
Advaita and Imagery: Śaṅkara on Devotional Objects, and as Himself an Object of Devotion

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There have been those who have downplayed the importance of the visual image and image worship in Hinduism. This downplaying has been criticized in recent scholarship as (a) not recognizing the ubiquity of image worship in popular religion, and (b) not acknowledging the forms of Hinduism which have developed theologies of a "real presence" of divinity in the consecrated image. Several scholars have singled out the privileging of Advaita Vedānta as the normative form of Hinduism for this dismissal or disparagement of image practices.

While it is appropriate to criticize the underestimation of the importance of the image in Hinduism and it is correct that this underestimation can be traced to a selective reading of Śaṅkara's Advaita, the thesis of this paper is that a closer examination of Advaitic tradition (defined here broadly as the tradition that looks to Śaṅkara [788-820 C.E.]¹ as its definitive exponent) precludes any identification of this tradition in Indian thought with the disparagement of the sacred image.

1. Hindu piety affords a much earlier date to Śaṅkara than this approximation favored by historians.

The presence of a qualified defense of anthropomorphic images referring to Brahman in Śaṅkara's commentarial writings, the intense devotion of his hymns, the salience of images in his hagiographies, and the fact that he is himself venerated in image form, all this, in fact demonstrates the importance of the image in Hindu religious life. Advaitic tradition, seen in this light, far from making the sacred image peripheral, actually gives evidence to support the position of those who now seek to underline the "power of images" in Indic civilization.

Reactions to the Downplaying of the Sacred Image

In her popular book, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Diana Eck writes:

While Hindu spirituality is often portrayed in the West as interior, mystical, and other-worldly, one need only raise the head from the book to the image to see how mistakenly one-sided such a characterization is. The day to day life and ritual of Hindus is based not upon abstract interior truths, but upon the charged, concrete, and particular appearances of the divine in the substance of the material world. (Eck 1985, 11)

Eck underlines the centrality of the sensory in Hindu India and preeminently the sense of sight which makes contact with the visual images of the deities. The passage cited is illustrative of a trend in recent scholarship which reacts to the many authors on Hinduism who have sought to downplay the importance of image worship in Indian religion. The latter include, for example, K.M. Sen who says of images of the deities:

Though these are used as aids in religious life, 'every Hindu hopes to escape someday from the necessity of using images'. It is the difficulty which the human mind has in grasping the nature of the all-pervading *Brahman* that often made specification and even personification necessary. (Sen 1961, 60)

In a similar vein T.M.P. Mahadevan writes:

The strong in spirit find God everywhere. For the feeble-minded the idol is an index of the Supreme. The Yogins see the blissful Lord in the self. The less developed require a concrete peg to hang their convictions on. Transition from the lower to the higher form of worship is the mode of the pilgrim's progress. This is recognized clearly by the Hindu Scriptures. The individual should evolve from the crude and the grotesque to the lofty and the sublime in religious experience. (Mahadevan 1966, 48)

Such a view is echoed in the introduction to a magisterial overview of ancient Indian art by Susan Huntington: "To those unfamiliar with the

Indic world, it might be surprising to learn that the use of images is thought to be least appropriate to the Truth itself since images have form and Truth is formless" (Huntington 1985, xxvi).

Richard Davis sees Huntington's notion as a re-statement of views held by an earlier renowned historian of Indian art, Ananda Coomaraswamy (Davis 1989). Davis calls this a "neo-Vedāntic" position on the topic of image worship and criticizes it for its implicit claim to represent normative Hinduism. The type of recent scholarship (for example, Eck 1985, Davis 1989, and the essays edited by Waghorne and Cutler, 1985) that is concerned with Hinduism "on the ground" is critical of the view which holds that Indian civilization regards the worship of images as merely a vulgar form of popular expression or as at best a prop or stage on the path to the highest level of religion; this highest level seen as aniconic or without form.² For these critics such a view does not do justice to the ubiquity of popular Indian devotionism and also ignores the sophisticated theologies of image worship found in both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva traditions which provided the theoretical underpinning for worship of God in visible form.

Blame for the origin of such a one-sided view is sometimes laid on those who implicitly present the system of Advaita Vedānta as the normative form of Hinduism which contains the interpretive key for understanding all of Indian civilization (and particularly the history of Indian art). Richard Davis writes: "Privileging the Advaita Vedānta position as the final word on image worship is, I believe, a fundamental historical flaw. Advaita is not the only system of Hindu religious philosophy, and it is by no means the most influential school of thought during the most prolific period of Hindu temple construction" (Davis 1989, 353).

Another voice in this critique of the assessment of normative or essential Hinduism as both neo-Vedāntic and aniconic is William Deadwyler who is both a scholar and a member of the ISKCON movement. Deadwyler sees the pervasive "anti-idolatry" heritage of Judaism and Christianity and the Medieval preference for "negative theology" as combining to promote in Western scholars a hostile assessment of image worship. For these writers, according to Deadwyler, Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta is a loftier Hinduism free from the degeneration of image practices. Such a view was also taken up by many prominent Indian scholars.³

2. Gregory Schopen writing on Buddhism is another voice in this type of critique. See for example his "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31 (1991).

3. We should perhaps single out Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), font of the Bengal renaissance and polemicist against idol-worship, as a major source of this attitude (Salmond 1992).

Deadwyler offers a synopsis of this perspective:

Another impediment to understanding *arcana* (image worship) comes from India itself. Indian apologists, who have attempted to defend image worship to Europeans, have almost all been proponents of *advaita vedānta*. Their understanding is cognitively about the same as that of Christian critics: sincere worshippers of divine images are indeed spiritually impoverished and theologically unsophisticated. For the image is *māyā* and the worshipper is an illusion. According to Śaṅkarācārya, when *brahman* is an object of knowledge, it is realized as *nirguṇa*—unqualified by names, forms, attributes, or relations, and it is not different in any respect from the knower. When *brahman* is an object of ignorance, however, it appears as *saṅguṇa*, as the personal Lord and creator of the universe, and as distinct from the worshipper. "As long as it is the object of nescience," Śaṅkarācārya says, "there are applied to it the categories of devotee, object of devotion, and the like." Thus, a spiritually enlightened person knows that God is ultimately to be understood through negative theology. It cannot be represented by words, let alone by images. (Deadwyler 1985, 75)

Deadwyler, belonging to a Hindu tradition which holds that divinity can become incarnate in the form of an image (*arcāvatāra*), contrasts his own tradition with that of Advaita which he sees as antithetical in its attitude to imagery.

These are a few examples of the criticism of the tendency to allow a "neo-Vedāntic" perspective to be taken as the definitive expression of Hindu religiosity. For Eck such a view ignores the immense importance of Hindu devotionism which centres on visual contact (*darśan*) with the divine image. For Davis, such a view ignores the ritualism of Śaiva Siddhānta and its notion of the image "enlivened" through invocation and consecration. Similarly for Deadwyler, this view is incapable of accommodating the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava doctrine of what we could call the "real presence" of divinity in the consecrated statue.⁴

This debate calls for a closer examination of the exact nature of the Advaita Vedānta position on image worship. The synopsis of Advaita on image worship offered above by Deadwyler *can* be supported by reading Śaṅkara's commentaries. However Advaitic tradition includes more than philosophical commentary, it is also hagiography and even iconography. This paper aims to show that from this wider perspective it is mistaken

4. Deadwyler offers a sophisticated apologetic for image worship from a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava perspective. For a thorough discussion of Śrī Vaiṣṇava theologies of the image see Katherine K. Young, "Beloved Places (Ukantarūṇiṇaṇilāṅka): The Correlation of Topography and Theology in the Śrīvaiṣṇava Tradition of South India" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1978), chap. 4.

to set up Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta as intrinsically anti-image. When we examine the devotional writings *by* Śaṅkara, the hagiographical writings *about* Śaṅkara and visual icons *of* Śaṅkara it becomes very apparent that Advaitic tradition far from denigrating imagery, shares in the espousal of its saliency. Even in Śaṅkara's commentarial writings, which do admittedly in places relegate devotion and image practices to a second tier of religious realization, there are other passages which defend the value of the anthropomorphic image of the Godhead and its use as a support for meditation.

Śaṅkara on Devotion and Image Worship: The Commentarial Writings

Two basic postulates of the Advaitic system are (1) that the highest Godhead is beyond attribution and (2) that the ultimate unity of ultimate reality precludes any real separation of the soul from God. These two postulates raise obvious problems regarding the place of devotionism in Advaita. In the first instance, if the Godhead is totally beyond attributes and description, how can it be represented and what image can provide a focus for devotion? In the second case, if there is no ultimate distinction between the individual and God how then can there be a place for devotional practices? Devotional practices are predicated on the separation of devotee from object of devotion and devotion is seen as a sort of current of love traversing the distance between the two poles of devotee and deity. Thus the non-duality of soul and God would seem to preclude devotionism. The answer to both these questions lies in a two-truth and two-stage notion whereby devotion is legitimated but only as a lower level of truth and spiritual realization. There are two levels of truth, conventional (*vyāvahārika*) and absolute (*paramārthika*); two levels of Brahman, with and without attributes (*saḡuṇa*, *nirḡuṇa*); and by extension from these there are two ways of apprehending the divine, through devotion (*bhakti*) and through knowledge (*jñāna*). In each set of pairs the second member is the higher entity.

Empirical existence is the realm of distinctions and on this level *bhakti* or devotion is a legitimate activity which has as its object *saḡuṇa* Brahman as *Īśvara* the Lord. However the true knower (*jñānin*) realizes that all distinctions ultimately are false and knows the truth of the formless *nirḡuṇa* Brahman and therefore has no reliance or need for the props of devotional images. While the *jñānin* at this highest level thus has no need of images, images are still considered useful as a means for generating *bhakti* which is proximate means (*antaraṅga-sādhana*) on the way to intuitive knowledge of Brahman.

Śaṅkara teaches that devotional practices employing visual images

are permissible as a preliminary stage for those not yet able to engage in the highest wisdom. He states in the *Gauḍapāḍakārikā Bhāṣya* IV, 42-42:

for those who are full of faith and are of right conduct, but are unable to fix their minds on the formless Brahman, meditation of the formless Brahman as having a form should be encouraged. (Ramamurti 1974, 65)

This then is Śaṅkara's "stage model" of devotion in which image worship, although legitimate as a preliminary practice, must find itself on a lower rung of the ladder of ascent to ultimate reality. Most authors alluding to Śaṅkara on this issue are content to leave the matter here. For example S. Radhakrishnan offers his interpretation of Śaṅkara on image worship: "Image worship is a means to realization. When we gain our ends, the means fall away. Lamps are useful so long as we live in darkness, but when the sun arises they cease to be of any help" (Bādarāyana 1968, 174). However, there are other areas of Śaṅkara's commentarial writings where he has a more directly positive view of image practices. These passages deserve our attention.

One context where images are useful is in the support of meditation. This role is discussed in Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* V.1.1:

As the Highest self Who is the eternal Ākāśa, is not the object of eyes and other sense-organs, so He is not perceivable to the mind without the help of some suitable symbol (Ālambana) to support it. For this reason, He is envisaged or imagined with faith and devotion, in His best symbol i.e. Ōṅkāra just as god Viṣṇu is envisaged by the people in His images made out of stone etc., having his limbs carved in them (Mishra 1967, 93).

Besides articulating the usefulness of images as supports for meditation, Śaṅkara also upholds the possibility of the personification of the absolute. In his *Brahmasūtra* commentary I.I.20, he defends the possibility of Brahman appearing in anthropomorphic form. He defends the view that the "golden person appearing within the sun and the eye" referred to in passages from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is indeed Brahman (my translation):

But now (concerning the objection) that the mention in *śruti* of form such as golden beardedness is not possible for the Highest Lord, we say to this that it may be so because of the free wish of the Highest Lord (that He takes) a form consisting of *māyā* for the sake of favouring his worshippers. Thus from the *smṛti* (we read): "O Nārada verily it is a device (*māyā*) emitted by me that you see me. You should not under-

stand me as endowed with the qualities of all beings." Also, where the form of the Highest Lord, removed from all distinguishing characteristics is spoken of (*upadiśyate*), there is the *śāstra* verse beginning with: "Without sound, without touch, without form, imperishable." But, because of being maker of all things, the Supreme Being is (also) declared to have some distinctions or modifying qualities as in the verse beginning with: "All works, all desires, all odors, all tastes" [*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.2]. In such a way there will be a description such as that beginning with "golden beardedness" and so on.

Śaṅkara also addresses the problem of particularity, that is, the problem of localizing that which is infinite and omnipresent in a particular limited place. In his *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* I.ii.7 he answers the complaints of those who contest the locating of the supreme Self in the heart:

While it is impossible from every point of view to assert all-pervasiveness for something that is spatially limited, it is possible in the case of the omnipresent One to speak of limited presence in some sense because of existence everywhere, just as a king ruling over the whole earth can be referred to as the king of Ayodhyā. (Śaṅkara 1977, 116)

Just as space can conventionally be described as being 'contained' in a jar, so too a universal monarch like Rāma who rules over the whole world, can be said to be king of Ayodhyā.⁵

The *Brahmasūtra* commentary continues with a passage I will quote at length which elaborates on this theme and which also refers to the worship of God in concrete form:

Opponent: From what standpoint, again, is omnipresent God, spoken of as having a tiny abode and minuteness?

Vedāntin: We say that this is declared thus for the sake of being contemplated on. That God, possessed of a set of such qualities as subtleness, is taught to be meditated on there in the lotus of the heart, just as (the Lord) Hari is taught to be worshipped on a *śalagrāma* (stone symbol). A certain state of the intellect, (brought about by the Upaniṣadic instruction), catches a glimpse of Him there. God, though omnipresent, becomes gracious when worshipped there. And this is to be understood on the analogy of space. Just as space though all pervasive, is referred to as having a limited habitation and minuteness from the point of view of its association with the eye of a needle, so also is the case with Brahman.

5. This notion is of course relevant to the question of "idol" worship in that part of the polemic of iconoclasts involves the "scandal of particularity" as the iconoclast demands: "How can you possibly say that the omnipresent, infinite Godhead is located in this particular lump of carved stone?" It should be noted that the word "idol" as used in this paper is without pejorative connotation, its usage following that of many Indian authors who use it interchangeably with "image."

Thus the limited habitation and subtleness being declared for the sake of meditation, these do not belong to Brahman in any real sense (Śaṅkara 1977, 116).

Thus Śaṅkara does acknowledge and legitimate image worship (the Lord can be worshipped in the *Śālagrāma* stone). It is true that he does place this below perfect realization but it is a means to such realization and nowhere is he dismissive of the means. While acknowledging the presence of a stage model approach to images in Śaṅkara it is important to indicate that this is in no way a denigration or dismissal of images and that there are many passages which indicate a favorable attitude to images in his philosophical writings. This favorable attitude is greatly accentuated in the devotional literature attributed to the great *ācārya*.

Śaṅkara as Devotionalist: The Hymns

Śaṅkara is said to have written many hymns (*stotra*) of a devotional quality. How many of the hymns ascribed to Śaṅkara are the actual work of the figure tentatively held to have lived from 788 to 820 C.E. is controversial. Doubtless many of these hymns are not actually from his hand, but the important point here is that the tradition ascribes them to him, and thus they must be seen as a component of the Advaitic tradition.⁶ David Lorenzen notes: "It is by no means clear which if any of the devotional hymns were actually composed by Śaṅkara. For present purposes it is mostly sufficient that they have been accepted by his followers as authoritative" (Lorenzen 1976, 105). I would concur with this statement in so far as it relates to my argument against those (such as Deadwyler quoted above) who would set up Advaita Vedānta as a position diametrically or inherently opposed to popular Hindu devotion and image practice. Space allows the devotionalism ascribed to Śaṅkara to be illustrated from just one of the many devotional poems the tradition attributes to him, the *Śivānandalahari*. In this work (verse 7) we find a description of the image of Śiva suggestive of the sculptural form:

O the Supreme Śiva. Let my mind stay at Thy lotus-feet; let my speech be engaged in uttering Thy praise; my hands in Thy worship; my sense

6. On this question see Robert Gussner, "A Stylometric Study of the Authorship of Seventeen Sanskrit Hymns Attributed to Śaṅkara," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96. 2 (1976). Gussner concludes that two of the seventeen he analyzed were authentically by Śaṅkara. A complicating factor here is the fact that the "abbots" of the monastic institutions (*maṭha*) held to have been founded by Śaṅkara have taken the title of Śaṅkarācārya down through the centuries. Thus some hymns ascribed to "Śaṅkara" could refer to these successors. In order to avoid confusion, the original Śaṅkara is now often referred to as Ādi (original or primordial) Śaṅkara or Ādi Śaṅkarācārya.

of hearing in listening to thy story; my intellect in meditation on Thee; and my eyes in looking on thy splendid form! (Śaṅkara 1980).

How is one to look on the form of Śiva? A subsequent verse (25) suggests that Śaṅkara has in mind the iconographical representation of the god in an actual sculpture (*mūrti*) as Umāmaheśvara:

When shall I behold Thee, that hast a blue throat, three eyes and a body embraced by Umā, that holdest in thy hands a deer and a cutting axe, that art seated on the hump of the big bull that is lusty and handsome, as Brahmā and other gods sing Thy praise, as the ascetics cry out "Hail! Hail!", and as the divine attendants dance around.

Later (verse 30) Śaṅkara relates how the finite individual should emulate the gods in the ritual worship of Śiva.

O, the One who wearest the young moon as the crest-jewel! O Lord of souls! O Master! O Teacher of the three worlds! If there be in me the status of the sun with a thousand hands (rays) in the matter of dressing Thee in clothes, the status of Viṣṇu in the matter of worshipping Thee with flowers, the status of Vāyu in the matter of applying sandal-paste (to Thy body), the status of Indra, the chief of Agni, in the matter of cooking food, and the status of Hiranyagarbha in the matter of making vessels, then may I render service to Thee!

The devotional service of God is compared to the anointing and worship made by the temple priests to the consecrated sculptures of the gods in the temple. The fact that such fervent devotional material was ascribed to Śaṅkara was perhaps a step on the way to his own person becoming an object of devotion.

Śaṅkara as Object of Devotion: The Hagiographies

The hagiographical literature dealing with the life of Śaṅkara casts him in the mold of an *avatāra* or descent of divinity. This literature also contains many references to image practices. As the hagiographies about Śaṅkara are replete with illustrations of image worship, this indicates that it is mistaken to equate the Advaitic tradition as a whole with the dismissal or repudiation of "visible religion."

In the best known of the hagiographies of Śaṅkara, the *Śaṅkara-Dig-Vijaya* attributed to Mādhava⁷ (also known as Vidyāranya, 14th century), even before the birth of the child who would become the renowned *ācārya*, there are allusions to image practices (Mādhava 1978). The

7. The attribution to the 14th century figure is controversial. David Lorenzen prefers a 17th or 18th century dating (Lorenzen 1976, 90).

mighty god Śiva manifests himself in a great *Śivaliṅga* on a hill known as Vṛṣācala in Kerala near the village of Kaladi where Śaṅkara would eventually be born. The local king erects a temple over the *liṅga* in order for it to be venerated. A devout Brahman in the nearby village has a son named Śivaguru who as a *brahmacārī* studies with a preceptor and acquires prodigious learning. Śivaguru wishes to become a *sannyāsī* but his father persuades him to marry. Śivaguru does so and he and his wife are a devout and pious couple. However they are unable to conceive a son. Śivaguru's wife comes to him and urges supplication of the image of Śiva. She says:

God Siva is the Kalpataru for man. By supplication to him we shall get what we want. The story of Upamanyu in the Mahabharata is proof of this. God manifests himself to man through His images. Men think that divine images are mere inert things. But quite the reverse is the case. Inertness lies in the nature of unregenerate man. (Mādhava 1978, 14)

Heeding his wife's instructions Śivaguru goes to the shrine of Śiva at Vṛṣācala and venerates the image there of Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara, "the Great God whose half is formed of his consort Umā, and whose matted locks bear the crescent moon as an ornament." His prayers are answered and his wife conceives the child who will be born as Śaṅkarācārya.⁸ At his birth miraculous flowers rain down from heaven and his body displays a supernatural lustre and bears the auspicious marks of Śiva's trident and the third eye.

Images or idols figure prominently in the various hagiographical accounts of his youth. One story relates that the boy was once suckled by the statue of Devī in a local temple (Kūppuswāmi 1972, 44). When Śaṅkara as a boy is about to leave his mother's home and take up the life of a wandering ascetic he hears the voice of Kṛṣṇa who asks him to save his image (the Kṛṣṇa idol) in a neighboring temple which is about to be inundated by a flood. Śaṅkara promptly moves the heavy idol and places it safely on higher ground (Mādhava 1978, 47).

When Śaṅkara as a renouncer eventually reaches the holy city of Vārānaśī he takes a bath in the sacred river Gaṅgā. The text states that he came out of the water looking like the reemergent moon: "his frame, with drops of the holy waters dripping all over, looked like a statue of Indrakanta stone..." (Mādhava 1978, 59). In another recension his body appears "like an image of Śiva carved in moonstone" (Lorenzen 1976, 102).

8. Another Śaṅkara hagiography, the *Śaṅkara-Vijaya* of Anantānandagiri portrays Śaṅkara's mother as a fervent worshipper of the famous *Ākāśaliṅga* of Śiva at Chidambaram. Through this devotion she comes to bear the incarnation of Śiva (Mādhava 1978, xxodiii).

Not only is Śaṅkara compared to an image of the deity, but the hagiographies also claim that he installed images of the gods (*mūrti*) in many parts of India. Accounts of his life claim that Śaṅkara visited Mount Kailāsa where Śiva as Parameśvara gave him five crystal *lingas* known as *Mokṣalinga*, *Varalinga*, *Bhogalinga*, *Muktilinga* and *Yogalinga*. A modern eulogizer of Śaṅkara alludes to this story:

Sri Sankara then repaired to Kedara where he installed the Muktilinga and established one of his pontificates there. Proceeding thence he went to Nepal, he vanquished the Buddhists who denied the soul and God. He installed the Varalinga there which is even now in worship in the Pasupatinath temple in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal (Sankara-narayanan 1969).

Śaṅkara is claimed, as well, to have installed a *mūrti* of Gaṇeśa as Śrī Vighneśvara at Tiruchirapalli. This image was placed before the image of a fierce goddess, Akhilānandēśvarī, to which Śaṅkara fixed two earrings in the form of the *Śrīcakra* (a *yantra* or geometric device) which acted to “tame” her (Kūppuswāmī 1972, 87). Śaṅkara is credited with pacifying several fierce goddesses with the *Śrīcakra*. The ascription of such activities to him may symbolize his purifying or elevating many primitive cults throughout India through his philosophical acumen.

The fact that many temples in India make the claim that their images were installed by Śaṅkara may reflect an attempt to appropriate the great philosopher to legitimate and lend prestige to those who have a stake in image and temple worship. The question arises as to whether or not the hagiographical literature about Śaṅkara and the attribution to him of devotional hymns should be seen as the attempt of subsequent theistic Hinduism to “co-opt” the great *ācārya* and use him to legitimate theistic practices such as image worship in the vested interests of those who benefit from temple practices. While this question is beyond the scope of this paper, what is significant for our purposes is that image worship has long been associated with Śaṅkara and that this fact militates against interpreting Advaitic tradition as essentially aniconic.

A conference in Madras in 1969 was held under the title “Sankara and Shanmata” and its subsequently published presentations stress the compatibility of Śaṅkara and Advaita Vedānta with theistic Hinduism, *bhakti*, and temple worship. The book begins with a *vandana* or salutation to Śaṅkara and a eulogy to him written by His Holiness Sri Chāṇḍrasekharendra Sarasvatī, the current (in 1969) Śaṅkarācārya of Kanchi. In this eulogy Śaṅkara is praised as the great defender of theistic Hinduism in its manifold forms:

Sri Sankara Bhagavatpada taught us the truth that all the deities we hereditarily worship are but the manifestations of the One Supreme Self—*Paramatman*. He established the worship of the forms of Siva, Vishnu, Sakti, Surya, Ganapati and Kumara, all sanctified in the Vedas, and each having a specific Gayatri Mantra. If worshipped with devotion, all of them will enable us to attain the same Supreme Soul . . . It is due to Sri Bhagavatpada and his prayer compositions in praise of the different manifestations of God that a new life has come to be breathed into temple worship and the festivals associated with temples. Therefore it behooves us to celebrate as a great festival the birthday (Jayanti) of Bhagavatpada. Had it not been for this one Jayanti, the observance of the Jayantis of the avatars like Rama, Krishna and other festivals propitiating Ganapati, Siva, Sakti and Kumara would have ceased owing to the spread of atheism.

Moving beyond this statement, another contributor to the book, A.S. Nataraja Ayyar writes:

Sankara raised Temple-Worship to its proper and unique position as the medium to reach Brahman. The Apostle of Nirguna worship as Sankara is stylized became in fact the Defender of the Faith of the millions of Bharata Varsha and thus placed the temple worshipper on a par with the Vedic sacrificer and this enabled him (the temple worshipper) to raise his head aloft and not bend low in the assembly of the wise. Thus in the hands of Sankara, Karma and Bhakti were shown to reach the same goal as Gnana. (Ayyar 1969)

Śaṅkara as Object of Devotion: The Iconographies

It is clear that Śaṅkara is invoked as the purifier and redeemer of theistic Hinduism. Also clear is the fact that the “Advaitins” who composed his hagiographies had no qualms about associating Śaṅkara with idols of the gods. Śaṅkara rescues idols, restores temples and installs images in them. Hailed as the champion of theistic Hinduism, Śaṅkara himself becomes an image of veneration. A section of the *Śaṅkara-Dig-Vijaya* entitled a “panegyric of Śaṅkara” is quite explicit in doing this (Mādhava 1978, 29–40). The flavor of this material is suggested by the following quotation referring to Śaṅkara:

. . . Vedic scholars say that by prostrating at his feet men would attain to the Lord or gain salvation. But I go further and say: Men attain to Moksha even by offering their heart's devotion at the feet of those who have served him. His thighs covered with a white cloth, resembled the trunk of an elephant whitened by the foam from the waves of a milk ocean.... His neck was in appearance like a big white conch, whose sonorous sound was the proclamation of victory over controversialists. (Mādhava 1978, 31, 32)

Such florid language is echoed in our own century by the salutations (*vandana*) with which Swami Sivananda prefaces his work on the *Brahma Sūtras*. One of these reads:

I contemplate on Śaṅkarācārya, who is seated in Padmāsana, who is tranquil, who is endowed with virtues like Yama, whose glory is like that of the enemy of Cupid, who wears the sacred ashes on his forehead, whose smiling face resembles the blossomed lotus, who has lotus-like eyes, with book (in one hand) and showing Jñāna-mudrā (in another hand), who is adored by the foremost of gods, who gives boons to those who prostrate to him. (Sivananda 1977, xiv)

The poetic images of the great preceptor are concretized in the actual paintings and statues of Śaṅkara which (in Weberian terms) act to routinize his charisma and serve as objects of devotion. The view that Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta is inherently aniconic is nowhere more obviously challenged than in the physical images of Śaṅkara himself. The great Advaitic teacher is now revered in India in many temples as an incarnation of Śiva and is portrayed as a deity for worship. There are many temples dedicated to Śaṅkara including one at Kaladi in Kerala, his alleged birthplace, Puri, Sringeri, and at Kedarnath in the Himalayas. The Śaṅkarācāryas or abbots of the monastic centers which trace their lineage back to Ādi Śaṅkara, have propagated devotion to the imagery of Śaṅkara. In the 1960s the Śaṅkarācārya of Kanchi began a program of building shrines to Śaṅkara at important places of pilgrimage such as Rāmeśvaram. At Tiruvidadimarudur, the Śaṅkarācārya commemorated the place where, in one version of the *Dig-Vijaya*, Śaṅkara desired that the *mahālīṅga* of the temple should attest to the truth of Advaita to dispel any lingering doubts in the people. Śiva manifested himself by projecting his raised right hand from out of the *līṅga* while his voice proclaimed: "Satyam advaitam, satyam advaitam, satyam advaitam." In 1963 the Śaṅkarācārya of Kanchi had a *līṅga* with protruding hand erected in a shrine at the Śaṅkara Maṭha and *pāduka* for the worship of Śaṅkara's feet to commemorate this event. He also had images of Ādi Śaṅkara and his four main disciples and *guru pāduka* erected at Kanchi (Mahadevan, 1969).

William Cenkner says of the twentieth century Śaṅkarācāryas:

Their devotion to the great master is unparalleled, and they actively promote devotion to him. At Sringeri there is a Śaṅkara temple, while in the Kanchi, Puri and Dwaraka *maṭha-s*, *pūjā* is regularly performed before formidable Śaṅkara idols. The Śaṅkarācāryas have built temples and memorials to the master throughout India. The Ādi Śaṅkara Jayanti Festival, inaugurated in 1833 by the then reigning Sringeri guru, is now an

annual celebration. The Jagadgurus are recognized as supreme devotees of Ādi Śaṅkara, and it is not uncommon for their followers to install Śaṅkara idols in their homes and make the master Advaitin a part of their daily devotional life. (Cenkner 1984, 152)

In art Śaṅkara is depicted as a *sannyāsin* seated in the lotus posture, and is typically shown with his ascetics staff or *daṇḍa*.⁹ His usual attributes are the water pot of the ascetic sometimes said to contain the ambrosia of knowledge and immortality and the manuscript (*pustaka*), which is also carried by Brahmā and Sarasvatī and symbolizes the Veda. It is also found in Buddhist depictions of Mañjuśrī and Prajñāpāramitā and symbolizes great wisdom and learning. Śaṅkara usually wears the Śaivite rosary made from the berries of *Elaeocarpus ganitrus*. The berries are held to have five segments signifying Śiva's five faces.

In sculpture, typically four of Śaṅkara's main disciples are depicted on the plinth supporting his image. The *ācārya* is often shown with his right hand in the position of teaching (*vyākhyāna mudrā*), in which the tip of the index finger touches the thumb, the palm outward with the other three fingers extended. The touching index finger and thumb symbolize the overcoming of any separation between self and godhead. This *mudrā* is referred to in the *vandana* or salutation which begins Śaṅkara's well known hymn to Śiva as Dakṣināmūrti:

I praise Dakṣināmūrti, the handsome youth who has expounded the truth of non-duality by eloquent silence, who is surrounded by a group of disciples consisting of aged sages who are absorbed in the contemplation of the supreme Self, who is the prince among preceptors, who by his hand (i.e. by the union of his thumb and fore-finger) shows the sign indicating the identity of the individual soul and the supreme Self, who is the embodiment of bliss, who delights in the Self, and who has a charming face. (Mahadevan 1980, 2)

In fact, Śaṅkara who is himself a "prince of preceptors", comes to be assimilated to the image of Dakṣināmūrti, the southward facing Lord.

At Kanchipuram, the figure of Śaṅkara enshrined in the Śrī Kāmākṣhī temple is seated within an arch of glory rising from a pair of aquatic monsters. A popular bazaar poster painting of this statue provides the frontispiece for the book *Saṅkara and Shanmata*. Śaṅkara sits under an honorific umbrella whose vertical handle is sometimes said to represent the *axis mundi* which extends down through the sacred figure. Curiously, this figure has not only the rosary of the Śaivite ascetic, but also an ornamental

9. The iconography of Śaṅkara is summarized in Gösta Liebert, *Iconographic Dictionary of the Indian Religions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976): 252.

necklace of jewelry more in keeping with the ornaments seen on the bodhisattva images from Gandhāra. This necklace may represent his spiritual riches. The figure also has the extended earlobes of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. He is decked out in a red robe and a garland extends down from his shoulders to the plinth below which depicts ascetic disciples standing with hands raised in the gesture of reverential salutation (*añjali mudrā*). These ascetics tempt one to see here an echo of the depiction of the ascetic disciples often shown on the plinth of Gupta period sculptures of the first sermon of the Buddha. Above the heads of the ascetics are the petals of a lotus seat which supports the main *mūrti* of Śaṅkarācārya. The lotus is of course the standard pedestal support for Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu divinities.

In front of the principal image is another *mūrti*, also of Śaṅkara but this time in metal instead of stone. The figure sits on a lotus base below which are perforations for the insertion of rods by which this image can be carried, indicating that this is an *utsavamūrti* for use in festival processions. Before both images is an array of *pūjā* implements and offerings: coconut, holy water, a bell, lamp, and incense. Truly, the teacher of non-dualism has become himself an object of devotion.

Conclusion

This paper began by citing recent criticism of those who would hold Advaita Vedānta as normative Hinduism especially in regard to image worship. It is agreed that this privileging of Advaita can result in a truncated vision of Hinduism if it ignores the pervasiveness of image worship in popular religion, consecration rites which “enliven” *mūrtis*, and also the other Hindu religious systems which have articulated sophisticated theologies of the image. At the same time Advaita Vedānta should not be held up as a tradition opposed to idols. It does regard image practices as a means towards realization. Only a very selective reading of Advaita could regard this as dismissive of the image. As well, I have tried to show how theistic Hinduism sees Śaṅkara, the paradigmatic Advaitin, both as a devotionalist and as object of devotion. Indian reverence for the guru holds that the teacher is identified with the teaching and thus is worthy of devotion including devotion to representations of his physical form.

Those professing an allegiance to Advaita, including the reigning Śaṅkarācāryas of today, advocate the veneration of images including the image of Śaṅkara himself. In doing so *Advaitic tradition itself* demonstrates the ubiquity of the image in Hindu religiosity. Theistic Hinduism does not posit a dichotomy between Advaita and imagery.

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