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“The Religion of the Future” and Vedānta:

The Importance of Consulting Primary Sources

In his book, *The Religion of the Future*, Unger groups distinct philosophies under the term Overcoming the World (henceforward, OW). This is problematic because Unger makes several metaphysical and epistemological claims about OW without clearly identifying which of these distinct philosophies supports his allegations. Specifically, Unger groups Vedānta under OW without distinguishing between Advaita and Dvaita Vedāntas – two similar but distinct traditions within Vedānta. Thus, while he mainly criticizes the views of Advaita Vedānta, which are similar but not equal to those of Buddhism, Dvaita Vedānta contradicts many of Unger’s assumptions on Vedānta. Thus, Unger misleads students who read his book into thinking that Advaita and Dvaita Vedāntas are the same. While I will not deal in this paper with the reasons why Unger might have decided to do so, I will introduce and clarify some of the distinctive features within the Dvaita Vedānta tradition that render his criticism of Vedānta in favor of his concept for a future religion problematic and biased.

The primary texts of the Vedānta tradition are the Upaniṣads, the Vedānta-Sutras, and the Bhagavad-Gītā. While the Sutras are a highly philosophical summary of the philosophy of the Upaniṣads, the Gītā is a much more accessible text. I will be using it in my analysis throughout this paper. Thus, “Gītā” throughout the text indicates a Vedāntic reading which contradicts Unger’s interpretation and presentation of Vedānta. Furthermore, I will provide endnotes for those interested in the exact chapters and verses of the Gītā mentioned in my analysis. In the endnotes, “Bg” will refer to the

Bhagavad-Gītā, and “Iu” to the Īśā Upaniṣad. Numbers will refer to chapters and verses. For example, “Bg.14.8” refers to Bhagavad-Gītā, chapter 14, verse 8. While there are many commentators of the Gītā, and disagreements among them, I will be quoting from a literal translation of the Gītā published by Howard Resnick aiming to show how it differs from Advaita Vedānta, which is the Vedānta tradition Unger mainly criticizes. Dr. Resnick received his Ph.D. in Sanskrit and Indian Studies from the Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

As I have mentioned above, the problem with Unger’s characterization of Vedānta is that he groups them with other traditions with distinct philosophies. In his own words, “the Indic Vedānta, the Upaniṣads, early Buddhism, and early Daoism represent the clearest instances of this religious and philosophical path.”¹ Vedānta and the Upaniṣads, however, are not instances of differing religious and philosophical paths. Vedānta is the study of the theology and philosophy of the Upaniṣads. In this instance, the word Vedānta indicates the study of the goal (*anta*) of the Veda (the Upaniṣads). There are two main distinct traditions within Vedānta itself: Advaita and Dvaita. Advaita indicates the study of the theology and philosophy of the Upaniṣads, which take the Ultimate Reality (God, in Abrahamic though not unproblematic terms) to be impersonal. This is the aspect of the Vedānta tradition that Unger criticizes. Dvaita indicates the study of the theology and philosophy of the Upaniṣads, which take the

¹ Unger, *The Religion of the Future*, 62

Ultimate Reality to be personal. This is the aspect of the Vedānta tradition that Unger does not mention and fails to distinguish from Advaita in his book.

Furthermore, to regard Schopenhauer's philosophy as the leading Western expression of Vedānta means prioritizing secondary over primary sources when studying the Vedānta tradition. That is, however, what Unger precisely does: in his own words, "the teaching of Schopenhauer is [the] consummate expression [of OW], both as metaphysics and as practical philosophy."² In other words, Unger substitutes Schopenhauer's secondary-source interpretation of Vedānta for what the primary sources of the Vedānta tradition claim about itself. Wicks relates that Schopenhauer's interpretation of Vedānta came from his studies with the Indologist Friedrich Majer and the philosopher Karl Friedrich Christian Krause, whose knowledge of Sanskrit helped Schopenhauer understand a Persian version of the Upaniṣads translated into Latin, which is the version Schopenhauer had read.³ Schopenhauer himself did not read Sanskrit. Schopenhauer's interpretation of Vedānta, then, is based on secondary sources. Hence, the importance of referring to Vedāntic primary sources in my analyses below.

Unger introduces mistaken views about the metaphysics and epistemology of Vedānta when he addresses the subject of the ontology of time. In his own words, "the decisive common element [of these philosophies] is denial of the ultimate reality of time."⁴ However, the ultimate reality of time is not denied in the teachings of the Gītā.

² Unger, 62

³ Wicks, 9

⁴ Unger, 62

There, Kṛṣṇa, the personality of the Ultimate Reality, says that “of the letters I am the letter A, and of compounds I am the pair. I alone am unperishing Time, I the all-facing Creator.”⁵ Time then is temporary but real, thus unperishing.ⁱ What is unperishing cannot be unreal. In other words, time is real, though impermanent. Notwithstanding its impermanence, it does not make time ultimately unreal. Thus, the Gītā does not deny the ultimate reality of time. It follows then that it should not be placed alongside philosophies that deny the reality of time without distinguishing its metaphysical and epistemological claims from the others. That is, however, precisely what Unger has done by failing to distinguish between Advaita and Dvaita Vedāntas – of which the Gītā is a primary source.

Besides equivocating on such distinction, Unger further claims similarities between OW traditions and Western religious mysticism because they tend to favor the idea of an impersonal God. In his own words, “the overcoming of the world resonates in the mystical countercurrents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”⁶ The Gītā, however, favors the idea of a personal God. There, Kṛṣṇa says that “[those] who know Me as the Ultimate Person, know All, and devote themselves to Me with all their being.”⁷ Thus, only the Advaita tradition favors the idea of an impersonal God.ⁱⁱ

Besides, Unger claims that the idea that favors an impersonal God leads to indifference before human suffering and a tendency towards a denial of the self. In the Gītā, however, Kṛṣṇa says that “one should uplift self by self; one should not degrade

⁵ Resnick, 186

⁶ Unger, 62

⁷ Resnick, 201

self... Self is friend to that self by whom self alone is conquered; but that very self can work as enemy, due to non-self's enmity."⁸ In other words, one should not be indifferent to one's or another's suffering. One should instead conquer the enemy of the self that creates such suffering. Besides, for the self to fight for itself, there must be a self, so there is no denial of the self in the Gītā either, as Unger claims the Vedānta tradition presupposes.ⁱⁱⁱ

The next set of Unger's misplaced premises involves metaphysical and epistemological claims about the reality of time and the distinction among selves. He claims that the vision of OW traditions is accomplished "on the basis of a devaluation of the reality of time and of the distinction among beings, including the distinction among selves."⁹ The Gītā, however, neither devalues the reality of time nor the distinction among beings or among selves. Because Unger does not clarify what he means when he talks about beings and selves, I want to propose some Vedāntic definitions in the Gītā, which may be helpful here as we continue our discussion below. "Self" means a spiritual being.^{iv} "Being" means an embodied self.^v "Embodied" implies a self that has become trapped in a body with gross and subtle characteristics. "Gross" means the body made of flesh and bones.^{vi} "Subtle" means the body composed of the faculties of mind, intelligence, and ego.^{vii} When I mention beings and selves below, I will be assuming such Vedāntic definition since Unger does not provide his own.

⁸ Resnick, 172

⁹ Unger, 63

Furthermore, note the difference between Unger's initial claim that OW traditions *deny* the reality of the time in a previous premise and his present premise that OW traditions *devalue* the reality of time. Unger makes such confusing claims because the traditions he has grouped under OW do not make the same claims on the reality of time as he presupposes. Thus, while one tradition under OW may deny the reality of time, another may devalue the reality of time. I have already quoted from the Gītā attesting that it does not deny the reality of time. I claim that it does not devalue the reality of time either. There, Kṛṣṇa says that "never did I not exist, nor you... nor indeed shall we ever not be."¹⁰ In other words, different beings exist in time. One cannot devalue the reality of time if the reality of time is necessary for different beings to exist. For there something to exist, something must exist in time. Time is then necessary. One cannot devalue time if beings are to exist.^{viii} Since beings exist, one cannot deny the reality of time. Thus, it does not follow, as Unger claims, that Vedānta denies or devalues the realities of time, beings, and selves. More on this later.

Next, Unger's mistaken premises try to make sense of the conception of universal being he ascribes to OW traditions. Unger claims that "the metaphysical idea informing [OW's] approach to existence is the affirmation of a universal being lying behind the manifest world of time, distinction, and individuality."¹¹ I have noted that the diverse traditions he has grouped under OW do not have similar metaphysical ideas, so his claim that they do already begs the question. I have also noted how Unger does not

¹⁰ Resnick, 156

¹¹ Unger, 63

clarify the terms he uses, so this premise has many vague terms: universal, being, world, time, distinction, and individuality.

Here, then, I will first try to make sense of this idea of a universal being. In the *Gītā*, when Kṛṣṇa shows Arjuna his universal form, Kṛṣṇa says, “Behold now the world entire in one place, in my Body, with the moving and the unmoving and whatever else you wish to behold.”¹² Here, Kṛṣṇa contests Unger’s claims that Vedānta favors the idea of an impersonal God. Kṛṣṇa claims that all moving and unmoving things that exist come from his person. It does not follow, then, from this verse that a universal being has to be impersonal; a universal being can be personal. Furthermore, Kṛṣṇa will later state in the *Gītā* that all beings are ultimately persons. They are personal. Unger should thus not assume that a being, just by being universal, cannot be personal and, then, has to be impersonal. By being universal, the universal being does not lose its universality. More on this later.

Another example of a misplaced premise follows. Unger claims that “the philosophy and theology of the overcoming of the world tell us... that time, distinction, and individuality are unreal, or that they are less real than they seem to be.”¹³ I have already noted that the *Gītā* neither denies nor devalues the reality of time. The *Gītā* says that time is real but temporary. Again, temporariness does not make it unreal. Similarly, it does not follow that just because the individual soul enters new bodies, that the soul’s individuality, and thus its reality, is unreal. According to the *Gītā*, it is the eternal soul

¹² Resnick, 187

¹³ Unger, 63

that enters temporary bodies: “as in the body, the embodied soul experiences childhood, youth, and old age, so too one attains another body,”¹⁴ and “the soul is never born and never dies, nor having existed will it ever not be.”¹⁵ In other words, according to the Gītā, the soul’s individuality is neither unreal nor less real than what it seems to be. It is the temporary body that undergoes birth, death, old age, and disease and thus seems indeed less real than what it seems to be.^{ix} The individuality of the soul is, according to the Gītā, an eternal fact. Thus, it can neither be unreal nor less real than what it seems to be. Since it eternally possesses individuality, the reality of individuality persists.^x Thus, as Unger claims, it does not follow that Vedānta tells us that the world, time, and we are unreal or less real than what they seem to be.

One of the consequences of Unger’s misplaced premises is that because the Gītā does not claim what he says Vedānta traditions do, the Gītā may actually corroborate some of the criticisms Unger directs at Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism. For example, the Gītā agrees with Unger that “our experience is the experience of the reality of time in this one real world... in which there is an enduring structure of different kinds of things and the individual mind is embodied in an individual organism.”¹⁶ I have already noted how the Gītā attests to the reality of time and thus to the reality of the world. I have also noted how the Gītā attests to the individual mind embodied in an individual organism.

¹⁴ Resnick, 156

¹⁵ Resnick, 156

¹⁶ Unger, 63

I will try to make sense now of how the Gītā explains the structure of different things in the world. There, Kṛṣṇa says that “earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, reason and egotism: this is My separated eight-fold nature... I am the origin and dissolution of the entire cosmos.”¹⁷ In other words, the enduring structure of different kinds of things endures because it comes from the eternal Person through his manifold energies. It involves different things because they manifest from the different manifold energies of this eternal person’s nature.^{xi} Thus, Unger’s views align with those of the Gītā against Advaita. Why he has decided to conflate Dvaita and Advaita Vedānta when many of his views against Advaita are corroborated in the Gītā is beyond the scope of this paper.

The next issue I want to try to make sense of is Unger’s misplaced notion about what the Vedas are and what they are supposed to do. In his own words, “the radical versions of [OW] (as we have it, for example, in the Vedas or in Schopenhauer) deny time, distinction, and individuality altogether.”¹⁸ I have already noted that regarding Schopenhauer as the consummate spokesperson for the teachings of Vedānta means to accept secondary source material while primary sources may claim otherwise. I have also noted that the Gītā does not deny time, distinction, and individuality. Here, I want to make sense of one consequence of Unger’s claims that the Gītā sharply contradicts. There, Kṛṣṇa claims that “from me come memory, knowledge, and forgetting. By all Vedas, I alone am to be known. I made Vedānta and I alone know the Veda.”¹⁹ In other words, one cannot infer that from a person, Kṛṣṇa, who claims to be the source and

¹⁷ Resnick, 176

¹⁸ Unger, 63

¹⁹ Resnick, 201

essence of the Vedas in the primary source of Vedānta that is the Gītā, that the Vedas deny the personality and individuality of persons.^{xii} If the Vedas denied the personality and individuality of persons, Kṛṣṇa could not be what he claims to be in the Gītā: the personal cause of the Vedas.

Nevertheless, Unger continues to make misplaced assumptions about the Vedas, such as that they are a radical version of the metaphysics and epistemology of the disparate tradition Unger has grouped under OW. First, the Vedas are not philosophical treatises espousing metaphysical and epistemological denials of time, distinction, and individuality. The Vedas are, instead, a collection of verses.^{xiii} The philosophy of the Upaniṣads tries to make sense of the poetry of the Vedas, and its ancillary non-philosophical treatises named the Brāhmaṇam and the Āraṇyakas. Thus, it is the philosophy of the Upaniṣads which makes metaphysical and epistemological claims based on how its speakers understood the poetry of the Vedas. Vedānta is, as I have already noted, the study of the philosophy of the Upaniṣads. The Vedas, then, cannot be a radical version of OW because they are not philosophies making systematic metaphysical or epistemological claims.

Next, Unger poses some questions and issues that allow for more robust criticism of what he assumes Vedānta to be. One of his questions is, “why has unitary and timeless being become manifest in divided and time-bound experience?”²⁰ Unger claims that we cannot know the answer to these questions, but several Vedāntin scholars have offered

²⁰ Unger, 63

them. The question then asks how Kṛṣṇa, the unitary and timeless being of the Gītā, manifests himself in the world. Kṛṣṇa says in the Gītā that “to deliver the righteous, destroy the wicked and restore *dharma*, I appear in every age.”²¹ In other words, unitary and timeless being manifests in divided and time-bound experience to restore the *dharma*, the eternal function, of the souls, which is to realize their true spiritual nature. Unger seems to presuppose that a unitary being could lose its unity were it to manifest in the world. However, as the Īśā Upaniṣad claims, this eternal and supreme unitary being, being complete in itself, does not lose its completeness even though it manifests all that we know.^{xiv} Besides, in the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa also claims that “I am the source of all; from Me, all emanates.”²² In other words, the Vedāntic unitary being, from whom all emanates, does not lose its completeness even after manifesting all.^{xv} Thus, Unger’s presupposition that it does cannot hold.

Unger further claims that the next issue he wants to understand also has no answer, but he claims so because of his dependence on Schopenhauer as the source for his knowledge of Vedānta. Although Unger claims that “no philosophical statement of this worldview (not even Schopenhauer’s) has ever provided a developed account of why or how underlying being becomes expressed in phenomena that generates such illusions,”²³ I hope I have shown that the Gītā provides answers to such questions. However, a further assumption is that such an underlying being generates illusions. As Resnick points out, according to Vedānta, “illusion occurs, rather, when we identify the

²¹ Resnick, 165

²² Resnick, 184

²³ Unger, 64

'I' with a changing mortal body instead of with our true eternal self."²⁴ In other words, illusions occur because a soul misidentifies itself with the body. Because it thinks it is the body, the fundamental delusion according to the Gītā, all other illusions following from that fundamental illusion occur. All three primary sources of the Vedānta tradition, then, the Upaniṣads, the Vedānta-Sūtras, and the Gītā, provide philosophical statements of why or how an underlying being becomes expressed in phenomena that generate such illusions. I have noted how such an underlying being manifests itself in the world above. Thus, Unger's claim, dependent on Schopenhauer, does not hold.

The next issue Unger presents questions Vedānta's ontology of this world. In his own words, Unger asks, "why does there exist not just a world but a world that appears – at least to us – under an aspect contradicting its ultimate reality?"²⁵ I have already noted how this world manifests out of the underlying being. Here, I want to try to make sense of what causes such an appearance of contradiction in the world. In the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa says that "goodness, passion, darkness – modes born of nature – bind the unchanging embodied in the body."²⁶ In other words, because of the modes of nature in which that body operates – a consequence of being an embodied soul – we think this world and our bodies speak to our essence. Because they do not, since we are spiritual, it appears to us contradictory to how we see the world. I have noted how the Gītā explains that we are not these bodies but souls. Once we recognize that we are eternal souls, we realize that this world appears to us, contradicting its ultimate reality. Like

²⁴ Resnick, 10

²⁵ Unger, 64

²⁶ Resnick, 197

our bodies made of matter, this world is also made of matter. Thus, it seems contradictory because of our misidentification of what we really are, souls, with the bodies we, as souls, embody.^{xvi} Thus, appearances ensue.

Unger then poses a series of negative statements about OW. First, he claims that, in OW, “we dare not attribute to unified being the intentions a person.”²⁷ I have already noted how the Gītā corroborates a person’s intentions to Unger’s unified being. Vedāntin scholars have equated such unified being variously with the persons of Śiva, Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa, and Kṛṣṇa.^{xvii} Then, he admonishes that “we are separated from this ultimate reality by the abyss of embodiment and by all the illusions accompanying it.”²⁸ In the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa says for those who want to reach Him, “fix your mind in Me alone, invest your reason in Me. You shall henceforth dwell in Me alone, no doubt.”²⁹ In other words, although we are separated by the abyss of being spirit souls entrapped inside material bodies, and hence, living under manifold illusions, the study of Vedānta provides a path to break this cycle. Thus, Unger’s negative concept of separation does not have to imply a fatal inability to cross over this abyss.^{xviii}

Furthermore, Unger criticizes Vedānta’s ontology of consciousness. He admonishes that in OW, “our most reliable connection with the one being and the one mind is the experience of consciousness, understood to soar above the divisions that are imposed on this ultimate reality by the incarnation of universal mind in individual bodies.”³⁰

²⁷ Unger, 64

²⁸ Unger, 64

²⁹ Resnick, 192

³⁰ Unger, 64

Several assumptions are at play here: for instance, the one being and the one mind cannot be personal. I have already noted that the Gītā argues otherwise. Besides, Unger does not clarify here what he means by the mind. I have already noted how the mind, according to Vedānta, is subtle faculty of the body. Thus, the mind cannot belong to this universal being since, being a faculty of the body, it is still material while the one being is spiritual – beyond matter. About how consciousness can soar over divisions, Resnick points out that “in clear consciousness, we realize that soul simply witnesses the motions and acts of a material body that covers the soul as clothes cover the body.”³¹ In other words, consciousness is a symptom of the soul’s presence in the body.^{xix} Thus, consciousness can soar above divisions resulting from a misidentification with the body. Furthermore, Unger errs when he ascribes reincarnation of the universal mind in individual bodies. Reincarnation implies one being born again in another body. The universal being does not reincarnate; it manifests itself in different bodies. I have noted before how the Gītā attests to that.

Another negative and misplaced statement on Vedānta follows. Unger notes that “nothing in the experience of consciousness explains why universal mind should appear to us thus partitioned in the form of individual minds.”³² I have already noted how this universal being does not reincarnate but manifests itself. I have also noted that this unified being does not lose its unity even as it manifests itself. I now want to try to make sense of how this unified being enters individual minds. In the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa says,

³¹ Resnick, 80

³² Unger, 64

“of senses, I am mind, and of beings, I am consciousness.”³³ In other words, for Unger, the universal mind, Kṛṣṇa, appears partitioned in the form of individual minds because Unger thinks Kṛṣṇa loses his completeness when he manifests himself in individual minds. Because the Gītā claims that we are souls and not bodies, and even if we understand Unger’s mind as spiritual in nature since he does not clarify what he means by mind, this universal mind is, according to the Gītā, the source of all. Thus, we are parts of this universal mind. One could even argue that is why we can inquire into this universal mind in the first place – because we also inhere in it.^{xx}

I could continue on about the several misleading statements Unger claims by (1) miscategorizing Vedānta, (2) not distinguishing among differing metaphysical and epistemological claims within Advaita and Dvaita Vedānta, and (3) by relying on Schopenhauer’s account for his vision of “Indic Vedānta.” To be fair to Professor Unger, one could hardly expect him to have mastered all the knowledge of these differing philosophies. However, that should not excuse him for misleading students with the claims he makes in his book.

In this paper, then, I hope to have presented necessary explanations of how the Dvaita tradition within Vedānta, and especially the Bhagavad-Gītā, denies most of Unger’s claims on Vedānta. I have also presented instances where the Gītā agrees with some of Unger’s accusations against Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism. I have done this by relying on a literal translation of the Bhagavad-Gītā, one of the three primary sources

³³ Resnick, 185

for the Vedānta tradition. Although not every Vedāntin scholar would agree with the analyses I have provided following this literal translation of the Gītā, it is my view that most of them would disagree with how Professor Unger uncaredful generalizes particular Vedāntic claims in the tradition.

Professor Unger's general conclusions about Vedānta, therefore, are particularly unwarranted. Since his findings are not convincing, his use of them against Vedānta and in favor of his concept for a future religion sounds biased. In this paper, I have attempted to clarify some of these Vedāntic issues so that students reading his book may come to understand his vital concept for a future religion on less shaky and firmer Vedāntic grounds.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Bg.10.33
- ⁱⁱ Bg.15.19
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bg.6.5-6
- ^{iv} Bg.2.13
- ^v Bg.2.22
- ^{vi} Bg.3.39
- ^{vii} Bg.3.42
- ^{viii} Bg.2.12
- ^{ix} Bg.2.13
- ^x Bg.2.20
- ^{xi} Bg7.5-6
- ^{xii} Bg.15.15
- ^{xiii} Bg.15.1
- ^{xiv} Iu.5.1.1
- ^{xv} Bg.10.8
- ^{xvi} Bg.14.5
- ^{xvii} Bg.11.52
- ^{xviii} Bg.12.8
- ^{xix} Bg.13.33
- ^{xx} Bg.10.22

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