

Article

A Comparative Study of Medieval Religious Spirituality: Bonaventure's Theory of Six Stages of Spirituality and Śaṅkara's Sixfold Practice Theory of Advaita Vedānta

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Abstract: In medieval India, the desire for “the unity of Brahman and Self” was present in the Vedānta tradition of Hinduism. Adi Śaṅkara, the master of Vedānta philosophy, proposed the six-fold sādhanā: mind control, sense control, mental tranquility, endurance, potential faith, and concentration. These six-fold practices can help Vedānta followers realize unity with Brahman. In medieval Christianity, mysticism was regarded as an important path for Christians to seek a closer relationship with God. Pursuing “the unity of God and man” became the goal and direction of Christians at that time, which could be achieved through spirituality. Bonaventure, known as the Seraphic Doctor, was a representative figure of medieval Christian mysticism. He proposed six stages of spirituality: Sense, Imagination, Reason, Intelligence, Understanding, and Spark of Conscience, through which one can achieve unity with God. This article attempts to compare Bonaventure's theory of six stages of spirituality with Śaṅkara's idea of six-fold practice and discover the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western religious spirituality in the Middle Ages. Through this comparison, we can further explore the medieval religious believers' desire for ultimate reality and try to find the possibility of dialogue between Christianity and Advaita Vedānta.

Keywords: Śaṅkara; Bonaventure; comparative theology; spiritual formation; sādhanā



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1. Introduction

We generally believe that Eastern and Western religious traditions are very different, but, coincidentally, there was a similar method of realizing oneness with ultimate reality in medieval Christianity and Hinduism, which was called spiritual formation or sādhanā.

Adi Śaṅkara (788–820) was one of the greatest philosophical masters in medieval India. He inherited part of the teachings of traditional Advaita and developed new ideas. He was not only a philosopher but also a great spiritual guru who was beloved by his devotees. Śaṅkara organized the free-moving monks into ten orders of monks, called daśanāmī (ten) orders. He also established four maṭhas or monasteries in the four corners of India (Potter 2014). These monasteries made important contributions to the development of Hinduism. Śaṅkara discussed in detail the “six treasures”, which are the six practices of the aspirant, in *Vivekacūḍāmaṇī*¹ and *Tattvabodha*.

Bonaventure (1221–1274), known as Dr. Seraphim, was a representative figure of medieval Christian mysticism. Born in Bagnorea, Italy, Bonaventure was a Franciscan bishop, theologian, and philosopher. He was a contemporary of Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquinas based his theological system on Aristotelianism, while Bonaventure's ideological background was derived from Augustinianism in the Platonic tradition (Gilson 1965). *The Soul's Journey into God* written by Bonaventure is an important spiritual work. In this book, he proposed six stages of ascent to God through spiritual formation. Next, we will explore their respective spiritual thoughts through the above-mentioned works and make comparisons.

2. Śaṅkara on the Six Treasures

The important idea in Indian philosophy—“the unity of Brahman and Self”—is the core content of Śaṅkara’s Advaita thought. According to Śaṅkara, this theory refers to the fact that there is no duality between the true Self and Brahman as the sole ultimate reality. In other words, Ātman and Brahman are one and the same. The sacred phrases “Tat Tvam Asi” (You are that) and “Ayam Ātmā Brahma” (I am Brahman) are strong proofs of this view.

In Śaṅkara’s theory of liberation, there are two paths through which devotees can attain liberation. One path is the theistic approach. For those who believe in God, they should work selflessly without being attached to the results. They should give up the fruits of their work and devote all the fruits to God. The other path is the path of knowledge. For believers, “Brahman and I are one” is the highest truth, that is, true knowledge. They must distinguish what is true and recognize that Brahman alone is the ultimate reality. Everything else is false because they are all illusions superimposed on Brahman due to ignorance. The path of knowledge is a process of discernment–enlightenment–liberation. The result of these two paths is the same: the elimination of ignorance, the realization of the unity of self and Brahman, freedom from suffering, and the attainment of endless bliss. No matter which path one chooses, one should first become a qualified seeker who must undergo the training of spiritual practice. What kind of person is a qualified seeker? In the book *Ātmabodha (Self-Knowledge)*, Śaṅkara began with the clear statement, “I am composing the *Ātmabodha*, or Self-Knowledge, to serve the needs of those who have been purified through the practice of austerities, and who are peaceful in heart, free from cravings, and desirous of Liberation.” (Nikhilananda 1946, p. 117). Śaṅkara explained that a qualified seeker should possess four qualifications: viveka, vairāgya, śamādi-ṣaṭka-sampatti, and mumukṣutva².

Śamādi-ṣaṭka-sampatti means six treasures, which are the six practices I am mainly discussing. Sādhana is a significant topic in Hinduism. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (17.14–16) mentions three kinds of penance: the austerity of body, the austerity of speech, and the austerity of mind. The Six Treasures are the most practical part of the seeker’s fourfold spiritual practice, which shares certain similarities with Christian spirituality. The six treasures are Śama (mind control), Dama (sense control), Uparati (mental tranquility), Titikṣā (endurance or patience), Śraddhā (potential faith), and Samādhāna (concentration). According to Śaṅkara’s philosophy, these six spiritual exercises are the fundamental practices of Advaita. Before pursuing true knowledge, the seeker must make his/her mind calm, restrained, and full of endurance, which requires the help of the six practices. If aspirants can practice effectively, they can remove their bondage and maintain peace of mind. Seekers should not only practice in daily life, but also regard these qualities as treasures once acquired.

2.1. Śama (Mind Control)

शमः कः? मनो-निग्रहः । (*Tattvabodha* 1.3.1)³

Śamaḥ kaḥ? Mano-nigrahaḥ.

Śaṅkara defined śama in *Tattvabodha*: “What is śama? It is the restraint of the mind”. Mind control is the restraint of the waves of the mind. Mind control interacts with sense control. Śama is also mentioned in *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (22), “The resting of the mind steadfastly on its Goal (viz. Brahman) after having detached itself from manifold sense-objects by continually observing their defects, is called Shama or calmness.” (Madhavananda 1921, p. 9). Śama can be understood as calmness, which is the stability of the mind whose goal is Brahman. The way to control the mind is to constantly observe and discern the objects of sense. After understanding the defects of sense objects, we should strive to restrain our minds from tending to sense objects. The aim is to detach the mind from the objects of sense and return to its own essential nature. Finally, the mind calmed down. According to Śaṅkara, the mind is an extremely active instrument. It makes one attached to all sense objects. Therefore, it is the root of all troubles. People are in bondage by their restless minds.

Then, if one wants to be detached from sense objects and free from bondage, he/she must control the mind. Swami Vivekananda believed that, when the mind is controlled, one can achieve anything. As Ramakrishna stated ([Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York n.d.](#)), only the mind has the possibility of being bound and the ability to be liberated. Once the mind is free from attachment, God will be realized.

2.2. Dama (Sense Control)

दमः कः? चक्षुरादि-बाह्येन्द्रिय-निग्रहः ।। (*Tattvabodha* 1.3.2)

Damaḥ kaḥ? Cakṣurādi-bāhyendriya-nigrahaḥ.

“What is sense control? It is the control of the eyes and other external organs”.

According to Śaṅkara’s thought, the term bāhyendriya (external senses) encompasses five sense organs and five action organs. The five sense organs are the eyes, ears, nose, skin, and tongue. The five action organs are hands, feet, mouth, excretory organs, and reproductive organs. The senses are the gateways to the phenomenal world which link us to the external world. They are governed by the mind, which attaches itself to the sense organs and goes out. It then returns and takes the form of an object. The final identification is made by the internal senses. This is the process of perception. The sense organs cannot perceive anything by themselves; only when the mind is attached to them can they respond. Swami Vivekananda gave the example of a bell to illustrate this point. Many times, when you are deeply immersed in an idea, you do not hear the bell ringing. This is because the mind is not connected to the organs ([Vivekananda 1970](#)). Sense organs help us understand external objects. Subsequently, egoism has the desire to get something. At this moment, the action organs begin to function. We are bound. The senses are tools in the hands of the mind. They lead us to their respective objects and deceive us that these objects are eternal. The connection of the senses and the mind creates countless troubles. The senses and minds that do whatever they want will disturb our minds and take us farther and farther away from the door of liberation. Therefore, the aspirant must strive to conquer the senses and control the mind. As the *Bhagavad Gītā* (3.6–3.7) conveys, he who does selfless things by controlling his mind and organs is a great person. Conversely, someone who seems to be sitting quietly and controlling the organs of action, but is carrying out countless actions in his heart, is a hypocrite. So how does one control your senses? The *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.58) uses the analogy of a tortoise, suggesting that one should withdraw the senses from their objects, just as a tortoise retracts its limbs into its shell. For humans, closing their eyes can be seen as a form of sense control. Likewise, if one can “turn off” external organs such as ears under the guidance of the mind, they succeed in controlling their senses. In other words, we need to actively withdraw our minds from our feelings. It should be noted that control does not mean suppression. Controlling the senses is accomplished through the guidance of the mind. Instead of allowing our senses to run toward external objects as wild horses would, we must hold the reins of our minds and steer them toward the inner light.

2.3. Uparati (Mental Tranquility)

उपरतिः कः? स्वधर्मानुष्ठानमेव । (*Tattvabodha* 1.3.3)

Uparatiḥ kaḥ? Svadharmānuṣṭhānam-eva.

“What is peace of mind? One who follows natural duty is uparati”. Uparati has three meanings. The first meaning is “peace of mind”. Uparati and śama both mean “peace of mind”, but there are some nuances in the meanings of the two words. Śama pertains to calming a disturbed mind, while uparati refers to maintaining an already calm mind unchanged. Śama is the way to pacify disturbances, while uparati prevents disturbances or maintains inner peace. We can think of one as treatment and the other as prevention. The second meaning is related to the concept of sannyāsa. Uparati can be understood as accepting the vows of sannyāsa or living a monastic life. In *Tattvabodha*, Śaṅkara gave uparati a third meaning, which is the purification of the mind through the selfless performance of daily duties. Śaṅkara categorized karma into five types: Kāmya Karma (desire-born ac-

tions), Niśiddha Karma (sinful actions), Nitya Karma (daily obligatory), Naimittika Karma (occasional duties), and Prāyaścitta Karma (purificatory actions) (Sunirmalananda 2005). Uparati means fulfilling Nitya Karma and Naimittika Karma wholeheartedly. Daily duties include acts such as sacrifice, worship, meditation, prayer, and more, while occasional duties mainly involve celebrating some sacred festivals. Both actions purify the mind and maintain lasting peace of mind. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (23) puts uparati and dama together and mainly talks about the first meaning of uparati. The best uparati involved keeping the mind in a state of peace in which the mind is no longer affected by external things.

2.4. Titikṣā (Endurance or Patience)

तितीक्षा का? शीतोष्णसुखदुःखादि द्वन्द्व सहिष्णुत्वम् । (*Tattvabodha* 1.3.4)

Titikṣā kā? Śītoṣṇa-sukha-duḥkhādi dvandva-sahiṣṇutvam.

“What is titikṣā? titikṣā means to endure the dualities of cold and heat, pleasure and pain with equanimity”. In daily life, it is difficult for ordinary people to endure the pain. When we are in pain, we are unable to do anything meaningful. Spiritual progress is even less possible. However, the saint showed no reaction in the face of pain. Haridāsa was beaten by many people in the market, but his endurance was extraordinary. He just smiled and suffered the beatings, chanting the name of God. *The imitation of Christ*⁴ said, “Without striving thou canst not win the crown of patience; if thou wilt not suffer thou refusest to be crowned. But if thou desirest to be crowned, strive manfully, endure patiently.” (A Kempis [1471–1472] 1877, p. 150). Sages are indifferent when confronted with pain, as they know that the dualities of cold and heat, pain and pleasure are all transient. These occasional irritations are meaningless. The endurance threshold of saints is very high, just like Swami Vivekananda who could endure hunger, heat, and cold while wandering. That is, everyone has their own unique pain threshold. The higher the spiritual capacity, the better the capacity of endurance. Therefore, titikṣā is the increase in the level of our threshold of endurance. According to *Tattvabodha*, Śaṅkara believes that one aspect of titikṣā is to improve the body’s endurance, such as enduring cold and heat, which is called endurance. On the other hand, it is to improve the endurance of the mind, such as enduring pain and happiness calmly, which is called patience. These two levels are collectively called titikṣā. In modern terms, people need to bolster both physical immunity and mental endurance. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (24) has more additions to titikṣā. “The bearing of all afflictions without caring to redress them, being free (at the same time) from anxiety or lament on their score, is called Titikṣā or forbearance.” (Madhavananda 1921). In *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, Śaṅkara emphasized that genuine endurance is an internal quality, rather than an external display of passive austerity or asceticism. After distinguishing between truth and unreality, seekers understand the truth of suffering and cease to cling to the elimination of suffering. Instead, they begin to calmly tolerate the anxiety and sadness caused by pain.

2.5. Śraddhā (Potential Faith)

श्रद्धा कीदृशी? गुरु-वेदान्त-वाक्येषु विश्वासः श्रद्धा । (*Tattvabodha* 1.3.5)

Śraddhā kīdr̥ṣī? Guru-vedānta-vākyaṣu viśvāsaḥ śraddhā.

“What is the nature of Śraddhā? śraddhā is belief in the Guru and the words of Vedānta”. In the Vedānta system, the Guru is the spiritual master. According to *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (33), the Guru possesses three qualities: (i) on the intellectual level, the Guru is a knower of Brahman and must be proficient in the Vedic scriptures, (ii) on the moral level, the Guru is free from sin, (iii) on the spiritual level, the Guru is not disturbed by desires and exhibits complete control over the mind. In summary, a Guru is a knower of Brahman who is proficient in the scriptures, understands the truth, and has attained liberation. In *Tattvabodha*, Śaṅkara said that a seeker should have absolute faith in the words of the Guru and the teachings found in the scriptures. This is śraddhā. We can perceive the process of spiritual practice as a form of healing to eliminate ignorance and break free from saṃsāra, much like the way we treat physical ailments. In the process of treating physical illnesses,

we must first believe in the medical system. Secondly, we must have full trust in the doctor and cooperate actively. Likewise, in the process of spiritual practice, the Vedānta scriptures serve as our system of medicine and the Guru is our doctor. Is this faith in Vedānta and Guru unfounded? No, the prerequisite for our confidence is discernment. According to *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (23), through discernment, the seeker concludes that the scriptures and the teachings of the Guru are true, and, then, develops a firm and positive belief based on this understanding. This belief helps us recognize the ultimate reality.

2.6. Samādhāna (Concentration)

समाधानं किम्? चित्तैकाग्रता । (*Tattvabodha* 1.3.6)

Samādhānam kim? Cittaikāgratā.

“What is concentration? Concentration is to focus the mind on one point—Brahman or Ātman”. In *Tattvabodha*, samādhāna means concentration. In *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (26), concentration refers to the continuous concentration of the mind on pure Brahman, rather than the mind becoming obsessed with an object out of curiosity. The oldest and most effective way to practice concentration is dhyāna, which means meditation or contemplation. In the Indian culture, meditation is the key to practice, especially in yoga. The Aṣṭāṅga yoga system proposed by Patañjali in the *Yoga Sūtra* includes meditation. In *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (277), Śaṅkara instructed his disciples to use yoga methods to practice concentration. He suggested that the seeker should keep his mind focused on Ātman as a yogi would. Then, comes the end of desire. Finally, all the superpositions on Brahman are eliminated. Meditation, in its broadest sense, assumes two main forms: object meditation and subject meditation. Object meditation means the mind meditating on objects external or internal to the body. Subjective meditation means that the mind contemplates the Self itself, which can also be said to be contemplating Ātman or Brahman. In *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (380–381), Śaṅkara directly declares that the object of meditation for the seeker is Ātman. He also elaborated on the necessity of meditating on Brahman in verses 254–266. The sacred phrase “You are That” means Brahman and I are the same. Ātman is the supreme, indivisible Infinite One. There is nothing but Self. Hence, by allowing the mind to relinquish all illusory attachments and consistently meditating on Ātman, one can realize that Ātman is their true self. Through repeated efforts to practice meditation, seekers can achieve mental tranquility. The purer their minds, the stronger their desire to know the truth. At this stage, seekers are no longer governed by worldly desires, but earnestly long for the truth. They direct their mind focus on the Self, absolute knowledge, and ultimately attain the realization of the infinite self.

3. Bonaventure on the Six Stages of Christian Spirituality

As a Franciscan master, on the one hand, Bonaventure adhered to the ideals of poverty and simplicity, on the other hand, he emphasized intellectual training, because he was educated at a famous European university. He firmly believed that theology and spirituality could be integrated on the path to oneness with God⁵. He advocated finding grace in nature and believed that nature and grace were not separate but mixed. According to him, philosophy follows the natural path of reason to acquire knowledge, and its purpose is to guide believers towards God. In other words, philosophy is a preparatory stage for entering into God, a vehicle for the soul’s journey toward God. In addition to using reason to prove the existence of God, he also emphasized the importance of understanding God through people’s inner emotions and experiences, which amounts to the exercise of the soul, because he believes that God is not just an abstract principle that can be understood by people, but always lives in people’s hearts. People can establish a connection with God in their lives, and their souls can unite with God. “All proofs of God are nothing more than reflections intended to form in us a correct idea of God, and to make us realize more clearly how wrong our previous ideas of God are. These are not so much a demonstration as an exercise of the soul, through which it embarks on its journey to God.” (Xiong 2005). In one of Bonaventure’s greatest works, *The Soul’s Journey into God (Itinerarium Mentis in Deum)*⁶,

he discussed the disciplines that the soul must undergo before it can enter into God. In 1259, under a divine impulse, Bonaventure wanted to seek a quiet place, longing to find peace of mind there. He went to Mount La Verna in Tuscany, the spot where St. Francis had a vision and received the stigmata (Macquarrie 2005). While pondering the vision of St. Francis of Assisi in this place, Bonaventure was inspired to write this book.

Seraphim is a type of angel with three pairs of wings. Bonaventure was called “Dr. Seraphim” because he drew a parallel between these six wings and the six spiritual faculties. Using these six spiritual faculties as paths, believers can go to the place where God lives as seraphim does. These three pairs of wings represent the six spiritual stages before believers enter into God. The six stages of abilities of the soul are *sensus* (sense), *imagination* (imagination), *ratio* (reason), *intelligentia* (intelligence), *intellectus* (understanding), and *apex mentis seu synderesis scintilla* (the apex of the mind or spark of conscience). All believers who desire to ascend to God must cultivate these six natural abilities to be free from the sin that distorts their nature. In *The Soul's Journey into God*, Bonaventure asserted that to arrive at the place of God, we should progress through the vestiges of God, which are material, temporal, and external. We also must enter our soul, which is the eternal image of God that is spiritual and internal in our mind. Finally, we must ascend to the eternal and supreme realm beyond ourselves to contemplate the First Principle (Bonaventure [1259] 1978).

3.1. Contemplate God by His Vestiges

The initial two stages involve the contemplation of the relics of God. In this part, the objects of the mind are material and external.

*De gradibus ascensionis in deum et de speculatione ipsius per vestigia eius in universe*⁷ (Bonaventure 1259).

“The steps to ascend to God and how to contemplate Him through His vestiges in the universe”. The first stage is the contemplation of God through His vestiges in the world. Awareness of creation in the sensible world is the first step on our path to God. God is the Creator; therefore, all creation reflects God Himself to varying degrees, and all things are vestiges of God. The omnipotence, wisdom, and kindness of the Creator are embodied in creation (Bonaventure [1259] 1978). The senses include physical senses and internal senses. The physical senses can convey the omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator to the inner senses through three methods: contemplation, faith, and rational inquiry, thereby stimulating the love, worship, and gratitude of the soul towards God. Contemplation means considering things as they are. We observe the external characteristics of creation, including its form, type, function, etc., which all come from the Almighty Creator. Faith leads us to think about the origin, development, and end of the world. By faith, we believe in the continuity of the world’s development. We think about the first principle, God’s providence, and justice. Rational inquiry can be thought of as discernment. We distinguish whether things exist or are alive, whether they are material or spiritual, and whether they are temporary or immortal. With the awareness of these visible things by the senses, we comprehend the existence of God. God is alive, eternal, immortal, and purely spiritual. Therefore, controlling the senses to understand the world is an important step before being closer to God. We must open our eyes, ears, mouths, and other senses to see and hear vestiges of God in the created world and praise God. Otherwise, you will be an ignorant who does not know God as the First Principle and the ultimate reality.

3.2. Contemplate God in His Vestiges

De speculatione dei in vestigiis suis in hoc sensibili mundo (Bonaventure 1259).

“Contemplate God in His vestiges in this sensitive world”. After learning to employ the physical senses to detect vestiges of God, the next practice is to contemplate God in these vestiges of God. That is, we should contemplate God in external things, as their images enter our souls through the senses. Everyone’s soul can be likened to a small world (Bonaventure [1259] 1978). The soul is united to the body in a separable way. Objects

in the external world or the macrocosm can infiltrate the small world through the five senses. For example, we perceive solid objects through touch and the colorful things through sight. These things do not enter our souls as substances, but are perceived as likenesses. In modern terminology, likeness means concept. These likenesses pass from the external organs into the internal organs through the medium and are finally realized by the apprehensive faculty of the soul. The sense of external objects intuitively elicits feelings of pleasure or pain. Individuals then make judgments, such as evaluating the source of their happiness. Through the process of judgment, images of the external world are brought into the rational faculty of the soul. Since all things are created by God, the process of individuals capturing external things through their senses based on knowledge, feeling happy, and judging represents a process of describing God. It is God himself who generates an identical image. This all-pervading image unites the human senses and brings a sense of fulfillment and happiness, thus leading individuals back toward God.

During these initial two stages, we must exercise our senses in recognizing visible creation, as creation serves as a vestige of God. We can understand the invisible God behind them through these external, visible, and sensible aspects of creation. Once we learn to use our senses to contemplate God externally, we next turn our attention inwards and contemplate God within ourselves.

3.3. Contemplate God by His Image

In the third and fourth stages, we turn our attention to our soul. We should exercise the power of reason and intellect within the soul to introspect and contemplate God through His image.

De speculatione dei per suam imaginem naturalibus potentiis insignitam (Bonaventure 1259).

“Contemplate God through His image marked by natural powers”. In the third stage, we turn inward to contemplate God through the image of God in our own souls. Just creatures can serve as guides to help us know God, it is reasonable that humans, as creatures, can also understand God by knowing themselves. This form of knowledge is deeper than realizing God through knowing external phenomena. For in our souls, the light of truth shines like a candle on the face of our souls. The image of the Trinity also shines (Bonaventure [1259] 1978). Differing from the previous two stages which involved practicing senses and imagination to understand external objects, this stage demands that we must understand ourselves by using the power of reason. The first faculty of the soul is memory, a repository of the timeless. “For the memory retains the past by remembrance, the present by reception, and the future by foresight.” (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 80). This faculty of memory is akin to God, indivisibly present in the past, present, and future. Memory can obtain information from the external senses, and it can also obtain the above knowledge in a simple form. Memory can present unchanging truths. Therefore, we recognize that the human soul is the image of God, and the human soul can comprehend God. The second faculty of the soul is intellectual understanding. Our intelligence can comprehend the highest truth, which is also the prerequisite for our ability to comprehend other things. The third faculty of the soul is the power of choice or will. “The function of the power of choice is found in deliberation, judgment, and desire.” (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 83). The purpose of these three steps is to lead to the highest good. Bonaventure summarized the three abilities of the soul: the memory leads to eternity, the understanding of truth, and the power of choice to the highest good (Bonaventure [1259] 1978). These three faculties reflect the Trinity within the human soul. Understanding emanates from memory, and choice is based on understanding. When individuals exercise the faculties of the soul, it is akin to looking into a mirror and seeing the Holy Trinity through themselves in the mirror. This also acknowledges the existence of the eternal and supremely good God.

3.4. Contemplate God in His Image

De speculatione dei in sua imagine donis gratuitis reformata (Bonaventure 1259).

“Contemplate God in His own image reformed with free gifts.” In the previous stage, we discovered that the image of God is immanent in our souls. At this stage, we should enter into the image of God residing in our souls and contemplate God. We can contemplate the image of God with the help of our natural faculties, but the truth is that few people can genuinely contemplate God in their souls. Bonaventure claimed that the mind is so absorbed in external matters that it cannot return to its true self. The mind is distracted by care, clouded by sense images, and seduced by desire (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 87). So, how can we purify our souls? By faith, hope, and love for God and Christ. Bonaventure said that the image of our soul, therefore, should be clothed with the three theological virtues by which the soul is purified, illuminated, and perfected (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 89). Similar to the early church fathers, Bonaventure emphasized the importance of the spiritual experience of God through the spiritual senses. Through faith, desire, and love for Christ, our spiritual senses are restored. The purification of our soul is completed. We delve deep into our souls and witness God’s transformation within them. Here, we can feel the loving kindness of God.

In the third stage, we exercise the soul’s ability to introspect and recognize that the image of God resides in the soul. We should use rational and intellectual methods to contemplate God through His image in the soul. In the fourth stage, we rely on the three virtues given by God to govern our spiritual senses, purify our souls, and ascend toward God.

3.5. *Contemplate the Divine Unity through Its Primary Name Which Is Being*

As we enter the fifth and sixth stages, the mind turns to God Himself.

De speculatione divinae unitatis per eius nomen primum, quod est esse (Bonaventure 1259).

“Contemplate the divine unity through Its primary name which is Being.”. In the previous two sections, we contemplated God first externally and then within our minds. Now, we contemplate God directly from God Himself. At this stage, Bonaventure proposes that we focus on the idea that God is Being itself. “Hence Moses was told: I am who am.” (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 95). God is the absolute Being itself. It is beginningless and eternal, it does not have any non-existence, it is pure, it has no possibility, for any possibility may be non-existence, it is the most real. As Being itself, it has no defects, it has no diversity, it is perfect, it is the Supreme. These attributes of God as Being itself can be arrived at through rational inquiry. God as Being itself permeates space–time, and then all other existences derive from this Being. God’s grace overflows from His own essence, but, sometimes, there is blindness in people’s senses and reason. Our eyes may be drawn to the allure of the created world, but we ignore the Being itself that we as creatures will first encounter. As a result, we often encounter God last, but, fortunately, God is both the beginning and the end. We all could rest our souls in God.

3.6. *Contemplate the Most Blessed Trinity in Its Name Which Is Good*

De speculatione beatissimae trinitatis in eius nomine, quod est bonum (Bonaventure 1259).

“Contemplate the most blessed trinity in Its name which is good”. In the sixth stage, God is contemplated as Goodness. Bonaventure said that goodness is self-diffusive. Therefore, God, as the highest good, must naturally extend His goodness. The greatest diffusion is the simultaneous production of a beloved and a co-beloved, the one generated and the other inspired in the highest good. These divine relationships correspond to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. “Here is supreme communicability with individuality of persons, supreme consubstantiality with plurality of hypostases, supreme configurability with distinct personality, supreme coequality with degree supreme coeternity with emanation, supreme mutual intimacy with mission.” (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 105). As we contemplate the truth of the Trinity, all we have to do is marvel and praise. Bonaventure advocated that we should contemplate the mystery of the Trinity through Jesus Christ, the

mediator between God and humanity. Union with Christ becomes the inevitable pathway into the divine Trinity. In *The Soul's Journey into God*, Bonaventure said: "For we should wonder not only at the essential and personal properties of God in themselves but also in comparison with the super wonderful union of God and man in the unity of the Person of Christ." (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 106).

In the last two stages of contemplation, we exercise the soul's power of understanding and pursue the illumination of the soul. It is through Christ that our souls realize the union of our humanity with God. At this point, the insight of the mind rests. Having reached the end of the sixth stage, the soul's journey is complete. In the seventh stage, we let our intellect rest and redirect all our emotions and passions toward God. The prerequisite for full union with God is knowing God. Philosophical methods help us in this preparation, but knowledge ultimately gives way to passion. Bonaventure said at the end of the book:

"But if you wish to know how these things come about, ask grace not instruction, desire not understanding, the groaning of prayer not diligent reading, the Spouse not the teacher, God not man, darkness not clarity, not light but the fire that inflames and carries us into God by ecstatic unctious and burning affections." (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 115)

4. Compare the Similarities and Differences between the Two Paths

After discussing Śaṅkara's six sādhanas and Bonaventure's six stages of spirituality, respectively, we find that there are certain similarities in their thoughts on the characteristics of the ultimate reality and the methods of spiritual practice.

Firstly, both Śaṅkara and Bonaventure recognized that there is a supreme ultimate reality. According to Śaṅkara, Brahman is not an object, but an eternal subject. Brahman is the Absolute Infinite which pervades everything and represents absolute knowledge. When Śaṅkara discussed Samādhāna, he directly mentioned that the object of concentration and meditation is Brahman or Ātman. Because in Śaṅkara's theory, everything, except for the Supreme Being Brahman, is false. Bonaventure also argued that God is the first principle and God is Existence itself. In the fifth stage of spiritual practice, Bonaventure suggested that spiritual disciplines should be directed toward God himself. He proposed that "Being" is the first name of God. People's first concept is existence, and the concept of non-existence arises from the absence of existence. Therefore, understanding existence is the prerequisite for grasping non-existence. Understanding actual existence is the prerequisite for understanding potential existence. The Existence itself is intelligible and purely real. It is not an individual existence or a specific category of existence, rather, it is a divine existence. Bonaventure said that God is the original, eternal, simplest, most realistic, perfect, and unique existence (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 97).

Secondly, they all proposed methods to attain oneness with ultimate reality through spiritual practice. In both practices, they all believe that the key to spiritual practice is the six abilities of believers. Śaṅkara declared that the six treasures are the spiritual methods for seekers to pursue Brahman. Seekers should also possess these six qualities and abilities. We start with śama and dama. The aspirant should practice controlling the mind and letting the mind direct the senses to withdraw from external objects. Next is uparati. We maintain peace of mind by observing our natural duties. Additionally, we need to cultivate the endurance of the mind, which is titikṣā. Faith brings the soul to truth, which is called śraddhā. Eventually, our minds begin to think seriously about Ātman. This stage is called samādhāna. Our mind is focused on the Self, Absolute Knowledge through meditation. Ultimately, this practice leads us to realize the infinite self and attain the state of unity of Brahma and the self. The spiritual practice proposed by Bonaventure also comprises six stages. In the first two stages, we should practice using our senses and imagination to find vestiges of God in all things and to contemplate God in His vestiges. Because all creation is created by God and reflects God Himself in some way. Awareness of creation in the sensible world is the first step on our path to God. In this section, Bonaventure emphasizes the role of the senses and imagination. The senses connect us to the external creation. Imagination

helps us understand what God is like. In the third and fourth stages, the soul turns from the external to the inward. The faculties of the soul manifest as reason and intelligence. We should contemplate God through His image within our souls. Then, we enter the image of God himself, contemplating God through the faith, hope, and love of His grace. In the last two stages, the soul's faculties appear as understanding. Finally, there is the spark of the soul. We understand God as Being Itself and God as the Supreme Good, thereby directly contemplating God Himself. After traversing these six stages, our souls find rest in God. Eventually, we release our passion and enter a state of ecstasy.

Thirdly, both Śāṅkara and Bonaventure emphasize the importance of mental ability or wisdom in their practice methods. In India, sādhanā is an ancient tradition. The *Bhagavad Gītā* uses the phrase abhyāsa (practice) yoga to underscore that practice and renunciation are the paths to liberation. The *Yoga Sūtras* illustrated that liberation can be attained through the practice of aṣṭāṅga yoga. In Śāṅkara's system, there is little emphasis on physical practice because Śāṅkara's path to liberation is Jñāna Yoga⁸. Śāṅkara emphasized discernment, control of the mind and senses, and concentration. These abilities are all under the category of human rationality. Similarly, Bonaventure also paid more attention to mental ability and intellectual practice. The *Ordo Fratrum Minorum* adhered to the principles of asceticism, although Bonaventure inherited St. Francis's thought of poverty. To a certain extent, he emphasized spiritual exercise by wisdom more than pure physical asceticism. Bonaventure advocated learning would be necessary to attain holiness (Lee 2020). He believed that the contemplative life, the ascetic life, and the soul-healing life could all be found in Christianity (Moorman 1968). In the book *The Soul's Journey into God*, Bonaventure mainly discussed the exercise of the mind rather than the physical practices. Both Śāṅkara and Bonaventure repeatedly emphasized the role of the mind and senses. Bonaventure believed that, upon creation, human nature was peaceful and pure, but, due to sin, humanity became ignorant and greedy. Fortunately, they can be graced by God. They must be cleansed by justice, exercised by knowledge, and perfected by wisdom. Bonaventure's views coincide with Śāṅkara's Māyā theory. Māyā envelopes Brahman and Ātman. People's minds attach to false realities, resulting in suffering and bondage. Nonetheless, the mind can return to its true nature through self-effort.

Because of their disparate religious traditions, there are also obvious differences in their spiritual theories.

First, does ultimate reality create everything? In Śāṅkara's theory, Brahman, as the ultimate reality, creates nothing. Bonaventure believed that God created everything. Śāṅkara maintained that everything else except for Brahman is an illusion superimposed on Brahman due to ignorance. Brahman is supreme, indivisible Infinite. Everything else we see in the so-called creation is just superposition. The world is just a superposition on Brahman. All external things are false, so we must control our minds and focus on Brahman. In Bonaventure's thought, God is the ultimate reality and the Creator. Everything is created by God, so all creation has vestiges of God. The world and living beings created by God are real. The first two stages of spirituality proposed by Bonaventure are based on the idea that God created all things. The root of this difference is the disparate understanding of ultimate reality in the two religious traditions.

The second difference is the relationship between ultimate reality and people. This question is also relevant to understanding the effective outcomes of spiritual practice. Śāṅkara maintained that there is no duality between Brahman and Self. In contrast, Bonaventure believed in a duality between God and humanity. Śāṅkara's foundational ideology is the unity of Brahman and the self. Consequently, the practice he proposed involves the process of discovering one's true self. The highest truth or the true knowledge is encapsulated in the phrase "Brahman and I are one". The purpose of jñāna yoga is to realize this supreme truth. With respect to the process of liberation practice, the path of knowledge is a process of discernment–enlightenment–liberation. With a profound yearning for liberation, the seeker initially distinguishes what is real and what is unreal. The seeker then embarks on a series of spiritual practices that include the control of the

mind and senses. Finally, he/she is liberated. From Śaṅkara's perspective, ultimate reality and people's true selves are the same. Therefore, the purpose and most effective result of spiritual practice lies in understanding and realizing the unity of Brahman and the self. In Bonaventure's teachings, God is the ultimate reality that transcends all things. Bonaventure argued that God is Being itself and the supreme Good. His image resides within the human soul, but, fundamentally, God transcends everything, including humanity. God's grace is the prerequisite for all self-effort. Regarding the purpose of this spiritual practice, Bonaventure believed that individuals should let their souls rest in God. The highest state that people can reach through the six stages of spiritual practice is to ascend into God under the grace of God. This state is referred to as the unity of God and human. Bonaventure also emphasized that entering this realm necessitates not only rational exertion, but also the fervent desire of the soul. Ask for grace instead of instruction, for desire instead of understanding, for groans of prayer instead of diligent reading, for a spouse instead of a teacher, for God instead of men, for darkness instead of clarity, not for light but for utter burning fire (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 115). This view is completely different from Śaṅkara's view of self-effort. Śaṅkara asserted that enlightenment can only be achieved through self-effort. There are no intermediaries on the path to enlightenment. As he aptly noted in *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (54), one can know what the moon is only by looking at it through one's own eyes.

The third disparity is the path of practice. Śaṅkara believed that the sixfold practice is an external–internal process. Bonaventure's six stages represent a bottom-up ascent and a process of introspection from the external to the internal. Śaṅkara's six practices constitute an outside-in process that guides the mind from the external world back to its origin. The core of this process is the management of the mind. Since the ultimate reality—Brahman and Ātman—are one in Śaṅkara's theory, there is no process of ascent and climbing of the mind. On the other hand, Bonaventure said, "Just as there are six stages in the ascent into God, there are six stages in the powers of the soul, through which we ascend from the lowest to the highest, from the exterior to the interior, from the temporal to the eternal." (Bonaventure [1259] 1978, p. 62). Bonaventure divided existence into three levels: creation, soul, and God, all of which correspond to the three objects of contemplation of the soul. The three pairs of wings on the seraphim symbolize ascent, which means that the soul progressively ascends through the wisdom imparted by Christ until it attains a peaceful state. The reason for this contrast is that Śaṅkara believed that Brahman and I are one, while Bonaventure adhered to the concept of duality between God and humans.

5. Conclusions

As it can be seen from what has been discussed above, the most important similar aspect of spirituality is achieving oneness with ultimate reality through the discipline of wisdom. They respectively proposed a six-step spiritual practice method based on wisdom abilities. Śaṅkara's theory of liberation is called Jñāna Yoga. Bonaventure's Six Stages of Spirituality repeatedly emphasize that this is an exercise of the mind that relies on wisdom. However, due to the barriers of religious tradition, the differences between the two theories are also obvious. The first question is whether ultimate reality creates anything. According to Śaṅkara's advaita thought, Brahman does not create anything. Everything we see including the world is an illusion superimposed on Brahman due to ignorance. Bonaventure's ideological foundation is that God is supreme and created all things. Because of this difference, their theories on the relationship between God and man also differ. Śaṅkara followed the Vedic concepts of "You are that" and "I am Brahman". In other words, there is no duality between ultimate reality and the true self. Then, the spiritual practice means that the seeker realizes this truth completely through his own efforts. In Bonaventure's thought, God is the undoubted first cause and created human beings. The dualistic gulf between God and man is unbridgeable. Therefore, the so-called "unity of God and man" is predicated on God's grace rather than self-effort. By comparing Bonaventure's Theory of Six Stages of Spirituality and Śaṅkara's Sixfold Practice Theory of

Vedānta, we find that their theories are very complete and convincing in their respective traditions. They explained their theories of spiritual practice with unique arguments and provided effective practice methods for their respective believers. Their teachings have become integral to Vedānta philosophy and Christian theology. This comparison is a tool for understanding others which can be used to know the beliefs of others and explain the meaning of one's own beliefs. That is, believers can deepen their understanding of their faith by learning about other traditions. Although the encounter between Christianity and Hinduism has made some progress since the nineteenth century, the dialogue between the two traditions is still in its infancy. Richard De Smet and Swami Abhishiktananda have made several contributions to the dialogue between Advaita and Christianity. They seek to grasp the meaning and importance of the Hindu teaching of non-duality to Christian theology and spirituality (Malkovsky 1999). Raimon Panikkar is "an apostle of inner-faith dialogue". Recently, Daniel Soars (2023) has compared the thought of Thomas Aquinas with Advaita and has proposed that the relation between God and the world in Christianity should be understood as non-dual. Comparative methods are applied to various branches of the humanities. As Clooney says, comparative theology is a practical response to religious diversity (Clooney 2010). Faced with the diverse and interconnected world, it is essential to recognize the value of dialogue between different traditions. In daily life, encounters between believers of different religions are inevitable. Conflicts due to differences in religious beliefs or exclusivism also occur from time to time. As a neutral research method, comparative study can draw people's attention to the differences between different traditions. From a comparative perspective, it is easier for us to acknowledge the Other and see that different religious traditions have their unique charms. Respecting, appreciating, and learning from others does not hinder one's own beliefs. For example, Christianity can use the idea of Advaita to deepen its understanding of God, and Vedānta can also find inspiration in Christianity to help its believers grasp the truth. It should be noted that the purpose of mutual understanding and learning is to make human culture richer rather than homogeneous. In the process of comparative study, we should not only maintain the uniqueness of our respective traditions, but also respect the diversity of spirituality so that different religions and cultures can flourish harmoniously.

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Notes

- ¹ The authorship the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* has been questioned. This work is traditionally attributed to Śaṅkara. However, most scholars now reject this attribution. According to Grimes, "modern scholars tend to reject its authenticity as a work by Śaṅkara," while "traditionalists tend to accept it." (Grimes 2004, p. 23). In any case, *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* is an indispensable work of Advaita. So, I consider and discuss it as the work of Śaṅkara now.
- ² The fourfold qualification of a seeker of Truth. Viveka means discrimination; virāgya means dispassion; sampatti means six sādhanas; mumukṣutva means the desire of liberation.
- ³ *Tattvabodha* was composed by Śaṅkara around the 8th century AD. The original Sanskrit text at the beginning of each paragraph can be found in the translated version by Svarupa Chaitanya (Śaṅkarācārya 1981). The verses in this work are not uniformly numbered and I have used the verse numbers from this translation, from 1.3.1 to 1.3.6 (Śaṅkarācārya 1981).
- ⁴ *The Imitation of Christ* was originally written in Medieval Latin as *De Imitatione Christi* around 1418–1427 and first printed in 1471–1472.
- ⁵ The author of *Mysticism and Intellect in Medieval Christianity and Buddhism: Ascent and Awakening in Bonaventure and Chinul* demonstrates Bonaventure's views on theology and spirituality. That is, the study of scripture and theology does not interfere with contemplation and spiritual practice (Lee 2020).

- ⁶ *The Soul's Journey into God* was written in Medieval Latin as *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* in 1259. It is usually translated as *The Soul's Journey into God* or *The Journey of the Mind Into God*.
- ⁷ In *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, the title of each chapter summarizes the stages of contemplating God. The original Latin texts can be found in the database Documenta Catholica Omnia.
- ⁸ The tradition of jñāna yoga can be found as early as the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Śaṅkara emphasized the importance of absolute knowledge, so his theory of liberation is also known as jñāna yoga.

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