

## Divine-Human Community as the Standard of Relationship in Vedānta Deśika's Śrīvaiṣṇava Vedānta

The September 2008 seminar in Vienna was convened to consider “the subject as a principle of relationship in the context of a hermeneutic of religion.” Even if the topic indicates concern for a hermeneutic of religion (on which, more at the end of this essay), it first raises interesting questions about the self and its capacity for relationship but also, consequently, the nature of its particular relations. The Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindu materials (which I prepared as my contribution) take for granted that divine and human subjects are by essence and by choice in relationship with one another. For them, the problem pertains to how an essential relationship to the Lord (*bhagavān*) can also be recognized to be necessarily a relationship to his people (*bhāgavātas*) as well. In this context, relationality is explored as an existential as well as ontological reality, its psychological and social implications regarding God and humans explicated with subtlety. To show the dynamics of this distinctive Śrīvaiṣṇava approach to relationality, I turn to the *Śrīmadrahasyatrayasāra* (henceforth RTS) of Vedānta Deśika (Veṅkaṭanātha 1270-1369). I will introduce briefly several passages from early in the RTS, and then reflect more amply on RTS 16.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Translations from the RTS are my own, with page references to the *Śrīmadrahasyatrayasāra*, edited and annotated by Ramadesikacaryar Swami (Srirangam 2000). Readers may also wish to consult the available English translation of the *Rahastrayasāra* by Ayyangar 1956. For more background on the *Śrīmadrahasyatrayasāra*, see chapter one of Clooney 2008a), and Clooney 2008b. On RTS 16, see also Clooney 1988: 358-369. On further communal and ethical implications of relationality in community, see Clooney 2008c: 169-185.

Near the beginning of the RTS there is ample exposition of the nature of the self in relation to God: all beings, whether non-conscious (*acit*) or conscious (*cit*) are dependent on the Lord, unable to exist separately from him. A succinct summation of this teaching occurs at the start of RTS 3 (“Our Primary Distinctive Teaching”, *pradhānapratitantrādhikāram*):

All this world — whatever exists, its continuation, activity and result — forms the primal maker’s body, subject to the rules regarding dependence and the rest: realizing this, he plunges his thoughts in the Lord perceived in the all-pervading mirror or in the deep uncreated verses [of the Veda].<sup>2</sup>

Later in RTS 3 the point is stated more technically:

The Lord is the one (*śeṣin*) to whom all things belong: the upaniṣadic voice says that Śrī’s consort declares all conscious and non-conscious beings to be His own, and rules them subject to the rules regarding their existence, continuation, and the rest: O Lord of Śrīraṅga, here you are both, being means and end, this is here your essence, both are not your qualities. Therefore I take you as a refuge in Śrīraṅga, without pretext of wanting anything more.<sup>3</sup>

The same points of dependence and divine ownership are likewise spelled out more elaborately in RTS 4 (“The Five Things to be Known”, *arthapañcakādhikāra*) and RTS 5 (“The Three Realities”, *tattvatrayacintanādhikāra*). There is no question here, or in the earlier Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, of a self that is independent, such that relationality would be puzzling or even impossible. Selves are essentially relational, innately related to the Lord on whom

<sup>2</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 49: *ādheyatvaprabhṛtīnyamair ādikartuś śarīraṃ sattāsthemaprayatanaphaleṣv etad āyattam etam viśvaṃ paśyann iti bhagavati vyāpakādarśadrṣṭe gambhīrānām akṛtakagirāṃ gāhate cittavṛttim.*

<sup>3</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 53: *īcvaraṇ sarvaśeṣiy ākaiy āvatu – upādatte sattāsthitīnyamanādyaiś cidacitau svam uddiśya śrīmān iti vadati vāg aupaniṣadī. upāyopeyatve tad iha tava tattvaṃ, na tu guṇāv atas tvāṃ śrīraṅge śaye [corr. śaya] śaraṇam avyājam abhajam.*

they are ever dependent, though likewise ever distinct. Conversely, the Lord is essentially related to those non-conscious and conscious beings. Rāmānuja, the great *ācārya* to whom Deśika always refers, grounds these stipulations in his reading of the *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 6, wherein both spiritual and material beings arise from the original existent being. To be in this radically dependent relationship is to be *śeṣa*, existing for the sake of a *śeṣin*. The *śeṣa-śeṣin* relationship is a ritual paradigm stated earlier and most succinctly in the *Mīmāṃsāsūtras* III.1.2-6:

What is *śeṣa* is for the sake of another: Substances, qualities, and preparations are *śeṣa*, is [the opinion of] Bādari. Acts too, since they are for the sake of the result, says Jaimini. Results too, since they are for the sake of the performer. The performer too, since he is for the sake of the action.<sup>4</sup>

This ritual model of *śeṣa/śeṣin* envisions things and living beings, qualities and actions, as contributory to a single larger ritual event; what is part of a ritual exists there for the sake of the ritual action. Rāmānuja employs this model to explain/defend the relationality of humans to God and then to one another, and it is his *Vedārthasaṃgraha* that Deśika quotes early in RTS 16:

*Śeṣa* is the one whose proper-form is nothing but the chosen one on account of his desire to sustain the excellence of the other. The *śeṣin* is the other.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Later in the *Mīmāṃsāsūtras*, the gods (*devatā*) are added to this list of elements as *śeṣa* to the sacrifice: *śeṣaḥ parārthatvāt, dravyaguṇa-saṃskāreṣu bādariḥ, karmāṇy api jaiminiḥ phalārthatvāt phalaṃ ca puruṣārthatvāt puruṣaś ca karmārthatvāt.*

<sup>5</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 297: *paragatātiśayādhānecchayopādeya-tvam eva yasya svarūpam, sa śeṣaḥ paraḥ śeṣī.* The cited passage of the *Vedārthasaṃgraha* may be found in context in Raghavachar 2002: 145.

## Relationships in RTS 16

In RTS 16, “The Highest Human Goal” (*puruṣārthakāṣṭhādhi-kāra*), the ramifications of this relationality are spelled out at length. Deśika argues that dedicated service to those dedicated to the Lord does not violate the requirement that one live in exclusive dedication to the Lord alone. In taking up this topic in RTS 16, he presumes self-in-representation as a settled matter: to be a human person is to be in relation to God. Something more important/difficult is now at stake: validating interpersonal relations among community members, in the context of God’s relationship with the community and each of its members. In turn, Deśika delves deeper into the nature of personal relationality as a human phenomenon in order to describe more richly the nature of the relationality innate to the divine and human persons. The original and ontological truth is as it were now brought down to earth, explored in a communal context where relationships are also *experienced*.

While Veṅkaṭanātha does not explain directly the connection between this chapter and the preceding chapter (“What is to be done after *prapatti*”, *uttarakṛtyādhikāram*), later commentators note the closing Sanskrit verse of RTS 15, which announces that “the human goal of service begins with the *bhagavān* and culminates in the *bhāgavātas*”. How this can be is the topic of c.16, which begins by asserting divine sovereignty and graciousness, and service in community as the final, highest goal:

Because he is the independent Lord, this beloved of Śrī, God, arranges everything conscious and non-conscious in the vessels of his great favor; for those, whose mind have been instructed in accord with ordinary experience and tradition by the lord of ascetics and those following him, our service therefore has culminated in those favored by him.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 296: *svatantrasvāmītvāt svabahumatipātre-ṣu niyataṃ śrīyaḥ kānto devaḥ sa khalu viniyuñkte cidacitau; ya-thālokāmnāyaṃ yatipatimukhair āhitadhiyāṃ. tato naḥ kaiṅkaryāṃ tadabhimataparyantam abhavat.*

On this ground, the chapter explores the dynamics of relationality in the human community, as justified and even intensified because of the divine-human relationship. The issue is how these “givens” relate to one another. Consequently, Deśika offers a series of technical distinctions by which to clarify divine-human and human-human relationships, and to these we now turn.

### The model of *śeṣa-śeṣin*

Early in RTS 16, Deśika indicates that while *śeṣatva* is the true condition of all beings, it is distinctive among conscious beings, since they are capable of more than simply manifesting essential dependence on the Lord:

[Objection:] What is the glory that the individual self can confer on the Highest? With respect to his body and the like, he can confer only the same glory as non-conscious things do; such service is common to him and the non-conscious. [We respond:] The distinctive glory conferred pertains to their consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

This is so whether humans act properly or contrary to the divine will:

When the individual self acts contrary to the instructive scriptures, the Lord, the ruler and the dispenser of punishment, enjoys the delight of his *līlā* and by that enhances his glory. When a person acts in accordance with the instructive scriptures, he causes the Lord’s delight ... He does not let his nobility and other qualities go to waste, but promotes the glory of the Lord, with the result that the Lord himself extols such a person ... In the same way, liberated and eternal beings promote distinctive enjoyment for the Lord, since they see directly the Lord’s will and then act in such a way as to give him enjoyment ... And it is the same with the person “who has done all that

---

<sup>7</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 297: *aṅāl jīvaṅkkuṭṭuṭṭu paraṅaiṭṭu para śakya-māṇa atīśayam etu eṅṅru pārttaviṭṭattil śarīratvādimukhattālē atīśayā-dhānam paṅṅṅukai iṅṅṅukkuṭṭu acittukkuṭṭu potuvāy iruntatu. iṅṅṅ ceṣikku viceṣittuṭṭu paṅṅṅum atīcayam caitanyamukhattālē-y āyirukkuṭṭu.*

has to be done,” since they know the Lord’s will from the instructive scriptures, and accordingly render service.<sup>8</sup>

The possibility of intentional relationships entails also the prospect of mutual enjoyment as a further criterion of personal interconnections. The Lord enters into a deep affective relationship with those who are not only in essence dependent on the Lord, but also able to know and love him:

On the other hand, we may consider the thinking of this Person who is ever dependent on these persons who are exclusively devoted to him who possesses all modes. He has said, “[The person devoted to me] is dear to me also” (*Bhagavadgītā* 7.17). Then, in accord with what he adds, “Among them the wise person is my very self” (*Bhagavadgītā* 7.18), the Lord is pleased at the service rendered to those devoted to the Lord, as if it were service rendered to his own inner self.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 297-298: *atil ivan śāstraviruddham āka vartikkum pōtu śāsītāvāy daṇḍadharaṇāna icvaraṇukku līlārasamātrattai-y uṇṭākki ammukattālē atīśayādhāyakaṇām āstrānugūṇam āka vartikkum pōtu ... īśvaraṇukku santoṣattai uṇṭākki avaṇuṭaiya audāryādiguṇaṅkaḷ kumarirāta paṭi ammukattālē udārāḥ sarva evaite eṇru avan tāṇē koṇṭāṭum paṭi atīśayādhāyakaṇām. ... appaṭiyē nityarum muktaram icvarābhīprāyattai sākṣāt karittu paṇṇākīra kaiṅkaryāṅkaḷālē ... ipparakāram āstramukhattālē icvarābhīprāyattai aṇin tu kaiṅkaryam paṇṇākīra kṛtakṛtyaṇukkum samānam.*

<sup>9</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 300-301: *sa ca mama priyah eṅkīra paṭiyē paramaikānti viśayattil pṛītiparatantraṇāna prakāriyīṇuṭaiya niṇaivaip pārttāl jīāni tv ātmaiva me matam enkīra paṭiyē bhāgavata-kaiṅkaryattai bhagavāṇ taṇ antaryāṁipakkalilē paṇṇīnātāka ukakum.*

That the Lord comes to depend on those devoted to him is an important minor theme in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. *Nāṇmukaṇ Tiruvantāti* 7 is taken, the commentarial tradition, to echo the same sentiment at *Bhagavadgītā* 7.18, but in Tamil: “Now and tomorrow and even this very minute, Your grace abides my portion, and surely, I do not exist without you, but see, Nārāyaṇa, Without me you are not.” In turn, Rāmānuja’s *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* comment on *Bhagavadgītā* 7.18 implicitly echoes *Nāṇmukaṇ Tiruvantāti* 7: “I consider myself as de-

In the *Vedārthasaṃgraha* and elsewhere in his writings, Rāmānuja likewise emphasized that every object and person has God as its inner self. Accordingly, every reference to a thing or person is ultimately a reference to God; but this also means that attention to God is attention to those beings who are his own self.

As the passage just quoted indicates, Deśika is also assuming the move from theoretical to enacted relationships, from dependence (*śeṣatva*) to selfless service (*kaiṃkarya*), related but not identical states: dependence is explanatory of the underlying ontological relationship of the divine and the human, whereas selfless service is the practicality of acting for the sake of the other. What was settled ontologically has a distinctive force when it becomes the measure of how one is to act and how one is to understand one's relationship to those with whom one cooperates in community.<sup>10</sup>

---

pending on him for my support. Why is it so? Because this person considers Me to be the highest and finds it impossible to support himself without Me; I also find it impossible to be without him. Thus, verily, he is my self." *Tiruvāymoḷi* 4.3.8 also points to the inseparability of God and self: "You are in my spirit, your form is knowledge, light abiding as everything, filling the lovely seven worlds — your spirit is mine, my spirit is yours: can I ever explain how you are?"

<sup>10</sup> Deśika returns to the issue later in the chapter, to stress the flexibility of the relationships defined as *śeṣa*: "It may be asked, 'If each of two are the Lord's people, would it not be inconsistent that they should be both *śeṣa* and *śeṣin* to one other?' The answer is as follows. Just as it is possible for a person to render help to another and also to receive help from him, here too there is no contradiction. [Similarly in the ritual context:] As one competent for results, the sacrificer is *śeṣin* as eligible for the results, but as doer of the sacrifice, he is *śeṣa* to the sacrifice." (Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 304)

### Paradigms for Explaining the Divine-Human Relationship

To explain further this relation to the Lord as manifest in the web of communal relationships, Deśika turns not to a philosophical vocabulary of the finite and infinite, but rather to a series of modest and practical distinctions. First, as in a ritual context, actions are immediate (*advāra*) or mediate (*sadvāra*) contributory to the overall event:

In addition to its gaining the approval of the *śeṣin*, the relationship of the individual self to the Lord as his *śeṣa* is also mediated (*sadvāra*). For his service to the Lord may be mediated through [attention to] those devoted to the Lord.

[Here is a verse:] “To the highest self who is always with Śrī and holds those devoted to himself as his very self, being a *śeṣin* is [direct], by being-with Śrī, and mediately [through those devoted to the Lord].”<sup>11</sup>

Service is thus enacted in these terms:

If we reflect on what this means, being *śeṣa* is both mediate [*sadvāra*, through the Lord’s people] and immediate [*advāra*, directly reaching him]. In this situation, the service that is the *śeṣa*’s activity is both immediate [for God] and mediate [for the community].<sup>12</sup>

On the divine level, Nārāyaṇa already shares his *śeṣitva* with the goddess Śrī, and his sovereignty is mediated through her; so there can be no real theological objection to *śeṣatva* being medi-

---

<sup>11</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 301: *cēṣatavam ākiṛa sambandhan tāṇ sadvāarakam ākavum uṇṭākaiyāl kaiṅkaryamum sadvāarakam ākavum prāptam. atu eṇṇaṇṇēy eṇṇil, nityaṃ śrīyā sametasya bhaktair ātmavataḥ sadā. saha sadvāarakam ca syāc cheṣitvaṃ paramātmanaḥ.*

<sup>12</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 302: *iv vartattai anusantittāl ic ceṣatvam sadvāarakam ākavum advāarakam ākavum niṅṇa nilaiyilē ceṣa viruttiyāṇa kaiṅkaryamum niṅkum.*



ated through community. This mediation of dependence and service is explained by a royal analogy:

[God's pleasure in humans' care for one another is like this]: a king who is independent and who takes pleasure in acting just as he pleases places his own ornaments and garlands around the necks of his servants and of his elephants and horses.<sup>13</sup>

That love of God should be mediated through love and service in the community is the Lord's own intention:

As it says, "[The Lord who is] immaculate has put me in service to his servants" (*Amalaṅādīpīrāṇ* 1).<sup>14</sup>

More subtly, this necessary attachment to the Lord's people becomes a matter of personal taste and determination:

"I, Nārada, have come here with an eager longing to see you. To men like me, O Brahmin, those who are dedicated to the Lord are masters" (*Padmottarparvāṇa* 81.52). So too, "I have no relation to those who think there is some other deity, but I am bound in service to those devoted to you" (*Periya Tirumoli* 8.10.3).<sup>15</sup>

According to these passages, the individual self is absolutely subject to the will of the Lord; service of the *śeṣin* is due also to those who are favorites of the Lord, and so dependence on the Lord extends even to the Lord's people. This too is an enduring relationship that lasts as long as the self lasts, that is, eternally. Another pair of quotations shows this interdependence to be intentional as well as innate. In the first, Lakṣmaṇa is disposed to serve Rāma under all conditions, because he is Rāma's brother, and because he is won over by his good qualities:

<sup>13</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 301: *svatantraṅāy svacchandalīlanāṇa rājā tāṅ pūṅṭa ābharanattaiyum iṭṭa mālaiyum aṭiyārkaḷ ūṭaiyavum āṇai kutiraikaḷ uṭaiyavum kaḷuttīlē iṭum ā pōlē.*

<sup>14</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 301: *aṭiyārkkku eṅṅaiy āpāṭutta vimalaṅ.*

<sup>15</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 301-302: *nārado 'ham anuprāptas tvaddarśanakutūhalāt. prabhavo bhagavadbhaktā mādrśāṃ satataṃ dvija. eṅṅum marṅum ōr teyvam uḷa tenṅiruppārōṭu urṅilēṅ urṅatum unṅaṭiyārkkatimai eṅṅum collukīra paṭiyē.*

Our being *śeṣas* to the Lord's people arises from their being devoted to the Lord. It thus pertains to our essential nature, but it also arises secondly by our own choice, from knowledge of their qualities: "[I (Lakṣmaṇa) am his younger brother (due to birth)], but I have become his servant because [I am won over by] his qualities" (*Kiṣkindakāṇḍa* 4.12).<sup>16</sup>

In the second, Periyālvār expresses extreme willingness to serve the Lord's people:

[Moreover,] Periyālvār, the (great) commentator on the *Kalpasūtras*, stated: "These servants of those who utter [names of the Lord] are entitled even to sell us [as slaves]" (*Periyālvār Tirumōḷi* 4.4.10).<sup>17</sup>

The relational dimension of being a person is therefore also an existential principle; what is innate is also conditional, dependent on recognition of the good attributes of others. This is shown with reference to beings eternally dedicated to others and those who learn the connections through experience:

It may be asked whether this relationship of being *śeṣa* to the Lord's people is due to one's innate way of being (*svābhāvika*) or is rather conditional (*aupādhika*). Inasmuch as it lasts as long as the self lasts, and will continue also in the state of liberation, it may be called innate. As it says, "[May I be one with your attendants, my celestial masters, the eternally free (souls) who forever delight in your service, for whom you are the sole object of enjoyment], and whose hearts are forever melted with the sentiments [of love] fresh each moment, each one ever regarding the other as superior!" (*Śrīvaikunṭhastavam* 77).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 302: *iṅku bhāgavatavamaṭṭiyāka svarūpaprayuktam ākavum guṇair dāsyam upagataḥ eṅkiṛa nyāyattālē guṇajñānam aṭṭiyāka svecchaiyālum vanta bhāgavataśeṣatvam, bhagavadbhaktāḥ mādrśām eṅkiṛa iraṅṭu patattālum sūcitam.*

<sup>17</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 302: *pēcuvār aṭṭiyārkaḷ entammai viṅkavum peruvārkaḷē eṅru kalpasūtravyākhyātakkalāṇa periyālvār aruḷi ceytār.*

<sup>18</sup> As translated by Nayar 1994: 42.

But it may also be said to be conditional, as it is a particular connection arising from recognition of the Lord's relationships.<sup>19</sup>

What is essential and necessarily the case is recognized and affirmed by practical assent: knowledge of the Lord and persons in relationships intensifies the fact of relationality. Pertinent too is the movement from what must be done by way of obligation (*kārya*) to an appreciation of flourishing (*vṛddhi*), fruition that eventuates from action and overflows in the community:

Therefore in accord with one's ability, this service of the Lord's people is the human goal, the flourishing of that form that is perfected in service of the Lord ... As for the devout person who is exclusively focused and whose *dharma* is like that of a chaste wife, it is appropriate to act in accord with the will of the Lord. Since this state of being dependent on another arises for no reason other than knowing that we are dependent on no one else [but the Lord], there is no contradiction.<sup>20</sup>

The relationship of God and humans, though innate, is also a matter of mutual intentions prompted by experience. It arises in the delight of the Lord and individual in relationship to one another. The experience of the community is therefore confirmatory of the innate yet new relationship with God, as the excess of delight recurs in the community's own life:

---

<sup>19</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 303-304: *ippākavata cēṣatvaṃ svābhāvika-mō aupādhikamō v-enṇil karmādyupādhikaḷ ara nityābhivāñchitaparaparasparanīcabhāvaiḷ eṅkiṛa paṭiyē yāvad ātmabhāviy āyk koṇṭu muktadaśaiyilum anuvartippa tonrā kaiyālē svābhāvikam eṅṇa-v umām bhagavatsambandhajñānaviṣeśanibandhanam ākaiyālē aupādhikam eṅṇa-v umām.*

<sup>20</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 302-303: *ākaiyāl taṅ caktikku anurūpam āka bhagavatkaikāryattiṇuṭaiya sādhyākāravivṛddhiyāna puruṣārthattil ellai nilattait taricu tūru viṭā toḷiyap prāptam ... pativartādharmam pōlēy irukkīra paramaikāntitvattukku mikavum ucitamāna paticcitānuvartanam ākaiyāl hetvantarattāl aṅrikkē ananyārhaṣeṣatvājñānamaiyāka varukaiyālē ivvanyaceṣatvam viruddhamāṅru.*

So too, when each of the Lord's people is bent on promoting the glory of the other, without either of them expecting that glory, they become *śeṣa* by promoting the glory of the other; they are *śeṣis* inasmuch as they are the recipients of that glory. There is no fault in this position.<sup>21</sup>

This then is a matter of living out in experience the dynamics of *śeṣatva*. One serves the other, without expectation of reward; one receives, with knowledge that this is also to the glory of the Lord within.

### Interpersonal Relationality as a Way of Life

The concluding Tamil verse reemphasizes how relationality, enacted in service, constitutes a way of life:

The Lord's people who know the Veda are amazed at the brilliant, excellent Lord on whose established path we now travel, as we desire that service greatly revered by the good people at his feet and taught in the imperishable secret books: such is the way of steady righteousness, our unwavering way of life.<sup>22</sup>

The closing Sanskrit verse emphasizes that the grace of community can be said to matter most:

By our word emitting a fragrance coveted even by the lotus in his navel pool we do not beg of our lord for anything — all that straw — and all we seek is that more and more we gain the grace of those

---

<sup>21</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 304: *appaṭiyē anyonyam paṇṇum aticayaṅkalai upajīviyātē ṛuttarukkoruttar atīśayādhānam paṇṇiṅāl atīśayādhāyakatvaveṣattālē iruvarukkum ceṣitvamuṇṭākak kuṟai-y illai.*

<sup>22</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 305: *vētam aṛinta pakavar viyakka viḷaṅkiya cīrnātaṅ vakutta vakai perunām avaṅ nallaṭiyārkkku ātaramikka-v aṭimaiyicaintu aḷiyā marainūl nīti niṟutta nilai kulaiyā vakai niṅraṅamē.*

pure in their firm understanding, pure in their inmost beliefs: the splendor dawning for the liberated.<sup>23</sup>

In these words Deśika highlights a special relationship in the community, that of each member with the *ācāryas*, “those pure in their firm understanding, pure in their inmost beliefs”. For it is these teachers that make clear the inestimable gains achieved in community.

Concluding reflection on the interrelation of theology, person,  
and community

RTS 16 does not have the tone of a philosophical inquiry into the idea of relationality. By precisely changing the terms of the discourse, however, RTS 16 offers a more intensely nuanced set of strategic resources for reflection on God, self, and community. The values discussed by Deśika are interior to the community and not a matter of discussion in a wide public discourse. It may be that the subject’s experience in community was not considered a Viśiṣṭādvaita topic such as could be analyzed in the theoretical terms of Sanskrit discourse; accordingly, Deśika seems not to have discussed elsewhere how the *ātman* can subsist in relationship to other persons in community.

That Deśika does not explicate relationships in strictly philosophical terms does not mean that he is merely offering a homiletic or pastoral rationale for community. Rather, he strives to catch the existential import of an emphasis on personal relationship, and thus too its theological implications. He draws on a ritual paradigm wherein relations are calculated in terms of their performative efficacy, and grounded in ends, means, and effects. While of course the language of an eternal *ātman* is not denied, in fact the ideal person portrayed by Deśika is a deeply interrelated,

<sup>23</sup> Ramadesikacaryar 2000: 305: *nāthe nastr̥ṇam anyad anyad api vā tannābhinālīkinīnālīkaspr̥haṇīyasaurabhamucā vācā na yācāmahe. śuddhānām tu labhemahi sthīradhiyām śuddhāntasiddhāntinām muk-taiśvaryadinaprabhātasamayāsattiṃ prasattiṃ muhuḥ.*

interactive, and affectively engaged agent. The nature of this person is more readily described in terms of the performative ritual relationship of *śeṣa* and *śeṣin*.

The “subject of relationship” is here richly imagined as a being of intelligence and pleasure who by choice as well as nature is related to the divine person and to other persons in a human community. Relationality, taken for granted, can then be richly elaborated in terms of the language of tradition and experience of community. Deśika can draw upon a richer sense of person, as inevitably a matter of the person-in-relationship, as defining both divine and human persons. In turn, this relationality, though innate, is enacted as intentional and manifest in service. Human choices affirm and echo divine intentions, as making possible what would otherwise be contested as contrary.

We know from his vast array of writings that Deśika could easily work in a more abstract philosophical language; that he also chose to write RTS 16 gives us, too, a choice as to how to think about the Śrīvaiṣṇava view of relationality. His reflections therefore also advise us against reducing our interpretation of basic features of religion to what can be gleaned on the basis of general and abstract principles. We are reminded to leave room for a more in depth interpretation, rooted in a detailed reading of concretely articulated religious traditions expressing themselves in the words and images of their scriptures and moral practices, saints and teachers, and their experience of self before their deities. In a theological context, the concrete complexity of the human condition before God as experienced, enacted, felt with passion is as firm a ground for reflection on human religiosity as would be considerations of the finite and infinite, immanent and transcendent, or other such philosophical categories. Moreover, Deśika might add, the prospects for keeping together the divine-human and human-human relationships are dimmer if one proceeds only on the grounds of what seems philosophically plausible.

## Bibliography

- Ayyangar 1956 M. R. Rajagopala Ayyangar, *Śrīmad Rahasyatrayasāra*. Translated by Agnihotram Ramanuja Thathachariar. Kumbakonam 1956.
- Clooney 1988 Francis X. Clooney, In Joyful Recognition. A Hindu Formulation of the Relationship between God and Community, and Its Significance for Christian Theology. In: *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25/3 (1988) 358-369.
- Clooney 2008 Ibid., *Beyond Compare*. St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God. Washington 2008.
- Clooney 2008a Ibid., *The Truth, the Way, the Life*. Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindus. Leuven 2008.
- Clooney 2008b Ibid., For Your Own Good: Suffering and Evil in God's Plan according to One Hindu Theologian. In: *Deliver Us From Evil*, edited by M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling. New York 2008, 169-185.
- Nayar 1994 Nancy Nayar, *Praise-Poems to Viṣṇu and Śrī*. The Stotras of Rāmānuja's Immediate Disciples. Mumbai 1994.
- Raghavachar 2002 S. S. Raghavachar, *Vedārtha-Saṃgraha of Śrī Rāmānujācārya*. Kolkata 2002.
- Ramadesikacaryar 2000 Ramadesikacaryar Swami (ed.), *Śrī-madrasahasyatrayasāra*. Srirangam 2000.

