Globethics Repository



Nammalvar, God’ s Decoy

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Weber, Edmund
Publisher	Frankfurt University
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-04 05:55:17
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/191215

Journal of Religious Culture

Journal für Religionskultur

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber
in Association with / in Zusammenarbeit mit Matthias Benad
Institute of Religious Peace Research / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik
Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935 - © E.Weber – E-mail: irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de
web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik

No. 36b (2000)

Nammalvar, God's Decoy

Anthropocentric and Theocentric Soteriology in the Hindu Religions of the Tamil Shrivaishnavas



By

Edmund Weber

The basic argument the canonical and apocryphal theologies of the South Indian Tamil Shrivaishnavas grow worm over since centuries is the question: Has God set into motion the process of salvation in order to save mankind - the anthropocentric tradition is teaching -, or in order to save himself, the way a theocentric soteriology would teach. To answer this question we have to examine particularly the theocentric religion of salvation because it

was held apocryphal by the anthropocentric orthodoxy and has therefore to be reconstructed from sources that are all concealed anthropocentrically.[1]

1. Anthropocentric Soteriology: The Salvation of Mankind

The orthodox theologies of the South Indian Shrivaishnavas, both of the Vatakalai and of the Tenkalai, take for granted transmigration, samsara, and the necessity of human salvation, moksha. As long as there is no salvation the transmigrating souls have to suffer. The suffering of the souls stems from their eternal offences to God.[2] The suffering itself is God's punishment for that offences. The souls suffer the imprisonment of samsara will say the endless continuation of reincarnations, which is kept into motion by the karmic deeds of the souls.

According to the Shrivaishnavas, there is nothing in the soul, which could make God saving it. On the other side, the souls cannot achieve salvation by themselves, not even by means of great religious acts. There is definitely no self-salvation possible. Only God can bestow redemption. The reason why God actually redeems the souls is only his benevolent nature.

Only dealing with the salvation of the human beings the Shrivaishnava soteriology is purely anthropocentric. In the two Shrivaishnava religions there is no dispute over the anthropocentricity of the soteriology. However, as soteriology, the Shrivaishnava theology has to answer the question by which means human beings can get salvation. Upon this issue there has been a dogmatic dispute persisting up to the present day.

The Vatakalai see as means of salvation the cooperation of human beings with God whereas the Tenkalai ascribe this function to Vishnu only.[3]

These soteriological differences are usually illustrated by the example of two behavioral patterns from the animal world. The Vatakalai religion compares the relationship between God and soul with the manner a monkey mother carries her child: although she is carrying the young animal, it has to hold to her out of its own strength. Thus the soul actively participates in the process of its own salvation. On the contrary the Tenkalai religion compares God's relationship to the souls with the manner a cat mother carries her child: the cat seizes her little one on the neck and carries it to the destination without any cooperation on its side.[4]

Although the two images clearly demonstrate the differences between the two religions they also show their soteriological conformity: man is the goal of the salvation, not God.

Both theologies fight out their dispute about the right way of souls' salvation by the example of the surprising conversion of the Tamil bard Nammalvar. The central theological issue the Shrivaishnava theologians discuss is the question whether the Lord bestowed salvation on Nammalvar because of his grace only or because of the alvar's previous good actions.

---

[1] Quotations of the primary sources are taken from Patricia Y. Mumme's article: "Grace and Karma in Nammalvar's Salvation". *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 107.2 (1987) 257-66 [=PM]. Because of technical reasons diacritic signs are not marked.

[2] PM 268-269

[3] The acts of God are usually characterized as grace. However, this is not correct. Grace implies that God gives up the enforcement of justice altogether. The Shrivaishnavas presuppose that the Lord does not possess such a power. He has to provide at least some achievements as a substitute in order to free men from the law of karma, from the samsara of justice which is seen as unconditional in power. In the prevailing theological systems the Lord is savior of the men and not of himself. He pays himself to the almighty Yamaraj, the king of justice, the required ransom. In this way both the justice required by Yamaraj and the law of karma respectively, and the compassion of the Lord, which is inherent to him, remain preserved in the salvation process.

[4] PM 257

This anthropocentric dispute about salvation will be discussed in the following in order to understand the theocentric religion stemming from the same sources in a better way.

1.1. The Synergetic Soteriology of the Vatakalai Shrivaishnavas

Vedanta Deshika, the leading theologian of the Vatakalai Religion, disputed with his Tenkalai colleagues about the true soteriology: If God in his nature is truly merciful, and there is no doubt about that, then he would want to save all souls. However, if he does not require any action from the souls, the way the Tenkalai teach, God should have saved all souls long ago.[5] Otherwise he would be guilty of cruelty to the souls that still have to be saved, and of the unjustified preferential treatment of the other souls.[6]
It is obvious that contrary to the Tenkalai Vedanta Deshika measures God's behavior according to the rules of justice. Therefore, he has to find a reason beyond God for the fact that only a part of the mankind has been saved so far.[7] For this purpose, he brings forward the argument of the necessity of different times of salvation.
Not having deserved salvation because of their damnable behavior the souls can be saved by God only. Reason is that God has unbound grace at his disposal. Applied to the individual this gracious salvation is connected with certain actions of the soul, which help to remove God's resentment.[8]
Out of that pure grace God has bestowed the effect of reconciling the souls to him on certain human actions, which have got the capacity to erase all the insults to God, and to give moksha. These privileged actions are bhakti-yoga and prapatti.[9]
The annihilation of all karma originated through the insult of God occurs when bhakti-yoga and prapatti are willfully and actually realized.[10]
The actions to which God has given a redemptive power are the fruits of previous good actions of the souls they had accomplished at various periods of time. That is why also the ripening of these fruits occurs at various periods of time.
This time variety of the karma production of the different souls and the time variety of ripening of the accumulated karma fruits, in this case are the fruits bhakti and prapatti, are the reason why the individual souls are saved at various times, or not saved yet respectively: "The endless streams of karma belonging to these souls go about ripening at various times."[11]
In order to achieve moksha in the end soul and God must wait until a bhakti-yoga or prapatti fruit has been produced and comes to ripening. If this happens the forgiveness and salvation machinery, which has been established by God out of pure grace, is activated.[12]

---

[5] PM 263
[6] PM 263
[7] PM 265
[8] PM 263
[9] PM 264
[10] PM 264, note 33
[11] PM 265
[12] Vedanta Deshika rejects the miscellaneous assignment of karmic fruit that causes bhakti. Though God bestows the fruit he does so only according to the preceding human karma. "Unless Lord grants fruits according to karma, the fault of partiality will accrue to Him" [PM 265]. God is a voluntary agent of karmic justice. In this way he maintains the karmic order and enables the order of salvation. The omnipotence of the karmic religion is manifested here: God must respect it if he wants to save men from it. Even he is not able to change this law completely. The Christian God of salvation also paid tribute to the religion of justice: as the Son of God he sacrificed himself for the sins of mankind and put a treasury of rightful actions as a com-

By teaching the necessary cooperation of the souls regarding God's salvation, Vedanta Deshika can solve the theological problem of the conflict between universal grace and universal justice. God's grace is not unjust even though not yet all souls have been saved up to this day, despite his universal grace.
Consequently, the Vatakalai religion presupposes a double cooperation of the soul in the salvation process. First, the soul must perform good actions in the course of its rebirths that have bhakti or prapatti as their fruit. Second, the soul must enjoy this fruit willfully as soon as it becomes ripe, i.e. it must experience its corresponding prarabdha karma will say bhakti or prapatti.
The basis of this synergism is God's unfathomable will to save the souls that have been cursed to an eternal samsara. As the human beings cannot get salvation on their own, they hurry to the gracious God for help.
This synergistic construction of the Vatakalai theology serves only one purpose: the salvation of men it represents an anthropocentric soteriology.

1.2. The An-ergetic Soteriology of the Tenkalai Shrivaishnavas

Contrary to the Vatakalai religion the Tenkalai theologians completely deny any operation of the souls for their own salvation. Salvation is bestowed, actually imposed to them only by God's actions. This exclusive acting of God occurs through his glance. Where his glance falls, all evil disappears: "The place where the Lord's glance falls becomes devoid of faults."[13] God's redemptive glance fell upon Nammalvar this time. According to the Tenkalai he did not give any reason for this act of grace at all: "Thus it fell on this one soul who was shuttling back and forth in any and every kind of birth, indifferently taking up whatever body was dictated by his karma, no mater what jati nor varna ... ."[14] Therefore, God did not consider Nammalvar's actions in previous lives, and even not in the present life; nor did he take into consideration his caste, or whether he had stored bhakti in sanchita karma, or whether he was indifferent to the rebirths in samsara.
The Tenkalai scholars were aware of the fact that this kind of redemptive ideas was perceived as a very unusual, even paradoxical one. In order to intensify this soteriologically intended paradox, they used to tell that even the wives of the Lord thought his behavior was incomprehensible: "This special grace, which cannot be known or understood even by the Lord's consorts as He lies in their close embrace, is without any cause but His own will."[15]
In case of Nammalvar whom the Tenkalai used as an example to introduce their salvation theory not only the fruit of bhakti was missing but also the will and wish to love God. Further more, he was a convinced anti-bhakta as he had practiced neither ascetic austerities nor social welfare work nor any other pious exercises.[16]
Though the Lord did not consider the karmic prerequisites in selecting Nammalvar, the Tenkalai did not reject the validity of the karmic predisposition for the alvars's salvation.
The notion a soul could carry out bhakti without any previous action was unthinkable even to them. Even they were under the power of karmic religion.
In order to justify the assertion that Nammalvar became a bhakta without any participation on his side they developed the doctrine of God's substitutive karma. According to which

---

pensation for the punishment of their sins at their disposal. Similarly to the indo-genous ones, the Christian religions presuppose the karmic order and pay their tribute to it.

[13] PM 260
[14] PM 260
[15] PM 260
[16] PM 261

Nammalvar’s unexplainable bhakti was neither created out of his self nor out of nothing. It was the result of a corresponding act of God: "Thus the Bhakti which Alvar received is the fruit of the labors of the Lord of all."[17] Thus, God’s actions are organized according to the karmic law. Obviously God produces good i.e. bhakti causing deeds. However, he does not need these good deeds; they are so to say surplus good deeds.
Such deeds could be transferred to men in order to benefit them. In this way, the fruit of a deed does not have to be enjoyed by the doer himself, but can also be enjoyed by the recipient.
God has allotted such a substitutive karma to Nammalvar so that he could experience its effect: feeling nothing else but bhakti. By effectuating the salvation of the soul through God's meritorious deeds the Tenkalai have satisfied the theological claims the all-pervading karmic religion is enforcing.
Through the doctrine of the treasury of God's surplus good deeds and their free transfer to other acting agents, i.e. the substitutive salvation, the absolute act of God's grace, the radical *sola gratia*[18], is secured: all salvation actions "came about from the Lord alone ... not on the basis of his [Nammalvar's, note of the author] good karma."[19]
In this way, one questions not only the grounds for the objective possibility of bhakti through Nammalvar's previous life but also his independent and free consent to its realization. He defended himself against the realization of bhakti, which was imposed on him: "I never agreed to place him [God, note of the author] in my heart."[20] The alvar comments on his spiritual rape with bitter irony: "Me - the one who was made to consent."[21] The Tenkalai theologian Manavalamamuni interprets this phrase as a proof that Nammalvar contributed absolutely nothing to his salvation: "If he had previously given permission or consent, [Nammalvar] would not have said, 'I never agreed' or 'was made to consent'."[22]
However, against the background of this radical *sola gratia* doctrine, bhakti acquires a completely new theological meaning. It is no more *syn-ergos*, cooperation of men for the achievement of moksha. It is now *an-ergos*, a non-deed. It is not an independent and autonomous product of the soul but a condition which has been imposed from outside: "You gave me a mind to approach and worship you."[23] This implanted bhakti is not a means to salvation but salvation itself. Otherwise, the *sola gratia* principle would be destroyed. However, there is no trace of it in the Tenkalai doctrine. Manavalamamuni summarized the entire soteriology of the Tenkalai in five statements: "1) The Alvar’s excellence, 2) that the Lord’s causeless grace is the basis for it, 3) the uniqueness of the bhakti that he had on account of [the fact that it was based on account only on the Lord’s grace], 4) that it was not gained from [Nammalvar’s] karma or jnana, 5) that there is no other cause for the Lord accepting him but that grace alone."[24]
The last statement shows the Tenkalai wanted to understand their an-ergistic model of salvation as a strictly anthropocentric one. Of cause, bhakti is no more a way to salvation. However, it is a condition worth aspiring after, even though the human being, in this case

[17] PM 261
[18] Lat.: Salvation happens *only by* external *grace* and not by one's own deeds.
[19] PM 262
[20] PM 262
[21] PM 262
[22] PM 262
[23] PM 262
[24] PM 263

Nammalvar, does not wish for it in his blindness. Then, in retrospect, forced to his happiness, the alvar confessed with joy and gratefulness: "You destroyed my evil mind."[25]

2. Theocentric Soteriology: Vishnu's Religion of Salvation

Studying the traditions of the two diverse Shrivaishnava soteriologies one can discover a third indeed completely different religion. Through their interpretation the two dominant theologies have changed the specificity of the third religion making it unrecognizable and turning it to its opposite.[26] Nevertheless, we can identify theocentric motifs and can reconstruct a corresponding soteriology through a typological differentiation of the Shrivaishnava traditions, particularly from the Tenkalai religion, which has been anthropocentrically understood all the time.

This third Shrivaishnava soteriology can be found in various exegeses, in narratives and parables of the Tenkalai tradition, especially within the avatara doctrine, in the parable about the peasant and the doctrine of the decoy.

According to the Tenkalai soteriology[27] God took various animal forms in order to reveal the Vedic truth and to resurrect it. As the souls did not react to this actions the Lord incarnated many times, did marvels, and revealed the Shastras, which taught the way to salvation. However, all these attempts of Vishnu proved to be a failure: "Still he saw that all these efforts to win these souls to himself had been in vain."[28] God completely failed: "they resisted all the Lord's attempts to convert them."[29] The transmitting Tenkalai orthodoxy gives the following reasons for it in a denunciatory intention: "attachment to the material world and their selfish desires."[30]

But the souls were interested in something else; they followed their own interests and loved their samsaric world. They missed nothing, nothing which could have forced them to accept voluntarily God's urge to love and worship him.

Only God felt something missing: people who loved him. In this way the purpose of God's failed redemptive attempts became obvious. He wanted to be loved by the human beings. But experiencing the souls' denial of love for ages God could not wait any longer and put an end to his suffering. Thus a Tamil theology of suffering is visible in God's desperate salvation story.[31]

From the viewpoint of the orthodoxy the conflict looks different. According to it man has been insulting God for ages and has therefore deserved the painfully experienced karmic effects of samsara. As the souls have become slaves to the material world, and, to their own harm, have followed only their egotistic interests they are unable to save themselves from their misery. Out of his inherent grace, God takes the initiative and gives the unsaved soul the possibility of liberation.

---

[25] PM 262

[26] Such violent exegeses are usual in the history of religion. However, a religio-typological criticism should aim at revealing the specificity of the submerged experience of the Holy in order to secure its freedom and wealth. The power of the ideology which propagates the necessity of human salvation and which is taught by the dominant theologies is manifested also in the fact that it is taken by consideration even by the non-religious Western discipline of Indology. The reason is most probably the implicit, or explicit respectively, religious anthropocentrism, which is common to both.

[27] PM 260

[28] PM 260

[29] PM 260

[30] PM 260

[31] Cf. the Christian parable of the so-called Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).

On the contrary, the theocentric interpretation starts from the assumption that a human being is free in his relationship to God, goes his own way and finds his happiness without God's grace and without bhakti. Hungry for love God can get hold of these souls only through spell and enchantment.

Though Vishnu could not kindle bhakti in the souls with the help of the Vedic, Upanishadic and Avataric religions (i.e. the religions of Rama, Krishna, and Buddha![32]), he did not give up, just the way a peasant does not give up when there is a crop failure.[33] Because of its anthropocentric soteriology, the orthodox Tenkalai tradition refers to the Lord as "compassionate."[34] Such a characterization is only theocentrically correct insofar as God has compassion for his own suffering, i.e. he does not give up his initiatives in his own favor.[35]

The point of comparing Vishnu with the peasant is to be seen only in the common characteristics not to give up a goal despite most difficult setbacks. Otherwise, Vishnu differs completely from the peasant in case of a failure. Whereas the peasant sticks to the same method of agriculture despite of the crop failure, the Lord undertakes a completely new strategy in order to achieve success finally. He puts into action an enchanted decoy.[36] Just the way the hunter of birds and animals tame an animal of the same species in order to use it as a decoy and catch the victims with its help, so does the Lord proceed with the unwilling souls: "Similarly, the Lord looked to someone suitable for this task – someone of the same kind to use as a decoy."[37]

Choosing Nammalvar for this purpose Vishnu provided the Shrivaishnavas with a special theological problem. Thus, Nammalvar was the least godless soul among the godless ones. He was a soul, who was particularly far away from God. According to the orthodox Tenkalai even the worst karmic and samsaric conditions left his soul completely indifferent to God: "indifferently taking up what ever body was dictated by his karma."[38]

The anthropocentric soteriology of the Shrivaishnavas extensively discussed the question about the possibility and reality of changing the relationship to the lord by the then extremely godless Nammalvar. This question, arising from the premise of the Shrivaishnava anthropocentric theology, asks how it was possible that exactly the least pious human being suddenly achieved extreme bhakti.[39]

The anti-karmic theocentric soteriology solves this problem in a non-karmic way. In order to win the love of men, Vishnu took to the last resource, namely magic art. He cast a love spell on Nammalvar so that he became a bhakta, even an ardent lover of Vishnu. As already mentioned the magical cure Vishnu used was his divine glance. This glance has its converting effect not through a divine substitution of karma, the way the anthropocentric Tenkalai soteriology teaches, but through the magic power inherent in itself.

---

[32] The anti-karmic theocentric religion denies any value of the other great Hindu religions, and of Buddhism. They all are refused because they deny God their non-karmic love. Producing karmic and anthropocentric illusions they are worse than the once godless Nammalvar insofar as they believe God wants to make a business with them according to the principle of do ut des, and therefore they failed to kindle pure love for God.

[33] PM 260

[34] PM 260

[35] The theocentric Shrivaishnava religion makes use of the dominant dogmatic language of the anthropocentric orthodoxy, i.e. of its opponents. As no theocentric orthodoxy was formed and therefore no proper conceptual terms could be developed, it was unavoidable to make use of an inadequate terminology in this period.

[36] PM 260

[37] PM 260

[38] PM 260

[39] PM 260

As a magician God is not subjected to the karmic law, and he can work without the cooperation of the soul the Vatakalai postulate.
A decoy has to lure other innocent birds into the trap of the hunter. As such a decoy, Nammalvar had to maneuver other men, who - like him - did not feel and did not want to feel bhakti, into a position so that God could successfully hunt them. However, the sources do not elaborate on the specifics of the hunt.
Thereafter, Vishnu transformed the alvar into a medium of his magical grace. This is explained with a new picture: "He took and transformed his [this soul, note of the author] into a channel for the flood of His grace."[40] Transforming Nammalvar into a channel Vishnu could reach other souls. In this way the souls got *gratia plena*[41] will say could be filled with his irresistible grace, which transformed them into bhaktas.
Absolutely determined to achieve his own salvation, sc. the love of human beings, God set into motion the archaic enchantment, illusory luring and magical infusion, and no longer karma or samsara, or the religion of Rama, Krishna or Buddha.
This decoy and channel soteriology is not based upon a thought of men's need for or interest in salvation. It has its roots only in God's desire for his own salvation, in winning the human love. Putting an end to his suffering he abstains from revenge, punishment or blackmail. With regard to the free and self-conscious godless human beings such punitive measures would have resulted only in God's deeper fall into the horror of disregard.

3. Conclusion

The logically clear theocentric theology of enchantment, decoy and channel is constantly being blurred and deformed by the anthropocentric religion of justice according to the deeds. At least, one tries to force it into the corset of the anthropocentric karma-samsara religion.
Nevertheless, though fragmentarily, even in the Shrivaishnava tradition, the omnipotence of the karma-samsara religion is undermined by God himself for the sake of his own salvation. For this theocentric goal of salvation God sacrifices man's freedom of will and the law of reprisal. According to theocentric fragments the karma-samsara religion, including its liberal Tenkalai version, is not dismantled by men but by God himself.
Our reconstruction of theocentric soteriology is based on literary fragments transmitted and distorted respectively by opposite religious traditions. A comprehensive study of the liturgy, folklore and other sources, including Shaiva tradition, should be done in order to reconstruct the whole theocentric religion of salvation of the Dravidians.

[40] PM 260

[41] Lat.: St. Mary was told by the archangel Gabriel (Luke 1,28): You are *full of grace*, which means: without sin.