

## ***Madhvācārya as Prophetic Witness, by Deepak Sarma***

### **Abstract**

*Madhvācārya, the 13<sup>th</sup> century propounder of dualism, exemplifies a prophet whose prophetic witness was enacted in a kairos, which demanded his dualist response. The school of Vedānta that he founded was a radical corrective that urged the return to a theistic conception of the universe that was in accordance with the prescriptions of the śruti (the revealed canonical texts). I offer stipulative definitions of three terms and one phrase used in Catholicism, namely kairos, prophet, witness, and the combined, prophetic witness. I use these to show that he is a prophet, and a prophetic witness who acted during a kairos.*

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Stipulation Terminology**
- 3. The *kairos***
  - 3.1 The Basic Theological Beliefs**
  - 3.2 Advaita Vedānta**
- 4. Madhvācārya as Prophet**
  - 4.1 Basic Mādhva Vedānta**
- 5. Concluding Remarks**

### **1. Introduction**

In this paper I will argue that Madhvācārya, the 13<sup>th</sup> century propounder of dualism, exemplifies a prophet whose prophetic witness was enacted in a *kairos*, which demanded his dualist response.<sup>1</sup> The school of Vedānta that he founded was a radical corrective that urged the return to a theistic conception of the universe that was in accordance with the prescriptions of the *śruti* (the revealed canonical texts).

To do this I will first offer stipulative definitions of three terms and one phrase used in Catholicism, namely *kairos*, prophet, witness, and the combined, prophetic witness. I will use these as a heuristic template in which to place Hindu, specifically Mādhva, materials and to show that he is a prophet, and a prophetic witness who acted during a *kairos*.

### **2. Stipulative Definitions**

I will stipulate that *kairos* is a term that points “to a decisive moment, a moment of truth, a compelling moment in history which demands a radical response.”<sup>2</sup> I will further stipulate that a prophet is someone who is “authorized by God, sent by God, and/ or given words by God.”<sup>3</sup> A witness is one whose practices exemplifies and follows what seems to the practitioner to be the prescriptions of God. A prophetic witness is either a prophet who is witnessing or one who aspires to be like a prophet in her/ his witness and speaks against the prevailing beliefs and practices, imploring listeners to act in ways

more in accordance with God's prescriptions.

### 3. The *kairos*

The context within which Madhvācārya lived was certainly “a decisive moment, a moment of truth, a compelling moment in history which demand[ed] a radical response.”<sup>4</sup> Madhvācārya (1238-1317 CE) was born of Sivalli Brahmin parents in the village of Pājakakṣetra near modern day Udupi in the Tulunadu area of southern Karnataka. Southern Karnataka was filled with a diversity of theologies and people. This pluralistic environment had a significant effect on Madhvācārya. His innovations included reminding potential adherents to stay true to the theism presented in the *śruti* (the revealed canonical texts) and also to maintain the *varṇa* (class) system which was the existing social system that he felt was being threatened by the prevailing heretical beliefs found in Advaita Vedānta. Advaita Vedānta appeared to Madhvācārya to be merely Buddhism in disguise. This time was a *kairos*, a decisive moment, a moment of truth, a compelling moment in history, which demanded a radical response. And this response was *bhakti-yoga* (the path via devotion), a radical devotionally oriented dualism that Madhvācārya argued was in accordance with *śruti*, upheld the *varṇa* system and therefore, that would eventually benefit the greatest number of people.

But first, what was at stake? What were the basic theological beliefs? And what were the ones that Madhvācārya felt needed to be corrected?

#### 3.1 The Basic Theological Beliefs

The philosophical and religious traditions extant in medieval South Asia other than Abrahamic ones, all shared a belief in circular time. The universe was governed by this circularity as it is perpetually born and destroyed. This exhibited itself on the microcosmic level as the cycle of rebirth and the mechanism of *karma*, that one's actions in earlier lives affected both the rebirth and events that are to occur in one's future lives. The entity that was reborn is the *jīva* (enduring self) also known as the *ātman*. One accumulates some combination of *puṇya* (meritorious) *karma*, or *pāpa* (demeritorious) *karma*, popularly rendered in the West as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ *karma*, and is born again and again in *saṃsāra* (worldly existence).

One manifests one's *prārabdha* (latent) *karma*. That is, the accumulated *karma* manifests itself until it is depleted or until more is accrued. Though the traditions differed widely on the origins and precise function of these mechanisms of *karma* and *saṃsāra*, they all agreed that this system existed. They also all shared an interest in ending this seemingly endless cycle and this desire was their *raison d'être*. The state that sentient beings enter after being liberated from the cycle is called *nirvāṇa* in Buddhism and Jainism, and *mokṣa* among the Hindu traditions. The ontological status and characteristics of *nirvāṇa* and *mokṣa* differ vastly and each tradition of thought offered methods by which adherents could break the cycle and attain the desired end.

It is believed that if one had the right cognitive habits and implemented them then one will eventually achieve *mokṣa*, if not in this lifetime then in future ones. If, on the other hand, if one's beliefs and practices were incorrect then one would jeopardize one's future births and compromise one's chances of breaking out of the cycle of birth

and rebirth. The stakes were very high indeed.

### 3.2 Advaita Vedānta

Madhvācārya's chief rival was the Advaita school of Vedānta. The schools of Vedānta are commentarial traditions and each makes differing claims about the truth found in *śruti* and, therefore, the method by which one can obtain *mokṣa*. Each links the entirety of its doctrinal system to these interpretations. Each has prescriptions that must be followed by adherents and that conform to their doctrines.

The Advaita School of Vedānta had many followers in the area, making medieval southern Karnataka a ferment of theological dispute. Temples, which were officiated by priests who followed ritual and other worship texts found in the Advaita canons, were built in the area, as were affiliated *maṭhas* (monasteries). According to the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya*, a hagiography of Śaṅkarācārya, the most important expounder of Advaita, Śaṅkarācārya (788-820 CE) visited southern Karnataka in the 9th century and disputed with scholars of local traditions.<sup>5</sup> One of the four *maṭhas* established by Śaṅkarācārya himself was located in Sringeri, only about 50 km, from Udupi, the heart of Mādhva Vedānta.

But what made Advaita Vedānta so heretical? What inspired Madhvācārya to bear prophetic witness against them?

The Advaita School posits that the relationship between *Brahman* (considered the impersonal absolute in Advaita theology) and the *ātman* (self) is *advaita* (non-dual). Furthermore, the universe is not comprised of difference and different entities, as it seems. Knowing this, adherents can eventually obtain *mokṣa* (liberation) from *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth and rebirth).

According to the Advaita school, the only entity in the universe is thus *Brahman* (the impersonal absolute). *Brahman* is outside of language and it is beyond duality. *Brahman* is *sat* (being), *cit* (consciousness), and *ānanda* (bliss). Difference that one normally perceives is only apparent. *Brahman* is incorrectly superimposed upon. Thus, it appears as if there is a multiplicity of *ātman* (selves). This too is only apparent, as the *ātman* are mistakenly understood to be different from *Brahman*. The error, Śaṅkarācārya explains, is a result of *māyā* (illusion) and *avidyā* (ignorance), terms that he uses interchangeably. *Mokṣa* (liberation), the goal of the Advaita School, is therefore, the realization that the *ātman* has a non-dual relationship with *Brahman*.

The similarity between Śaṅkarācārya's Advaita and Mahāyāna Buddhism has led many to speculate that it is merely a Buddhist position in disguise.<sup>6</sup> Madhvācārya's student Nārāyaṇa Paṇḍitācārya, characterized Madhvācārya and Śaṅkara as born enemies in his *Madhvavijaya*, a hagiography of Madhvācārya. In it he further describes Śaṅkara's *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* as "composed by (demon) Maniman (born as Śaṅkara) on earth."<sup>7</sup> Dasgupta summarizes much of the Mādhva mythology that grew around Śaṅkara:

[Śaṅkara]...really taught Buddhism under the cloak of Vedānta....The

followers of Śankara were tyrannical people who burned down monasteries, destroyed cattle and killed women and children...<sup>8</sup>

Śankara, represented as an evil being that was on earth to preach heterodoxical doctrine, was frowned upon by the orthodox Indian philosophical community. His heterodoxy resulted from the implications of this position that members of all classes could achieve *mokṣa*. After all, Śankara proposed *jñāna-yoga* (the path to *mokṣa* via knowledge) and this was not restricted and, at first glance, did not demand adherence to the *varṇa* system. His philosophy is thus very similar to the anti-class sentiment propounded in Buddhism. The Buddhists, of course rejected the authority of the *Vedas*, which made them heretical. Thus Śankara is often cursed as heretical by the Mādhyas for his quasi-Buddhist doctrines. The following passage from Paṇḍitācārya's *Madhvavijaya* exemplifies these accusations:

In the place of the non-existent world (according to the Buddhists) this wicked Śankara said that it is different from what exists and what does not exist. He called the (Buddhist) Relative Truths (*samvṛti*) *Māyā* (Illusion) and the *Brahman* attributeless for the substantiation of voidness. Alas! So this Śankara became famous as a Buddha in disguise.<sup>9</sup>

It is against this position and during this *kairos* that Madhvācārya acted as a prophetic witness. After all, the hierarchical world put forth in the *Vedas* was under threat. Ironically, those who were swayed by the anti-class flavor of Advaita Vedānta would, Madhvācārya believed, be accumulating *pāpam* (demeritorious *karma*) and would likely be born in situations even less efficacious and helpful for attaining *mokṣa*. Here an anti-hierarchical position was heretical, rather than the reverse.

#### 4 Madhvācārya as prophet

I have stipulated that a prophet is someone who is “authorized by God, sent by God, and/ or given words by God.” In this connection, Madhvācārya's travels took him to Mahābadarikāśrama, the home of Vyāsa, and author of the *Brahma Sūtras*, to meet the founder of the Vedānta tradition himself. Vyāsa is believed to be an *avatāra* (incarnation) of Lord Viṣṇu, the deity around which Mādhy Vedānta is centered.<sup>10</sup> Under the guidance of Vyāsa, Madhvācārya is said to have composed his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, a commentary on Vyāsa's *Brahma Sūtras*.<sup>11</sup> An informative autobiographical statement made by Madhvācārya occurs at the end of his commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras*:

Vāyu, whose three forms are described in the *Vedas*, who has the great radiance of a god, who is bestowed upon [us] and, in this way, visible [to us], whose first manifestation was as a messenger to Rāma, whose second was as [Bhīma,] the destroyer [of the Kaurava army] and whose third incarnation is Madhva by whom this *bhāṣya* (commentary) is made for the sake of [establishing the supremacy of] Hari [that is, Viṣṇu].<sup>12</sup>

As per my stipulative definition, Madhvācārya is certainly a prophet. Madhvācārya

himself has an unusual background as he proclaims himself to be the third *avatāra* of Vāyu, the wind God, who is also the son of Viṣṇu.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Vāyu incarnated himself two times before he appeared as Madhvācārya. Hanuman, the monkey deity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic and Bhīma, one of the Paṇḍavas in the *Mahābhārata* epic, are the first and second incarnations. According to the stories found in these two texts, both assist Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, two *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, in defeating *rākṣasas* (demons), and others who threaten the stability of *dharma*.<sup>14</sup> In his incarnation as Madhvācārya, Vāyu again assists Viṣṇu, though this time against a more insidious threat, namely Advaita Vedānta/quasi-Buddhism.

Vāyu, namely Madhvācārya, is thus a guide for *bhaktas* (devotees) on their journey towards Viṣṇu and has a dynamic position as a mediator between devotees and Viṣṇu. This self-identification further confirms his status as a prophet.

What did Madhvācārya proclaim? How does it differ from his Advaita predecessors?

#### 4.1 Basic Mādhva Ontology

As stated in the *Parama Śruti*: ‘...the wise [recognize] that [the universe] is known and protected by Viṣṇu. Therefore it, [the universe,] is proclaimed to be real. But Hari [that is, Viṣṇu] alone is supreme.’<sup>15</sup>

This passage, taken from Madhvācārya’s *Viṣṇutattva(vi)nirṇaya*, summarizes the chief elements in Mādhva Vedānta. For Madhvācārya, the universe is unquestionably real, as are its components. Viṣṇu, who is *Brahman* and is the pinnacle of the Mādhva system, governs all things. Furthermore, correct knowledge of Viṣṇu and one’s place in relation to Him is the prerequisite for *mokṣa* (liberation).

Viṣṇu is the facilitator of all entities and all possible events. The entire universe is manifested due to His activity and is utterly dependent upon Him. To reflect this dualism in ontology, Madhvācārya separates all of reality into *svatantra* (independent) and *asvatantra* (dependent) entities. The only *svatantra* entity is Viṣṇu while all other entities are *asvatantra*.<sup>16</sup> All things, moreover, are in a hierarchical relationship with one another and with Viṣṇu, where Viṣṇu is at the zenith. This chain of command is known as Madhvācārya’s doctrine of *tāratamya* (gradation). The hierarchy pervades every aspect of the Mādhva system and can be found even in *mokṣa*. There is *tāratamya* in *mokṣa* because of the gradation in the devotion towards Viṣṇu.<sup>17</sup> This is known as Madhvācārya’s *ānanda-tāratamya-vāda* (theory of a gradation in bliss).<sup>18</sup>

Knowledge of Viṣṇu alone is insufficient for attaining *mokṣa*. Madhvācārya writes:

Bhakti (devotion) comes from knowledge of the greatness [of God] and is the strongest [in all circumstances when compared] to others. Mokṣa [is achieved] by this [bhakti] and in no other manner.<sup>19</sup>

Madhvācārya’s emphasis on *bhakti* as the only method for obtaining *mokṣa* distinguishes his position from ones in which knowledge alone is sufficient.<sup>20</sup> *Bhakti* is

the central component in Madhvācārya's soteriology. Not only is *bhakti-yoga* (the path to *mokṣa* via devotion) the sole method for obtaining *mokṣa*, but it also most accurately characterizes the experience of *mokṣa*. Fostering *bhakti* and becoming a *bhakta* is both the means and the ends of Mādhva Vedānta.

Devotees must also obtain the grace of Viṣṇu in order to obtain *mokṣa*. Madhvācārya writes:

Direct realization of the highest Lord [comes] only from grace and not [from] the efforts of the *jīva*.<sup>21</sup>

The *jīva* is utterly dependent upon Lord Viṣṇu as is exemplified in the need for Viṣṇu-*prasāda* (grace). The reward of Viṣṇu-*prasāda* is a natural outcome of *bhakti-yoga* (the path to *mokṣa* via devotion). When *bhaktas* show their awareness of the hierarchy of the universe, namely the supremacy of Lord Viṣṇu, and act accordingly, then they are awarded for their submission. Madhvācārya explains:

Hari [that is, Viṣṇu] is the master of all for [all] eternity. [All] are under the control [of the] Highest [One]. This *tāratamya* and the supremacy of Hari are to be known.<sup>22</sup>

It is thus essential to act according to one's *varṇa* (class) lest one act against *tāratamya*. In his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Madhvācārya reminds adherents that *varṇāśrama-dharma* (obligatory duty according to class and stage) must be performed.<sup>23</sup>

Madhvācārya, of course, held that these beliefs and practices were in accordance with those found in *śruti* and, indirectly, were dictated by God. He saw people being misled by Advaita Vedānta and sought to correct this and to return to a theistic conception of the universe.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In this short paper I have used Catholic categories to analyze the status and activities of Madhvācārya, a medieval Indian theologian. As per my stipulative definitions Madhvācārya seems to be a paradigmatic example of a prophet whose prophetic witness was enacted in a *kairos*. Madhvācārya derived his authority from God, namely Viṣṇu, and sought to remind people of the importance of *tāratamya* (gradation). This meant that people ought to know both their place in relation to Viṣṇu as well as to one another. In the latter case this meant that people ought to fact in ways according to their *varṇa* (class) and ought not to follow what appeared to be an anti-hierarchical and any-social-inequality stance put forth by Buddhism, via Advaita Vedānta.

**Deepak Sarma**, an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Case Western Reserve University, has published in Indian philosophy, Hindu studies, method and theory in the study of religion, and bioethics. His chief focus has been the Madhva School of Vedānta. He has delved into comparative philosophy of religions, comparative theology, and served as the president of the Society for Hindu- Christian Studies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Alice Bach, Frank Clooney, Paul Griffiths, and Peter Haas for assisting me as I thought about this topic.

<sup>2</sup> Bonganjalo Goba, “The Kairos Document and Its Implications for Liberation in South Africa,” in *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1987), 314.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Frank Clooney for this language.

<sup>4</sup> Bonganjalo Goba, “The Kairos Document and Its Implications for Liberation in South Africa,” in *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1987), 314.

<sup>5</sup> See the Padmapādatīrthayatrāvarnam and related chapters of Mādhava’s *Śamkaradigvijaya*. These chapters are descriptions of religious pilgrimages and travels undertaken by Śamkarācārya.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, King, Richard. *Early Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism: The Māhāyana Context of the Gaudapādīya-Kārikā*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Rau, D.R. Vasudeva, (ed. & tr.), Nārāyana Panditācārya’s *Madhvavijaya*, Śrīmadānanda Tīrtha Pub., A.P., India, 1983, 5.17.

<sup>8</sup> Dasgupta Surendranath. *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922.I, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Nārāyana Panditācārya’s *Madhvavijaya*, Śrīmadānanda Tīrtha Pub., A.P., India, 1983, 1.51.

<sup>10</sup> *evamvidhāni sūtrani krtvā vyāso mahāyaśāh | brahmarūdrādidevesu manusyapitrpkaksisu | jnānam samsthāpya bhagavānkridante purusottamah | BSB o.*

<sup>11</sup> For further reading about the link between Madhvācārya and Vyāsa, see Sheridan’s ‘Vyāsa as Madhva’s Guru: Biographical Context for a Vedāntic Commentator.’ In *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*. ed. J. Timm. 109-126. NY: SUNY PRESS, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> *yasya trīnyuditāni vedavacane rūpani divyānyalam bat taddrsatamittham eva nihitam devasya bhargo mahat | vāyo rāmavaconayam prathamakam prkso dvitīyam vapurmadvho yattu trīyakam krtamidam bhāsyam harau tena hi | BSB 4.4.23.*

<sup>13</sup> *vāyum hareh sutam... | Chāndogyopanisadbhāsyam 3.15.1.*

<sup>14</sup> *tasmād balapravrttasya rāmakrnsnātmano hareh | antarangam hanumāś ca bhīmastatkāryasādhakau | Mahābhāratatātṭparyanirnaya 2.34-35.*

<sup>15</sup> *matam hi jñānināmetasmitam trātam ca visnunā | tasmāt satyam iti proktam paramo harir eva tu iti paramaśrutih | Visnutattva(vi)nirnaya.*

<sup>16</sup> *svatantram asvatantram ca dvividham tattvam isyate | svatanthro bhagavān visnur | Tattvasamkhyāna 1.*

<sup>17</sup> *tāratamyam vimuktigam | Anubhāsyā 3.3.*

---

<sup>18</sup> *yathā yathā ‘dhikāro viśisyate evam muktāvānando viśisyate | Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya 3.3.33.*

<sup>19</sup> *māhātmyajñānapūrvastu suddrhassavato ‘hidkah | sneho bhaktir iti proktastayā muktir na cānyathā | MBhTN 1.85.*

<sup>20</sup> Madhvācārya believed that the Advaita school holds that knowledge alone is sufficient.

<sup>21</sup> *paramātmāparoksyam ca tatprasādād eva na jīvaśaktyeti ... | Brahma Śūtra Bhāṣya 3.2.22.*

<sup>22</sup> *sarvesām ca harirnityam niyantā tadvaśāh pare | tāratmyam tato jñeyam sarvocatvam harestatthā | Mahābhāratatātparyanirnaya, 1.79.*

<sup>23</sup> *ato niyatam varnaśramocitam karma kuru | BGB 3.8.*