

**THE ADVAITIC EXPERIENCE IN CHRISTIANITY AND
HINDUISM:
Comparing Jacques Dupuis' Discernment about Jesus'
Awareness with Saradananda's Notes on Sri Ramakrishna's
Mystical Experience**

Toar Banua Hutagalung

Abstract

Relationality between Jesus the Son and God the Father becomes a perfect model of God and humanity. But, how do we understand the meaning of this relationality? Why in Hinduism, especially, in Advaitic tradition, this relationality issue becomes essential element to realize the one God? Can we do a pilgrimage of our faith by comparing Christian and Hindu tradition? This study will examine on mystical approach of Sri Ramakrishna's experience as a Hindu and the discernment of Jacques Dupuis' on awareness as a Catholic. The notion of relationality would be exposed within those two different traditions, each with different perspectives. One will question *advaita* and the other will delve into *awareness*. In the end, *advaitic* perspectives will help us to comprehend the relationality of God and humanity through our readings of understanding Dupuis' *awareness*.

Keywords: Jacques Dupuis, Sri Ramakrishna, mysticism, awareness, *advaita*, relationality.

Abstrak

Relasionalitas antara Yesus, sang Anak dan Allah sang Bapa menjadi model sempurna dari hubungan Allah dan manusia. Akan tetapi, bagaimana kita memahami makna relasionalitas tersebut? Mengapa dalam Hinduisme, terutama dalam tradisi Advaita, isu relasionalitas ini menjadi elemen yang esensial untuk menyadari Allah yang satu? Dapatkah kita melakukan ziarah iman kita dengan membandingkan tradisi Hindu dan Kristen ini? Studi ini akan mengupas pendekatan mistik yang terjadi pada pengalaman Sri Ramakrishna sebagai orang Hindu dan penalaran Jacques Dupuis tentang kesadaran sebagai seorang Katolik. Ide relasionalitas akan diperlihatkan dalam kedua tradisi yang berbeda tersebut, masing-masing dengan perspektifnya.

Perspektif pertama akan berbicara mengenai *advaita* dan yang lain akan membahas mengenai kesadaran. Pada akhirnya, perspektif *advaita* akan menolong kita memaknai relasionalitas Allah dengan manusia dengan pembacaan kita terhadap soal kesadaran Dupuis.

Kata-Kata Kunci: Jacques Dupuis, Sri Ramakrishna, mistisisme, kesadaran, *advaita*, relasionalitas.

Introduction

The encounters among different faiths have produced intriguing acknowledgments about other faiths. Some may try to find the bad sides of other faiths, but some people look for the positive values, helping them understand deeper their own faiths. In addition, disagreements also can enrich each faith. Theologians nowadays suggest a new approach called “comparative theology” which sustains the ongoing process of encounters. As a new branch of the grand theological discourse, comparative theology analyzes the diversity in religious traditions, and it offers understanding of other faiths from their own traditions and their own perspectives by sharing their stories through shared experience. Then, hopefully, those who want to engage deeper on comparative theology can find something from their dialogues partners to strengthen their own faiths.

This article is an attempt to find and compare ideals in Christianity and Hinduism. The comparison, primarily, is located on *advaita* notion, or the non-duality. Therefore, I will focus the scrutiny on the *Advaita Vedanta*, particularly the experience of Ramakrishna as told by Saradananda, and on Jesus’ awareness of being one with God, in the thought of Jacques Dupuis. The common basis of this argument on this *advaita* is the unification of these two persons with the divine. Moreover, *advaita* tries to question the reality of persons. On the one hand, Dupuis posits that Jesus realizes his presence as being one with God. This depiction is shown in his relation as the Son of God. On the other hand, Ramakrishna has also been claimed to have had many mystical experiences of union with God, especially with the Divine Mother, Kali. One of them is his three days’ experience when he became a Christian. He entered into a certain ecstasy of being united with Jesus. Either the life story of Jesus or of Ramakrishna poses the non-duality or *advaita* notion in Hinduism or - to make it equal- hypostatic union of Christ in Christianity. I hope to

imagine a piece of theology that strengthens an understanding of the non-duality aspect of God in Christianity.

Jacques Dupuis on Jesus' awareness

Awareness becomes the main issue for Jacques Dupuis to address the non-duality dimension. According to Dupuis, the advaitic notion in Advaita Vedanta can be used to explain the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son. First, he points out the terms *ahambrahmasmi* and *tattvamasi* derived from the Brihadaranyaka and Chandogya Upanishad.¹ The first few lines in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1, 4, 10 say:

This self was indeed Brahman in the beginning. It knew itself only as "I am Brahman." Therefore it became all.²

Here, the Absolute Self is called Brahman. The knowledge of being one with Brahman is the absolute, and that knowledge takes over all humanity. Likewise, the Chandogya Upanishad 6, 8, 7 states, "Now that which is that subtle [*si*] essence (the root of all), in it all that exists has its self. It is the true. It is the self, and *thou*, O Svetaketu, *art it*."³ This Upanishad tells a story about Uddalaka teaching his son, Svetaketu, about the Self. In this passage, everything has its one "self" that is the Self. Moreover, in Chandogya 6, 2, 1, it says:

'In the beginning,' my dear, 'there was only which is, one only, without a second. Others say, in the beginning there was that only which is not, one only, without a second; and from that which is not, that which is was born.'⁴

The "one-without-a-second" (*ekam advitiyam*) surely emphasized the notion of the Absolute Brahman. All the universe and history is reduced into relativeness (*vyavahara*). Dupuis explains that the cognition of *aham* (I) as *brahman* in a body (*shariram*) is an

¹ Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 272.

² Swami Nikhilananda, *English translation of Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 9. Downloaded from <http://sanatan.intnet.mu/> (accessed April 29, 2012).

³ F. Max Müller, *The Chandogya Upanishads*. [Http://www.hinduwebsite.com/sacredscripts/hinduism/upanishads/chandogya.asp#Pra6](http://www.hinduwebsite.com/sacredscripts/hinduism/upanishads/chandogya.asp#Pra6) (accessed April 29, 2012). Reproduced from Müller, F. Max. 1879. *The Upanishads*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁴ Ibid.

advaitic experience. The finite ego is submerged by the divine *Aham*, since no other is absolute (*paramartha*), except the Absolute. This is a process of illumination when the subjective knowledge of *Aham* is taking place and leaving no room for the finite ego. This is advaita in Dupuis' thought.⁵

Next Dupuis tries to understand the way Abhishiktananda perceive Jesus. Dupuis asserts that Jesus' experience with God as His Father can be understood in the light of advaita. Using some biblical statements, he provides passages that signify the notion of advaita in Jesus' life. Mainly in the Gospel of John (e.g., 5:18), Jesus and God share the one and same mystery that makes them equal. In what follows, there are many notions of unity between God and Jesus. What Jesus does, God does in Jesus. This common action between them is undivided. Dupuis, then, expounds this according to the *I-Thou* relationship. The experience of Jesus is the mystery of *being* as the Son of God. God exposes God's divine mystery in the life of Jesus. Therefore, in one sense, the mystery of God as the Father is reflected through the Son. But in other sense, according to Dupuis, that mystery of God is not fully reflected, since God will not be contained in the human consciousness of Jesus.⁶ *Advaita* in Hinduisim, however, is slightly different than Dupuis' understanding. *Advaita* does not speak about the relational. Unification, or what is inseparable, simply means non-dual or only one.

When Jesus then said that He and the Father are one, Jesus had fully realized the knowledge of *ahambrahmasmi* and *tattvamasi*. Dupuis says, this is "the awareness of a distinction in unity, the experience of interpersonal relationship whose two poles (distinction and oneness) are inseparable constituents."⁷ Jesus realized that the Word of God is embodied as Him that made Jesus and the Father are one, though Jesus is not the Father. This consciousness of being one as the Father is similar to the consciousness of being as Brahman. However, the main difference here is that Jesus as human is fully aware about His union with the Father. Jesus is a self-realized spirit. On one side, the divine "*Aham*" takes over the wholeness of the life of Jesus, but on the other side, Jesus does not lose his humanity. In other words, quoting Dupuis, "Jesus' awareness of his relationship with his Father is the supreme realization of *advaita* in the human condition." This inseparable relation is communion between Jesus and His Father.⁸ Here, Dupuis introduces a "new" or moderate view

⁵ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 272.

⁶ Ibid., 270-271

⁷ Ibid., 272

⁸ Ibid., 273

of *advaita* that intermingles the notion of *advaita* in Hinduism and relational communion of the Father and the Son.

Saradananda's notes on Sri Ramakrishna's advaitic experience

There is a story of the Great Master about Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experience. According to Saradananda, Ramakrishna experienced a conversion for three days. One day, after finishing a *sadhana*, Ramakrishna, who heard a story from the Bible, had a sort of epiphany. He faced something strange that made him forget all about the Divine Mother, Devas and Devis, and Hinduism. Instead, in those three days, he began to have a great faith in Jesus at a Church, and pray. Moreover, in the three days, he claimed to Saradananda that he met Jesus. This encounter was physically confirmed by Ramakrishna's followers who are familiar with Jewish appearance, for Jesus himself was a Jew. In addition, when Ramakrishna met Jesus, there was an acknowledgment deep in his heart that Jesus the Christ, the loving Son of God, is one with the Father. Jesus came into Ramakrishna's body, and Ramakrishna experienced it in an ecstasy. He was unified to the Omnipresent Brahman. Since this occurrence, Ramakrishna understood Christ as the incarnation of God.⁹

Saradananda exuded the most common characteristics of divine incarnations. For example, he mentioned Jesus, like the other divine incarnations, as the Incarnated God, born into a poor family.¹⁰ Jesus had a spiritual experience before birth since in the childhood and the parents were considered holy.¹¹ He renounced all worldly pleasures and endured suffering to redeem the suffered.¹² He could spiritually impart the divine power, and so forth.¹³ What Jesus experienced is commonplace for other religious figures. Ramakrishna's experience as a Christian in three days caused him to believe the notion of divine incarnation in Jesus, although it may not explain how the majority of Christianity understands the incarnation.

Ramakrishna has posited some characteristics about incarnation. According to him, incarnation requires a special state of body and mind. *Sadbakas* will face death if they cannot stand with the influence of divine emotion. Saradananda asserts,

⁹ Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master* (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1952), 295-296.

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Ibid., 33, 100.

¹² Ibid., 570.

¹³ Ibid., 632.

“A fit body is necessary to contain the abounding surge of emotions born of perfect knowledge or perfect devotion.”¹⁴

He continues by pointing out the effect of the endurance of Jesus' and Sri Chaitanya's bodies.¹⁵ The blood comes out of the body as if a powerful energy, which is the spiritual emotion, oozed out from the whole pores of the body. Thus, their physical forms are actually enduring extreme pain, as if there is a burning sensation in them.¹⁶

What Ramakrishna felt when he did the *Sadhana*, or the spiritual practice, was a sort of incarnation. That explains the mystical experience of having Jesus inside his body. He felt something strange that caused him to ask the Mother about this peculiar occurrence. In addition, Saradananda stated that there was a great force, like waves of water, that completely submerged Ramakrishna's Hindu ideas. Ramakrishna, then, was able to understand the divine emotion of Brahman in the form of Jesus as the Incarnated God.¹⁷ As soon as he realized the stranger was Jesus, Jesus entered Ramakrishna's body.

This realization is the sign of Ramakrishna's perfect stage of practicing the five spiritual loving moods (*rasa*), the perfect moods of Krishna. Saradananda clarifies this by saying that the Master (Ramakrishna) has already known how to love the Object. Therein he absolutely forgets his existence and merges in the Object, realizing non-duality. Furthermore, Saradananda uses the term of I (servant) and Thou (Master) to describe the relation between the servant and the Master. He asserts that in the loving relation, “I” forgets “servanthood (thou)” since they simultaneously are in a loving relation. This notion of non-dual mood then becomes the ultimate development of the other moods that people have in daily life.¹⁸

The non-duality aspect of life is explained further by the saying “remain in *bhavamukha*.”¹⁹ *Bhavamukha* means 'toward the *bhava* (mood).' In other words, to remain in *bhavamukha* means to be in-between the Absolute and the Relative.²⁰ Saradananda exposes this by focusing on the importance of non-dual knowledge (*advaita-jnana*). We should not think that “I am a...” or “I am the father of...,” but we should think that “I am his...” or “I am a part of...” This difference

¹⁴ Ibid., 148.

¹⁵ Sri Chaitanya is honored as the avatar of Krishna in Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism is a sub theology of Advaita.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 296

¹⁸ Ibid., 220.

¹⁹ Ibid., 387

²⁰ Narasingha Prosad Sil, *Rāmākṛṣṇa Paramahansa: A Psychological Profile* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1991), 98.

signifies the I-consciousness.²¹ We should realize that we are “the limited I” and there is “the unlimited I (the Mother; Isvara; Brahman; God).” By realizing this, we can continue our works as the limited I, while at the same time acknowledging the presence of the “I” as the Absolute. It is akin to understanding God as simultaneously *saguna* (with attributes) but also *nirguna* (without attributes).²² In other words, having a non-duality (*advaitic*) consciousness is not the same as merging into one absolute. Rather, it is to be in tension with or in-between the self and the Self, in-between I and Thou, in-between the Mother and I. This is the meaning of remaining in *Bhavamukha*. That is the reason why Ramakrishna did not end up having Jesus inside Ramakrishna’s body, but Ramakrishna emphasized the consciousness of being not divided as in dualism but also not merging into the “one without a second.” In other words, it is a sort of *advaita* with dual consciousness.

However, Ramakrishna does not necessarily deny the concept of dualism and monism with non-dualism. For him, dualism, non-dualism, and monism are stages of human mind. The initial stage is to believe that dualism is the truth, while other states are false. Then, at a higher spiritual stage, it proceeds toward non-dualism. Finally, it ends in monism, where all things become merged into one.²³

Comparing the Advaitas

Jacques Dupuis uses Upanishads as the source for understandings of Advaita. He explains the Advaita experience as that of non-duality, which is a matter of consciousness. Dupuis mentions that this consciousness of non-duality brings people to realize that he or she is actually is one ontological being with Brahman, but this consciousness is still exist inside the people that makes them distinctive at the same time. It will not be merged and disappear in instant. Every *jiva atman* in every human being is essentially the same as Brahman. The problem is that humanity, according to Hinduism, somehow still does not realize it. A not-yet-realization separates people from God or Brahman. But this realization—according to Christian theology—cannot be attained by any human being except by Jesus alone.

Jesus’ physical presence on earth is an exception, because as a spirit, Jesus was fully realized the physical state. He realized that He

²¹ Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna*, 387.

²² *Ibid.*, 386.

²³ *Ibid.*, 388.

and God are one, just like the notion of *aham brahmasmi* (atman [the soul in creatures] is brahman [the soul of God]). He fully understood the dimension of non-duality in Himself. This recognition is depicted in the relation between Him as the Son and God as the Father. This unity shows that in their relation, the true self (ontologically) of Jesus is the Father, as Thou, which is similar to *tattvamasi* (Thou art that). Nevertheless, Dupuis also asserts that although Jesus does what God does, God is not exhausted in the life of Jesus. He also reminds us that Jesus does not put aside the human nature, to be overtaken by the divine nature, so that the two natures are merged as the Divine. When the consciousness arises, the divine Atman is usually taking over by the finite ego of someone so they can understand the non-duality dimension. Nonetheless, Dupuis points out that Jesus is fully in unity with God but, at the same time, is still aware of His humanity. This unity is strongly described in the basis of relationality, as mostly Eastern theologians emphasize.

Saradananda's notes about Ramakrishna depict a slight difference with Dupuis'. Saradananda claimed that the Master taught a different understanding of non-duality (advaita). Advaita should not be a mere one-without-second. Therefore, when we use the conception of *bhavamuka* as stated above, we understand that to speak about Advaita is to know that there is a duality and absoluteness without trying to be at either of these positions. To merge in as one consciousness of non-duality means to become monistic (as one). Advaita supposed to alternate the categories of duality and monistic. To be human does not mean total renouncement.

Therefore, the common view between Dupuis and Saradananda about Advaita rests on consciousness. Both claim that Advaita is a certain condition, namely to realize the non-duality idea. The differences are that, in Dupuis' thought, it seems advaita should result in oneness, while according to Saradananda's notes, advaita ought to be in-between both duality and monism.

However, the exception of Jesus' awareness actually signifies the non-duality aspect that was taught by the Master. According to the Master, Jesus in his life did not forget his humanity side. In fact, on many occasions, Jesus blatantly showed that He is human by being angry or afraid, by crying, eating bread and fish, and so on. At the same time, He also spoke about the desires of God that people should perform on earth.

Indeed, Dupuis is mostly influenced by Abhishiktananda. Dupuis took Abhishiktananda's notion of *tattvamasi/ahambrahmasmi* to

suss out the mystical relation between Jesus and the Father.²⁴ Concerning this, I reserve several critiques.

First, there is misunderstanding in Dupuis' thought. The misunderstanding is located at the explanation on the meaning of advaita as it relates to Jesus' awareness of his humanity. According to advaitic tradition, one of the nondualists, advaita should show no more personhood or relational bases, while Dupuis seemed to make a new "advaita" concept that mediates advaitic Hinduism with Christianity. But it doesn't mean that Ramakrishna has better understanding about Jesus life. This leads to further critique.

Second, it seems difficult to apply the non-duality of Ramakrishna's experience to Christianity. Even though it can signify the consistency of advaita in Jesus' relation to God, Ramakrishna's experience was an individual experience and not an objective view. His mystical experience of having the non-duality dimension of Jesus in Christianity or the same non-duality notion in other religions cannot exhaust the definition of the God of Christianity or those other religions. The definition becomes exhaustive if we try to apply this idea to Christianity. For example, Ramakrishna's notion of advaita significantly employs a *pantheist* understanding of the world as God. In that case, there will be no difference between God and human being; Creator and creation. This leads to ontological and phenomenological problems. In this advaitic notion, the phenomenological dimension will disappear and end up in a single ontological level or reality that is the Divine Mother, Kali. In Christianity, the phenomenological level is truly distinct from God, while perhaps originating from God as the ontological source. Therefore, being in union with God will not have the same ontological meaning in Hinduism as in Christianity.

Third, Dupuis says that the Son and the Father are one and this oneness is illuminated through the non-duality. Nevertheless, it seems that Dupuis agrees with the advaitic notion that the unity of Jesus and God is only located in the awareness or the consciousness. In contrary, according to the Trinitarian doctrine, the Father and the Son are clearly ontologically the same, one being, but are different Persons. The Father and the Son are God, but the Father is not the Son, and *vice versa*. The relation of Jesus to the Father is not a relation that eliminates the personhood of Jesus. The person of Jesus will always remain in Christianity, while in *advaitic* tradition, the personhood of Jesus should disappear or become merged into one-without-second.

²⁴ Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 269

Last, contemporary Christianity in Indonesia enjoys heavy influence from Pentecostalism and other Charismatic movements. For example, based on my experience visiting number of national high schools, many of the schools hold Charismatic worship. Under influence from Pentecostalism or Charismatics, many Christians in Indonesia claim the presence of God in the level of experience. Many claim to have had some kind of mystical personal experience. One evidence is they refer to the experience of King David who danced before God (2 Samuel 6:14-23); this event of ecstasy or filling of the Holy Spirit they can experience, as well. I argue that Pentecostalism or Charismaticism, at least in Indonesia, has shown the entanglement or, in Christian's term, perichoretic movement of God and humanity on the level of personal experience. In relation to the topics above, when people are having this similar personal experience, it is believed that the Holy Spirit mystically fulfills the human beings. The Holy Spirit, then, becomes inseparable from human beings. The advaitic experience or the non-duality between God and humanity takes place. Thus, the advaitic experience is not limited to a unique divine-human being, like Jesus; this notion of advaita also occurs in the relation between God and humanity. It occurs on the level of deep worship or of devotion to God. In this case, even it looks in tune with the Bhagavad Gita for devotion, as a way to reach God. In other words, the mystical relation in Christianity occurs between human beings and God—driven as it is by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion and Further Possibilities

Though Dupuis claims that he uses Hinduism's scriptures—such as the Upanishads, to expound the meaning of advaita—I have shown that other Advaita Hindus profess a differing understanding. The notion of consciousness that arises in advaita discussion, however, is undeniably valuable. Thus, the goal of my comparison here has been to show that non-duality is not restricted neither to Hinduism in Advaita Vedanta nor to Vishisadvaita tradition. Dupuis has shown that advaita can help us better understand the relation between Jesus as the Son and God as the Father. Further helpful is Dupuis' reasoning with regard to the relation between Trinity and advaita, using the term *saccidananda*.²⁵ According to Abhishiktananda, *saccinanda* (*sat*: the beginning or the source, *cit*: the Self-knowledge, and *ananda*: love or everlasting bliss) reveals a reality similar to the

²⁵ Ibid., 274.

notion of Trinity. Here, Dupuis concludes that the diversity of faiths signifies the incomplete faces of God or the Divine Mystery that can be fulfilled in the human face of God.²⁶

My concern here, however, is not about the *saccidananda*. Rather, I emphasize a possibility to understand the ontology of the Triune God in a form of a communion. The communion of the Trinity is reflected in the in-betweenness of the monism (singularity), twoness (duality), or even threeness (triad). Such communion will never take place when there is only one person. Therefore, the three persons of the Trinity are different in their distinction and uniqueness, yet these differences are not separable, as in dualism. There is non-duality or perhaps non-triality. I admit further work is ostensibly needed. Nevertheless, at the most basic level, the advaita experience can be a significant term pointing to the reality of communion in the Trinity. In addition, this advaita experience from the Hinduism can perhaps be a significant alternative for Christians to understand the closeness and relation between God and humanity.

About the Author

Toar Banua Hutagalung meraih gelar *Master of Arts* (M.A.) in Theological Research dari Andover Newton Theological School, Newton, Massachusetts, Amerika Serikat pada tahun 2013. Ia lulus dari program strata satu, Sarjana Sains Teologi, di Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Jakarta (STTJ) pada tahun 2010. Saat ini, ia menjadi staf humas (*public relation*) sekaligus, sebagai dosen tidak tetap, mengajar di almamaternya tersebut dalam bidang teologi sistematika dan teologi agama-agama. Kini, ia juga menjabat sebagai direktur Asosiasi Teolog Indonesia (ATT).

²⁶ Ibid., 279.

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