

INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING AND PROPHETIC WITNESS

Topic:	Interreligious Learning and Prophetic Witness
Convener:	Francis X. Clooney, Harvard Divinity School
Moderator:	Karen Enriquez, Boston College
Presenter:	Deepak Sarma, Case Western Reserve University
Respondents:	Alison Benders, Lake Erie College Francis X. Clooney, Harvard Divinity School

In his paper, “Madhvacharya as Prophetic Witness,” our invited guest Deepak Sarma (Case Western Reserve University) introduced us to the Madhva Acharya, the 13th century propounder of Hindu Vedanta dualism, a tradition regarding which Professor Sarma himself is professionally and personally expert. Sarma proposed that Madhva could be taken as a prophet who witnessed to truth at a crucial moment of divine and human import (*kairos*) that demanded his spiritual and theological response. In his view, the nondualist Vedanta of Sankara was incorrect and unfaithful to Vedic tradition, and leveled necessary distinctions in the ultimate human apprehension of God in the liberative state. In its heterodox teachings and socially dangerous view of right action, the Sankara school was implicitly a form of Buddhism that required refutation for the sake of this-worldly and ultimate well-being. In this sense, Madhva was speaking out as a critical theologian. But he has also been considered, by his tradition over the centuries, a divine messenger sent to speak the truth and restore the order of this world, an incarnation (*avatara*) of the same divine Vayu (wind god) who had incarnated also in earlier times of distress in order to exemplify righteousness. Sarma concluded, “In this short paper I have used Catholic categories to analyze the status and activities of Madhvacharya, a medieval Indian theologian. As per my stipulative definitions, Madhvacharya seems to be a paradigmatic example of a prophet whose prophetic witness was enacted in a *kairos*. Madhvacharya derived his authority from God, namely Visnu, and sought to remind people of the importance of *taratamya* (gradation). This meant that people ought to know both their place in relation to Visnu as well as to one another. In the latter case this meant that people ought to act in ways according to their *varna* (class, caste) and ought not to follow what appeared to be an anti-hierarchical and any-social-inequality stance put forth by Buddhism, via Advaita Vedanta.”

In his response Francis Clooney (Harvard University), first raised some specific Hinduism-related questions regarding the historical and political contexts of medieval Hindu debate. He then asked about the relationship between theology and prophetic witness (is not the theologian often catching up to where prophets have gone?), and the dynamic of prophecy (does it point to a new future or rather to a restoration of an ideal and proper past?) Was Madhva the prophet in his debate with Sankara? Or was Sankara, in proposing a new egalitarian endpoint for reality, speaking prophetically while Madhva tried to restore the old order? Clooney also asked whether Sarma’s plausible effort to include Madhva in the category of prophetic witness might not then also reshape how Christians think about the meaning of prophecy and witness.

In her response, Alison Benders (Lake Erie College) indicated that Sarma's presentation enabled her to notice interesting similarities with respect to *devotion*—traditions seeking to reconcile faithful believers with God by calling them back to worship and devotion; *authenticity*—traditions seeking to embody the devotion and truth that they preached; the *identity* of the teacher as a divine incarnation (*avatara*). She also noted the unsettling nature of comparative study, since Professor Sarma's work at first surprised, then unsettled, and ultimately refreshed her understanding of time—and hence of *kairos*.

Our discussion at this well-attended session was wide-ranging: clarifications of the nature of the Madhva project, comments on the representation of Madhva as a divine being, conversation about whether, in fact, this Indian theologian, somewhat of a polemicist, really does fit into the category of prophetic witness as generated from the Biblical tradition. It was also noted that no easy answers are possible, since the category of "prophetic witness" is itself open to various explanations in Jewish and Christian tradition, and no settled definitions are available. This kind of comparative study does us the favor of stretching the category, compelling us to rethink how and for what theological and political purposes we use terms such as "prophet" and "witness" in the first place.

Karen Enriquez (Boston College) presided and moderated the discussion.

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