

ISKCON Studies Conference

**ISKCON and Interpretation:
Context, History, Theory, Practice**

Prabhupadadesh, Italy

Friday 27 – Monday 30 July, 2007

ISKCON Studies Institute

Aims

The ISKCON Studies Institute aims to,

- develop the field of ISKCON studies and related areas of interest;
- develop forums for academic exchange;
- promote relevant research and facilitate publishing about ISKCON in various disciplines.

Members

Its members are,

- Krsna-ksetra Dasa
- Lal Krishna Dasa
- Merudevi Dasi
- Pranava Dasa
- Radhika Raman Dasa
- Rembert Lutjeharms
- Shaunaka Rishi Dasa

Day One: Preparing the ground

1.1 10-11.20am Introductions

1.2 11.40am-1pm Introduction: Mapping the field

Radhika Ramana Dasa

Interpretation is a central human activity, and an inevitable function of religious institutions. In this session, Radhika Ramana Dasa will provide an overview of the themes that will be explored during the meetings. He will raise key questions, pointing out both the necessity and difficulties of interpretation in a devotional context. Who is qualified to interpret the scriptures? What are the limits of interpretation, and why are we warned against it? How can we facilitate proper interpretation and learn to recognise it?

Lunch

1.3 3-3.50pm Text and context

Rembert Lutjeharms

What is the importance of interpretation for Hindu religious traditions and how do they approach sacred texts? How do these approaches compare with those of the Gaudiya Vaishnava acaryas? How unique was their approach and how much did it mirror other Indian traditions? What did they reject and what did embrace and modify? Finally, what role does tradition play in interpretation? How does tradition shape interpretation and how is it in turned shaped by it?

1.4 4-4.50pm Bhaktivinoda and bhadrakok: Responses to colonial Christianity

Krsna-ksetra Dasa

Christian missionaries and the forces of European

secularism posed a great challenge to nineteenth-century India's religious traditions. Bhaktivinoda Thakura's interpretation of Vaishnava scripture sometimes resisted and sometimes embraced these new views. This important *acarya* in the Gaudiya tradition wrestled vigorously and fearlessly with the Vaishnava tradition he so loved, turning it into a 'modality of change' for reformulating spiritual renewal to the tune of universalism that resonated with Enlightenment thinking of his time.

1.5

5-6pm

Viewing the East from the West

Federico Squarcini

How does our cultural background affect our interpretation? Our commonly shared European attitude towards *anything* needs an act of interpretation to be understood. We tend to be convinced by our own 'understanding' and our own 'comprehension' of reality. Using classical South Asian materials and example we will see the potential incompatibility between our largely shared 'post-modern' view and a more 'classical' understanding of what it means 'to interpret'.

Day Two: Spiritual institution or institutional spirit?

2.1

10-10.50am

Re-Visioning ISKCON:

Constructive theologising for reform and renewal

Krishna Ksetra Dasa

This paper, co-authored in 2000 (and published in 2004) by Krishna Ksetra Dasa and the late Tamal Krishna Goswami, was an attempt to engage in 'constructive theology' within an educated public forum. The ideas generated in this article may be perceived as anywhere from passé to downright blasphemous, as either creative interpretations or misinterpretations of the Caitanya Vaishnava tradition.

2.2 11–11.50am

Session Two: Institution as interpretation

Jayadvaita Swami

While interpreting the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, ISKCON also interprets itself. That is, its members and leaders develop ideas of what ISKCON is and should be. And these in turn affect both ISKCON and the personal lives of its members, as well as others with whom ISKCON stands in relation. Those affected then further affect ISKCON itself. How do post-charismatic dilemmas and other social forces influence ISKCON's interpretation of itself? And how does ISKCON's self-interpretation affect the way ISKCON arouses, interprets, and responds to the forces of alienation, schism, heresy, and competition? What has history shown us, and what can we expect?

2.3 12–1pm

Case Study One: Bhaktisiddhanta and the Gaudiya Math

Pranava Dasa

In what way was the Gaudiya Math a response to the need to translate the Vaishnava tradition for a broader audience and to meet the challenges posed by modernity? Traditionally in Gaudiya Vaishnavism a network of personal, spiritual relationships was the accepted pattern of social hierarchy and interaction. However, if the tradition was to reach the educated Hindu middle class and a Western audience, a modern, sophisticated institution was required. Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, building on the legacy of Bhaktivinoda Thakura, developed that kind of institution. This allowed Gaudiya Vaishnavism to expand beyond the cultural and religious borders of Bengal and, later on, India.

Lunch

2.4 2.50–4.10pm

Session Four: Introducing schism

Massimo Introvigne

The term 'schism' is not originally sociological, but

theological. It belongs to the jargon of the Roman Catholic and of the Eastern Orthodox churches, where its use has always been politically important. Some recent examples, both Catholic and Orthodox may illustrate how the use of the word 'schism' is socially constructed and politically negotiated. The original theological meaning does not apply well to religious organisations (including Protestantism) that don't use the episcopal Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox model. However in a landmark 2004 article, Sutton and Chaves tried to construct a sociological concept of 'denominational schism' applicable to Protestantism (Zuckerman did the same for Judaism in 1997 but his article was less influential). Although not easily applicable to a Hindu or non-Judeo-Christian context, these sociological works may form the basis for a typology of schisms independent from the original theological meanings of the term.

2.5 4.20–5.10pm

Case Study Two: Legislative interpretation

Sesa Dasa

How well equipped is ISKCON Law to handle irrational eruptions, ideological eruptions, and other destructive emotional responses that can easily form the basis of 'witch trials'. Who interprets ISKCON Law? Who enforces ISKCON Law? Does ISKCON Law contribute to hysteria or mitigate against hysteria?

2.6 5.20–6.00pm

Session Six: Plenary

Day Three: Day trip

Day trip to Lake Garda

Cost €25

Day Four: Interpretation and schism

4.1 10–11am 'As It Is' As it is: Understanding the hermeneutical principles of Srila Prabhupada

Ravindra Svarupa Dasa

Srila Prabhupada makes claims about his principles of understanding scripture that appear, to the modern mind, to be patently false, even absurd, and they tend to be dismissed out of hand as an instance of naive, unreflective 'fundamentalism'. This study shows, however, that Prabhupada works from a profound and highly sophisticated theology of sacred utterances, which constitutes in effect a defence of his hermeneutics. A close reading from Prabhupada's translation and commentary on *Srimad Bhagavatam* (1.3.44–1.4.1), discloses the core of Prabhupada's hermeneutical process. We see that essential to it is the systematic formation of the intellect and character required by which the hearer attains the qualification (*adhikara*) for reception. In this light, Prabhupada's creation of ISKCON is revealed as a necessary component of the hermeneutical process itself. Indeed, that process constitutes the *raison d'être* for the institution. Those who want to understand Prabhupada's hermeneutics, must take into account both his theology and the hermeneutical way of life it entails.

3.2 11.10–12.00am Schism: Cause and effect (historical examples)

Kumari Priya

In this session we will survey several instances of schism in religious traditions. The main focus will be on analysis of a few examples of 'heresies' that led to schisms in early Christianity. Examples from Buddhism and Islam will also be discussed. We will touch on themes previously introduced, such as 'Whose tradition is it?' and therefore 'Who has the right/privilege to assume authority of interpretation and why?' We will also assess the importance of context for 'orthodox' and 'heterodox'

interpretations. The main area of discussion will address: 'What motivates schisms?' What can we draw from the examples discussed that will help us to identify and constructively address the roots of schisms? Can we identify defining lines between orthodox and heterodox interpretations?

3.3 12.10–1.00pm

ISKCON schisms:

The good, the bad, and the normal

Braja Bihari Dasa

Schismatic groups – groups that break away from the established religious organisation – are a common phenomenon in history. ISKCON is no exception. Even during Srila Prabhupada's time one existed, and since then there have been several major schisms. This presentation will examine the history of ISKCON's schisms, place those schisms in the light of social theory and the history of other religious organizations, and discuss the benefits and problems these schisms create.

Break

3.4 2.30–4.00pm

Wrapping up

Acknowledgements

Reflections from speakers

Summary on behalf of ISKCON Studies Institute – Radhika Raman Dasa

6pm

Closing dinner

The speakers

Braja Bihari Dasa (Brian Bloch) is the director of ISKCONResolve, ISKCON's conflict management system. He is presently finishing his Master's degree in Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University. He is a trained mediator and ombudsman having mediated dozens of ISKCON-related conflicts and met with hundreds of visitors to his ombud's office. He is the former director of the Vrindavan Institute of Higher Education. Originally from New York, he joined ISKCON in 1977. He now lives in Vrindavan, India, with his wife Ananda Vrindavana Devi Dasi and their son, Gopinath.

Massimo Introvigne is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of numerous books and articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is also an attorney specialising in intellectual property rights and part-time professor of Sociology of Immigration in the postgraduate programme of the European University of Rome.

Jayadvaita Swami serves as an editor and trustee for the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust.

Krsna-ksetra Dasa, a research fellow of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, recently published his doctoral thesis *Attending Krsna's Image: Caitanya Vaisnava Murti-seva as Devotional Truth* (Routledge, 2006). He teaches regularly at Bhaktivedanta College, recently taught for one year at the University of Florida, and will soon begin teaching in the department of Cultural and Religious Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong as a visiting scholar.

Kumaripriya Dasi (Claire Robison) was a student in the pioneering year of the ministerial training programme at the Bhaktivedanta College. She has recently completed her BA in Theology at Oxford, where she came first in her year in the University's Theology Faculty. She plans to pursue graduate studies in Comparative Religion, with a specialisation in Hinduism.

Rembert Lutjeharms joined ISKCON in 1999 in Penang, Malaysia. In 2001 he received an undergraduate degree in Oriental Studies from the University of Ghent, Belgium, specialising in Sanskrit, and two years later earned his Master's degree from the same department. He has served the Dutch branch of the BBT as a Sanskrit editor, translator, and proof-reader since 2000. He is currently finishing a doctoral degree at the University of Oxford on Kavikarnapura's poetry and poetics, and he teaches 'Introduction to Hinduism', 'Vedas and Upanisads' and 'Introduction to Sanskrit Poetry' at Bhaktivedanta College, Belgium, as well as courses on Hinduism and Sanskrit at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies.

Pranava Dasa joined ISKCON in Vrindavan in 1983. After ten years of book distribution in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, he served as the congregational director (1993 to 1996) and the temple president of ISKCON Gothenburg in Sweden (1996 to 1999). He started his academic career in 2000. He completed an MA in the History of Religion and Indology at the Universities of Gothenburg and Stockholm. He teaches courses on 'Indian Philosophy' and 'Science and Religion' at the Bhaktivedanta College, Radhadesh. He is presently completing his Ph.D. on the contributions of Bhaktisiddhanta Saravati. He and his wife, Kalpavasini Devi Dasi, live in Gothenburg.

Radhika Ramana Dasa (Ravi M. Gupta) is Assistant Professor of Religion at Centre College, USA, where he recently received the teaching award for junior faculty. He teaches every year at Bhaktivedanta College in Belgium, holds a D.Phil. in Hindu Studies from the University of Oxford, and is the author of *The Caitanya Vaisnava Vedanta of Jiva Gosvami* (Routledge, 2007).

Ravindra Svarupa Dasa received initiation from Srila Prabhupada in 1971. He has a BA in Philosophy and a Ph.D. in Religious Studies. In ISKCON he has served as a temple president, as a writer and editor for *Back to Godhead*, and as a researcher and writer in the Bhaktivedanta Institute. Currently he serves as a member of the Governing Body Commission. He is also the leader of the Vedic Planetarium Cosmology Project.

Sesa Dasa teaches Ethics. He joined ISKCON in 1973, inspired by the political activism of the In God We Trust Party for Purified

Leaders, organised by members of ISKCON. He is a member of the Governing Body Commission and head of the Ministry of Educational Development. He served as the temple president in both Washington DC and Philadelphia; as the Managing Editor of Back to Godhead magazine; and as the North American Secretary of the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. He attended the United States Military Academy and later received a degree in Political Science from the State University of New York, Albany. In 1991 he earned a Juris Doctor degree from the UCLA School of Law. He lives in Alachua, Florida, with his wife, Madhumati, and two daughters.

Federico Squarcini received a Ph.D. in ‘Social and Historical Studies of Religions’ from the University of Bologna. He is currently researching the sociology of South Asian classical religious and juridical traditions and is teaching ‘History of Indian Religions’ at the University of Florence, where he is affiliated at the Chair of Sanskrit Language and Literature. Federico is author and editor of volumes including *Ex Oriente Lux, Luxus, Luxuria. Storia e sociologia delle tradizioni religiose sudasiatiche in Occidente* (SEF 2006) and *Boundaries, Dynamics and Construction of Traditions* (Firenze University Press 2005), he has published in *Critica Sociologica*, *Orientamenti Pedagogici*, *Parole Chiave*, *Rivista di Studi Orientali*, *Social Compass*, and serves on the board of directors of *Religioni e Società* and *Kykéio*.

