Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality

Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion

Ayon Maharaj


**Review**

Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886) has been variously considered a mystic, a prophet, a devotee, and an early modern propounder of the harmony of religions. However, this spiritual luminary has seldom been considered a philosopher. Academic engagements with his life and precepts have been negligible. In *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality: Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*, Ayon Maharaj ventures to correct this problem by writing “the first scholarly book in English on Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy” (2), which “combines detailed exegesis with cross-cultural philosophical investigation” (3).
For this, Maharaj relies on two Bengali authoritative accounts of Sri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings, Mahendranath Gupta’s *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Kathāmrtya* and Swami Saradananda’s *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Lilāprasaṅga*. Maharaj focuses on “the infinitude of God … religious pluralism … the nature and epistemology of mystical experience … and the problem of evil” (6). He brings “Sri Ramakrishna into creative dialogue with recent Western thinkers,” primarily analytic philosophers (5). Maharaj situates Sri Ramakrishna as a unique mystic-philosopher, and argues that cross-cultural “philosophizing … should be seen less as a niche activity of a tiny minority of philosophers than as a methodological imperative for all philosophers (10).

The task that Maharaj has set before himself is daunting, and since no one seems to have attempted this before, is fraught with difficulties; and given the paucity of space, there is little room for clarifications and elaborations. Aware of these limitations, Maharaj concentrates on select aspects of Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy, and attempts to bring out the nuances of his unique contribution to religious studies, *Vijñāna* Vedanta. Maharaj introduces the readers—again for the first time in a comprehensive manner—to academic and philosophical scholarship on the mystic. He argues that while Sri Ramakrishna echoed ideas from most religious or philosophical traditions, he was neither the advocate of any of the extant traditions, nor was he philosophically inconsistent or incoherent; rather he harmonized all of these faith or philosophical traditions through the standpoint of *Vijñāna* Vedanta. Maharaj holds that Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna’s chief disciple, saw in Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings, the echoes of the nonsectarian Vedanta of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

Maharaj emphasizes that Sri Ramakrishna’s nonsectarian philosophy was based “on his own spiritual experiences,” and that it was his mysticism that led to forming this catholic and inclusive outlook (16). It is interesting that although Maharaj gives great importance to Sri Ramakrishna’s mystical and spiritual experiences as the bedrock of his philosophy, he is reluctant to assert “the veridicality of Sri Ramakrishna’s reported mystical experiences” (17). Maharaj argues that though “there is no way to prove that Sri Ramakrishna’s alleged mystical experiences of God were, in fact, veridical,” we could grant some “evidential value” to these experiences (145). Maharaj then gives four adequacy criteria for assessing theories of religious pluralism. He says that every theory of religious pluralism should satisfy the conditions of internal consistency, robustness, fruitfulness, and plausibility to be considered as a valid theory (148).

Wasting no time, Maharaj creates a toolkit to analyze Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings through five interpretive principles; he arrives at six central tenets of Sri Ramakrishna’s *Vijñāna* Vedanta. This is Maharaj’s singular contribution to Sri Ramakrishna scholarship. Through this approach, Maharaj gives his readers an excellent model for doing cross-cultural philosophy. In his interpretive principles, Maharaj holds that Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy is self-contained, context-based,
nonsectarian, spiritual, and syncretic. Maharaj argues that the central tenets of Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy are the state of *vijñāna*, the ultimate authority of spiritual experience, the statement that the Infinite Divine Reality is both personal and impersonal, the proclamation that there are two levels of Advaitic realization, the teaching that the *vijñānī* accepts both the *nitya* (real) and the *līlā* (apparent), and the message that various religious paths are “salvifically efficacious paths to realizing God” (44).

Sri Ramakrishna’s pluralistic view is that religious aspirants realize their preferred aspect of God. However, God cannot be limited only to that particular aspect. Maharaj successfully establishes the soundness of this argument by quoting Sri Ramakrishna, and juxtaposing such statements with the ideas of contemporary thinkers on religious pluralism. Maharaj takes the support of Sri Ramakrishna’s simple and wonderful examples from daily life to establish his arguments. These examples make this book more readable.

To the objection that the Western “threefold typology” of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism need not be imposed on Sri Ramakrishna’s thought, Maharaj answers that such “typology ... is not mutually exclusive with trying to stay faithful to Sri Ramakrishna” (98). Moreover, according to Maharaj, this typology helps in “distinguishing various competing perspectives on religious diversity,” and in “identifying Sri Ramakrishna’s position as a form of religious pluralism that facilitates cross-cultural dialogue by helping to locate his position *vis-à-vis* Western views on religious diversity.” Maharaj then argues that “Sri Ramakrishna’s religious pluralism ... belongs to the same family [of] ... numerous Western theories of religious pluralism and hence can be brought into fruitful philosophical dialogue with these Western theories” (98–99).

Maharaj has given the world of religious literature a historically important work that situates Sri Ramakrishna as a philosopher in his own right. Maharaj’s work brings home the urgency to actively engage with Indian thought that is often hidden in the precepts of saints and mystics. A pioneering and comprehensive scholarly work, *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality* is highly readable and would serve as a great resource for scholars of religious studies, philosophy, hermeneutics, theology, Indian studies, and Sri Ramakrishna.

**About the Reviewer(s):**
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