent individuals of creation. This idea has the potential to expand the concept of relation into interpersonal relationships. In my view, this implication of Grant’s work is underdeveloped, and it is for this reason that I turn to Mayra Rivera Rivera in the final section of this essay.

Rivera’s “Touch of Transcendence”

Contemporary feminist theology and proponents of postcolonial studies have made significant contributions to the discussion of how the human/divine relation impacts inter-human relationships. In her recent book, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology*

of God, Mayra Rivera examines the concept of divine transcendence and how it can work as a liberatory force in contemporary contexts of Christianity. For Rivera, divine transcendence is essentially relational. It functions within the world through the dynamic, complex reality of personal engagement with all that is “other.” Therefore, people experience and worship the transcendent divine through their relationships with other beings and the earth. Drawing on multiple sources including the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, radical orthodoxy, liberation theology, and postcolonial studies (Gayatri Spivak), she locates the divine in the inability to grasp, fully know, conquer, or master another being or the earth. She writes, “Our images of the divine other shape our constructions of human otherness. An apparent structural relation exists between imagining our relation to the human other and to God as wholly Other: God can be perceived as an extreme instance of interhuman difference.”²³

She goes on to argue that the similarity between God’s otherness and interhuman difference is not only structural, but that human beings actually encounter the divine through the diversity of their particular relationships. Rivera essentially conflates the traditional dichotomy of immanence and transcendence. Her transcendent is immanent, working in and through persons and nature. Nonetheless, it is ultimately transcendent insofar as it requires the acceptance of the divine as mystery. This delicate balance provides a compelling model for inter-religious dialogue that accounts for difference within a relational theology.

As discussed in the first part of the essay, Grant stresses the importance of transcendence in order to avoid the temptation of idolatry, or the mere imitation of Jesus rather than an active participation in the mystery as a means of return to ultimate unity with the Godhead. She further develops a sophisticated understanding of the transcendent that is at once relational and non-dual. Rivera’s contribution of imagining the divine as immanent-transcendent within interhuman relations potentially develops Grant’s work in way that I find compatible with Grant’s overarching theological praxis. Grant sought mutual respect with her students and with the diverse practitioners of her ashram community. She actively discouraged gossip and made a conscious choice not to encourage conversion explicitly from her students.²⁴ In this way, she demonstrated respect for the alterity of her context while maintaining faith in the ultimate saving power of God.

Additionally, it is Rivera’s discussion of radical orthodoxy (Pickstock, Milbank) that is especially relevant for the comparison with the work of Sara Grant. According to Rivera, radical orthodoxy relies on a largely platonic understanding of cosmology. As such, the creator stands apart from its creation as eternal and unchanging. The creation exists in terms of its relation to the creator. Or, “The worldly realm derives its reality from its ‘participation’ (methexis) in the immutable forms.”²⁵ This concept of participation draws, in part, upon Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of human dependence on God. Rivera quotes Aquinas: “The being of every creature depends on God, so that not for a moment could it subsist, but would fall into nothingness were it not kept in being by the operation of the Divine power.”²⁶

As discussed above, according to Aquinas, creation is wholly dependent on God for its very existence. Rivera argues that this implies that a “creature’s worth is placed in something other than the creature—in a realm external to and independent of all cosmic life.”²⁷ Rivera draws from this a “split between the creature and its value,” such that being is not inherently valuable. Rivera draws a further parallel between God as a distant ruler and colonial rule, or globalized corporate rule, and thus highlights the danger of removing transcendent power from the subjectivity of daily experience. Transcendence implies upward motion, and as Rivera points out, this has had the effect of validating sociopolitical hierarchies. Rivera writes:

Hierarchical caricatures of transcendence depend on hypercertainties supported by claims to absolute knowledge, totalizing systems that foreclose the openness, excess, and irreducibility that transcendence implies, for appeals to a realm beyond the grasp of normative subjects, systems of thought, and social structures

would threaten the certainties on which these hierarchies depend. Transcendence is thus relegated to an invisible realm and thus effectively prevented from touching our daily lives.²⁸

Interestingly, Rivera makes several allusions to this (Thomistic) theology as setting the very reality of the world in question. Regarding the spatial and hierarchical difference between the Creator and creation, she writes, “The inherent reality of creation is thus called into question.” Following the quote from Aquinas above, she comments that the ontological gap between God and creatures results in “placing creatures perilously close to nonbeing.”²⁹ She concludes with the follow caution: “These ethical considerations should call us to assess the implication of the assumption of the inherent nothingness of things for its tendency to subordinate the value of the very existence of creatures to other ‘more real’ principles.”³⁰

Concluding Remarks

Contemporary reflections on transcendence articulate an awareness of abusive power, domination, and social inequality that was not present for the classical authors, nor was it central to Grant’s writing. This is an important contribution. The tension between classical and modern interpretations of the transcendent is evident, and yet, I contend that Sara Grant’s comparison of Thomas Aquinas and Sankara sheds an evocative new light on classical interpretations of the Creator/creation relationship. By positing the “non-reciprocal relation” of Thomas Aquinas as an analysis of perception, Grant distinguishes it as an invitation to a deeper level of participation. The subsistent real relation of the Trinitarian mystery is open to creation, but this requires creation to realize its fundamental relationality.

The fruit of Grant’s comparative project is the articulation of her “non-dualist” Christianity, which gives a solid theological expression to the experience of non-duality within the orthodox structures of Christianity. I contend that this aspect of non-duality serves to emphasize the participatory nature of the transcendent. Grant’s study of Sankara brings a new light to Aquinas. In this way, neither figure is found to be negating the value of this world as such, but rather, both are seen to be advocating a radical shift in perception as an integral aspect of religious praxis. Rivera also advances a concept of divine touch as interpersonal touch which is, in my view, both compatible with nonduality and attentive to the practical expression of divine embodiment and relation. Indeed, the divine transcendent within interhuman relations is perhaps the most concrete and faithful means of imagining a non-dual Christian praxis that honors the genuine mystery of both God and creation.

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Notes

¹ Her dissertation was published in 1998, but was apparently written at least 20 years earlier: *Sankaracarya's Concept of Relation*, (Delhi: Motilal Canarsidass Publishers, 1998).

² For a detailed study of Catholic ashrams in India and the guru system see: Catherine Cornille, *The Guru In Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation?* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1991).

³ For example: Henri Le Saux; Bede Griffiths; Thomas Matus. Another lesser celebrated, but equally important person is the Benedictine Jules Monchanin.

⁴ Sara Grant, R.S.C.J., *Toward An Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), p. 23.

⁵ Ibid, biographical account based on Pt. 1.

⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

⁷ Ibid., p. 13. (Emphasis in the original).

⁸ Grant (1998), p. 182.

⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 130-146.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 128-129.

¹² Ibid., p. 64.

¹³ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁴ For a contemporary Hindu scholar that supports this understanding of Advaita see: Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), p.76.

¹⁵ Grant (1998), p. 39.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 150, quoting from Sankara in *Brhamasutrabhasya* I.i.11.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 160, quoting from Thomas Aquinas, In Sent. 20, 1.1.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

²¹ Ibid., p. 169.

²² Ibid., p. 174.

²³ Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p.2.

²⁴Bradley Malkovsky, in the Introduction to Sara Grant's, *Toward An Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*, p.xiv.

²⁵ Rivera, p. 23.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.