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Karmayoga – Jñānayoga in Rāmānuja or Active Life – Contemplative Life in Aquinas. A Meeting Point between Indian and Christian Thought

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1. Introduction

The publishing of the Papal Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* in 1998 brought awareness of the importance of the dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophy. In its point 72, the Holy Father says:

«My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical system»¹.

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¹ Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, 1998, point 72.

It is not possible to speak of Indian Philosophy as a single corpus of ideas. It is more appropriate to speak of Indian philosophies, i.e. the various philosophical schools developed throughout the centuries on Indian land². Nevertheless, in spite of the opposite views existing among these schools, there are some basic concepts which are common to all of them:

«The systems of philosophy in India were not stirred up merely by the speculative demands of the human mind which has a natural inclination for indulging in abstract thought, but by a deep craving after the realization of the religious purpose of life. It is surprising to note that the postulates, aims and conditions for such a realization were found to be identical in all the conflicting systems. Whatever may be their differences of opinion in other matters, so far as the general postulates for the realization of the transcendent state, the *summum bonum* of life, were concerned, all the systems were practically in thorough agreement»³.

Karma, meaning action; *jñāna*, meaning knowledge; and *yoga*, meaning a method or special skill, are some of those basic concepts present in all schools of Indian philosophy. Combined together they make up two pithy concepts which are *karmayoga* and *jñānayoga*, i.e. a skilful managing of human actions so to attain the final end of man, based on true knowledge of God's and man's nature⁴.

In this paper we will discuss the meaning of *karmayoga* and *jñānayoga* in the philosophy of Rāmānuja, a medieval philosopher from South India⁵, and the validity of these concepts within the framework of Christian philosophy, with particular reference to the concepts of 'active life' and 'contemplative life' in Thomas Aquinas.

² The systems of philosophy in India are classified into two classes: the *nāstika* and the *āstika*. The *nāstika* systems do not regard the Vedas (i.e. sacred books of Hinduism) as infallible. They are the Buddhist, the Jaina and the Cārvāka (or school of materialism) system. The *āstika* systems are those which regard the Vedas as infallible and establish their own validity on their authority. They are called orthodox schools and are six in number: Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika.

³ S. DASGUPTA, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1992, Vol. 1, p. 71.

⁴ The word 'man', according to classic usage, means 'all men and women' and in this sense it has been used by Rāmānuja and other philosophers. Because of this fact we prefer in this paper to keep using the word 'man' knowing we include both men and women equally. However, very often we use other terms such as 'human being', 'people' and so on.

⁵ Rāmānuja, according to biographers, lived from 1017 to 1137 in South India (present Tamil Nadu). He belonged to an old theistic school of Vedic origin. His philosophy has its roots in the Vedantic tradition, wherein the teachings of the Upaniṣads have been systematized by the Vedānta Sūtras and the Bhagavad Gītā (i.e. the triple text of the Vedānta or Prasthānatraya). As a good ācārya (i.e. master), he wrote commentaries on them: the Vedānta-sāra, Vedānta-dīpa, and Śrī-bhāṣya are commentaries on the Vedānta Sūtras; the Vedāntasamgraha is a summary of the meaning of the Vedas, and the Gītābhāṣya, a commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā. A manual of worship, the Nityagrantha, is also attributed to him, and another one, the Gadyatraya, is of doubtful origin.

2. *Karma* in Indian Philosophy

2.1. *Karma*: Usages and etymology

The Sanskrit word *Karma* has three usages: action, the law of *karma*, and movement⁶.

The law of *Karma* goes together with the concept of transmigration (*saṃsāra*) and rebirth. *Karma*, in this sense, means that previous acts determine the condition into which a being, after having enjoyed some reward in heaven or some punishment in hell, is reborn in one form or another. *Karma* binds the selves of beings to the world and compels them to be subjected to the cyclic process of births and deaths.

The word *Karma* comes from the root *kṛ* (to do). From *kṛ* also comes the word *kṛti*, i.e. voluntary act done by the agent. Therefore, the primary meaning of the word *Karma* is action.

Karma as action has the capacity of bringing two opposite effects: bondage and liberation. As binding force *karma* implies the performance of acts with attachment to results, while, as liberating force it implies an attitude of detachment in our actions. According to this analysis, we come across in Indian Philosophy a division of people into two main streams: those who are committed to a life of action (*pravṛttam Karma*⁷) and those who are committed to a life of knowledge (*nivṛttam Karma*). Thus, action and knowledge are sometimes seen as two contrary paths of life and other times as two complementary paths.

2.2. Evolution of the ‘theory of *Karma*’ in the schools of Indian Philosophy

2.2.1. *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*

The theory of *Karma* as a path towards liberation begins with the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* School of Indian Philosophy⁸. The *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* starts with an

⁶ The last meaning refers to motion, which according to Vaiśeṣika doctrine is considered as one of the seven categories of things. «The Vaiśeṣika system is regarded as conducive to the study of all systems. Its main business is to deal with the categories and to unfold its atomistic pluralism. A category is called padārtha and the entire universe is reduced to six or seven padārthas. Padārtha literally means ‘the meaning of a word’ or ‘the object signified by a word’. All objects of knowledge or all reals come under padārtha». Chandradhar SHARMA, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1991, pp. 175-176.

⁷ Pravṛtti means active worldly life. It refers to the desireless performance of duties pertaining to one’s status in life. According to the Gītā the karmayogin gives up desired-prompted actions and performs ‘niṣkāma karma’, i.e. actions in which he gives up the hope of fruit.

⁸ Basically, *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* gives rules to interpret the commandments of the Vedas and it justifies philosophically the Vedic ritualism. It has three basic presuppositions: 1. It distin-

enquiry into the nature of *dharmā*⁹ made by Jaimini in his *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* (probably written about 200 B.C.). For action they mean rituals. Every action leads to further actions constituting a chain of actions and generating some by-product in the form of *apūrva*¹⁰, part of which is carried after death into the next rebirth if the soul is not retributed. Human being is fully dominated by the law of *Karma*: Man is in bondage.

Pūrva Mīmāṃsā School is later on subdivided into two branches named after their founders: Prabhākara School and Kumārila Bhaṭṭa School. The school of Prabhākara attributes greater importance to action than to knowledge, while the one of Kumārila develops the concept of *jñāna-karma-samuccaya*, i.e. a harmonious combination of knowledge and action as a valid path towards liberation.

2.2.2. Vedānta philosophy

Vedānta philosophy inherits this doctrine and its main ethical concern is how to release man from his bondage. *Vedānta* (i.e. end of the *Vedas* or *Upaniṣads*) has the *Vedānta Sūtras*, written by Bādarāyaṇa, as its original authoritative work. It is a summarized statement of the general view of the *Upaniṣads*¹¹. This text has

guishes between facts, which are the object of descriptive knowledge (*avidyā*) and values, which are the object of prescriptive knowledge (*vidyā*); 2. A prescription (*sadhya*) should be realizable and conducive to total well being (*desirability*). Thus, for every end there must be an appropriate means (*sādhana*, *marga* or *yoga*), which is available and accessible; 3. There should be a symbiosis of knowledge (*jñāna*), will (*iccha*), action (*karma*) and result (*phala*).

⁹ «Dharma is a very complex concept in the religio-philosophic literature of India. In fact, the authentic name of Hinduism is Sanātana-dharma, or Eternal Law. The word dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ-dharati* = to hold fast, uphold, bear, support, keep in due order. The etymology itself suggests the real notion of dharma, which is conceived to be that which maintains the universe in due order ... The Indian concept of dharma stands for ethics, religion, morality, virtue, spirituality, truth, good conduct and so on; it also stands for natural and positive laws, the moral code, the various distinct duties of the individual. The whole religio-philosophical and didactic literature of India lays great stress on the necessity of maintaining dharma for spiritual realization. All the various systems of Indian thought emphasize the observance of dharma as a *conditio sine qua non* of internal purification leading to eternal bliss ... in Vedic literature, instead of dharma, we have *ṛta*». J. KATTACKAL, *Religion and ethics in advaita*, St. Thomas Apostolic Seminary, Kottayam 1985, p. 43.

¹⁰ *Apūrva* means the remote consequence of human actions. It is the link between every act and its fruit.

¹¹ *Upaniṣad* means 'esoteric doctrine' and implies listening closely to the secret doctrines of a spiritual teacher. They are part of the *śruti*, or revealed word. They try to ascertain the mystic sense of the *Vedas* and they deal with topics such as the origin of the world and the true nature of God, among others.

There are more than 100 *Upaniṣads* which are known to us, and one can see an evolution in their teachings toward the concept of a single Supreme Being with whom man – by way of knowing – tries to reunite. Each *Upaniṣad* differs much from one another with regard to their content and methods of exposition.

been commented and interpreted in a different way by several philosophers. Some of these commentaries gave origin to the subdivisions of the school: Śaṅkara's *Advaita Vedānta*¹²; Rāmānuja's *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta* or Non-dualist *Vedānta*; and Madhva's dualism¹³.

For Śaṅkara, *jñāna* is the sole means to liberation, while *Karma mārga* (in the sense of *Vedic* ritualism) is incapable of leading to final release. The one who knows *Brahman*, having his ignorance destroyed by wisdom, becomes *Brahman*. Liberation can be achieved after death, or even in this world¹⁴.

Śaṅkara regards as contradictory and against the teachings of the sacred texts (*Śāstras*), the combination of knowledge and action as a liberating path. For him, the *jñāna-karma-samuccaya-vāda* should be replaced by *jñāna* alone. All evil stems from the fact that men are in a state of ignorance, being conscious only of the phenomenal world. It is only through *jñāna*, the intuitive vision of the Supreme Reality, that man transcends the empirical world. *Karma* and *upāsana* (meditation) are subsidiary to knowledge and at most they may be a preparation, by way of purifying one's own mind, to get that liberating knowledge or *jñāna*.

2.2.3. *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta* philosophy¹⁵

Viśiṣṭādvaita School integrates *Karmayoga*, *jñānayoga*, and *bhaktiyoga* as different stages in the progressive realisation of salvation. Rāmānuja, its main representative, accepts various kinds of action¹⁶. The important thing is to perform

¹² Śaṅkara (788-820) is the main representative of Advaita Vedānta or non-dualism, the philosophical system that affirms the ultimate unity of all beings. He believes in one eternal unchanging reality (Brahman), which is pure consciousness and is devoid of all attributes (nirguṇa). This Brahman (or ātman) is associated with its potency māyā, or avidyā, and appears as the qualified (saguṇa) Brahman (also Īśvara or 'the Lord'), the creator, preserver and destroyer of this phenomenal world. Māyā is something material and unconscious. It is the inherent power of Brahman. It is beginningless. It is indefinable for it is neither real (it exists in Brahman), nor unreal (it projects the world of appearances). It has a phenomenal and relative character. It is removable by right knowledge.

¹³ Madhva (1197-1286) sustains unqualified dualism (dvaita). Difference is the very nature of things. To perceive things is to perceive their uniqueness which constitutes difference. There are three eternal and real entities: God, souls, and matter, which are different from each other. Souls and matter do not constitute the body of God, and have substantive existence themselves.

¹⁴ This is the case of *jīvan-mukta* who is the one who gets released from the law of Karma while being physically alive.

¹⁵ Rāmānuja settled the bases for this new branch within Vedānta philosophy. *Viśiṣṭādvaita* is a compound word made up of *advaita* (i.e. oneness of being) and *viśeṣa* (attributes). Sometimes it has been erroneously translated as 'qualified monism', but it really means 'qualified non-dualism', i.e. it includes within the unity of the Supreme Self the existence of modes or attributes: the whole universe made up of spiritual and material beings.

¹⁶ Actions, according to Indian tradition, are classified into:

-Bodily (*kāyika*); -Vocal (*vācika*); -Mental (*mānasa*).

-Ritual actions; -Non-ritual actions. Ritual acts can be divided into those which are enjoined

them under the knowledge of the real nature of God. Knowledge and performance of the duties should go together.

Rāmānuja bases his theory of human action on his understanding of the *Bhagavad Gītā*¹⁷, wherein actions are not restricted to those prescribed by the sacred texts. All actions performed by an ordinary person are included in the word *Karma* as used in the *Gītā*.

Action in the *Gītā* can be identified with duty: it refers to the performance of action with an accent on the principle of *dharma*. The fulfilment of our duties – *Karmayoga* – becomes a path to liberation.

Indian Philosophy shares one important aim of philosophy, namely, transforming human life. Sometimes it appears as if this goal «(is) the sole concern in Indian tradition. This idea of philosophy as a transforming influence is clearly reflected in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and is discernible more specifically in its highly idealised conception of duty»¹⁸.

3. The Concept of *Ātman*

3.1. Meanings of *ātman*

The human being is an embodied self. In him there are two elements: body and soul (*ātman*). *Ātman* means the individual self. It is also called *jīva* and, according to *Sāṅkhyan* cosmology, *puruṣa*¹⁹. Originally it meant life-breath and gradu-

(vidhi) and those that are proscribed (niṣedha). Vidhi acts are said to be fourfold: -regular daily rites (nityakarman); -occasional rites (naimittikakarman); -desired acts (kāmyakarma) (acts which are prescribed for one who wishes to obtain a certain result, say, heaven); -expitiatory actions (prayaścitta).

¹⁷ The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a poem inserted within the *Mahābhārata*, one of the great epics poems of ancient India. The central theme of the *Mahābhārata* is the contest between two noble families – the Pandavas and their blood relatives the Kauravas – for possession of a kingdom in northern India.

It is a dialogue between two persons – Lord Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna – which takes place while a battle is about to start. The dialogue that emerges from that particular battle is a timeless one, a dialogue that will have an enormous transcendence over the whole history of India and one that will be the starting point of a deep philosophical analysis with special reference to Ethics.

The *Gītā* is the best-known work on Indian literature all over the world. In Europe it was first made known through C. Wilkins' English translation (1785), and was spread mainly through A.W. Schlegel's critical edition and Latin translation (1823). See, DE SMET and NEUNER (editors), *Religious Hinduism*, St Paul's, Bombay 1996, pp. 279-291.

¹⁸ S. GOPALAN, *The Concept of Duty in the Bhagavad Gītā: An Analysis*, in A. SHARMA (editor), *New Essays on the Bhagavad Gītā*, Books & Books, New Delhi 1987, p. 1.

¹⁹ *Sāṅkhya* maintains a total dualism between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* (the unintelligent and uncaused root-cause of all worldly effects). The *puruṣas* are many and all are essentially alike. *Prakṛti* evolves, to serve the purpose of the *puruṣa*, into twenty-four principles. All of these, together with the *puruṣa*, make up the twenty-five categories, or metaphysical principles.

ally evolved into the meanings of feeling, mind, soul, and spirit. *Ātman* means the eternal element existing in each human being. It transcends the boundaries of humanity since, due to the law of *karma*, it can be united to different *karmic* bodies, such as irrational animals and so on.

3.2. *Ātman* in the Upaniṣads

The older *Upaniṣads*²⁰ and the system of Śaṅkara understand *Brahman-ātman* as the only supreme reality. *Ātman* is the same *Brahman* individualised in particular bodily structures due to the law of *karma*, which is the cause of bondage.

In the later *Upaniṣads* we find another view. There, the individuality of the finite self is stressed. *Brahman* resides within this self as 'Other'. He is unaffected by the imperfections of the finite self. God and the finite self are «*in that personal relationship which religious experience demands*»²¹.

3.3. *Ātman* in the Systems of Indian Philosophy

All the *āstika* systems of Indian Philosophy admit the existence of *ātman*, i.e., a permanent entity which is the essential element of every being.

Even though they differ regarding the exact nature of this *ātman*, they consider it pure and unsullied in the sense that all impurities due to action are attached to the body but not to the soul.

The *summum bonum* of life consists in apprehending *ātman* in its pure nature without any of the imperfections attached to it.

3.4. *Ātman* in Rāmānuja

For Rāmānuja, it is of capital importance to know the nature of the self. However, it is also difficult to get that precious knowledge. The self cannot be perceived by the senses nor conceived of: only by *yogic* practice and the exercise of several virtues can man get that knowledge which has been revealed in the *śāstras*.

The starting point is that the self is absolutely opposite to the body. The self is «*...immortal, ...free from birth, old age, death and such other material attrib-*

²⁰ The earliest *Upaniṣads* were compiled by 500 B.C., but they continued to be written even as late as the fourteenth and fifteenth century. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Chāndogya*, *Taittirīya*, *Aitareya*, *Kauṣītākī*, and the prose section of *Kena* are usually regarded as earlier than other *Upaniṣads* such as *Kātha*, *Īśa*, *Muṇḍaka*, *Maitrī*, and *Śvetāśvatara*.

²¹ KUMARAPPA, *The Hindu Conception of the Deity*, Inter-India Publications, Delhi 1979, p. 50.

utes»²². It is a real mode, or part (*amśa*), of the *Brahman*. Several texts show that Rāmānuja maintains a real distinction between God and individual souls. In the *Śrībhāṣya* he wrote:

«That Brahman which is described in the mantra, ‘True Being, knowledge, infinite is Brahman,’ is proclaimed as the Self-abounding in bliss. And that Brahman is the Highest Brahman, other than the individual soul»²³.

If *Brahman* were the goal to be achieved by the *jīva*, then it would be contradictory that agent and end are identical. The difference between God and individual selves has always existed: before creation, in the *pralaya* or unevolved state in which souls have a subtle form; in their present evolved or gross form; and in the released state when they get some good qualities but yet remain distinct from God.

The self is *anādi*, which is without beginning and consequently without end. The self is eternal. It has eternally existed in *Brahman* as a mode (*prakāra*) without losing its own individualness.

Nevertheless, the self, in spite of being eternal is not independent from the Supreme Self. *Puruṣa* and *prakṛti* compose the body of God, i.e. they are under his permanent and total control: «For by reason of its being the body of the Lord, the essential nature of the self finds its joy only in complete dependence on the Lord»²⁴.

For Rāmānuja the *jīva* is an eternal mode of *Brahman*, and at the same time a separate entity²⁵. The finite self is a centre of existence of its own, with its proper qualities, but also an inseparable attribute of *Brahman*. For him, the realisation of the proper form of the soul is a propaedeutic step in the process of getting final release. He wrote:

«Those who, through knowledge already taught relating to the distinction between the body and the self, understand the distinction between them, and then, after learning that freedom from arrogance and such other qualities constitute the means of release from the *prakṛti* which has evolved into the material elements (constituting the body), put (the qualities) into practice – they, completely freed of bondage, attain the self characterised by unlimited knowledge and abiding in its own form»²⁶.

²² *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Tr. M.R. Sampatkumaran, *Rangacharya Memorial Trust*, Madras 1969, Chapter XIII, Verse 12, p. 376.

²³ Rāmānuja’s *Śrībhāṣya*: The Vedānta Sūtras with *Commentary* by Rāmānuja, Tr. G. Thibaut, *The Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XLVIII, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1996, I, 1, 16, p. 233.

²⁴ *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Chapter XIII, Verse 12, p. 376. God is a personal God, very different from the impersonal Absolute, which is disconnected from reality and for whom the finite self counts for little.

²⁵ Rāmānuja holds that souls in their subtle form are eternal. Nevertheless he does not explain how they came into existence. He accepts their eternal existence and, at the same time, their continual dependence on God, their inner Sustainer.

²⁶ *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Chapter XIII, Verse 34, p. 395.

4. Mokṣa and the Puruṣārthas

Together with *karma* and *ātman* there is another basic concept in Indian Philosophy: *mokṣa*, or final liberation. It is one of the four *puruṣārthas*, i.e. those end-values representing man's final goal as well as the path towards it.

Human actions, by means of which we relate towards other people, towards material wealth, and towards our own desires, are regulated by the first three *puruṣārthas*, namely, *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*. These relations manifest a bond, which is expressed by another word: *ṛṇa*²⁷.

Puruṣārthas are an answer to the question: what then must I do? *Dharma* means what I must do in relation to others. My impulses to act, urged by my own conscience or by an external written or oral law, have to be other-directed. We give, but we also expect to receive. This is *artha*, i.e., attainment of riches or worldly prosperity.

Under the imperatives of *dharma*, *kāma* becomes one of the *puruṣārthas*. *Kāma* literally means desire, particularly of psychophysical enjoyments. Desire, not understood in an egoistic sense, but considering the wishes of every one else.

Moreover, man is not reduced to this limited and material life but he aspires more. Man is conscious of his freedom as well of his boundness. The conscience that there is something else, permanent, beyond the evanescent world, is expressed in a desire for final liberation and it refers to the fourth of the *puruṣārthas*: *mokṣa*.

Thus, the doctrine of *puruṣārthas* is a development of the *ṛṇa* theory: we are not isolated beings. *Ṛṇa* suggests the obligation man has to make his life conformed to that order that regulates human society and the universe, namely *dharma* and *ṛta*²⁸.

Looking at the *puruṣārthas* we see that the life of every being in this world is imperfect and it aspires to something better. Human life is clearly end-oriented. *Dharma* values lead to *mokṣa* values which implies the «establishment of a society of perfect individuals wherein the sorrows and sufferings of the world cease to exist»²⁹. This is the deeper meaning of *mokṣa* and implies for the individual self the following of a rigorous discipline (*sādhana*), i.e. a serious moral, intellectual and spiritual effort to attain it.

²⁷ *Ṛṇa* means mutual obligation in a corporate living. It is said that everyone is born with three debts to pay off: to sages, gods, and the manes; and he who learns the Vedas, offers sacrifices to gods, and begets a son, becomes *anṛṇa* (discharged from all obligations).

²⁸ See footnote 9 where we explain the similarities between *dharma* and *ṛta*.

²⁹ S.R. BHATT, *Studies in Rāmānuja Vedānta*, Heritage Publications, New Delhi 1975, p. 140.

5. Main trends of Rāmānuja's thought

Rāmānuja built up a system of thought in which he tries to answer three basic questions, namely:

What is ultimate reality? (Doctrine of *tattva*).

What is the Supreme Good? (Doctrine of *puruṣārtha*)

What is the method and way to realise the Supreme God? (Doctrine of *hita*)³⁰.

If it is true that the central theme of *Vedānta* is the philosophic enquiry into *Brahman*, the Supreme *Tattva*, it is also correct to say that *tattva* does not refer exclusively to *Brahman* but also to its modal expressions of *cit* and *acit*³¹. Thus, for Rāmānuja there are three ontological principles organically interconnected:

Jagat: Cosmos, the entire physical world. (Also called *acit*, unconscious or material)

Jīva: Individual and finite souls. (Also called *cit*, consciousness)

Īṣvara: God.

Īṣvara, or *Brahman*, is the material cause of all existing beings. Rāmānuja accepts the theory of *satkāryavāda* which says that the effects (*Kārya*) pre-exist in the causal substance itself. They are nothing else but an alteration or rearrangement of the cause. Nevertheless they are absolutely real, because causality implies production of a new state³².

Jagat and *Jīva* constitute the body of the infinite spirit of *Brahman*. Initially they are in a subtle or unmanifested form but subsequently, in a gross or manifested form (i.e. the numerous forms of life).

The reason behind this enquiry is not purely intellectual. Rāmānuja, as a good *Vedāntin*, wants to know *tattva* in order to attain it. The metaphysical object of knowledge becomes a moral goal in life. Knowledge gives way to wisdom.

Finite souls are under the law of *Karma* and therefore during the period of its

³⁰ After Rāmānuja's death, Viśiṣṭādvaita split into two different schools: the Vadakalai sect, represented by Vedānta Deśika (Died in 1369) and the Tenkalai sect, represented by Pillai Lokāchārya (Died in 1327). There are several points of difference between both Schools which are not very fundamental, and which can be reduced to only one problem, namely the relation between Grace of God and human acts in the efforts to attain final release. In spite of the differences, they have in common the devotion to Viṣṇu as the All-Self and Universal Redeemer. For a detailed analysis of these differences see SRINIVASACHARI, *The Philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita*, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras 1978, pp. 521-542, especially pp. 536-542.

³¹ *Cit* expresses the spiritual order of the universe in its subtle or causal state, while *acit* means the material one.

³² «Causation is nothing but a manifestation, a manifestation from latent to patent and again from patent to latent... It is nothing but a change of state in one substance. Cause and effect are only different successive stages that a substance undergoes... All things are eternal and form a part of Brahman, who is the abode of all and abides in all». S.R. BHATT, o.c., pp. 92-93.

bondage in *saṃsāra* are attached to a particular body. Nevertheless, both of them are different.

The main characteristic of the soul is the one of consciousness. *Jīva* is a knower, endowed with intelligence, by which he can know the rest of reality, i.e. nature, other selves and God, and with self-consciousness.

All souls are inseparably united (*apr̥thaksiddhi*) among themselves and with God. This special unity is the pivot on which Rāmānuja's thought turns. It is an internal relation, which implies a necessary dependence of one another³³.

The Supreme Absolute together with the entire universe may be described as an organic unity, like the one of a living organism, in which one element predominates over and controls the rest of them. Immersed in that whole, and without losing their own individuality one can find intelligent entities which are under a particular law, the law of *karma*, limited in their own capacities. Those entities are the finite souls that according to the law of *karma*, are embodied in a particular way, such as minor gods, demon, man, animal or nature. The created universe and God are one³⁴.

God is filled with love for the soul. He leads him by different ways to a life of happiness by granting him, in due time, final release.

The finite soul, on the other hand, by his devotion to this loveable God, together with his knowledge and actions, co-operates with God's grace in the attainment of final liberation.

Human action plays an important role within Rāmānuja's philosophy, but human action cannot be separated from these metaphysical and theological presuppositions.

6. Nature of human action in Rāmānuja

The key topic for Rāmānuja is to know how a human action becomes a pathway for release instead of being a cause of perpetuating the life of bondage. At the beginning of the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, he sums up the different stages of the soul that goes from transmigration in bondage (*saṃsāra*) to the final attainment of perfect bliss. He says:

³³ «He (i.e. that yogin), seeing his own self as similar to Me, always remains within sight to Me also when I am seeing Myself, because of similarity with Me». *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Chapter VI, Verse 31, p. 181.

³⁴ Was Rāmānuja a Pantheist? Several scholars have studied this question. We agree with Fr. De Smet that in spite of being highly personal, the God of Rāmānuja is not supposed to be complete without his modes. It seems to fall short of that radical transcendence which is the mark of divine personality. A term introduced by Karl Krause in the early nineteenth century – Panentheism – could be applied to Rāmānuja's concept of God and nature. «Panentheism views all things as being in God without exhausting his infinity. It... considers God as having accidents really distinct from his substance». DE SMET, *Rāmānuja, Pantheist or Panentheist?*, «Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute», Poona 1977-1978, p. 563.

«True knowledge of the individual soul³⁵ and of the Supreme Spirit, applied to the obligations imposed by the various dharmas pertaining to each stage and station of life³⁶, are to precede pious and humble acts of devotion for and meditation on the Supreme Spirit – acts held extremely dear by the devotee – that ultimately result in the attainment of the Supreme Spirit»³⁷.

6.1. The doctrine of *Karmayoga*

Man should attempt to attain self-knowledge by means of a special discipline (*sādhana*) made up of two elements, *karmayoga* (action) and *jñānayoga* (knowledge); then, he is able to contemplate God through *bhakti* (lovely devotion).

Karmayoga is a discipline that refers to the management of actions, i.e. how to perform them so they become real means for achieving our final end.

For Rāmānuja the relation between knowledge and action, i.e. the relation between *jñānayoga* and *karmayoga* is not a relation of two different paths separated from each other. On the contrary, knowledge and action are interrelated and mutually dependent³⁸.

Because of this interrelation, we are not surprised to see that *karmayoga* has its roots in association with a particular attitude of mind, the need for which is emphasised many times in the *Gītā*. That attitude of mind – the one of a person who is ‘steady in mind’ (*sthitaprajña*) – refers not to the process of knowledge about the true nature of the self but to the determined conviction we arrived at because of that knowledge. It refers to the principle of equable reason.

To be certain about the presence of two distinguishable elements in man gives us the necessary equanimity of spirit to face the various conflicting situations in which sometimes we find ourselves. Those situations, any kind of action, carry within themselves the ambivalent values of pleasure and pain. Thus only after having realised the imperishability of the *puruṣa* we become equable towards all the different circumstances of our life. This principle of equanimity of mind is the fundamental basis of the philosophy of *karmayoga* and it is achievable by any one irrespective of his situation in life.

³⁵ Jīvātman: The individualised ātman in natural conjunction with the body.

³⁶ Varṇāśrama: varṇa refers to a social order founded on religious law (the four castes: Brāhman, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra); while āśrama refers to the ideal life-periods established by the Law of Manu for the Brahmāns, such as: brahmacārīn (boy initiated into the study of the Vedas under his spiritual preceptor); gr̥hastha (the householder or paterfamilias); vānaprastha (the anchorite who, retired from public life, lives in the forest praying and fasting); samnyāsīn (the religious mendicant, retired from all social and marital life).

³⁷ Rāmānuja's *Vedārthasamgraha: Introduction*, critical edition, and annotated translation, J. A.B. Van Buitenen, Deccan College Monograph Series 16, Poona 1992, § 3.

³⁸ «Karmayoga presupposes jñānayoga and jñānayoga includes karmayoga... The two can be distinguished but not separated. Hence there must be a blending (samuccaya) of the two». S.R. BHATT, o.c., p. 147.

Karmayoga does not refer to any kind of particular action. *Karmayoga* is a generic concept that applies to the way we perform actions and the motivation existing behind them. The *Gītā* says: «*To work alone is your right and never to the fruits (thereof). Do not become (i.e. do not regard yourself as) the cause of work and (its) fruit, nor have attachment to inaction*»³⁹. This verse has for Rāmānuja a transcendental importance because of the truths revealed in it. Let us analyse each of its sentences:

- ‘To work alone is your right’: A person like Arjuna, who represents humanity in search of spiritual freedom, has the right, which is at the same time an obligation linked to his situation in life, to act. That means he should not renounce action.

- ‘And never to the fruits’: That person should not be concerned with the fruits of actions. The word ‘fruits’ is a key word in the understanding of *Karmayoga* and it is closely related to the concept of divine and human agency. We can say that a fruit is something that belongs to someone who is the real agent of the action, but not to someone who only performs an action. For that reason the *Gītā* says ‘do not become...the cause of work and (its) fruit’. It also refers to the motivation or recititude of intention with which we perform our actions.

- ‘Nor have attachment to inaction’: The verse finishes by putting more emphasis in the importance of working. Thus, the message is that no one should give up work.

Work is an obligation for every man, but we have to work with a particular disposition in mind consisting in a «*skill in performing works which produces bondage in such a way as to win salvation*»⁴⁰.

6.2. The concept of binding action

The important matter to clarify is why an action can lead either to bondage or to release. Why is it that an action normally has the effect of binding the agents? To begin with we can distinguish four general consequences of action⁴¹:

- 1) Action creates a tendency in the agent to repeat it. An action is something that – if repeated several times – creates a habit that could be good (i.e. virtue) or bad (i.e. vice). A habit is a stable disposition that impels us to act easily, in a particular way. The path to acquire or to lose that habit consists in repetition of acts. This is the meaning of an action creating a tendency to repeat the same act.

- 2) If the action is wrong «*it renders the agent unfit to try out better ways*»⁴². By the law of *karma* the accumulation of the effects of all past actions influence our present situation in life.

³⁹ *Bhagavad Gītā*, Chapter II, Verse 47.

⁴⁰ *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Chapter II, Verse 50, p. 57.

⁴¹ We follow here the work of Raghavachar, *Rāmānuja on the Gītā*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta 1991, p. 35.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

3) Action produces consequences like pleasure and pain, happiness and misery. And we have already mentioned how these feelings can affect a person who is devoid of a real knowledge of the self.

4) Action curtails the power of knowledge in a way that a person does not achieve that equanimity of mind so necessary for the practice of *karmayoga*.

All these effects of action are constitutive of bondage so the question is: how does an action become a pathway for release? Or, what are the conditions needed for an action to become a means of final liberation instead of being the cause of perpetuating the life of bondage?

6.3. Human action as sacrifice

To perform an action in the spirit of *karmayoga* means to convert it into a sacrificial⁴³ act by giving up its fruits. The ideal action is a desireless one (*Niṣkāma-karma*⁴⁴) which is a non-binding action. The binding factor is not the action itself, but the motivation behind it. Rāmānuja wrote:

«This world becomes subject to the bondage of karma (through subtle impressions), when work ... is performed, serving selfish purposes. Therefore, for the purpose of sacrifice, do you perform works... There, whatever attachment exists because of its being the means for accomplishing selfish purposes, become free from that attachment and carry out that (work). When work is thus done for the purpose of sacrifices and other works (prescribed by the śāstras), by one free from attachment, the Supreme Person (Paramapuruṣa), pleased by sacrifices and such other works, bestows on him the undisturbed vision of the self, after eradicating the subtle impressions of karma of that person which have continued from time immemorial»⁴⁵.

For Rāmānuja the word ‘sacrifice’ is not restricted to sacrificial rituals but comprehends any kind of action. To act for the purpose of sacrifice means that our actions in their final end are performed to honour God, to Whom we offer our life, with all its actions, in order to attain Him. A real human action is one leading towards final liberation and consisting of a sacrifice expressed in the renunciation the fruits of our actions, offered to the Supreme God as a hymn of praise to Him.

⁴³ The concept of yajña, or sacrifice, as expression of an action performed in the spirit of *karmayoga*, is introduced in the *Gītā* in chapter III, verses 9 to 16. Yajña means sacrifice and it is regarded as the means for obtaining power over this and the other world, and over all creatures. In the *Gītā*, it serves to clarify the way works have to be performed in the authentic spirit of *karmayoga*.

⁴⁴ All actions fall into a twofold division: *kāmya-karma*, or desire-prompted action (performed with hope of fruit), and *Niṣkāma-karma*, or desireless action (performed giving up the hope of fruit).

⁴⁵ *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Chapter III, Verse 9, p. 82.

7. 'Active life' and 'contemplative life' in Aquinas

7.1. Aquinas' Anthropology

Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* follows a logical sequence in the way he studies the different existing beings.

First of all, he deals with the Supreme Being, i.e. God. His purpose is to explain what kind of knowledge we can get of God as He is in Himself. Thus, God is seen in his unity and Trinity. Aquinas considers God as the self-subsisting Being (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*), the First Being who possesses being in the most perfect way.

Next, Aquinas proceeds to consider the procession of creatures from God. It is a basic tenet of Christian dogma that God is Creator of whatever exists in heaven and earth. At the beginning of the 'Treatise on the Creation', he writes:

«It must be said that every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation, must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire. ... Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation. Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly»⁴⁶.

God is the first cause of all things, including primary matter⁴⁷ and spiritual souls. All created beings are finite and contingent, owing their existence to the necessary Being.

In the case of human being we have a creature composed of a spiritual and corporeal substance⁴⁸.

The soul, for Aquinas, is considered to be the first principle of life of those things that live. It is incorporeal and subsistent. This conclusion can be drawn from the fact that it has an operation which is *per se* apart from the body: this operation is called 'act of understanding'.

As a contrast to this, we have the operations of the sensitive soul, which are proper both to human beings and brute animals. They are always accompanied with bodily changes. They are not *per se* operations and consequently they are not operations of a subsistent soul but of a composite of body and soul⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ *Summa Theologica*, Christian Classics, Allen 1981, I, q. 44, a. 1.

⁴⁷ Aquinas denies the existence of anything outside the creative power of God. He says, «Therefore whatever is the cause of things considered as beings, must be the cause of things, not only according as they are such by accidental forms, nor according as they are these by substantial forms, but also according to all that belongs to their being at all in any way. And thus it is necessary to say that also primary matter is created by the universal cause of things». *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 44, a. 2.

⁴⁸ See *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 75.

⁴⁹ Aquinas mentions the doctrine of the Pre-Socratic philosophers. For them there was no dis-

God created the soul of man out of nothing, as a spiritual principle giving life to the material body. Soul is not eternal but it is immortal to the extent that it transcends the perishability of the human body. The immortality of the soul follows from its own proper nature and it «*is not simply gratuitous, save in the sense that its very existence, like the existence of any other creature, is gratuitous*»⁵⁰.

The essence of man cannot be reduced either to his soul or to his body. Both elements are integral parts of him, and they belong to his species.

The union between body and soul is a union of matter and form (substantial form). Body and soul are really distinct parts of man. They have the same unique act of substantial existence, namely, the life of a living body. They are one being, one entity absolutely speaking, and not two different entities. According to Aquinas' terminology, the entire substance is known as 'being' in the primary, unqualified sense of being. The essential parts of this being, i.e. its matter and substantial form, are also called beings, but in a secondary sense.

Man, according to Aquinas, is a rational being whose last end is the attainment of happiness. It is clear that every person wants to be happy and the question is of what things happiness consists of. His Christian background provides him with the datum that the last end of human being is something supernatural, i.e., the attainment of divine vision⁵¹.

7.2. Action and Contemplation

Thomas Aquinas has also dealt with human action as an instrument to obtain man's final end of life⁵². His treatise on it runs throughout the entire second part of the *Summa Theologica*. There, Aquinas gives a full theory which, to the last detail, analyses action in general and in particular. Every factor has been taken into account. There we find a detailed study of man as image of God, who is the

distinction between sense and intellect since the principle of all human actions was something corporeal. Later, Plato had the great insight of teaching about an incorporeal principle of both sensing and understanding, i.e. soul. He drew a distinction between sensitive knowledge and rational knowledge, but linked both functions to the same subsistent soul. For him, man is a soul which makes use of a body. Aristotle, on his part, stated that, among all the operations of the soul, understanding is the only one to be performed without a corporeal organ. See, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 75, a. 3.

⁵⁰ F. COPLESTON, *A History of Philosophy*, Volume II, Image Books, New York 1993, p. 384.

⁵¹ For Aquinas the existence of man has been marked by the Christian dogma of Original Sin, a specific inherited fault which has affected the entire life of man and his relation to other people and to God. Unlike the law of karma, original sin is not the cause of the union of body and soul; rather the lack of harmony between both elements is the effect of original sin.

⁵² At the beginning of question 6 of the *Prima secundae* dealing with the "Voluntary and the Involuntary" Aquinas says: «Since therefore Happiness is to be gained by means of certain acts, we must in due sequence consider human acts, in order to know by what acts we may obtain Happiness, and by what acts we are prevented from obtaining it».

agent, «*the principle of his actions, as having free will and control of his actions*»⁵³.

At the end of the *Secunda secundae* Aquinas deals with the classic division of human life, as deriving its form from the intellect, into active and contemplative. It is a relevant topic for us, considering its similarities with the discussion present in Rāmānuja about the validity of *karmayoga* and *jñānayoga* as effective paths towards the achievement of man's final end. Aquinas says:

«All the occupations of human actions, if directed to the requirements of the present life in accord with right reason, belong to the active life which provides for the necessities of the present life by means of well-ordered activity... Those human occupations that are directed to the consideration of truth belong to the contemplative life»⁵⁴.

It was common during the Middle Ages in Europe to discuss this matter which has, in fact, Aristotelian roots. Some scholars made a sharp division between both paths as if it would be possible to consider them as two mutually exclusive ways. Aquinas opted for a middle path following the logic of his theory of action in which the powers of the soul, namely will and intelligence, act jointly.

First of all, Aquinas stresses that contemplative life does not pertain wholly to the intellect, for the simple reason that only the will can move all the other powers, including the intellect, to their actions. He wrote, «*the contemplative life has also something to do with the affective or appetitive power*»⁵⁵. If to contemplate means to consider the truth, then that act is motivated by the intention of my will to get that appetitive good.

Aquinas explains that contemplative life is not at all separated from the practice of good external actions, i.e. moral virtues. It is true that a life of contemplation refrains from external actions and that moral virtues do not belong to the contemplative act in itself. However moral virtues positively contribute to a life of contemplation to which they belong secondarily, or dispositively. Contemplative life is hindered both by the passions and by external disturbances. «*Now the moral virtues curb the impetuosity of the passions, and quell the disturbance of outward occupations*»⁵⁶. Thus active life – or, better said, the practice of good external works – is a disposition to the contemplative life⁵⁷.

⁵³ *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Prologue.

⁵⁴ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 179, a. 2, ad 3.

⁵⁵ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 180, a. 1.

⁵⁶ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 180, a. 2.

⁵⁷ Aquinas links the relation “active-contemplative life” to the concept of the beautiful. God, our Supreme object of contemplation, is beautiful, «*as being the cause of the harmony and clarity of the universe*». *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 145, a. 2. We apply the adjective beautiful to a body having his limbs well proportioned together with certain clarity of colour, and, similarly, we speak of spiritual beauty as standing for moral beauty, consisting in human

Active life, or the practice of human actions, can be considered from two different angles. One is to look at it as the mere practice of external actions. In this case if there is no effort required for practising virtue, then the external act is a hindrance to the life of contemplation. The other way is to consider it as the exercise of those moral virtues that leads to the knowledge of and delight in the Divine truth. Quoting St. Gregory⁵⁸ Aquinas says, «*Those who wish to hold the fortress of contemplation must first of all train in the camp of action*»⁵⁹.

Active life is the path towards final contemplation in this earth and in the after-life. It is also the necessary path for many people. For most human beings, contemplation and activity should be wisely combined. Rather than opposing one way of life to the other it is a matter of joining both of them. Thus, «*when a person is called from the contemplative to the active life, this is done by way not of subtraction but of addition*»⁶⁰. Contemplative life precedes the active life with regard to its nature because it consists in actually knowing and delighting in the Supreme truth. But this contemplation should move and direct the active life. Active life «*comes first in the order of generation. In this way the active precedes the contemplative life, because it disposes one to it*»⁶¹.

In addition, active life is necessary for our relation with our neighbours. We are not isolated beings but people belonging to a concrete community in which we have social responsibilities. We cannot omit our social commitments by relying on a false spirit of contemplation. Once again Aquinas quotes Gregory, this time from his *Homily on Ezekiel*:

«Without the contemplative life it is possible to enter the heavenly kingdom, provided one omit not the good actions we are able to do; but we cannot enter therein without the active life, if we neglect to do the good we can do»⁶².

Contemplative life is a path leading to our final end, namely knowledge and possession of God. It could be achieved imperfectly in this life and perfectly only after death when we shall see God face to face. However, already in this life, contemplative life bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude, which will be continued in the life to come. «*Wherefore the Philosopher (Ethic. X. 7) places man's ultimate happiness in the contemplation of the supreme intelligible good*»⁶³.

actions being well proportioned according to the clarity given by the order of reason, i.e. the practice of moral virtues. Therefore, beauty is found principally in the contemplative life which is an act of reason, but also «beauty is in the moral virtues by participation, in so far as they participate in the order of reason». *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 180, a. 2, ad 3.

⁵⁸ Aquinas quotes largely from his *Moralium Libri xxxv*, or *Commentary on the Book of Job*.

⁵⁹ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 182, a. 3.

⁶⁰ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 182, a. 1, ad 3.

⁶¹ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 182, a. 4.

⁶² *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 182, a. 4, ad 1.

⁶³ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 180, a. 4.

In itself contemplation is more perfect than external action. However both should interact in a way that both go together. Aquinas concludes his analysis of these two kinds of life by saying:

«...those who are more adapted to the active life can prepare themselves for the contemplative by the practice of the active life; while none the less, those who are more adapted to the contemplative life can take upon themselves the works of the active life, so as to become yet more apt for contemplation»⁶⁴.

In the interaction between external activity and contemplation we find a motive cause which is essentially 'love'. Our appetitive power moves us to look at things either for love of the things seen or for love of the very knowledge we get by observation. Action leads us to contemplation and we act because we love and our love increases when we act.

8. Conclusion

The theories we are comparing touch upon the distinction and mutual relationship between two types of life or, to put it in a different way, two different approaches to life. Rāmānuja calls them *karmayoga* and *jñānayoga*, while Aquinas applies to them the terms 'active life' and 'contemplative life'. We cannot fully equate these concepts but we can affirm they have many points in common.

First of all we have to consider these theories in a bigger framework by looking at some fundamental notions such as the nature of Supreme Being and human being, which are their base.

Rāmānuja and Aquinas consider the Supreme Being as full of perfections and qualities, the source of all beings, and cause of every effect. However they understand the God-world relation differently.

For Rāmānuja, God is the material cause of the universe. He also exists in the effects, though in a different way (theory of *satkārya-vāda*). Cause and effect are different realities making a unity with God. Creatures are modes of God and they exist in God as a metaphysical accident which is distinct but inseparable from its substance.

Rāmānuja affirms the co-existence of the Supreme *Brahman* together with non-sentient matter, or *prakṛti*, and the intelligent souls, or *puruṣa*. There is no concept of creation *ex nihilo* in Rāmānuja, but there is the affirmation that *Brahman* is the universal cause of whatever exists. Matter and spirit constitute the body of *Brahman* in the sense of being completely subordinated to him.

⁶⁴ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 182, a. 4, ad 3.

«We by no means abandon our tenet that Brahman the cause modifies itself so as to assume the form of a world differing from it in character. For such is the case with the honey and the worms also. There is difference of characteristics, but – as in the case of gold and golden bracelets – there is oneness of substance»⁶⁵.

For Aquinas, God is Creator, i.e. efficient and final cause of the entire universe. All the effects exist as absolutely different beings, although depending on Him. He draws from the Christian's concept of creation, which is a concept of creation *ex-nihilo*. The world does not enter into a real composition with the Creator: there is an infinite distance between God – Pure Actuality – and his creatures, in which there is a mix of potentiality and actuality. Every creature takes part, by participation, in the being of the Supreme Being but it is not that Supreme Being. The absolute transcendence of God in relation to all created beings is a main characteristic of Aquinas' doctrine. He wrote:

«Hence if the emanation of the whole universal being from the first principle be considered, it is impossible that any being should be presupposed before this emanation. For nothing is the same as no being. Therefore as the generation of a man is from the not being which is not-man, so creation, which is the emanation of all being, is from the not being which is nothing»⁶⁶.

Regarding their concept of man, both thinkers state the presence of two different elements in it, namely body and soul, or matter and spirit, which are united forming one being with capacity of interacting with the external world through his organs of action, knowledge, and volition.

They consider man as a rational and free agent, one who has the power of knowing the essence of the objects surrounding him and who is self-master of his actions. This agent is oriented towards a final end, and all his actions are supposed to be the means to reach that goal.

Rāmānuja's concept of body is linked to the eternal and primordial matter, i.e. *prakṛti*, which evolves under the guidance of the Supreme Self. Body is a substance of purely instrumental nature, fully under the dominion of the spiritual element of man, i.e. the soul, *puruṣa*, or *jīva*, the eternal individual self, which is the most true and permanent element within man. Body does not belong to the essence of *jīva* and it will not remain after final release.

Puruṣa is the real doer, the one who acts through his relation to a body. Therefore, man is an embodied soul, an eternal soul united to a body because of a beginningless law of *karma*, which has a redemptive purpose. Man is destined

⁶⁵ Rāmānuja's *Śrībhāṣya*, II, 1, 7, pp. 418-419.

⁶⁶ *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 45, a. 1. Aquinas uses the word "emanation" as meaning "creation".

to attain liberation from bondage, i.e. to get free from his *karmic* body, and consequently enjoy perpetual bliss⁶⁷.

For Aquinas, body is the material element substantially united to the soul, which is the substantial form. Both are united making up a single composite being, i.e. human being. He maintains that man has been created in his body and in his soul.

In Aquinas we find a harmonic relation between human body and soul. From a metaphysical point of view that harmony lies on the Aristotelian concept of substantial union. Matter and form have a metaphysical tendency to be united, which remains forever.

We cannot label Rāmānuja as dualistic. Even though matter and soul are different elements, they are interrelated in a harmonic way. Rāmānuja did not have the Aristotelian's background of Aquinas, and thus he was unable to speak in terms of substantial union between form (soul) and matter (body). Nevertheless we are not here facing a case of accidental union.

We can explain the union of body and soul with a negative cause: a deception. The *puruṣa* – individual self – mistakes himself for a material self. Thus, from the *puruṣa* point of view the union is a deficiency. However, when you look at the present condition of man you see a harmonic relation between both elements. Man is an embodied soul in which the body is completely dependant upon the spiritual soul and under his dominion. The soul is an agent that consciously directs the body, its perfect instrument. This is an important remark because, even though the body is considered from a negative point of view, in the whole theory of Rāmānuja its mission as a useful instrument is underlined.

For Rāmānuja man is an uncreated soul united to a *karmic* body while in the state of *samsāra*. Each soul is a sort of uniform spiritual monad, which experiences changes in its degree of knowledge – essential attribute – because of the beginningless process of causation known as the law of *karma*⁶⁸.

Regarding the ends of human life, Rāmānuja assumes the doctrine of

⁶⁷ The *Gītā* says, «Do you know both *prakṛti* and the soul to be without beginning?» See, XIII, 19. God has not created *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* though they form his body, like an accident inhering on the divine substance, and they are under complete subordination to Him. *Brahman*, for Rāmānuja, is essentially different from the created world. He is all-powerful and out of sport arranges the entire creation from the eternal uncreated realities of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*, according to the beginningless law of *karma* affecting each and every individual soul.

⁶⁸ In this universe man cannot be seen as occupying a place of special privilege in it. The idea of a hierarchy of beings is foreign to Rāmānuja thought, while it is a central concept to Aquinas' world vision: «Hence in natural things species seem to be arranged in degrees; as the mixed things are more perfect than the elements, and plants than minerals, and animals than plants, and men than other animals; ... Therefore, as the divine wisdom is the cause of the distinction of things for the sake of the perfection of the universe, so is it the cause of inequality. For the universe would not be perfect if only one grade of goodness were found in things». *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 47, a. 2.

puruṣārthas which was prevalent in Indian Philosophy. In it we find a balance between the ends of this life – *kāma*, *artha*, and *dharma* – and the last end, or liberation – *mokṣa*. The first three ends are ‘this-worldly ends’ while the last one is ‘other-worldly end’, i.e., divine vision.

Aquinas, assuming his Aristotelian influence, states that the last end of our actions is the attainment of happiness, or *eudaimonia*, consisting in the vision of God.

Even though both authors agree that to achieve divine vision is the final end of man, an important distinction should be made. For Aquinas, the vision of God completely exceeds the natural human capacity. Man needs a special supernatural help – namely, divine grace – to attain it. On the contrary, for Rāmānuja man attains his final end of life by getting full understanding of his own nature as an eternal mode of God. This can only happen once the soul is fully released from his *karmic* body. A clear distinction between natural and supernatural order is not found in Rāmānuja’s writings.

In the effort for attaining the final end of human life we find the two paths of knowledge and action. We can look at them as opposing each other, or as intermingling to the point of becoming one in need of the other. That seems to be the approach of both Rāmānuja and Aquinas.

The path of contemplation or knowledge is higher than the path of action because it is an act of our highest capacity, namely intelligence. For Rāmānuja, *jñānayoga* implies putting into practice a particular technique of concentration in order to get knowledge of the self in its pure nature, i.e. as a mode of God. It is a long and arduous process which demands the conquering of the senses and cannot be done without God’s help. Therefore, in theory, *jñānayoga* is loftier than *karmayoga*, but in practice the latter is easier to follow and more effective in its results. Thus, more than two incompatible paths, we see in them two aspects of one’s own effort, i.e. to act with detachment of the fruits, while having clear knowledge about our own nature and relation to the Supreme Person.

Aquinas, relying on Aristotle and on Sacred Scriptures, also considers contemplative life to be more excellent than active life. However, he accepts that very often there are reasons compelling people to prefer the active life on account of the various needs of daily life⁶⁹. Contemplative life is of greater merit but active life has enough merit to reach man’s final goal. In the end what makes the difference is the love man puts in his actions, i.e. in how he refers all his actions to his Creator. Thus, Aquinas says,

«...it may happen that one man merits more by the works of the active life than another by the works of the contemplative life. For instance through excess of Divine love a man may now and then suffer separation from the sweetness of

⁶⁹ Aquinas quotes Aristotle who in *Topics* iii. 2 wrote: «It is better to be wise than to be rich, yet for one who is in need, it is better to be rich». See *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 182, a. 1.

Divine contemplation for the time being, that God's will may be done and for His glory's sake»⁷⁰.

This statement of Aquinas could have perfectly fitted into Rāmānuja's *Gītābhāṣya*. Chapter five of the *Gītā* starts with the startling question posed by Arjuna to *Kṛṣṇa*: «You praise, O *Kṛṣṇa*, the giving up of works and again (the) *yoga* (of works). Of these, tell me which one is well ascertained to be preferable?». *Jñānayoga* and *karmayoga* are both praised in the previous chapters of the *Gītā* and it seems that *karmayoga* is to be preferable by reason of ease in practice and quickness in results. The whole chapter discusses the possible answer and, without discarding any of the two paths, it seems to give pre-eminence from a practical point of view to the path of action. This *karmayoga* based on the practice of all kind of actions, with a clear knowledge of the self, is an effective way. It becomes like an act of worship to God. Rāmānuja says at the end of the chapter:

«knowing Me as the Great Lord of all the worlds and as the friend of all and regarding *karmayoga* as of the nature of My worship, he becomes engaged in it happily. Such is the meaning. All creatures, indeed, strive to please a friend»⁷¹.

In Rāmānuja the interconnection between the path of action and the path of knowledge is clearly seen. *Karmayoga* is a necessary preparation for knowledge. There is a blending (*samuccaya*) of the two in a way that *karmayoga* implies having the knowledge of the nature of the self proper to *Jñānayoga* and this knowledge includes the practice of action with detachment of its fruits.

In the *Gītā* the practice of several virtues are enunciated to the seeker of God⁷². Especially important it is the performance of exemplary virtues for those who have a leading role in society.

For Rāmānuja and for Aquinas there is a clear appreciation for the path of action, as something needed for our present condition of life and as a preparation for our final goal, i.e. the union with God through love. Rāmānuja recommends the practice of actions united to the one of knowledge. This recommendation fits perfectly well within the system of a Christian author such as Aquinas. We can bring forward two quotations which are a clear proof of this conclusion. In them we distinguish their author due to their different terminology and distinct style: the content is basically the same.

The first quotation is from Aquinas who wrote at the end of the questions of the *Summa* comprising his analysis on the two types of life, i.e. active and contemplative:

⁷⁰ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 182, a. 2.

⁷¹ *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Chapter V, Verse 29, p. 163.

⁷² See *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Chapter XVI.

«...Those who are more adapted to the active life can prepare themselves for the contemplative by the practice of the active life; while nonetheless, those who are more adapted to the contemplative life can take upon themselves the works of the active life, so as to become yet more apt for contemplation»⁷³.

The second quotation comes from the fifth chapter of Rāmānuja's *Gītābhāṣya* where he does a brief summary of what was explained throughout the previous chapters:

«In the second chapter, You have shown that karmayoga alone should be first practised by the aspirant after mokṣa and that the vision of the self should be effected by means of Jñānayoga by one whose mind has its impurities rubbed off by karmayoga. Again, in the third and fourth chapters, You praise the discipline of karma to the effect that the discipline of karma is better even for one who has reached the stage of being qualified for Jñānayoga...»⁷⁴.

Rāmānuja and Aquinas agree that knowledge and action should go together in human actions. We insist that for them what really matters it is to attain final release. Consequently, the key issue is to know clearly how an action should be performed.

It is remarkable to see how two thinkers, in spite of their belonging to very different cultural milieus, coincide in many basic points. It is true that their religious background has influenced their understanding of fundamental issues regarding God, man and the world. Nevertheless, we find in their intellectual efforts and in their sincerity of life a clear proof that in man there is an innate capacity to achieve truth regarding his nature and his relation with the Supreme Being.

We finish this paper with a quotation from Rāmānuja's *Gītābhāṣya* which somehow summarizes whatever we have said throughout these pages.

«Do all actions, secular as well as religious, in such a way that the roles of being the doer, enjoyer (of fruits) and object of worship (therein) are made over to Me ... you, the performer and enjoyer (of the fruits) of rituals, belong to Me and have (your and their) essential nature, continued existence and activity dependent on Me. Only to Me, therefore, who am the Supreme owner and the Supreme agent, offer everything – yourself as the agent, enjoyer (of fruits) and worshipper ... Moved by indescribable devotion, meditate on finding your sole delight in subservience to and dependence on Me, on account of your being subject to My control...»⁷⁵.

* * *

⁷³ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 182, a. 4, ad 3.

⁷⁴ *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Chapter V, Verse 1, pp. 142-143.

⁷⁵ *The Gītābhāṣya of Rāmānuja*, Chapter IX, Verse 27, pp. 268-269.

Abstract: *The Papal Encyclical Fides et Ratio has recommended a dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophy. Karmayoga (skilful management of actions) and jñānayoga (true knowledge of God and man) according to Rāmānuja (main representative of the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta School of Indian Philosophy) can be fruitfully compared with the doctrine of active and contemplative life in Thomas Aquinas. The Sanskrit word Karma primarily means action. Karma brings bondage or liberation. Rāmānuja integrates Karmayoga, jñānayoga and bhaktiyoga (devotion to God) as different stages in the progressive realisation of salvation. Human being is an embodied self made up of body and soul (ātman), united due to the law of karma. The individual self is an eternal mode, or part of Brahman. It is a centre of existence of its own but also an inseparable attribute of Brahman. Dharma (moral law), artha (wealth), kāma (psychophysical enjoyments), and mokṣa (final liberation) constitute the four puruṣārthas, i.e. those end-values representing man's final goal as well as the path towards it. The key topic for Rāmānuja is how a human action becomes a pathway for release instead of being a cause of perpetuating the life of bondage. To perform an action in the spirit of karmayoga means to convert it into a sacrificial act by forsaking its fruits (desireless action). Aquinas has also dealt with human action as an instrument to obtain man's final end of life. In itself, contemplation is more perfect than external action. However both should interact. Action leads us to contemplation and we act because we love and our love increases when we act. Despite their belonging to very different cultural milieus, which have influenced their understanding of fundamental issues regarding God, man, and the world, Rāmānuja and Aquinas coincide in many basic points. Concretely, in them, there is a clear appreciation for the path of action, as something needed for our present condition of life and as a preparation for our final goal, i.e. the union with God through love. Rāmānuja recommends the practice of actions united to the one of knowledge. This recommendation fits perfectly well within the system of a Christian author such as Aquinas.*



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DIO E LA NATURA

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Collana: Studi di filosofia - 25
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Gli studi che formano questo volume si inseriscono all'interno del dialogo oggi in corso tra le scienze della natura e il pensiero filosofico, là dove si pone il problema ricorrente di Dio. Si tratta infatti di stabilire un quadro epistemologico nel quale il rapporto tra scienza sperimentale, discorso metafisico su Dio e teologia sia affrontabile con legittimità razionale per evitare confusioni, mescolanze di piani e false incompatibilità. Solo su questa base, infatti, si potrà verificare in che senso e con quali condizioni la visione scientifica della natura è in grado di aprire spazi di approfondimento all'indagine filosofica e alla ricerca teologica.

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