

The Authority of Hindu Scripture

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We live in an age which, in one way or other revolts against the very concept of authority. The term 'authority is all too often associated', as a recent study report of the Faith and Order Commission observed, 'with authorities demanding blind obedience and therefore suppressing freedom rather than creating it'.¹ The term also involves the idea of *status quo*, and to speak about the authority of scripture may obscure rather than illuminate the nature and function of the scripture in leading man to his final destiny, that is, the knowledge of the Ultimate. The scripture becomes meaningful and relevant to a seeker, only when he turns to it with a genuine 'desire to know'. This desire to know, *jīgnāsā*, should begin with an admission that the 'authority' of the scripture is not 'something evil which is imposed on an innocent human community from the outside by conniving priests',² as Thomas D. Sarker puts it. The Hindu *ācāryās*, appealed to the scripture as the ultimate authority in matters spiritual. 'But the appeal itself, is for a reason', writes Mahadevan, 'and reason comes in as an aid at every stage in the process of selection and interpretation of scriptural passages'.³ And the reason for appealing to the scripture is reasoning's inability to comprehend the ultimate. Reasoning, as we know from our experience, is not an absolutely dependable mode of knowing. Our application of a reason is conditioned by many factors which in effect may veil the truth from us. What we perceive as reality through our modes of knowing is 'reality only as it is presented by the modes and not as it is'.⁴

Hindu scriptures, on the basis of their authority, are divided into two categories, *śruti*, (that which is heard) and *smṛti* (that which is remembered). The Vedas, the oldest scriptures of India, belong to the first group. The orthodox Hindu considers this body of scripture as revealed and eternal. The authority of the *smṛtis* (i.e. the epics, *Manusmṛti*, *Sāmkhya smṛti*, etc.) is subordinate to the *śruti* and in so far as they conform to the truths expounded in the Vedas. "The

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¹ Faith and Order, Louvain 1971, *Study Reports and Documents*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1971, p. 14.

² Thomas D. Parker, 'Authority Today: A Reconsideration', in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. XXVI, No. 3, p. 220.

³ T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Gaudapada, A Study in Early Advaita*, Madras, University of Madras, 1954, p. 77.

⁴ C. Kunhan Raja, *Some Fundamental problems in Indian Philosophy*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1960, p. 85.

authority of the Vedas', says Swami Prabhavananda, 'does not depend on anything external. They themselves *are* the authority, being the knowledge of God'.⁵ Vedas are the breath of the Eternal.⁶ As such, to speak about the authority of *śruti*, is to speak about the nature and authority of revelation. In this paper we will briefly examine the authority of *śruti* (revelation) as seen by the Vedantins, Advaitins in particular, for the present writer holds that Vedanta represents the vedic tradition more than any other school of thought in Hinduism.

Theologians speak of two kinds of revelation; natural (general) revelation, and special revelation. The truths which man can discover, even truths concerning the ultimate, by his unaided reason from nature, are called natural or general revelation. Special revelation is given through the sacred scriptures, the Vedas, and through *avatāra*. The argument in *Brahma Sūtra* I.1.2 that the Supreme is the basis of the whole world process, its origin, maintenance and dissolution, is an example of the former.⁷ General revelation adopts the view that the world at large is a revelation of the Supreme Reality. Śaṅkara, in his commentary of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad (II.5.19) says that the Supreme Reality has manifested itself as the world of name and form, *nāmarūpa*, and as life, *prāṇa*, and this manifestation of the one Reality, with its knowledge and power increasing gradually, rises higher and higher from inanimate things to animate beings, then to mankind, and lastly in the most developed human beings. This can be described as a progressive revelation which leads man to ever greater knowledge of Brahman. But, this will not lead one to know Brahman in its essential nature as 'reality, consciousness and bliss'. 'Unless it is known as it is in itself, knowledge of it is neither complete, nor fully true; but at the same time we are not shut off from all knowledge of it. This knowledge, which every rational being possesses, is *sāmānya*, but not *vīśeṣa*;⁸ 'only *śruti* can provide the seeker with *vīśeṣa* knowledge'.

Vedanta accepts the special revelation through *avatāras*. Śaṅkara explains in his *Gītābhāṣya* that the personal God Nārāyaṇa took the form of Kṛṣṇa for the protection of *dharma* and to restore righteousness. In the person of Kṛṣṇa, God revealed the way of salvation to humanity. Śaṅkara says that God was partially (*aṁśena*) born as Kṛṣṇa, the son of Devakī and Vasudeva. In his use of the term *aṁśena*, Śaṅkara implies that God has not ceased to be the creator and sustainer of the universe, when he took human form. Though God became man, he was not exhausted in the form of Kṛṣṇa. Through an *avatāra*, God reveals the eternal truth anew, which has been neglected, but which is contained in the Veda. The *avatāra* may emphasize and assert certain truths, but he will never teach anything that contradicts the *śruti*.

⁵ Swami Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1962, p. 28.

⁶ *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*. II. IV. 10.

⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *Brahma Sūtra, the philosophy of spiritual life*, London, 1960, p. 104.

⁸ K. S. Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, Waltair, 1959, p. 7.

At the same time an *avatāra* will never be able to teach all that is in the *śruti*. Śaṅkara, in his introduction of the *Gitābhāṣya*, says that the teaching of an *avatāra* is *śamastavedārthaśarasamgraha*, i.e., the essence of the meaning of the Veda in brief. This statement is an indication of the pre-eminence of the Vedic revelation compared to that of *avatāra* in Śaṅkara's thinking. All the Advaita thinkers follow Śaṅkara's lead in their approach to the Veda and its revelatory content.

According to Advaita Vedānta, the Veda is eternal and promulgated at the beginning of each world-cycle by Īśvara, and it contains the final truth about dharma and Brahman. The Advaitins offer several proofs for the eternity of the Veda. Vacaspati argues that since dharma and Brahman are absolute, the *śāstra* which contains the knowledge of them must always remain the same. Even in form it cannot change.⁹ Śaṅkara in his commentary on the *Brahma Sūtra* (I.iii.29) points out that 'the eternity of the Vedas having been determined (in Pu. Mi) on the ground of the absence of any remembrance of any definite author etc., and thereafter raising a doubt that there would be a contradiction in holding that individual Gods, etc., were liable to be born and therefore non-eternal, and after refuting the same by the previous sūtra, (*Atha Prabhavatvat* I.iii.26), the Sutrakara now in this Sūtra strengthens the same already established eternity of the Vedas, by the sūtra. Hence it is that (the Vedas) are eternal'.¹⁰ Prakasatman has another proof to establish the eternity of the Veda which is mainly an argument from silence. All other scriptures, such as those of the Buddhists, are distinctly known to have been productions of some historical characters, while no one is remembered as the author of the Veda. Another proof put forward by Vacaspati runs as follows: 'The world cannot be generated from the non-eternal, for then the latter also would be an effect, and this would lead to a regress. So the Veda is eternal, because it is the cause of the generation of the world, like God'.¹¹

This argument stems from the Advaita concept of the eternity of words. At the beginning of each world-cycle God uses the words in the same sense in which they were used in the past world-cycle. If the reference of words differs in each aeon, then there would be no settled order, such as 'This is good, this is bad', etc., for what is called good in the past aeon may be called 'bad' in the present. As there was never an absolute beginning of the world, the Advaita says that even God never had the occasion deliberately to devise words as the conventional sign of things. At the beginning of each creation, words have always been used by God in the same sense in which they were in the previous world-cycle. Śaṅkara in his detailed exposition of B.S. I.iii.28 develops his theory of the eternity of words. The words in the Veda, as they were in the past world-cycle, manifested themselves in the mind of Prajapati, the creator, before creation, and then he created accordingly. Thus, for instance, from the word '*bhuh*' (earth)

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁰ Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, Tr. by V. M. Apte. Bombay, 1960, pp. 195-196.

¹¹ Quoted by K. S. Murty, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

which occurred in his mind he created the terrestrial world. According to Śaṅkara, the fact that the world has been created from the 'Word', *śabdaprabhava*, is known from the Veda and the *smṛtis*, which are respectively called 'perception' and 'inference' by Bādarāyaṇa. The Veda is 'perception', because like the latter it is an independent *pramāṇa*; whereas a *smṛti* is dependent upon the Veda, like inference which is dependent on perception.¹²

The Advaitins also accept the internal evidences in the Veda to prove its eternity. In Rgveda viii.75.6 we see the declaration that the Veda is eternal. The *smṛtis* also declare, 'Formerly the great sages, with the permission of the self-born, obtained through their penance the Vedas together with the epics, which had been hidden at the close of the cosmic period'.¹³

Śaṅkara builds a strong argument in support of his theory of the eternity of the Word and the Veda in his exposition of B.S.I.iii.30. The world is destroyed and recreated in each aeon. Śaṅkara argues that the transmigratory existence is beginningless. He says, 'Even though there is complete re-absorption and regeneration respectively at the end of the *Kalpa* (aeon) and the beginning of another, there is no contradiction, even as there is no contradiction in the case of sleep and awakening . . . and the practical worldly transactions (of a man) are the same after the reappearance of consciousness, as they were before the cessation of consciousness'.¹⁴ This is so because the same pattern of name and form is repeated in each new aeon, just as the seasons appear regularly one after the other in the same order year after year.

Two kinds of eternity are distinguished in the Indian tradition, (a) *kūṭastha nityatā* and (b) *pravāharūpa nityatā*. If a thing is unchanged for ever it is the former and if a thing in spite of its incessant change remains in the same pattern, it is the latter. A rock is an example of *kūṭastha nityatā* and a river of *pravāharūpa nityatā*. Śaṅkara seems to conceive the eternity of the Veda as the latter, because he distinctly uses the word *pravāha* and says that all the three worlds and creatures are a flux, but have a pattern.¹⁵ Most of the Advaitins accept this view and consider the Veda as a beginningless and endless flow. From one world-cycle to another the stream of Vedic study is kept on unbroken and without a beginning.

Brahma Sūtra affirms that Brahman itself is the source of the Veda. (*Śāstra-yonitvāt*, B.S.I.i.3). Śaṅkara gives two interpretations of this sūtra. (i) *Śāstra-yoni*, the cause of the scripture: (ii) that of which the scripture is the cause or source of revelation, or *pramāṇa*. The first interpretation means that Brahman is the cause of the revelation of the Vedas. According to the second, only the *Śāstra*, i.e. Rgveda etc., is the source, the cause, the authoritative means, of the understanding of the right knowledge of Brahman as it is.

¹² Śaṅkarācārya, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-190.

¹³ Quoted by S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

¹⁴ Śaṅkarācārya, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

¹⁵ K. S. Murty, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

Śaṅkara's understanding, and that of Advaitins in general, of Vedic revelation is contained in this second interpretation of the *sūtra*. A right understanding of this *sūtra* should eliminate many misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Vedic revelation. Śaṅkara's statement clearly rules out any possibility of 'verbal inspiration' or the infallibility of the scriptures in all realms of human knowledge, as advocated by certain schools of thought and also alleged to be that of Advaitins. *Śruti* is the only source of knowledge as far as the knowledge of *dharma* and Brahman are concerned. This knowledge originates from Brahman. For all other types of knowledge, knowledge concerning the empirical world, *śruti* is not the authority. It can even be said that when *śruti* goes against our everyday experiences and knowledge gained through other empirical means, an Advaitin is free to reject such teachings, if any, of the *Śruti*. But for Brahma vidyā, *śruti* is the unquestionable, infallible authority. This infallibility can be compared with the Roman Catholic doctrine of Papal infallibility. Only the ex-cathedra statements of the Pope, i.e., statements concerning faith, are infallible and unquestionable.

Śaṅkara elucidates his doctrine of revelation further in his *bhāṣya* of B.S. I.i.4. The purport of revelation is to give true knowledge of Brahman. Anything that obstructs this knowledge has to be rejected and anything that is helpful has to be accepted. This, in a nutshell, is the Āchārya's answer to the Mīmāṃsā interpretation of the Vedas. He does not do away with the Mīmāṃsā doctrine of action. But his contention is that action alone is not enough. It will not lead to the Final Release. He does not see eye to eye with the Mīmāṃsā position; 'the Vedas having action (*Kriyā*) as their purpose, those portions of it which do not indicate any action, are purposeless' (*Jaimini Sūtra* 1.2.1). He takes the Vedānta portion of the Scriptures, which the Mīmāṃsakas reject as 'purposeless', most seriously, for they (Upaniṣads) lead man to his ultimate release. In his words, 'all those who regard final release as a creed, understand it as being eternal, and therefore it would not be proper to propound Brahma as being supplementary to action'.¹⁶ He establishes this position on the basis of Scriptural authority. 'He who knows Brahma, becomes Brahma' (*Mund.* 3.2.9). 'All the sum total of his actions perishes when he who is both the higher and the lower is beheld' (*Mund.* 2.2.8). 'O Janaka, you have indeed reached fearlessness' (*Bṛih.* 4.2.4). For Śaṅkara, the Final Release is not something which admits of being subjected to a process of refinement, so that it should expect some sort of operation. Final Release being of the nature of Brahma, it cannot be attained by the refinement of one's character through one's *karma*.¹⁷ These two are on different levels. Other writers of the Advaita school maintain the same position regarding the authority of the Scripture. Vacaspati says, 'Though Vedic statements are generally treated as authoritative in relation to injunctions, the authoritativeness of the means of valid

¹⁶ Śaṅkarācārya, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Śaṅkarācārya, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

knowledge consists in their generating knowledge which is uncontradicted, not already understood and indubitable'.¹⁸

For Advaitins, the Veda is the only true scripture. All other śāstrās, such as the Bhagavad-gītā, Manusmṛti, etc., depend upon the Veda, as inference depends on perception. The relationship between the Veda (*śruti*) and *smṛti* is very important for the Vedāntin. Any teaching of a *smṛti* that does not conform with the teachings of the *śruti* is to be rejected. *Smṛti* is helpful for some people to understand the purport of the Veda. Śaṅkara, in his commentary of B.S. I.ii, points out that *smṛtis* which are clearly in conflict with the Veda ought to be rejected, because the authors of *smṛtis*, being but men, cannot know anything about supersensuous matters. In other words, *smṛtis* are authoritative only when they are in agreement with the Veda. In the light of this principle, Advaitins openly reject schools of thought such as Vaiśeṣika, Pāsupata, Pāncaratra etc., which are not entirely in accordance with the Vedic revelation. On the other hand, Vedānta adopts a selective approach towards Sāṃkhya *smṛti*, Manusmṛti etc., because some of their teachings are based on Vedic texts. Each system and its doctrines are tested in the light of the Vedic revelation. Advaita adopts this norm for testing the validity of a *smṛti*, because according to Advaitins, dharma and Brahman cannot be perceived or inferred by anyone, including the great sages who composed the *smṛtis*.

It is to be noted that even though Advaita holds that God is the source of the Veda and it is eternal, its eternity is not like the eternity of Brahman but is beginningless and everlasting only in the empirical sense. Again, Advaita teaches that the Veda is only as real as the world and from the standpoint of absolute truth both are unreal. Still, the Veda can give rise to true knowledge, as the picture of a snake (false snake) can give a correct idea of the real snake, or as one may get the solution of a problem in a dream. One has to see the rôle of reason in the Advaita system in the light of this concept of Vedic revelation.

Vedānta considers *anumāna* (inference) as a *pramāṇa* in the realm of empirical knowledge. This type of knowledge is produced by our knowledge of invariable relation (*vyāpti*) between the thing to be inferred (*sādhyā*) and the reason or ground from which we infer. Inferential knowledge can be attained only from the knowledge of *vyāpti*. Unless our past experience of an inferent is at work, we cannot arrive at any knowledge. Advaita contends that *anumāna* cannot be a *pramāṇa* in the case of Brahman. Since Brahman is devoid of all qualities, it can have no differentiating mark, and it has no *hetu*, with which it could have *vyāpti*. On the basis of this principle, Advaita rejects the proofs formulated by Nyāya for the existence of God. Advaitins like Amalānanda and Appaya Dīkṣita admit that the Nyāya argument from effect to cause can prove the existence of the world's cause. But, this inference cannot establish that the world is the effect of one cause, and therefore this proof is not valid. The Advaita writer Rāmānanda says that the above Nyāya argument is not in the category of *anumāna*, for it does not give us any certain knowledge. It only shows that something is *probable*. Therefore, all theological proofs offered by

¹⁸ Quoted by S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

Nyāya and Yoga are only *yuktis*. They only show that it is *probable* that God is: but they cannot prove *what God is*.¹⁹ This seems to be the reason that Advaitins speak more of the relevance of *tarka* than that of *anumāna* in our pursuit of the knowledge of Brahman.

According to Indian Logic, *tarka* is a type of reasoning which is ancillary to a *pramāṇa*, but which is itself never a *pramāṇa*. '*Tarka* is the formulation of a probable hypothesis, (*uha*) in the case of a thing, whose real nature is not known, when there is a ground for such a hypothesis'.²⁰ Śaṅkara says that mere *tarka* cannot be depended upon in matters which must be understood in the light of *śruti*. *Tarka* is based on man's individual suppositions (*utpreksā*) which are unfettered, while some intelligent persons may formulate *tarka* with great care, more competent persons may refute them, and their *tarkas* in turn may be refuted by others. Even if we assemble all the logicians in one place and leave them to iron out their differences, it would be impossible for them to formulate one *pramāṇa* for the knowledge of Brahman and the dharma. So, Śaṅkara argues, (B.S. II.i.11) that the formulations reached through *tarka* can never be conclusive. This does not mean that Śaṅkara rejects *tarka* in worldly transactions. Life would be impossible if we do away with all reasoning. On the other hand, Śaṅkara sees a genuine role for *tarka* in understanding the difficult Scriptural passages. 'When there is contradiction in Scriptural passages, it is only by means of reasoning, which explains the general force or import of sentences, and by refuting their wrong and apparent meaning, that the correct ascertainment of their meaning is accomplished'.²¹ So, while *tarka* cannot be depended upon for a knowledge of Brahman, no logician can reject the validity of the knowledge generated by the Veda. Scripture and *tarka* which follows (conforms to the) scripture: these two can, according to Śaṅkara, establish that Brahman is the world-cause.

Śaṅkara emphatically rejects the Sāṅkhya position that when scripture is opposed to another *pramāṇa*, scripture should be subordinated to it. *Yukti*, according to Sāṅkhya, seeks to establish an unseen thing on the analogy of a seen thing, is nearer to experience; while scripture, which is a mere tradition in terms of what it propounds, is far removed from experience. Śaṅkara replies to this by saying that since Brahman is a unique thing, it is mere wishful thinking to believe that *pramāṇas* other than scriptural testimony have any scope here. As in the case of dharma, Brahman can only be known through the Veda. He quotes Upanisadic passages to support this. 'This knowledge cannot be acquired by reasoning. Oh dear no, it becomes properly understood only when it is taught by another (competent person)' (Katha 1.2.9). The Āchārya says that though the Upanisadic passage enjoining *manana* shows that *tarka* should receive due respect, that cannot be a pretext for introducing mere arguments (*śuśka tarka*) into Vedānta; only the *tarka*, which follows scripture, can be accepted

¹⁹ K. S. Murty, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²¹ Śaṅkarācārya, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

as a help towards Brahman-intuition (*anubhavāṅga*). Since such *tarka* is admissible, he says that scriptural or *smṛti* texts which condemn *tarka* condemn only *śuśka tarka*, as it cannot by itself be a *pramāṇa*.

In certain other passages, Śaṅkara further minimizes the role of *tarka*. In his *bhāṣya* of *Bṛhadāranyaka Upanisad* (I.i.1) he takes up the following objection and very conclusively answers it. 'Since the *śruti* points out certain grounds of inference for the existence of the self, and these depend on perception, (these two are an efficient means of the knowledge of the self)'.²² Śaṅkara answers to this thus:

'That the self is eternal, and that it does not come to an end with death, cannot be perceived; for were this perceptible, the *carvakas* and Buddhists would not deny it. The existence of *Ātman* can be known only from the Veda and from certain empirical grounds of inference cited by it. The followers of the *Mīmāṃsā* and the *Nyāya* imagine that these grounds of inference, mentioned by the Veda, are products of their ingenious minds, and declare that the self can be known by inference'.²³ Śaṅkara succinctly rejects the *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* teaching of *tarka* in his *bhāṣya* of B.S. II.i.3. He says, 'Final beatitude is not attained by the mere knowledge of *Sāṃkhya smṛti* or the path of *Yoga*, without reference to the Veda. The scriptures obviate the possibility of any other means of attaining final beatitude except the knowledge of the self referred to in the Vedas'.²⁴ On the basis of this, he refutes all *smṛtis* based on reasoning. To him the scriptural command 'No one who does not know the Vedas, knows the great one' (*Tait. Brā. 3.12.9.7*) is infallible authority.

Śaṅkara bears a remarkable similarity to some modern Christian theologians, Barth and Brunner in particular, in his approach to revelation and reason. Of course, the content and the nature of the revelation are different for the Advaitin and the Christian. Brunner admits God's partial disclosure of Himself through nature. Śaṅkara speaks of the general manifestation of Brahman, for all that exists speaks of Brahman.²⁵ For the Christian the final revelation is in the person of Christ and he sees the record of that revelation in the words of the Bible. To Śaṅkara the final, saving, revelation is in the Veda. Both Śaṅkara and the Christian theologian agree on the 'once-for-all-ness' of the revelation. Śaṅkara has an uncompromising attitude towards those who do not accept the 'finality' of the Veda. Karl Barth is certainly Śaṅkara's counterpart in asserting the 'finality' of the Biblical revelation. Both of them limit the role of reason, within the compass of revelation. This remarkable similarity of approach leads us to another related problem, viz., the exclusive claim of revelation. Some modern exponents of Hinduism who make explicit statements

²² Upanishads, *Bṛhadāranyaka Upanisad*, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya. Tr. by Swami Madhvananda. Mayavati, 1950, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁴ Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahmasūtra Śaṅkara-bhāṣya*, p. 282.

²⁵ c.f. Psalms 19.1. 'The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament sheweth his handiwork'.

such as 'all religions are true' do it not on the authority of orthodox Hindu tradition. The views of Jaimin, Kumārila, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and others clearly indicate that the Vedic faith is exclusive. Vedic revelation is the only true revelation that will lead man to his final release. The teachings of these authorities are on the same plane with that of the Semitic religions, which teach that God revealed the final truth to them. One has to say that modern exponents of Hinduism violate the spirit of the Vedic revelation, and the teachings of the ācāryas. The writings of Dr S. Radhakrishnan are an example of 'liberal' interpretation. In his commentary of B.S. 1.1.4, *tat tu samanvayāt*, he stretches the text as far as to accommodate scriptures of other religions. He writes, 'Today the *samanvayāt* or harmonisation has to be extended to the living faiths of mankind. Religion concerns man as man and not man as Jew or Christian, Hindu or Buddhist, Sikh or Muslim'.²⁶ This type of 'harmonisation of the scriptures', will not make a Hindu a good Hindu, or a Christian a good Christian. But, on the other hand, it will only create a new religion, which has no deep roots in any religion at all.

One can see a very close parallel between the Vedanta idea of verbal testimony (*śabda* or *āgama*) and the Barthian concept of the 'Word of God'. To the Vedantins 'who regard Truth as revealed by Scripture, *śabda-pramāṇa* is vitally important'.²⁷ In the Barthian scheme, too, language is paramountly important in revelation, for 'God reveals Himself in propositions by means of language, and human language at that, to the effect that from time to time such and such a word spoken by the prophets and apostles and proclaimed in the Church becomes His Word'.²⁸ God's language also 'refers to the form in which we hear the Word of God'.²⁹ The big issue between the Vedantins and the Barthians, as Prof. Arapura points out, 'is the role of language in revelation, and the nature of knowledge that is borne through language'.³⁰ 'Their differences' writes Arapura, 'are symptomatic of some very crucial divergences pertaining to the whole understanding of Reality, an understanding which is of great consequence for religion'.³¹ The differences between the Vedanta and the Christian positions become sharper, when the Christian begins to speak of the historicity of the revelation. The Christian looks at the 'Christ-event' as the central reality of the revelation. Thus, for the Christian, 'The question of the relationship between *revelation* and *history* is the central theological problem of the present day'.³²

²⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

²⁷ T. M. P. Mahadevan, *The Philosophy of Advaita*, Madras, Ganesh, 1969, p. 47.

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part I. Translated by G. T. Thompson, Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1936, p. 156.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

³⁰ John G. Arapura, 'Language and Knowledge. A Vedantic Examination of a Barthian Issue' in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, p. 153.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Heinz Zahrnt, *The Question of God*, Translated by R. A. Wilson, London, Collison, 1969, p. 208.

The Vedantin does not see revelation as taking place in history and therefore to speak of 'revelatory events' does not make any sense to him. It should be a matter of concern for Vedantins and Christians to look at the nature of faith (*śraddha*) anew and see whether its relation to revelation (*śruti*) is shaped by history or not.

The Vedānta understanding of *śruti* draws criticisms from many quarters. First of all, there are *smṛti* passages which make the eternity of the Veda doubtful. The Bhagavad-gītā declares, 'I am the author of the Veda and the knower of it'.³³ This contradicts the Advaita position that God is the source or cause of the Veda, not its author as Kalidāsa is the author of *Śākuntalam*. The very idea of revelation, from the theist point of view, implies a Revealer and a recipient. This means a subject-object relation in the act of revelation, which is totally against the Advaita teaching. Again, the question arises as to the content of revelation. What is revealed? Is it a universal principle of truth? Is it *dharma*? If so, has it (i.e., the content of revelation which is clothed in Vedic words) got a reality apart from the Veda? Though the Advaitins argue that the eternity of the Veda is only from the empirical standpoint, the answers to the above questions are less satisfactory. Some of the theists go as far as to ask, 'if the Veda is illusory in the ultimate analysis, how can that which is illusory give us absolute knowledge?' To the theist critic, the answer to this question is negative. On this assumption, K. S. Murty makes a biting remark: 'Indeed the Advaita Vedānta seems to lead to the absurd conclusion that an illusory individual knows from an illusory scripture that what he previously regarded as "himself" is an illusion, and that he is something other than "himself"'.³⁴ Here the critic overlooks the fact that even in our every day experience, we gain knowledge from illusory objects. The Advaitin would cite the nature and function of language as an example. From the absolute point of view, language has no reality. But, this language acts as vehicle of knowledge. Mathematical symbols are another example. These symbols have no reality of their own. Yet they give us knowledge about the principles for which they stand.

Śaṅkara's theory of *avatara*, has been the subject of criticism by many theists. In his *Gītābhāṣya*, he upholds that God takes human form, and Kṛṣṇa was really Nārāyaṇa, the Creator-God. All individuals are really Brahman according to the Vedānta. 'If so', asks the critic, 'in what way is an *avatara* person superior to others?' Śaṅkara's answer implies that the appearance of an *avatara* is an illusion in a double sense, while that of Brahman as *jīva* is an illusion in one sense only. Then, how can a double illusion restore *dharma*?³⁵ Here, the critic is clearly confusing Brahman and *Iśvara*. It is *Iśvara*, who incarnates for the restoration of *dharma*. *Iśvara* always knows himself to be Brahman, both in his 'pure' state as well as in *avatara* state. Śaṅkara explains that while an *avatara* has awareness of his

³³ 'Vedānta kṛt vedavideva cāham'. B.G. XV, 15.

³⁴ K. S. Murty, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 279.

identity with Brahman, we have no such awareness. In the light of this explanation, K. S. Murty's question, 'Moreover, God incarnates in every *kalpa*, and if *avatara* is only a Brahman-knower (who can never be born), how does he incarnate in every *kalpa*?'³⁶ seems to be unwarranted. An *avatara* is a Brahman-knower, not because he is a *jiva* who has attained the right knowledge of his identity, but because he is Isvara in the *avatara* form.

The remarkable aspect of the Vedanta understanding of the authority of scripture is the freedom it allows within the context of the revealed. Any philosophical system, which solely depends on human reason, by the very nature of the pursuit, is bound to limit itself to sensuous objects. The Vedanta is well aware of this danger and takes the big leap from reason to revelation. Once it establishes the authority of the Vedas, it has the freedom to use reason as a handmaid to explore and communicate the contents of the revelation. The Vedantins make skilful use of reason in selecting and interpreting the scripture. *Śruti* becomes more meaningful through the commentaries of the *ācāryas*. The students of Vedanta are required to place their faith in *śruti* and the *bhāṣyas* of the *ācāryas*, 'even as the learners of science must begin with a sense of confidence in the scientific theories formulated by the master-minds in the field'.³⁷ The end of *brahma-vijnana*, inquiry into the nature of reality, according to Śaṅkara, is experience (*anubhava*); that which is imparted by 'the Scripture must become a matter of experience; only then revelation would have fulfilled its mission'.³⁸

The study report of the Faith and Order Commission to which we referred earlier, states, 'the question of the authority of the Bible is inseparable from the interpretative process in the Church'.³⁹ The Vedantin comes closer to this in that he sees the authority of the *śruti* established through the selection and interpretation of the texts by the *ācāryas*. It is the 'Word', *vac* or *vāk*, that is known with the aid of the Scripture. For, *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad* declares: '*Vāk* verily is Brahman, indeed *Vāk* is the supreme Brahman'.⁴⁰ It is a fruitful attempt for the Indian Christian to enter into a dialogue with the Vedantin to discern some of the basic thoughts which underlie the 'concept of *Vāk*' and the doctrine of the 'Word of God'.

³⁶ Bhagavad-gīta, XI. 16.

³⁷ T. M. Mahadevan, *Gaudapada, A Study of Early Advaita*, Madras, University of Madras, 1954, p. 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 80.

³⁹ Faith and Order, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, IV. 1,2.