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## INTRODUCTION

“If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”

—Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)

“Only curiosity about the fate of others, the ability to put ourselves in their shoes, and the will to enter their world through the magic of imagination, creates this shock of recognition. Without this empathy there can be no genuine dialogue, and we as individuals and nations will remain isolated and alien, segregated and fragmented.”

—Azar Nafisi, Professor and Best-selling Author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

In the mid-1960s, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) articulated what might be seen as the basis of interfaith concerns: “Revelation is always an accommodation to the capacity of man. No two minds are alike, just as no two faces are alike. The voice of God reaches the spirit of man in a variety of ways, in a multiplicity of languages. One truth comes to expression in many ways of understanding.”<sup>1</sup>

This always made sense to me. Deep and thoroughgoing interreligious conversation is useful, if not crucial, in understanding the similarities and differences between various peoples of the world—and, make no mistake, both similarities and differences are important, giving us a more complete picture of our neighbors. It's true in any relationship. To really hear each other—not just in regard to our agreed upon ideas but also in our palpable distinctions—this is what relationship is all about. For example, married couples whose marriages last—they know the value of honest dialogue, of sincere back and forth, of serious communication. No talk, no understanding. The usual result of such disharmony: Divorce. Do we want to be divorced from our brothers and sisters in other religious traditions?

In the end, genuine dialogue is well worth it, especially in the religious arena. But for maximum effect, it is necessary that it is not done superficially, or with an agenda to convert to our own way of thinking. We should sincerely want to learn the other person's perspective. Again, like in marriage: If we converse just to tell our side of the story, it becomes clear that we are more interested in monologue than dialogue. And that just won't do.

First and foremost, real dialogue necessitates revealing one's heart, not just doctrinal jargon, memorized verses, or inherited traditional teachings. And we must be able to receive what is in the hearts of others, too. Indeed, in effective dialogue, we don't only hear through the ears but also through the heart. This idea was noted by Professor Anne Hunt, Dean of Theology and Philosophy at Australian Catholic University, who writes about interfaith dialogue in terms of an alternate form of seeing and hearing—she says we must use “the eyes and ears of the heart.” This resonates with me. In Hunt's work, she cites both Christian and Sufi instances of how this takes place. In the Christian tradition, for example, she mentions the *Letter to the Ephesians* (1:17-19), where the Apostle Paul writes: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” St Benedict, too, Hunt notes, instructed his monks to “listen with the ears of your heart.”

From the Vaishnava-Hindu side, with which I am more familiar, we see this same principle at work. For example, Krishnadas Kaviraja Goswami writes in his *Chaitanya-caritamrta* (1.5.21) about the *prema-netra*, or “eyes of love,” explaining that one sees God (and no doubt hears Him as well) through the vision (and sounds) of *bhakti*, or devotion. Ramakrishna, too, famously said:

God cannot be seen with these physical eyes.  
In the course of spiritual discipline one gets a “love body,”  
endowed with “love eyes,” “love ears,” and so on.  
One sees God with those “love eyes.”  
One hears the voice of God with those “love ears.”

In the *Brahma-samhita* (5.38), we find, *premāñjana-cchurita-bhakti-vilocanena*: “only a person whose eyes are smeared with the ointment of love can see the beautiful form of Lord Krishna. Or Mirabai sings, “My eyes are glowing with the light of love. It seems that all the sins and sorrows and cravings of my life have

been used as fuel for the fire of this love.” Sri Krishna says: “You cannot see Me with your present eyes. Therefore I give you divine eyes, so that you can behold My mystic opulence.” (*Bhagavad-Gita* 11.8)

Finally, according to Kabir, the fifteenth-century Indian poet, “When the eyes and ears are open, even the leaves on the trees teach like pages from the scriptures.”

The point should be clear: real spirituality comes with a certain openness of heart, with the spiritualization of the senses, whereby one can perceive ultimate truth. It would serve those who enter religious dialogue well to bear this in mind when interacting with each other. Otherwise, there is no real dialogue. And what is the result of no dialogue? Hans Küng addresses this:

No peace among the nations  
without peace among the religions.  
No peace among the religions  
without dialogue between the religions.  
No dialogue between the religions  
without investigation of the foundations of the religions.

The two religions here, despite much historical evidence to the contrary, have certain advantages when it comes to interfaith dialogue:

The Hindu religion is naturally pluralistic. A well-known Rig Vedic hymn says that “Truth is One, though the sages know it variously.” (*ekam sat vipra bahudā vadanti*). This is *Rig Veda* 1.164.46, and it will be addressed in the pages that follow. Along similar lines, Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagavad-gita* (4:11), “As people approach me, so I receive them. All paths lead to me” (*ye yathā māṁ prapadyante tāṁs tathāiva bhajāmyaham mama vartmānuvartante manusyāḥ pārtha sarvaśāḥ*). Traditionally, it is well known that Hinduism, in its many forms—especially Vaishnavism—is nothing if not open when it comes to alternate conceptions of God. This does not mean, of course, that they accept all forms as Divine, but, given certain qualifying characteristics, the tradition is quite “catholic,” so to speak.

And let us not forget that *catholic* means “all-embracing,” coming from *katholikos* (*katholou*), i.e., “throughout the whole,” or “universal.” The word is used in Greek classics, such as those of Aristotle and Polybius, and was often used by early Christian authors, too, in its more generic sense. I wonder, sometimes, how the word became associated with the Roman Catholic faith, and although I have not yet researched the subject in depth, I can only assume that the early Church was more open than it became in later years. I understand

that the word was first used to describe the Church in the early second century to emphasize its universal scope. I see this scope in the early Christian mystics, many of them Catholic, who point toward Christianity's universality with spiritual poetry and philosophy that could easily have been written by the Vaishnava sages, with whom, again, I am much more familiar. I am happy that we are finally doing an issue of JVS on Vaishnava-Christian dialogue, and I can say that I have learned much from its contents.

But let it be said, too, that the following pages represent a very special series of dialogues. Such discussions always transpire between *individuals*, who bring to the conversation their own perspectives and realizations. The highly qualified contributors to this volume shed much light on their respective religions. But before going into specifics about this issue of JVS, I want to say that, for me, two luminaries of interreligious dialogue will always stand out as exemplary, and I would feel remiss not to mention them.

I refer to Mahanambrata Brahmachari (1904–1999), a Vaishnava *sadhu* who did doctoral work on Jiva Goswami at the University of Chicago, and Thomas Merton (1915–1968), the famous trappist monk, writer and mystic. The two of them happened to meet first in Grand Central Station and then at Columbia University, initiating a friendship that would last a lifetime. They had a great amount of respect and admiration for each other, as is evidenced in Merton's recalling of their various meetings in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, his autobiography. Recently, I discovered a "personal tribute" that Merton wrote in further appreciation of his Vaishnava friend, and I advise readers of this journal to peruse it in its entirety: <http://www.mahanambrata.com/missionary.htm>

Some highlights from that tribute:

"I have realized how true it is not only that East and West may meet, but that they must meet, not in the chance collision of alien cultures in which one seeks to impose upon the other the patterns of power and of technology, but in a profoundly human exchange in which each culture finds itself in the other."

"We do not find ourselves until, in meeting this other, we receive from him the gift, in part at least, to know ourselves. And doubtless in this same act, never sufficiently understood if it is only unilateral, we also may reveal to the stranger something of his true self."

"Thus, in an age of ecumenism, the love of one's fellow man consists not in depriving him of his own proper truth in order to give him yours, but rather in enabling him to understand his own truth better in the light of yours."

These truths are at the heart of the Vaishnava-Christian dialogue you are about to read. And now for some specifics: The dialogues in question—held annually in Potomac, MD, just outside of Washington, DC, since 1998—would inevitably produce some sort of publication. Its organizers knew this from its earliest meetings. Anuttama Dasa and Samuel Wagner, particularly, began to seriously discuss publication about five years ago. At that time, they called a meeting to gather the inventory of the proceedings, hoping to thereby conceptualize just how a published volume might emerge. Their records were not complete. Some of the years, one or two presenters had written papers. Other years there was nothing written, only spoken, and in some instances only spotty recordings were available. The inventory process was more or less completed in three meetings over the course of just as many years.

In 2009, Kenneth Cracknell gave the project a sense of deadline, of crucial importance, by suggesting that they push for a 15th Anniversary publication. Following Cracknell's recommendation, Wagner and Dasa brainstormed an outline for the publication in early 2010. Then, in early 2011, they refined that outline over two lengthy working sessions, which included, again, extensive digging through the files to determine, based on available materials, what papers might be included. In April 2011, Dasa and Wagner presented the publication outline to the annual Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue for feedback. Shortly thereafter, Graham Schweig informed Dasa and Wagner that the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* would likely be interested in publishing the project. For the next year, Wagner and Dasa, in consultation with several others, undertook the extensive planning process required to make this issue a reality.

As the publication was taking shape, it was determined that in order to depict the full spectrum of qualities present in the dialogues, the publication would need to consist of three parts. First, we would have a section with introductory articles, perhaps pertaining to how this dialogue came to be, and/or theological reflections on such dialogue from both Vaishnava and Christian points of view. Second, highlights of the content from 15 years worth of meetings would be included as well. These ten papers (including two from an earlier dialogue on Boston) are academic/theological works and examples of what has provided the basis of discussion over the years.

Of the varieties of papers that comprise this publication, perhaps one of the more unique is the third type: reflections. A persistent challenge in the planning stages of this publication was how to convey not only the theological/academic fruits of these meetings, but also the personal and spiritual fruits of gathering individuals from two very different religious communities over the

course of many years. After much discussion, it was determined that the most effective and perhaps comprehensive route would be to include reflection pieces from both Christians and Vaishnavas who attended.

In conclusion, enthusiastic acknowledgement must be made of Anuttama Dasa and Sam Wagner for their dedicated efforts regarding the publication at hand. All that's left is for you to read it with your eyes and heart.

—Steven J. Rosen

### **Endnotes**

1. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays Edited by Susannah Heschel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 244.

## PROLOGUE: REFLECTIONS ON VAISHNAVA-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

I am honored to contribute to this special issue of the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* that calls to the attention of a wide readership the considerable accomplishment of the fifteen years of this Vaishnava-Christian dialogue.<sup>1</sup> I am happy to add some thoughts here, though I have been only minimally involved in this series of meetings. It is true that I was a member of the first of these dialogues in 1996 and came again for the one in 2010, but while I have had many other occasions to converse with Hindus and work with them in many contexts, I have never engaged in so specific and focused a dialogue as this 15 year long dedicated series.

It is easy to speak of this as an instance of “Hindu-Christian dialogue,” but of course no one involved has represented the full range of Hindu traditions or Christian communities. Even if there are core beliefs that almost all of us share, Christians come in many varieties. Even if one speaks of Protestant Christians or Catholic Christians, one can question further which church, which liberal or conservative dispositions, etc. Similarly, “Hindu” marks a group of traditions. A dialogue with a wide range of Hindu participants, or one with Advaitins or Shaivas or Tāntrikas would of course be quite different than a focused dialogue with Vaishnava Hindus. And even if we speak of Vaishnava Hindus, this is still broad reference, since different *sampradāyas* have flourished over the centuries in different parts of India. And if we back up, we can readily admit that a juxtaposition of “Christians” and “Vaishnavas” cannot mean an exact proportion of numbers involved, since the former indicates a very large community, over a billion.

But for the sake of this brief reflection, I will use the terms “Christian” and “Vaishnava,” though occasionally “Catholic” and “Śrīvaishnava.”

### A Bit of History

That Christians and theistic Hindus such as Vaishnavas are in conversation is hardly new or surprising, of course, since there is a history of contact between Vaishnava Hindus and Christians. Consider for a moment the Jesuit Catholic example. In a 1546 letter, St Francis Xavier, the first Jesuit in India, recounts hearing a Vaishnava mantra, and reveals his fascination in encountering a man who was probably a Vaishnava brahmin. He is fascinated by the brahmin's observance of a sabbath, respect for the moral law and a natural law instinct for monogamy, and even a particular prayer, which he took to be very much like a Christian prayer: "Those who are wise observe Sundays, something that is quite incredible. On Sundays they say no other prayer than the following, which they repeatedly recite, 'Om Śrī Nārāyaṇāya Namah,' which means, 'I adore thee, God, with your grace and assistance for ever,' and they recite this prayer very gently and softly in order to keep the oath they have taken."<sup>22</sup>

Inadvertently or not, Xavier's report marks the beginning of an enduring Jesuit interest in Vaishnavism. In the early 17th century, Roberto de Nobili paid special attention to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and so did many of his successors in the century to follow. While his intentions were polemic—he charged that the epic is inconsistent, the ethics unclear, the notion of God murky—clearly he noticed the similarities to Christianity and the pertinence of comparison, even when aiming to criticize the story of Rāma. Vaishnavism was a religion to be taken very seriously.

This interest has continued in modern times. For example, early in the 20th century, Camil Bulcke developed sophisticated interpretations of the Tulsidas telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, most notably in his *Rāma-kathā: Utpatti aura Vikāsa* (Prayaga: Hind Parishad, 1950). In the 1970s, the Indian Jesuit Noel Sheth wrote a Harvard University dissertation on Krishna that became *The Divinity of Krishna* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1984); in 1990 Ishanand Vempeny published his *Christ and Krishna* (Pune: Ishvani Kendra, 1988), an ambitious and forward looking effort to map out the whole range of theological and practical issues pertaining to how we think about Christ and Krishna in their traditions and in relation to one another. Of course, there is no deficit of Protestant writings on the theme, nor of Hindu reflections on the meaning of Jesus; my point here has been not so much to sketch a complete history, but only to note that even in my own Jesuit tradition, there is a long history of reflection on Vaishnava themes. Others in the pages that follow will surely testify to the fact that Vaishnavas have a long history of interest in the figure of Jesus, have noted the parallels between Vaishnava and Christian theology and piety.

### My Own Experience

All of this gets personal too. I am sure that in the pages to follow contributors will explain how they came to be interested in the dialogue and the tradition other than their own. Here I will mention some early points in my own Catholic engagement with Vaishnavism. Upon graduating from college in 1973, I went to Kathmandu to teach in a Jesuit high school for two years; it was early in the post-Vatican II era, and many of us were inspired to learn more deeply from religions and cultures other than our own. But before going, I knew little of Hinduism. I had read the *Bhagavad Gītā*, but it had not made any great impression on me; I admired Gandhi greatly, but cannot say that I thought of him primarily as a Hindu. But very early in my stay there, I vividly remember hearing Hindu students singing a *bhajan* in honor of Rāma and Sītā; it caught my attention, for its purity and devotion, and as it were opened a door to thinking about Hindu devotion in the Vaishnava tradition.

Though as a seminary student, and then as a doctoral student at the University of Chicago, I was fascinated by Śaṅkara's thought, it was early on in my doctoral program that I became also very interested in Rāmānuja. Despite the insistent and odd Christian preference for Advaita manifest in figures such as Pierre Johanns, Richard DeSmet, and Henri Le Saux, it seems that Hindu theistic traditions with strong intellectual grounding—such as the Vaishnava traditions—are particularly suitable partners for conversation with Christians.

Over the past three decades, moreover, I have engaged in the study of Śrīvaishnavism, both the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions and the crossover between the two. When in grad school it was under the guidance of A. K. Ramanuja that I started reading the *alvars* and my interest in Śrīvaishnavism came alive. The beauty and power of this poetry touched me deeply, indeed, and I became entirely interested too in the rich Sanskrit/Tamil language commentarial tradition that flourished around the poetry.

When in India, I have found it particularly meaningful to visit Vaishnava temples, notably well-known sites such as Tirupati (Tiruveṇkaṭam), the Pārthaśārathi temple in Triplicane, and the Śrīraṅgam temple (though not permitted to enter the sanctum there)—but also innumerable smaller Vaishnava temples in Mylapore and other parts of India. I have written a number of times about such experiences, and included in my recent Comparative Theology a lecture on interreligious learning that begins in the sanctum of a Vaishnava temple in Mylapore, before the *mūrti* of Śrī Lakṣmī.<sup>3</sup>

*The Theological Problems and Possibilities*

History aside, it is also important to be alert to the particular theological underpinnings and presuppositions that make the prospects of Vaishnava-Christian dialogue favorable. We know that dialogue needn't be founded on explicit theological foundations to get started, and that there are many other starting points of contact for fruitful exchange. Again, the essays that follow will give many specific examples, but a few general comments may help.

It is easy to identify areas of common ground. Reading the two traditions together has highlighted for me several claims about what God is like. In my book *Hindu God, Christian God* (2001), for example, I sought to highlight some claims common to Christian and Hindu theistic theologies: God is omniscient, omnipotent, without beginning; God can be recognized as the maker of the world, because the world requires an intelligible and intelligent source, and this source can be named as "God." This is true even if much more needs to be said to explain what it means to say that God makes the world. Such a God is accessible, loving, and intent on the good of the human race. Such claims indicate largely shared theological ground.

There are other points that are shared by Vaishnava Hindu and Christian thinkers, even if not fully: that God is without flaws is agreed upon by Vaishnava and Christian theologians, but they do not agree on whether having-a-body and being-possessed-of-desires are flaws or essential dimensions of the divine reality. Vaishnava theologians see divine materiality and divine desire as goods, not flaws; Christians and Vaishnavas agree on the possibility and importance of divine embodiment; while terms such as "incarnation" and "avatāra" do not point to identical claims about God and humans, they do highlight a shared conviction about what God is like and how God becomes involved in our world. While Vaishnavas and Christians will agree that we are in some real ways like God who nonetheless transcends our every category, there is no agreement whether this perfect God too can be described as male or female, or both or neither. Both traditions respect complexity and relationality within the divine simplicity. For Christians, this is manifest in the doctrine of the Trinity, while for Hindus a more likely form of relationality is the male-female relationship of a divine couple. Either way, the divine person is one, yet relational. All of this is exciting to think through and discuss with one another, in both academic and dialogue settings.<sup>4</sup>

Dialogical exchanges need not be thought through only on a conceptual level and apart from practice, and I know that this dialogue community has

been committed to some occasions for prayer and worship together, at least opening the possibility of this other and often deeper level of sharing. This makes sense to me as well, even just in terms of my own Catholic tradition in dialogue with Vaishnavism. For Catholicism has always been committed to a rich array of ritual practices that appeal in various ways to all the material and spiritual senses. Indeed, my earliest memories of the pre-Vatican Church have always been a help to me in Hindu temples, where one likewise encounters a rich appreciation of the sacramental aspect of the religious life, a spiritual materiality, one might say, that helps us to pray spiritually with and through our senses.

There are points of consonance in practice too. We cannot deduce ritual practice from theological tenets—the reverse is more likely: as we pray, so we believe and then theologize. Nevertheless, still we can point to the appreciation of the material world that Vaishnava and Catholic spiritualities manifest, and we can notice how a shared appreciation of the embodiment of God and the sacramental presence of God in the world leads to richer, more vivid worship. The world of things is good; God dwells in matter too; things, properly understood, speak to us of God in all the ways that our senses can understand.

And then there is the necessity of mutual engagement: Vaishnavism and Christianity must be in conversation, to be coherent within themselves. For the faith and theology of these communities make claims on the world as a whole. Neither thinks of itself as merely local, merely sectarian: our God is the God of all. And so the “other” must be taken into account, explained in terms of God’s will for the world. We know that Christians have long debated this topic, and that Christian positions range from an exclusion of the possibility that other religions are from God or have an enduring value, to a tolerant pluralism that sees the Christian tradition simply as one among many. Most of us including, I am sure, the Christian participants in the dialogue, are somewhere in-between, and this has to be sorted out in the dialogue.

The Vaishnava communities too will not share a single view of other religions or God’s plan for the world. Sampradāyas such as the Mādхva show little interest whatsoever in other traditions, even most Hindu traditions. Some account for the others as lesser ways meant for people not yet ready for the higher way of Vaishnavism. Some Vaishnavas, in my perception, really do want everyone to become devotees of Krishna and even hold that everyone is really already worshipping Krishna, in light of *Gītā* 9.23: “Even those who have offered their love to different deities, who, filled with faith, perform sacrifice—even they perform sacrifice for me alone, O Kaunteya, though not according

to injunction."<sup>5</sup> And some, surely, are quite content to let everyone worship as she or he will, knowing that the same God graciously hears all prayers in all. The essays that follow will show how many years of dedicated conversations have changed the ways in which these Vaishnavas and Christians view the other religion, its theology, practices, and distinct claims about life's ultimate meaning and destiny.

### ***The Hard Work To Be Done***

In the end, Vaishnavas and Christians have a lot in common and a lot to talk about. But none of this is as easy as I have perhaps made it sound. Any Hindu-Christian dialogue requires dedication and the hard work of listening and study. It also has to be in part a spiritual and social rectification of the past troubles in the Hindu-Christian relationship, including the offense given by overly aggressive missionaries who revile religions other than their own. One of the very best ways to move forward in this rectification is by an extended conversation such as the years of dialogue that have occasioned this special issue of JVS. This dialogue will certainly be appropriate and salutary in the West where, though the benefit will be mutual, it is particularly true that Christians have so much to learn about Hindu beliefs and practices. Yet too, the benefits of dialogue in this new era of mutual learning will be considerable for the Hindu majority in India, so that fresh and more nuanced understandings of Christian beliefs and practices can come to the fore.

The commitment to study together, pray together, share personal insights and then friendship places the dialogue on an immeasurably firmer ground than any brief and passing contacts could do. My hope in the end is that we can all learn from this committed dialogue, and hear more of the value of particular encounters with people of other religions—and their beliefs, practices, the material and spiritual things of their traditions—as these offer some satisfying, even compelling reason for learning across religious boundaries.

I close then simply by expressing my appreciation to the participants in this long communal conversation for their dedication to it, the real and meaningful understandings and friendships that have blossomed in these dialogues over so long a period. It is an honor to have a few pages in this volume, which will surely offer real and substantive guidance and inspiration to many another dialogue around the world.

### Endnotes

1. I am happy to have published in the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* on related matters in the past: “Hindu Love and the Practice of Catholicism,” 5.2 (Spring 1997), 9-28, and “Teaching All Nations: An Observer’s Reflections on a Constructive Śrīvaishnava Response to Pluralism,” 19.1 (Fall 2010), 69-79.

2. From his January 15, 1544 letter to his companions in Rome. Collected in *The Letters and Instructions of Francis Xavier*. Translated and introduced by M. Joseph Costelloe, SJ. Institute of Jesuit Sources (1992) pp. 71-72 (adapted)

3. *Comparative Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), c. 6.

4. This paragraph is adapted from Chapter 7 of *Comparative Theology*. See also Chapter 2 of *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* (Oxford University Press, 2005), in which I study in detail the Śrīvaishnava Parāśara Bhaṭṭar’s *Śrīgūṇaratnakośa* as offering a rich theology of the Goddess Śrī, and draw some careful comparisons to the theology of the Virgin Mary in Catholic piety.

5. Graham Schweig, translation.



## WHY HINDU-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE: A CATHOLIC REFLECTION

John Borelli

### *Many Beginnings*

. . . Thus, in Hinduism men and women contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiries. They seek freedom from the anguishes of our human condition either through ascetical practices or through profound meditation or through a flight to God with love and trust. Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which persons, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or to attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing ways, comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of acting and of living, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the one she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim, Christ as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (Jn. 14:6), in whom men and women may find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself. (Cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-19.)

The Church therefore exhorts her sons and daughters to recognize, preserve, and foster the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among the followers of other religions. This is done through conversations and collaboration with them, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life.<sup>1</sup>

**I**t is nearly impossible for me to recall when I first read these sentences. They flow one into the next in paragraph 2 of *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. The document reached its final form in the last months of 1964 and received final approval in October

1965. I was in my first year of college in fall 1964 and was well into my second year at the time the statement became an officially promulgated statement of the Catholic Church. Unlike most young people my age, I was actually paying attention, as best I could, to what was happening in Rome during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) or Vatican II as it is more popularly known. I might have read *Nostra Aetate* very soon after it was promulgated on October 27, 1965, but I cannot recall that with certainty. If I did, it was all new information for me, an American Catholic living in the middle of the United States in Oklahoma City and without much experience of religious diversity beyond my neighborhood of Protestants, Catholics and Jews.

Since fall 1960, I had been a Catholic seminarian. I was in a “minor seminary,” one that covered four years of high school and, in some cases as this one did, two years of college. The faculty was mostly drawn from the diocesan clergy of the Diocese of Oklahoma City and Tulsa, who made my nine months of residency in a seminary interesting and generally pleasant. Even during grammar school in Oklahoma City, I was gradually being formed spiritually in the renewed participation in church life that would characterize Catholic life after Vatican II. Change was as prevalent as incense in the air of some Catholic parishes in Oklahoma, where liturgical renewal was already unfolding as was the case in my home parish in Oklahoma City throughout the 1950s and to some extent lay leadership was receiving encouragement. As Jesuit historian John O’Malley has shown, Vatican II was about change, whether conceptualized as development, updating, or renewal through return to sources:

Of the three categories, development (and its close equivalents like evolution and progress) was the least threatening because it inserted changed into an unfolding continuity. Yet even amid this continuity change was at its core. The word “change” stuck in the throats of bishops at the council, and it stuck in the throats of Paul VI [elected pope after the first session in 1963 and guided the council to its conclusion]. Nonetheless, the council frequently employed change-implied words and did so to such a degree that they became part of its most characteristic vocabulary. They suggested that even the final documents of the council were not final in the sense of establishing an end-point beyond which there would be no further movement.<sup>2</sup>

I first read these words of *Nostra Aetate* 2 with particular enthusiasm some years later, probably around 1972 and then again sometime soon after 1976 with an added excitement for imagined possibilities for interreligious experience. Much had happened in my life in the intervening ten years; yet, mine was only one set of hundreds of millions of unintended consequences of

Vatican II. I was no longer a seminarian studying for the diocesan priesthood. I was married. I had become a lay graduate student of theology, had experienced a year tour of duty in Vietnam, and changed my interests from historical theological studies to the history of religions. I was not in Oklahoma City but in New York, at Fordham University, where the study of the religions of India was the most competently resourced area for history of religions study within a theologically engaged faculty. This was the only Catholic graduate school of theology that had inaugurated such a program of study since Vatican II. I had no idea that in another ten years I would be in a national office promoting dialogue and eventually appointed a consultor to the Vatican office for interreligious dialogue.

As a Catholic, the words of *Nostra Aetate* 2 were liberating. In a few short and simple sentences, this ground-breaking document of church teaching stated intelligent and legitimate reasons for respecting the religious ideas and practices of Hindus and Buddhists and the *raison d'être* for religions everywhere. The text offered the foundation for a new approach for Christians to the religions of India and to religions everywhere, one of respect and dialogue. I was preparing myself for dialogue. I imagined that I would be of service to the Catholic Church, but probably as an academic, teaching with my doctorate, whose method of study, which we called history of religions, included dialogue and engagement in such a way that the engaging subject entered the subjectivities of one's partners in dialogue.

Of course, by the 1970s, I was learning about those in the distant past, like Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), who had adopted the garb of Brahmin scholars, gave up meat, carried the walking stick and water jug used by Hindu renouncers, and learned Sanskrit sufficiently to read and even write treatises of his own.<sup>3</sup> I found inspiration from those in the not so distant past too, like Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda, 1910-1973), a French Benedictine monk who left for India and the life of an ascetic, establishing the now famous Christian ashram of Shantivanam and developing a spiritual practice founded on a Christian reading of Vedanta.<sup>4</sup> I read about Indians from the previous century who had bridged the Christian West with Hindu India, like Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who journeyed to Chicago to participate in the 1893 Parliament of Religions and along with Manilal Dvivedi (1858-1898) sought to relieve Americans of their condescending stereotypes of Hindu practices and beliefs.<sup>5</sup> In the 1970s, my fellow graduate students and I found Raimon Panikkar (1918-2010) intriguing because he could skillfully wind a path through high Hindu theological texts showing us Catholics how

to understand the mystery of Christ, ever present and revealing behind philosophical concepts and principles best identified by Sanskrit terms.<sup>6</sup> Living and teaching in New York in those days was A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977), founder of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, who, in line with the Sri Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition, respected Jesus as a saint, founder, and teacher with extraordinary insight and powers, whose name, when chanted by Christian devotees, could bestow spiritual transcendence.<sup>7</sup> All these and many others were examples of how Christians and Hindus had already been saying a great deal to one another and would continue to do so in dialogue. These sentences of *Nostra Aetate* assured Catholics of the support of their church for them to join with Hindus to “recognize, preserve, and foster the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values” found in our two traditions.

With confidence, I applied myself to my studies and, early in 1976, defended a thesis on the late Hindu theologian Vijñānabhiṣhku, in which I translated some of his work and presented the core of his Vedānta teaching, located him with his own Hindu traditions, and then sought to understand his insights through comparative study of western thinkers and principally theologians.<sup>8</sup> Besides the foundational knowledge and budding technical skills gained from my studies, I was fortunate to have absorbed a sympathetic spirit, sufficient humility and a broad desire to marvel at discovery when seeking to understand the faith of my partners in dialogue from within their perspectives, whether Hindus or members of some other tradition.

Coming from such an organized tradition, like the Catholic Church, whose spiritual leadership could summon its more than 2500 bishops in 1962 to one large meeting in Rome and through their combined efforts could issue policy statements supporting dialogue, I felt at a distinct advantage. There were numerous resources within the Christian tradition, individuals and institutions that had devoted themselves to appreciating the gifts of India’s civilizations and cultures. Now in addition to these, there were the teaching documents of the church, like this text of Vatican II, which carried considerable authority.

The words of the text cited at the beginning of this article represent a beginning at answering the question of why Hindu-Christian dialogue? The program at Fordham was a beginning in graduate theological study at answering the same question in the post-Vatican II era, but individuals, Hindus and Christians alike, had been asking the question for centuries.

### ***Context and Resources for Vatican II***

In my work with Fr. Thomas Stransky who served on the staff of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity from 1960 to 1970 when *Nostra Aetate* was composed, I have surfaced a range of discoveries that throw some light of how these sentences came to be. The basic story of *Nostra Aetate* has been told a few times by those who helped compose it.<sup>9</sup> Pope John XXIII, who called the council, much to the surprise of nearly everyone in the Catholic Church and himself, did not articulate “interreligious relations,” much less dialogue with Hindus, among the reasons for calling a council. He did not even mention correcting the church’s teachings on the Jews, at least initially. He did want this council, Vatican II, to be ecumenical in some way, that is, to be open to restoring unity among Christians.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, among the preparatory commissions that Pope John set up was the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, which began its tentative existence on June 5, 1960. Less than two weeks later, Pope John had a visitor, the elderly French scholar and former member of the ministry of education of pre-World War II France, Jules Isaac. He was a Jew and a survivor of the Holocaust, who had spent his years in hiding during war and afterwards in study and conferences and dialogues with others reflecting on the teaching of contempt for Jews that had been prevalent in the church since apostolic times and had provided fertile ground for the abysmal ideology of Nazism to be implemented in such unthinkably horrible proportions.

On that trip to Rome, Isaac also visited Cardinal Augustin Bea, an elderly Jesuit scholar of the Jewish scriptures who then served as head of the Secretariat. Before long, a statement on the Jews was on the agenda for the council.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Stransky has evidence from Pope John’s private secretary that after the visit of Jules Isaac, he never gave up on the thought of a statement on the Jews.

As it turned out, *Nostra Aetate* was the shortest of all 16 documents of Vatican II, a little over 1,600 words of their more than 100,000 words, and a mere 41 sentences. It was perhaps the most controversial of the documents, debated when the establishment of the State of Israel was hotly contested and demanding Catholic bishops to reinterpret the implications of religious pluralism. Removed from the agenda for the first of the council’s four fall sessions (1962) for reasons of international politics, John XXIII restored it at the request of Cardinal Bea who believed the council produce a theological statement on Jewish relations. It passed through another five committee

approved drafts. First presented to the bishops on November 18, 1963, it was already in a new context from the previous years because Pope John had passed away and Pope Paul VI was in his place and had soon promised before the second fall session began in 1963 that there would be another secretariat in due time, one to relate to members of other religions.<sup>12</sup>

Then, between a second presentation of the text in September 1964 and the third in November 1964, it was expanded to five numbered paragraphs addressing relations with all religions in general including Hinduism and Buddhism in two paragraphs, relations with Muslims in paragraph 3, relations with Jews in paragraph 4, and religious bigotry in paragraph 5. Paragraph 4 remained central to the text. It is quite a story how a draft on the Jews became such a document. It was quite a process requiring insights of scholars, careful attention of staff, and the willingness of bishops for all over the world to invite Catholics into the arena of interreligious dialogue and relations. The particular consultor who helped with expertise in the study of Hinduism was Joseph Neuner, S.J.<sup>13</sup>

There was much overlooked in Catholic tradition and little explicitly analyzed over the centuries of a positive nature, except by specialists whose work was not widely known. This was especially true regarding inspiring Catholics to dialogue with Hindus. Surprisingly, Pope John's predecessor, Pope Pius XII, had urged Catholics in India, ten years before Vatican II convened in 1952, to remember that the church belongs to the east as well as the west and is bound to no particular culture. He further said that "what is consonant with man's God given nature, is good and simply human, the Church permits, further ennobles and sanctifies."<sup>14</sup> This has slight echo in *Nostra Aetate's* urging Catholics to "foster the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among the followers of other religions." Pope Pius' next sentence conveys a pleasant enthusiasm: "This once made clear, beloved sons and daughters, it is for you to be conscious of your duty and to your country and people." He added this profoundly positive insight a few paragraphs later, "The people of India should rejoice in the religious spirit rooted in their soul."

To understand how a statement on the Jews could come out the way it did, one needs to understand that the Second Vatican Council was an event in a technical sense. Following one historian of the council who has summarized this idea well, I mean that Vatican II was a noteworthy occurrence with consequences, including a significant enough rupture with the general direction of earlier time that it continued to unfold well past a discreetly defined conclusion with enough outcomes to legitimately influence how we

view from any perspective what happened during the event.<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that the rupture made the initial major outcome, the document itself, to stand alone from what had occurred before. This is not true at all, because first there was the intense amount of scholarly activity that the person of Neuner represented to the Secretariat composing the text. Second, the text cites scripture with a freshness of insight, but it is still scripture. The third numbered paragraph on Muslims cites an eleventh century papal document.

Still, Vatican II was an event in this technical sense, and this is most evident with *Nostra Aetate*. Nowhere before in official texts of the Catholic Church had the words “dialogues” or “conversations” been applied to relations with those who are not Catholic, especially since the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Nowhere in official teachings of the Catholic Church had respect for Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and others who are not members of the church been stated with such care and attention.

By contrast, the 1952 radio address of Pope Pius was complimentary of the people of India and the cultures in which Catholics in India lived, but the sentences of *Nostra Aetate* represent a move beyond these accolades. Remembering that *Nostra Aetate* was but one of sixteen official acts of Vatican II in the form of documents, the text itself needs to be read in connection with the text on ecumenical dialogue with other Christians, with the text on the theological understanding of the church as a communion of believers drawn into the communion of God, with the text on the church’s missionary activity, with the declaration on religious liberty, with the final and concluding statement on the church in the modern world, and with much more. All these collectively provide a treasure-trove for answering the question from a Catholic point of view, “why dialogue with Hindus?” Pope Paul VI made it clear that the way to interpret Vatican II was through all the documents collectively.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from these specific published texts, during those years from the announcement of the council on January 25, 1959, to the final general congregation on December 8, 1965, much occurred that altered the original vision of the Council, the attitudes of the direct participants, and numerous outcomes. I have already mentioned that Pope Paul VI, advised as he was by bishops from Asia, decided to create a second secretariat, one to greet all religious people, at some point during the council.<sup>17</sup> No one at the time knew what the implications of this office would have just on the text of *Nostra Aetate*, which didn’t have such a title on September 12, 1963, when he made this announcement. It did not have these two words in its initial Latin sentence,

translated as “in our time,” until November 1964. By then, Pope Paul had formally set up the Secretariat for Non-Christians. He announced this new office to stand alongside the Secretariat Promoting Christian Unity on Pentecost Sunday, May 17, 1964. At the time, he revealed his own receptive attitude: “no pilgrim, no matter how distant he may be religiously or geographically, no matter his country of origin, will any longer be a complete stranger in this Rome.” All Hindus and whomever will have a place to receive them, welcome them, and hear them when they visit Rome, and this openness was to be repeated wherever the Catholic Church exists in all the dioceses around the world.<sup>18</sup> Two days later, he established the Secretariat, but he left the further declaration on interreligious dialogue in the hands of the other Secretariat originally established in 1960. Since 1988, the Secretariats are called “Pontifical Councils,” and the one handling relations with Hindus has the name, “Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.” No longer is there a negative word, “non-Christian” in the offices title, another reflection on how clearly open-ended Vatican II was.

A few months after that office was set up, by November 1964, the words that I quoted at the beginning of my article were in place. Then, a month later, Pope Paul VI made a rare papal trip outside of Italy. Up until that time, popes had not traveled far from Rome. Pope John XXIII had made a couple of journeys, and Pope Paul had made an historic trip to the Holy Land in January 1964 to greet the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in an embrace that would be the beginning of the end of 900 years of estrangement between the church in the east and the church in the west. In addition, Pope Paul went to Bethlehem and gave an historic address that included a greeting to monotheists. But, in December of the same year, with the words of *Nostra Aetate* in place and a new Secretariat established to carry on interreligious dialogue after the close of Vatican II, Pope Paul journeyed to India. The trip was principally set up for the pope to visit the Eucharistic Congress that was meeting in Bombay. The first of these was held in 1881 and the aim had been “to make the Eucharist better known and loved.”<sup>19</sup> The changes at Vatican II including “the more extensive participation of the people in the liturgy, including far greater use of the vernacular,” helped this aim. The meeting in Bombay was the 38th Eucharistic Congress. But the trip became a model for papal pilgrimages to countries that would become a hallmark of the papacy of John Paul II (1978-2005).

One major feature of these papal pilgrimages was meetings with religious leaders, especially with leaders of the majority traditions. Thus, in India, on

December 3, 1964, to an audience representative of the peoples of India, Pope Paul remarkably prayed an ancient prayer of the Hindu tradition:

This visit to India is the fulfillment of a long cherished desire. Yours is a land of ancient culture, the cradle of great religions, the home of a nation that has sought God with a relentless desire, in deep meditation and silence, and in hymns of fervent prayer. Rarely has this longing for God been expressed with words so full of the spirit of Advent as in the words written in your sacred books many centuries before Christ: "From the unreal lead me to the real; from darkness lead me to light; from death lead me to immortality" (*Br. Up.* I, 3, 28).

This is a prayer which belongs also to our time. Today more than ever, it should rise from every human heart. The human race is undergoing profound changes and is groping for the guiding principles and the new forces which will lead it into the world of the future . . .

The next day, he told an audience of representatives of various religions:

This is the mission of the Church here, and We are deeply grateful for the freedom assured to the preachers of the Gospel in your country. They communicate the message of Jesus with the highest respect for the convictions of others, in the language and cultural expressions of the people, and encourage Christians to express their faith and devotion in harmony with the civilization of India and in truly Indian forms. Thus the Church, having gathered the varied treasures of many cultures of East and West, will be further enriched by the contribution of her Indian sons, drawn from their country's rich and ancient cultural tradition.

Indeed his message was mixed. On the one hand, he had just thanked those in India who over the years had expressed respect for Jesus and asserted that Christians in India were encouraged to express their faith and devotion in harmony with the civilization of India in truly Indian forms. This "inculturation" would enrich the church, allowing it to receive through dialogue and cultural exchange a richness that would enhance the life and spirituality of the church. On the other hand, he mentioned the mission of the church to preach the gospel and expressed gratitude for the freedom that Christians enjoyed in the Indian democracy. Mission and dialogue go hand and hand, and it would be a misrepresentation that Vatican II promoted both, dialogue as a way of relating to all peoples of faith and a renewed mission to preach the gospel to all peoples. Would the enduring mission to preach the gospel subvert attempts at Hindu-Christian dialogue?

***Updating the Message of Nostra Aetate***

Vatican II was an event in the technical sense because it was more an invitation to numerous initiatives than a final assessment of value. Clearly this is evident with regard to interreligious relations and Hindu-Christian relations in particular. The passage from *Nostra Aetate* cited at the beginning of this article appear to us today a bit and in need of explanation. Religious pluralism, the engaged religious diversity that characterizes more and more the lives of all people in the world, has become a more commonplace experience. While dialogue and respect seem obvious to us today and certainty that the lessons of dialogue enhance our understanding of religious experience, we wonder if *Nostra Aetate* was simplistic. It appears arrogant too. Were Hindus waiting for Catholics to acknowledge that truth awaits those who study the insights and practices of Hindus? Did Hindus care whether or not the Catholic Church in an official way acknowledged that their ancient sources respond to the restlessness of the human heart and provide avenues to what is good? If the text is read as a public document serving a role beyond encouraging Catholics to open up their lives to dialogue, it is not much of an achievement. A little scholarship and attention to Hindu sources and friendship easily provide answers to the question why Hindu-Christian dialogue? Finally, even if the text of *Nostra Aetate* is revolutionary in the history of Christianity, and perhaps it is still not so extraordinary when one weighs how organized Catholics are as a church, the text of 1965 still conveyed a paradoxical message. That message is: Christians want to dialogue with you for many good reasons including the value of your Hindu sources but they also must proclaim that Christ is the way, the truth and the life.

Pope John Paul II did not shy away from this twofold message. He was honest about this issue when he spoke on his first trip to India on February 1, 1986:

My purpose in coming to India has both a religious and human dimension. I come to pay a pastoral visit to the Catholics of India, and I come in friendship with a deep desire to honor all your people and your different cultures. As I begin, I take this occasion to express my sincere interest in all the religions of India—an interest marked by genuine respect, by attention to what we have in common, by a desire to promote interreligious dialogue and fruitful collaboration between people of different faiths.

Among his many interests was his fascination with Mahatma Gandhi. At Raj Ghat in Delhi, that same day, he spoke extensively about Gandhi:

It is entirely fitting that this pilgrimage should begin here, at Raj Ghat, dedicated to the memory of the illustrious Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation and 'apostle of non-violence' . . .

From this place, which is forever bound to the memory of this extraordinary man, I wish to express to the people of India and of the world my profound conviction that the peace and justice of which contemporary society has such great need will be achieved only along the path which was at the core of his teaching: the supremacy of the spirit and Satyagraha, the 'truthforce', which conquers without violence by the dynamism intrinsic to just action.

The power of truth leads us to recognize with Mahatma Gandhi the dignity, equality and fraternal solidarity of all human beings, and it prompts us to reject every form of discrimination. It shows us once again the need for mutual understanding acceptance and collaboration between religious groups in the pluralist society of modern India and throughout the world.

Four days later in Madras on February 5, he cited Gandhi on the importance of inwardness:

Gandhi's spirituality is an eloquent illustration of this. He says: 'Let me explain what I mean by religion . . . that which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself' . . .

And then, he cited another sage, one of Tamilnadu, Pattinattar: "Believe the One above. Believe that God is. Know that all other wealth is naught. Feed the hungry. Know that righteousness and good company are beneficial; Be content that God's will be done. A sermon this is unto thee, O Heart!" Noting the date, this was just a few months before the historic meeting in Assisi, Italy, the World Day of Prayer for Peace, October 27, 1986. The trip by the pope to India was one of many preparations for religious leaders to come to Italy.

On January 25, 1986, Pope John Paul announced that he would invite religious leaders, including Hindus, to join him for pilgrimage, fasting, and prayer in Assisi. When that historic day dawned some ten months later, religious leaders from several traditions kept silence while each prayed in his own way. Reflecting on that day in December, he marveled at the unique power of prayer, showing profound respect for the distinctiveness of every individual's effort:

Every authentic prayer is under the influence of the Spirit “who intercedes insistently for us . . . because we do not even know how to pray as we ought,” but he prays in us ‘with unutterable groanings’ and ‘the one who searches hearts knows what are the desires of the Spirit’ (Rm 8: 26-27). We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person.

Pope John Paul II returned to India in 1999. There on November 7 in New Delhi, he spoke again of contributions from Hindus to peace and harmony among peoples:

In India the way of dialogue and tolerance was the path followed by the great Emperors Ashoka, Akbar and Chatrapati Shivaji; by wise men like Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda; and by luminous figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Gurudeva Tagore and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who understood profoundly that to serve peace and harmony is a holy task. These are people who, in India and beyond, have made a significant contribution to the increased awareness of our universal brotherhood, and they point us to a future where our deep longing to pass through the door of freedom will find its fulfillment because we will pass through that door together. To choose tolerance, dialogue and cooperation as the path into the future is to preserve what is most precious in the great religious heritage of mankind. It is also to ensure that in the centuries to come the world will not be without that hope which is the life-blood of the human heart. May the Lord of heaven and earth grant this now and forever.

On that occasion, unable to give a speech at Raj Ghat, due to the political changes in India and the ascendency of Hindu political parties stressing the overriding values of the Hindu character (Hindutva) of India, Pope John Paul was a silent pilgrim to the memorial dedicated to Gandhi. Barefoot, he poured cups of water over the steps and offered a silent prayer.

These few tiny steps, taken in official ways by Catholic spiritual leaders, are a slim record for the last four decades of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first. They illustrate developments that move well beyond the few simple lines of *Nostra Aetate*. A prayer by a pope using the an English translation of an Upanishad and the humble silence of the most recognized spiritual leader in the world, one with the persuasive authority to gather leaders from all the major religions of the world, speak volumes through example and encouragement. Our Hindu and Christian traditions are ancient with roots deep in the primeval soil of India and the Middle East. The contributions of a few reformers who journeyed west in the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries and who journeyed east in the twentieth century should be seen against this backdrop stretching to prehistory.

For Catholics, *Nostra Aetate* was truly an invitation and not a final guiding judgment. Go with confidence and find out with the help of God was its basic message, and additionally, do so through study and dialogue and friendship. In particular, Catholics living in India and wherever Hindus live in large numbers should appreciate the cultural contexts in which they are raised and which educates them to experience, judge, and act. An office for dialogue was established in Rome but it would serve more as example than as arbitrator. In fact, following the principle that “all dialogues are local,” it was more productive when bishops established offices for dialogue in dioceses and at institutions for education and service. Bishops were encouraged to form national conferences and, in some cases, regional conferences. Thus the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India and the Federation of Asian Bishop Conferences took leading roles in promoting dialogue and mutual understanding.<sup>20</sup> There was considerable progress in the early years after Vatican II.<sup>21</sup>

In 1984, the office for interreligious dialogue in Rome issued an extensive reflection on the experience gained through dialogue which resulted in a text, *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions, Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*. It marked the twentieth anniversary when Paul VI introduced the term “dialogue” into the unfolding of Vatican II through his encyclical on the church.<sup>22</sup> The 1984 text on dialogue and mission gathers the experiences of dialogue which had been occurring everywhere in the church.

It is here in that 1984 text that for the first time a fourfold typology for dialogue was suggested distinguishing four somewhat different approaches and each providing a different set of answers to the question, Why Hindu-Christian dialogue? These four kinds of dialogue are: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of social engagement, the dialogue of experts, and the dialogue of religious experience. These need not happen separately and overlap to some extent. At the same time, they are very different sorts of engagement. The dialogue of life is the daily engagement of life, when friendship across religious boundaries result in the many fine benefits of friendship, sharing the common concerns of life, celebrating together times of joy and nurturing one another in times of stress and suffering. These daily experiences can be quite profound. At times, religious groups band together to address the social needs of their communities and nations, helping the poor and

needy, establishing justice where it is lacking, and restoring public virtue. Experts need to dialogue to share and test their knowledge, and through sincere comparative work to open their insights to all with a freshness of understanding that stretches the horizons of knowledge. Such comparative work, reading Hindu and Christian texts together, has been the mainstay of the Vaishnava-Christian dialogue convened annually in Potomac, Maryland. To keep interreligious dialogues from being occasions of detached intellectual insight, this dialogue has also made space for a spiritual dimension to the meetings. Prayer and worship are also occasions for interreligious encounter, the dialogue of religious experience, giving rise to a spiritual companionship that is one of the wonderful benefits of interreligious dialogue.

### ***Why This Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue?***

In November 1986, the Catholic bishops of the United States approved funding for a professional staff position promoting interreligious dialogue with adequate funding for office support, programming and travel. The following year, I took up that position at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, DC. The Catholic bishops of the United States, even before the end of the final session of Vatican II in 1965, had made provision for staff positions and adequate funding for ecumenical dialogue with other Christians and relations and dialogue with Jews. The wide diversity of Christian communities and the size of the Jewish population provided excellent, if not unmatched, opportunities for ecumenical and Christian-Jewish dialogue. The U. S. record is commendable in moving these dialogues towards their goals. It took another twenty years before a case could be made for Catholic bishops to devote as much time, money, and energy to interreligious dialogue. Given the world situation and especially issues related to the Middle East, which had become even more complex since the time of the composition of *Nostra Aetate*, priority in interreligious relations beyond Jewish relations was to be given to forming relationships with the growing Muslim population of the United States.

While my training and focus of doctoral studies kept me vigilant for opportunities in Hindu-Christian relations, I accomplished little in the first ten years than to offer occasional advice and lend my presence and support to local initiatives where a particular diocese was involved in a project with the Hindu community. The 1993 commemoration of the parliament of religions in Chicago was one such occasion. I continued to attend the American Academy of Religion, as I had when I was still an academic, and participated in sessions leading towards the eventual establishment of the Society for Hindu-Christian

Studies. Networking with Hindu and Christian scholars with an interest in dialogue and comparative studies was one important aspect of my work on the staff of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. In addition, I attended meetings and special sessions planned by the Executive Council of the U.S. chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, which included the participation of Hindu leaders. Building trust and rapport between religious leaders is one important reason for Hindu-Christian dialogue and all ecumenical and interreligious relations.

An opportunity arose in April 1997 for some in-depth reflection between Catholics and Hindus on dialogue. Professor Ewert Cousins, a specialist in Bonaventure and Franciscan Studies and a former professor of mine at Fordham, was then a visiting scholar at the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary. Over the years, Professor Cousins and Professor K. R. Sundararajan, St. Bonaventure University, had engaged in a “Franciscan-bhakti” dialogue, sharing their theological and spiritual resources around various themes favoring devotion to God. A public event was scheduled for April 7 at Mundelein featuring this dialogue, and I invited a few individuals, Hindu and Catholic scholars, to meet in Mundelein for reflection on fostering Hindu-Catholic dialogue in the United States. Cousins and Sundrarajan reported on the success of their efforts to relate the Vaishnava and Franciscan traditions. Others at the consultation were Anand Mohan (Queens College), Francis X. Clooney, S.J. (Boston College), Anant Rambachan (St. Olaf College), Gerald Carney (Hampden-Sidney), Albert Nambiaparambil, C.M.I., who for many years staffed interreligious relations for the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India and had been spending a year of ministry in Louisiana, and myself. It was refreshing to come together and talk specifically about how Hindus and Catholics relate to one another on a variety of topics and could do so more often in the United States. The group concluded that associations of Hindus in the United States lacked the resources and institutional goals of the bishops’ conference for joint partnership for an ongoing dialogue on a national level; however, the individuals present and their networking potential could serve to assist dialogues on a local level. Modest efforts in Los Angeles and Chicago involving the archdiocesan offices for dialogue in those cities and Hindu leaders were already in progress. There was hope that in Minneapolis a similar effort might occur. The April 7-8, 1997, was the most explicit project to date in Hindu-Catholic dialogue that I was able to pull off. Still, the focus for future work was in promoting local initiatives.

All credit goes to Anuttama Dasa for the next step. He presented a paper at a meeting of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies. Francis Clooney suggested that we talk because Anuttama, in his capacity as a communications officer for ISKCON, had already brought a few together for a Hindu-Christian dialogue. We chatted, and by the next spring, April 17, 1998, to be exact, Anuttama had invited several of us to a dialogue on the everlasting soul in Hinduism and Christianity. The annual Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue was born and had attracted sufficient numbers to keep it alive and well for a good many years to come. If I did a little initially, it was to host a planning meeting the following September 18 to make the dialogue a joint effort and one that would have a compelling reason for continuing. The major activity of the group is sharing spiritual resources by pairing texts or groups of texts that fit well enough together to evoke creative insights by the participants.

For example, we chose for the next meeting a theme, “Spirit in the World/Renunciation and Affirmation,” and we chose two texts—the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the Gospel of John. We asked two experts on these texts to present them, but we asked a Vaishnava and a Christian to respond to each of the presentations. In subsequent years, we would at times choose two or two sets of readings but ask for a Vaishnava and a Christian paper on each. The dialogue continued open ended through an afternoon, evening, and into the next day.

People are drawn to interreligious dialogue and Hindu-Christian dialogues for a variety of reasons. Those in this dialogue feel enriched by the experience. Most have sufficient background and interest in the study of both traditions to attend to expand their knowledge. Others attend because the spiritual companionship gives them encouragement, joy, strength and any number of advantages. For some, friendship and rapport across religious lines will be helpful when future projects and needs require cooperation and assistance.

Let me conclude with the wisdom of Sara Grant, a Catholic nun and Scots-woman, who began living in India in 1956, and from 1977 was the co-ācārya of the Christa Prema Seva Ashram in Pune. A series of three lectures in England in 1989 have been collected in the volume entitled *Toward an Alternative Theology, Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*. She concludes her third and final lecture making reference to the ways of knowledge, devotion, and action and then says something of great significance about interreligious dialogue contextualized in her Hindu-Christian life:

I said at the beginning of my first lecture that there is in every human being something of the *jñāni*, the *bhakta*, and the *karma yogi*, though in varying degrees. Each temperamental type or “way” has its own contribution to

make to the Church and society at large. We all need each other, and in theological gatherings no less than in the rest of life the centripetal movement of convergence has to prevail over the tendency to diversification and self-assertion, lest we destroy the very richness of our diversity.<sup>23</sup>

### Endnotes

1. *The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)* 2, Second Vatican Council, October 27, 1965. This translation of the original Latin text is by Thomas F. Stransky, C.S.P., recently rendered for a larger project on the genesis and development of this declaration at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Fr. Stransky worked on this text nearly 50 years ago, when he served as one of the original members of the staff of the Vatican Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, established by Pope John XXIII in 1960 to serve as a preparatory commission for the upcoming council. Fr. Stransky devoted much of his time and effort to producing this text, and I am privileged to be working with him in recent years on the task of writing a thorough analysis of its genesis and development.

2. John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 300. This is the best single volume history of Vatican II. See pp. 36-43, 298-303 for fuller analysis of Vatican II and change.

3. See *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises by Roberto de Nobili, missionary and scholar in 17th century India* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000).

4. See James Stuart, *Swāmī Abhishiktānanda: his life told through his letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989).

5. See Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions : the East/West encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, 2nd ed., 2009).

6. See R. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964). This initial writing of Panikkar was sufficiently revolutionary for its time; however, his final book, *The Rhythm of Being* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010) is a masterpiece of reflection on essential questions by someone who is doubly resourced by internalizing the interface between his Christian faith and the traditions of Asia, principally India.

7. See Ravi M. Gupta, "He is our master": Jesus in the Thought of Swami Prabhupāda," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 23 (2010), 15-19.

8. *The Theology of Vijñānabhidhikshu: A Translation of his Commentary on Brahma Sūtra 1.1.2 and an Exposition of his Difference-in-Identity Theology*, Fordham University, 1976. I did not have my thesis published, but I did publish several articles using the comparative mode of interpretation: "Vijñānabhidhikshu: Indian Thought and The Great Chain of Being," in *Jacob's Ladder and the Tree of Life: Concepts of Hierarchy and the Great Chain of Being*, 371-84, edited by Marion and Paul Kuntz (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); "Coincidence and the Harmony of Religions in the Thought of Nicholas of Cusa and Vijñānabhidhikshu," *Bulletin, Secretariat for Non-Christians*, 61 (1986): 36-46; "Matter and Exemplar: Difference-in-Identity in Vijñānabhidhikshu and Bonaventure," in *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*, 137-59,

edited by R. Baine Harris, *Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern*, vol. 2 (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1982); and “*Vijñanabhiksu and the Re-assertion of Difference-in-Identity Vedanta*,” *Philosophy East and West* 28, 4 (October 1978): 425-37.

9. Thomas F. Stransky, C.S.P., “The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions,” in *Vatican II An Interfaith Appraisal*, edited by John H. Miller (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 335-348; “*The Genesis of Nostra Aetate: An Insider’s Story*,” in *Nostra Aetate: Origins, Promulgation, Impact on Jewish-Catholic Relations, Proceedings of the International Conference, Jerusalem, 30 October-1 November 2005*, edited by Neville Lamdan and Alberto Melloni (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2007), 29-53; and John M. Oesterreicher, “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, volume 3, edited by Herbert Vorgrimler with comments on Hinduism by C. Papali, on Buddhism by H. Dumoulin, and on Islam by G. Anawati (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 1-136.

10. Joseph A. Komonchak, “Is Christ Divided? Dealing with Diversity and Disagreement,” 2003 Common Ground Initiative Lecture, published in *Origins, CNS documentary service*, 33, 9 (July 17, 2003):141.

11. Thomas F. Stransky, C.S.P., “*The Genesis of Nostra Aetate*,” *America* (October 24, 2005), 8-12. The other sources cited previously cover this story of Isaac’s visit to Rome as well as the now standard five volume *A History of Vatican II*, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and in English by Joseph A. Komonchak. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995-2006. Regarding Isaac’s own writing, among his several books is the following: *Genèse de l’antisémitisme. Essai historique*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1956; 2nd ed. 1985; Paris: Éditions, 10/18 (May 31, 1998) ; in English as *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.

12. John Borelli, “The Origins and Early Development of Interreligious Relations during the Century of the Church (1910-2010),” *U. S. Catholic Historian*, 28, 2 (Spring 2010) 94.

13. Joseph Neuner entered the Jesuits in 1926, wrote a thesis on “The Doctrine of Sacrifice in the *Bhagavad Gītā*,” and since 1938 had been teaching in Pune. During Vatican II, he planned a conference on “Christian Revelation and non-Christian Religions,” which took place in Bombay prior to the papal visit of Paul VI to India in December 1964. This was a historically important conference involving Hans Küng, Piet Fransen, Joseph Masson, and Raimon Panikkar. The proceedings were edited by Neuner as *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, first as a special number of *Indian Ecclesiastical Studies*, IV, 3-4 (1965) and then by Burns & Oates, 1967.

14. A radio broadcast to the bishops and faithful of India, December 31, 1952, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 45 (January 16, 1953), 96-99.

15. Joseph A. Komonchak, “Vatican II as an Event,” in *Vatican II, Did Anything Happen?*, edited by David G. Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007), 24-51.

16. This is particularly evident in his closing addresses in the final weeks of the fall session 1965.

17. Ralph M. Wiltgen, SVD, *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber* (New York: Hawthorne, 1967), 73-78.

18. There exists a collection of statements by Vatican II, popes, and offices in the Roman Curia under the title, *Interreligious Dialogue, The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II* (1963-2005), edited by Francesco Gioia (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). This passage can be found on p. 161. All these texts can be found on-line, tracking the sources on the Vatican website, [http://www.vatican.va/phome\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/phome_en.htm), whether stated by popes, the council, Vatican offices or related entities, like the Synod of Bishops or the International Theological Commission. I see no need to document every single statement from this point on.

19. Anne M. P. Twomey, "The Eucharist at Bombay," *The Tablet* (December 12, 1964) 1397-8.

20. See for example, FABC Papers No 76, *Working for Harmony in the Contemporary World, A Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, October 23-29, 1995. This dialogue produced a statement

21. An amazingly rich example of the fruits of dialogue in India is the 814 page publication *Shabda, Shakti, Sangam*, edited by Vandana Mataji (Bangalore: St. Paul's Press, 1995), replete with contributions of Hindus and Christians on how sacred word, divine power, and religious communion give inspiration.

22. *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 6, 1964), issued half-way through Vatican II, the text uses the term "dialogue" over 70 times, defines it, and places it within the mission of the church.

23. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 95.



## THOUGHTS ON THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE VAISHNAVA-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Anuttama Dasa

### *My Preamble to Dialogue*

While in Denver Colorado, my home from 1975 to 1993, I had my first experience with formal dialogue when, as a local Hare Krishna<sup>1</sup> member, I attended the inaugural meetings of an interfaith group concerned about the environment. While the goals were important, protocol was a tripping point, and after three meetings when participants were still apologizing for using terms like “church” in a “mixed group of faiths,” I lost hope that anything significant could ever arise from a group so stuck on labels.

In 1993, I moved with my family from Denver, Colorado, to Washington, D.C., to continue my new role as ISKCON’s North American Director of Communications in the nation’s capital. I became involved in multiple projects involving dialogue, as a participant, and later Board Member, of the Washington Metropolitan Region of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (later the National Conference for Community and Justice), known as the NCCJ.

At those dialogues, I learned how to understand the world from another person’s perspective and how to relate better with my fellow human beings despite differences in gender, race, age, religion, sexual orientation, and other “diversities.”

What I couldn’t experience during those exchanges was a sense of how the Divine was working in their lives. That topic, though occasionally given cursory treatment, was not front and center. What mattered most to that group, despite its original religious orientation, was to root out discrimination based on bodily distinctions. While that is certainly an important and noble cause, I couldn’t overcome my Vaishnava bias. The stinging message of the *Bhagavad-gita* about ultimate priorities reverberated in my mind: “Neither you, nor they, are these earthly bodies.”

For me, at least, I intuited that the human connectedness we seek, often in dialogue, needs to transcend even the most pressing issues of our material limitations and begin to address our spiritual identities and possibilities.

That urge for a spiritual epicenter in my life had led me years before to walk away from the values of my secular, Midwestern upbringing and commit myself to the path and practice of Vaishnavism, or Krishna Consciousness. After months of travel and experimentation, I chose the life of a *brahmachari*, or celibate student. I learned to chant the “Great Mantra for Deliverance” as a daily meditation and to study in depth the *Bhagavad-gita* and other texts that revealed the “Supreme Personality of Godhead.” That same urge continued as I later looked to dialogue as a means to build broader community in Denver and then in D.C. I sought not just to hear from others about their journey and their experience of the Divine, but also to *understand*.

My view was motivated in part by a prayer by Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur, a 19th-century Vaishnava author and teacher. The Thakur wrote that upon encountering the expression of another faith, as when visiting a temple, mosque or church of another tradition, one should think in this way:

Here is being worshipped my adorable highest entity (God in a different form than that of mine). Due to my practice of a different kind, I cannot thoroughly comprehend this system of theirs, but seeing it, I am feeling a greater attachment for my own system. I bow down with prostration before His emblem as I see here and I offer my prayer to my Lord who had adopted this different emblem that he may increase my love towards Him . . .<sup>2</sup>

That vision of God’s versatility, His<sup>3</sup> unlimitedness, and His existence beyond my cultural prejudices and small ability to comprehend Him made sense to me. To be able to say, “Hey, He is working over here, too,” seemed like a window to heaven. He is bigger than me; bigger than you; bigger than us. That just made sense to me.

### ***Interfaith Beginnings***

When my ISKCON Communications colleague in Europe, Shaunaka Rishi Das, organized an interfaith dialogue between Christians and Vaishnavas in Wales, I was inspired to do the same in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the first Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue in North America was held in East Freeport, Massachusetts outside of Boston, in September 1996.

In attendance were such notables as Francis X. Clooney, Larry Shinn, Gordon Melton, Leonard Swidler, and Kenneth Cracknell, Klaus K. Klostermaier and, from the Vaishnava side, Tamal Krishna Goswami, Ravindra Svarupa das (Dr. William Deadwyler), Shaunaka Rishi, and others.

I selected the topic: “The Destiny of the Soul” (The Kingdom of God). We

spent two days and two evenings in discussion. I confess that I chose this topic because the Vaishnavas had so much to say about it. I thought it would give us a chance to show how much we had to share; dissipate false conceptions that we were “new kids” on the theological block; and make a strong showing as dialogical partners. Krishna’s “pastimes” with His friends in Vrindavan, the beautiful descriptions of God’s *lila*, or play, as revealed in the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* and other Vaishnava scriptures would surely be appreciated by the august crowd—some of whom knew little of Vaishnava revelation.

During a round of sharing organized by Father Clooney, we all spoke what was most meaningful to us about the topic. I was moved (and prematurely proud) that my Vaishnava colleagues were so profound in their descriptions. We clearly had an advantage in this one; we were doing well.

Then Dr. Larry Shinn spoke, a Methodist Minister, friend and scholar who had written much about the Hare Krishna movement, especially during our earliest years. Larry spoke simply. He said his scripture, the Bible, didn’t say all that much about the details of God’s Kingdom. But, he added, that was fine for him. He was confident it was a wonderful place. What he said mattered most to him was that he, as a Christian, led a life consistent with the principles of God’s Kingdom, and that his community reflected that truth to the world.

As Larry spoke, I felt my foolishness revealed, at least to me. While I could recite, almost like a parrot, descriptions of God’s “home” from my tradition—I questioned whether my life, my heart, and perhaps my community were a reflection of that truth.

I had, in a sense, been made naked. The experience allowed me to realize that dialogue was not for basking in my own light, but to reveal my darkness. I sensed that I needed these people around the table to tell me how God reveals Himself to them. If I want to genuinely understand something of God, I must be open to how *He* chooses to reveal Himself to the world, and not just how *I* choose to prop Him up as my shield and selfish emblem.

### *The Washington, D.C. Dialogues*

Boston was an attractive place to meet, but it was off the beaten path for many. Since my residence was now in Washington, the capital city, it was natural—if we wanted the dialogue to continue, and the initial response had been favorable—to bring it closer to home. Thus, the first Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue in Washington, D.C. (held in nearby Potomac, Maryland) took place in April of 1998.

Under the advice of Reverend Kenneth Cracknell, I contacted Dr. John Borrelli, of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) for his

help and guidance. Together we strategized topics and participants. Some from the Boston meeting continued with us; others based in the greater Washington region now joined us.<sup>5</sup>

We met in April at beautiful retreat center, Rockwood Manor, amid flowering cherry trees and nearby a national park and the Potomac River. About twenty of us gathered, one-half Christian and one-half Vaishnava. Although that first year we met for just one day, from 10 AM to 4 PM, the next year we expanded to a two-day format. We decided collectively that we needed more time to digest each other's presence.

The second year was to set our standard. The schedule began after lunch on Friday, at 1 PM, and continued through the evening hours. Many of us, but not all, slept at the Manor overnight. Due to the design of the Manor's guesthouses, a few of us were in private rooms but most shared with a roommate or two, or three. Saturday, our second day, we were together from 8:30 AM until 4:30 PM. Thus, we squeezed two days of being together into a mere 27-hour period. The same location and schedule have served us well since that second year.<sup>6</sup>

The dialogue has also followed a consistent format. We gather in an open, carpeted room with a high, beamed ceiling and around a large table that bulges with our twenty or so members. We begin with an hour of introductions and personal updates on the highlights of the previous year. While in the early years the emphasis was on introductions, as time went by the first session has become more like a high school reunion where we catch up on major events, children and grandchildren born, conferences attended, books published, and other milestones we wish to share with old and dear friends.

After our introductory time, we listen to our first presentation, or paper, on that year's theme.<sup>7</sup> For instance, one year we heard a presentation on theodicy from the Christian perspective, then a presentation on theodicy from the Vaishnava perspective. Some years we hear both papers first and then open for discussion, while some years we discuss each paper separately. The presentations serve the same function either way—to provide food for thought, and to help us begin to digest our theme.

Most years, but not all, the presenters provide readings from their traditions to be reviewed before the dialogue. Those average thirty pages per side, so homework is required. The themes are chosen one year in advance by the group and are always theological, or philosophically based. While other dialogue groups may focus on shared projects, or shared social issues, ours does not. As I view it, we seek to learn about the deepest issues concerning God, His creation, and our relationship to Him—from our friends around the table and from each other's traditions.

I come to this dialogue in the mood of a pilgrim: “I know a little something about God from my Vaishnava tradition, and perhaps I can share some of that with you. Would you kindly help me to understand some of what you know about God from your Christian tradition(s)?”

In this way, the first day is spent in back and forth conversation about our theme, and the two presentations. Often questions are directed towards the speakers; at other times the conversation is freewheeling. There are simple rules: Respect each other, and listen with an ear to learn—as well as to teach. Most years, John Borelli of the USCCB, and/or I would moderate, although the main challenges were simply (a) be sure to inject an occasional break into the lively conversation, and (b) ensure the most enthusiastic participants give way so that all might contribute.

After a sumptuous eight-course vegetarian dinner around 7 PM, the evening is less structured. We either continue with casual individual conversations or, some years, we share an hour or so of devotional music and meditation—listening to Vespers by one of our Methodist members, or a kirtan performed by a Vaishnava, or a few shared choruses of “Amazing Grace” and other favorites. One or two of the years classical Bharata Natyam dancers entertained us; one year Sam Wagner, a Lutheran, played his sitar for us.<sup>8</sup>

Saturday morning, after many of us rise early to chant our mantras, say our prayers, walk in the woods, or perhaps dash over to the nearby Starbucks, we come together again for a specially prepared east-meets-west vegetarian breakfast (with everything from home made blueberry muffins, to upma with tomato chutney, and scrambled curd with strawberry jam).

Following breakfast, we observe, or—per our individual preference—partake in two prayer services. One of our Christian members, who previously volunteered, leads us in a half-hour Christian prayer service. After that, or preceding that in alternative years, a Vaishnava leads us in a half-hour prayer service from the *bhakti* tradition.

The two prayer services generally consist of a scriptural reading, singing of hymns/*bhajans*, a brief talk or commentary, and often a question and answer period about what we just observed. While the Vaishnava prayer has consistently been from the Chaitanya school, for a variety of reasons, the Christian prayer service has been sometimes Roman Catholic, sometimes Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Lutheran. (In this way, the Vaishnavas have been particularly enriched.)

After that, with a break around noon for lunch, we continue through the balance of the day with more round table discussion on Friday’s theme, or any

topic that arose from the prayer services. The topics always provide more than sufficient material for two days of dialogue.

At 3:30 PM we put aside our theme to decide collectively what topic we will examine the next year, what the readings will be, and who will be presenters. If time allows, we chose who would lead next year's prayer services, too.<sup>9</sup> The Dialogue ends at 4:30 with a group photo, hugs, and farewells.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Why Vaishnavas Should Be in Dialogue***

I would now like to briefly examine what I understand are the Vaishnava theological underpinnings for engaging in events like this, and why I feel it is imperative for Vaishnavas to be active in such exchanges.

*Bhagavad-gita* is a preeminent scriptural text for Vaishnavas. In the *Gita*, Lord Krishna, the “Supreme Personality of Godhead” explains:

Although I am unborn and My transcendental body never deteriorates, and although I am the Lord of all sentient beings, I still appear in every millennium in My original transcendental form. Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice or descendant of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion—at that time I descend myself.”<sup>11</sup>

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Founder-Acarya of ISKCON, explains in his commentary on this verse:

It is not a fact that the Lord appears only on Indian soil. He can advent Himself anywhere and everywhere, and whenever He desires to appear. In each and every incarnation, He speaks as much about religion as can be understood by the particular people under their particular circumstances. But the mission is the same—to lead people to God consciousness and obedience to the principles of religion. Sometimes He descends personally, sometimes He sends His bona fide representative in the form of His son, or servant, or Himself in some disguised form. . . . In all incarnations of the Lord, therefore, the same principles are taught, but they appear to be higher or lower in varied circumstances. . . . The whole purpose of the mission of incarnations is to arouse Krsna [God] consciousness everywhere.”

Vaishnavas believe that God comes into this world repeatedly. So doing, He establishes religious principles to help humankind awaken love for Him, and become qualified to enter Vaikuntha, or the Kingdom of God.

In His analysis of spiritually advanced souls, Krishna later states in the *Bhagavad-gita*, that:

The thoughts of my pure devotees dwell in Me, their lives are surrendered unto Me, and they derive great satisfaction and bliss enlightening one another and conversing about Me.<sup>12</sup>

These two verses, I believe, shed light on why Vaishnavas are (or should be) open to dialogue. The *Gita*'s version is that (a) God comes repeatedly to this world with varying but single-pointed messages, and (b) He encourages His devotees to "enlighten one another and converse about Him." Thus, it seems reasonable to include in such discussions the practitioners of other great religious traditions, i.e., devotees of God who worship a different "incarnation," or representative of the Lord (such as Jesus, Moses, or Mohammed).

One may argue that Vaishnavas should only dialogue with other Vaishnavas, or perhaps other Vaishnava *sampradayas*, or traditions. I disagree. I believe that we should dialogue with other Vaishnavas. But, there is no need to limit ourselves to conversing only with those within our own broader tradition.

As a simple example: If I love my spouse, I want to learn all that I can about her from her parents and other family members. I'm enthusiastic to understand the details of her childhood, her personal quirks, prior interests, etc., that her relatives can share with me. That is natural because I love her. However, my interest for my spouse will naturally endear me to *anyone* who can help me understand and know her better. That may include neighbors, and perhaps even a few people unknown to the family, who have some intimate connection with her. In the same way, if we love or are deeply curious about God, we may be inspired to know as much about Him as possible from any, and every, genuine source.

It also may be argued that one who has understood something of how vast God is, will be open to whatever sources of revelation and information may exist about Him. None of us can claim to know all there is to know about God. He is, after all, "unlimited." It follows that not everything there is to know about the unlimited must, or can, be contained within "my" holy book(s), "my" rituals, or "my" teachings—exclusive of any other book, ritual or teaching.

In the *Bhagavad-gita*, Lord Krishna supports this analysis from at least two angles of vision. First, in the Tenth Chapter, He explains that all the wonders of this entire universe spring from "but a spark of My splendor."<sup>13</sup> God is great and so vast, sources of knowledge about Him must therefore be vast. And, I argue, it is to our advantage to be open minded about what all those sources are, and where they are to be found.

Second, Krishna teaches that to approach Him, one must be a humble soul, and not proud.

Humility, pridelessness, non-violence, tolerance . . . accepting the importance of self-realization and philosophical search for the Absolute Truth—all these I declare to be knowledge, and what is contrary to these is ignorance.<sup>14</sup>

Humility and pridelessness are of central importance to self-realization and the search for the Absolute Truth. In fact, per *Bhagavad-gita*, they are knowledge. A falsely, or overly, proud man, who is “full of himself” finds little room for growth due to his lack of humility and openness. Conversely, a humble person, Krishna hints, should be open to learning from others.

Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a 16th-century Bengali (Indian) saint and founder of the Chaitanya-Vaishnava lineage, spoke often about humility. Although Chaitanya’s followers headed by Sanatana Goswami, Rupa Goswami, and Jiva Goswami, wrote many books in explanation of Chaitanya’s thought, only eight stanzas are directly attributed to him—his *Shishtakam* prayers, in which humility is a central theme:

“One should chant the holy name of the Lord in an humble state of mind. One should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige, and ready to offer all respects to others. In such a state of mind, one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly.”<sup>15</sup>

Chaitanya also taught that God has “hundreds and millions” of names, directly it seems, opening the door for interfaith appreciation, and giving value to dialogue—at the very least discussion on the sanctity of God’s many names.

### ***Why ISKCON Should Be in Dialogue***

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) comes in the line of both Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Sri Krishna, and thus finds inspiration in their statements about multiple incarnations, multiple sources of religious instruction, multiple names of God, and the need for enlightening discussions between the devout. These are foundational principles for ISKCON. They open the door for dialogue, and provide optimism about its outcome.

To clarify ISKCON’s official vision and role in regard to dialogue, a document “ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God” (1999) was drafted and later authorized by ISKCON’s Governing Body Commission (GBC) Executive Committee.<sup>16</sup> That statement includes a brief summary of ISKCON’s essential theology, its view of the “other” and the benefits of dialogue with others:

In ISKCON we consider love of a Supreme personal God to be the highest form of religious expression, and we recognize and respect this expression in other theistic traditions. We respect the spiritual worth of paths of genuine

self-realization and search for the Absolute Truth in which the concept of a personal Deity is not explicit. Other communities and organizations advocating humanitarian, ethical, and moral standards are also valued as being beneficial to society.

ISKCON views dialogue between its members and people of other faiths as an opportunity to listen to others, to develop mutual understanding and mutual trust, and to share our commitment and faith with others, while respecting their commitment to their own faith.

ISKCON recognizes that no one religion holds a monopoly on the truth, the revelation of God or our relationship with God.

ISKCON's members are encouraged to be respectful to people of faith from other traditions and to see the need for people of different faiths to work together for the benefit of society as a whole and for the glorification of God.

ISKCON affirms the responsibility of each individual to develop his or her relationship with the Supreme Lord.

Further, this clarifies the benefits of spiritually minded people engaging one another in dialogue:

Through dialogue, theistic people and those engaged in the pursuit of the Absolute Truth can encourage one another to be more true to their own practice. Many traditions prescribe the disciplines of self-control, sacrifice, austerity and charity for developing spiritual enlightenment but we all need encouragement and inspiration in our endeavors. To fulfill the requests of our spiritual teachers and to provide good examples to society, we need to encourage one another to be faithful to the principles of our own traditions.

Dialogue offers a challenge to the faith to devotees of every tradition. This challenge is a necessary and welcome part of spiritual life in a multi-faith world. Such dialogue can help strengthen the faith and character of individuals, the integrity and vision of institutions and the support and appreciation of those who expect enlightened spiritual leadership . . .

In this statement we find that ISKCON is “bullish” about dialogue. ISKCON believes that dialogue can challenge us to grow, strengthen our character, and encourage us to be more true to our own faith while building appreciation for others and their tradition(s). At the same time, there is much more to be done, within ISKCON and beyond, to bring this statement to full life.

***Institutional Benefits of Dialogue to ISKCON, and Beyond***

ISKCON is a continuation of the five hundred year-old Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition and the more than two-millennium old Krishna devotional tradition. At the same time, ISKCON, the institution, is new—not quite yet 50 years old. ISKCON was not founded until 1966, when Srila Prabhupada registered the first temple of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness at a lower eastside storefront location in New York City.<sup>17</sup>

As a *new old* tradition, and one that continues to bring new members into its fold across the globe, ISKCON has not always shown the most mature face to the public, or to its religious contemporaries. Nor have we always acted with the wisdom of a society based on norms established and evolved over thousands of years.<sup>18</sup>

Being open to dialogue on an institutional and individual level provides needed opportunity for serious self-reflection and self-criticism. Dialogue—as a genuine process of hearing and learning from others and being open to change and growth through that process—can mediate and minimize the isolation and extremism that impact today’s religious climate.<sup>19</sup>

It is the bane of religious communities to become complacent, and even arrogant about their status in the world. Which of the world’s great traditions, for example, especially in those places where it is the majority faith, has not sometime in its history become proud, and then demeaning of other faith traditions? Are not the seeds of Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish and other forms of religious extremism sown through ignorance of other faiths, and thinking ourselves to be not only dominant, but exclusively blessed?

I believe that ISKCON can play an important role in countering these tendencies, and in promoting the shared progress and spiritual awakening of modern society. Human beings are meant to comprehend the reality of higher consciousness and the needs of the soul—beyond bodily necessities, modern conveniences, and “sense gratification” (which my tradition declares so boldly to be destructive to the essential human aspirations).

Chaitanya Vaishnava theology addresses some of the core epistemological and sociological issues that confront modern people. For example, people are realizing there is a limit to how much we humans can consume—the earth’s resources are not unlimited—and we are being forced consider alternatives sources, not for just energy, but for our unquenched thirst for happiness.

It is the duty of religious men and women to offer alternative perspectives on the world’s complexities. We do so best when we exemplify respect and

cooperation with our fellow religious. While we may never agree on all aspects of philosophy, ritual, culture, or absolute reality, those searching after God can agree to respect, learn and benefit from each other's wisdom, earnestness and shared values.

As Srila Prabhupada wrote in the 1950s:

Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and the members of the other sects that have convincing faith in the authority of God must not sit idly now and silently watch the rapid growth of a Godless civilization. There is the supreme will of God, and no nation or society can live in peace and prosperity without acceptance of this vital truth.<sup>20</sup>

In my experience, dialogue between Vaishnavas and Christians, in particular, opens the doors for deep and meaningful mutual understanding of the “personality” of the Godhead, His love for His children, the means of awakening love for Him, and how to better share and care for the earth.

This may be true because our traditions have so much in common. We both emphasize the concept of an eternal and loving God; we both believe that this world is not our real home and that God, out of His compassion, comes into this world to deliver us; and we both believe that the soul cannot be fully satisfied until we offer ourselves to the Supreme.

Conversely, it may be that this dialogue is deep because of our differences: We vary in how we explain the source of evil in the world; we differ in understanding universal origins and time; free will, while essential to us both, differs in its application within our respective traditions.

Or, it may be that this dialogue is deep because our similarities and differences challenge us both to examine our deepest questions and doubts: Why is there *so much* evil in the world? What of this earthly existence? Are we to embrace it or renounce it, or both? Can I be a rationalist and a person of faith? Can I overcome, or will God help me overcome, my repeated failings? Am I so sure?

On a global scale also, I believe that dialogue between Vaishnavas and Christians has an important role to play. We live in a world embroiled in tension, much of it religiously inspired, or conspired. While our two traditions speak of peace and love, they have also both seeded, sometimes condoned, and often ignored sectarianism, needless violence and persecution.

Today, for instance, Christians are often scapegoated in India with deadly results. They are unfortunate victims of anti-colonial fervor pent up over centuries, as well as Hindu or Indian nationalism. While no doubt the British

imperial policy created havoc and caused immense suffering for millions, that does not justify the modern persecution of innocent people because of their faith, nor their desire to give witness to it.

Neither can we whitewash the history of cultural imperialism that systematically strove to overwhelm Indian culture and religious identity, and replace it with European and Christian models. Those dark periods of our collective history need to be acknowledged, understood, repented, and transcended.

Today too, for instance, at the time of this writing, Vaishnavas in Russia face a crisis. Spurred on by nationalist sentiment, xenophobia, and heightened fears among a few in the Orthodox church, a court case is underway attempting to label the “*Bhagavad-Gita*,” specifically the translation and commentary by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, as “extremist” or “terrorist” literature. That such a witch trial can occur in post-Communist Russia is a wake-up call. Thankfully, scholars and leaders from around the world, including within Russia itself, are speaking out against this attack on a minority faith. The implications are clear: If the *Bhagavad-gita* is terrorist, so too are its followers. And the world, including Russia, deals harshly with terrorists.

Vaishnavas and Christians are at the center of many of the world’s stress points and conflicts. We can, and must, continue to reach beyond the confines of our own doctrines and cultural comfort zones. Our two communities share a message of God’s universal love. In dialogue with each other we can learn to better see how that love manifests in the hearts of those within our traditions, and beyond. We thus teach by example to our respective sangas and fellowships that are called to seek God’s blessings without trampling the rights, dignity, or spiritual worth of others.

Bhaktivinode Thakur spoke of this when he wrote:

It is not proper to constantly propagate the controversial superiority of the teachers of one’s own country over those of another country although one may, nay one should, cherish such a belief in order to acquire steadiness in a faith of your own. But no good can be affected to the world by such quarrels.<sup>21</sup>

Srila Prabhupada shared his vision in broad terms during a public lecture in 1969:

Everyone should follow the particular traditions or *sampradaya*, the regulative principles, of your own religion. This is required as much as

there are many different political parties, although everyone is meant to serve one country.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Final Thoughts***

My search for God began around 1971, in the midst of the counterculture, when I signed up for a high-school religion class—because several of my friends had enrolled—and when I discovered a taste for George Harrison’s hit song “My Sweet Lord,” immersed as it was with intermittent choruses of Alleluia and Hare Krishna, Hare Rama.

My curiosity was piqued, and after three years of searching and experiencing church, Zen centers, meditation, attempts at political reform, and occasional Hare Krishna temples, I left college, my family and friends to seek a higher solution to life’s problems.

While I ended up as a Hare Krishna monk and a few years later president of an ISKCON temple and then its Minister of Communications, I never lost my appreciation for the spiritual value of the other “paths” I crossed. Years of mission work on behalf of ISKCON only increased my conviction that the serious practitioners of many faiths that I met daily were undergoing genuine spiritual transformation.

Looking back on 15 years of the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue, I am aware that it has become an invaluable source of learning and inspiration for me—a highlight of my life.

Through those experiences, I’m convinced that it is important for ISKCON members, and especially our leaders, to be active in interfaith dialogues like the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue. We have much to gain, and to offer, by increasing the number of dialogues that ISKCON convenes or contributes to around the world. I hope the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue (and its younger sibling, the Vaishnava-Muslim Dialogue which began in 2010) will serve as a model for additional dialogues around the world with other religious traditions.

Personally, I am a more faithful and compassionate person because of dialoguing with my Christian friends. When my Roman Catholic and Protestant partners describe Jesus’ love for humanity, and of his sacrifice for us, I am moved to go deeper in my own devotion. When I read St. Bonaventure and St. Ignatius, I am more convinced to overcome my own limitations and “weaknesses of the flesh.” After learning from my Christian colleagues about their struggles and joys in dedicating their lives to the Divinity, I yearn to be more attentive to my own spiritual practice.

In conclusion, I offer my gratitude to both my Vaishnava and Christian friends in dialogue. By their warmth, scholarship, and faith I now better understand the *Bhagavad-gita*'s claim that God's devotees "dwell in Him, their lives are surrendered unto Him" and most importantly, they derive "great satisfaction and bliss enlightening one another and conversing about Him."<sup>23</sup>

### **Endnotes**

1. Hare Krishna is a popular way of referring to members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). As will be explained, ISKCON is a continuation of the Gaudiya Vaishnava, or Caitanya Vaishnava devotional and monotheistic tradition, or sampradaya, within the broad Hindu culture and religious diversity. His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prabhupada, who established ISKCON in New York City in 1966, brought the tradition to the west from India.

2. *Sri Caitanya Siksamrita*, Chapter 1.

3. While throughout this paper I will use the more traditional Christian and Vaishnava reference for God by referring to "Him" in the masculine, it is interesting to note in the Vaishnava tradition, God is manifest in both masculine and feminine aspects, as in Radha-Krishna, or Sita-Ram. The feminine is always listed first.

4. Shaunaka Rishi Das was ISKCON's European Director of Communications and, in that role, a pioneer in building interfaith relations for ISKCON. He was the principle author of "ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God," an official statement on the topic which will be discussed in this article. Shaunaka organized the first Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue in Europe in January 1996, in Wales, at which Dr. William Deadwyler (Ravindra Svarupa das) and Dr. Kenneth Cracknell presented papers on the topic "The Nature of the Self." He also offered vision and support in planning the Boston Dialogue.

5. Special thanks are due to Dr. John Borelli, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), for his and the Conference's years of support for the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue. The USCCB was the official co-sponsor of the dialogue for more than a decade, and while financial and other limitations have recently restricted that co-sponsorship, one or more representatives of the USCCB have been active participants to the Dialogue every year.

6. A Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue using the one-day format was also held in Detroit, Michigan at ISKCON's Bhaktivedanta Cultural Center on September 24, 1999. Father John A. Saliba, S.J., and Ravindra Svarupa Dasa presented on the topic: "The Millennium and Beyond" from a Christian and Vaishnava perspective, respectively. Other less formal events have also been organized since in Boston and elsewhere.

7. The themes and presenters are available upon request.

8. In 2011, a few Christians and Vaishnavas took the night off to attend a performance of *The Wizard of Oz*, performed by local school children including my seven-year old granddaughter. It was entertaining, and enlightening enough to warrant an entry in

Professor Ed Shirley's Facebook page.

9. In the early years the Christians had a clear advantage in the number of scholars at the table. However, over time the number of young Vaishnava scholars in America has increased significantly, and thus the Vaishnavas now too provide an articulate variety of presenters.

10. It's interesting to note that we've had close to seventy participants over 15 years of dialogue, most of whom came two, three or more years. There is a core group of six or seven from each side who consistently return year after year.

11. *Bhagavad-gita As it Is* Chapter 4, verse 7; translation and commentary by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (Bhaktivedanta Book Trust)

12. *Bhagavad-gita* 10.9

13. *Bhagavad-gita*, 10.41

14. *Bhagavad-gita*, 13.8-12

15. *Shishashtakam*, verse 3

16. The full document, authored by Saunaka Rishi Dasa in consultation with many other participants of the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue, was published in the ISKCON Communications Journal, Volume 7, Number 1, June 1999, and is available on line.

17. I was endeared to Dr. Gordon Melton, during the Boston Dialogue, when he mentioned that he was a member of a new religious movement, because he is a United Methodist Minister. Methodists trace their roots to the teachings of Jesus, two thousand years ago, and the Hebrew Scriptures before that. More recently, they are followers of John Wesley, 18th-Century preacher and church reformer. Most recently, they became a *new old religion* when several branches of Methodism merged, reformed, and re-registered in the United States as the United Methodist Church. The parallels to my ISKCON affiliation were striking, and this insight became a memorable learning experience.

18. A great tragedy of our fledgling society was the child abuse scandal that rocked our communities and led to a more than \$10 million settlement in US Bankruptcy Court in 2005. I have stated publicly (as have others) that if ISKCON was less socially isolated in its formative years when most of the abuse occurred, circa 1975-1990, we would have been aware of the potential for abuse that exists in religious communities, and perhaps avoided some of the terrible pain our children and communities underwent.

19. I'll mention briefly here another dialogue I enter each year, although within a much different culture, and with different rules. As a leader of a *new old religion*, I have attended the annual conference of the International Cultic Studies Association, formerly the American Family Foundation, for about as long as I have participated in the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue. Sometimes I attend alone, and more often I bring colleagues from ISKCON in the U.S. and Europe. We do not attend such meetings as equal partners, but more as a "suspect organization." However, over the years those relationships have matured and changed. At many ICSA conferences ISKCON members have served on panels discussing uncomfortable histories of ISKCON's problems in the

hope of demonstrating our honesty in dealing with those issues, as well as our desire to learn how to be a more healthy religious institution. (In recent years, I also sat on a panel with a former priest who discussed similar issues in a Catholic order.) In those venues I/we seek to understand how my community can grow, mature, and avoid the excesses so common in religious communities and organizations. I have learned much, and I share what I have taken away from those meetings with other ISKCON leaders.

20. *Light of the Bhagavata*, p. 20
21. *Sri-Caitanya-Siksamritam*, p. 7
22. As quoted in “ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God”
23. *Bhagavad-gita* 10.9

## VAISHNAVA BHAKTI THEOLOGY AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Graham M. Schweig

**D**ialogue holds a profoundly important place in the practices and theological vision of the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism. First, dialogue is itself an essential part of the practice and worship in the life absorbed in Krishna *bhakti*. Dialogue is also a literary matrix through which even the greatest revelations of Krishna's divine acts are most often disclosed. Moreover, dialogue is the pedagogical medium through which the teachings of *bhakti* are transmitted. And finally, dialogue becomes a constituent and essential element within the most intimate exchanges between divine personages within *lilās* contained in the divine realm.

Dialogue, I will claim, is clearly something that runs through every level of *bhakti*, and it is of the very nature of *bhakti* itself. Here I will argue that because of the onto-existential dimensions that emerge from a deeper theological understanding of *bhakti*, dialogue between persons of other faiths with persons of *bhakti* is not only plausible, or even most desirable—it is an absolute imperative and necessity for the very practice of *bhakti* and a life fully lived in *bhakti*. And finally, it is in *bhakti* that dialogue becomes the basis of a genuine pluralism of faith.

### *Dialogue and Sacred Hindu Texts*

When beginning to explore the relationship between Vaishnava theology and interfaith dialogue, it is impossible to ignore the central place that dialogue has in sacred Hindu texts. One of the most important, if not the most important literary forms or modes of expression in Hindu scriptures is that of dialogue, especially observable in the earlier principal Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Dialogue is the dominant mode of expression in these texts. As we often speak of the Socratic dialogues, we may also similarly speak of the Upanishadic dialogues, since the Upanishads, especially the early ones, are replete with didactic dialogues between teacher and student.

The famed *Bhagavad Gītā* is essentially a dialogue, a conversation, between

Krishna and Arjuna, coming from within the outer narrative layer of dialogue between Dhritarāshtra and Sanjaya. It is not uncommon to find multilayered dialogues within the frame narratives of Sanskrit epic and historical texts. For example, Śuka's dialogue with Parīkṣit, which occurs in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, is recounted within the dialogue between sages of the Naimiśa forest. Moreover, the *Bhāgavata* text is filled with various dialogues. Especially notable is Krishna's dialogues with the Vraja Gopikās that is recounted within the dialogue between the sage Śuka and the king Parīkṣit in the famed Rāsa Līlā Pañcādhyāyī, the ultimate *līlā* of Krishna.<sup>1</sup> In both the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata*, dialogue is the locus of revelation.

For the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism, the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, a text very sacred to the school for its biography of Chaitanya and for the greatest theological synthesis of the tradition's earliest teachers, also contains many dialogues. Of the many dialogues recounted in the text, perhaps the most meaningful for this discussion here is that famous dialogue between Chaitanya and his close friend Rāmānanda Rāya. This particular catechismal dialogue is exemplary because Chaitanya repeatedly implores Rāmānanda to go deeper and deeper in response to his questions.<sup>2</sup> Chaitanya's example of dialogue is one of two persons sharing and discovering together new and greater depths of realization and deeper interpersonal connecting.

### ***Dialogue and Faith***

When we speak of a dialogue that is specifically “interfaith,” such as “interfaith dialogue,” then it is important to appreciate that this is a special kind of dialogue in which the words exchanged are not just any words, but words of *faith*. Here it is important to affirm a simple, working understanding of what is meant by the word *faith*. The word can, of course, refer to the particular vision of the divine and relationship with the divine espoused and cultivated by a particular religious tradition in which a community presumes to share a common faith. In this context, the word *faith* refers to a specific shared vision of ultimate reality and thus the word can be found in the plural, since there are many such shared visions in the many traditionally defined *faiths* of humans. And as a member of a religious community or tradition, one can identify with a particular *faith*, and the *faith* of an individual is reinforced, cultivated, and strengthened by its connection with a shared *faith* of other individuals. But from an understanding of *bhakti*, this understanding of *faith* is epiphenomenal in relation to the more basic, onto-existential level of what *faith* originally is.

Faith is an irreducible and universal quality of human existence and of each individual human being. First and most fundamentally, and indeed ultimately, faith is a matter of what resides most deeply within any individual or single person's heart. Whether a person claims to be a member of "a" faith or religious tradition or spiritual path, or whether a person claims to be a nonreligious humanist or a proclaimed atheist, whatever the collective faith with which one may identify, faith is first something more basic, and something that every individual possesses. It is something inborn and intrinsic to human nature—something that proceeds directly from the deepest recesses of the heart.

In Sanskrit, the word *śraddhā* is most commonly, and perhaps most appropriately, translated by the English word "faith," because in Sanskrit the word etymologically breaks down as meaning "where one places (-dhā) one's heart (*śrad-*)."<sup>2</sup> This definition speaks to the universal quality of faith as something that cannot be claimed merely by religion. It is intrinsic to each and every human being, it is what motivates all human living, and it is what constitutes what is most important to humans everywhere. It is what is at the very core of a human.

On the other hand, faith is intensely personal and individually formed and shaped. It is what each of us most ardently desires and loves, what each of us most passionately believes, and what each of us trusts as a totally embracing vision of reality. While faith is a universal quality of human being, each person's faith is unique and individual because each person, according to *bhakti* theology, is an eternally constituent infinitesimal part of supreme being. And therefore even if a person is a member of a particular faith tradition, his or her participation in a shared faith will still be uniquely shaped and formed.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, no one person's faith is exactly like another's, inside a shared traditional vision or outside. Thus dialogue is as important within a tradition as it is between traditions. Often practitioners become too comfortable with one another due to false assumptions that the heavily binding doctrinal adherences among practitioners automatically achieve an identical faith among members of a tradition. This relaxed notion among members within a tradition ironically often eclipses their dialogue.

Over the years of experience I have had in interfaith forums, I often get the impression that there is an assumption in the minds of partners in interfaith dialogue that they are to strive to discover similarities or commonalities, and to get away from differences. I have also seen that the discoveries of what is assumed to be similar or even identical ways of thinking or experiencing the religious life somehow gets higher praise or appreciation than the differences.

Moreover, these apparent similarities often point us to deeper differences and uniquenesses between traditions. Exploring and comparing similarities and differences within dialogue is natural. However, I would argue that this comparing is not ultimately the point of dialogue. Rather, it is the dialogue itself that is the goal. It is the sharing that takes place within dialogue that is the achievement, and this sharing should not be eclipsed by assumptions of similitude when there is a mutual exploration of faith through dialogue.

### *Many Truths of the One Reality: Sat*

There is a well-known, much celebrated Hindu adage. It is often engaged as a Hindu way of understanding the diversity of religious traditions in the world. This adage is often worded in the following way: “Truth is one. Paths are many.”<sup>4</sup> Another rendering of this adage goes like this: “Truth is one. Sages call it by many names.” And there could easily be variations of either of these renditions.

What is important to note here is the essential message most likely intended by these types of renderings: There is something that unifies human beings in their many ways (as in “paths are many”) of grasping the one ultimate reality (as in “truth is one”). A more precise or strict translation of the original source of these sayings, which is originally located in the *Vedas*, reveals this very intention quite clearly:

*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*

There is one (*ekam*) Reality (*sad*)  
about which vibrant persons (*viprā*)  
in various ways (*bahudhā*) speak (*vadanti*).<sup>5</sup>

Clearly differences between the popular renditions of this passage and the direct translation that I provide here are obvious. For example, no words such as “names” or “paths” exist in the original Sanskrit of this passage. But the intention, I believe, is to be expressing what the passage says most literally. Thus from the earliest sacred writings of India one finds this wise vision that has certainly been a powerful influence on traditions typically grouped under the umbrella term, Hinduism. And included in that group would obviously be the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism.

This Vedic passage presents essential components for setting the stage for

dialogue and the revelational gifts that can come from it: (1) There is “one reality” in which we all find ourselves, no matter what our faith orientation may be. Everything exists together in this one totality of reality no matter what religious truth we may hold as absolute, whatever we believe or claim as truth—or that which is closest to our hearts. Whatever exists is contained within this “one reality” which, in Sanskrit, is *ekam sat*. (2) Persons who directly experience a connection or a relationship with that one reality become *viprā* (literally “shaking”) or “vibrant persons.” Such deeply inspired persons shake or vibrate in their experience or relationship with the divine as the absolute truth. This experience can consist of (a) that one reality revealing something of itself to such persons, or (b) something of that one reality as being reached or attained by such persons, or (c) a combination of the two. (3) Following from such an experience, persons are moved to share what has so deeply moved them or inspired them by “speaking” about that divine relationship with the one Reality that constitutes their “absolute truth.”

Now, to whom shall these people speak their absolute truth? These inspired persons share through dialogue their experience with either (a) persons who also participate in something of their vision of that absolute truth, or (b) persons who do not participate in their own vision but are nonetheless moved by their relationship with the one Reality that constitutes a different vision, a different “absolute truth.” (4) The fullness of the one reality is such that there is no end to the experiences that such inspired persons can have of it, and thus the “various ways” of speaking about their relationships with the one Reality are endless.

Partners in dialogue will utilize whatever ways can best express this ultimate relationship. Each way of expressing it is unique, whether it be within a tradition or between traditions. And what is implied here is that the more such inspired or vibrant persons share with one another their experiences of the one Reality, the more that this very sharing itself through dialogue becomes the special way of uniting human hearts. What will invariably emerge between partners in such a dialogue is the special kind of revelation of the one Reality that cannot be found anywhere else. The Rig Vedic passage explored above thus reveals the unique form of revelation of the one Reality that should be the very basis of dialogue and the very ground on which a genuine religious pluralism is built, and further, it expresses an interfaith ethos that forms a foundation on which the Chaitanya school’s vision of dialogue and *bhakti* rests.

### *Reality and Relationality: Rasa*

The word *bahudhā* in the famous Rig Vedic passage presented above, which I have translated there as “in various ways,” should be more closely examined. This word, which can mean, “in many ways,” “in many parts,” “in many forms,” “manifoldly,” etc., is significant.<sup>6</sup> Humans speak about the one reality in various ways, in many forms, etc., because humans have different ways of relating to the one Reality. Simply, and interpreted for our purposes here, each of us has a specific and unique relationship with the one Reality. This relationship is absolute because it is connected to the absolute reality. It is also absolute because it is the ultimate way each of us relates to the absolute. A key verse of the *Bhagavad Gītā* affirms the notion that there are is an endless variety of relationships that can be reciprocated and accommodated by the divine Reality:

In the way they offer  
themselves to me,  
in just that way  
I offer my love  
to them reciprocally.  
Human beings  
follow my path  
universally,  
O Pārtha.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, these many forms or ways each constitute the “the” that immediately precedes the word “truth,” expressing the singular exclusive vision within a relationship of the one Reality for each and every person. And thus the Vedic adage can be seen as anticipating the well-known Upanishadic phrase, *raso vai sa*, or “Rasa truly is that (Reality).”<sup>8</sup>

For the Chaitanya school, *rasa* is ultimate reality, or the relationship with the one Reality as person. That relationship which connects humans to the one true Reality, imbuing it with absolute value or truth, is *rasa*. “The truth” of religious traditions, that exclusive absolute truth of religion, rests in this very notion of *rasa* with the one reality. A revision of the popular renditions of the passage from the *Rig Veda* examined above, then, might read as, “The totality of all reality is one. Religious truths (or *rasas*) are many.”<sup>9</sup>

Though there are specifically five general types of *rasas* according to the Chaitanya school, the word *rasa* could be broadened and opened up to whatever one experiences and knows in a relationship with the one Reality. It is precisely

because of *rasa*, therefore, that humans speak in many ways about the one Reality. In genuine dialogue, it would be precisely on the nature and experience within this *rasa* that would be shared between humans who experience *rasa*, thus disclosing a unique revelation. The extent to which this *intra-faith* dialogue takes place between humans and the divine determines the extent to which humans can offer themselves in *inter-faith* dialogue with other humans. When intrafaith dialogue is deep, then one becomes lifted up by dialogue into an even greater experience of Reality in which a shared state of elevated consciousness and the intimate connection of hearts is experienced between souls.

### **Mutual Enlightenment: Kathā**

In order to appreciate the nature of this new kind of revelation that comes to each of us through the special type of sharing in dialogue between traditions, we turn to a specific verse in the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

With their thought on me,  
     with their life-breath  
     offered to me,  
     enlightening one another  
 And conversing about me  
     continuously,  
     they are satiated and  
     they feel rapturous love.<sup>10</sup>

For the kind of sharing that is possible in *bhakti*, for ushering in the special kind of revelation available between souls, there is a certain ordering of activity prescribed in four stages that correspond to the four quarter lines found in the above verse: (1) The first quarter of the verse directs one to go deeply into one's own relationship with the divine, by focusing all one's thought processes on the divine, and offering one's very life-breath to the divine (*maccittā mad-gata-prāṇā*). (2) The second quarter of the verse describes what one can do with others, with the phrase "enlightening one another" (*bodhayantah parasparyam*). (3) The third quarter of the verse speaks about how this mutual enlightenment between souls becomes a completely absorbing *kathā*, or a continuous conversing about the divine (*kathayantaś ca māni nityanī*). (4) And the last line describes the satisfaction and affection one feels in this kind of sharing within *bhakti*.

Here, of course, the first person objective voice is found in the pronoun

“me,” spoken by the divinity as Krishna. And certainly, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the voice of divinity is declared to be that of Krishna. There is, however, precedent in the tradition for leaving the specific identity of the divine open by utilizing the words *bhagavān* and *iśvara* without any direct reference to a particular deity.<sup>11</sup> So for this reason, I feel that the Chaitanya school can take such a verse and apply its process broadly, expanding its application to the intimate personal interactions involved in interfaith dialogue.

The *Gītā* speaks also about the nature of what is shared within this sharing, and with whom it should be shared. What is shared is described as a divine secret. Indeed, as I’ve discussed elaborately elsewhere, the narrator of the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna, and the teachings offered, describes it as “the supreme secret of yoga.”<sup>12</sup> What is shared by practitioners with others is the most valuable thing, the most secret thing, what is held closest to one’s heart. Here relationality, *rasa*, is an experience between those humans who are prepared to share and risk their deepest and most precious truths, their experiences of the one reality. Therefore it is normally secret. What is held as secret, then, should be shared with only those with whom one can engage in a truly balanced and mutually enlightening sharing as described in the *Gītā* verse above. Krishna instructs in the final portion of his teachings that his divine secret disclosed to Arjuna should not be spoken to one who is not committed and to one whose heart does not know divine love, or to one who possesses antagonism toward the divine.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, this type of deep sharing of one’s highest religious truths is deemed to be most blessed, as expressed in Krishna’s words:

One who reveals  
this supreme secret  
to those who have  
offered me their love,  
Enacting the highest  
offering of love for me—  
that one shall certainly  
come to me, without doubt.

And among humans,  
there is no one whose acts  
are more dearly loved by me  
than that one,

Nor shall there be  
any other on earth who  
is more dearly loved by me  
than such a person.<sup>14</sup>

From these words of Krishna, it is so very clear that this kind of intimate sharing of divine secrets and religious truths is most precious, most blessed, and most rewarded.

### Onto-Existential Dimensions of *Bhakti*

If we speak about dialogue as something that takes place *between* faiths or between religious traditions, that is one thing. But ultimately, I would argue, in light of *bhakti*, dialogue is the genuine encounter of, and partnership between, one heart with another heart, whether it is within a faith or between faiths. Dialogue, that is specifically *interfaith*, as I have been developing it here, is constituted of two souls embraced by the supreme reality, who come together in dialogue in order to realize their mutual connection to the divine heart.

The structure and interpersonal dynamics of dialogue can be seen paralleling the elements essential to *bhakti*. An etymologically grounded and literal definition of *dialogue* reveals aspects of dialogue that highlight these paralleled features between the two. The word *dialogue* consists of two parts, the prefix *dia-*, and the stem *-logue*, which comes from the Greek word *logos*, meaning “words” or “discourse.” Three meanings of the word’s prefix are telling. In dialogue, words are exchanged “between” two partners, words move “across” from one partner to the other, and meaning moves “through” the words in dialogue to each person. It is precisely this space between partners in dialogue, the *dia-* of dialogue, as it were, that becomes filled with the intermingling of words, ideas, and heartfelt communications in which one shares the most precious part of life.

An examination of the word *bhakti* itself is also revealing. The word is often translated as simply “devotion.” In published work of my own, I have translated it as “devotional love” and in a more protracted translation as “the practice or life of offering all of one’s heart to the divine.” A related word is *bhakta*, which means one who practices or lives a life of *bhakti*. The word *bhakta*, or one who offers one’s heart, can mean simply one who is “loved” or one who is “beloved.” The significance of these meanings of *bhakti* and *bhakta* make more sense when the verb root from which these words are derived is understood.

The verb root *bhaj* has two first, primary meanings: “to divide” and “to share.” These two apparently opposing meanings for the same verb is telling in the way they reflect what is at the heart of *bhakti* metaphysics, and, in turn, what is at the heart of interfaith dialogue as well. The two senses of the verb belong together, because that which is divided can be shared, and that which is shared can be divided. The soul or the *bhakta*, then, is something *divided* or *apportioned* from the supreme whole, and yet the *bhakta* also is something *shared* by the supreme and something that has *participated* in the divine as well. The former sense points to the oneness of the soul with the divine, and the latter to its separateness. Existentially and ontologically speaking, the former signifies the experience of *being apart* from the divine, and the latter the experience of *being a part* of the divine, at the same time.

In the word’s verbal sense of “to share,” the self is a constituent irreducible part or share of the Self or the divine. As a part or share of the divine the individual self naturally shares in the being of the divine as do all other beings who are also portions of the divine. All individual beings, then, participate as shares of divine being while they remain distinct and discrete entities. Because all souls share in the divine, they do so collectively, and this collective sharing is the basis of community, the uniting of hearts in *bhakti*. Therefore, the soul’s unity with the divine and its community with humans are both constituent aspects of *bhakti*, and when speaking about the one, it absolutely necessitates the existence of the other. When one offers all one’s heart to the divine in *bhakti*, it necessarily means that one has connected deeply to the hearts of other humans, and other living beings. And one offers all one’s heart at the altar of another eternal being’s heart, within which the presence of the very heart of the divine is manifested, one has also connected deeply to the very heart of the supreme. It is in *bhakti* that the greatest love is found between humans and the divine and also among humans who belong to and long for the divine. In *bhakti*, there is (1) a deep communing or union with the divine, and (2) a deep communing or union with others’ hearts. The one is not possible without the other, and therefore a *bhakta*, who gives his or her whole heart to the divine, also honors and values all souls as individual and discrete beings who are both a part of and yet apart from the divine. This onto-existential vision creates an intimate relationship between the *bhakta* and all life and all souls. But further, it makes dialogue with persons of faith, partners *in* faith. It makes them especially valuable because in them, through them, and between them, as partners elevated to a heightened sense of community, greater dimensions of the unlimited divine are revealed.

The essential meaning of the word *bhakti*, as discussed above, is “sharing,” and the directly related participial word (in Sanskrit), *bhakta*, means literally “distributed,” or “apportioned,” referring to the practitioner who has “offered one’s heart fully to the divine Beloved.” In effect, *bhakti* is that practice in which the *bhakta* has shared his or her heart fully with others’ hearts and with the divine Beloved, and finds that these two are absolutely inseparable.

#### ***Four Axes of Revelation in Dialogue***

In concluding this brief essay on the relationship between Vaishnava *bhakti* theology and dialogue, we are now in a better position to appreciate not only how dialogue is greatly valued by the Chaitanya school of Vaishnava *bhakti*, and how dialogue is an essential practice of *bhakti*, but how dialogue represents the intrinsic character of *bhakti* and, even more so, how it ultimately has the potential of furthering and deepening a revelation of religious truth of the one reality through dialogue itself.

The foregoing exploration in this essay supports the idea that one realizes and experiences the power of divine revelation as four axes within dialogue: (1) the ontological (leading to a type of universalism), (2) the traditional (leading to an exclusivism), (3) the interpersonal (to an inclusivism), and (4) the existential (to a pluralism). The relationship of these four axes to one another, and the various dynamic ways divinity becomes present in the life of the *bhakta* can be illustrated in the diagram below.

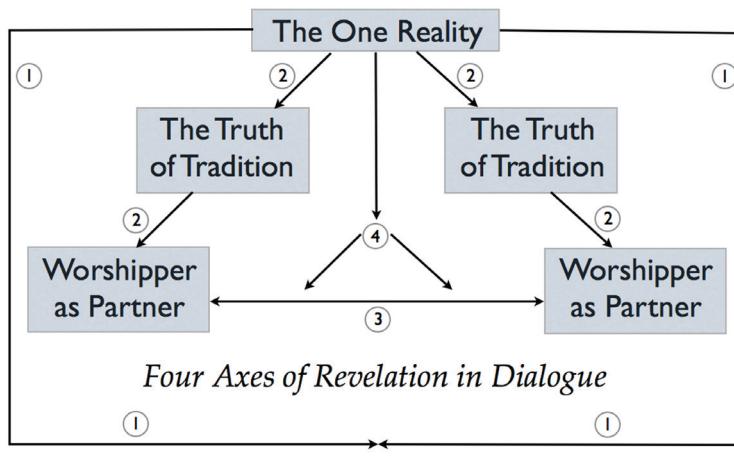


Figure 1.

The first axis, identified as number one of the arrowed lines, conveys the all-embracing “one reality” in which everything exists, all truths, all dialogues, etc. It is the divine embrace that a *bhakta* experiences and feels behind everything. It represents the outermost reaches of existence that ultimately supports each and every dialogue and the partners within such dialogues.

This ontological axis then acknowledges a revelation of the totality of all being and all beings in which every human being is grounded. Yet, as we have seen, this ontological dimension must be characterized as relational since distinctiveness of being and beings is sustained. As this first axis, dialogue is the exchange between the nondividual level of the oneness of all being in relation to, or in dialogue with, the level of *in*-dividual (in the sense of indivisible or irreducible) beings. The great sayings of the Upanishads poignantly and powerfully relate this ontic dialectical relationship between the undivided oneness and the individual beings. The famous saying *tat tvamasi*, translated literally as “That (*tat*) [totality of reality] is [the very nature of] the you (*tvam*), [of which] you are (*asi*) [a constituent part].”<sup>15</sup> The phrase, *aham brahmāsmi* is another great saying that engages this ontic dialectic: “I am (*aham*)[of the nature of] supreme reality (*brahma*)—[of this, truly,] I am (*asmi*).”<sup>16</sup> The oneness of which the Upanishads speak is interpreted by the Upanishads themselves, especially as seen in the following statement:

As a lover knows nothing within or without  
when embraced by the beloved,  
a person knows nothing within or without  
when embraced by the intelligent soul.<sup>17</sup>

The indivisible oneness of ultimate reality can only be asserted and appreciated by virtue of the paradoxical and necessary assertion of divisible character of oneness. Conversely, the divisible nature of reality can be asserted only on the contingent basis of its oneness. In deepening dialogue, partners strive to find the grounds of oneness between them, and also discover greater closeness and communion between hearts within conversational exchanges. The Upanishads reflect this ontological axis of revelation that forms the basis of dialogue.

The second, identified by number two, is the axis of religious truth, the “absolute truth” for those within a certain tradition. In the healthiest sense, this axis represents the exclusive and focused relationship with the divine, incomparable to all else. It is intensely personal and it nourishes the faith of the worshipper. It is the *rasa* a particular worshipper has with the particular vision of the One Reality.

Mining the jewels of a tradition is no easy task. It requires a life of practice, contemplation, and commitment to the deepest aspirations of the heart. In order to understand the relationship of interfaith dialogue to the *bhakti* theology of the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism, it is first necessary to seek the very source, the very core, or essential wellspring from which the one reality flows to worshippers. It is all about accessing the divinity within one's heart. To the extent that this *intra-faith* dialogue between the worshipper and the worshipped is established, it will be to that extent that a worshipper can then become a “partner” in dialogue, the third axis.

The third is the interpersonal axis of dialogue. While the second axis represents the “space within the heart,” as the Upanishads speak about it, the third represents the space between one's heart and the heart of another in dialogue. At this stage, the exchange between one partner in dialogue with the other represents a healthy form of inclusivism in which each partner discovers more about his or her own tradition by exploring the tradition of another in dialogue.

Deep conversation and sharing characterizes the fourth stage of dialogue. It is in this final stage that the whole of the dialogue is greater than the sum of the two parts or partners that comprises it. Both partners are lifted up into a greater sense of community, a precious experience of a shared theological moment, a new revelation, as it were, of the one reality that would otherwise remain concealed had it been the case that these two partners never engaged in dialogue together. Dialogue now becomes the back-and-forth movement of play, like that of a dance between hearts. Dialogue as a dance is the effortless and movement between partners, the way two dancers together are being danced by the dance itself.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the Chaitanya school sees the ultimate symbol of the sharing between human hearts as an eternal dance of divine love.

### Dialogue as a Dance of Divine Love: *Rāsa*

The five *Bhāgavata* chapters known as the *Rāsa Līlā* are rich with the symbolism of dialogue. Elsewhere I have illuminated this ultimate symbol of union in divine love, the *Rāsa曼陀羅*, in great detail. But it is specifically the formation of the great circle, or *manḍala*, of the dance known as *rāsa*, that is significant here. This dance begins with the Vraja Gopikās, the cowherd maidens of Vraja, linking arms to form a great circle of dancers around the divine figure of Krishna who remains at the center of the *manḍala*. Then it is Krishna who duplicates his divine form as many times as it takes to enter between every two Vraja Gopikās. The significance of Krishna entering between two Gopikas is this: two partners in dialogue have the power to attract a new presence or

revelation of the divine, which constitutes the fourth axial phase of dialogue as discussed above; this must be considered the perfection of dialogue.

The Chaitanya school sees in the Vraja Gopikās, as described in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the very paradigm of this intimate kind of sharing between souls and between souls and divinity.<sup>19</sup> And it is precisely the heartfelt and intermingling of their forms among all of the dancers that allows each of them to celebrate supreme love in the great circle dance. I have argued that the great symbol of supreme love as the circle dance of Krishna and the Gopīs can speak beyond the Vaishnava tradition to which it was originally revealed. The symbol of the Rāsa Maṇḍala could be seen and interpreted as a great symbol of dialogue, the building blocks of an authentic pluralism. At the very least, it can speak to Vaishnavas as symbolizing a perfect form of dialogue or sharing between humans and the divine, and also between humans and other humans. And further, I suggest, it can contribute a visual image of this symbolic representation of an authentic pluralism.<sup>20</sup>

How the divine circle of the Rāsa dance could be seen as symbolizing a genuine religious pluralism bears repeating here briefly. The Rāsa Maṇḍala is a great circle in which human beings, collectively, of different faiths, first become linked together in joyous harmony for offering their hearts to the divine, and then individually, each soul receives the exclusive, singular and superlative attention of the divine. There is a great lesson here. We in the human community must first link together in dialogue, and the more we do this, the more that each of us will attract the attention of divinity. As I state elsewhere:

The cowherd maidens linking arms in the dance represent the linking of human hearts and the solidarity of the human community of devoted souls. All souls, collectively, are invited to dance together with God, while simultaneously each individual soul is able to dance with God personally and exclusively. The Rāsa dance symbolizes the humility and passion of the devoted soul--the humility of love expressed through linking with other human beings, and the passion of love through souls linking with the supreme. This linking is the meaning of yoga, of which, as we have seen, the Gopīs are masters.<sup>21</sup>

It is significant that the formation of the Rāsa Maṇḍala first begins with and is initiated by the Vraja Gopikās themselves. They, who represent souls who are immersed in loving the divine, become unified, forming bonds of affection that surround the divine in an unbroken circle of celebration. This

first formative action represents how humans must realize a total inclusivism. It represents how humans must share in a dance of divine love between hearts, and then the collective and exclusive, intimate, and personal offering of the heart to the divine is possible. The second formative action of Krishna then duplicating himself as many times as there are Vraja Gopikās represents how humans can realize a pure and healthy form of exclusivism, the purely personal and individual attention of the divine, which yet occurs all the while only within the totally inclusive circle of human linking. The humility enacted within the Rāsa Maṇḍala's inclusivism and the passion enacted within the Rāsa Maṇḍala's exclusivism are inseparable, representing how these two must exist with one another in a new revelational pluralism that can only arise from dialogue.

In closing, it is important to point out that the One Reality already embraces all humans and all faiths just as Krishna attracts all the Vraja Gopikās to the beautiful jasmine-scented forest on that full moon night in autumn. No one person's faith, whether it be secular or sacred, traditional or individual—no faith whatsoever is excluded. This embrace from the One Reality is indicated in the above diagram as the two arrowed lines of axis number one. In this embrace, one can see the “two arms” embracing or encompassing the other axes within the totality of reality.

Within that embrace of the totality of reality, souls receive the revelation of truth from tradition and the revelation of others' hearts in dialogue. However, souls offer their return embrace when, as worshippers and partners in dialogue, they embrace with both arms, as it were, the truth of tradition (axis two) and the truth of dialogue (axis three). Then they follow the example of the Vraja Gopikās when they link arms within one another surrounding Krishna at the center of the complete circle they form.

It is for both this divine embrace and the return embrace that we as humans must strive. The return embrace of humans becomes stronger and stronger as the reception of revelation from tradition and humans becomes stronger and stronger. As these embraces strengthen, then, just as Krishna does with the Vraja Gopikās when he intimately and exclusively attends each maiden, a new revelation of divine intimacy comes to the human community. And this mutual embracing of the human with the divine, then, lifts both up into a newly shared revelational moment in which the divine dances most intimately with each and every soul (axis four). This transporting mutual embrace between souls and the divine produces a greater revelation. It allows us to offer what is deepest in our

own hearts to both the divine Beloved and the divine within all beings---this constitutes the unending and ongoing perfection of dialogue.

### Endnotes

1. Perhaps Indic traditions have more in common with the Greek philosophical tradition than they do with the early Christian faith, the latter which could be characterized as more sermonic and homiletic rather than dialogic. In Bhakti, it is the dialogical rather than the homiletic interpersonal communications that become the highest order of connecting and exchanges between humans.

2. See *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, Madhya Līlā, Chapter 8. The dialogue begins with verse 57 and takes up at least two hundred verses.

3. In the object relations school of depth psychology have shown that even during a particular lifetime, a person's faith is always changing and growing in ways that correspond to the natural developmental phases of the psyche. See *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*, by Ana-Maria Rizzuto, M.D. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

4. One of the most celebrative presentations of this Vedic adage can be observed at Satchidananda Ashrama, Yogaville, founded by Swami Satchidananda in Buckingham, Virginia, where he built the Light Of Truth Universal Service (LOTUS) temple that celebrates all religions. This Vedic passage is prominently displayed there and appears in the literature of the sect.

5. *Rig Veda* 1.164.46. Translation mine.

6. *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Sir Monier Monier-Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899).

7. *Bhagavad Gītā* 4.11. Note the word “path” in the singular, contrasting the popular notion of “paths are many.”

8. *Taittirīya Upanishad* 2.7.1. See my co-authored article with David Buchta, “Rasa Theory,” in the *Brill Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (ed., Knut Jacobsen) for a concise history of the word *rasa* and how its usage culminates in the Chaitanya school in the word of Rūpa Gosvāmin. The more complete translation surround this passage is the following: “Because truly that existence is auspiciously formed, *rasa* truly is that existence; for once one here reaches that *rasa*, this person becomes completely blissful.”

9. Here I present a rendition that follows the syntax of the popular renditions mentioned above, which present the Vedic adage as two sentences. If this same rendition offered here were to be more syntactically accurate, keeping “the one reality” phrase as the object by utilizing the passive voice, it would read, “The one totality of all reality is that which is revealed through many religious truths.”

10. *Bhagavad Gītā* (BG) 10.9. All passages from the *Bhagavad Gītā* engaged in this essay are from *Bhagavad Gītā: The Beloved Lord’s Secret Love Song*, by Graham M. Schweig (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007).

11. The gradual way in which Krishna's identity is revealed to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is examined within the "Textual Illuminations" portion of my translation of the text, in a section entitled, "Krishna: Intimate and Infiinate Divinity" (page 259). Here I show that it is not until the fourth chapter of the text that Krishna's identity as the supreme divinity is boldly declared by him. Krishna's identity as a charioteer occurs first, then his identity as a confidant, second, and then as a guiding teacher, third. And throughout the text, even after the fourth chapter, much of the text is devoted to the different manifestations of the divine that are coming from Krishna but are treated and spoken of as separate from him. For example, Krishna states:

In that one only,  
 take shelter  
 with all your heart,  
 O Bhārata.  
 Through his grace  
 you shall attain  
 supreme peace,  
 the eternal dwelling. (BG 18.62)

The significance of this phenomenon of independent divine manifestations, as expressed by Krishna speaking about them in the third person, has to do with the tacit fluidity and flexibility of divine manifestations in this Vaishnava theology. This is also reflected in the *avatāra* theology of Vaishnavism, that the very person of Krishna can take many different forms, for purposes of *lilā* or cosmogenesis, etc. Moreover, within the broader Hindu context, we find that in the *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali, there is no specific deity named at all; rather, it is to *iśvara* that Patañjali directs his reader, or to one's *iṣṭa-devatā*, "one's most loved deity." It is also interesting to note, as we shall see later in this essay, that in the *Bhakti Sūtra* of Nārada, there is no deity specific nomenclature engaged; only *bhagavān* and *iśvara* are engaged.

12. BG 18.75. For an in-depth discussion on the "secrecy" in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, see the section entitled, "The Secret Love Song" within Textual Illuminations in my translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Also, see my article, "Toward a Constructive and Comparative Theology of Krishna Bhakti for Contemporary Bengal Vaishnavism," especially the section entitled, "A theology of divine secrecy" (*Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 / Fall [2009]).

13. BG 18.67:

This is not to be spoken  
 by you at any time  
 to one who is  
 without discipline,

nor to one who  
does not offer one's love,  
Nor to one who hears  
yet has no desire to follow,  
nor to one who is  
envious of me.

14. BG 18.68-69.

15. *Chāndogya Upanishad* 6. This great saying is repeated several times throughout this portion of the text.

16. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10.

17. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* 4.3.21.

18. Here I invoke Hans-Georg Gadamer's eloquent philosophy of "play" as explicated in his chapter entitled, "Play as the clue to ontological explanation" in *Truth and Method* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1989 [1975]), 101-133. Gadamer speaks about the way play plays the players.

19. See my *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa: India's Classic Sacred Love Story* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), the chapter entitled, "The Song of the Flute: Veṇu Gīta" (pages 78-85: *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Chapter 21, Book 10), and the chapters of the Rāsa Līlā in which the Vraja Gopikās, during Krishna's absence pour their hearts out to one another: Act 2: "The Gopīs Search for Krishna," and Act 3: "The Song of the Gopīs: Gopī Gīta," in *Dance of Divine Love* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Book 10, Chapters 30 and 31).

20. See my *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa: India's Classic Sacred Love Story*, the chapter entitled, "Messages of the Text," especially pages 179-182. Any discussion here in this essay engaging the Rāsa Līlā text derive from my work on the famous *Bhāgavata* five chapters, known as the Rāsa Līlā Pañcādhyāyi.

21. *Dance of Divine Love*, p. 180.

## CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Kenneth Cracknell

These days, there are Catholic and Protestant Christians who joyfully take part in Christian-Vaishnava dialogue, as well as in many other interfaith discussions. But it was not always so, and the eager participation of all Christians in such conversations cannot be taken for granted. Indeed interreligious dialogue is still a very recent phenomenon and Catholics and Protestants alike are still finding their way forward. In this process the fifteen years of rich experience and experiment in Christian-Vaishnava dialogue that has been taking place in Washington (as well as elsewhere) gives us abundant material for reflection as well as many pointers to fruitful developments in future years. As we move forward together it will be helpful to review some of the Christian theological reflections that form the basis for the active engagement of Christians in dialogue with Vaishnavas.<sup>1</sup>

### *Old, Unhappy, Far-Off Things, and Battles Long Ago*

Both Catholics and Protestants have had much historical baggage both to hinder them in their own free participation in inter-religious discussion, and to raise doubts in the minds of their partners in dialogue as to what their intentions might be. Chief among these impediments is the long Christian missionary past and its underlying structures of polemical depreciation, if not actual defamation, of other religious paths and ways. Catholics and Protestants alike have at times in their histories regarded religious others as lost in darkness and doomed to perish eternally. The Council of Florence in 1442 puts it most bluntly:

The Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and proclaims that none of those who are outside the Catholic church, not only pagans, but Jews also, heretics and schismatics, can have part in eternal life, but will go into eternal fire, ‘which was prepared for the devil and his angels,’ unless they are gathered into that Church before the end of life.<sup>2</sup>

With few exceptions, and until relatively recently, this doctrine, *extra ecclesiam*

*nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation),<sup>3</sup> was universally accepted. One example of the human consequences of this exclusivist stance can be seen in the life of St Francis Xavier (1506–1552) as recounted by Walbert Bühlmann:

On his journeys he was accompanied by a loyal servant, a pagan Chinese who stuck by him even when the Portuguese deserted him. He regarded Francis as a brother. Unfortunately it never once crossed his mind to adopt his master's religion. Suddenly he died, and Francis Xavier wrote: "We could not reward him for his goodness of heart, for he died without knowing God. We could never help him or pray for him even after his death, for he is in hell."<sup>4</sup>

A near contemporary of Francis Xavier, the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546), took exactly the same position on the salvific status of religious others 'All worship and religions outside Christ are the worship of idols,' he wrote; for 'apart from Christ there is nothing except mere idolatry, an idol and a false figment of God.' For Luther, salvation was by faith in Christ alone and therefore 'whatever is outside faith (*extra fidem*) is idolatry. Consequently 'the Christian faith is set apart from every other religion and faith. It makes all the others false and useless.' We can say that for Protestants who followed Luther, *extra fidem nulla salus*: 'outside faith [in Christ] there is no salvation.' But Luther drew the circle of exclusion even more tightly:

Those who remain outside Christianity, be they heathens, Turks, Jews or false Christians although they believe on only one true God, yet remain in eternal wrath and perdition.<sup>5</sup>

By 'false Christians' here Luther meant Roman Catholics.

A century later British Protestants (in the tradition stemming from John Calvin [1509–1564]) affirmed in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) that salvation was for the elect, those chosen before the foundation of the world, alone:

Others not elected, although they be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet can never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved; much less can men not professing the Christian religion be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they ever so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the law of that religion they do profess; and to say that they may, is very pernicious and to be detested.

In sermon, creed and song, such doctrines were expressed by generations Protestant believers, even those who never read Luther or Calvin. So I as a young person learnt in my Methodist Sunday School and on Overseas Missions Sundays

that: 'O'er heathen lands afar, Thick darkness broodeth yet' (Lewis Hensley); that 'the song must go round the earth,' so that 'lands where Islam's sway, Darkly broods o'er home and hearth' may 'Cast their bonds away (Sarah Geraldine Stock); that the 'Word of life, most pure and strong' must spread 'till from its dreary night/All the world awakes to light' (J. F. Bahnmair); that those whose 'Souls are lighted/With wisdom from on high' cannot 'to men benighted/The lamp of life deny' (R. Heber). The firm impression was implanted by these hymns is that God is absent from the world and that idolatry rules everywhere until such time as the missionary arrives with the message of Christ. Charles Edward Oakley declared as much in his striking hymn 'Hills of the North Rejoice' where he wrote 'Though absent long, your Lord is nigh/He judgment brings and victory.' Such images that I took with me when I became a missionary 'to bring Christ' to Eastern Nigeria in 1962.<sup>6</sup>

It is, however, far from my purpose to pour scorn on either Catholic or Protestant missionaries who endured great hardships, sicknesses, persecution and very often death for the sake of preaching Jesus Christ. Yet in the light of history a serious question mark has to be placed against their missionary theologies. Believing there was little or no truth to be found in 'heathen darkness' meant that discourse with the non-Christian world was turned into either one-sided monological proclamation or disputatious defamatory polemic. We know from the historical records of both Catholic and Protestant missions that for a very long time their need to win the debates and thus to assert superiority over the religious others precluded the possibility of the missionaries themselves learning from people of other religious paths.

#### *The Discovery of the Faith and Commitment of the Religious Others.*

How Christians changed from proclamation to dialogue is a long and complicated story that cannot be told in detail here.<sup>7</sup> But we may perhaps highlight a few key moments in this transformation. These range from individual changes of heart to great shifts in the shaping of the world order, and from fresh thinking on part of both Catholic and Protestant philosophers and theologians to what can only be described as powerful spiritual movements within major Church councils and assemblies.

At the individual level we can point to the immense learning that actually took place in authentic missionary encounters, where Christians discovered in the religious others unsuspected riches of spirituality and wisdom. While such illumination can be found everywhere on the so-called mission fields, there were particularly frequent in India. On the Catholic side such eminent persons as

Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda), and Bede Griffiths affirmed a Catholic-Vedanta connectedness and embraced Hindu *sannyasa* as part of their Christian understanding.<sup>8</sup> On the Protestant side we may instance the rich appreciation of Hindu theism, in particular Bhakti traditions displayed by missionaries like C. F. Andrews (1870–1940) the close friend of Gandhiji and Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>9</sup> The outstanding American Methodist missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones, also a friend of Gandhiji, was the author of *Christ at the Round Table* (1928), a book whose title presages the interfaith dialogue movement.<sup>10</sup> These missionaries were just two among many who were deeply influential in changing Christian attitudes to Hinduism.<sup>11</sup>

The missionaries had their counterparts among the scholars and thinkers whose high regard for Hinduism sprang not so much from their personal encounter with Hindus as from their vast reading in newly discovered Indian sources. Between 1874 and 1894 Max Müller, the first Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Oxford, published forty-nine volumes of *The Sacred Books of the East*. These volumes impressed Catholic and Protestant scholars alike and the serious study of religion became commonplace in western universities. In the generations that followed, a number of seminal thinkers offered fresh and positive interpretations of the religious experience of humankind. These included Roman Catholics like Baron Frederich von Hügel, Erich Przywara, and Karl Rahner, and Protestants Brooke Foss Westcott, Nathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto and Paul Tillich. As we shall see below, their thinking has contributed much to the development of a coherent theology of interfaith dialogue.

All these individuals worked in a period of seismic changes in the world political situation. The old attitudes toward other religions were formed within a world dominated by a Christian outlook, and bore the marks of imperialism. Devaluation of those outside Christendom in general went hand in hand with disregard of the religious other. After 1914–18 that all changed: Europeans and many North Americans lost confidence in their own superiority. At the same time, slowly but inexorably, new nations found their voices, shook off colonialism and took their place in the new world-order.

This process accelerated rapidly after 1945 and necessarily included within it the resurgence of the great religious traditions of Islam, of Buddhism and of Hinduism. Moreover, after 1945 western Christians had to come to terms with Holocaust, most certainly caused to a large extent by sustained anti-Jewish teaching in the Catholic and Protestant churches. Also, the social and political consequences of colonialism in subjugating other races were coming to light as the new nations struggled for their independence.

Against this background the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) was convened, and had on its agenda the repudiation of all forms of anti-Semitism. This was done by the affirmation of a profound respect for Judaism.<sup>12</sup> But at the Council bishops from Asian countries also pressed for positive words to be said about Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, the religious traditions amidst which they lived. The result was the *The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions* (1965) always known by its Latin title, *Nostra Aetate*.

The Protestant story is somewhat different. The major ecumenical body, the World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded in 1948. At the time of its establishment, its member churches belonged almost entirely within western Christendom. In 1948 the WCC's overwhelmingly European and North American leadership remained convinced of the need to convert the world to Christ, by which they meant western forms of Christianity.

But in the next two decades the situation altered enormously. The independence of new nations meant the rise of new indigenous churches which brought new patterns of leadership for the WCC. By the time of the Third Assembly in New Delhi in 1961, Asian voices like Paul Devanandan and M. M. Thomas urged co-operation with people of non-Christian religious traditions.<sup>13</sup> By 1979 the WCC was able to adopt its own statement *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*. This was commended to WCC member churches for study and action. These Guidelines were adopted by individual churches and councils of churches, among them the British Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches of the USA. An examination of these two seminal documents, *Nostra Aetate* and the *Guidelines on Dialogue*, will give a sense of how the new era in interfaith relations was established and shaped.

### ***Nostra Aetate (1965)***

*Nostra Aetate* begins with the following call to action: 'In this age of ours when human beings are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened the Church examines with greater care the relation which she has to non-Christian religions.' The Church, it continues, reflects at the outset on what human beings have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them. From the Church's point of view the greatest communalities lies in sharing 'a common destiny, namely God.' All though history, *Nostra Aetate* states, 'there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life. At times there is present even a recognition of a supreme being or still more of a Father.' Consequently the Catholic Church 'rejects

nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.' While the Church always is under obligation, it said, to proclaim Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life, it may at the same time urge its children to enter 'with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.'

Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among nonChristians also their social life and culture.

Then follows some brief indication of what the 'moral and spiritual truths' might be among Muslims and Jews, and then some appropriate responses to them. Nothing is said about approaches to Hindus or Buddhists (or Sikhs, Jains, or Zoroastrians). We have only a tantalizing reference in paragraph 2 to the way in which in more advanced civilization responds to 'the unsolved riddles of existence' and so it baldly states that in Hinduism,

[human beings] explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love.

We shall return to the limitations of this characterization of Hinduism when we come to our section on the Christian-Vaishnava dialogue. Meanwhile we may note that there is no positive teaching anywhere in *Nostra Aetate* about the salvation of those who are not Christian, indeed the implication remains that only in Christ is there salvation: only in Christ 'in whom God reconciled all things to himself' will people find 'the fullness of their religious life. Since 1964, however, much more work on this issue has been done by both Catholic and Protestant thinkers, and this has lead to an affirmation that God's salvific purposes may be worked out through non-Christian religious commitments.<sup>14</sup>

So we may take *Nostra Aetate* as an opening volley in the struggle against 'the old unhappy things and battles far ago'; quite certainly countless Roman Catholic people have taken it as a full mandate for interfaith dialogue.<sup>15</sup>

**WCC Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies  
(1979)**

It would be another fourteen years before the ecumenical movement would promulgate its equivalent to *Nostra Aetate*. The vicissitudes behind this long delay are explained in S. Wesley Ariarajah's admirable book *Hindus and Chris-*

tians: *A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought*.<sup>16</sup> Like the Catholics, the Protestants were very reluctant to concede that God was at work within other religious traditions, let alone that God offered salvation through them. The most that could apparently be agreed in the consultation in Thailand that produced the final draft of the *Guidelines* in 1978 was a set of questions:

What is the relationship between the universal creative redemptive activity of God towards all humankind and the particular creative/redemptive activity of God in the history of Israel and in the person and work of Jesus Christ?

Are Christians to speak of God's work in the lives of all men and women only in tentative terms of hope that they may experience something of Him, or more positively in terms of God's self-disclosure to people of living faiths and ideologies and in the struggle of life?

In the same way that the Catholic theological community has been discussing the ramifications of *Nostra Aetate*, Protestant theologians have been engaged ever since 1979 in wrestling with the issues raised in the *Guidelines*.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, something positive had to be said on behalf of the Ecumenical Churches, and in the years that followed two key themes have dominated the discussions on interfaith relations; the first is captured in the phrase 'a dialogue of communities' and the second in the idea of 'bearing authentic witness.'

The *Guidelines* declared that Christians begin their reflection on community with the understanding that God is the creator of all things and of all humankind: 'from the beginning He willed relationships with Himself and all that He has brought to life; to that end He has enabled the formation of communities, judges them, and renews them.' The simple realities of the world are that we live with religious diversity. But we can go further, and affirm that this richness and diversity is God-intended. With a note of self-criticism the *Guidelines* refer to the human temptation to 'regard one's own community as the best and to attribute to one's own religious and cultural community an absolute authority.' But our Christian convictions should lead us to an attitude of real humility toward all people. Dialogue is accordingly to be thought of as a 'life style,' and as 'a fundamental part of Christian service within community'. It was to be an 'active response to the command "love God and your neighbor as yourself."' Moreover, in a world where communities are often fractured and antagonistic, dialogue was to be seen as a 'joyful affirmation of life against chaos.' Christians were called therefore to share with all others who are seeking 'the provisional goals of a better human community.'

But the question of mission could not be avoided,<sup>18</sup> and the *Guidelines* dealt

with the issues involved in evangelism by invoking the concept of ‘bearing an authentic witness.’

In dialogue Christians seek to ‘speak the truth in a spirit of love, ‘not naively “to be tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4.14 15).’ In giving their witness they recognize that in most circumstances today the spirit of dialogue is necessary. For this reason we do not see dialogue and the giving of witness as standing in any contradiction to one another.

Accordingly the *Guidelines* went out of their way to stress that while dialogue was a way in which Jesus Christ can be confessed in the world today, our partners in dialogue can and must be assured that Christians ‘come not as manipulators, but as genuine fellow pilgrims, to speak with them of what we believe God to have done in Jesus Christ who has gone before us, but whom we seek to meet anew in dialogue (Para. 19).<sup>19</sup>

The last paragraphs of the *Guidelines* sum up the position of the WCC in 1979. Though it could not make much in the way of theological progress, its stance toward people of other religious traditions at once generous and affirmative and forms the mandate upon which many Protestants act:

To enter into dialogue requires an opening of the mind and heart to others. It is an undertaking which requires risk as well as a deep sense of vocation. It is impossible without sensitivity to the richly varied life of humankind. This opening, this risk taking, this vocation, this sensitivity are at the heart of the ecumenical movement and in the deepest current of the life of the churches. It is therefore with a commitment to the importance of dialogue to the member churches of the WCC that the Central Committee offers this statement and the Guidelines to the Churches

### ***Christian Theology with Special Reference to Vaishnava Dialogue***

The stage was now set for a rapid increase in serious reflection by both Protestant and Catholic theologians on the theology of religion.<sup>20</sup> Although the recent history of interfaith relations with people of other faith and commitment has involved a wide variety of dialogue partners we shall confine ourselves to some of the specific issues raised by the conversation with Vaishnavas.

When participants in Christian-Vaishnava dialogue began this fruitful process in the 1980 there was a major conceptual difficulty to be overcome. We have already alluded to the preferences of earlier scholars of Indian religion for the monistic or non-dualistic school of Shankara, known as Advaita Vedanta. This,

they thought, was the tradition most truly representative of Indian philosophy and religious aspiration and therefore the one with which Christianity had most to reckon with (thus the reference in *Nostra Aetate*, already quoted, to ‘the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy.’) In this earlier period Abishiktananda and Bede Griffiths were widely perceived as seeking to reconcile Advaitic thought with Christian spirituality and that therefore that the dialogue would be focused on the Vedanta.

For their part, earlier Protestant scholars had allowed a certain intellectual distaste to creep in their characterization of the *bhakti* paths. We have, for example, descriptions of Krishna worship as ‘incurably idolatrous,’ as ‘sensuous’ and as ‘lacking a content of revelation.’ The most influential missiologist of the twentieth century, Hendrik Kraemer, asserted that the *bhakti* versions of Hinduism were ‘exclusively individualistic and essentially eudaimonistic.’<sup>21</sup>

But there was always a paradox in these positions. These writers often hinted that Advaita needed the corrective of ‘personalist’ understanding of both God and the human soul. ‘Christians,’ Bede Griffiths once wrote, ‘have to show the Hindu in the light of our faith, that in the ultimate experience of God, the absolute being, the world and the soul are not lost, nor is the personal being of God absorbed in the impersonal Godhead.’<sup>22</sup> Griffiths writes here as though he had never heard of Ramanuja.

Other students of India, and indeed many Christian missionaries, knew better, and I use first the work of the German Protestant theologian Rudolph Otto as an example. In 1930 Otto published his seminal book, *India's Religion of Grace*, in which he spoke of a doctrine of salvation that is ‘offered to all’ and to the ‘poor in spirit’ in particular. This salvation, he wrote, ‘comes not by mystic experience, by the loss of personality in the impersonal primal cause of all being, but by *bhakti*, that is by surrender in simple, trusting appropriation of the “grace” of the Lord and in love to Him.’ This salvation is the free gift of grace and is offered through ‘the saving might of the Lord.’ Otto declared that in ‘this Indian *bhakti* religion there is presented, without a doubt, a real, saving God, believed, received and—can we doubt it?—experienced.’<sup>23</sup> In India Aiyadurai Jesudasen Appasamy, later to become bishop of Coimbatore, wrote in 1927 that the *bhaktas* ‘adore His goodness, worship Him with bowed heads and clasped hands as seeking in all possible ways to establish a relation with Him which will grow into a mystic union.’ Appasamy thought that only such men and women could appreciate the inner spirit of Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

Such were two early advocates of the Christian-Vaishnava conversation as practiced today. But it still took another fifty years for this dialogue to take root

and to blossom in the way it has done in the last fifteen years. For reasons that I have sought to set out previously ('ISKCON and Interfaith Dialogue' *ICJ*, Vol.8, No.1 June 2000) I believe this was a high order religious encounter. I felt able to affirm in that essay that in these dialogues we had become a community of 'learners and teachers.' Thus, I thought then (and still do), that 'Christians and Vaishnavas draw very close to one another because of their sense of mission. At the heart of each faith is a profound sense that it is the bearer of good news for everyone. Both Christians and Vaishnavas are essentially preachers with a Savior to commend.' I continued:

It is this devotion and commitment that we recognize in one another. At the same time, each of our theologies recognizes that God has come to other men and women in different modes and forms. In Christianity, we look to the teaching of God's universal wisdom, and speak of Spirit or Logos Christologies. The sense that Christ will have spoken within other religious traditions is increasingly common among us.

This brief allusion to 'Spirit' or 'Logos' christologies needs some amplification here, as they represent developments that were taking place in the churches at the same time as the Christian-Vaishnava dialogues of the 1980s and 1990s were occurring. By the year 2001 several major statements by WCC commissions and major Protestant communions had been issued. These had employed two themes central to Christian theology (immediately springing from its understanding of the Holy Trinity) to affirm the presence of God with people of different faith commitments. The first theme was the ever-present action in all places and at all times of the Spirit of God: 'The person of the Holy Spirit moved and still moves over the face of the earth, to create, nurture and sustain.' How the Spirit works passes beyond our definitions and descriptions in the manner of the wind that 'blows where it wills' (*Gospel of St John*, chap 3, v.8).

We can assuredly see the results of the Spirit's activity in the lives of Gaudiya Vaishnavas. We Christian participants are happy (what an understatement!) to discern and acknowledge that the gifts and graces of our partners in this dialogue are the fruits of the Spirit (namely love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, see St Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*, chap 5, v 22-3) Thus in the formal words of a 2001WCC Declaration, contemporary theology for interfaith dialogue boldly asserts that the Holy Spirit is present in the life and traditions of people of living faith:

People have at all times and in all places responded to the presence and activity of God among them, and given their witness to their encounter with

living God. In their testimony they speak both seeking and having found wholeness, or enlightenment, or divine guidance, or rest, or liberation. This is the context in which Christians testify to the salvation we have experienced through Christ.<sup>25</sup>

Other documents and statements focus on verses from the first chapter of St. John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word (Logos) and the Word was with God and the Word was God. . . . All things were made by this Word and in him was life and this life was the light of all people' (vv 1-4). This light has always shone in the darkness and the darkness has never extinguished it (v.5). From as early as the second Christian century these words have been used to suggest that the light of Christ has always shone far beyond the boundaries of the Christian church. So Justin Martyr (c100 -165 CE) wrote in his *First Apology*: We have shown that Christ is the Word (Logos) of whom the whole human race are partakers, and those who lived according to reason (Logos) are Christians, even though accounted atheists and in his *Second Apology* ventured the astonishing thought: 'Whatever men have uttered aright . . . belongs to us Christians; for we worship and love, next to God, the Word (*Logos*) which is from the Unbegotten and Ineffable God.' He was claiming that the Greek philosophers were hidden Christians and that their great thoughts were Christian too.

Today no contemporary Christian would ever dream of claiming that Hindus are really Christians or that their theology is really Christian as well. But exponents of the Logos theology/christology are convinced that the Logos touched Sri Chaitanya or Bhaktivinoda Thakura or Srila Prabhupada. If indeed the Word did speak to them it is incumbent upon Christians to listen to, to learn from, and to reflect upon their teachings. This approach was put into formal theological language by the report of the General Synod of the Church of England entitled *Towards a Theology for Inter-faith Dialogue*

Christians need to be open to recognize and respond to all manifestations of the Logos. The decisive revelation of God in Jesus Christ has to be safeguarded for that is the canon by which we are enabled to recognize all other manifestations. Furthermore in the encountering of those other revelations new depths are discovered in the fullest revelations of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Readers of this *Journal* will detect a certain defensiveness in the second sentence of this quotation, and I must ask them to remember this was also an attempt to reassure nervous Christians of the latter part of the twentieth century that they were not going to betray Jesus Christ by entering into dialogue with religious others as equal partners. Such a sentence has not been felt necessary in theologies

of dialogue in the twenty-first century. The situation has changed, and participants in now innumerable dialogues with Jews, and Muslims, and Buddhists and the other traditions testify that their partners are courteous and respectful of Christian convictions and indeed are usually anxious to have these convictions fully expressed and carefully explained.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the best I can offer now are some recent contributions to a theology of dialogue from outstanding individual scholars deeply committed to finding new and better ways of expressing their commitment to Jesus Christ and at the same time the reality of the presence of God with religious others. One is Catholic, two are Protestant, but making this denominational distinction seems to have become increasingly irrelevant in the Christian struggle to find a constructive theology for dialogue.

### *Jesus as the Sacrament of Christian Salvation*

Particularly in the context of the Christian-Vaishnava dialogue we must explore an important contribution made by the Catholic theologian Paul Knitter. In the most recent statement of his interfaith theology, Knitter has focused on the contrast between thinking of Jesus, on the one hand, as the single and therefore unique constitutive cause of salvation and of Jesus, on the other, as the sacramental bearer of salvation.<sup>28</sup> In most Catholic and Protestant theologies up to our time Jesus has been seen as the sole author of salvation. There are at least five theories of how Christ died for our sins, the most widespread in North America is undoubtedly that known as penal substitution or substitutionary satisfaction. Its premise is that all creation has been broken and distorted by sin and Jesus has died on the cross to bridge the vast gap between sinful human beings and a righteous and judgmental God. The wages of sin include death and Jesus died in our place to pay the price of sin on our behalf.<sup>29</sup> In his death he reversed the consequences of the fall of Adam and Eve and opened the gates to eternal life for all who believe on his name. This has always been seen as unique and ‘once-and-for-all.’ For if salvation is understood as a matter of fixing what was broken, then there need only be one fixer. Once something is repaired, Knitter notes, especially if the repairer is divine, it does not need to be fixed again! This leads to the conviction that ‘there is no other name given by which we may be saved except that of Jesus of Nazareth,’ as in Acts 4.12, a verse of the New Testament that on first reading puts a stop to any true interreligious dialogue and any kind of positive theology of other religions.

Over against this negativity, Knitter presents a Jesus who has become the central *symbol* of God’s saving love. Recalling the seminal work of two of his teachers, Paul Tillich (1886–1965) and Karl Rahner (1904–1984), Knitter writes

For both these theologians, symbols are necessary to communicate or express realities that are beyond ordinary words. Symbols enable us to see things that we would otherwise not be able to see. Symbols participate in what they symbolize. A wedding ring, in the eternity of its circularity and in the preciousness of its material, truly participates in the love that it expresses; yet that love is so much greater than this little, but so important, ring.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, says Knitter, when the first followers of Jesus called him ‘the Son of God,’ they were using a symbol that expressed for them the experience that to have met Jesus was to have met God.

For them ‘Jesus’ and ‘God’ were almost the same thing. But they weren’t the same thing! Jesus as symbol participated in the divine reality yet was not the fullness of that reality, for as he reminded his disciples in John’s Gospel, the Father is greater than me (John 14.28)<sup>31</sup>

Because he both embodied the divine nature and demonstrated what human nature could become when fully opened up to breathing in the divine spirit, Jesus is authentically called both the ‘Son of God’ and the ‘Son of Man.’ In this way he becomes a sacrament—indeed, the primary sacrament—for Christians. Such an understanding, Knitter suggests, is most fruitful for our theology of dialogue for it makes room for other saviors in other religions.

We cannot stress too much the contrast Knitter is drawing between Jesus as the one constitutive element in the salvation of human beings and Jesus as opening up the way to New Being. As Knitter puts it ‘Jesus as the Sacrament of salvation is open to other sacraments.’<sup>32</sup> In terms of the conversation with Vaishnavas few things are more apparent than the sacramental intensity of Krishna as a transforming presence. Vaishnava salvation, Rudolf Otto suggested, comes through ‘simple, trusting appropriation of the grace of the Lord and in love to Him.’ Knitter, I think, would agree that Krishna is most surely a legitimate sacrament of salvation.

It seems to me that this suggestion is most helpful for an all-embracing Christian theology of religion that will transform the churches’ understanding of the place of Christian faith amid religious diversity in the next two or three generations. All we need to note here is that the teaching about symbolism by Paul Tillich, a Protestant, and Karl Rahner, a Catholic, have come alive in the context of the theology of religion and the theology of dialogue.

### **Pure Universal Love**

In what follows I am largely speaking from within my own tradition of faith, namely that of the Methodists, the followers of John Wesley. In this I am aided by

the English scholar of Indian Religion Eric Lott, one of the most distinguished of my Methodist colleagues.<sup>33</sup> He and I were nurtured by the hymns of divine love of John and Charles Wesley, as for example Charles's great verse:

Love divine, all love excelling  
 Joy of heaven to earth come down  
 Fix in us thy humble dwelling  
 All thy faithful mercies crown.  
 Jesu, thou art all compassion  
 Pure, unbounded love thou art;  
 Visit us with thy salvation.  
 Enter every trembling heart.

In another hymn (actually it is more of a reflective poem) Charles Wesley asks to know the name of God, specifically saying: 'tell me if thy name is Love' and he receives this answer:

‘Tis Love! tis Love! Thou diedst for me!  
 I hear thy whisper in my heart  
 The morning breaks, the shadows flee'  
 Pure, universal love thou art  
 To me, to all, thy mercies move;  
 Thy nature and thy name is love

In straightforward prose, John Wesley insisted to his Methodists that they were to be: 'grounded in love, in true catholic love, till thou art swallowed up in love for ever and ever'.<sup>34</sup>

For Eric Lott this understanding of the centrality of love is plainly paralleled in Indian *bhakti* or devotional theism of which he has profound knowledge. One immediate parallel he cites is the Alvar tradition, where as he notes, an *alvar* 'is as the name means, one drowned in divine love.' His prolonged study of vernacular devotional songs in south India shows '*an experience of divine love as passionately personal* (italics his). He gives many examples of which Nammalvar's verse is one:

O Lord of celestial powers,  
 In your grace you have entered even my heart,  
 O Lord of eternal glory, the living spring of all that lives...

Ramanuja has described this inseparable relation with the Great Self as ‘an unbroken flow of oil,’ and as ‘an ocean full of forgiving love for those who take refuge in him, the supremely merciful.’<sup>35</sup>

In the light of all this, Lott is able to see Methodism as a Christian *bhakti* movement where the love experience of God is an end in itself, and where this experience of God is made possible only by divine grace. But as in the case of Wesleyan theology, Lott observes that such experience has transformative implications and discusses them fairly fully in his article. Of course, this is thematic material for Christian-Vaishnava dialogue rather than a theology for interfaith dialogue. In the end, Lott has some important concluding words about *bhakti*-faith:

We [Westerners] should not go on . . . overlooking those faith traditions that may even enable us to recover a deeper sense of the wonder that is God, the wonder of Charles Wesley’s “Love divine, all loves excelling.” It may be that this faith from afar may enable us to be more faithful to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup>

The theology of this should be clear: we are truly to expect that the God whom Methodists describe as pure universal love is at work everywhere and that because of the diversity of God’s children, in some places some of them will have seen further or understood more than God’s children in other places. With this kind of understanding Christian participation in interfaith dialogue becomes a dialogue towards truth not yet fully known to any of us. Because of the profound affinity of Methodism as a Christian-*bhakti* movement with the rich and varied Vaishnava responses to God it can perhaps help this pilgrimage of discovery to attain new levels. Certainly the Methodist emphasis will always ensure an emphasis on experience and worship, a doxological dialogue, within the interfaith process.

#### *No Longer The Same*

[A] stranger, suddenly  
showing up, makes the very thing you were doing no longer  
the same.

That is [,] suddenly  
what you thought, when you were alone, and  
doing what you were doing,  
changes because someone else shows up<sup>37</sup>

These verses give the title *No Longer the Same* to a recent book by an American Anglican layman, David Brockman, whose work is new to the list of publications on Christian theology of religion.<sup>38</sup> Brockman is concerned that for two thousand years Christianity ‘has operated as if it were the only game in town, or at least the only game that mattered.’<sup>39</sup> But this he says is no longer sufficient. For many reasons it has become vital in our time to have a theology that is ‘faithful not only to the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ but also to encounter with religious others as a potential truth event witnessing to that God.’<sup>40</sup> This will involve the element of ‘comparative theology,’ which involves serious scholars work together in direct conversation and mutually enriching research. Interestingly he instances among the major proponents of this approach James L. Fredericks, Francis X. Clooney and John P. Keeney.<sup>41</sup> The first and that last of these scholars have been concerned with Buddhism but Frank Clooney will be well-known to readers of *JVS* and actually contributes an article to this present issue.<sup>42</sup> As more and more scholars join in this enterprise Brockman hopes that they will include in this remit the wider social, political and economic contexts of the texts and teachings that have hitherto preoccupied participants in this important form of interfaith dialogue.

In the future, Brockman suggests, other perceptions and insights will become both part of the sources and norms for Christian theological reflection in such a way that the witness of religious others will have been brought into fully reciprocal, mutually critical dialogue with Christian witness. Here it is important that comparative theology not limit itself to merely what appears to be ‘similar’ but engages with what is really different. This dialogue may well suggest answers to some Christian theological puzzles and raise new questions about issues that Christianity had previously taken for granted: equally it could perhaps solve some Vaishnava puzzles and shed new light on issues that Vaishnava tradition has taken as settled.<sup>43</sup>

Brockman’s underlying concern about comparative theology, as indeed about any other form of theology, is that we all have to recognize that any given religious tradition is likely to be involved in structures of authority, power and repression. All theologizing, he says, needs *to look up* from texts scriptures, traditions, doctrinal debates and ritual practices, and *to look around* at social, political and economic contexts (the italics are in Brockman’s original text). The positive message embedded in religious traditions is about transformation, both immediate and ultimate.<sup>44</sup> There is a utopian dimension in religious discourse, the scent of a changed world and a conviction that the human framework can be ultimately changed. Certainly this applies to Christianity and Vaishnavism: both are committed to ‘a praxis which transforms what exists.’<sup>45</sup>

Brockman helps us enormously in giving us the phrase that he has made key to his own thinking: *no longer the same*. After fifteen years of working together, none of us, Christian nor Vaishnava, is any longer the same. We have begun on a process that will lead us together toward things that we can only imagine.

### **A Final Reflection**

One Christian theological principle ties together the thinking of Knitter, Lott and Brockman highlighted in this paper. It is best described as ‘eschatological’ and reminds Christians that Christ is not fully disclosed to us, that in fact in this present life we only see things in part or in a distorted form. As St. Paul describes our situation in the First letter to the Corinthians, we see the things of God now only as in a mirror, rather dimly and in a puzzling way (*blepomen gar arti di’esostrou en ainigmati*. 1 Cor. 13.20). Only in God’s *eschaton* (last times) will the enigma (*ainigma*) become clear as we see the Lord face to face and gain the full personal knowledge of God. Until that time theologians have to speak with a proper humility. As Knitter has indicated we have been given a glimpse of the divine splendor in symbols and sacraments, with the result that that, as he wrote, Jesus manifestly ‘participated in the reality of God yet was never the fullness of that reality.’ Indeed, as St Paul declares later in the same First Letter to the Corinthians, the accomplishment of God’s purposes will be when God is all in all to all people (1.Cor. 15.20).

This is, as Lott reminds us, ‘the wonder that is God, the wonder of Charles Wesley’s “Love divine, all loves excelling,” when the new creation is complete and we are changed from glory into glory, lost in wonder, love and praise.’ Meanwhile, one of our common tasks in our dialogue is to anticipate in our life a quality of love and devotion not yet fully known to any of us. Maybe we can sense in our mutual participation as two different kinds of *bhakti* movement in sharing insight and wisdom as ‘a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all human kind.’

Brockman, as we saw, believes that the ‘*no longer the same*’ encounters with religious others may become potential truth events witnessing to and deepening our understanding of God. When this happens, as is now increasingly often case something wholly new comes to birth. There is then as it were a new creation, both marvelous and unforeseen. This is now the vocation laid upon both Vaishnavas and Christians in which God is saying to both communities in vigorous if ungrammatical language: ‘you ain’t seen nothing yet!’ With eyes open expectantly we move to this new world, itself a witness to the eschaton of God, all in all to all people.

### Endnotes

1. Some of this material revisits what I wrote twelve years ago as 'ISKCON and Inter-faith Dialogue' in *ISKCON Communications Journal*, Vol 8, No 1, June 2000
2. Denziger/Schonmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Friburg in Bresgau, Herder, Editio 29, No. 1354.
3. The formula 'extra ecclesiam nulla salus' is in fact derived from Cyprian: he wrote, 'Habere non potest Deum patrem qui Ecclesiam non habet Matrem': 'who does not have the Church as Mother cannot have God as Father' and the phrase 'salus extra ecclesiam non est' itself appears in his *Epistulae LXXII* 21.
4. In *All Have the Same God*, St Paul Publications 1979, p. 21.
5. *Larger Catechism* II, iii.
6. To my profound and lasting astonishment I found that Christ had been there a long time before I arrived: but that is another story.
7. I have made an attempt at telling some of the history of these developments on the Protestant side this in my *Justice Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions 1846-1914*, Epworth Press, 1995.
8. See below for further comments on their espousal of advaitic Hinduism as their chief dialogue partner.
9. Andrews wrote in 1910 'The whole field of Hindu theism needs working over and its treasures bringing to light. At present it is far too little understood or appreciated.' quoted in Cracknell, *Justice Courtesy and Love*, p 179
10. Jones recorded with admiration the words of a Bengali Goswami at one of his conferences in the 1920s: 'I believe in Sri Chaitanya. I practice both *bhajana* . . . and *kirtana*. . . I feel that God is very near me. I have this experience almost every time I have *kirtana* in the morning. The name of Hari gives happiness.' *Christ of the Round Table*, Abingdon Press, 1928, pp 30-1.
11. For many others see my *Justice, Courtesy and Love* and note in particular two Americans, Robert Allen Hume and John Peter Johns.
12. In the following terms: 'Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be obtained, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions.'
13. Paul Devanandan is, I think, the first to use the word Dialogue in a WCC context, see his *Preparation for Dialogue*, Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1964.
14. The issues of salvation though other religions remains controversial. The most recent book on this subject (2011) Gavin D'Costa, Paul Knitter and Daniel Strange, *Only One Way: Three Christian Responses on the Uniqueness of Christ in a Religiously Plural World*, SCM Press, 2011 has the three authors locked head to head in maintaining diametrically opposed positions. D'Costa defends the excluding position of Benedict XVI as found for

example in *Dominus Jesus* (2000). Paul Knitter also a Roman Catholic theologian notes the names of Roger Height Jacques Dupuis, Peter Phan, Jon Sobrino, Tissa Balasuriya, Jacob Kavunkel and Michael Amalodoss as among those who have incurred Papal displeasure for suggesting that this at least an open question. Knitter names other Catholic theologians offering serious work on the distinctiveness of Jesus: Raimundo Panikkar Aloyius Pieris and we can add his own name and that of his teacher, Karl Rahner.

15. D'Costa points out correctly that *Nostra Aetate* is a 'Declaration' and has no dogmatic value. See his full discussion of the theological issues involved in *No Other Way?*, pp. 7-46.

16. Eerdmans, 1991

17. Numbered among the most influential Protestant thinkers of the last generation are Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Krister Stendahl, John Hick, John B. Cobb Jr, Stanley Samartha, I would find it invidious to name those who are currently making new and fresh contributions.

18. "Fresh in the ears of many in that period were these words from a Hindu from North India politely declining to take part in a WCC organized formal dialogue: 'Do not think I am against dialogue . . . on the contrary, I am fully convinced that dialogue is an essential part of human life, and therefore of religious life itself . . . Yet to be frank with you, there is something that makes me uneasy in the way in which you Christians are now trying so easily to enter into official and formal dialogue with us. Have you already forgotten that what you call 'inter faith dialogue' is quite a new feature in your understanding and practice of Christianity? Until a few years ago, and often still today, your relations with us were confined, either merely to the social plane, or preaching in order to convert us to your dharma ... For all matters concerning dharma you were deadly against us, violently or stealthily according to cases . . . quoted by Stanley Samartha in his *Courage for Dialogue*, WCC, 1981.

19. In Britain we responded to the WCC Guidelines by summarizing them into Four Principles of Dialogue:

DIALOGUE BEGINS WHEN PEOPLE MEET EACH OTHER

DIALOGUE DEPENDS ON MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND MUTUAL TRUST

DIALOGUE MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO SHARE IN SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

DIALOGUE BECOMES THE MEDIUM OF AUTHENTIC WITNESS

I expounded these in the context of Christian-Vaishnava Dialogue in my article, 'The Four Principles of Interfaith Dialogue and the Future of Religion, in *ICJ* Vol 4, No 1, June 1996.

20. Two good guides to these developments are Paul Knitter *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, Orbis, 2002, and David Brockman and Ruben L.F. Habito (ed), *The Gospel among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology, and Spirituality in a Multifaith World*, Orbis 2010.

21. Hendrik Kraemer *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian world*, Edinburgh House Press, 1938.

22. Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India*, Templegate, 1984, p. 16.
23. *India's Religion of Grace*, Macmillan, 1930, pp. 16, 18, 21.
24. Aiyadurai Jesudasen Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga; A Study in the Mysticism of the Johannine Writings*. Macmillan, 1927, pp. 2 and p. 21..
25. *The Bossey Declaration: Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding* printed in full in Kenneth Cracknell *In Good and Generous Faith*, Pilgrim Press, 2006 pp. 218-9.
26. *Towards a Theology for Interfaith dialogue*, CIO Publishing 1984, p 19.
27. I was moved to re-read eleven years later, these words from my previous article: 'A report from one of the earliest residential interfaith conference records Vaishnavas as being moved by the "openness and humility of all the members of the Christian churches present" and indeed some expressed not a little amazement at the "lack of false ego" in these participants. They expressed gratitude for the "real willingness to understand" the Vaishnava philosophy. According to this report, several devotees said that they had discovered a real increase in "respect, appreciation and esteem" for Christians and Christianity, calling the conference time 'essential and extremely productive.'
28. In, *Only One Way?* p. 158.
29. Daniel Strange in *Only One Way?* p. 115, actually refers to 'God's holy and righteous wrath', later quoting the late John Stott, an Anglican evangelical leader: 'Thus, God took his own loving initiative to appease his own righteous anger by bearing it his own self in his own Son when he took our place and died for us.' p. 125.
30. In *Only One Way?* p 67, Knitter cites Karl Rahner, 'The Theology of the Symbol' in *Theological Investigations* No 4. Helicon 1966, and Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*, chap. 3 'Symbol of Faith,' Harper and Row 1957.
31. *Ibid*, p. 68.
32. *Ibid*, p. 70.
33. See his chapter "All Loves Excelling": A Methodist reflects on Hindu Faith' in Martin Forward, Stephen Plant and Susan White (eds), *A Great Commission: Christian Hope and religious Diversity*, Peter Lang, 2000, pp. 244-265.
34. Sermon XXXVI: *The Catholic Spirit*.
35. *op.cit.* pp. 248-9.
36. *ibid*, p 265.
37. Charles Olson, *Coles's Island* in Robet Creeley (ed), *Selected Poems*, University of California Press, 1993.
38. The full title is *No Longer the Same: Religious Others and the Liberation of Christian Theology*, Palgrave, 1911.
39. *No Longer the Same*, p126
40. *Ibid*, 127
41. Fredericks and Keeney have been concerned with Buddhism, see for example James L. Fredericks *Buddhists and Christians: through Comparative Theology to Solidarity*, Orbis, 2004 and John P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ; A Mahayanan Christology*, Orbis, 1989.

42. See Francis X. Clooney among many other writings, *Seeing Through Texts Doing Theology Among the SriVaisnavas of South India*, State University of New York Press, 1996. *Hindu God, Christian God*, Oxford University Press, 2001, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* Oxford University Press, 2004, *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, T. and T. Clark 2010.

43. I had a doctoral student in Cambridge UK twenty years who, having learnt Sanskrit, suggested to me that the Methodist theologian John Wesley would have found it more congenial to use the thought of Ramanuja in which to frame his teaching. Unfortunately, this idea was some years ahead of its time.

44. Eric Lott commented in his article cited above that there is ‘another aspect of at least some *bhakti*-faith that surely should encourage the sense of need for wider social change. This is the conviction that *the new age of God has now dawned* on people everywhere being touched by God’s grace. A kind of realised eschatology . . . this has been best brought out by . . . Hare Krishna movement,’ italics his, *op.cit.* p. 262.

45. The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, quoted by Brockman, *op.cit* p. 139.



## THE SOUL AND ITS DESTINY: CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

Klaus Klostermaier

### *Preface/Postscript*

I deeply appreciated the invitation from Shaunaka Rishi and Anuttama Dasa to prepare the Christian position paper for this conference, and I enjoyed the warm atmosphere created by our friendly hosts. When preparing my manuscript I was naturally aware of significant doctrinal differences between not only the various branches of Christendom, but also between traditional and progressive thinkers in one and the same denomination. I intended to give a summary of what I thought was mainstream traditional Christian teaching on the soul and its destiny, beginning with a study of some Biblical notions relating to soul, giving an outline of Thomas Aquinas' and mediaeval official Church teaching, providing some mystical/experiential accounts, summarising a major contemporary Roman Catholic theologian's view on the "destiny of the soul," mentioning some major modern challenges to Christian views of the soul, and ending with a few personal/critical remarks on the issue.

I came away from the meeting with the impression that there is not a single statement regarding the nature and destiny of the soul that would be accepted by all Christian denominations. The doctrinal development in the various Christian denominations, and the disinterest shown by many contemporary Christians in any formulations of "metaphysical doctrines" has reached a point where it is pretty meaningless to speak of a "Christian position" on questions like the soul and its destiny vis-à-vis, e.g., a Vaishnava position. It would be possible—as was suggested by one participant—to compare and contrast the teaching on soul of, for instance, Thomas Aquinas and Jiva Goswami; however, it was widely felt that such a comparison would be rather useless. The emphasis, all were agreed, should be on contemporary perceptions, and a perceived relevance to the questions of our age and day.

The following write-up does not claim to reflect the collective thinking on the soul and its destiny of the individual Christians present at the gathering (none of whom came in any official function), but is offered as a historic docu-

ment and as a point of departure for the discussion which proved to be lively as well as going in many different directions.

### ***Biblical Background***

Since this paper is meant to prepare a dialogue with Vaishnavism, the horizon of the “soul-dialogue” must encompass not only Western philosophical and theological Christian *psyche* notions, but must cover all notions contained in the Indian notion of *jivatman*. Accordingly, the Biblical background will include notions of “life” and “spirit” over and above “soul.”

**Life** (Hebrew *chain*; Greek *zoe*; Latin: *vita*) is one of the most fundamental concepts of the Bible. “The living God” is a standing expression, as compared with the “dead idols.”<sup>1</sup> God is “life-giving-spirit,” and life is the most precious possession of man. Life is not seen only in terms of modern medicine and biology, as a mere physico-chemical mechanism, but it is the whole of existence, feeling, thinking, knowing God. Life is something divine-only God can give it. Genesis relates that humans got their life through a special and immediate act of God. Life in the proper sense is union with God; the sinner is “dead,” even if biological life is still going on. Life is thus the most cherished treasure of humans, identical with God’s blessing, merit, good—whereas death is synonymous with sin, God’s curse, evil. Since sin has deprived humans of their true life—the union with God—the purpose of salvation is to restore the life. Christ calls himself “life.”<sup>2</sup> God is life, and can give life. “Life” is the state of the redeemed ones, a life which is the fruit of the redemption through Christ, which will last forever. “Eternal life” is not something which comes “after death,” but it is the divine life, which is already in those who have received salvation. Life is essentially seen as a process of communication, whose source is “the living God.” The conditions to receive it are faith in Christ,<sup>3</sup> good works, love of neighbour especially,<sup>4</sup> baptism and Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> Baptism is described as the “dying with Christ and rising with Christ to a new life in God.”<sup>6</sup>

**Soul** (Latin: *anima*) is the translation of the Biblical *nephesh* and *psyche*, and etymologically both contain the idea of breath, blowing, drawing breath. Sometimes *psyche* is used simply as a synonym for life, or the principle of life,<sup>7</sup> or for “living being”—either animal or man;<sup>8</sup> in other places it means the principle which is opposed to the body,<sup>9</sup> which is immortal and which is man’s most valuable “part”: “What does it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your soul? What can you give in exchange for your soul?”<sup>10</sup> And: “There is no need to fear those who kill the body but have no means of killing the soul; fear him more, who has the power to ruin body and soul in hell.”<sup>11</sup> The use of the term

“soul” in the Bible is far from uniform—it is not used in a philosophical way. “Soul” signifies the spiritual principle of humans coming from God and somehow remaining forever.

**Spirit** (Hebrew: *ruah*; Greek: *pneuma*; Latin: *spiritus*) is used often in the Bible in different senses. Sometimes it is a synonym for life, soul or living being, people.<sup>12</sup> Occasionally it stands for the seat of feelings, thoughts, intentions. Sometimes *pneumata* (spirits) describes the deceased ones.<sup>13</sup> With Paul we find very often spirit as the opposite to “flesh” (*sark*). Spirit stands for union with God, and thus also the body of the redeemed ones (as referred to here, the body of the risen Christ) is “spirit”, whereas the whole existence of the sinner, who is “far from God,” is “flesh.”<sup>14</sup> Spirit is the divine power which justifies and sanctifies; flesh is the weakness in which sin is dwelling and thriving. This “spirit” is the “spirit of Christ”—the faithful become “One spirit with Christ.”<sup>15</sup>

There are some more expressions in the Bible which could be used in order to show how “soul” is to be understood: we find sometimes human essence expressed as “the heart” (Hebrew: *leb*; Greek: *kardia*). Also “flesh” is used as expressing human existence, not just in the negative sense. The terminology of the Bible is far from uniform, and we do not find clear definitions of the term. Life, soul and spirit stand for a reality which is transcategorical. The Bible wants to make clear that the whole existence of humans is from God, and depends on God, who is the “living God.”

### *The Theology of the Early Church and the Middle Ages*

When Christianity came into contact with Greek philosophy it had to give an answer to the problems posed by Greek philosophers. Greek philosophy had already coined definite, mutually exclusive, concepts of body and mind, matter and spirit, it had a “body-soul-problem” which was unknown to the Bible.

According to Plato the soul had a pre-existence as a pure spirit in the realm of ideas. For some fault it had been imprisoned in a body, and its liberation, its freedom, the regaining of its own true nature, could only be through discarding the body. In the Epicurean school the soul was considered to be inseparably connected with matter. The death of the body meant the annihilation of the “soul.” The Aristotelians raised problems concerning the origin of the soul, the existence of separate spiritual substances, the nature of the soul, and the relation of body and soul. Representatives of all schools, who had become Christians, tried to interpret the Christian message in their respective terminology.

It is interesting to observe that the early Church saw a threat against its “souldoctrine” coming more from the “spiritualistic” schools than from “mate-

rialistic” doctrines. Therefore, the Apologetes of the first and second century sometimes use expressions which overemphasise the opposition to Neo-Platonism, sometimes calling the soul “material and naturally mortal.” Tertullian in his *De Anima* seems to think of the soul as made of a very subtle material substance.

Manichaeism and Priscillianism tried to divide reality into two hostile camps: the realm of God, spirit and light on the one side, and the realm of the devil, body and darkness on the other. The Councils of the Church opposed such a dualistic concept of reality. They taught that the substance of the soul was not identical with the substance of God, nor could it be considered a part, or transformation of a part of it.<sup>16</sup> The body was not a creature of the devil, but was created by God, and therefore in its nature good.<sup>17</sup> Marriage, instituted for the propagation of the human race was not a devilish and sinful institution, but ordained by God and made a sacrament.<sup>18</sup> The human body received through Christ’s redemption a dignity of its own and will rise again for life eternal.<sup>19</sup> Human souls did not have any pre-existence in heaven before they were united with the body, and it is not because of some fault or sin of the soul that it becomes embodied.<sup>20</sup> The soul is not transmitted by the parents through natural generation, but is created individually by God.<sup>21</sup> In death the soul becomes neither one with the substance of God, nor does it perish altogether.<sup>22</sup>

One of the questions repeatedly discussed throughout antiquity concerned the time at which soul and body are united. Aristotelian philosophers thought of a successive animation of the body: in the moment of conception the body had only a “plant soul,” some months later this would be replaced by an “animal soul,” and only at birth the “spiritual-soul” would be given. The Christian philosophers used the categories shaped by Greek philosophy, not always fully aware that by doing so they shifted the centre of the Biblical teaching. They no longer dealt with the human person as whole, but with a “part,” with “soul.” For centuries Aristotle’s *Peri psyches* was the great textbook of philosophical psychology. The greatest philosophers of the Middle Ages wrote commentaries on it. Thomas Aquinas, whose *De Anima* is a classical treatise of mediaeval psychology, lists the following questions:

Can the soul be a form and a particular thing?

Is the soul, so far as its act of existing is concerned, separated from the body?

Is there one possible intellect, or intellective soul, for all humans?

Is it necessary to admit that an agent intellect exists?

Is there one separately existing agent intellect for all humans?

Is the soul composed of matter and form?  
Should the rational soul be united to a body such as humans possess?  
Is the soul united to corporeal matter through a medium?  
Are the rational, sentient and vegetative souls substantially one and the same?  
Is the soul its powers?  
Are the powers of the soul distinguished from one another by their objects?  
Is the human soul incorruptible?  
Is the soul, when separated from the body, capable of understanding?  
When the soul is united to the body, can it understand separate substances?  
When the soul is separated from the body, can it understand separate substances?  
When separated from the body can the soul know all natural things?  
When separated from the body can the soul suffer punishment by corporeal fire?

In response to the opposition of Manichaean dualism Aquinas emphasises that the union of body and soul is essential for humans, and that it is to the advantage of both body and soul. “To be united to body is not to the detriment of the soul but to its enrichment. There is the substantial benefit of completing human nature, and the accidental benefit of achieving knowledge that can only be acquired through the senses.”<sup>23</sup> He says that our body substance is not from an evil principle, as the Manichaeans imagine, but from God. “By the friendship of charity, by which we love God should we cherish the body.”<sup>24</sup> In his opinion the psycho-somatic interdependence goes so far that the quality of intellectual life depends on the quality of the body. When the body is a hindrance for the achievements of the higher aims of human life, it is not due to its being body, but to sin which corrupts the body and disturbs the harmony between body and soul.<sup>25</sup>

Another major problem was that of the “oneness of the intellect”. The background lies in the Aristotelian concept of mind. Human understanding comes about by an active process of the mind by which mind abstracts from the (passive) objects an “idea” and makes it its own, “assimilating” it to its own nature. To make this possible, Aristotle had to assume a distinction in mind itself: an active mind, which provides for the contact with the outside world and which delivers to the “passive mind” the ideas, the abstractions of things. “Passive mind” is a mere interiorising faculty and intellect proper.

But then how to explain the objectivity of human knowledge, the likeness of ideas and understanding? Aristotle left this question open. The great Arab interpreters of Aristotle, Averroes (Ibn Rosd 1126-98) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina 980-1037), tried to explain it by some kind of “super-mind,” an intellect which is

common to all humans. They asserted either that the active mind was common in the passive individual, or that the passive mind was common in the active individual. Thomas rejects this doctrine, which contains the danger of doing away with personal responsibility and the individuality of men.<sup>26</sup>

Human souls are manifold, and their oneness is not one of substance, but of species. The “objectivity” and likeness in understanding comes from the sameness of nature, not from the sameness of existence. As bodies are different, the souls which are their specific “form” are bound to be different.<sup>27</sup> Against this background Aquinas defends the individual immortality of the soul. After death the soul does not merge into any “supersoul,” neither separated substance nor Absolute, but remains an individual human soul and capable of either beatitude or damnation: “Mind is not composed of matter and form, for its ideas are not physical but spiritual as their universality declares, they are abstract and not tied down to matter or to the material conditions of time and place. The mind is, therefore, a subsisting form, and is consequently immortal.”<sup>28</sup>

One of the favourite topics of mediaeval philosophy was speculation about “separate substances,” beings that are pure spirit. The profound discussions about their location, their kind and method of knowing, and their relation with the world of matter have lost much of our interest. (It is interesting to note that theoretical physicists have resurrected some of these problems and terminology in their description of the mode of existence of subatomic particles.) One topic, however, has gained more interest in our times: the concept of “person.” Thomas defines person in a very general manner, as “individual substance of a spiritual nature.” Thus, it applies to humans, angels and God. It does not express any kind of limitation or restriction, but on the contrary, it means the highest perfection in its order of being. It is a “name of eminence.”

Person ranks highest in the metaphysical scale of being. Person means something unique, ineffable, a value in itself, an end in itself. Person as such is indestructible. The ultimate stage of perfection is therefore not a merging of created persons into the uncreated (personal) Absolute, but a communion of persons, a “being face to face,” a “dialogue,” between God and humans.

While most of the psychological and anthropological problems of mediaeval theology have lost their actual importance, the problem of “person” has become the central issue of both modern philosophical anthropology, as well as modern sociology. The human understood as person is the end to which all non-personal values have to be referred. It sets definite limits to the impersonal powers such as state, party, nation or economy. It is the personality of every human which distinguishes human society from an ant hill, which makes

human history different from natural history, which gives a sense and a richness to human life.

### ***Mediaeval Visions of Soul and God***

Beginning with Paul, Christianity relied on visions as an important and genuine medium of communication between God and humans. Since that time visionaries have described an “out-of-body-experience” as the initial phase of such a visionary event. The soul detaches itself from the body, often looking at the body as it were from a distance, always recognising the body as its own, whether being delighted by its contemplation as Alpais de Cudot (p.55),<sup>29</sup> or horrified by it as Elsbeth Stagel (p.112), and beholding itself, before being immersed in the vision of God. The self-description of the soul is usually in terms of light and brightness:

She was a round, beautiful and illuminating light, like the sun, of a golden red hue, and that light was so immensely beautiful and pleasant that I cannot compare it with anything else. If all the stars in heaven were as large and beautiful as the sun and were combined into one splendour, it could not compare with the beauty in my soul. It appeared to me as if a light was issuing from me which illuminated the whole world, and the whole world enjoyed a glorious day. And in this light, which was my soul, I saw God whine blissfully, like a beautiful light in a beautiful lamp stand, and I saw that he so lovingly and graciously joined my soul that he became totally one with her. And in this union of love my soul received from God the assurance that all my sins were completely forgiven, and that she was so pure and clean as she was after baptism (Elsbeth Stagel, pp.111-2).

In a more abstract way, Alpais de Cudot described the soul as “simple, invisible, incorporeal, not divided into parts like the body, present as a whole in whatever she does . . . the soul is not in a particular place. As God is everywhere . . . so the soul is everywhere in the body, more powerfully in heart and brain, as one says that God is in a special way in heaven . . .” (pp.56-8).

While being in that condition, the soul is not making any distinctions between good and bad, noble or ignoble. As Angela da Foligno reports:

I perceive (God) present and recognise how He is present in all of nature, in everything that is, in the demon, the good angel, in hell, in paradise, in adultery and murder, in every good deed, in beautiful and ugly things. When I am in this truth I am as happy when I see God or an angel or a good deed or an evil one . . . when the soul sees that it cannot take offence at anything (p.142).

Mystics emphasize that in that vision everything belonging to the previous state of soul disappears and is transcended, including faith. As brother Aegidius said: “Whosoever has faith in the perfect way in which one ought to have it, God will take it from him.” When asked what he would do in such a “faith-less” state if he had to celebrate Mass (which requires the priest to say “I believe In God . . .”), Brother Aegidius began singing with a strong voice: “I know One God, Father Almighty.”

### *The Destiny of the Soul According to Michael Schmaus*

Christian tradition has always affirmed the spirit-soul’s substantiality, immortality and individuality. Its “destiny,” then, was perceived as fulfilment of its natural longing for God. Popularly (and biblically) that fulfilment has been described as “heaven.” The “joys of heaven” have been held up to Christians of all generations as compensation for the denial of earthly enjoyments and as an incentive to not only fulfil the commandments, but to exert themselves to the utmost in the service of God on earth. For many centuries “eschatology” has been a major part of systematic theology; and within eschatology the heavenly existence of the soul has been dealt with quite extensively. Due to the speculative nature of the subject, individual presentations by different theologians widely diverge. It is also here that the factional feuds and prejudices of denominationally-defined Christianity become painfully apparent: the qualifications for entering “heaven” are usually the same as those required for joining a particular church or sect.

In the following I am summarising the views of the well-known twentieth century theologian Michael Schmaus (1883-97), whose *Katholische Dogmatik*, appearing in many editions during his lifetime, has been quite influential. It also is expansive and detailed. According to Schmaus “with death begins a kind of existence that lies beyond all experience-it is the authentic form of existence, intended by God from eternity. Its perfect form is only gained in the resurrection.”<sup>30</sup>

The “separated soul” leads a kind of in-between existence: “Human spirit is intended for an existence in, with and through a body.” For Schmaus “the belief that death liberates spirit from the body is a romantic-idealistic misunderstanding” whose “historic roots are to be found in platonic/neo-platonic anthropology.” He asserts, however, that “according to Catholic doctrine the spirit-soul is alive and awake in the period between death and resurrection.”

Referring to official Church pronouncements, such as the 1336 papal bull “Benedictus Deus” by Benedict XII, he tells us that the following souls are

already living in paradise: the saints deceased before the coming of Jesus Christ, the apostles, martyrs, faithful who have been baptised (both those who did not need cleansing and those who were cleansed), and baptised children. (The fateful statement “Extra ecclesiam nullus salus” was usually understood to mean that nobody who had not been baptised after the coming of Christ could go to heaven; at best a kind of “limbo” could be reached, the same place where unbaptised infants were supposed to dwell.)

The souls in heaven “have an immediate vision of the divine essence, face to face”; they are blissful. Heaven not only is the ultimate “destiny of the soul,” but also the “completion of God’s reign in individual humans.” Schmaus speaks of it as “a defined area” and “a form of existence.” “Heaven as “home” was meant as the soul’s ultimate destiny from the very beginning. There is no way beyond it . . .”

Heaven also is a “living in Christ and Christ in us,” a “conscious direct beholding of Christ.” According to the Council of Florence “the blessed see the Triune God as He is without image and mediation.” Schmaus amplifies: “The blessed soul sees the glory of the Being of God and the life-exchange of the three divine persons. He sees in God and through God also the world in the right light.” The blessed takes delight in contemplating the qualities of God and participates in the conversation between the three divine persons: “In this conversation the perfect comes to know the secret of God and world. The Father explains to him everything that He tells the Son . . .”

The distinction, however, between God and humans is not obliterated. “God remains superior to humans in a non-sublateable way. . . . They remain different as creator and creature. Also, in heaven, God remains for humans an impenetrable mystery. Humans cannot understand everything that the Father tells the Son . . .”

Schmaus emphasises both the individuality of the perfect, and the community character of heaven. But, “everybody remains a mystery for everybody.”

“Uninterruptedly the blessed gain new, delightful insights into the wonderworks of creation from the vision of God . . . fulfilment of every genuine desire for knowledge, love and happiness.” And, “the dominion which has been promised by Christ to the blessed, which is a participation in his own dominion, comprises all of creation. Everybody is Lord of the entire world.”

#### ***Reflections on Christian Perspectives on the Soul and Its Destiny***

Christianity did not begin as a coherent philosophical system, but as a branch (“fulfilment”) of Judaism, which itself had no clear-cut and agreed upon teach-

ing on the nature of the soul. Some of its schools did not accept the notion of an individual life eternal others maintained conflicting views on life after death. The Christian New Testament, as specialists like; the scholars of the “Jesus-Seminar” tell us, is largely the creation of the Christian Church(es) of the first two centuries: only about 15% of the sayings attributed to Jesus are today considered authentic Jesus-words. The constant divisions within the Christian Church-virtually from beginning-lead eventually to the establishment of several thousand Christian Churches which maintained their own sets of beliefs and practices and did not encourage the development of a systematic, commonly accepted, philosophy of “soul.”

Sayings attributed to Jesus use the word *psyche* in a colloquial, popular sense. It does not emerge clearly whether an eternal soul was ascribed to each and every individual human being, or only to the “elect.” (That Christianity had a problem in this area emerges from the mediaeval discussion “whether women have souls,” and from the early modern issue of not ascribing souls to the “savages” of newly discovered America.) Paul seems to not only maintain the existence of a “spirit” (*pneuma*) over and above *psyche* (and *sark*), but also to assume that only those who had the *pneuma* possessed immortality.

The early Christian preachers did not win adherents by effectively arguing for a convincing philosophy of the soul but by telling the Jews that their hope for a Messiah had been fulfilled, and by telling non-Jews that Jesus was “Lord.” Eventually it was the military victory of Constantine which gave Christianity the status of a state religion. The first step taken by Christians in power was not the establishment of theological centres, but the assumption of secular offices and the displacement of pre-Christian religion and its officials; philosophical schools and institutions of learning were closed down without replacement. A strong anti-intellectual and anti-philosophical strain has characterised much of Christianity throughout its history.

Initially it was only individual Christians who had had the benefit of a “pagan” education (like Basil or Augustine) who made an effort to philosophically digest Christian teaching in order to formulate a “Christian philosophy.” Even they, when facing real philosophical problems, quickly resorted to “revelation,” and denounced secular philosophers as being in error.

A major boost in the direction of developing a soul-philosophy came in the early Middle Ages when, due to the appropriation and utilisation of Greek philosophy by the early Muslims, a challenge was thrown at Christianity in the very heartland of Europe. Christian teachers seriously attempted to cast their teaching in a philosophical systematic mould. Neither did this happen without major

opposition from within the Church, nor did it result in a definite and universally accepted doctrinal position on such crucial questions as the nature and the destiny of the soul. While some principles of Aristotelian philosophical psychology-like the axiom of the soul being the *forma corporis*-became official Church teaching (established at some minor Councils), the resistance against the attempt to make Christianity a more philosophical religion grew inside the Church, and became a major factor in the major break-up of Western Christianity, called the “Reformation.” Luther, for instance, had nothing but contempt for the “pagan philosophers” and for those who tried to bring their teachings into the Christian faith. *Sola fide* became the watchword the “whore reason” was to be driven away from God’s temple.

It is accepted as a matter of course today that each Christian denomination has its own theology and its own doctrines concerning such matters as the nature and destiny of the soul. It is also accepted that within each denomination every major theologian would have their own version and interpretation of such doctrines. Some contemporary theologians interpret (or reinterpret) traditional teachings on the soul in a Freudian or Jungian perspective, without expressing clearly whether they accept the reality of what they talk about. Most pastors would squirm when confronted with the question of whether they really believed what their Churches officially teach about the soul and its destiny. “Post-modernism” in a variety of ways has made in-roads into the thinking even of non-intellectuals. It is no longer politically correct to assert the unqualified reality of anything, or to assume that one can know truth. It is telling that “soul” does not appear in the index of as influential a popular theological work as Matthew Fox’s *Original Blessing* (Sigmund Freud, Erik Fromm, Carl Gustav Jung, besides Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart do appear, however!).

While “officially” nothing has been taken back from the late mediaeval Church teaching on “soul,” in practice not much of it seems to matter. Since the eighteenth century the West has gone through an anti-metaphysical phase, and “soul” (in the sense understood by the scholastics) is no longer the subject matter of serious scientific/ philosophical investigation. The “psychological” notion of human nature seems to have penetrated fairly deeply. One consults a psychologist when in “psychological” trouble; one trains “specialists” to deal with “psychic trauma”; but one hardly recognises a need for a “curate of the soul” in the literal (Socratic) sense.

Concerning the destiny of the soul, for most contemporary Christians “heaven” is not much of an attraction, nor is “hell” much of a deterrent in the pursuit of their “legitimate interests.” The main, if not exclusive concern is with a good

life here and now, with health (physical and mental) and with security (job and financial). Those who assume a life after death do not argue along dogmatic/metaphysical lines, but refer to “near-death-experiences,” mostly enjoyable, and purely on the level of individual experience. The contemporary euthanasia debate does not contain references to the fate of the eternal soul, but has an exclusive foreground ethical concern arising largely from the fear that euthanasia may be misused.

As far as the dialogue of Christianity with Vaishnavism is concerned, it will be indispensable to openly face the present situation as described. Both Vaishnavas and Christians have to rethink their traditional teachings on the background of contemporary psychology and neuro-science, and have to restate their metaphysics in a contemporary idiom. They must recognise the historicocultural conditioning of traditional teaching without giving up the timeless insights expressed in them. Vaishnavism was always perceived to be close to Christianity in its theology and its ritual practices. It may be possible to find a common language to speak about the soul and its destiny that could religiously inspire late-20th-century women and men.

### **Endnotes**

1. Deut. 5, 23; Matt. 26, 63.
2. John 16, 6; 11, 25.
3. John 3, 15; 5, 24 f.
4. Rom. 2, 7; 1; John 3, 14.
5. Rom. 6, 4; John 6, 27, 32, 50, 58.
6. Rom. 6, 1 ff.
7. Matt. 2, 20; 10, 28; 10, 39; John 10, 11.
8. 1 Cor. 15, 45; Rom. 13, 1.
9. 1 Pet. 2, 11.
10. Matt. 16, 16.
11. Matt. 27, 50; Appoc. 11, 11.
12. Heb. 15, 23.
13. Rom. 8, 4–13.
14. 1 Cor. 6, 16.
15. 1 Cor. 6, 17.
16. Symbolum Concilii Toletani (400 C.E.): “*Animam autem hominis non divinam esse substantiam, aut Dei partem, sed creaturam . . .*” (D 20) Concilium Bracarense II (561 C.E.): “*Si quis animas humanas vel angelos ex Dei credit substantia existitisse, sicut Manichaeus et Priscilliani dixerunt. A.S.*” (D 242)

17. Concilium Bracarensis II: “*Si quis plasmationem humani corporis diaboli dicit esse figuratum, et conceptiones in uteris matrum operibus dicit daemonum figurari, propter quod et resurrectionem carnis non credit, sicut Manichaeus et Priscillianus A.S.*”

18. D 242f.

19. ibid.

20. ibid. D 236f 20. “*Si quis animas humanas dicit prius in coelesti habitatione peccasse et pro hoc in corpora humana in terra deiectas . . . A.S.*”

21. Justinian *Liber adversus Originem* A.D. 543 (D. 203).

22. The so-called “Thetnopsychists” believed in a temporal death of both soul and body.

23. *De Anima* 1 ad 1, 2 ad 14. *De Anima* was written about 1260. English translation: *The Soul* by J. P. Rowan, St. Louis 1951.

24. *Summa theologiae* II-II, 25, 3.

25. *Summa theologiae* I, 85, 7: “Because some people have more finely tempered bodies their souls have greater strength of understanding.” Cf. *De spiritualibus creaturis*, 4.

26. *Summa theologiae* I, 76, 2.

27. One of the most central and fruitful teachings of Aristotle’s is the idea that the soul is “the form of the body.” I.e. The soul is the principle of existence of the body: if there were no soul, there would not be a body. The individual nature of the body depends on the individual nature of the soul, and vice versa. This understanding has been incorporated into the official doctrine of the church. *The 5th Lateran-Council* (1512-17) defines: the soul is “*Vere et essentialiter humani corporis forma . . . et immortalis et pro corporum, quibus infunditur, multitudine singulariter multiplicabilis, et multiplicata, at multiplicanda sit.*”

28. *De Anima* 14.

29. All page references are to Martin Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, Diederichs: Jena, 1909. All translations are my own.

30. All quotes are my translations from the original German in M. Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik*, Vol. IV, part 2: “*Von den letzten Dingen,*” 5th edition, Mnchen: Max Hueber Verlag, 1959, pp. 301-15.



## THE SOUL AND ITS DESTINY: VAISHNAVA PERSPECTIVES

Tamal Krishna Goswami

The Vaishnava understanding of the soul's destiny may be conveyed by focusing the discussion on three topics: consciousness, salvation and the kingdom of God, of which salvation is perhaps the more inclusive term. To locate and frame this discussion in categories appropriate to Gaudiya Vaishnavism,<sup>1</sup> we may label these three topics with the Sanskritic terms *sambandha*, *abhidheya*, and *prayojana*.<sup>2</sup> *Sambandha* refers to the conditioned soul's relationship with God. (Here, our analysis of consciousness post-mortem is meant to identify the soul as the one who survives death); *abhidheya* refers to the regulated activities of the conditioned soul for reviving its relationship with God; and *prajojana* indicates the ultimate goal of life for conditioned souls. These definitions suggest, at least for the present discussion, the following loose epistemological equation: *sambandha*, *abhidheya* and *prajojana* = consciousness, salvation, and the kingdom of God.

### ***Sambandha—Consciousness Post Mortem***

*Aham brahmasmi*, the *Upanishads* declare, “I am not this body; I am spirit.” We are each infinitesimal parts of the Godhead, one in quality with Him, while quantitatively different. The *Bhagavad-gita* (2.24) informs us that the individual soul is “unbreakable and insoluble, and can be neither burned nor dried. He is everlasting, all-pervading, unchangeable, immovable and eternally the same.”<sup>3</sup> Consciousness is an inseparable aspect of the soul which pervades the entire body, much as sunlight illuminates the universe.<sup>4</sup> As light is a symptom of the sun, so is consciousness a symptom of the soul. Consciousness is not a result of matter interacting nor can it be equated with the mind, intelligence or ego which together form our psychic body.

The body / soul distinction is immediately understood by the statement: “my body.” By this assertion we distinguish our true person from our physical being. We do not say, “I body.” Similarly, “I mind” and “I intelligence” are equally incorrect. Therefore, personal identity is not jeopardized when memories,

thoughts and other products of the mind are altered, or even lost. Personhood remains even in the state of *susupti*, deep sleep, in which there is no psychic activity. Our mental conditions may be useful in ascribing personal identity, but do not in and of themselves constitute personal identity. The soul is the true self, the subject of self-awareness, and the ultimate agent of thinking and feeling. This agent is free and responsible, unlike matter which can make no moral choices but only follow deterministic patterns. Consequently, death is merely a termination of the physical state—an end to the neural firings, but not the end of our spiritual being.

The Vaishnavas maintain that this spiritual being is distinctly individual—not only in the state of bondage, but after liberation as well. This view differs markedly from the monistic Vedantists who contend that at liberation the individual self is consumed by the One Supreme Self. *Atman* becomes one with Brahman, like a drop of water merging with the ocean, and there the story ends. The monists assert that the self as an individual should not survive death, for that very desire is the root of all problems. The Vaishnavas find this conclusion abhorrent, since denying permanent individuality to the soul strips it of personality and deprives it of ever achieving the ultimate bliss of service to God. But first one has to understand transmigration.

How has this effulgent, spiritual being called the soul become fettered to this world of illusion, and forced to undergo the repetition of birth and death? Gaudiya Vaishnavas believe that we were once with Krishna, enjoying an eternal life full of knowledge and bliss, but we abused that freedom, misjudged our strength and gave up that relationship which was the very basis of our existence. Each of us made a wilful decision to abandon Krishna and instantly plummeted downwards. Imprisoned in material existence from a time immemorial, we can neither recall our original sin nor easily find the means to expurgate it. This is hell, though certainly there are regions darker than this. Yet the term of our imprisonment need not be eternal. Our bondage will cease when the sins that continue to stain our consciousness are entirely removed. Until then, the soul must continue to transmigrate.

At death, the soul sheds the gross body, to be transported by the subtle vehicle of mind (*manas*), intelligence (*buddhi*) and false ego (*ahamkara*) to its next destination. This psychic vehicle is not dependent upon the brain, and it survives the body's demise. The *Bhagavad-gita* (8.6) provides us this axiom: "Whatever state of being one remembers when he quits his body, that state he will attain without fail."<sup>5</sup> The departing soul's consciousness—an accounting of all the thoughts and actions of one's life—is expressed in the form of unfulfilled

desires that propel the soul on a psychic vehicle to its next destination.

Under normal circumstances death plunges the soul into forgetfulness of its past life, yet various Puranic examples relate previous life remembrances. In the narrative of Maharaja Bharata (the famous king after whom the earth is named), the monarch could still remember his previous royal position despite his next birth as a deer. Such instances indicate that it is the same individual who survives death. And the same is true for an individual who may attain a transcendental body, as illustrated by the following statement of the sage Narada, quoted from *Bhagavata Purana*:

And so, O Brahmin Vyasadeva, in due course of time I, who was fully absorbed in thinking of Krishna and who therefore had no attachments, being freed from all material taints, met with death, as lightning and illumination occur simultaneously. Having been awarded a transcendental body befitting an associate of the Personality of Godhead, I quit the body made of five material elements, and thus all acquired fruitive results of work [karma] stopped.<sup>6</sup>

The next birth—whether material or spiritual—is awarded by the Supreme Lord, who, as *Paramatma*, the Supersoul, is privy to our most hidden desires and directs our wanderings that we may fulfil them. Reincarnation is neither arbitrary, nor need it be unending; our birth is a consequence of free will. Misuse of that freedom is played out in any of the universe's eight million four hundred thousand species of life; while with its proper use we can return back to our original home in the kingdom of God.

### ***Abhidheya—Salvation***

The *Gita*<sup>7</sup> instructs us to learn the truth by approaching a guru. And the *Gautamiya Tantra* confirms, “My spiritual master opened my eyes, which were blinded by the darkness of ignorance, with the torchlight of knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> The guru’s words and example are truth, and the guru is therefore considered to be “the supreme personality of servitor Godhead.” He intercedes on the conditioned soul’s behalf, seeking the soul’s reprieve from endless rotation on the wheel of samsara (the repetition of birth and death).

What precisely is that intercessionary act which reverses the soul’s downward spiral from the Godhead? Sri Chaitanya, teaching His disciple Rupa Goswami, likened it to planting the seed of the creeper plant of devotion (*bhakti-lata-bija*) in the disciple’s heart.<sup>9</sup> By doing so, the guru does not introduce something new, or even something unknown. Devotion to God is part of the soul’s constitution, but was covered in the forgetfulness of uncountable rebirths. The

association of a guru promotes faith (*shraddha*), which revives the disciple's dormant devotion. Faith, therefore, is the seed of the devotional creeper which in maturity blossoms as *prema* (love for God). Faith and guru (the bestower of faith) are essential for the healthy growth of the *bhakti-lata*.

After a period of mutual testing the relationship between guru and disciple is formalized by initiation (*diksha*). This is an essential rite of passage, for by accepting a disciple, a guru is said to absorb his karma. It is not merely the stored merit of the particular guru that neutralises the initiate's sins; rather, it is the guru's connection with God through an unbroken chain of spiritual masters (*parampara*) that allows the sinful reactions to be vanquished by the Godhead Himself. The salvific relief a disciple experiences by this act of mercy cannot be underestimated; nevertheless, it is only the beginning of the benefits initiation is meant to bequeath. If salvation is understood in the restricted sense of release from karma, it is subservient to devotion. A guru's primary duty beyond neutralizing karma, is to offer a disciple training in the devotional arts as a preparation for eternal spiritual life. Devotional service then becomes the inclusive term to describe all one's spiritual activities—before liberation and after. A devotee hesitates to ask God even for salvation (if salvation means simply release from birth and death), for that too is a selfish desire. A devotee is prepared to do anything in any number of births to please Krishna, so salvation as an unconditional appeal to be engaged in God's service is alone acceptable.

Following rules and regulations (*vaidhi sadhana bhakti*) under the three-fold authority of guru, *sadhu* (saintly practitioners) and *shastra* (scripture), a devotee performs mandatory devotional service until the practice becomes spontaneous (*raganuga bhakti*). Revelation can take place at either stage of practice, for both bring one into direct contact with the Godhead in His various manifestations: His names, His message, His worshipful form in the temple and foods which have been offered to Him and are to be consumed as a sacrament (*prasadam*). Of all practices, chanting God's holy names is considered the *yuga-dharma*,<sup>10</sup> the most important religious act in this present age of Kali (*kali-yuga*), capable of cleansing the heart of all inebriety accumulated through countless births.<sup>11</sup> This is not to deny the efficacy of other services,<sup>12</sup> but to emphasize its centrality in Lord Chaitanya's mission.

When the heart is cleansed of all unwanted desires (*anartha-nivritti*), then faith in God and His devotional service are firmly established (*nishtha*). The devotional acts are so conceived as to exactly resemble the very same performed by liberated souls in the kingdom of God. When one has learned to serve spontaneously with taste (*ruchi*) and attachment (*asakti*), one's relationship

with Krishna is automatically revealed, and one is able to emulate the mood described in scripture of the eternally liberated associates of the Lord. This relationship will accord with one of the primary *rasas*, the loving moods relished in the exchange of love with the Supreme Personality of Godhead. These are, in the order of increasing intimacy, passive adoration (*shanta rasa*), servitorship (*dasya rasa*), fraternal love (*sakhya rasa*), paternal love (*vatsalya rasa*) and conjugal love (*madhurya rasa*). Keeping in mind the ideal of an appropriate exemplar from the Lord's eternal entourage, emotions will gradually intensify until there is an actual awakening of love (*bhaava*<sup>13</sup>), and its full manifestation (*prema*<sup>14</sup>). The fully Krishna conscious devotee, though still physically residing in this world, actually lives in the kingdom of God.

### *Prayojana—The Kingdom of God*

What is the kingdom of God and where is it located? The term “kingdom of God” suggests a supreme Deity who presides over a spiritual realm. But what exactly is the nature of that kingdom? Has it physical dimensions, or is it only a metaphor for the internal landscape of a devotee’s consciousness? The *Gita* (8.21), provides the following information:

That which the Vedantists describe as unmanifest and infallible, that which is known as the supreme destination, that place from which, having attained it, one never returns—that is My supreme abode.<sup>15</sup>

It is “unmanifest” (*avyakta*) to those lacking spiritual vision; “infallible” (*akshara*) or eternal in contrast to the created universes; and the “supreme destination” (*paramam gatim*) because one who attains it never returns.

We may hesitate to exactly locate God’s kingdom, fearing to do so would suggest limitation. But the *Bhagavata Purana* reminds us of our own universe’s enormous size, which, along with innumerable others of similar and even greater proportions, constitute but one-fourth of existence. God’s kingdom makes up the balance.<sup>16</sup> *Vaikuntha* (which literally means “without anxiety”) is the descriptive nomenclature used to identify the entire spiritual realm. Manifested from the Lord’s internal, spiritual potency (*antaranga-shakti*),<sup>17</sup> the infinite *Vaikuntha* space is the Upanishadic Brahman, which the Vaishnavas explain as God’s bodily effulgence. This undifferentiated *brahmajyoti* is the destination of monists who desire to merge their individuality into the existence of God. Vaishnavas, who eschew such impersonal liberation, target one of the many spiritual abodes on which the Lord personally resides.

One of these, *Goloka* (which literally translates as “the planet of cows”), is

said to be the abode of Krishna, who is also known as Gopala, the protector of cows. For those finding difficulty in the very concept of locating the Godhead, consigning the most opulent Supreme Being to a cowherd village seems inconceivable. To be certain, it is not a village like any in our experience. Literature like the *Brahma-samhita* inform us that Goloka's soil, trees, calves—everything—is spiritually surcharged with the power to fulfil all of one's desires.<sup>18</sup> There is nothing of the dirtiness, the toil and hardship we normally associate with farms and animal maintenance. It is the perfect setting for God's *lila* (a most apt Sanskrit term that describes God's "play"). Here He cavorts with His intimate associates and devotees, whose "play" is simply delight, free of all dross and drudgery.

The more conventional vision of God's kingdom—one of splendors, palaces, thrones and other opulent paraphernalia—is, according to Gaudiya Vaishnavas, found in the other planets of the Vaikuntha space where Krishna's majestic expansion—the four-armed form of Narayana—is worshipped. Whereas in Goloka the charming arrangement makes all the participants forgetful of their subservience to the Godhead, the majesty that characterizes the other Vaikuntha planets inspires the sort of awe and reverence normally associated with the Godhead. There, all are mindful of the Godhead's greatness and their own need to maintain a respectful distance.

These spiritual worlds are beyond empirical observation, unapproachable by any material means. As those travelling to other planets in our solar system must adapt to different atmospheres, entrance to the transcendental abodes requires a particular spiritual preparation. To facilitate the practitioner, the Godhead's abode is recreated within the bounds of our own planet. Appearing to be a simulated world of virtual spiritual reality, these training grounds seem, at first sight, to be no different from their surrounding geography. Yet we are told that they are in fact replicated portions of the spiritual sky.

One of these locations is situated approximately one hundred miles south of New Delhi, India. The area of Vraja in the district of Mathura, which includes the pilgrimage town of Vrindavan, has many cowherd villages. Life goes on there much as it has for thousands of years, except for the occasional intrusion of modernity—a blaring radio or a madly honking bus horn. Otherwise, the rambling ox carts along the dirt roads, the sounds of butter being churned by hand and songs of the cowherd people all seem to resist the influence of time. Of the pilgrims who come here, some are able to submit to the discipline that spiritual cultivation demands; others will leave, taking with them memories they will relive again and again until the day they can return. For the Vaishna-

va, such holy places are non-different from their transcendental counterparts in the spiritual sky, placed within this world like windows through which to view eternal reality. Vaishnavas remember God's eternal play, moulding themselves until they are also suitably qualified to participate.

So far this is a definition of the kingdom of God in physical terms—the spiritual planets of Vaikuntha and the pilgrimage-site counterparts in this world. To be complete it needs to include how a devotee's consciousness directly interacts with, and even impacts on, spiritual reality. Specifically, this paper attempts to demonstrate the important correlation between motivation and goals, and what bearing these have on the Gaudiya Vaishnava cosmology.

As indicated previously, there is a class of impersonal transcendentalists whose aspiration is not meeting with God, but merging in Him. Monists forsake a personal loving relationship with God in favour of absorption in His brilliant aura. The effulgent spiritual sky which surrounds God's kingdom is in fact made of shining spiritual particles intermixed with the souls of monists whose desire for undifferentiated oneness is thus fulfilled. In contrast to the devotees who desire to experience the blissful cognition of the Lord's unparalleled company, monists can realize only the eternal nature of the Godhead. Unable to savor the full satisfaction which comes with God's personal association, monists inevitably retrace their spiritual journey, returning dissatisfied to resume material existence.

What could possibly induce the monists to undertake even lifetimes of austeries if the net result of their efforts is to boomerang through the cosmic covering, only to return to their original point of departure? They hold the mistaken impression that perfection lies in annihilating individuality, while suffering is an illusion caused by differentiating oneself from the rest of existence. But their attempt at spiritual suicide fails due to the soul's indestructible and indivisible character—to be eternal, full of knowledge and bliss—qualities that only a loving relationship with God can fulfil. The monist fails to recognize that in relationship with the personality of Godhead there is none of the mundane ineptitude characterizing material interactions. Monists therefore commit a fundamental error by using their material experience as a basis for judging spiritual life. God is unlike any person they have known, but the clash of egos they have encountered previously in all of their interpersonal dealings makes them think that with the annihilation of individuality their problems will be solved. Arriving at this imperfect conclusion, they try to deny their desire to love and be loved.

The monistic example illustrates the powerful role fear plays in spiritual en-

visioning. In most religious practices, fear of consequences is a primary motivation for the adherent. Religious laws are codified in lists of “do’s” and “don’ts,” with an elaborate description of corresponding positive and negative consequences. Considering human frailties, it is hard to imagine any tradition’s success without such strictures. Yet the very nature of “rules” implies a ruler, who may employ force, which in turn invokes fear. God’s omniscience, omnipresence and unlimited strength indicate, among other things, His unparalleled capability as a law enforcer, making the wrathful God an image common to many traditions. Directly or indirectly, nearly every religion invokes fear as a method of keeping believers in line. It is difficult to ignore God’s retributive capability, especially (as is usually the case) when it is woven into the very fabric of worship. If awe and reverence are the warp and woof of the religious fabric, fear is the thread itself. It induces humility, defines the tone of prayer and demands surrender.

Built into the concept of awe and reverence is the feeling of subordination; hence, distance. God’s unparalleled attributes make Him nearly inaccessible and potentially alienate the worshipper. Stressing God’s mightiness initially conditions our relationship with Him, establishing even overtly that He is great, we are small.

This does not exclude the possibility of love, for we see that parents and children are bound by strong ties of affection specifically due to their respective greatness and smallness. The dependency of one upon the other defines their relationship. And it is this same sense of dependency which characterizes the love many devotees feel for God, irrespective of their denominational affiliations. The opulence of God the Father’s majesty provides a protective umbrella beneath which they can take shelter.

Yet the Lord’s mercy can be so overwhelming, His affectionate dealings so appealing, that awe and respect are eclipsed by unbounded love. Intimacy and familiarity replace awe and reverence, as a devotee becomes overwhelmed by the sweet dealings of the Lord. Devotees with such capacity for love relate to God in friendship, parental affection, even conjugal love. What distinguishes these devotional moods from those who take shelter of God’s majesty is the degree of intimacy each entails. The roles are reversed: God becomes the equal friend, the subordinate child, the paramour. The intimacy of such relationships succeeds in bridging the distance awe and reverence created.

Anyone who attains the kingdom of God lives in a state of perfection. To suggest that one devotee’s perfection is better than another seems to imply that the achievement of some is incomplete. Yet if love of Godhead increases in propor-

tion to the degree of intimacy, it may not be incorrect to assign different grades of perfection. All may be complete, just as various vessels may be filled to capacity though the amount of water differs depending upon the size of each.

This may cause some to feel an egalitarian disappointment where an ideal in which all are “equal” seems compromised. As if to suggest a solution to this dilemma, Rupa Goswami, the foremost of Gaudiya aestheticians, refers to Krishna’s manifestations in Dvaraka, Mathura and Vrindavan (the three divisions of His abode, Goloka) and says that Krishna is respectively perfect, more perfect and most perfect in each.<sup>19</sup> How astonishing! God is better in some situations than in others. Yet even in the least of such circumstances He is “perfect.” Similarly, all devotees in God’s kingdom are perfect; but some are more perfect than others.

There is a fascinating parallel between God, His kingdom and the devotee’s perfection. The intimacy of devotion, as well as determining relationships, also dictates which of His many features the Lord reveals. God assumes a commanding demeanour as Narayana of Vaikuntha for those whose devotion is filled with respect; for those whose feelings of reverence are mixed with equal feelings of familiarity, He reveals Himself as Vasudeva-Krishna to accommodate both moods; and finally, for those who want extremely intimate love, He is Gopala Krishna, a transcendental cowherd boy, who lives in the relaxed atmosphere of a village surrounded by His closest family and friends. These last circumstances are ideally chosen to evoke natural, spontaneous love, by which the supreme personality of Godhead comes fully under control.

Krishna acknowledges that He is incapable of properly reciprocating with those who love Him as intimately as these affectionate relatives and friends. And even though He is the cause of these devotees’ super-excellent devotion, Krishna admits defeat. At the same time He is fascinated by the paradox that though He is unconquerable, He has been conquered with love; though He cannot be surpassed, He has been surpassed by love.

Of the few who have vanquished Him in this way, none have done so as thoroughly as Shri Radha, His pleasure potency and spiritual counterpart. Reflecting upon His astonishing defeat at Her hands, He desired to understand the glory of Her love, the wonderful qualities in Him that She alone relishes through Her love, and the happiness She feels when She realises the sweetness of His love.<sup>20</sup> Meditating upon His own spiritual counterpart, Shri Radha, Krishna’s bluish body became imbued with Her golden complexion and transcendental emotions, transforming into the form of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

In His unique identity as “God the Devotee,” Chaitanya Mahaprabhu expresses the most sublime feelings of love in separation. Though He is the Godhead Himself, He “forgets” His supreme identity and madly searches everywhere for His beloved Lord. “Where is Krishna? Where is the Lord of my life?” He fervently appeals. Seeing their Krishna so transformed (as Sri Chaitanya), the residents of Vrindavan desire to share His ecstasy. So they manifested alternative forms, suitable to participate in Lord Chaitanya’s pastimes. Thus Chaitanya and His devotees incarnated on earth and inaugurated the religious practice most suitable for this age: congregational chanting of the Lord’s holy names. The followers of Lord Chaitanya are known as Gaudiya Vaishnavas. They worship both Chaitanya and Krishna, seeing Them as the same non-different Supreme Personality of Godhead. Dedicating their lives to this two-in-one Deity, they aspire to attain to Goloka Vrindavan, the topmost realm of Krishna and Chaitanya.

### Endnotes

1. Gaudiya Vaishnavism refers to that Vaishnava division which regards Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the fifteenth century Bengali saint, as the supreme Godhead Sri Krishna Himself.

2. These terms were used by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in His instructions to Sanatana Goswami to categorize his teachings. See Prabhupada, *Sri Chaitanya-charitamrita Madhya* 20.124.

3. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, trans. and comm., *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* (Los Angeles: BBT, 1989).

4. The comparison of consciousness/body with sunlight/universe is found in Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gita* 13.34: “O son of Bharata, as the sun alone illuminates all this universe, so does the living entity, one within the body, illuminate the entire body by consciousness.”

5. See Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gita* 8.6.

6. A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, trans. and comm., *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, 12 cantos. (Los Angeles: BBT, 1978) 1.6.27-8.

7. See Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gita* 4.34: “Just try to learn the truth by approaching a spiritual master. Inquire submissively and render service unto him. The self-realized souls can impart knowledge unto you because they have seen the truth.”

8. *om ajnaana timirandhasya  
jnaanaanjanasaalaakayaa  
chakshur unmilitam yena  
tasmai shri gurave namah*

Rohininandana dasa, ed., *Vaishnava Verse Book*, (Borehamwood: BBL, 1990) p.194.

9. See Prabhupada, *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*, *Madhya* 19.151: “According to their karma,

all living entities are wandering throughout the entire universe. Some of them are being elevated to the upper planetary systems, and some are going down into the lower planetary systems. Out of many millions of wandering living entities, one who is very fortunate gets an opportunity to associate with a bona fide spiritual master by the grace of Krishna. By the mercy of both Krishna and the spiritual master, such a person receives the seed of the creeper of devotional service.”

10. See Prabhupada, *Shrimad Bhagavatam* 12.3.51-2 for an explanation of the omnipotency of chanting God’s names in the present age: “My dear King, although Kali-yuga is an ocean of faults, there is still one good quality about this age: Simply by chanting the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, one can become free from material bondage and be promoted to the transcendental kingdom.”

“Whatever result was obtained in Satya-yuga by meditating on Vishnu, in Treta-yuga by performing sacrifices, and in Dvapara-yuga by serving the Lord’s lotus feet can be obtained in Kali-yuga simply by chanting the Hare Krishna maha-mantra.”

11. See Prabhupada, *Caitanya-caritamrta* Antya 20.12. The first of the only eight verses composed by Lord Chaitanya describes the benefits of chanting God’s holy names:

*cheto-darpana-marjanam bhava-maha-davagni-nirvapanam  
shreyah-kairava-candrika-vitaranam vidya-vadhu-jivanam  
anandambudhi-vardhanam prati-padam purnamrita-svadanam  
sarvatma-snapanam param vijayat shri-krishna-sankirtanam*

“Let there be all victory for the chanting of the holy name of Lord Krishna, which can cleanse the mirror of the heart and stop the miseries of the blazing fire of material existence. That chanting is the waxing moon that spreads the white lotus of good fortune for all living entities. It is the life and soul of all education. The chanting of the holy name of Krishna expands the blissful ocean of transcendental life. It gives a cooling effect to everyone and enables one to taste full nectar at every step.”

12. Devotional service to God (*bhakti-yoga*) can take any one of nine forms: (1) hearing of the spiritual name, form, attributes and pastimes of Krishna (*shravanam*); (2) chanting Krishna’s glories (*kirtanam*); (3) remembering Him (*smaranam*); (4) serving His lotus feet (*pada-sevanam*); (5) worshipping Him (*archanam*); (6) offering prayers (*vandanam*); (7) serving (*dasyam*); (8) befriending Him (*sakhyam*); (9) full surrender (*atma-nivedanam*).

13. When devotional service is situated on the transcendental platform of pure goodness, it is like a ray of the sunlight of pure love for Krishna. At such a time devotional service causes the heart to be softened by various tastes and is called *bhava*.

14. When *bhava* softens the heart completely, becomes endowed with a great feeling of possessiveness in relation to the Lord, and becomes very much condensed and intensified, it is called *prema*.

15. See Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gita* 8.21

16. See Prabhupada, *Srimad Bhagavatam* 2.6.20: “The spiritual world, which consists of three fourths of the Lord’s energy, is situated beyond this material world, and it is especially meant for those who will never be reborn.”

17. The material universes, unlike the spiritual universes, are created from His external, material energies (*bahiranga-shakti*).

18. *chintamani-prakara-sadmasu kalpa-vriksha-*  
*lakshavriteshu surabhir abhipaalayantam*  
*lakshmi-sahasra-sata-sambhrama-sevyamaanam*  
*govindam adi-purusham tam aham bhajami*

“I worship Govinda, the primeval Lord, the first progenitor who is tending the cows, yielding all desires, in abodes built with spiritual gems, surrounded by millions of purpose trees, always served with great reverence and affection by hundreds of thousands of *lakshmis* or *gopisShri Brahma-samhita* (Los Angeles: BBT, 1985) 5.29.

19. See A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, *Nectar of Devotion: A Summary Study of Srila Rupa Goswami's Bhakti-rasaamrita-sindhu* (Los Angeles: BBT, 1985) p.195.

20. This is a translation of a verse composed by Rupa Goswami and found in Prabhupada, *Caitanya-caritamrita* Adi 1.6:

*shri-radhayah pranaya-mahima kidriso vaanayaiva-*  
*svaadyo yenaadbhuta-madhurimaa kidriso vaa madiyah*  
*saukhyam caasyaa mad-anubhavatah kidrisam veti lobhaat*  
*tad-bhaavaadhyah samajani saci-garbha-sindhau harinduh*

## THE HUMAN SOUL: A ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW

Peter C. Phan

The intent of this brief essay is to present an overview of the Roman Catholic perspective on what is generally referred to as “the human soul.” Its approach will be both philosophical and theological since the Roman Catholic tradition makes use of both reason and faith, or more precisely, reason guided and illuminated by the Christian faith, to understand God and all matters pertaining to God. Though attention will be paid to the Catholic Church’s official teaching office, commonly referred to as the *Magisterium*, and its Tradition, the essay will focus on Roman Catholic theology.

A few preliminary observations on the use of the word ‘soul’ would be helpful. The primary dictionary definition of ‘soul’ is : “the immaterial essence, animating principle, actuating cause of an individual life,” or “the spiritual principle embodied in human beings, all rational and spiritual beings, or the universe” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*). It is taken to be opposite to, or at least distinct from, the ‘body,’ and being immaterial and spiritual, it is said to be immortal. ‘Soul’ is often used in conjunction with ‘spirit,’ albeit not as its equivalent, since the latter can exist without a body (for instance, an angel is a spirit but not a soul). In Christian anthropology, ‘body,’ ‘soul,’ and ‘spirit’ (with their corresponding Hebrew, Greek and Latin roots) have been thought of as essential components of being human. In contemporary empirical psychology, however, ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ are regarded as quaint metaphysical relics; instead, only ‘brain’ and at best ‘mind’ are the acceptable coins of the realm. Of course, the Catholic Magisterium rejects this reductionistic approach, though some Catholic theologians, as we will see, question whether ‘soul’ is still the appropriate term if the ontological unity of the human person is to be maintained.

### *On the Soul and the Unity of the Human Person*

The official teaching of the Catholic Church on the human soul is stated in its *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The Church teaches that every spiritual

soul is created immediately by God—it is not ‘produced’ by the parents—and also that it is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection.”<sup>1</sup> Four points are being made: first, the immediate creation of the human soul by God; second, its immortality; third, its separation of the soul from the body at death; and fourth, its reunion with the body at the universal resurrection.

At first sight the above text seems to espouse a dualism between body and soul: the body is ‘produced’ by the parents, whereas the soul is immediately created by God; the body is corruptible whereas the soul is immortal; at death the soul is separated from the body; and in the intermediate state the soul maintains a separate existence until it is reunited with the resurrected body. Indeed, Christian anthropology has often been accused, especially by feminists, of being infected by Platonic dualism, with its loathing for matter, the body (especially female) and sexuality. That there has been in the Christian tradition a longstanding abhorrence for these realities and that this Manichaean view was bolstered by Greek dualism is beyond question. A cursory reading of Origen, one of the great Greek theologians, or Augustine, one of the great Latin ones, will dispel any lingering doubt.

Before examining further this dualism in Catholic anthropology, it is to be noted that *Catechism* unequivocally affirms the ontological unity of the human person: “The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the ‘form’ of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.”<sup>2</sup> In support of this position, *Catechism* cites a text from the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*): “Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. . . . For this reason man may not despise his bodily life. Rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honor since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day.”<sup>3</sup> To understand the theological basis of the Catholic Church’s positive attitude toward the human body as expressed by Vatican II, which serves as a corrective to the church’s past dualistic anthropology, a brief overview of the teaching of the Bible is helpful.

#### *Biblical View of the Human Person*

Ironically, the concept of “spiritual soul,” which is central in Christian anthropology, does not have an equivalent in the Bible. The Hebrew term *nephesh*,

commonly translated as ‘soul,’ comes closest to it. However, it does not mean “soul” in the Christian sense as explained above, but the throat as the seat of vital needs, desire and feelings, life itself, or a living being. The Greek version of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) translates it with *psychē*, which in turn is (mis)-rendered into English as *soul*. In the New Testament, *psychē* refers to the physical life of an animal or a human being, the life principle, the human person as a whole (in the modern sense of “self”), or the moral self. At times it can mean something distinct from the body (*sōma*), as in Jesus’ warning: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).<sup>4</sup> In this case, *psychē* means something other than the physical life, since it cannot be killed by human beings.

Paul uses at least six different terms to describe the human being as a whole, each referring to the entire person but under various but not mutually opposing and exclusive aspects. (1) *Sōma* (body) is the person as a whole, a living and unified organism, the modern “self,” but with emphasis on the material component. (2) *Sarx* (flesh, equivalent to the Hebrew *basar*) is the human person as a natural, physical, earth-bound being, prone to being opposed to God and the things of God. (3) *Psychē* (soul) indicates the human being as a living being with conscious, purposeful activities. It is not yet the life with and in God or the Spirit of God. Like *sarx*, *psychē* is the human person seen as opposed to the life in the Spirit of God: the *psychikos* person or the flesh is contrasted with the *pneumatikos* person or the person animated by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:44-49). (4) *Pneuma* (spirit) is the human person who in his knowledge and freedom is open to receiving the Holy Spirit. In 1 Thessalonians 5:23, in his prayer for the Thessalonian Christians Paul enumerates three elements together, suggesting that they make up the human being: “May your spirit (*pneuma*) and soul (*psychē*) and body (*sōma*) be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (5) *Kardia* (heart) is the human person as the seat of knowledge and emotions. (6) *Nous* (mind) is the human being as a knowing and judging subject, capable of intelligence, planning and decision. Clearly, the Catholic concept of soul comprises all these six elements of Pauline anthropology.

In addition to *nephesh*, the Hebrew Bible uses the word *ruah* to refer to the human person. Literally meaning breath and wind, *ruah* refers to the human person as a living being. (The Latin word for *ruah* is *anima*, which also literally means breath and wind and is figuratively used to mean ‘soul.’) The life principle in humans is seen not as something they possess by nature but as a gift of God. It is derived from the breath of God, as is stated in Genesis 2:7: “The LORD GOD formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath

(*ruah*) of life, and the man became a living being.” In the New Testament, *ruah* is rendered with *pneuma* (spirit), and given the intimate connection between God’s breath and the human spirit, it comes as no surprise that *ruah* gradually refers to the immaterial part of the human person, that is, the equivalent of ‘soul’ in the modern sense. Furthermore, when the human spirit is enlivened by the Spirit of God, also called the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, and the Spirit, the human person acquires a new life which will lead to the resurrection of the body, as Paul puts it: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give you life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Romans 8:10-11). Paul calls this resurrected body “the spiritual body” [*sōma pneumatikon*], as opposed to the “natural body” [*sōma psychikon*] (1 Corinthians 15:44).

Paul does not explicitly speaks of the separation of the soul from the body at death. Furthermore, the so-called intermediate state was not much of a concern to him since he expected the resurrection of the flesh to occur within his lifetime (1 Corinthians 15:51). However, he was convinced that at the resurrection, “this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality” and death will be conquered (1 Corinthians 15:26; 54-57). Paul does not say what transpires to the soul between a person’s death and the resurrection, perhaps because for him the human person is a unitary being, not to be divided into body and soul, with the possibility of the soul existing apart from the body.

The most important biblical teaching on the human person is not however about the body and the soul and their ontological unity. Rather it is that humans are created in the image and likeness of God, and it is this theme that is central in contemporary Catholic anthropology. The basic text is Genesis 1:26-27: “The God said: ‘Let us make humankind in our image (*shelem*), according to our likeness (*demut*). . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’” In being the image and likeness of God, humans possess a fundamental and inviolable dignity as persons capable of knowledge and freedom whose basic rights must not be denied but rather promoted. In addition, since humans are God’s image and likeness in their being male and female, there are goodness in sexuality and gender equality in God’s original creation.

### *The Soul/Body in the Catholic Tradition*

This biblical vision of the fundamental unity and equality of the human person was preserved in second-century theologians such as Justin Martyr (100-c.-163)

and Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130-c.200). For the former, salvation includes not only the preservation of the immortality of the soul but also the gift of immortality to the mortal body. The latter, in his fight against the Gnostics, stresses that the human being is composed of a corruptible body (but called toward immortality) and the soul, that is, the breath of life which enlivens the body, and both are created in the image and likeness of God. In addition to these two elements there is a third, which however does not belong to the human person by nature but is the gift of God, namely the Spirit, who transforms by grace humans into the “perfect human being.”

In later centuries, however, this ontological unity of the human person became blurred. Developed within the Hellenistic context, Christian theology was heavily influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy with its dualistic cast and its disdain for matter and sexuality (especially woman). Origen (c. 185-c. 254) taught that from eternity God has created a world of spirits, all equal to each other, endowed with freedom of choice and united with bodies of subtle or ethereal matter. Some of these fell from their status by neglecting the contemplation of God, and were punished according to the severity of their sins. Those with the lightest culpability became angels, their bodies clothed with the thinnest matter. Those with the greatest culpability became demons, their bodies covered with the heaviest matter. Those in between became humans, their ethereal bodies taking on less heavy bodies like ours. However, by living a Christian life and practicing contemplation, humans can be freed from their heavy bodies and recover their original ethereal condition. For Origen, the human being is composed of three elements: body, soul, and spirit, the last being God’s gratuitous gift leading the soul to salvation. The soul itself is composed of two parts: the higher is called *nous* (intellect) or *kardia* (heart), which is the seat of freedom. Contrary to Irenaeus, Origen believes that only the *nous*, and not the body, is created in the image of God. If the *nous* is submitted to the spirit, it will become the likeness of God and spiritualize the soul’s lower part, which is added to the soul after its fall and corresponds to *thumos* (passion) and *epithumia* (desire). As for the body, Origen believes that it can exist in three states: earthly, like ours; demoniac, like those of demons; and ethereal and luminous, like those of the angels and the resurrected bodies of the holy people.

Origen’s neo-Platonist anthropology is amended by Greek fourth and fifth century theologians, especially the Cappadocians (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus). For them it is the entire human being, and not only the soul, that is the image and likeness of God. The bodily condition is not the result of a prehistorical sin but is created as good by God. As such the

body has a share in salvation, thanks to the body of Christ, of which Christians are members, especially through the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. The Cappadocians do make a distinction between the earthly, *psychikon* stage of the body and its resurrected, eschatological state. The former lies under the power of sin and is corruptible; the latter, which corresponds to God's creative intention, is the goal toward which humans must move. Even while affirming the human tendency to oppose God's will through the earthly body, these Fathers are convinced that material realities reveal their Creator and can be redeemed, and indeed, through being sanctified by the church, can function as "sacraments" or "mysteries" of God.

In the Latin Church, the African theologian Tertullian (c.160-c.225) still maintains the unity of body and soul, and, like Irenaeus, distinguishes between the human soul, which is breath [*afflatus*] of God, and the divine Spirit [*spiritus*], which is given to Christians. The divine Spirit is not a constitutive part of the human being, but without him, the human body-and-soul reality is worthless. Nevertheless, Tertullian insists that "the flesh is the hinge of salvation" [*caro salutis cardo*] and that "it is in the flesh, with the flesh, and through the flesh that the soul meditates on everything it meditates in its hear" (*On the Resurrection of the Dead*, XV, 3).

This highly positive appreciation for the flesh and for matter in general, is however much weakened in another, vastly more influential, African theologian, Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Augustine posits the existence of an immaterial substance in humans which he calls "spirit." This spirit is to be distinguished from the uncreated Spirit, God, and is created by God in God's image. On the basis of this image Augustine devises an ingenious analogy between the human soul and the Trinity, with memory, intelligence, and love in the soul standing for the Father, the Son, and the Spirit respectively. The superiority of the soul over the body is clearly affirmed; it is only by returning into the soul that one can truly discover God. Contrary to the Greek Fathers, Augustine does not think that the body can share in the process of deification. In spite of his diatribe against dualistic Manichaeism with its suspicion of matter, the body and sex, the bishop of Hippo never fully recovers from its intellectual and spiritual impact on him. Augustine's anti-body tendency is heightened by his theology of "original sin." Against Pelagius Augustine argues from the practice of infant baptism that humans are born with the deadly "original sin" inherited from the sin of Adam. Some of the consequences of original sin include physical death, the corruption of the will for good, concupiscence, and eternal damnation (the latter unless one is saved by baptism).

Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274), following Aristotle's *On the Soul*, especially

his teaching on matter and form, corrects the overly dualistic tendency of Augustinian anthropology. For Thomas, the human being is not the union of two independent *substances*, namely, the body and the soul. Rather the soul and the body are the *principles* constituting the *one* substance, namely, matter and form (the other two remaining “causes” of each finite being are efficient and final causes). As principles of being, matter and form—in this case, body and soul respectively—cannot exist by themselves but only in union with each other. As the “form” of the body, the soul makes it a *human* body and is its lifeforce. Together with the body it enables the person to actualize the three functions of growing and reproducing (the vegetative power), feeling (the sensitive power), and thinking (the intellective power). Hence, it is in principle impossible for the soul to survive the corruption of the body. However, following the Christian faith, Thomas maintains that the human soul, being spiritual and immortal, exists in a separate state from the body following death (*anima separata*) but this existence during this “intermediate state” is unnatural and will end with the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Thomas’s thought on the soul, as contained in his *Summa Theologiae*, I, 75), became the standard teaching of the Catholic Church, especially after the Ecumenical Council of Vienne (1311-1312).

### *Origin of the Soul and the Intermediate State*

Whereas the nature of the soul as the form of the body and its immortality are widely accepted in Catholic theology, there remains much debate about its origin and the so-called intermediate state. With regard to the soul’s origin, the above-mentioned *Catechism* asserts that “every spiritual soul is created immediately from God” (“creationism”). This position is a corollary of the doctrine that the soul is immaterial; as such it cannot be the result of the material evolutionary process. Whether the soul is created and infused into the embryo at conception, or several weeks later, when it has achieved its vegetative and sensitive functions (Thomas Aquinas), is debated. Those who are against abortion are generally in favor of immediate animation.

There is however another theory called “traducianism,” according to which the soul along with the body is transmitted through the parents. Tertullian and Augustine are the foremost proponents of this theory in antiquity, the latter to strengthen his theology of original sin. Among its opponents are Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas, the latter providing extensive argument for rejecting the view that the soul is “transmitted with the semen, as though it were begotten by coition” (*Summa contra Gentiles*, I, chapter 86). It is to be noted however that in itself traducianism does not affirm that the parents “create” the soul of their child

but only that they “transmit” it, or are at best its “secondary causes,” with God being its “primary cause.” The theological advantage of traducianism over creationism seems to be that the former accounts better for the unity of body and soul.

As to the theory of reincarnation as an explanation of the origin of the soul, *Catechism* states: “Death is the end of man’s earthly pilgrimage, of the time of grace and mercy which God offers him so as to work out his earthly life in keeping with the divine plan, and to decide his ultimate destiny. . . . We shall not return to other earthly lives. . . . There is no ‘reincarnation’ after death” (#1013).

Concerning the time between death and resurrection, as mentioned above, *Catechism* seems to imply that there is an intermediate state during which the soul exists separated from the body until it is united with the body at the final resurrection. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in God’s grace and are perfectly purified enjoy heaven, “the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness” (# 1024). On the contrary, “immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell” (#1035). Finally, those who die in God’s friendship but are still imperfectly purified must undergo a process of purification, which the church calls “purgatory.” This doctrine is derived from the church’s practice of prayer for the dead and commendation of “almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead” (# 1032).

Some contemporary theologians, for example, Karl Rahner, have argued that the intermediate state is not a defined dogma but only a cultural framework for the Christian teachings on human freedom and the inclusion of the body in salvation. To preserve the ontological unity between body and soul, Rahner and others (for example, Gisbert Greshake) have suggested the possibility of an immediate resurrection in death. Similarly, for the same reason, they prefer to speak of the resurrection of the dead rather than the immortality of the soul. Their theology has been opposed by Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI).

It may be argued that there is still a trace of neo-Platonist dualism in the teaching of *Catechism* on body and soul: “In Sacred Scripture the term ‘soul’ often refers to human *life* or the entire *person*. But ‘soul’ also refers to the innermost aspect of man, that which is of greatest value in him, that by which he is most especially in God’s image: ‘soul’ signifies the *spiritual principle* in man” (#363). It is doubtful that the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible, would warrant such hierarchization of the soul over the body. As we have seen, both the body and the soul embody God’s image and likeness, without any distinction and without privileging one over another.

Given this tendency to place the body in a lesser position and its underlying dualism, many contemporary Catholic theologians have suggested that the word ‘soul’ used in conjunction with ‘body’ to describe the human person is misleading. Instead, they prefer to speak of ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’ (or ‘world’) and of ‘spirited matter’ or ‘embodied spirit’. Thus, Rahner entitles his doctoral thesis on metaphysical anthropology as *Geist in Welt* (Spirit in World). Furthermore, they prefer to root the immortality of the soul not in the fact that the soul is a “subsistent form” (Thomas Aquinas) but in the fact that the human person is called to dialogue and enter in communion with God and with others. The human person is immortal not in virtue of its spirituality but of its interpersonal relationship.

The Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on the human soul, as any other of its doctrines, has evolved along two thousand years of reflection. Its roots remain the biblical teaching on the creation of humanity in both body and soul in the image and likeness of God and on the effects of sin. These basic truths have been brought into dialogue with different cultural contexts—mostly, neo-Platonic, Aristotelean and modern philosophies—all of them judged useful but ultimately inadequate ways to communicate the biblical truths. Reason and faith are not seen as mutually contradictory; rather they are seen as the two lungs humans need in order to breathe fully. The process of interpreting faith with categories appropriate to the times is unending, and the challenge is even more urgent and arduous as Christians encounter increasing cultural and religious pluralism in a globalized world.

### Endnotes

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dubuque, IA: Brown-Roa, 1994), # 366.
2. Ibid., #365. What is meant by the soul being the “form” of the body will be explained below.
3. Ibid., #364. The text cited is from *Gaudium et Spes*, #14.
4. The English translation of the Bible in this essay is the *New Revised Standard Version*.



## THE NATURE OF THE SELF: A GAUDĪYA VAISHNAVA UNDERSTANDING

Ravindra Svarupa Dasa

### *The Sparks of God*

The soul, or self (*ātma*), is described as a separated, minute fragment of God, the Supersoul (*paramātma*). God is like a fire; the individual souls, sparks of the fire. As the analogy suggests, the self and the Superself are simultaneously one with and different from each other. They are the same in quality, for both the soul and the Supersoul are *brahman*, spirit. Yet they differ in quantity, since the Superself (*param brahman*—“supreme *brahman*”—in *Bhagavad-gītā* 10.12) is infinitely great while the individual selves are infinitesimally small.

In the Upanishads some texts assert the identity between the individual soul and the Supreme Soul, while others speak of the difference between them. The way the Vaishnava Vedānta resolves this apparent contradiction recognizes identity and difference as equally real.

Such a reconciliation is conveyed in the *Katha Upanishad* (2.2.13) in the words *nityo nityānām cetannaś cetanānām eko bahūnām yo vidadhāti kāmān* (“There is one eternal being out of many eternals, one conscious being out of many conscious beings. It is the one who provides for the needs of the many.”) This text states, in effect, that there is a class division in transcendence. It says that there are two categorically different types of eternal, conscious—hence, spiritual—beings. One category is singular in number (*nityo*), a set with only one member. This, then, is the category of God, who is one without a second. The other class is plural (*nityānām*), containing innumerable members. This is the category of the souls. The members of both classes are *brahman*, spirit. Yet one of them is unique, peerless, in a class by Himself, for He is the singular, independent self-sustaining sustainer of all others. Each of the others possesses a multitude of peers, and all of them alike are intrinsically dependent upon the one. The one is the absolute, the many are relative.

*The Energies of the Absolute*

Fundamental to the Vaishnava Vedānta is the doctrine that the Absolute Truth possesses energies. (The impersonalistic Advaita Vedānta, in contrast, denies the reality of the energies.) The energies are divided into different categories; one of them is comprised of the innumerable individual souls.

The “Absolute Truth” denotes that from which everything emanates, by which it is sustained, and to which it finally returns. The products of the Absolute are thought of as its *śakti*, its energy or potency. Heat and light, for example, are considered the “energies” of fire. Just as the sun projects itself everywhere by its radiation yet remains apart, so the Absolute expands its own energies to produce (and, in a fashion, to become) the world while remaining separate from it. Unlike the sun, the Absolute can emanate unlimited energy and remain undiminished. (The arithmetic of the Absolute: One minus one equals one.) In short, while nothing is different from God, God is different from everything.

The host of souls makes up the category of divine energy called the *tatāstha-śakti*. *Tatā* means “bank,” as of a river or lake. *Tatāstha* means “situated on the bank.” The souls are characterised as marginal or borderline energy because they are, as it were, between two worlds. They can dwell within either of the other two major energies, the internal (*antarāṅga-śakti*) and the external (*bahirāṅga-śakti*). The internal potency is also known as the spiritual energy (*cit-śakti*), and the external potency is also called the material energy (*māyā-śakti*). The internal potency expands as the transcendental realm, the eternal Kingdom of God. The external potency expands as the material world, which is sometimes manifest and sometimes unmanifest.

Because souls are spiritual, their original home is the spiritual kingdom. Almost all souls dwell there. These are called eternally liberated souls. Only a tiny minority of souls inhabit this material world. These are called fallen, or conditioned, souls.

Souls are small samples of God. Hence they possess a minute quantity of that freedom which God possesses in full. Although they are eternal, full of knowledge and bliss, and although their *dharma*, or essential nature, is to serve God, they may still, in the exercise of that freedom, wilfully turn away from divine service. Thereupon these souls fall into the inhospitable realm of the external, material energy.

Because souls are constitutionally servants, even the rebellious souls remain under God’s control, but that control is now exercised indirectly and unfavourably through the agency of material nature. Souls do not have the freedom not to be controlled by God, but they do choose freely how they wish

to be controlled. Those who will not voluntarily be controlled by the Lord are controlled involuntarily by material nature. For this reason, souls become incarcerated within matter. Under the superintendence of the Lord, there is a confluence of the marginal and the external energies, and the creation arises.

### *Spirits in the Material World*

The presence of spirit within the material world is disclosed immediately to us by consciousness. Consciousness is the symptom of the soul. It is the current or the energy of the soul. Consciousness does not arise as a by-product of the material energy. A material object like a table or chair is entirely an object and in no way a subject. It does not undergo experiences. It has no significance for itself. An embodied soul, a living being, on the other hand, is a subject; it has significance for itself as well as for others; it undergoes experiences. The claim that the soul is a “metaphysical entity” beyond all possible experience is simply false. Not only do we experience the soul; the soul is the very condition for our having any experiences at all.

Thus, souls are fundamental, irreducible entities in the world. Each living, conscious being is of a different category from the material energy which embodies and surrounds it. The Upaniṣads declare: *aham brahmāsmi*, I am *brahman*, I am spirit. The corollary is: I am not matter. And further: I am not this body. Human beings achieve their full potential when they realize this.

The material elements, of which living bodies are made, are traditionally given as eight: earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intelligence, and false ego. They are arranged in sequence from the grossest to the subtlest, that is, from the most apparent to our senses to the least. The first five are the gross elements (*mahā-bhūta-s*); the last three, the subtle elements (*śukṣma-bhūta-s*). The gross elements become more intelligible to us when translated as: solids, liquids, gases, radiant energy, and space. The subtle elements, taken together, make up what we in the West generally call the “mind.” The subtle element *manas*, or mind, is the locus of habit, of normal thinking, feeling, and willing according to one’s established mind-set. *Buddhi*, or intelligence, is the higher faculty of discrimination and judgement; it determines mind-sets and comes to the fore when we undergo conversions or paradigm shifts. *Ahaṅkāra*, or the sense of self, is the faculty by which the embodied soul assumes a false or illusory identity in the material world.

Conditioned souls attain human form after transmigrating upward through the scale of beings; thereupon they become capable of self-realization and liberation. Liberation means giving up the false identification of the self with

the gross and subtle material coils and regaining one's original spiritual form as a servant of God.

Even in the conditioned state, the soul always remains a spiritual being. Like a dreamer who projects his identity onto an illusory, dream-self, the conditioned soul acquires a false self of matter. Although the self is by nature eternal, full of knowledge and full of bliss, this nature becomes covered by illusion. Identifying with the material body, the soul is plunged into the nightmare of history, trapped in the revolutions of repeated birth and death (*mṛtyu-saṁsāra*). This false identification by the embodied souls with their psychophysical coverings is the cause of all their suffering.

The quest by conditioned souls for happiness in this world inevitably fails. The eternal souls naturally seek eternal happiness, yet they seek it where all happiness is temporary. The fulfilment of the most common and basic desire, that of self-preservation, has not once met with success. Indeed, the deluded souls do not know that matters are just the opposite of the way they seem. Gratification of the senses is in fact the generator of suffering, not happiness. This is because each act of sense gratification intensifies the soul's false identification with the body. Consequently, when the body undergoes disease, senescence, and death, the materially absorbed living beings experience all these as happening to themselves. Death is an illusion they have imposed upon themselves owing to their desire to enjoy in this world. So enjoying, their agony continues unabated. A mind brimming with unfulfilled yearnings propels them, at the time of death, into new material bodies, to begin yet another round.

### *Recovering the Authentic Self*

Fallen souls have been granted a false material identity because they reject their authentic spiritual identity. The traces of that rejection are found everywhere. We see that all organisms, from microbes on up, are driven by the mechanism of desire and hate, by "approach" and "avoidance." This duality is the reverberation of the original sinful will that propelled them into this world. The original sinful desire is: "Why can't I be God?" And the original sinful hate, "Why should Krishna be God?"

When souls evince the desire to become the Lord, the Lord responds by granting them the illusion of independent lordship. They enter the material kingdom, to be provided with a sequence of false identities—costumes fabricated out of material energy—along with an inventory of objects which they think they can dominate and enjoy. Even so, the Lord accompanies them in

their wanderings, dwelling in their hearts as He works to bring about their eventual rectification and return from exile. When the soul in the depth of his being again turns to God, the Lord makes all arrangements for his inauthentic, illusory life to end.

The renovation of real life is called *bhakti-yoga*—reconnecting the soul with the Supersoul (*yoga*) by loving devotional service (*bhakti*). *Bhakti* rests upon the principle that desire and activity are not in themselves bad. The soul itself is the source of desire and activity. The original, pure desire of the soul is to satisfy the senses of the Lord. This is called *prema*, or love. When souls contact matter, their love becomes transformed into lust (*kāma*), which is the desire to satisfy one's own senses. The practice of *bhakti-yoga* reconverts lust into love. Desire is not suppressed or repressed; it is purified. One may call this “sublimation,” but it should be understood that when desire is thus sublimated it returns to its own natural and aboriginal state.

The world, the body with its senses, the sense objects are not to be enjoyed, but neither are they to be renounced. The world is God's energy, and it should not be decried as false or evil. Rather, the elements of this world are to be engaged in divine service. When that is done, the veil of illusion is lifted, and everything and everyone are seen in their true identity: in relationship to God. The way to see divinity everywhere and in everything is to utilise everything in the Lord's service. God is the first of fact, but our materially contaminated senses cannot perceive Him. When, however, the senses become purified by being engaged in the Lord's service, they regain their capacity to perceive God directly.

Such purified souls are fully joyful. They neither hanker nor lament. Their happiness does not depend upon the course of circumstance. They see all living beings as the same. They see that all the agony and hopelessness of the world is exorcised when the illusion that has rendered us oblivious to our own identity is dispelled, and they engage themselves in the highest welfare work of rousing sleeping souls from their nightmare. For themselves, they take no mind of what becomes of the future of their lives.

Because they have no material desires, there is no further birth for them in this world. Instead, they attain their original spiritual forms in the kingdom of God, spiritual bodies suitable for pastimes of love with the Lord.

### *Spirits in the Spiritual World*

The Absolute Truth has both an impersonal and a personal feature, but the

personal feature is the last word in Godhead. To say the Absolute is a person is to say that it has senses (*indriya-s*). Traditionally, the senses are ten: those through which the world acts upon us (instruments of hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, and smelling), and those through which we act upon the world (instruments of manipulation, locomotion, sound production, reproduction, and evacuation). The mind is often considered the eleventh sense. A body, accordingly, may be thought of as an array of senses organized around a center of consciousness. Thus, to say that the Absolute is a person is to say that the Absolute has body or form.

The body of God is not material. It is a spiritual or transcendental form—*sad-cit-ānanda-vigraha*, an eternal form of bliss and knowledge. Though differentiated by limbs or parts, a spiritual body is nevertheless completely unified and identical with its own possessor. Therefore, in God, there is no difference between body and soul, mind and body, soul and mind. Every limb or part of that body can perform all functions of every other limb.

Because the Absolute is a person, the souls, the offspring of God, are also persons, and they fully manifest their authentic identity only in relationship with the Supreme Person. When conditioned souls act under the impetus of sense gratification, their bodies evolve materially. But when the souls act in their constitutional position, their love toward God displays itself as the soul's proper spiritual bodies. Thus, the selves achieve their full personal identity and self-expression as lovers of God.

All relationships in this world are dim and perverted reflections of their real prototypes in the kingdom of God. The taste or flavor of a relationship is called *rasa* (literally, “juice”). It is said that there are five primary *rasa-s* a soul can have toward the Lord. In order of increasing intimacy, they are passive adoration, servitorship, fraternal, parental, and conjugal.

God and His devotees engage in eternal pastimes of loving exchanges in spiritual forms that are sheer embodiments of *rasa*. Such bodies are the unmediated concrete expressions of spiritual ecstasies. These unceasing, uninterrupted, ever-increasing variegated ecstasies are nondifferent from the souls and from the spiritual bodies that bear them. The forms and activities of the Lord and His devotees all possess transcendental specificity and variegatedness. The forms of love are not abstractions and their relations are not allegories. In the kingdom of God life is infinitely more full, vivid, and real than anything of the thin shadows that flicker here, on and off. Here, we are not what we are. There, we are truly ourselves again because we are truly God's.

**REFLECTIONS ON ST. BONAVENTURE'S  
THE SOUL'S JOURNEY INTO GOD  
AND SRILA VISHVANATH CHAKRAVARTI THAKURA'S  
CLOUD BANK OF NECTAR**

James A. Wiseman

***Introductory Remarks***

**A**s often in these annual dialogues, we are going to be reflecting this year on texts from our two traditions that have a number of common traits. Even so, St. Bonaventure's treatise *The Soul's Journey into God* is perhaps not the best choice as our Christian text, despite the fact that the great twentieth-century medievalist Etienne Gilson claimed that it is the most complete synthesis that Christian mysticism ever achieved. Various factors make the treatise difficult. In addition to its extremely condensed character, there is Bonaventure's love of playing with numbers (especially the traditionally sacred numbers of three and seven), his lack of clarity regarding distinctions between "through" and "in" (for example, seeing God "through his vestiges" [ch. 1] and "in his vestiges" [ch. 2]), and the work's rather obscure correspondences between certain academic disciplines and Trinitarian theology (as in Bonaventure's claim that metaphysics leads to the First Principle, the Father; that mathematics leads to the Father's image, the Son; and that physics leads to the gift of the Holy Spirit). Much of this will surely strike modern readers as too artificial and contrived. For these reasons, *Cloud Bank* was actually the easier text for me to understand, despite the fact that I had never heard of it before last year, whereas I have taught classes at The Catholic University of America dealing with Bonaventure's treatise.

My procedure will be to reflect on each text in turn, but in different ways. For the Christian text, I will give some background information (especially for ISKCON members who might be unfamiliar with this kind of literature) and a basic analysis of Bonaventure's approach—in other words, I will talk about the overall movement of Bonaventure's thought without getting bogged down in details. My principal resources here will be the work of two prominent

medievalists: Gilson's *The Philosophy of Saint Bonaventure* and Philotheus Boehner's introduction to his edition of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*,<sup>1</sup> often translated under the title *The Soul's Journey into God*. For *Cloud Bank*, I will more briefly point out some noteworthy parallels with Christian texts and also raise some questions of interpretation.

### *The Soul's Journey into God*

St. Bonaventure was a very important medieval Christian theologian, in the opinion of many ranking second in importance only to St. Thomas Aquinas. Like Thomas, he was a member of one of the newly founded "mendicant" orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans.<sup>2</sup> Founded respectively by St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic Guzmán, these religious orders were distinguished from the earlier monastic orders, such as the Benedictines and Cistercians, by not requiring their members to remain in one location, namely, a monastery that was quite strictly separated from life outside the walls of the monastic enclosure. Instead, these "friars" ("brothers") lived and worked in the midst of towns and cities, moving from place to place as their superiors deemed necessary for the spread of the Christian gospel. In this respect, these two mendicant orders had much in common, but there were also some major differences. The Dominicans, known officially as the Order of Preachers, gave relatively more emphasis to studies. They did indeed practice strict poverty, meaning that the individual friar had no personal possessions, but the Dominican practice of poverty was understood mainly as a means toward effective preaching, whereas St. Francis was wary of too much academic activity and understood the practice of poverty primarily as imitation of the poor man Jesus, who the Gospels tell us "had nowhere to lay his head."

Bonaventure, born in the Italian town of Bagnorea in 1217 (35 years after Francis and only nine years before Francis's death), was a "second-generation Franciscan" and with an understanding of intellectual activity rather different from that of the founder of his order. On this point, Fr. Boehner writes: "St. Francis does not need to detour over intellectual ways with reasonings and cumbersome speculations; [Bonaventure] needs them" (Boehner, p. 15). Nevertheless, Bonaventure "has caught in his own way the spirit of St. Francis" and "the result is the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, a plan of pilgrimage which the mind of an intellectual Franciscan must follow if he wishes to reach the high goal of St. Francis, peace and rest in the foretaste of things to come in mystical experiences" (Boehner, p. 15).

Bonaventure was thoroughly devoted to Francis even from his boyhood,

for he once said that while still young he was “snatched from the jaws of death” by Francis’s invocation. Feeling that he owed his very life to Francis, he entered the Franciscans, known officially as the Order of Friars Minor (“lesser brothers”), and years later wrote a life of that saint. In chapter thirteen of that life he describes a pivotal event in Francis’s life (to which he refers in our text as well):

On a certain morning around the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross [September 14], while Francis was praying on the mountainside [of Mount La Verna], he saw a Seraph with six fiery and shining wings descend from the height of heaven. And when in swift flight the Seraph had reached a spot in the air near the man of God, there appeared between the wings the figure of a man crucified, with his hands and feet extended in the form of a cross and fastened to a cross. . . . When Francis saw this, he was overwhelmed and his heart was flooded with a mixture of joy and sorrow. He rejoiced because of the gracious way Christ looked upon him under the appearance of the Seraph, but the fact that he was fastened to a cross *pierced his soul with a sword* of compassionate sorrow . . .

As the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a marvelous ardor and imprinted on his body markings that were no less marvelous. Immediately the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet just as he had seen a little before in the figure of the man crucified. . . . Also his right side, as if pierced with a lance, was marked with a red wound from which his sacred blood often flowed, moistening his tunic and underwear. (Bonaventure, pp. 305-6)

Bonaventure wrote this while he was minister general of the entire Franciscan order, a position he assumed in 1257 after about ten years as a professor of theology at the University of Paris. He had been minister general for two years when he decided to spend some time meditating on Mount La Verna, where he felt he could best search more deeply into Francis’s ideal, both for his own life and for guiding the order itself. It was there that he conceived the plan of the work we are discussing, *The Soul’s Journey into God*.

How Bonaventure (and Francis) introduced a new note into Christian spirituality can be illustrated by contrasting them with St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the Cistercian monk who was most influential spiritual writer of the preceding century. For Bernard, meditation on the humanity of Christ and on his passion was a profitable but still rather imperfect kind of devotion, belonging to what he called the realm of “carnal love” (*amor carnalis*) rather than “spiritual love” (*amor spiritualis*). Meditation on other aspects of the sensible world had even less place in Bernard’s spirituality. It was said that he did not even know the

structure of the oratory to which he went almost every day to pray. This led Gilson to make a striking analogy: “The walls of his mysticism are as bare as the walls of a Cistercian chapel” (Gilson, p. 488).

The contrast between that kind of relationship to the world around us and Francis’s relation to creatures is striking. As Boehner writes: “[Francis] felt a great reverence toward all creatures, since they were created and owned by his Almighty Lord, and hence he greeted them with reverence; he loved all of them dearly, since all were children of the good Father in Heaven, and [therefore] he greeted them as brothers and sisters” (Boehner, p. 13). This is best seen in one of Francis’s best-known works, often called “The Canticle of Brother Sun” or “The Canticle of the Creatures.” So highly did Francis think of this canticle that he urged his followers to do everything possible to see that it was not lost after his death. Part of its reads as follows:

Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures,  
 especially Sir Brother Sun,  
 who is the day and through whom You give us light.  
 And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;  
 and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.  
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
 in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful . . .  
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
 through whom You light the night  
 and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.  
 Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,  
 who sustains and governs us,  
 and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs . . .  
 (Francis, pp. 38-39)

### ***Chapters One and Two of The Soul’s Journey into God***

Reflecting this Franciscan love of the world around us, Bonaventure, in a more scholastic and less immediately appealing way, follows Francis’s lead in the first two chapters of *The Soul’s Journey* as he turns to the vestiges of God that are to be found in the universe. He writes that the beings that compose the universe are like so many steps of a ladder leading up to God, but he is clear that we cannot climb this ladder by our own power. Hence the emphasis on the need for divine grace already at the beginning of chapter one, where Bonaventure

writes: “We cannot rise above ourselves unless a higher power lifts us up. No matter how much our interior progress is ordered, nothing will come of it unless accompanied by divine aid.” But this aid is available “to those who seek it from their hearts . . . and this means to sigh for it . . . through fervent prayer” (Bonaventure, pp. 59-60).

A crucial aspect of God’s aid comes through the revelation of the Scriptures, which helps explain why there are so many quotations from the Bible to be found in Bonaventure’s work, as when he quotes from the Book of Wisdom: “From the greatness and beauty of created things, their Creator can be seen and known” (Wis. 13:5). He follows that passage with a line of his own: “The Creator’s supreme power, wisdom and benevolence shine forth in created things, as the bodily senses convey this to the interior senses . . . ” (Bonaventure, p. 63). Toward the end of chapter one he adds, “Whoever is not enlightened by such splendor of created things is blind; whoever is not awakened by such outcries is deaf” (Bonaventure, p. 67).

But this awareness of God in things will grow deeper still if “to what is immediately apparent in things, we add what we know of the conditions [within ourselves] required to enable us to see them” (Gilson, 448). This is the point of chapter two. According to medieval scholastic psychology, exterior sense objects enter the human mind (or soul) not through their very substance but through their “likenesses” that are “abstracted” by the power of the mind. This likeness (or “species”) is impressed on the mind and leads back to its source, namely, the object to be known. For Bonaventure, this suggests a parallel with what his faith tells him of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, who Christians believe became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Bonaventure writes: “The Eternal Light generates from itself a coequal Likeness or Splendor . . . ” and this Likeness, whom St. Paul calls “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), “leads us back to the Father as to the fountain-source” (Bonaventure, p. 72).

### *Chapters Three and Four*

The next two chapters of Bonaventure’s treatise turn from the sensible world to the interior world of the mind. Here he is basically working with a distinction drawn from that well-known verse in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis, where it is said that God made human beings “according to his image and likeness.” The Hebrew author of that verse probably made no clear distinction between “image” and “likeness,” but many Christian writers did: The image, they said, is given with our very being: if it were lost, we would

simply be annihilated. The likeness, however, can be lost through sin, while on the other hand it can be enhanced through the virtues, especially the “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and love. Following St. Augustine, Bonaventure locates the image primarily in the three faculties of the memory, the understanding (or “intelligence”), and the will and sees these as reflecting the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity: Just as the intelligence comes from the memory and just as “love is breathed forth as their mutual bond,” so too does the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, come forth from the Father, while the third person, the Holy Spirit, is breathed forth as the love between Father and Son. Since this image is always present, it will ideally help keep us aware of the divine presence. But because of the distractions caused by cares, sensory images, and worldly desires, our mind is not readily aware of God within us. In other words, the image alone is not enough. The likeness must be restored, and this restoration or reformation comes “through faith in, hope in, and love of Jesus Christ, . . . who is like *the tree of life in the middle of paradise*” (Bonaventure, p. 88).

Of these three virtues—faith, hope, and love—Gilson writes: “Once the soul believes in Christ our Lord by Faith, it has once more the ear to hear the teachings of the Saviour and the eye to look upon His miracles. . . . Hope, in turn, is applied to the soul . . . to perfect its action. . . . [Love], finally, perfects the work that has begun. Even one who had never before experienced it feels that contact with God has been given to him along with the desire for it, and that from now on he is prepared to seize his object in a spiritual embrace, and to savour the joy of a soul at last united to the being it loves” (Gilson, p. 453).

### ***Chapters Five and Six***

In the first four chapters of his work, Bonaventure focuses on the created order: the world around us and our very selves as human beings. Next, in the fifth and sixth chapters, Bonaventure turns from reality within the human mind to that which is above it, namely, God. In chapter five, he reflects on the Unity of God through what he calls its “primary name,” Being. This is found in the way God names himself when asked by Moses: “I am who I am. . . . Therefore, say to the Israelites, ‘He who is’ sent you” (Exod. 3:14). Reflecting on this, Bonaventure writes: “Behold . . . purest being itself and you will realize that it cannot be thought of as received from another. From this, it must necessarily be thought of as absolutely first. . . . It will appear as having no possibility for defect and hence as most perfect . . . and as supremely one” (Bonaventure, p. 97). And this is God.

After this kind of reflection on God's Unity, Bonaventure goes on in chapter six to consider the Trinity and what he calls its primary name, Goodness (or "the Good"). Being is good, and as good it blossoms into fecundity, for (as the sixth-century Christian writer Dionysius the Areopagite said) the good is diffusive of itself. This diffusion within the Godhead is what is meant by the Trinity, the Father begetting the Son and the two of them breathing forth (or "spirating") the Holy Spirit. Bonaventure writes: "Unless these were present, it would by no means be the highest good, because it would not diffuse itself to the highest degree" (Bonaventure, p. 103). He subsequently expresses his wonder not only at the coincidence of apparent opposites within the attributes of the triune God (communicability with individuality of persons; mutual intimacy with outward mission; etc.) but also at the union of opposites in the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son:

The eternal is joined with temporal man,  
Born of the Virgin in the fullness of time.  
The most simple with the most composite,  
The most actual with the one who suffered supremely and died,  
The most perfect and immense with the lowly, . . . (Bonaventure, p. 107)

### ***Chapter Seven***

In the seventh and final chapter of the treatise, Bonaventure emphasizes that the power of the intellect has now reached its limit. Just as God rested after the sixth day of creation, so now there is nothing remaining for the mind except a "day of rest" in mystical ecstasy. This ecstasy is described in terms borrowed from Dionysius's treatise *The Mystical Theology*. It occurs in darkness, for "all intellectual activities must be left behind and the height of our affection must be totally transferred and transformed into God" (Bonaventure, p. 113). Nature can here do nothing, hence he says that "little importance should be given to inquiry but much to unction; little importance should be given to the tongue but much to inner joy" (Bonaventure, p. 113). What is needful here is "grace, not instruction; desire, not understanding; the groaning of prayer, not diligent reading; . . . the fire that totally inflames and carries us into God by ecstatic unctions and burning affections" (Bonaventure, p. 115). His final advice is, therefore, to "impose silence upon our cares, our desires, and our imaginings" and "with Christ crucified" [that is, with the same Christ who appeared to Francis in his vision on Mount La Verna] to "pass out of this world to the Father, so that when the Father is shown to us, we may say with the [Apostle] Philip: *It is enough for us*" (Bonaventure, p. 116).

The overall movement in the entire treatise is from the external to the internal to the transcendent, from light to darkness, from reasoning to mystical illumination. Along the way, as I have said, there are a multitude of distinctions, a delighted playing with numbers, and a heaping of concept upon concept and image upon image that make this, in my opinion, a very demanding text. My intent has been simply to shed some light on what the treatise is all about.

### **Part II: Cloud Bank of Nectar**

#### *The Primacy of the Bhakti Path*

As I turn now to reflect on the Vaishnava text that was chosen for comparison with Bonaventure's work, I would like to begin by recounting a conversation I had a few years ago with an Indian scholar in New Delhi about the various kinds of yoga (*bhakti, jnana, karma, raja*). He actually rather scolded me for thinking that there is some clear distinction among them, in such a way that a person could claim to be a devotee of one with relatively little regard for the others. How different, however, is what one finds in *Cloud Bank*, where the author, Srila Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura, quotes from the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*: "For a devotee engaged in My loving service, with mind fixed on me, *jnana* and *vairagya* are not generally beneficial to achieve perfection in the world" (Chakravarti Thakura, p. 7). And a page later he writes: "*Bhakti* is . . . not dependent on purity of place, time, or even practice. One cannot say the same of *karma-yoga*, where even the slightest fault is a great obstacle to progress" (p. 8).

*Cloud Bank of Nectar*, in other words, is presented unabashedly as a work of bhakti-yoga, in clear distinction from other paths. The opening words of the text illustrate this: "The mercy of Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is an uncontrollable cloud bank of exquisitely sweet nectar which fully rejuvenates the grains of nine-fold *bhakti* in the field of the heart, . . . From far off, may those clouds of the Lord's mercy give satisfaction and pleasure even to the worthless soul" (Chakravarti Thakura, p. 1).

In that same opening chapter, the author asks about the cause of *bhakti*. He says there is no material cause of it, but he also denies that it is causeless. There's a sense that the devotee's mercy is the cause of *bhakti*, but this does not come from the devotee himself or herself. Rather, "the cause of that mercy is *bhakti* itself residing within his heart. Without the devotee having *bhakti*, there is no possibility of him giving mercy to others. *Bhakti* causes the devotee's mercy, which causes *bhakti* in another person. *Bhakti* causes *bhakti*. The self-manifesting, independent nature of *bhakti* is thus concluded" (Cakravarti Thakura, p. 4).

This seems quite parallel with the Christian doctrine that we cannot even begin to perform the slightest good act unless God's grace precedes, for grace is what gives us even the very desire to do something good. Moreover, the sentence "bhakti causes bhakti" is very similar to something that St. Bernard once wrote: "Amo quod amo," which means "I love because I love." In other words, there is no external or ulterior reason for loving. Love is generative of itself, the love that the New Testament says is God's very being (1 John 4:8, 16).

### *Ascent to the Ultimate Stage of Prema Can Only be Gradual*

Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura writes that some verses in the scriptures imply that devoutly reciting the holy name but once destroys all sins and frees one from all contamination. But then the question arises: Why does the spiritual journey normally take so long a time? This is simply because offenses we have committed (*aparadhas*) have lingering effects. The author uses a medical example:

As during a high fever, a person losing all taste for food finds it impossible to eat, so a person who makes serious *aparadhas* loses scope for hearing, chanting, and other devotional service. There is no doubt about this. However, if the fever lessens with time, some taste for food develops. Even then, nourishing foods like milk and rice cannot give their full nourishment, . . . Nevertheless, medicine and an invalid's diet can, with time, restore one's former health. . . . In the same way, after a long period of suffering the effects of *aparadha*, the intensity reduces slightly and the devotee develops a little taste. Again the devotee becomes fit for *bhakti*. Repeated doses of hearing and chanting the Lord's name reveal everything in progression. (Chakravarti Thakura, p. 31)

This, too, has clear parallels with Christian teaching. One of the best examples comes from a 19th-century British writer who is not much in favor today but who nevertheless said some important things. His name was Frederick Faber, and one of his finest passages goes like this: "God is slow, we are swift and precipitate. It is because we are but for a time, and He has been from eternity. Thus grace for the most part acts slowly, and mortification is as long as leveling a mountain, and prayer as the growth of an old oak. God works by little and little, and sweetly and strongly He compasses his ends, but with a slowness which tries our faith because it is so great a mystery" (Faber, p. 145).

### *Behavior of Someone in Love with God Can Appear Foolish*

Cloud Bank even has a reference to "addiction" as characterizing the state of

the devotee. Whether or not the term “addiction” is a good translation of the original word, there is no doubt but that the devotee will often manifest behavior that is very much out of the ordinary. The section on the Sixth Nectar Shower says that the devotee, “when asked by his relatives what’s the matter, will sometimes act like a mute, and at other times, feigning normality, he will hide his inner feelings. His friends will apologize, saying, ‘Recently he’s become scatter-brained.’ His neighbors will conclude he’s an idiot by birth. The followers of the philosophy of Jaimini will think him a fool” (Chakravarti Thakura, pp. 40-41).

So, too, the Seventh Nectar Shower has these sentences: “Sometimes, feeling he has obtained direct realization of the Lord in his heart, boundless joy dances in his heart. Relishing the rare treasure of the Lord’s sweetness, he becomes delirious. Then, at the disappearance of that feeling, he plunges into grief” (Chakravarti Thakura, p. 43).

The next chapter picks up the same theme: “Plagued by various doubts, the devotee falls on the dusty earth praying to again have *darshan* of the Lord. Hankering over and over for this but not obtaining it, he laments, weeps, rolls on the ground, wounds his own body, faints, recovers, stands, sits, runs about, and wails like a madman. . . . He spends the rest of his life behaving in this strange way, and no longer knows whether he has a body or not” (Chakravarti Thakura, pp. 51-52).

Christian mystical writers have noted similar behavior in persons filled with longing for their Lord. In Russia there are those known as “fools for Christ’s sake,” some of whose behavior is like that described in *Cloud Bank*. Moreover, the great fourteenth-century Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec, about whom I wrote my own doctoral dissertation, describes such persons in the following way:

A person [sometimes] thinks he is enveloped from within by a divine embrace of affection. . . . God enters the depths of the heart by means of his gifts and does so with so much savor, consolation, and joy that the heart overflows from within. This makes a person realize how miserable are those who live apart from love. . . . This delight gives rise to spiritual inebriation. . . . [This] produces much strange behavior in a person. It makes one person sing and praise God out of the fullness of his joy, and it makes another shed many tears because of the delight he feels within his heart. In one it produces restlessness in all his limbs, causing him to run and jump and dance about, and in another the force of this inebriation is so great that he must clap his hands in jubilation. One person cries out in a loud voice and so makes manifest the fullness that he feels within, and

another becomes silent and seems to melt away out of the delight he feels in all his senses. (Ruusbroec, pp. 82-83)

If and when this sense of the Lord's presence evaporates, the person will react in a way very similar to what *Cloud Bank* described. In Ruusbroec's words: "[Now] all the stormy transport and restlessness of love have been cooled. The hot summer has turned to autumn and all a person's riches have turned to poverty, so that he begins to lament and complain about his state: Where have all the warmth of love, all the fervor . . . and delightful praise gone? How have the interior consolations, interior joy, and perceptible savor escaped him? . . . He is thus like a person who has forgotten everything he ever learned and has lost his livelihood and the fruit of his labor. A person's corporeal nature will often fall prey to disorders because of such losses" (Ruusbroec, p. 91).

#### *Some Possible Questions for Reflection or Discussion*

Having pointed out some rather striking similarities between the two works, I would like to conclude this presentation with a few questions that seem worth pondering.

First, both texts are wary of too much speculation. Bonaventure writes: "Since in this regard nature can do nothing and effort can do but little, little importance should be given to inquiry but much to unction; little importance should be given to the tongue but much to inner joy; little importance should be given to words and to writing but all to the gift of God, that is, the Holy Spirit" (Bonaventure, p. 113). *Cloud Bank* has a somewhat similar piece of advice: "My dear Lord, devotional service unto You is the unrivaled path for self-realization. If someone gives up that path and engages in the cultivation of speculative knowledge, he will simply undergo a troublesome process and will not achieve his desired result" (Chakravarti Thakura, p. 6). These passages raise the following questions: What is the place of speculation in the spiritual path? Do either or both of these treatises seem overly speculative? What is the primary practical value to be found in either of them?

Secondly, both texts place much emphasis on the place of ardent longing. Bonaventure writes that whoever wants "interior progress" must "sigh for it . . . through fervent prayer" (Bonaventure, p. 60). He also says that the passing over into God "is mystical and most secret, which no one knows except him who receives it, no one receives except him who desires it, and no one desires except him who is inflamed in his very marrow by the fire of the Holy Spirit" (Bonaventure, p. 113). Similarly, *Cloud Bank* says that "prema pierces the devotee

like a shaft with ardent longing to see the Lord at every moment" (Chakravarti Thakura, p. 46). Some of the symptoms of *prema* are called "a change in the heart, tears in the eyes, and the standing of hairs on the body" (Chakravarti Thakura, p. 30). In some circles, this kind of ardent yearning is suspect, inasmuch as it may really be a longing for "the consolations of God" rather than for "the God of consolations." Sensible phenomena like tears or a literal hair-raising *frisson* may have little spiritual significance but may only manifest high-strung emotionality. What, then, is the place of affectivity on the spiritual path? To what extent is it to be proposed as something of an ideal for everyone?

These are just a few of the questions that the joint reading of *The Soul's Journey into God* and *Cloud Bank of Nectar* raise. That these works continue to challenge and intrigue us so many centuries after their composition is a sure sign of their classic status. It is itself a blessing that the annual Vaishnava-Christian dialogues held in Potomac, Maryland, give those of us who attend the opportunity to rise to the challenge.

### Endnotes

1. Boehner's edition includes not only his introduction and commentary but also the Latin text and his English translation on facing pages. For my paper, I am using the more accessible translation by Ewert Cousins, published by Paulist Press.

2. "Mendicant" literally means "begging," thereby indicating the insistence of the founders of these orders that the members were not to possess any money or property of their own. As I go on to show, however, the really crucial distinction between these new orders and the older monastic ones is that monks were expected to remain in their monasteries, while the mendicants lived among the people in cities and towns and could be sent from place to place (even from country to country) in accordance with the wishes of their superiors.

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## METAPHORS OF TRANSCENDENCE: A STUDY OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESS IN THE *MĀDHURYA KĀDAMBINĪ*

Claire Robison

Rev. James Wiseman has explored Bonaventure's description of spiritual progress and has also introduced descriptions by the Gaudiya Vaishnava theologian Viśvanātha Cakravartin of the ultimate goal of spiritual growth, *prema* (love for Krishna). I will further explore a Gaudiya Vaishnava understanding of spiritual progress, in particular through looking at the metaphors that undergird Viśvanātha's descriptions of progressive spiritual states in his seventeenth century work, *Mādhurya Kādambinī* ("Cloudbank of Sweetness").

Metaphor is a powerful device for conveying the character of religious life. Metaphors depicting spiritual progress serve to open out a new world to the practitioner—by construction and discovery simultaneously. Gaudiya Vaishnava scriptures and commentarial traditions adamantly assert the direct and non-metaphoric nature of their descriptions of the divine, Rādhā and Krishna, and their ultimate abode, Vṛndāvana. Though when it comes to describing what it is like to proceed along the path to Vṛndāvana—or even to relate the beauty and majesty of the divine—poetic metaphors are extensively utilized. As in many traditions, poetic metaphor here takes on a special power to convey spiritual truth. My focus in this study is to try to understand the function of metaphor in describing stages of spiritual advancement in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. To gain a glimpse of this, I will look primarily at the use of metaphor in the *Mādhurya Kādambinī* of Viśvanātha Cakravartin. Yet as Viśvanātha styles his *Mādhurya Kādambinī* as a commentary on select verses from Rūpa Gosvāmin's sixteenth century *Bhaktirasāmytasindhu*, I will also delve into Rūpa's work to provide context and fullness to the study.<sup>1</sup>

Both Viśvanātha and Rūpa outline religious practices and states of attainment, seeking to guide practitioners to the ultimate goal of love for Kṛṣṇa (*prema*). The concept of structured religious practice is termed *sādhana* in their works. Throughout descriptions of the methods that engender religious progress in the Gaudiya tradition, practitioners are guided through

landmarks on the path of *sādhana*, including both stages of advancement and obstacles (generally linked with *aparādha-s*, “transgressions”). The purification of desire and emotion involved in this process is made clear especially through the use of metaphors, such as the “mad elephant” of criticism that threatens to trample one’s carefully tended garden of devotion.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the thorough structuring and hierarchizing of emotions in this *sādhana* strongly puts forward a notion of spiritual life as process, while also highlighting the profoundly personal, subjective nature of religious experience in the Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava tradition.

Two types of religious metaphors are dealt with in this study: those that are descriptive, or depictive, and those that structure experience. Each contains some degree of oscillation between the realms of metaphorical construction and discovery. The former construct a vision of God for the reader through poetic analogies of beauty, mainly drawn from nature—a blossoming flower, the brilliant full moon, or a downpour after a drought. The latter, metaphors structuring experience, serve to portray the model for a successful practitioner’s experience. In imparting a depiction of God and religious experience, these metaphors bring about a type of divine discovery in the practitioner who hears them.

Janet Martin Soskice offers a working definition of metaphor as: “that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.”<sup>3</sup> In this case, the metaphor’s suggestiveness contains the ambiguity of two possible interpretations—the suggestion of a parallel between two objects that are known to the listener, or a suggestion (and a teaching) about an unknown object by means of its similarity with a known object. Sanskrit aesthetics, however, has a very complex system of figures of speech, wherein metaphor is defined differently from the grammatical categories, stemming from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, that undergird the Western terminology.<sup>4</sup> In his *Glossary of Indian Figures of Speech*, Edwin Gerow cautiously translates *rūpaka* as “metaphor,” but explains that the grammatical categories do not overlap neatly.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this study on the language used to describe spiritual progress, I will be employing the working definition of metaphor offered by Soskice, and will be dealing with the passages from Rūpa and Viśvanātha in light of this interpretative frame rather than from a perspective of grammatical analysis.

William Alston points out that it is unhelpful to think of literal and metaphorical as types of meaning, the former as the ‘respectable’ meaning as opposed to the latter as the ‘emotive’ meaning. Alston asserts: “A given

truth may be expressed by a metaphor, may perhaps only be expressed by using the metaphor, but this is not to say that it exemplifies a sort of ‘metaphorical truth’ distinguishable from and inferior to ‘literal truth’.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, metaphor’s potential to communicate meaning by a comparative process can be used in the realms of various subjects, some of which are difficult to communicate otherwise. In this respect, Rūpa and Viśvanātha act as guides for their tradition into rare levels of experience; they provide bridges through their systematic outlines of sādhanā and their metaphor usage to describe religious experiences. The uniqueness of religious metaphor in their theology also lies in that it not only imparts something about unknown experiences to the novice but also helps to bring about those experiences through evocation of emotion.

In the *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, Viśvanātha’s central metaphor is the creeping and blossoming vine (*bhakti latā*), which conveys spiritual advancement as a process of growth that ends in an ultimate bearing of fruit in the form of a relationship with Krishna. Viśvanātha’s growing creeper has nine stages of development, predicated on Rūpa’s nine-fold model of sādhanā progression. In the larger context of the *Bhaktirasāmrtaśindhu*, Rūpa describes stages of injunctive, regulated religious practice (*vaidhī-bhakti*) and the stages of spontaneous and natural contemplation that arise in an advanced practitioner (*rāgānugā-bhakti*). Progression or growth in sādhanā is largely determined by one’s emotional growth along these stages. However Rūpa’s revered nine-fold outline of the growth of devotional love is found in a mere two verses toward the beginning of his work:

The first stage of love is faith (*śraddhā*). Then one becomes interested in keeping the company of the devout (*sādhu saṅga*). Thereafter one develops a relationship with a spiritual teacher and engages in sādhanā, directing one’s life and worship according to the teacher’s instructions (*bhajana kriyā*). Through this, one’s vices are diminished (*anartha nivṛtti*) and one becomes stable and strong in the cultivation of devotion (*nīṣṭhā*). This increases to a state of desire (*ruci*) and then attachment (*āsakti*). Gradually devotion manifests (*bhāva*), and finally there is an awakening of love (*prema*).<sup>7</sup>

This brief description has served as a frame of reference for many later writers and theologians, and has to a large degree become the normative outline of spiritual progress in Gaudīya Vaishnavism.

In Rūpa’s own descriptions of these nine stages of spiritual progress, he uses metaphors sporadically, mainly to illuminate descriptions of otherwise

obscure emotional states and illustrate their relation to one another. He gives a description of the penultimate stage of devotion (*bhāva*) in relation to the highest stage of love (*prema*): “Devotion is characterized by a pure and luminous quality, and is like a beam of the sun of love; its desirous rays soften the heart.”<sup>8</sup> He also characterizes love thus: “Love is an abundant stream of bliss that incessantly pours forth passionate warmth. Even though it emits heat, it is cooler and sweeter than a billion moons.”<sup>9</sup>

However it is in Viśvanātha that the stages of spiritual progress receive their full metaphoric development. Viśvanātha’s *Mādhurya Kādambinī* expands the discussion of these nine stages with rich descriptions of the psychological state and behavior of the practitioner throughout each stage and the development of the *bhakti-latā* metaphor of progress that has since been of great importance to his tradition.

Viśvanātha is fond of water metaphors, as the title of his work attests. Images of divine grace as an ocean, cloudbank, stream, and river recur throughout the *Mādhurya Kādambinī*. The title itself translates as “cloudbank of sweetness” which, according to the final verse, is drawn from Śrī Krishna Caitanya, “ocean of sweetness” (*mādhurya-vāridhi*).<sup>10</sup> Krishna is also the “ocean of compassion” (*kṛpā-pārvāra*),<sup>11</sup> from which comes all grace. The eradication of weeds at the stage of *niṣṭhā*, steadiness in practice, increases the “downpour” of devotional feeling, and following the stage of desire (*ruci*), the practitioner falls into the “current of the great celestial river of attachment” to Krishna. Grace “rains down” and in turn love (*prema*), which arises like the “brilliant rising sun,” then “dips” one’s emotions in “a well of great *rasa*.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, like a moon, “*prema* rises in the devotee’s heart where it causes hundreds of waves in the ocean of his ecstasy to crash against each other.”<sup>13</sup> The practitioner is led from a downpour of rain, to being whisked away by a stream to a river, and finally to becoming immersed in the great ocean of this divine goal.

Viśvanātha also frequently turns to images of a garden and the flora and fauna inhabiting it. On the spiritual path, the *sādhaka* becomes a gardener, weeding and tending to his or her devotional growth. If the garden is kept under control, devotion will blossom. It is in the well-tended garden that the *bhakti-latā*, or vine, can grow and flourish as devotional love. This experience-structuring metaphor develops its leaves, flowers, and fruits in accordance with the running commentary on advancement in *sādhana*. The images of watering and the natural growth of plant life carry one back, in some ways, to gardening metaphors in the descriptions of spiritual progress in the Catholic tradition, such as Teresa of Avila’s garden in *The Interior Castle*.

For Viśvanātha, *sādhana* is like watering; it is a natural process evoking innate growth and, eventually, spiritual experience. Viśvanātha describes in poetic detail the beginning of the growth process: “Gradually, the creeper of devotion begins to sprout and two leaves, named *sādhana bhakti*, unfold. The first leaf is called *kleśaghnī*, “the destroyer of material sufferings,” and the second is called *śubhadā*, “the giver of all auspiciousness.”<sup>14</sup> Along the way however, one must watch out for weeds. Viśvanātha dedicates a significant portion of *Mādhurya Kādambinī* to the subject of weeds: the vices, transgressions, and selfish desires that choke the *bhakti latā*. These are said to be strongly present in the beginning of practice, and also hold some potential for disturbance up until the final stage of the practitioner’s development.

Rūpa and Viśvanātha’s elaborations on the nine stages of *sādhana* demarcate a gradual but clear transition period between the stage of diminishing vices (*anartha-nivṛtti*) and that of becoming stable and strong in devotion (*nisthā*). Viśvanātha describes that, though there is some oscillating before the practitioner settles down to a grounded stability, when it is achieved, the dynamics of *sādhana* change. No longer is one forcing the process but one rather begins to find deeper and deeper joy in it. Another significant step is taken at the stage of attachment (*āsakti*), wherein the normative mental state of the practitioner is no longer absorption in the worldly affairs which usually engage one’s mind, but absorption in Kṛṣṇa and one’s relationship with him.<sup>15</sup> The successful gardener eventually loses taste for topics and activities that hinder *sādhana* and becomes spontaneously drawn toward absorption in and worship (*bhajana*) of the Lord (*bhagavān*).<sup>16</sup> Āsakti is likened to a “cluster of buds on the *bhakti* creeper, heralding the appearance of its flower, *bhāva*, and its fruit, *prema*.<sup>17</sup> Then finally, at the state of *bhāva*, the creeper blossoms and attracts the bee-like Krishna (*madhusūdana*),<sup>18</sup> then soon after bears the fruit of *prema*.<sup>19</sup>

These metaphors are aimed at religious practitioners—particularly those who are new or inexperienced on the path of prayer or *sādhana*. Both authors extol absorption in the practice of *sādhana* and the cultivation of *bhakti* in daily life, and place them prominently in their formulas for affecting spiritual growth. In Viśvanātha particularly this becomes a spiritual journey, replete with landmarks as well as potential detours. The heart of their expositions, however, is to communicate the nature of the divine by bringing their novices closer to him through practice.<sup>20</sup> Yet in the end metaphors are only pointers; they cannot do justice to the reality of divine experience. How, then, can they guide one towards that state?

One purpose of metaphors is to awaken one to an understanding—either

one previously not reached or one not articulated. They can have a cognitive content of their own; they are purveyors of insight. It is there that the mind can capture meaning by accessing *rasa*, which is the heightened emotional state that, in Rūpa's devotionalism, develops in the context of a spiritual relationship with Krishna. This process of *rasa* evocation is considered to be superior to the ordinary processes of inquiry and knowledge acquisition. Rūpa's ontology of emotion asserts that emotion is not a hindrance to know higher truth. Rather, emotion is the vehicle through which such knowledge is gained. Rūpa emphasizes the efficacy of devotion, far more than philosophical pursuit and religious penances, in bringing one closer to the divine: "Even a tiny taste of devotion is tantamount to understanding the principles of devotion, while logic alone is not, because it is an unreliable measure of devotion."<sup>21</sup> Conversely, "That which is attainable by means of knowledge and renunciation can be attained by devotion alone."<sup>22</sup> Viśvanātha furthers Rūpa's claim: "Devotional love is essential to give results in the pursuit of spiritual knowledge but is itself not even the least contingent on any other process for its own result."<sup>23</sup> The underpinning notion here is that as *rasa* grows, so proportionately does knowledge of God. Indeed, knowledge of God is dependent on the formation of devotional love, which in itself can even be viewed as a type of cognition.

Intrinsic to metaphor's function of awakening understanding is both its ability to communicate a previously unknown reality and its evocation of emotion.<sup>24</sup> The religious experiences these theologians try to impart are not re-descriptions of experiences already known to most of their readers, but rather novel accounts of information regarding religious reality. They impart something unknown of the divine, Krishna, and how Krishna relates to those practicing *sādhana*. Given that they come from a tradition rich in mystical visions and encounters, the experiences they describe are not unprecedented. However, their unique contribution is that they have ordered these experiences via a specific metaphorical structure to provide a picture of the stages of spiritual progress.

Viśvanātha's portrayal of the creeper inspires many who were content to remain as 'seeds,' to delve into the growth of devotional love that is seen as the nature of the true self. The growth of the creeper that symbolizes one's spiritual development reorders one's present patterns of motivation and action, shifting from one's false self, *ahamkāra*, and its selfishly motivated actions, to selfless devotion. Rūpa's explicit description of the varieties and stages of devotional love also makes a self-centered emotional life suddenly unfamiliar and in turn

makes the very foreign world of Krishna and his surroundings close and eventually familiar.

Bonaventure links his stages of spiritual growth to the contemplation of God through ‘his vestiges in the universe and the sense world,’ a strategy that to some degree may parallel the use of naturalistic metaphor in Caitanyaite descriptions of spiritual progress. Though in depicting God strongly in personal terms, Bonaventure tends not to advance metaphors or other descriptions of God’s appearance in great detail. In contrast, the Vaishnava tradition typically develops detailed descriptions of Krishna alongside their experience-structuring metaphors and these descriptions are strongly asserted to be genuine portrayals of the personal Krishna. Yet even in these descriptions, metaphor abounds again, perhaps to evoke emotion as well as describe divine beauty. Rūpa portrays Krishna thus: “His complexion is as lovely as a blue sapphire, his smile is as bright and merry as a jasmine blossom, his clothing resembles a golden blossoming *ketakī* flower.”<sup>25</sup> Viśvanātha, in his characteristic imagery, further describes his vision of Krishna, the lotus-faced Lord, as “an ocean of ecstasy” (*ānanda-mahodadhi*).<sup>26</sup> Such descriptions impart a vision of the divine as much as they serve as a form of worship through words, and indeed these dual purposes seem intentional in Gaudiya theologians’ writings. They also make the unfamiliar familiar, both in giving a personal glimpse of Krishna and in orienting one’s imagination toward what a divine experience entails. As Rūpa conveys: “The youthful form of that one who inspires love is sweeter than all other sweetness and more exciting than all other excitement.”<sup>27</sup>

Alongside this description of divine beauty comes an evocation of intense feeling. For Rūpa, “In the course of encountering reminders of Krishna, love approaches the highest limit of perfect bliss and wonder.”<sup>28</sup> He later writes: “In the case inexperienced practitioners, a poem or drama about Krishna can affect the growth of devotion.”<sup>29</sup> Here the metaphorical or symbolic representations of Krishna and his surroundings have the potential to awaken love of God. Moreover, Rūpa states:

Those with mature love experience *rasa* to the extent that their love engenders reminders of Krishna in all situations of life. Love makes Krishna and all related to him vessels of sweetness, and then when Krishna and anything related to him is experienced as such, they expand that love.<sup>30</sup>

This speaks of a deep dynamic which begins with emotion though gradually extends beyond love or remembrance compelled by deliberate representations of Kṛṣṇa to include remembrance potentially evoked by a wider range of sen-

sory objects ('vestiges in the universe'?), all linking the practitioner back to contemplation of God. This level of advancement in *sādhanā* is determined largely by the presence of particular emotions in the practitioner, labelled by Rūpa and Viśvanātha primarily as *bhāva* and *prema*, which are seen to develop initially, according to the classical aesthetic theory from which Rūpa draws, in a certain carefully crafted environment. Rūpa explains that once basic love for Krishna is dominant in the heart of the practitioner, it intensifies and manifests as *prema*, the highest love, with the slightest provocation by metaphor or symbol for Krishna's beauty, such as the full moon or a blossoming lotus flower. These metaphors tie into the centre of Rūpa's entire religious system: the generation of a state of love for Krishna,<sup>31</sup> and his system, like that of Viśvanātha, is defined by a course of emotional development.

However is there not a tension between a system of *sādhana* and the spontaneous emotions evoked by theistic religious experience? Emotion and desire are, in the work of these authors, the means through which one senses and relates to God. It may seem a paradox, then, that Rūpa and Viśvanātha embark on formulating a system for one to cultivate 'spontaneous' emotional states. For after all, emotion tends to be polarized from system.<sup>32</sup> Emotions and desire cannot be forced, and if they are what bring about a relationship with the divine, then a highly systematized and rehearsed process seems dichotomous in relation to the natural emotionality of *bhakti*. Yet Rūpa and Viśvanātha imply in their structures of spiritual progress that emotions and desire can be "taught," or rather re-directed, in a way that *opens* one up to sacred reality. Thus emotion for Rūpa and Viśvanātha is compatible with system and structure. As any logical conclusion is reproducible by retracing one's train of logic, so developing—or opening toward—religious emotion is reproducible through the presence of the variables that caused it. This is the theoretical underpinning of Rūpa's development of *rasa* theory, wherein *bhakti-rasa* is awakened through the presence of certain conditions or 'excitants' which engender devotion.<sup>33</sup> In fact, turning the usual understanding entirely around, Rūpa asserts that for most practitioners, it is precisely through diligent dedication to *sādhana* that one can attain the desired emotion (*bhāva*) that grant one entrance into sacred reality. Only rarely can one attain love of Krishna otherwise.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps this relation of system and emotion is in fact central to the work of metaphors in these Gaudiya Vaiṣṇava notions of spiritual growth. Viśvanātha aims in the *Mādhurya Kādambinī* not only to convey something of the relationship between God and the practitioner, but also to engage the reader in that relationship through the experiential or supra-rational process of *sādhana*.

In the process of making the unfamiliar familiar, Viśvanātha details an advanced practitioner's vision of Krishna, depicted with crimson-hued lips and the brilliant smile of his moonlike face (*tadīya-vadana-smita-candrikā*).<sup>35</sup> More than pictorial language is required however to succeed in communicating something of the experience of seeing Krishna. One must evoke emotion in the reader, allowing him or her to begin to participate in the vision itself. The prominent way Viśvanātha does this is through monologue and detailed description of the devotee's feelings and reactions. Upon seeing a vision of Krishna, writes Viśvanātha, the devotee reacts with intense emotion, manifesting the physical symptoms of the awakening of ecstasy known as *sāttvika bhāva-s*.<sup>36</sup> This and other similar in-depth depictions of the practitioner experiencing love of Krishna can evoke a type of identification the devout reader. Therein the unfamiliar becomes so familiar that the description gradually grows out of being a model of spiritual development to be emulated, into an embodiment of the practitioner's own experience. The lines between construction and discovery blur as the metaphor moves from the head to the heart of the practitioner, where it takes on an active role of evoking emotion and invoking grace. Indeed, as Anne Dooney notes, this transition seems to lie at the heart of these metaphoric images.<sup>37</sup>

Viśvanātha describes the thoughts of one who has received a divine experience and is thus in transition from construction of the divine to genuine discovery:

Just the other day when I drew poetic parallels between your limbs and a fresh raincloud, blue lotus, or sapphire, or when I compared your face to the full moon and your feet to the fresh leaves of spring. . . . it was like comparing the golden Mount Meru to half a sesame seed, a lion to a jackal . . .<sup>38</sup>

Sentiments to the same effect are also quoted from the *Kṛṣṇakarṇāmṛta* of Bilvamaṅgala Thākura, who writes: "How can anyone compare your face to a lotus? The moon shrinks in each dark quarter until it is no longer worthy of mention. Hence it cannot be compared to your face either. To what shall I compare it? There is nothing at all equal to your face . . ."<sup>39</sup> Here, in almost an apophasic vein, metaphor is used to convey both the beauty of Krishna and the strongly emotional nature of spiritual experience.

The aesthetic and sensory realms are inseparable from metaphor in practice. It is in these realms that metaphor affects the religious practitioner, by imparting a concept or experience according to aesthetic language in addition to the

level of theoretical or intellectual understanding. Metaphors can therefore act as re-descriptions of reality, both in their articulation of transcendent experience and their function of imparting that to others and thus reordering their recipients' reality. Rūpa and Viśvanātha's descriptions of Krishna and one's identity in relation to him counter most, if not all, of our sensory experience. In that, they can be simultaneously descriptive (of the practitioners' experience) and prescriptive (for aspiring practitioners). David Haberman observes a chain of experience underlying all Gauḍīya Vaishnava meditative poetry—it is composed from and for recollection of Krishna's activities.<sup>40</sup> In this chain, the novices must rely on accounts of the experiences of others as the basis of their meditations, until they have perfected their own *sādhana* practice to the point where they can enter an ideal state of consciousness and have a direct experience of the divine. At this stage, one's own direct vision becomes the major source of knowledge of Krishna.<sup>41</sup> The experienced practitioners thus construct descriptions that point toward their spiritual discoveries; this leads younger practitioners ultimately to experience the described sacred reality.

In the context of Rūpa and Viśvanātha's *sādhana*, this may be called the surface or initial dialogue in the process of construction and discovery—namely the practitioner constructs a mental image of God/religious experiences through the depictions of others. Rūpa suggests: "One who is practicing structured *sādhana* should rely on scriptural instructions and favourable reasoning until the natural emotional states of devotion appear."<sup>42</sup> Yet as a general rule: "Diligent dedication to *sādhana* brings about desire for Krishna, then produces attachment for him, and then causes the birth of love for him."<sup>43</sup> Thus the transition to a deeper dynamic of construction and discovery is marked by one gaining the competence to receive and articulate a genuine experience of the divine.

However Rūpa and Viśvanātha assert the transcendent nature of spiritual experience and address its relation to sensory experience and perception by a theology of grace. Though the nature of contact with Krishna is beyond the scope of ordinary sensory perception, they assert that Krishna's grace enables the transcendent to meet with the worldly. In the final section of the *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, Viśvanātha describes a divinely bestowed sensory experience of Krishna: "The Lord himself makes his own most auspicious innate attributes—his stunning beauty, divine fragrance, melodious voice, tender touch, delectable taste, his magnanimity and loving compassion—perceptible to the devotee's eyes and other senses."<sup>44</sup> A crescendo of a water metaphor is offered to convey the intensity of the experience. Although this "ocean of ecstasy" is "beyond the power of any poet to describe," Viśvanātha compares it to the "ecstasy"

of taking shelter in the cooling shade under the dense foliage of a banyan tree contrasted with a desert road baked by the summer sun, or the “ecstasy of the forest elephant who has been drenched by a monsoon cloudburst, contrasted with his torment at being trapped in a forest conflagration.”<sup>45</sup> Further detailing the experience, Viśvanātha relates that Krishna reveals himself to each of the five senses of the devotee, in succession, and then reveals his magnanimity (*audārya*) and compassion (*kāruṇya*). Each time the perception is so intensely powerful that the devotee swoons in ecstasy, losing consciousness until the Lord revives him again with another of his seven attributes.<sup>46</sup> He imparts that this divine perception enables each of the senses to relish each of the attributes simultaneously.<sup>47</sup>

This is quite a world apart from the apophatic traditions to which Denys Turner refers in his argument on mysticism and experience, though perhaps reminiscent of Bonaventure’s discussion of the reformed, spiritualized senses engaging in the experience of Christ. (89-90) It must be emphasized, however, that this fusion of the sensory with the transcendent is again, for the Caitanya tradition, heavily dependent on one’s emotional development and one’s previous desires. It is not until devotion begins to “mature” and “ripen into love that Krishna is directly realized by *rāsika* devotees.<sup>48</sup> This is intertwined with the assertion that what one experiences is unlike any other sensory experience in this world in both its intensity and profundity. Faced with these experiences, the process of metaphor construction begins for our authors, for with what can you compare it? The experience truly surpasses what can be captured in words. The *Mādhurya Kādambinī* speaks of this in its section on the practitioner’s attainment of devotion (*bhāva*), the eighth and penultimate stage of Viśvanātha’s spiritual process. There, as we saw, the practitioner laments over the inadequacy of the descriptive metaphors to do justice to Krishna’s beauty. However, though the metaphors are ultimately inadequate, they are not abandoned. Though the experience is unlike any other sensory experience—and in some sense supra-sensory—it is experienced by the practitioner. There is some degree of communication or dialogue between the supra-sensory and the sensory.

In a volume on the ethics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Nicholas Lash asserts: “To be a Christian, or a Hindu, a Muslim or a Buddhist, is to know oneself apprenticed to a school the purpose of whose pedagogy is the purification of desire.”<sup>49</sup> Within the four faiths Lash names, there are differing understandings about the ontological place of desire. Bonaventure, for instance, foregrounds the role of desire in the cultivation of contemplation and ecstasy, and he asserts that one should not believe knowledge is possible without love or understanding

without humility. (55) The emotions generated in Rūpa and Viśvanātha's systems of religious growth are also not meant to be self-gratifying by nature. While one's progress is determined by the development of emotional absorption in the process, it is an absorption that acts to re-orient or "purify" of one's desires. The valued emotions of love, gratitude, and humility are the defining marks of spiritual growth, and the entry card for each stage is the deeper development of love and consequent abandonment of pride. The concurrence of these two qualities is found in Viśvanātha's system at the stage of attachment to Krishna (āsakti, the sixth of nine stages).<sup>50</sup> It is at this stage that the practitioner, due to an abandonment of selfish attachments, is able to continue in his or her sādhana despite whatever external obstacles arise.<sup>51</sup> Donna Wulff further assesses the character of purified desire as it developed in the Gaudīya Vaishnava tradition: "It is the enhancement of the devotee's love and desire for the Lord and his beloved, and for the privilege of witnessing their divine love, rather than the satisfaction of such desire, that is the primary aim."<sup>52</sup>

Emotion thus follows from desire and determines one's spiritual state. What, then, determines desire? Lash may provide a further clue: "The point I want to emphasize is that the character of remembrance shapes the character of expectation and desire. Differences of memory engender differences of hope."<sup>53</sup> This connection is seen clearly in Rūpa and Viśvanātha's works, in regard to the sādhana techniques of meditation and remembrance of Krishna. As Lash writes, it is the *character* of remembrance that shapes the *character* of desire. For our two theologians' systems, this shaping requires a general understanding of the process prescribed by more advanced practitioners and an awakening of desire and emotion therein.

Viśvanātha's growing and blossoming creeper strongly speaks of this transformation. The "seed" of *bhakti*, devotion, gradually transforms, in the careful heart, into the blossoming and fruitful love of Krishna. Parallel to this process is the transformation of the self as a whole—the eradication of the weed-like vices and the re-instatement of pure desire and emotion. Viśvanātha details the reorientation of emotions in the practitioner:

Though previously the hundreds if not thousands of emotions of the devotee were firmly bound by ropes of attachment to body, family, house, and money, *prema* now easily severs these bonds, and, through its own power, takes the same emotions, though illusory, and dips them into a well of great *rasa*, whose mere touch completely transforms them into radiant transcendental feelings. Then it firmly ties these spiritualized emotions to the sweetness of the Lord's form, name, and attributes.<sup>54</sup>

Rūpa also touches on this point, quoting Krishna from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*: “Just as a blazing fire turns all fuel to ashes, so devotion focused on me completely consumes all attachment to sense objects.”<sup>55</sup> It is through the process of *sādhana* that the self undergoes the transformation toward perfected and sustained devotion.<sup>56</sup>

Rūpa and Viśvanātha’s descriptions of spiritual progress illustrate something both intrinsic to the religious pursuit and possibly to human nature itself—the centrality of transforming process. The transformation of the self enables one to experience or participate in one’s innate relationship with Krishna. To that end, the experience-structuring and descriptive or depictive metaphors employed by Rūpa and Viśvanātha are oriented toward evoking a certain type and intensity of emotion which catapults the practitioner to a higher state of spiritual progress. They are both emotive and reality depicting, in this sense; they partake in the reciprocation of construction and discovery in spiritual life. Such metaphors act continually as devices for creating an outlet to express spiritual experience and as a roadmap to others for embarking on the path of Krishna *bhakti* through them. Through this structure, they help to awaken latent emotions within the practitioner. However, to this end, Viśvanātha also speaks of *bhakti* as something that arises and grows in and of itself; our efforts can orient us toward it, but ultimately they cannot direct it.<sup>57</sup> They can create the conditions in which experience of divine love may happen—though ultimately it is a matter of grace.

### Endnotes

1. Rūpa Gosvāmin (1489-1564), a formative theologian for Caitanya Vaishnavism, is largely responsible for the codification of *sādhana*, or structured religious practice, in the tradition, and as such is considered one of the foremost formulators and recorders of the tradition’s doctrine and practices. He writes with a rich use of metaphor, common in the theological writings of the Caitanyaite tradition. His most widely read work is the *Bhaktirasāmr̥tasindhu* (“The Nectar Ocean of Devotion”), wherein he describes in great detail aspects of human endeavour in *sādhana* and varieties and degrees of spiritual experience. Viśvanātha Cakravartin (1660-1754) writes roughly two centuries after Rūpa composed his works, and is considered the most prominent seventeenth and early-eighteenth century Caitanya Vaishnava theologian.

2. A metaphor attributed to Caitanya himself, in his instructions to Rūpa Gosvāmin in the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja (2.19), wherein metaphors of the garden and the *bhakti latā* are also developed at length.

3. Soskice, J. M. 1985. *Metaphor and Religious Language*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 15.

4. Gerow, Edwin. 1971. *Glossary of Indian Figures of Speech*. The Hague: Mouton & Co., 20 ff.

5. Gerow also identifies *utprekṣā*, *samāhita*, and *upamārūpaka* as bearing resemblances to the English usage of metaphor.

6. Soskice 1985: 69.

7. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 1.4.15-16. The technical terms used for describing these nine stages are difficult to translate, as they have certain conceptual overlaps in English as well as added richness in Sanskrit, so I have included the Sanskrit.

8. BRS 1.3.1; Viśvanātha uses the same analogy in the introduction to his chapter on the stage of *bhāva*.

9. BRS 1.3.61. This and the following translations are taken from David Haberman's translation (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts: 2003).

10. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 345. This and following translations are taken from Brzezinski, Jan K., et al., trans. and ed. 2005. *Srila Vishwanath Chakravarti Thakur's Madhurya Kadambini*. Mathura: Sri Krishna Chaitanya Shastra Mandir.

11. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 319.

12. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 292.

13. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 309.

14. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 88.

15. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 257.

16. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 255.

17. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 255.

18. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 265.

19. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 292.

20. The masculine gender is used here since, for the theologians under discussion, the divine as Krishna is gendered.

21. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 1.1.45.

22. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 1.2.251.

23. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 34.

24. Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 196.

25. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 3.3.4.

26. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 302.

27. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* 1.3.39, a quote from Bilvamaṅgala Thakura's *Krishnakarṇāmṛta*.

28. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 2.1.10.

29. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 2.5.96.

30. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 2.5.97.

31. Haberman, David L. 1988. *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Raganuga Bhakti Sadhana*. New York: Oxford University Press, 39.

32. Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 194.

33. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 2.1.3-5.

34. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 1.3.6. Thanks to David Haberman for pointing out this verse.

35. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 269.
36. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 287.
37. Dooney, Anuradha. 2003. "Clouds, Creepers, and Krṣṇa: The Flourishing of Faith in Viśvanātha Cakravarti's *Mādhurya Kādambinī*," unpublished M.St. dissertation, University of Oxford, 47.
38. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 322; Mount Meru is a celestial mountain according to Hindu mythology.
39. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 324.
40. Haberman 1988: 129.
41. Haberman 1988: 131.
42. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 1.2.293.
43. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 1.3.8.
44. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 303.
45. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 303.
46. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 305.
47. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 309.
48. *Mādhurya Kādambinī* 287 ff.
49. Lash, Nicholas. 1997. "The Purification of Desire," in Julius Lipner, ed., *The Fruits of Our Desiring: An Enquiry Into the Ethics of the Bhagavadgītā*, 4.
50. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 255.
51. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 256 ff.
52. Wulff, D. M. 1984. *Drama as a Mode of Religious Realization: the Vidagdhamadhava of Rupa Gosvami*. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 37.
53. Lash 1997: 3.
54. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 292.
55. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* 1.1.20-26. Rūpa cites the *Padma Purāna* and *Bhāgavata Purāna* to this end.
56. *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 1.2.2.
57. *Mādhurya Kādambinī*, 29 ff.

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**A FULL OUTLINE FOR THE PRESENTATION ON  
“SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE AND TRANSFORMATION:  
BASED ON THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF IGNATIUS LOYOLA”  
AND SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS AS PRESENTED BY  
JAMES D. REDINGTON, SJ**

*[Editors' Note: This article is different than the prior essays. It is in the form of personal notes and reflections. We thought it important to include this piece here because it looks at the process of personal transformation via the Spiritual Exercises.]*

**Author's Note:** As usual at the end of each year's dialogue, in 2003 we decided on the next year's topic: 'Transformation in Christ and in Krishna.' I agreed to present the *Spiritual Exercises* on that topic, and Ravindra Svarupa would present *Bhaktirasamrtasindhu*. My main endeavor in this article will be to reproduce my invitation letter of March 9, 2004, and my presentation of the *Spiritual Exercises* at the Vaisnava-Christian Dialogue of April 16, 2004, pretty much as they happened. And I shall end with some of the dialogue that followed the presentation or that came later in the weekend. I'll also make what might be called a "2012 Commentary" on one point raised in the dialogue, and I'll label it as such (as I shall any other such reflections as have occurred to me). The text that we used is: *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary*, by George E. Ganss, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1992). Passages will be identified by, for example: (Ganss, 1), in the text or in an endnote, or quoted when necessary for the present reader's understanding. First, then, the letter with which I introduced the readings on March 9.

(To the Vaisnava-Christian Dialogue Participants of 2004)

Dear Friends,

As for what to read on the topic of "Transformation in Christ according to the *Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola*," I've decided to give you mainly the 'Second Week' of the Exercises, preceded and

followed by a few other parts which should help. So, I've included a few pages explaining 'The Structure of the Book' (Ganss, 5-8); then the twenty 'introductory explanations' Ignatius wrote (Ganss, 20-29); then the title and the 'Principle and Foundation' of the first week (31-32); followed by the entire second week (53-80); and from the fourth and last week, the final contemplation 'to attain love' (94-95); and finally, the 'rules for the discernment of spirits' (121-129).

Just two things I would ask you to hold in mind as you read: 1) the 'Spiritual Exercises' is a handbook for the retreat director, not a book primarily to be read (rather, to be 'done'); and 2) on our theme of 'transformation', keep in mind that the "Third Prelude" on page 56 is the grace which the retreatant asks earnestly for before every contemplation and meditation of the second week, not just that first one. (Text: "*The Third Prelude* will be to ask for what I desire. Here it will be to ask for an interior knowledge of Our Lord, who became human for me, that I may love him more intensely and follow him more closely.")

Other than that, happy reading to you, and I'm looking forward very much to seeing you all again.

In God's Love,  
Jim Redington

**(Here follows the presentation at the dialogue,  
on the afternoon of April 16, 2004)**

Christian Presentation—Transformation in Christ according to the  
*Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola

**T**hank you for the grace of doing this presentation. Let's begin with Ignatius' 'Prayer for Generosity'. Presenter: Dearest Lord, teach us to be generous. Teach us to serve you as you deserve: to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labor and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we are doing your holy will, o my God. All: Amen.

### **What Do We Get in the Spiritual Exercises?**

Answers: An 'imitation of Christ' spirituality (= 'path', or *sadhana*);

based on a ‘will of God’ spirituality;  
with an important ‘finding God in all things’ spirituality;  
ALL based on a ‘love,’ or ‘love of God’ spirituality—a *Bhakti*.

And, by and large, it is experienced that God gives the grace that the retreatant asks for, to a greater or lesser extent. So especially do those people find who do the *Exercises* in their full, thirty-day form or their part-time but year-long form.

### *Ways and Examples of Transformation*

#### In the ‘Introductory Explanations’

#1 (p. 21) Definition of ‘spiritual exercises’: “By the term Spiritual Exercises we mean every method of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, vocal or mental prayer, and other spiritual activities, such as will be mentioned later. For, just as taking a walk, traveling on foot, and running are physical exercises, so is the name of spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul.”

#5 (22-23) “The persons . . . will benefit greatly by entering upon [the Exercises] with great spirit and generosity toward their Creator and Lord . . .”

#11, 12, 13, 16 (24-26) Discipline. Concentrate on this ‘week’ (of the four ‘weeks’) only; pray the full hour, or more; go against an attachment by praying and striving for its opposite. Strenuous *sadhana*. In terms of *rasa*-theory, we have *utsaha bhava* in *vira rasa*, i.e., great vigor or energy, in the warrior-hero’s mood. Much military imagery is used by and about Ignatius. But the point here is a disciplined, decisive and faithful will, no matter what figures of speech might be used.

#20 (28-29) Seclusion. The second and third reasons for it show that “graces and gifts” (= transformation) can very really be hoped for. (Text: “Second, by being secluded in this way and not having our mind divided among many matters, but by concentrating instead all our attention on one alone, namely, the service of our Creator and our own spiritual progress, we enjoy a freer use of our natural faculties for seeking diligently what we so ardently desire. Third, the more we

keep ourselves alone and secluded, the more fit do we make ourselves to approach and attain to our Creator and Lord; and the more we unite ourselves to him in this way, the more do we dispose ourselves to receive graces and gifts from his divine and supreme goodness.”)

#23 The “Principle and Foundation” (32) Very logical goal orientation; puts strong emphasis on choice, commitment to our “end” in life; discipline of “indifference” to other things helps us stay with our choice. (Text: “To attain this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things . . . Consequently, on our own part we ought not to seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short one . . . ”)

### Second Week

#91 Kingdom of Christ (53-55) Call, or vocation, by a worthy earthly king, then, all the more compellingly, by Christ. Sorry about the Crusade imagery! “That I may not be deaf to his call” is the grace. Jesus’ call is known to be a totally life-altering commitment, as with the apostles whom he first called. Some editors place the Kingdom meditation just before the ‘second week,’ so that it stands over it as a theme.

#101 Incarnation (56-57) Third Prelude: to know Christ more intimately, love him more ardently, and follow him more closely—as we have heard. This plea for grace drives the whole second week, and one could say it is the central theme of the whole Exercises. It is the grace sought in every contemplation on Christ’s life—ninety percent of the meditations from the second through the fourth weeks. And, it is transformation in *bhakti*—love of God.

#110 (58-59) The Nativity contemplation is an excellent example of the second week’s ‘Ignatian contemplations’. They are *bhavana*, ‘meditative imaginings’ of what the characters in the sacred narrative are doing, and inserting oneself, too, as in some Vaishnava *bhavanas*. “I will make myself a poor, little, and unworthy slave, gazing at them, contemplating them, and serving them in their needs, just as if I were there, with all possible respect and reverence. Then I will reflect upon myself to draw some profit.”

#135 (64) Introduction to Election “4. While continuing our contemplations of his life, we now begin to explore: in which state of life does the Divine Majesty wish us to serve him?” Both processes—contemplation and exploration—go on. The question might be put: in which way of life does God wish to transform us?

#136 (65-67) Two Standards. On values. Note the “Colloquy” (intimate speaking) with Our Lady (#147: “A Colloquy should be made with Our Lady. I beg her to obtain for me the grace from her Son and Lord that I may be received under his standard; first, in the most perfect spiritual poverty; and also, if his Divine Majesty should be served and if he should wish to choose me for it, to no less a degree of actual poverty . . .”) The transformation by imitation of Christ is getting deeper.

#163 (71-72) Matter for the “election” is to start on the fifth day (of the second week) because Christ is contemplated as leaving Nazareth then, and going to the river Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist—i.e., as having made his election.

#165 (72-73) “Three Ways of Being Humble” is considered high perfection—advanced love. Notice that the second way is already perfection according to the Principle and Foundation (#23). The third way is imitation of Christ even in its extreme negatives, and so it’s the highest love. It’s supreme *bhakti*; and it’s like supreme *bhakti* in the form of the agony of separation (*viraha*), as in Jesus’ saying: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’ (Mark’s Gospel, 15.34)? But it is, in my opinion, truly but only partly like that (i.e., a true but ‘transient emotion’—*cancalyabhava*). It is really more a union, but in the negativities (i.e., joined with Christ in his sufferings and humiliations).

#169ff. (74-80) The “election” is complicated, but interesting. It is, of course, the big choice, and so fits our theme of transformation. Otherwise, best to leave the ‘three times’ and ‘two methods’ aside.

### In ‘Fourth Week’

#230 (94-95) The “Contemplation to Attain Love”

- I.      Love based on gratitude, and culminating in a kind of *prapatti* ('total surrender') in the prayer “Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will—all that I have and possess. You, Lord, have given all that to me. I now give it back to you, O Lord. All of it is yours. Dispose of it according to your will. Give me love of yourself along with your grace, for that is enough for me.”
- II.     Finding God in all things. Kind of an apotheosis of scholastic philosophy, making *bhakti* out of routine (e.g.: “I will consider how God dwells in creatures; in the elements, giving them

existence; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence; and finally, how in this way he dwells also in myself, giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence . . .") Like a love-meditation on Lord Krishna's *vibhuti-s* in *Bhagavad-Gita* chapter ten. The culmination and end of the Spiritual Exercises.

#313 (121-129) Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. These rules are for figuring out what's going on in one's spiritual life. For instance, rules 3 and 4 (122) are important on consolation and desolation (these are in the rules for Week 1—the purgative stage—but are used generally):

*The Third . . .* By consolation I mean that which occurs when some interior motion is caused within the soul through which it comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord. As a result it can love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but only in the Creator of them all . . . Similarly, this consolation is experienced when the soul sheds tears which move it to love for its Lord . . .

*The Fourth . . .* By desolation I mean everything which is the contrary of what was described in the Third Rule; for example, obtuseness of soul, turmoil within it, an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations. These move one toward lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love.

**Concluding Comment:** By the Gospels and these Exercises, one's further life is envisioned as something to be transformed, by deeper and deeper interior knowledge and love of Christ, into more and more complete imitation of him. The most evident *bhakti* moods or relationships in this might be 'servant/Master' (*dasyabhava*) and/or 'friend/Friend' (*sakhyabhava*); but others would not be excluded.

#### **Some points raised in our 2004 Dialogue, and some 2012 Reflections**

At the end of the above presentation, I asked John Borelli to tell us whether he had just found the Spiritual Exercises transformative, since he had recently finished doing them in their 30-day retreat form. But regrettably, I didn't take

notes on his brilliant insights, and we broke for coffee/tea just after them. So, the few points I will consider, based on my notes, came from Ravindra Svarupa's presentation, just afterwards, and from the two sessions of dialogue, questions, and discussion that followed upon both our presentations.

Ravindra explained that, in Vaishnava theology, the soul actually has senses, but they're latent right now. *Bhakti* is to engage the senses in the service of the Lord of the senses. Our senses are ordinarily impure—they must be purified to engage in *bhakti*. This is very much like Ignatius Loyola's 'application of the senses,' 'composition of place,' etc., said Ravindra. Let me just explain Ignatius' terms. First, perhaps, 'composition of place,' done in every meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises*, is the use of the imagination to picture the location and action in Jesus' life which are going to be the subject of the meditation (and, in many of the meditations, to place oneself in them). And 'application of the five senses' (page 60's contemplation on the Nativity is a good example) is an exercise in which one applies the five senses, one by one, to the material contemplated, and then "... draws some profit from this." Thus, one will see "by the sight of my imagination" the place, persons, and actions, then hear them, then smell the fragrance, taste "the infinite sweetness and charm of the Divinity," and finally, "so to speak," touch, embrace or kiss the places where the persons are or were, etc. I agree with Ravindra about the vivid and positive sensuousness of both religious systems here.

Secondly, Sam Wagner and Ravindra Svarupa were the main discussants on a question regarding "indifference" in Ignatius' Principle and Foundation (#23, p. 32), as to how it compares with some potential counterparts in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Ravindra made the point that detachment from the fruits of actions (often called *niskamakarma*) is one thing, while *samadarsana* ('seeing as equal') is another. As a devotee, one can see even a negative thing as a good coming from the Lord. It's according to whether it fits the service of God, explained Ravindra. I would agree that Ignatius' "indifference to all created things," by which we "choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created," is a bit different from the Gita's detachment from the fruits of actions, although the two are close. But the 'seeing as equal' taught by Lord Krishna is, I think, quite the same as Ignatius' "... we ought not to seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short one, and so on..." What is for the Lord's service is good.

Finally, there were a few lively discussions about the nature of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In his presentation, Ravindra Svarupa said (approximately—these are notes): I now understand the *Spiritual Exercises*. It has a brute force that you

don't see in a Hindu *bhakti* system. A Kshatriya ('warrior class') mentality. [Like a "boot camp," someone said.] And in our discussion later that night, Ravindra said it was "almost a brainwashing." In response it was pointed out that the military flavor and imagery of Ignatian spirituality was very often emphasized in Christian evaluations of the Exercises as well. And I made the point that any profound and long-lasting initiation into deep religious truth and *sadhana* required a substantial but intelligent self-surrender by the retreatant, novice, devotee, or whomever. I referred by way of comparison about 'brainwashing,' to an affidavit I had written in 1977 against a proposed piece of legislation in New York state. The International Society of Krishna Consciousness had asked me to write on the issue. And I wrote that, as far as I knew as a scholar of Vaishnavism, ISKCON did not "brainwash" its devotees. So, brainwashing may be something we come close to, in the view of an outside observer, but don't do. By the way, in the dialogue this was not all as 'earnest' as it sounds here, and was delivered, and also accepted, in good spirit. Freedom of religion has to allow people to go deep, though not mindlessly.

2012 Commentary: Yes, the *Spiritual Exercises* is a Kshatriya spirituality, developed by the would-be knight Ignatius (as Zen Buddhism is, at least in part, a Samurai spirituality). Is there an example of Kshatriya spirituality in Hinduism, even Vaishnava *bhakti* Hinduism? I'd say yes: the *Bhagavad-Gita*! It's interesting how both Hindu *bhakti* and Christianity (a *bhakti* religion) tend to downplay the military and "boot camp" aspects of both these religious texts. But they're there (remember the appeal to Arjuna's Kshatriya pride in chapter two, the disciplined self-denial of the *niskamakarma* teaching of chapters two and three, and so forth). In hindsight, my own emphasis on Week Two of the Exercises shows a downplaying of Week One's purgative, "boot camp" character. I'm not claiming any parity of such emphasis in these two texts, but might chapters one to three be the Gita's 'boot camp'?

*May this Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue go well beyond fifteen more years!*

**THE CRUCIFIXION AND THE RĀSA MĀNDALA:  
A COMPARATIVE SKETCH OF  
TWO GREAT SYMBOLS OF DIVINE LOVE**

Graham M. Schweig

*Ultimate Imagery of Divine Love*

The Catholic tradition within Christianity and the Vaishnava tradition within Hinduism each celebrate a singular focal point of worship, a supreme emblem of faith, and an ultimate image of divine love. The imagery of each expresses what is most deeply cherished, and what is considered to be most precious in each tradition, respectively. Each vision of divine love contains the powerful elements of sacrifice in love, suffering in love, and salvation in love. Each image arises out of a sacred narrative found in their respective scriptures, which then in turn receive deep theological reflection and explication. However, each tradition through its symbolism of supreme love paints a picture of sacrifice, suffering, and salvation very differently and distinctively.

In this brief presentation, it is the crucifixion for the Carmelite Catholics and the Rāsa Māṇḍala for the Chaitanya Vaishnavas on which I will focus. Specifically, from each of these traditions, I examine an older, very original sample of the imagery and couple it with a later image that illuminates and expands upon the earlier. For the crucifixion, which I will examine first, I only briefly engage an early crucifixion icon from the Greek Orthodox Church but concentrate on the crucifixion drawing of John of the Cross. Focusing on the latter allows me to highlight the elements of sacrifice, suffering, and salvation in the crucifixion.

For the Rāsa Māṇḍala, my examination will emphasize the classical depiction of the “great circle dance” and then its abbreviated imagery in the portrait of the two figures of Rādhā and Krishna that are so commonly worshipped in temple settings. Each of these displays of supreme love contains the elements of sacrifice, suffering, and salvation, and in order to discover this I will resort to narrative material that serves to contextualize these images.



Figure 1. Attributed to Bernardo Daddi. *The Crucifixion*, c. 1335. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.2, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

*The Crucifixion: Aesthetic and Theological Analysis*

The history of the depiction of the crucifixion is extraordinarily rich and complex. The sheer variety of depictions is tremendous. And one also finds a great variety in the depictions of the Rāsa Mandala imagery as well. The variations and permutations of the imagery for the ultimate focal point in worship attests not only to the ultimate importance of the image but also to its infinite capacity to be personalized in its representation—two essential factors that indicate the greatness of ultimate religious symbols of a tradition.

The depictions of the crucifixion in painting throughout its history almost always shows a ground level, frontal view of the event. Whether the viewer is placed farther or closer to Jesus on the cross, the depiction involves one of seeing Jesus from a standing position looking slightly up at Jesus who is raised above the ground on the cross. The view is usually one from being directly in front of the cross, though there are some depictions from a three quarter view from one side or the other, but always as if standing on the ground. Often the depiction of the crucifixion is without anyone else standing by witnessing the suffering Jesus on the cross. It is just the viewer alone with Jesus in those instances. However, we the viewer often join other onlookers who are grieving the loss of Jesus, who, standing much closer, to the side or directly in front of Jesus, who visibly feel the devastation of the event. In Figure 1, an early Greek orthodox icon, we join onlookers who are crying out and grieving. Various figures have a nimbus around their heads, as does Jesus, indicating their elevated holy status. Also present are angels in midair, flying in the background. However, the little drawing of the crucifixion by St. John of the cross presents us with a very different, yet extraordinarily powerful expression that is worthy of our attention.<sup>1</sup>

The first feature which immediately stands out in the drawing is the unusual perspective St. John provides for his viewer. (See Figure 2 on next page.) The cross and the figure of Christ have a strong downward, one-point perspective from a three quarter aerial view. One is virtually looking down from above, and slightly in front of, the cross on to the left side of Christ. This angle of vision of Christ on the cross immediately sets St. John's drawing apart from all other representations of the crucified Christ in the history of Christian art. The effect of this unusual angle and perspective is dramatic: it gives the picture a great deal of tension.

While this angle of viewing the crucifix establishes the drawing's drama, there are other elements which contribute to its intensity. The cross itself



Figure 2. *The Crucifix Drawing* by St. John of the Cross. The original is preserved in the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation, in Avila, Spain. 16th century.

leans so far to the right of the composition that it appears as though it were about to fall backwards. One struggles to keep the cross upright while viewing it. Most people, seeing the drawing for the first time, are compelled to turn the picture on its left side to compensate for this strained angle.

At the same time, the strong downward force of the perspective and the weight of Christ's body, which is accentuated by his knees buckling under him and his head hanging parallel to the ground, is in contrast with the dramatic angle of the cross itself. Christ's body is falling forward to the left of the composition, pulling in the opposite direction from the backward leaning cross.

Christ's outstretched arms add still further to the vexing tension which vibrates through the composition. The spikes through the palms are large, with the limits of strain in the arms portrayed by long tendon-like lines in them, and drops of blood fall in the air. This tension created in the the arms is further emphasized by the swollen chest, shoulder and back muscles, and the feeling of the weight of Christ's body as he is falling forward.

The lighting is, however, the most subtle and intriguing aspect of the composition. The source of light appears to be above the cross, but, unlike the viewer, is at a three quarter aerial angle from behind the cross. This lighting from above and behind places Christ and the front of the cross in shadow. The figure of Christ therefore is dark with lines indicating only general shape and form. But the side and top surfaces of the cross receive the light from behind Christ, whose head falls away from the light.

Certain responses are invoked by the work whether or not the viewer is familiar with St. John's writings. The work commands a new attention from the viewer. The radically different angle from which the crucifix is seen emphasizes, perhaps even more than other depictions of the crucifix, the intense suffering of Christ. The angle causes Christ's left hand, with the spike prominent, to be the part of his body closest to the viewer. Again, the suffering of Christ is emphasized. And finally, this angle causes Christ's face to be hidden. All these features of the picture generated simply by the angle would leave the viewer with a feeling of devastation.

Aside from the influence of angle, however, there is another powerful element at work. This element is the interplay of light and shadow. The light is coming from above and behind the cross from the right of the viewer. While the light illuminates the sides and top of the cross, it leaves Christ's form in shadow. One's vision is irresistably drawn, by the angle, down toward Christ's darkened form, and is simultaneously drawn toward the light reflected on the cross. This illumination gives the viewer a subtle sense of relief from the utter despair portrayed in the figure of Christ.

The power of this composition lies in the dynamic between the influences of the angle of vision and the effect of light on the subject. What is the significance of this very vivid and dramatic portrayal of Christ's suffering? Why is the light coming from behind, and what is the source of this light? And why is the viewer placed in this position in relation to Christ?

The full significance of this work must be understood in terms of St. John's mystical doctrine of divine love. Anyone who is acquainted with the extensive writings of St. John of the Cross knows that he de-emphasized trinitarian mysticism. But more importantly, he dwelt even less on the crucifixion of Christ. In his writings he intricately describes the rigorous ascetic practices of the mystical life, and the experiences of the divine union with God. This perfection of divine union is characterized by a marriage between the individual soul, who is always the bride, and Christ, who is the beloved Bridegroom. This is known as "Bridal Mysticism," which is central to St. John's teachings. Given this, why does St. John emphasize the crucifix through this very vivid drawing?

St. John wrote very detailed and didactic treatises, but he also utilized aesthetic forms for expressing his religious experiences. He wrote much poetry which communicated divine matters in a way that mere prose could not; for all his treatises are commentaries on his poetry. As for this drawing, it is known to be the product of a vision. But he chose not to express this vision in poetry. Apparently, the subject of this vision was better communicated through a picture than through any verbal expression.

The work was obviously derived from inner religious experience; for its style and composition are unique. It was not meant to be a public image, or even an icon. Rather, it was the pure and simple expression of an esoteric vision, shared only with his fellow spiritual aspirants. Therefore, if we are to interpret this drawing, we must go to St. John's works. In St. John's prose or poetry, it is rare to find anything which relates the crucifixion to his doctrine of the divine marriage. But we do find three small stanzas in one of his less known poems. Here, Christ is speaking to the Father:

Your great power will be seen  
And Your justice and wisdom.  
I will go and tell the world,  
Spreading the word  
Of Your beauty and sweetness  
And of Your sovereignty.

I will go seek My bride  
And take upon Myself  
Her weariness and labors  
In which she suffers so;

And that she may have life  
I will die for her  
And, lifting her out of that deep,  
I will restore her to You.<sup>2</sup>

If we interpret St. John's drawing of the crucifix in light of these few verses, then the mystery of his work is revealed. As these verses plainly express, Christ, the Bridegroom, wants to relieve the bride, or the soul, of her suffering by taking it upon himself. And in doing so, he restores her to the Father.

The viewer of this work is verily the bride, who is looking on from above at the tortured Bridegroom, and who is compelled in the direction of the light source, being restored to the Father. The picture, even more than these revealing verses convey the absolute suffering and sacrifice of Christ, expressing his intensity of love for the bride. While the bride experiences feelings of grief and separation, the light provides a sense of the presence of the Father to whom the bride is restored. Thus the crucifix for St. John is an expression of the intensity of love that the Bridegroom has for the bride as she enters the inner life of God.

#### *The Rāsa Maṇḍala: Aesthetic and Theological Analysis*

As the event of the crucifixion is the climactic event of the Jesus story in the biblical New Testament, so the formation of the great circle, or *maṇḍala* of dancers—Krishna with the cowherd maidens of Vraja, or the Vraja Gopikās—is the climactic event within the ultimate story, known as the Rāsa Līlā (the “play” or *līlā* of the “circular dance” known as the *rāsa*), within the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.<sup>3</sup> (See Figure 3 on next page.) Again, there are endless depictions, with all their variations, for this most celebrated vision of the Rāsa Mandala. And the Rāsa Mandala and its manifestation in the two divine figures of Rādhā and Krishna function as the ultimate vision of divine love, the very focal point of worship, as the crucifixion is for so much of Christianity.

The word *rāsa* indicates a certain ancient dance form which is comprised of the circular formation of many female dancers, whose hands or arms are interlocked with one another in a chain-like manner, and around whose necks

the arms of their male dance partners are placed. In the *līlā* or play of Krishna's *rāsa* dance with the Gopīs, however, it is Krishna who duplicates himself from the center of the *rāsa* circle by virtue of his divine power and becomes the sole male partner for each and every Gopī.

The dance takes place in the paradisal forest of Vraja in which the lotus flowers, full fruit trees and honey bees come alive during the enchanting night, when this divine dance is performed under the full moon of the autumn harvest season. Indeed, the colors that fill the scenery are those of autumn. The viewer of any depiction of the Rāsa Maṇḍala can immediately grasp the joyous occasion of the event. Though the event occurs at night under the full moon, the dancers are always very colorfully adorned and luminously glowing from the arena of the forest setting. The viewer witnesses from an angular ariel view the full circle of the Vraja Gopikās as they dance, each experiencing the exclusive attention of Krishna. It is almost as if the viewer, in effect, joins the other distantly depicted celestial beings floating in the sky who joyously witness the performance while they also sing, play instruments, and shower flowers down upon the dancers. We, the viewer, have joined the audience that is most often depicted in artistic renderings of the Rāsa. The narrative informs us that they sing songs of love in harmony with Krishna and in chorus, as the percussive sounds of the bells on their ankles and belts tingle, while their bracelets clang to the rhythmic movements of their forms, and celestial beings shower flowers down, joining in with song and drumming from the heavens.

The formation of dancers in a circle or *mandala* is loaded with symbolic significance. A circle has no beginning or no end, both in time and space, and thus expresses what is unending and eternal. There is no limit as to how many dancers may join this circle. Just as in geometry a singular point can be inserted between any two points that constitute the circle, indefinitely, over and over again, there is no limit to how many dancers may join the eternal circle of the Rāsa dance. The space within the circle projects a feeling of a closed and exclusive intimacy, while the space outside the circle is open to and inclusive of everything and everyone. This simultaneously existing concavity and convexity of the circle points to the synergistic necessity of both, and a feeling of closedness and openness in the Rāsa, which speaks to the exclusivism and inclusivism, respectively, in a relationship of supreme love with the divine. Moreover, the Rāsa Maṇḍala promotes a balanced sense of individuality that is fully supported by a powerful sense of community and unity.

The circle of the Rāsa is not just any circle, but a circle of dancers that is one of dynamic sacred movement. Note that around the heads of all

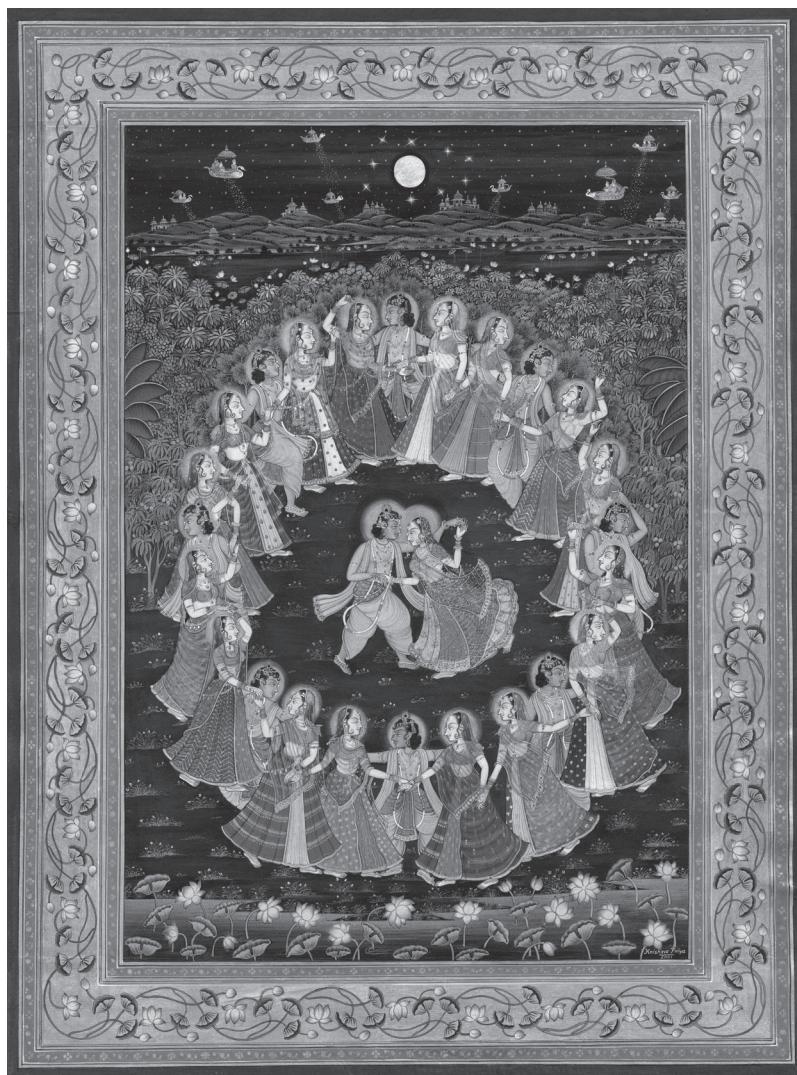


Figure 3. *The Wondrous Circle of the Rāsa Dance: Rāsa Maṇḍala*. Painting by Krishna Priya in Jaipur, State of Rajasthan, India (2001). Opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on handmade jute and cotton board (31 ½" by 23 ½"). Composition designed and commissioned by and located in the private collection of the author.<sup>4</sup>

the female dancers as well as the duplicated forms of Krishna is the glow of a nimbus, which indicates the transcendent and holy state of this event and the personages within it. This event is otherworldly, yet also feels like a paradisial part of this world.

The circle of the *Rāsa* is not static. It revolves around the circle's centerpoint, indicated by the circular movement of dancers. Krishna became the very centerpoint of the circle when the Vraja Gopikās linked arms with one another surrounding him. Then, as it were, Krishna adds to the circle of Gopīs his own centrifugally duplicated forms to attend each Gopī in the dance. But invariably, almost always, the viewer does not see Krishna standing at the center alone, as the *Bhāgavata* narrative describes him. Rather, Krishna is almost always depicted as standing there along side of his goddess consort, Rādhā, the most beloved among all the Vraja Gopikās. It is far more the exception than the rule to find Rādhā missing at the center of the *Rāsa* Maṇḍala.

The presence of a singular Vraja Gopikā, identified as Rādhā, is a radical departure from and addition to the *Rāsa* Līlā's passage wherein the *Rāsa* Maṇḍala is described in detail. There is not even a hint of any other figure accompanying Krishna in such descriptions. This discrepancy between the narrative and artistic expressions points to the theological vision of the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism, the school that is responsible for the natural expectation on the part of almost every Hindu to find Rādhā with Krishna at the center of the *Rāsa*.

Put in the simplest terms here, the school explains that the Vraja Gopikās who make up the circle of female dancers are but the embodiments of Rādhā's emotions. Thus, the whole *Rāsa* Maṇḍala is simply a portrait of both Rādhā and Krishna: the Vraja Gopikās, each as a particular embodiment of Rādhā's emotions, are themselves partially duplicate forms of the goddess Rādhā herself, and Krishna's duplicate forms standing with each one of the Gopīs are, of course, ways in which Krishna lovingly attends to each and every emotional display of Rādhā. While the narrative of the sacred text centrifugally sends multiple duplications of Krishna out into the circle of female dancers, the interpretive eye of the Chaitanya theological school centripetally projects from the Vraja Gopikās into the very center of the circle with Krishna the goddess Gopī, Rādhā, from whom all the other Gopīs originate.

How can Krishna be without his greatest beloved, Rādhā, at the center of the *Rāsa* Maṇḍala? Impossible, says the Chaitanya school. Thus, the *Rāsa* Maṇḍala is an expanded form of the divine couple, as I have spelled out in previous work I have done. And the standardized, intimate depiction of Rādhā

and Krishna standing together united in divine love is essentially a condensed form of the Rāsa Maṇḍala. When gazing or contemplating the divine figures of Rādhā and Krishna, cultivated worshippers see all the Vraja Gopikās and all the duplications of Krishna; and when gazing upon the imagery of the Rāsa Maṇḍala, worshippers see a portrait of the two divine figures.

The standard portrait of both Rādhā and Krishna can be seen in Figure 4. By *standard*, I am referring to both the image's artistic and ecclesiastical contexts. Both Krishna and Rādhā are standing, facing forward with their gazes toward the viewer. Now the viewer has a direct frontal view of the divine figures, in contrast to the ariel view of the Rāsa Maṇḍala. In the rendering of the divine couple shown in Figure 4, one easily observes the emphasis on the loving couple, not only by Rādhā's loving posture that favors Krishna's form, but also in the various traditional and conventional motifs of loving couples employed in painting, such as pairs of birds, a pair of calves, a tree with a vine wrapped around it, etc.

In contrast to the divine figures of Rādhā and Krishna who are dancing within the circle of the Rāsa, here in the standard portrait they are standing closely to one another as if calling out to the viewer. Indeed, Krishna, while holding a flute up to his mouth with both arms, stands with one foot casually crossing over the other stationary foot. This pose of Krishna, with its flowing bodily curvature, is known as his very lovely and attractive "three-fold bending form." It is with the music of the flute that Krishna calls souls to himself and his yearning heart, the very music he makes to attract the Vraja Gopikās out of their homes to be with him in the forest to perform the Rāsa dance. It could perhaps be conjectured that when Krishna is closely present with Rādhā and also playing the flute, that the divine couple is calling us, the viewer, to them. It is as if they are calling viewers to join them in the eternal dance of the Rāsa.

Western and Indian scholars alike have viewed the amorous or even "erotic" imagery of the Rāsa Līlā allegorically as the soul's passion to be united with God, and some take it as a form of mystical eroticism. Still others fear that its impassioned expressions might promote a degrading form of religion. The Vaishnava devotee, however, to this day, embraces the episode as the perfect picture of God's most intimate self, in the most profound revelation of divine love.

#### ***Comparative Reflections: Sacrifice, Suffering, and Salvation***

The view afforded by the artistic rendering of these greatest symbols of divine love send powerful theological messages to the viewer. The viewers

of St. John's crucifixion and the Rāsa Maṇḍala experience a viewpoint that is aerial. Such an aerial view dramatically draws the viewer closer to the arena of salvation. With the former, the viewer is being lifted up into the realm of light in which God dwells. With the latter, the viewer is being lifted up to view the full circle and splendidous sight of the Rāsa dance, as an invitation to enter it, to participate in it, and ultimately to be drawn into it. The frontal view of most crucifixion depictions and the conventional frontal view of the divine couple is both confronting and beckoning at the same time. Both call the viewer into engagement with the event of redemption, salvation, and elevation.

The contrasts between the two great images and their respective surrounding altar-like supporting narratives are dramatic and telling. In the Christian context, it is God that makes the sacrifice, while in the Vaishnava context, the soul makes the sacrifice. In the former, God sends his only son, and when he does, he is tortured, he suffers, and dies a most agonizing death. In the latter, God as Krishna does not sacrifice, but the Gopīs who do. They leave home and effectively die to the world, sacrificing all social norms, and they even relinquish their physical bodies to be with Krishna, undergoing a kind of death. Both expressions of sacrifice are ultimate, total, and necessitate death as a means to a salvific end. Both speak to the ways in which the power of divine love is boundless and ultimately cannot be contained by anything in this world.

The greater narrative of the Christian symbol begins in the divine realm with God sending his only begotten son to this world, and then returns to the divine realm via the resurrection. Again, it is God doing all the work here. In contrast, it is the soul that begins in this world, as a Gopī does in her home, undergoes a transformative death that gives the soul a spiritual body to be with Krishna in the Rāsa, and then the soul returns to this world, as the Gopis do at the end of the Rāsa event. In the Vaishnava instance, all the work is being done by the soul. The former displays the power of God's love through his grace, and the latter displays the power of the soul's love through her devotional passion. The former displays God's power of love to become weak and meek like a human, and the latter displays the soul's power of love to become elevated to the divine so as to participate in the inner life of God. It is God who initiates the gift of grace to humans through Jesus. It is also God who out of a divine yearning calls all souls to his heart through the sounding of the divine flute. But in the former, souls are absolved of their sins and suffering by God's sacrifice, whereas in the latter, souls are absolved of any suffering and even worldly happiness by their own sacrifice and intense passion in their love for the divine.



Figure 4. Rādhā and Krishna in Vraja Scenery. Ivory miniature 5 3/4" x 3 5/8". 19th century. Artist unknown (initials CK appear on bottom right corner). Miniature in the collection of the author.

Both traditions infuse in the hearts of their worshippers an intense longing for the divine, but in very different ways. In the suffering that Jesus undergoes, worshippers suffer with Jesus. Some Christians may even feel or experience his wounds or desire to do so. There is a profound sense of the suffering in Jesus' sacrifice that is powerful enough to save souls from sin. This longing and grieving for Jesus is a powerful, divinely uniting force for the Christian and the crucifixion in compelling ways stimulates this relationship.

In my analyses of the *Rāsa Līlā*, I have shown that there are nine phases or characteristics of divine love: (1) awakening (2) anticipation (3) meeting (4) conflict (5) separation (6) devastating loss (7) reunion (8) rejoicing, and (9) returning. The formation of the *Rāsa Maṇḍala* occurs during the eighth phase, *rejoicing* in the triumph of love. I believe that these phases can be observed as occurring in the Jesus narrative as well. The crucifixion, for example, would be occurring at the sixth phase, *devastating loss* and grief in the experience of God's absence and an intense longing to be with God and to be saved by God. But the existence of the sixth phase, as with any other phase, depends on the existence and experience of the other phases. And thus, within the devastating loss expressed in the crucifixion is the rejoicing in the triumph of love through the resurrection. In love, one cannot have one phase without the others, at least to some minute degree. Within the rejoicing in the triumph of love expressed in the *Rāsa Maṇḍala* is the devastating loss when being separated from Krishna or the inability to find Krishna, as is narrated in the story line of the *Rāsa Līlā*.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that these remarks are only a "sketch," and volumes could be written on the subject matter at hand. In closing, it should be pointed out that in the image of the crucifixion there is an expression of suffering and loss not just on the part of humans for the divine, but also on the part of the divine from within the divine, that is, God for his only begotten son. The contemplation on devastating loss in the form of the depths that suffering takes in the crucifixion in unexcelled, fueling the meaning and power of the resurrection. On the other hand, it must be observed that the *Rāsa Maṇḍala* is a celebration of the power of love, not just over the hearts of humans, but also over the heart of God. God becomes subsumed even by the love coming from souls, and this is expressed by the *Rāsa* dance itself. Krishna is known to have a bluish complexion, and the *Vraja Gopikās* golden. The narrative of the *Rāsa*, in a key verse, points out that Krishna's complexion changes to an emerald green color, yet the complexion of the *Vraja Gopikās* does not change. Mixing the complexions of both, the blue of Krishna and the golden of the *Gopīs*, produces the secondary color of green. But it is significant that it is Krishna's complexion

that changes and not that of the Gopīs, thus expressing how even the divinity can be transformed by the power of the soul's love.

### Endnotes

1. Much of my analysis of St. John's drawing of the crucifixion here in this essay is taken from my published chapter, entitled "Imagery of Divine Love: The Crucifix Drawing of John of the Cross," in *Carmelite Studies VI: John of the Cross*, edited by Steven Payne, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1992), 162-166.

2. St. John of the Cross, *Romance 7*, "The Incarnation," verses 9-11 *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez with an introduction by Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 1964), 731.

3. Rāsa Līlā (also known as *rāsa-krīḍa*) is the name of particular *līlā* or, a special dance of divine love between the supreme divinity Krishna and his divine cowherd consorts, the Gopīs. The Rāsa Līlā, as it is described in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, is especially treasured by the Caitanya (or Gauḍiya) school of Vaishnavism as the highest and most sacred revelation of God's love. In modern times, the phrase *rāsa līlā* can also refer to dramatic and musical performances of the many other childhood *līlās* of Krishna that are performed in and outside of India.

The complete episode of the Rāsa Līlā, including the events that lead up to Krishna's dance of divine love, is often referred to as the *rāsa-līlā-pañcādhya-yāyi*, the "five chapters of the Rāsa Līlā," comprised of chapters twenty-nine through thirty-three from the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata* text. Although the episode is found in less theologically rich and poetically elaborate forms within the *Harivaiśa* and *Vishnu Purāṇa*, the *Bhāgavata* version has been the most celebrated and honored source of the Rāsa Līlā. Especially for the Caitanya school of Vaishnavism, for whom this episode is held as the most sacred and ultimate culmination of all other *līlās* of Krishna, the *Bhāgavata* is the authoritative text.

For a complete study and translation of the Rāsa Līlā chapters of the *Bhāgavata*, see my *Dance of Divine Love: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa: India's Classic Sacred Love Story Introduced, Translated, and Illuminated* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

4. Frontispiece for my book, *Dance of Divine Love*.



## THE WORD BECAME FLESH: THE DYNAMIC HUMANITY OF JESUS

Edward L. Shirley

**J**esus was a man who lived, died, and, according to his early followers, was Resurrected.<sup>1</sup> In the Gospels, Jesus asks his apostles who people say he is. After hearing a variety of answers, ranging from the generic “one of the prophets” to the specific “John the Baptist, back from the dead,” he asks them “But who do you say I am?” Mark, the earliest gospel, portrays Peter saying simply “You are the Messiah,” (Mark 8: 29? but Matthew, written perhaps 20 years later, has Peter saying “You are the Christ [that is, the Messiah], the Son of the Living God.” (Mt 16:11) Dermot Lane has outlined four distinct stages of Christological reflection (focusing on the phrase “Jesus is Lord”) in the formation of the New Testament literature itself, running from “Eschatological Prophet” (the bringer and ruler of the Kingdom) to the Word made flesh (“Lord” now indicating divinity). Each new stage was precipitated by historical shifts, whether the spread of the Gospel to new populations (Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles), or the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.<sup>2</sup>

The post-New Testament Christian community continued to ask this question, and continued to offer responses.<sup>3</sup> From Clement of Rome (perhaps contemporaneous with the Gospel of John) through the Apostolic Fathers, into the Apologists and early theologians like Tertullian and Irenaeus, the on-going significance of Jesus to the Christian community was reflected upon, discussed, and debated. This was expressed in metaphors such as a building crane, hoisting stones with the rope of the Holy Spirit; the Word coming from Silence; and, with Tertullian, the language, if not a complete theology, of nature and person.

I cannot go into detail about these debates, and, indeed, do not have to for a good portion of this assembled group. However, because this is a dialogical encounter with Vaishnavas, perhaps not familiar with said development, I will offer a summary of the issues at stake. In its simplest form, the question centers around the relationship between the humanity of Jesus, on the one hand, and whatever is his relationship with the Father, on the other. Many positions were proposed by one group or another. The following is a brief summary of those

proposals. Many of these proposals had a variety of specific forms, only a few of which will be mentioned.

1. Jesus was simply a human being, albeit an extraordinary one, through whom God works. This form was often called “Adoptionism,” because it proposed that at some point in his life, Jesus was “adopted,” i.e., chosen and empowered by God.

2. Jesus was a divine, or at least, purely spiritual being, who only appeared to be human. This view was held by diverse groups such as the Docetists (he “appeared” to be human) and the Gnostics. Often their view of Jesus was colored by a dualistic mindset that saw matter, and therefore the body, as evil in and of itself. Sometimes the creation of matter was attributed to a lesser, or even evil, being, whom the Jews worshipped as “God.” That, in itself, was problematic to the mainstream of the Christian community, given both the generally-held Christian view that the God of the Jews was, indeed, the Father of Jesus, and that Creation was the work of that God, who declared it “good.”

3. Jesus was the incarnation of the Logos, which was the first Creation, and, thus, a higher reality than the rest of Creation, though not actually divine. This was the view of the Arians. Interestingly, in Arius’ view, Jesus was neither divine, nor, strictly speaking, fully human.

4. Jesus was a divine person who certainly had a human aspect, but his divinity swallowed up, as it were, his humanity. This is the view that seems to have been held by the Monophysites, who claimed that after the Incarnation, there was only “one nature” in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

5. Jesus was human with the Divine Word riding around inside him. Jesus’ humanity cooperated with the Logos, with whom it shared a moral but not metaphysical unity. This was the view of Nestorius.

6. Jesus was, at the same time, both fully human and fully divine. Irenaeus, for example, argued this, maintaining that given both the Christian doctrine of monotheism and the Christian doctrine of salvation as becoming a new Creation, and being made partakers in the Divine Life, the Savior must be both divine (only God can create and give divine life), and human (God must be truly, and not simply metaphorically, united with humanity).

These debates reached turning points with the first four Ecumenical Councils: Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon. Nicea and Constantinople, of course, held in 325 and 381, respectively, declared Jesus to be consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, and thus set the direction for understanding the Godhead as a dynamic Trinity of interrelated modes, or “Persons.” Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) were more directly connected with our

question here, ultimately declaring Jesus to be one Person (*hypostasis* and *prosopon*), uniting two complete natures (*physis*) trying to give expression to the mysterious relationship of unity and distinction (*acintyabhedābheda?*) between the integral humanity and integral divinity of Jesus: in his divinity, he is everything the Father is, without being “Father,” and in his humanity, he is everything we are, except for sin and the tendencies toward sin.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the earliest Fathers spoke of Christ as both Illuminator and Example. Humans, they reasoned, needed illumination, not only because as humans, God was completely beyond our ability to comprehend, but also because sin had blurred our intellect. They said Christ was an example of what human life was supposed to be about. Hence, he was seen in his humanity as a model of authentic human life, and as the cause of our ability to so live.

It is clear that the mainstream of Christian thought, and, for our purposes, the whole of Catholic Christianity, came to the conclusion that Jesus is the full Incarnation of the Divine Word, that is, God’s Self-Expression, which is, in Itself, God, as human. Thus, Jesus is seen to be more than simply a “God-realized” human, more than the epitome and apex of what human beings are called to be. He is seen to be more than simply the full flowering of the Presence of God within Creation. He is seen as somehow also being the actual Presence of God in human history: Emmanuel. In Christ, Christians proclaim, God has entered human history as one of us: that human history is God’s own history.

Contemporary theologians have identified two approaches to Christology: ascending Christology (a.k.a., “Christology from below”), and descending Christology (a.k.a., “Christology from above”). Again, for the sake of our dialogical partners, I will explain the significance of these approaches. Ascending Christology begins with the historical Jesus, and, looking at his life, asks how one sees God in action. This is the earliest approach to Christology, beginning, obviously, with Jesus, who lived and taught, ate and drank, laughed and wept, died and rose. Descending Christology, on the other hand, begins with the divinity of Jesus, and asks how this divinity manifests itself as human. Using this very simple shorthand, one could say that the Gospel of Mark, which views Jesus as the Eschatological Prophet who will usher in the Kingdom of God, is an example of ascending Christology, and that the Gospel of John, which begins with the Logos, who “is with God, and is God,” and who “became flesh,” is an example of descending Christology. Since the Council of Chalcedon, Christological reflection took a definite “descending” emphasis, asking how the Infinite Logos could, in fact, become *anything*, including flesh. The humanity of Jesus tended to be defined totally in light of this descent, sometimes losing

a recognizable humanity in the process. For example, medieval theologians, often using the term *hypostasis* (person) in a univocal rather than analogous way, tended to see Jesus as a divine Person who *had* a human nature. This had implications for the knowledge and consciousness of Jesus: being divine, he was omniscient. As human, he enjoyed complete infused knowledge, that is, “poured in” directly from his divinity, yet also had “acquired” knowledge, that which is learned through experience or teaching. Karl Rahner, a twentieth century Catholic theologian, upon whose thought this paper is based, referred to this as a “crypto-monophysitism,” for it often tended to blur the significance of the real humanity. Indeed, medieval theologians sometimes speculated that any one of the Divine Persons *could have* become incarnate (thus, the Incarnation tells us nothing of the inner workings of God), and that whatever Divine Person *did* incarnate, *could have* become some other creature than human. Thus, the Incarnation did not tell us anything specific about either the properties of the Logos nor of what it means to be human.

Renewed interest in study of Scripture and the Fathers, particularly the development of higher criticism among Scripture scholars, has helped to begin to address this imbalance. Unfortunately, some theologians, in their enthusiasm for a newly rediscovered “ascending” Christology, have run aground of an at least crypto-Nestorianism: a tendency to so over-emphasize the humanity of Christ that one could get the impression that he is “only” a human being who is chosen and moved by the workings of the Spirit.

This paper is not a detailed analysis of the dangers of imbalance on either side of the equation, nor is it an attempt to answer once and for all the precise way in which two distinct “natures” (to use the classical term) are, or can be, united on one “person.”<sup>6</sup> Nor is it a detailed exploration of the Christology of Karl Rahner. It is, however, an exploration of what it means for Christ to be truly human, particularly as seen from the standpoint of Rahner’s theological anthropology. This discussion is shaped, in part, by the question posed by my colleague, Ravindra Svarupa, of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness: “What does it mean for the Lord to become a devotee?” particularly as seen in the life of Sri Caitanya, and stands as a reminder of how interreligious dialogue must remind us to return to our own theological roots, and, in the words of *Nostra Aetate*, albeit in a different context, “to examine more closely” the implications of what we have said in the past.

*Rahner's Christology: Summary*

Though Christology is not the foundation of Rahner's system, it does play a central role in his thought, as Rahner himself stated that Christology stands at the center of all other mysteries of the faith, for they are all revealed there.<sup>7</sup> It is on the basis of Rahner's understanding of grace, presented in the previous chapter, that his Christological writings can best be appreciated.

Though a major article from the early 1950's indicated that Rahner was aware of the difficulties the traditional approach to Christology was facing, it was not until the late 1950's and early 1960's that he began to treat the issue with any detail. Some initial articles raised the question of how the immutable Word of God could actually *become* human: This is the period where he concentrated on Christology from above.<sup>8</sup> Some early writings also dealt with the devotion to the Sacred Heart as the center of the humanity of Jesus. It is within this context that Rahner developed his theology of the "real symbol."

Later Rahner turned to questions raised by the more independent position of Scriptural exegesis, which in heavily discounting the Gospel of John as a historical source, eliminated the traditional source of much descent Christology. It is at this point that Rahner, without repudiating his earlier positions, began to develop his ideas of an ascending Christology, in which he focused on the issues of Christology within an evolutionary worldview and the knowledge and consciousness of Christ. And finally, in his last major work, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner attempted to synthesize these two earlier phases.

Rahner holds that there are two basic types of Christology, both of which can be expressed in either orthodox or heterodox manners, which exist in relationship to each other; in fact, quite often one finds them in a hybrid state. Rahner calls them the "Saving History Type" and the "Metaphysical Type."<sup>9</sup>

The Christology of Saving History begins with the fact that the eye of the believer, in his experience of saving history, falls upon Jesus in his human reality: the fact that God is gracious to humans despite our refusal becomes definitively and unsurpassably clear to the experience of faith in Jesus. Jesus, then, is not simply *an* utterance of God to humanity, but is *the* definitive, unsurpassable and victorious, that is to say, eschatological utterance.

Hence, Jesus cannot be just another prophet or religious leader; on the contrary, from this starting point, one can arrive at the faith expressed in the Chalcedonian statements, provided that they themselves are correctly understood.<sup>10</sup> The point of departure, then, is the human Jesus and the Resurrection in which his fate was brought to its conclusion. In Jesus is

experienced the fact that the mystery of humanity, which is not for humans themselves to control, is hidden in God. “Jesus in his human lot is the (not al!) address of God to man, and as such eschatologically unsurpassable.”<sup>11</sup>

In this type of Christology, then, Jesus is seen in the context of the individual human’s quest for salvation in the concrete conditions of his life; there is no connection to the cosmos or saving history. Any transition to the metaphysical type of Christology could at most be arrived at on the basis that the Spirit given through Jesus signifies the self-communication of the absolute God to humanity as he is in himself.

When speaking of the second type, Metaphysical Christology, Rahner uses the term “metaphysical” in its broadest sense, and not simply to designate the classical Western philosophy of being. This type is marked with two special characteristics:

1. A markedly descending Christology which is more than simply the inversion of the first type. This characteristic emphasizes the pre-existence of the Logos, Jesus’ relation to the Father, and so forth. The Logos descends from heaven, assumes a human reality of his own in such a way that the Logos claims as his own the history which he himself has shaped and molded.<sup>12</sup>

2. The second characteristic implies a doctrine concerning the cosmic and transcendental significance of the Incarnation: the Logos created the world, and the Incarnation is the highest point of the relationship of the Logos to the world. Creation, then, is the enabling condition for the *kenosis* of the Logos in the Incarnation: humanity is that which comes to be to the extent that God utters Godself. The Incarnation is, then, the supreme moment of the history of the cosmos and of humanity.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it can be seen, that Rahner’s transcendental Christology and Christology within an evolutionary framework, which are generally classified as components of Rahner’s ascending Christology (in the sense he uses the terms in *Foundations*, and as defined by McDermott), are actually part of the metaphysical type of Christology. Again, it is good to keep in mind Rahner’s caution of the ambiguous use of the terms “ascending” and “descending.”

Let us now turn our investigation to specific points of Rahner’s Christology. I shall only briefly describe Rahner’s descending Christology, focusing on his treatment of the Real Symbol. And though Rahner himself does not offer a complete anthropology, I will offer brief parallels from modern social sciences with regard to the dynamism of the human person.

### *Theology of the Real Symbol*

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1: 14). This verse contains three words, which, for Rahner, contained the keys to understanding the full impact of the Incarnation: Word, became, and flesh. For it is precisely the Word, and no other divine hypostasis, that Incarnated in Jesus. This Word, immutable by virtue of divinity, really *became* something; and that *something* is precisely flesh, that is to say, a human reality.

Rahner addresses the question of why the Logos becomes flesh. Some strands of medieval theology, in a desire to maintain the equality of the Three Divine Persons, maintained that any one of the Three could have become Incarnate. In fact, many theologians speculated as to whether God could have incarnated in some other form than human. The fact that it was the Logos that became human was not intrinsically connected to the place of the Logos within the Godhead, nor to the role that humanity plays in the economy of salvation.

Rahner, on the other hand, maintains that it is precisely the Logos, and only the Logos, that can become Incarnate, and that said Incarnation must be human. To understand this, we must examine Rahner's theology of the Real Symbol. No theology is complete, Rahner maintains, unless it is also a theology of the symbol, of the expression. Here Rahner turns to his understanding of the Trinity as the ontological background for such a theology. Though he does not work out the precise connections, he says "It is enough for our purpose to point out very simply that the theology of the Logos is strictly a theology of the symbol, and indeed the supreme form of it..."<sup>14</sup>

"The Logos is the 'word' of the Father, his perfect 'image,' his 'imprint,' his radiance, his self-expression."<sup>15</sup>

But this means that the Logos is the 'symbol' of the Father, in the very sense which we have given the word: the inward symbol which remains distinct from what is symbolized expresses itself and possesses itself.<sup>16</sup>

Rahner maintains that every being possesses plurality as an intrinsic element of its unity. This plurality constitutes itself in such a way that that which is distinct and originated (that is, derivative) is in agreement with its origin, and hence has the character of expression or "symbol" with regard to its origin. Thus, the first axiom might be stated more fully: "Being is of itself symbolic, because it necessarily 'expresses' itself."<sup>17</sup>

Here the reader can also be referred to Rahner's theology of the Economic and Immanent Trinity: in the offer of God's self-communication to humanity and the free human acceptance of that offer, God becomes present in

history in the mode of the Logos. Thus, the fact that the Logos-made-flesh is God's *eikon* in the economy of salvation is a reflection of the role within the Immanent Trinity as the Father's self-expression. Thus Rahner can maintain that one can understand the Incarnation only if one understands the Logos as the Immanent expression of the Father, and one can understand the Logos only if one understands the Incarnation and the identity of the Immanent and Economic Trinity.<sup>18</sup> In this case, the Logos as the symbol *ad extra* in the Incarnation would be simply the continuation of its function within the Trinity itself.

It is because God 'must' 'express' himself inwardly that he can also utter himself outwardly; the finite, created utterance *ad extra* is a continuation of the immanent constitution of 'image and likeness'—a free continuation, because its object is finite—and takes place in fact 'through' the Logos (Jn 1:3), in a sense which cannot be determined more closely here.<sup>19</sup>

This, of course, has even further implications for the humanity of Christ, for if the humanity, as discussed previously, is in fact the self-disclosure of the Logos himself (so that when God exteriorizes himself the result is the humanity of the Logos), then

It follows from what has been said that the Logos, as Son of the Father, is truly, in his humanity as such, the revelatory symbol in which the Father announces himself, in this Son, to the world—revelatory because the symbol renders present what is revealed.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Significance of the Real Humanity***

What is the nature of this humanity, then? The Council of Chalcedon declared that Jesus is true human, and, indeed, Rahner states, "God is man, this really tells us something about God himself."<sup>21</sup> But what precisely does this tell us? How are we to develop our understanding of the significance of this humanity? In classical and medieval theology, human nature was conceived in terms of body and soul. If Jesus is truly human, he must have everything that is necessary for humans to be human, and that would be body and soul.

However, the question of what is meant by body and soul is somewhat problematic, even without the questioning of traditional Hellenistic metaphysics during the European Enlightenment in the 18th and 19th centuries. Today, our view of what it means to be human has expanded. This does not necessarily mean an abandonment of "body-soul" language, but it does mean that traditional understanding must be expanded. Today, no anthropology could even

pretend to be complete without taking into account the natural and social sciences. Thus, some anthropologies look at the human person as physical, psychological, sociological, political, historical, and many other adjectives. Rahner, in his theological anthropology, begins with the human person as historically constituted.

### ***Humanity as Faced with the Infinite Mystery***

Rahner begins with concrete human existence in the world. Each person is a particular historical persons with a particular historicity: born with particular parents, as a particular ethnicity and sex, raised in particular circumstances, all in a particular time and place, with particular experiences that help to form who we are. There is no “place,” as it were, for human beings to encounter themselves or the Divine outside of this realm. There is no “Neoplatonic” escape to a non-created realm, even within the mind, for human beings are formed within their concrete historicity.

Let us use some concrete examples. It is clear that our physical being is initially formed through the union of sperm and egg. In the Christian worldview, each individual person is unique in his or her own historical situation. Had another sperm entered the egg, or had another egg been present in the womb, the unique combination of sperm and egg that is you (barring identical twins) would not exist.

Likewise, we know that our mental and emotional sides are also formed by the world around us. It is now recognized that the physical and emotional well being of the mother affects the child in the womb. When born, a child comes into a concrete situation: whether the child is raised by birth parents, adopted, or in foster care; whether there are siblings or the child is an only child; the relationship of the parents: loving, combative, divorced; rich, poor, middle class; all of this goes into the mix we call the human person.

While Rahner begins with our historicity, he also maintains that we are free beings. Rahner’s argument for human freedom is based on the fact that humans have discovered their own historical causation. For example, Marx identified historical and economic factors that form human consciousness. Freud identified internal psychological forces over which we have, evidently, no control. No less a person as B. F. Skinner maintained that there was no such thing as human freedom, that if he knew all of the factors that influenced a person, he could predict their every move.

Rahner counters with the argument that to recognize our causation indicates

that somehow we are more than that causation: if we were *only* rats in a maze, we could not discover the fact that we were rats in a maze. To discover our causation means that we somehow also transcend that causation.

Rahner maintains that any change in one's relationship to the world simultaneously involves a change in the self, who one is becoming. Some changes are thrust upon us, as for example, the presence of siblings. Other changes are products of our own choices. When we choose a new relationship with the world, we are choosing, according to Rahner, who we shall become.

Let me, again, use an example. If we are driving down the highway, and see someone in need of help, our choices include (1) stop and help; (2) call for help; (3) pass them by, without helping; (4) point and laugh. When we make that choice, Rahner maintains that we are choosing, perhaps without realizing it, to transcend our limitations or to become self-enclosed. As we continue to make choices throughout our lives, choices become easier, based on past choices, and, ultimately, we choose whether to be a person open in love and transcendence or to become a self-enclosed person.<sup>22</sup> Thus, from a Christian standpoint, our historical choices end with death, and we are the person we chose to become. There is no external "judgment": we *are* persons united to, or alienated from, others.

For Rahner, the "goal" of self-transcendence is not some finite reality. Rahner accepts Aristotle's contention that human beings are a drive to know, that is, to experience. However, every experience, every "answer," is accompanied by a simultaneous arising of a new question. Perhaps this question is articulated no more fully than simply, "Is this all there is?" If we are true to this inner drive, which constitutes who we are, our ultimate goal, according to Rahner, is not simply a continuous series of finite experiences, but is oriented toward the Infinite Horizon of Mystery. Take, again as an analogy for this drive, walking. As we walk, we "bump into" objects: walls, rocks, trees, and so forth. However, if we are true to an infinite drive to walk, we are oriented toward the horizon, a horizon that can never be reached: it is always beyond. Beyond the finite experiences of beings lies the Infinite Horizon of Being Itself.

This Infinite Horizon, which can never be captured in finite experience, is what Christians mean by the word "God." Human persons are, in their very constitution, beings oriented toward the Infinite Horizon.

At the same time, we cannot, Rahner says, simply identify ourselves as this drive, as though we were identical to that drive. If it were us, or if we were that drive, pure and simple, there would be no freedom to choose self-enclosure. Therefore, this drive toward the Infinite is, at the same time,

something like our innermost reality, while at the same time, being something other than what we are. This drive, Rahner maintains, is an invitation to participate in the reality of the Infinite. This drive, both at our core and beyond us, is, Rahner maintains, what Christian tradition calls “grace.” Unlike scholastic theology, which identified grace as a *tertium quid*, given by God, to create a change, an effect in us (Aristotle’s category of efficient causality), Rahner maintains that the gift is, in fact, the Giver: God’s offer of God’s own Self, that works within us, not as an efficient cause (causing an effect other than itself), but “more like” what Aristotle called “formal causality” (like that which drives an acorn to become an oak). Sometimes Rahner’s idea is identified as “quasi-formal causality”: God’s offer of Self, to which we are invited to say “yes” becomes the deepening of our unity with God.

To the extent that one says, “Yes” to this offer, the Infinite Mystery becomes part of one’s concrete human existence. Since an invitation is only such if there is a real possibility of acceptance, a complete yes would mean the full Presence of the Infinite Mystery in human history. If we are honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that we are not complete “yeses” to this offer. We are, for the most part, a combination of yes and no. Rahner says we must search human history to see if there has ever been such a yes.

This is what Christian tradition says of Jesus. In his divinity, he is the fullness of God’s offer of self-communication. In his humanity, he is the full acceptance of said offer. This has traditionally been called the hypostatic union, the union in the one *hypostasis*, Person, of two distinct natures: human and divine. Rahner reinterprets this doctrine as the union of full offer and full acceptance. Thus, Rahner says, the hypostatic union stands as at least the asymptote toward which human persons are oriented. The difference between Jesus and us, Rahner says, is that while he is both the offer and the acceptance, we are not the offer. Whether Rahner actually accomplishes what he hopes is beyond the scope of this paper. However, at the very least, we should register no surprise if Rahner’s position raises more questions. This is something that Rahner has already told us must be the case.

### *Christology in an Evolutionary Worldview*

Hebrews 1:1 says that God has spoken in many and partial ways in the past, through the prophets, but “in these, the last days, he has given us a son.” The theme of the “fullness of time” is important for the Christian understanding of Jesus. Christian theologians since the 18th century have

talked about the distinction between human history and salvation history: *Geschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte*. Because of Rahner's theological anthropology, in which the dynamism of human existence is constituted by God's offer of self-communication, human history *is* salvation history. In fact, Rahner himself acknowledges that his position may be closer to the traditional Franciscan approach to Christology than the traditional Thomistic approach: Christ is the fullness of Creation itself. In this view, one might do a sort of Christian "midrash" of John 1:14, and say "The Word was becoming flesh."

The question can now be raised as to how exactly to envision this relationship of the Incarnation to Creation, particularly in light of the contemporary scientific view of the evolution of human life: if Christ is related to the whole of Creation, and if that Creation has come about through an evolutionary process, then there is a necessity to develop a theological interpretation of that process in light of the Incarnation. This, in fact, is one of Rahner's most significant contributions to the field of Christology, and it is, in fact, this approach which characterizes his so-called ascending Christology.

The history of the cosmos as described by natural sciences is seen as the homogeneous history of matter, life and humanity. This one history does not exclude, but includes differences in nature. In this history, the lower evolves to the higher, the lower preparing the way for the higher by the development of its own order and reality. In this evolution, it moves toward the boundary line (which is seen only in retrospect, and even then without any clear resolution) in its own history, which it then crosses in actual self-transcendence.<sup>23</sup>

Humans are the self-transcendence of living matter, for the history of nature and spirit forms an inner graded unity, which develops toward humanity and continues in humanity as its own history. This history is conserved and surpassed in humans and reaches its proper goal with and in the history of free spirit. Since human history still includes the natural history of living matter, it is always supported, even in the midst of freedom, by the structures and necessities of the material world. Therefore, since humans are not simply observers, but participators as well, human history is also the history of the alteration of the material world.

The goal of natural history corresponds to human transcendence into God, who is infinite Mystery, and hence the goal of natural history remains hidden from natural human powers. Insofar as it is the history of free spirit, it is also posed in freedom, like human history, as the history of guilt and trial. However, insofar as it is also embraced by the grace of God, according to Christian belief,

the history of the cosmos as a whole will find its own consummation despite, in, and through human freedom.<sup>24</sup>

Rahner criticizes the natural scientific view of humanity as a temporary accident of nature, which will one day again be swallowed up by a nature which is indifferent to its existence. Such a view, he says, ignores the fact that humanity is the product of nature (and thus contradicts not only metaphysics and Christian thought, but also natural science itself).<sup>25</sup> Rather, the ability of nature to become present-to-self has become a reality in humans. This cosmic self-consciousness is given in a unique way in each individual, even if only incompletely.

For in his corporeality, every man is an element of the cosmos which cannot really be delimited and cut off from it, and in this corporeality he communicates with the whole cosmos in such a way that through this corporeality of man taken as the other element of belonging to the spirit, the cosmos really presses forward to this self-presence in the spirit.<sup>26</sup>

This self-presence in spirit of the individual human has a still-continuing history, taking place in the history of the individual and humanity as a whole in self-present act, both individually and collectively. Though at times it seems that nothing final will emerge from this history because the process seems to dissipate itself, this seeming dissipation is only because at present it is impossible to see the whole picture. Indeed, the very notion of evolution implies a final goal, since evolution indicates a tendency, without which there would have been no beginning. The goal is the immortality of the soul, understood in the sense that it is the process by which the cosmos finds itself, and not as an escape from the material world.<sup>27</sup>

The self-transcendence of the cosmos in humanity toward its own totality and foundation finds its final consummation when the spiritual creatures receive the ultimate self-communication of its ultimate ground itself, that is, the self-communication of God in grace and glory as its consummation.

God does not merely create something than himself—he also gives himself to this other. The world receives God, the Infinite and ineffable mystery, to such an extent that he himself becomes its innermost life.<sup>28</sup>

This takes place when the absolute ground of the human individual's reality becomes directly interior to him, who is grounded by it: "The end is the absolute beginning."<sup>29</sup>

If the history of the cosmos is basically a spiritual history--the desire to become conscious of itself and of its cause--then the direct relationship to God in his self-communication to his spiritual creature, and in it to the cosmos in general, as the goal which corresponds to the meaning of this development, is basically an indisputable fact, provided that this development is allowed to any degree at all to reach its own absolute goal and is not merely moved by it as something unattainable.<sup>30</sup>

### *Christ as the Apex of Human Evolution*

Rahner presupposes the purpose of the world is God's self-communication to it. He presupposes that the world dynamism, which is placed by God in the heart of the world, is always meant as the beginning and first step toward this self-communication and its acceptance by the world. The spiritual subjectivities of the cosmos signify freedom. Once this is presupposed, it is possible to also presuppose that the history of the self-consciousness of the cosmos is also the history of the intercommunication of these spiritual subjects, with the result that they become more intimate to each other (otherwise becoming present to self would separate and not unite). Thus, there is a common history, and God's self-communication given to the human race is historical.<sup>31</sup>

Human persons, who possess a transcendental hope for their individual and communal fulfillment, must look to history to see if such a hope has been realized. The historical person who comes in space and time and signifies the beginning of God's absolute self-communication which inaugurates this self-communication for all people as something irrevocable and as a sign this is happening, Rahner gives the title "Savior." Christians proclaim that this Savior is precisely Jesus of Nazareth.

This does not mean that God's self-communication to the world begins in time only with Jesus (and certainly Christian belief maintains that it did, in fact exist before him). Rather, this is the person in whom the process of God's self-communication comes irrevocably as a whole; in him this self-communication reaches its climax, equally both as an offer and acceptance. This is the Event in which the history of the self-communication of God realizes its proper nature and in which it breaks through.

Just as any historical movement exists in virtue of its end even in its beginning, so, too, with the history of this self-communication, even when it takes place before it is made irrevocable in the Savior.

The whole movement of this history lives only for the moment of arrival at its goal and climax—it lives only for its entry into the event which makes it

irreversible—in short, it lives for the one whom we call Saviour.<sup>32</sup>

Now it becomes possible to see what is meant by the hypostatic union, and the Incarnation of the Logos, and how it fits into the evolutionary world view. The Savior is the historical moment of God's saving action exercised on the world, a moment which is part of the history of the cosmos itself in its climax (and not simply God's acting on the world). This is what is meant by the Christian dogma "Jesus is true human" (truly part of the earth, "born of woman").<sup>33</sup> Jesus is just like us in his spiritual, human and finite subjectivity, that is to say, the recipient of God by grace.<sup>34</sup>

The Logos, then, assumes the unity of human nature: "In Jesus, the Logos bears the matter just as much as the soul, and this matter is a part of the reality and the history of the cosmos."<sup>35</sup> Even traditional theology, Rahner points out, held that after death, the Logos had a different relationship to his body, but not a looser one.

His taking hold of this part of the one material-spiritual world-reality may quite legitimately be thought of as the climax of that dynamism in which the Word of God who supports everything, supports the self-transcendence of the world as a whole.<sup>36</sup>

Creation, then, is a part-moment in the process of God's coming into the world. Creation and Incarnation are not two disparate, adjacent acts of God *ad extra*, but are two moments and phases of the one unique process of God's self-renunciation and self-expression in something other than Godself. Though Rahner does not deny that God could have constituted their relationship otherwise, he points out that such a view can appeal to a very ancient tradition of Christocentricity.<sup>37</sup> Hence, it is not necessary either to assume the Incarnation to be a second thought, as it were, on God's part, conditioned by the Fall, nor to view the Redemption as simply become a repair job to fix something which has always been basically good; Christ then loses his eternal function if it is in fact the prior goodness of the world which supports him, and not he who gives the world its foundation and completion. But, Rahner states, this approach divides the goodness of the world from its need for redemption. Rather, the world can be redeemed precisely because *as good* it is capable of redemption. Though this could have been done in some other way than the Incarnation, "in fact he did so by becoming himself what was in need of redemption."<sup>38</sup> This is the only Redemption we know.

Rahner, then, holds to the pre-lapsarian intent of the Incarnation, thus following the Scotist school: the Incarnation is the most original act of God,

and not merely an act of restoration. Though sin and guilt color the Redemption (which they must as part of human history), they do not simply make the Redemption “necessary.” Since the offer of God’s self-communication (on account of Christ) is not conditioned by sin, it becomes necessarily the offer of forgiveness and victory over guilt. It is not Christ’s actions that cause God’s will to forgive, but God’s will to forgive that determine Christ’s actions.<sup>39</sup> Nor should redemption be thought of as a legal transaction or a “non-reckoning” of guilt; it is the communication of divine grace, taking place in the ontological reality of God’s self-communication.

This addresses one side of the Christological question, that is, Jesus as true human, as truly a part of the history of the cosmos. The final consummation, the self-transcendence of spirit into God, must be conceived as something which happens to all spiritual subjects, at least in intent. Insofar as Christianity understands grace and glory as the direct self-communication of God, it also professes this unsurpassable consummation belongs to all humans and angels. But what of the other side of the question, that is, Jesus as true God? Where does the uniqueness of the hypostatic union fit in here? Is the hypostatic union simply a higher stage in which the gift of grace to spiritual creatures is surpassed, or is it a peculiar moment in the process of granting grace which cannot be thought of without the hypostatic union taking place on account of it?<sup>40</sup>

If the Incarnation is the absolutely proper and new stage in the hierarchy of world realities, which surpasses the others, yet without being itself necessary for these lower stages, one of two things could follow. Either it remains the climax surpassing all other worldly realities (still fitting the evolutionary world view) or one must abandon the idea that it is the climax of the development of the world, and it no longer fits the evolutionary schema. However, Rahner points out, it is difficult to see how the Incarnation could be the highest stage, the goal of the world, without the aid of the theory that the Incarnation is already an intrinsic element and condition of the general gift of grace.<sup>41</sup>

Whenever God—by his absolute self-communication—brings about man’s self-transcendence into God, in such a way that both these factors form the irrevocable promise made to all men which has already reached its consummation in this man, there we have a hypostatic union.<sup>42</sup>

To the objection that the self-communication of God in grace and glory is possible without the hypostatic union, Rahner responds, “For in us this communication is possible and effected precisely by this union and acceptance as it occurs in the hypostatic union.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, in Christ,

God's self-communication takes place for all. Unless this mediation is also the divine reality itself, it is only a transitory and unsurpassable stage of human development.

Hence, if the reality in which God's absolute self-communication is pledged and accepted for the whole of humanity and thus becomes 'present' for us (i.e., Christ's reality) is to be really the final and unsurpassable divine self-communication, then it must be said that it is not only posited by God but is God himself.<sup>44</sup>

This human reality belongs absolutely to God, and this is what is meant by the hypostatic union. The difference between Jesus and us, then, is not what is pledged (that is, grace), but the fact that Jesus is God's pledge to us; we, however, are not in turn the pledge, but recipients of the pledge.<sup>45</sup> The unity between the pledge and the one who pledges cannot be merely moral, for it is an irrevocable unity.

It means this and, properly speaking, nothing else: in the human reality of Jesus, God's absolute saving purpose (the absolute event of God's self-communication to us) is simply, absolutely and irrevocably present; in it is both the declaration made to us and its acceptance—something effected by God himself, a reality of God himself, unmixed and yet inseparable and hence irrevocable. This declaration, however, is the pledge of grace to us.<sup>46</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This exploration of Rahner's Christology is, admittedly, and unavoidably, a truncated exploration. We have only briefly touched on his treatment of why and how the immutable Logos can become anything. Fuller explorations of a wider variety of factors that constitute human historicity are needed. The theological reflection on the significance of human evolution must be examined in closer juxtaposition to a strictly biological treatment. In other words, a fuller dialogue with natural and social sciences is necessary. However, in general, Rahner can help elucidate the question posed in this particular dialogue: if Jesus is, in fact, the Incarnation of the Eternal Logos, this must tell us something about human nature, in general, and give us an insight into the humanity of Jesus, in particular. If human persons are designed (dare I say "hardwired"?) for self-transcendence, invited into transforming union with the Infinite Mystery that is God, then Jesus must, by definition, be the exemplar of that full humanity. Whereas classical Christology used the term "full human nature" to mean

that whatever is authentically human, Jesus must “have,” from a Rahnerian point of view, we can ask whether Jesus is, in fact, the only fully human person.

### **Endnotes**

1. I won’t address, at this point, the varied understandings of what this term might mean, especially since I am focusing on the dynamic humanity of Christ during his historical lifetime.

2. Lane, Dermot. *The Reality of Jesus*, chapter 6.

3. By “post-New Testament,” I do not mean to imply the full formation, either as individual works or as a body of literature) known as “the New Testament.”

4. I say “seems to have been held,” since there is some debate about what the Monophysites meant by formula “mia physis tou logou theou sesarkomene,” used by Cyril of Alexandria, who opposed Nestorius (and, who got it, unwittingly, from Apollinaris, who denied the full humanity of Jesus). Monophysites do not claim to follow Apollinaris, but instead, claim to be faithful to the words of Cyril.

5. It is interesting to note that the Chalcedonian formula defined the unity and diversity of the natures in negative terms: “without confusion, without change, without division and without separation.” [Just a personal note: it would be interesting to compare this with the Indic method of *neti, neti*: “not this, not that.”]

6. No theological system can ever hope to capture the entirety of the Mystery of God revealed in Christ, and it is my suspicion that this dogma is one of the places where there will be no final answer. Jesus’ question, “Who do you say I am?” continues to shape Christian reflection, though always in dialogue with conciliar (and even theological) teachings of the past. Karl Rahner, asked to contribute an essay for the 1500th anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon in 1951, entitled it “Chalcedon: A Beginning.” Every new answer opens further questions. It has always been that way, will always be that way. That is because we must use, in Thomas Aquinas’ famous reminder, analogies to point to the theological truths we are trying to convey. Though some analogies are more appropriate than others, even the best analogy cannot hope to capture the reality of the Infinite Mystery.

7. McDermott, “The Christologies of Karl Rahner,” *Gregorianum* 67/1 (1986): 87.

8. Rahner, “Two Basic Types of Christology,” *TI*, vol. XIII, *Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Crossroad, Seabury, 1975), 213-214. The terms “from above” and “from below” are used here in the sense given by McDermott, and by Rahner himself in *Foundations of Christian Faith*. For a note on the ambiguity of the terms, see below.

9. Idem, “Two Types of Christology,” 213-214. Rahner refers to the “Saving History Christology” as an ascending Christology and the “Metaphysical Christology” as a descending Christology. Rahner admits the ambiguity of the designations of “from above” and “from below,” for the “rising up” can be seen as being under the impulse of

the initial “downward” movement of God, and, he says, even the classical Christology of the Chalcedonian formula, which appears at first glance to be a metaphysical type, is probably, upon closer examination, of a mixed type.

10. Ibid., 215.
11. Ibid., 216.
12. Ibid., 217.
13. Ibid., 218-219.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 236.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Idem, *Foundations*, 215.
19. Ibid., 236-237.
20. Ibid., 239.
21. Idem, “Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas,” *TI*, vol. V, *Later Writings*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975; New York: Seabury, 1975), 29.
22. Interestingly, this corresponds to recent brain studies, suggesting that repeated behavior creates particular neurological pathways in the brain, and that the alteration of that habitual behavior creates new pathways. Thus, our choices really do affect who we are.
23. Ibid., 167.
24. Ibid., 168.
25. Ibid., 169.
26. Ibid., 170.
27. Ibid., 171.
28. Ibid., 171-172.
29. Ibid., 172.
30. Ibid., 172.
31. Ibid., 173-174.
32. Ibid., 175-176.
33. It is precisely here that the Virgin Mary bears the most significance, for it is from her that Christ received not only his “human nature” in the classical sense, but through her that he assumed the whole of human history.
34. Rahner, “Evolutionary View,” 176.
35. Ibid., 177.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 178.
38. Idem, “Current Christology,” 179.
39. Idem, “Evolutionary View,” 186.
40. Ibid., 179.
41. Ibid., 180-181.

42. Ibid., 182.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 183.

45. Ibid. See also *Foundations*, 202.

46. Ibid., 183-184.

## ON THE BED OF ARROWS: VAISHNAVA THEODICY BEYOND KARMA

Gopal K. Gupta and Ravi M. Gupta

In the *Mahābhārata*, Vidura tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra the story of a man who found himself in a dense, dangerous forest teeming with beasts of prey. The man shuddered with fear and ran from these animals, only to be met by a large, frightful woman standing with outstretched arms. Running blindly in any direction, the man eventually fell into a deep chasm and ended up hanging upside down, caught in the creepers and vines growing from its sides. He was menaced by a large snake and by a twelve-footed elephant at the bottom of the chasm, while rats chewed away at the vines holding him from certain death. And yet, there was a silver lining—a beehive laden with honey hung from the branch of a tree above. Honey dripped from the hive and landed upon his face. Intent on drinking more of that honey, the man never gave up hope for prolonging his life.

This, says Vidura, is our condition in this world. In the journey of our life, we try our best to avoid disease and suffering (the beasts of prey), only to run headlong into the arms of old age (the frightful woman). As we fall headlong to our death (the snake), our lifespan is eaten away by the passing days (the rats) and months (the twelve-footed elephant). But far from realizing our precarious predicament, we stay busy trying to satisfy limitless desires for petty pleasures (drops of honey), oblivious to the passage of time. “The wise know life’s course to be even such,” Vidura concludes. “Through that knowledge they succeed in tearing off its bonds.” (Ganguli 11.6).

Various versions of this story are found across Indic traditions,<sup>1</sup> and they remind us of a crucial point: any Vaishnava (or for that matter, Indic) theodicy must begin with an assumption of the word’s inherent miserableness. There is little expectation that the world should have been a better place, or that misery is something that should take us by surprise. This, after all, is the nature of the beast; should we not expect a serpent to be poisonous?

Nevertheless, Vaishnavas, like most other human beings, have asked why serpents must be poisonous and why the world must have the problems it does.

And so the Problem of Evil raises its head in both philosophical and ethical contexts. In the former context, the problem is often characterized in terms of ignorance or illusion: if “all this is Brahman” as the Upanishads declare, then how do we explain the existence of ignorance? Where does illusion exist, if not in Brahman, the perfect ground of all being? And so the *Vedānta-sūtra* (2.1.34–36) provides one of the earliest responses to the problem of evil in Indian philosophy by placing the responsibility for suffering squarely on us, the individual person. It is the living beings’ karma, their own actions, which lead to our temporary suffering and enjoyment. But did God not create the living beings and begin their cycle of karma? The *Vedānta-sūtra* answers in the negative—all living beings are beginningless, and activity is their everlasting characteristic, regardless of whether it is performed in a liberated or conditioned state. Saṅkara explains that action and creation have the relationship of a seed and a tree: a seed produces a tree which produces another tree, without beginning (280). Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa similarly emphasizes that the flow of karma is beginningless, just like Brahman and the living beings themselves (269). Vācaspati Miśra adds that God’s deference to the law of karmic reaction is a “freely chosen self-limitation,” to allow for human free will and freedom (Clooney, 536).

The *Bhagavata Purāṇa* reaffirms this doctrine of beginningless activity. In its narrative of Purañjana, for example, the *Bhāgavata* suggests that some souls, who are originally with God, fall and reincarnate in this world due to their own actions. When Purañjana reincarnates as Queen Vaidarbī and is overwhelmed with grief due to her husband’s death, Krishna approaches her in the guise of a *brāhmaṇa*. Krishna speaks of himself and the queen as friends who have wandered together, far from their original home: “Do you remember yourself as having an unknown friend and that you, becoming attached to earthly pleasures, left me in search of some place?” (4.28.53).<sup>2</sup> The *Bhāgavata* here suggests that souls acted originally with God, with whom they enjoyed a relation of friendship, until some of them willfully gave up his company in order to enjoy the pleasures of this world. “O Friend! You left me and, with your heart set on carnal pleasures, went to earth” (4.28.55).<sup>3</sup>

And yet, while one may posit karma as philosophical resolution to the Problem of Evil, it hardly provides a resolution to the evidential problem, to the human experience of suffering. After all, why must we suffer this much? Why doesn’t the Lord seem to care? Why isn’t the escape any easier? Indeed, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* does not see karma as an adequate solution to the problem of suffering. It admits that just as it is difficult to ascertain the cause of a forest

fire, which may be due to lightning or the rubbing of sticks, so also “the cause of living beings’ acquiring and losing physical bodies is difficult to understand” (10.1.51). In particular, the Purāṇa ponders what John Bowker calls, the “Hindu problem of Job” (Sutton, 411).<sup>4</sup>

### *On the Bed of Arrows*

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa begins as a continuation of the Mahābhārata’s central narrative’s conclusion. After the battle of Kurukṣetra, Yudhiṣṭhīra, who has ascended to the throne, is in a condition of immense agony, overcome by guilt, regret and loss. Accompanied by sages, his brothers and Krishna, Yudhiṣṭhīra proceeds to the now-quiet battlefield to seek consolation from Bhīṣma, the powerful grandsire of the Kuru dynasty, who is lying on a bed of arrows that had been shot through his body. Indeed, all the survivors of the terrible battle were distraught by the great loss of life, but the Bhāgavata specifically draws attention to the suffering of Yudhiṣṭhīra because he was the son of the god Dharma, the very embodiment of righteousness. Surely the Pāṇḍavas, who understood the intricacies of dharma and lived by them, were the least deserving of suffering. The Purāṇa expresses this sentiment in the words of Bhīṣma who shows great sympathy for the Pāṇḍavas’ misery: “Oh sons of Dharma! Alas how painful! How unjust! You, who have always taken shelter of brāhmaṇas, dharma and Acyuta (Krishna) do not deserve to live such a miserable life” (1.9.12).

The Pāṇḍavas had undergone immense suffering. As children they lost their father and were harassed by their cousins. Their wife was humiliated and they were banished to the forest for thirteen years. In the end, they lost all their children, dear friends, relatives, and teachers in the battle. Their mother, Kuntī, lost her husband at a young age and raised five children on her own.

Bhīṣma rejects the idea that the Pāṇḍavas’ distress is a product of their past karma. Indeed, throughout the Bhāgavata’s narrative, the Pāṇḍavas’ good character and spotless reputation are emphasized. Here Bhīṣma points out that although the Pāṇḍavas always lived righteously, they nevertheless had to undergo great distress. How could such pure-hearted persons be afflicted by so much injustice? The doctrine of karma makes a person singularly responsible for his or her own fate. Bhīṣma, however, finds such a view of suffering to be unsatisfactory and proceeds to ponder other causes of suffering.

### *Time as the Cause of Suffering*

Bhīṣma suggests that time may be responsible for Yudhiṣṭhīra’s suffering:

And I think that whatever unpleasant has happened to you is brought about by time (*kāla*), under whose influence the entire world along with its rulers are carried, just as clouds are carried by the wind (1.9.14).

As a manifestation of Krishna or Vishnu, time is held responsible for the creation and destruction of all the worlds. Although time brings about the beginning and end of everything, time itself has no beginning or end (11.3.8, 1.8.28, 3.29.45, 4.11.19). The *Bhāgavata* personifies time as Sudarśana, the wheel-weapon of Vishnu, which is often eulogized with prayers (9.5.3-11). As this wheel turns, says the *Bhāgavata*, it takes away the lifespan of all beings, from the demiurge Brahma down to a blade of grass (5.14.29). The motif of time as a wheel that crushes everything is a powerful and persistent image within the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

As a destructive force (*kāla-sakti*), time operates on everyone and ultimately lays to ruin all the efforts of men and women (10.16.49). The cold hand of time in the form of death abruptly cuts a person's ambitions and accomplishments (10.70.26; 3.9.17). Like a strong current, time carries all alike in its stream and like wind sweeping away clouds, straw, cotton and dust, it brings people together, causes friction between them, and then deftly separates and sweeps them away (8.17.27; 10.82.43-44).

The wheel of time acts on "those who are not devoted" to Bhagavān and is death for the sinful (5.17.18), but it does not affect liberated souls who have become immortal and thus transcend the barrier of time. The *Bhāgavata* also extends this privileged position to godly souls on earth. Time has no power over Bhagavān's devotees: "My weapon, Winkless Time, does not affect them, as I am their beloved Lord, friend, son, preceptor, relative, and their very life" (3.25.38). Several narratives in the *Bhāgavata* show that devotees of Bhagavān are unaffected by time and death. Dhruva is a prime example of such a devotee. When death approaches him at the end of his life, Dhruva uses death's head as a footstool to board an airplane to his abode, the eternal polestar (4.12.30).<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly Yudhiṣṭhīra was a dear devotee and relative of Bhagavān Krishna, so how could time affect him? Bhīṣma recognizes this problem by asking rhetorically, "Can there be calamity in the presence of King Yudhiṣṭhīra, the son of Dharma; Bhīma, the club-holder; Arjuna, the carrier of the Gāndīva bow; and above all, Krishna, the well-wisher?" (1.9.15). This verse resonates with the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s final text (18.78), which declares that victory, morality, power and fortune always accompany Krishna and Arjuna. Thus, Bhīṣma seems to reject time as an explanation for the Pāṇḍavas' suffering, and turns next to destiny.

### *Destiny as the Cause of Suffering*

Bhiṣma states: “Therefore, this [suffering] is all due to the power of providence [daiva]” (1.9.17). In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the cause of human suffering is frequently identified as daiva, destiny or fate. The text presents destiny in a variety of ways, three of which occur most frequently. Destiny often refers to 1) the results of previous actions (karma), 2) the inevitable progress of time, and 3) the will of the gods or Bhagavān. We find many verses where daiva directly refers to the fruit of one’s past actions. “Those who are naturally disposed to hurt the feelings of others wound them by harsh words. Such persons are doomed by providence (daiva)” (4.6.47). Another reference is found in the seventh book: “. . . it is due to providence (daiva) that creatures are brought together and separated in accordance with their respective karmas” (7.2.21).<sup>6</sup> Daiva is also used in the sense of time—a power which reverses all human endeavor. “They who by day have their senses absorbed in doing worldly actions, and go to sleep with minds full of different desires, get their sleep disturbed every moment, and their endeavors after their objects are frustrated by fate (daiva)” (3.9.10). Finally, daiva also often refers to the will of God: “It is Bhagavān who brings living beings together and then separates them” (10.82.42).

As we have seen, Bhiṣma rejects karma and time as possible causes for Yudhiṣṭhira’s suffering, and so the remaining possibility here is the will of God.

### *God as the Cause of Suffering*

Since God himself frequently accompanied Yudhiṣṭhira, only He could be the ultimate cause of Yudhiṣṭhira’s suffering. In verse 1.9.16, Bhiṣma implicitly implicates Krishna: “Oh King! No one can fully understand the intentions of this [Krishna]. As a matter of fact, even learned people who desire to fathom it become perplexed.” But if Krishna was the cause of Yudhiṣṭhira’s suffering, why did Bhiṣma not say this from the beginning? Commentators suggest that it would have been indecorous for Bhiṣma to directly point to Krishna as the cause of the Pāṇḍavas’ suffering. Since Krishna was personally present during the conversation, Bhiṣma blamed the Pāṇḍavas’ suffering on time and destiny. They agree that Bhiṣma’s intent, however, was to say that “this improper situation has arisen because of Vishnu, the mover and maintainer of the whole universe” (Viśvanātha, 1.9.12).

Bhiṣma indicates that no matter how much one tries to understand the plan of God, who is supremely independent, it is an impossible task: “Even though great philosophers inquire exhaustively, they are bewildered” (1.9.16). At this

point in Bhīṣma's monologue, Viśvanātha raises a pertinent question: since Krishna was actually present before Bhīṣma and the Pāṇḍavas, why did they not simply ask the Lord about his plan? Viśvanātha answers his own question:

Even if asked by Bhīṣma, the Lord will not speak, but instead will evade him...  
Even if he [the Lord] says something, he still bewilders everyone. Therefore his plan is to be followed, but is not subject to inquiry (Viśvanātha, 1.9.18).<sup>7</sup>

Viśvanātha adds that Krishna confuses everyone, particularly by his oblique speech. In Book Eleven, Krishna announces that even the Vedas speak elusively and answer questions indirectly. "The Vedic seers and mantras deal in esoteric terms, and I am also pleased by such confidential descriptions" (11.21.35). Nevertheless, Viśvanātha admits that although "no one can understand or interfere with the plan of Krishna," one is still drawn to inquire (Viśvanātha, 1.9.16).

Inquiry is necessary. Does God want to give us suffering? Does he want to give us joy? Does he want to give us suffering and joy? It cannot be the first option, because his quality of being affectionate to his devotee would be cancelled. It cannot be the second, because we have not seen any happiness. It cannot be the third option because that would be a contradiction to his kind nature. It is finally decided that no one can solve the problem by inquiry (Viśvanātha, 1.9.16).

Although no one can know the plan of the Lord, Bhīṣma urges one to accept that plan when it unfolds, because "his plan is perfect." "There never has been any change in Krishna's mind or his actions, because he is the soul of all, impartial, without a second, free from pride, and free from all sins" (1.9.21). Bhīṣma is confident that although the Lord may cause distress, he always acts for the benefit of all, and especially for the benefit of his pure-hearted devotees.

The *Bhāgavata* affirms that the supremely independent Lord uplifts his devotees in the way that he feels best for them. A devotee understands that the happiness and distress he or she undergoes while performing *bhakti* is the special mercy of the Lord. This point is made explicit in many passages: "Just as a father, out of his own accord, looks after the good of his child, you personally also do what is good for us" (4.20.31). Viśvanātha comments, "The Lord certainly knows what is best for me, even if I don't know. Karma and time have no effect on a devotee, so this is Krishna's personal arrangement for me. Out of his mercy, Krishna sometimes gives me happiness and sometimes gives me distress" (Viśvanātha, 10.14.8). By giving temporary distress, Krishna frees his devotees from the actual cause of distress—namely their forgetfulness of God. Suffering drives a righteous person to remember and take refuge in God. That

remembrance forever frees the devotee from repeated birth and death in this world (11.2.49).

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is so deeply convinced about the soteriological purpose of suffering that it even portrays devotees asking God for more suffering. After the Kurukṣetra battle, Kuntī, the Pāṇḍavas' mother who witnessed the demise of her entire dynasty, asks Krishna for this rather unconventional benediction: "May calamities befall us at every step, O Teacher of the world, if in these calamities we are blessed with Your sight, which eliminates the possibility of our seeing another birth [and death]" (1.8.25). Calamity serves as a powerful aid in helping the Queen become free from temporary worldly attachments so she can constantly remember the Lord. "May my mind be continuously drawn in love to you and not be attached to any other object, just as the water of the Ganges forever flows into the sea" (1.8.42).

The *Bhāgavata* often describes suffering as a burning (*tāpa*) which purifies the soul, as "gold, when smelted by fire, gives up its impurity and again takes on its own form" (11.14.25). The practice of *bhakti* burns off any remaining selfish desires (*kāma*) due to past karma and allows souls to experience the sweetness and beauty of Krishna and join his eternal play (*lilā*) in the spiritual realm (10.29.10). When the devotees' love for Krishna and other living beings is constant and selfless, they experience "limitless and unending happiness," and Bhagavān becomes controlled by their affection (Viśvanātha, 10.29.10). He chooses to serve them, as he did in the case of the Pāṇḍavas. Viśvanātha states that Krishna's first expression of mercy "bears the fruit of tormenting pain." His second wave of mercy causes an "extraordinary shower of sweet *bhakti-rasa* to rain down" on his devotees, and then Krishna promises that "I give mercy in the form of my very self" (Viśvanātha, 10.88.9).

### Conclusion

The *Bhāgavata* does not tire of portraying the human condition as one dominated by suffering despite the best of intentions. In one such portrayal, the sage Śuka explains an extended metaphor of a merchant caravan (5.14), in which a group of merchants, determined to make money by collecting wood to sell in the city, venture into a dense forest full of tangled vines. There the merchants are attacked by rogues, thieves, and jackals, and before long a breeze makes some dry trees rub together and start a forest fire. As they flee in fear, they are scorched by the fire, their feet are pierced by thorns and stones, and they are faced with a steep mountain pass.

Śuka explains that the merchants represent the souls (*jīvas*) who are originally with God. As the merchants leave their home to make money, so the *jīvas* leave God's kingdom to find pleasure in the temporal world. The forest's tangled creepers are likened to the *jīvas'* desire for profit, praise, and prestige. Intent on fulfilling their selfish desires, the *jīvas* traverse the path of *samsāra*, which is treacherous like a mountain pass. They burn in the forest fire of miseries, and their uncontrolled senses, like rogues and thieves, constantly harass them. All the *jīvas'* endeavors are obstructed by numerous thorn-like difficulties, ultimately rendering them fruitless.

But unlike the *Mahabharata*'s forest metaphor, with which we began this essay, Śuka's metaphor has a potentially happy—and distinctly Vaishnava—ending: After experiencing immense tribulations, the *jīvas* can betake themselves to the path of the Lord's devotees and resort to the lotus-like feet of Lord Hari (Krishna)—those “feet which pacify all the afflictions and agonies of *samsāra*” (5.14.1). And so it is that the caravan of merchants (humanity) can return to “the starting point of this journey (God) which, the sages say, is the terminus to the road of *samsāra*” (5.14.38). The *Bhāgavata* urges its readers to see that the soul's envelopment in matter is a temporal and temporary experience with a beginning and an end, which the soul undergoes only once as a necessary step in its spiritual evolution.<sup>8</sup> When the soul remembers its eternal relationship with the Lord, and takes refuge in him, it gains the greatest freedom, even in suffering, and after death returns to its original home beyond matter.

Thus the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* presents a message of hope—a message we find in the metaphor of the merchant caravan and in Kunti's prayers to Krishna: although calamities may befall us at any moment, “the sight of Krishna will occur, ending the repetition of worldly existence” (1.8.25; Valpey, 276). Indeed, even after being shot with dozens of arrows, and seeing his entire dynasty destroyed, the *Bhāgavata* portrays Bhīṣma as being undeterred in his devotion for Krishna. “Oh protector of the earth, Yudhiṣṭhira! Look at his compassion on his staunch devotees that Krishna himself has appeared before me, when I am giving up my life” (1.9.22). Bhīṣma's sentiment is indicative of the *Bhāgavata*'s overall response to the problem of suffering, namely to celebrate “devotional heroism,” the facing and conquering of unavoidable suffering through intensified devotion (Valpey, 275).

### Endnotes

1. For a Jain account, see Embree (59-61).

2. Translations of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in this essay are based largely on Ganesh Tagare's translation.

3. Commentators such as Śridhara Svāmī and Viśvanātha Cakravartī have suggested that the reason for Purañjana's fall is inexplicable (see commentaries on *Bhāgavata* 4.25.20).

4. The authors are especially thankful to Dr. Kenneth R. Valpey for his helpful comments on this essay.

5. Vishnu resides in Dhruva's planet and thus it is deathless. In the *Bhāgavata*'s cosmology, all the constellations revolve around the polestar, mirroring the classic image of the Sudarśana revolving around Vishnu's index finger (5.14.29). Just as Vishnu, the hub of Sudarśana, is deathless, so also the polestar is unaffected by the sweep of time that moves the universe.

6. Several writers have assumed that the realm of daiva is completely separate from karma. O'Flaherty (1980), for example, writes, "Karma is clearly distinguished from fate (*daiva*); the latter is often used to explain otherwise inexplicable occurrences which even karma is regarded as inadequate to justify" (19). Similarly Jarow states, "Fate, like death, is immutable and works above the level of the individual" (59). It is difficult, however, to uphold such a clear distinction between karma and daiva in the *Bhāgavata*.

7. All quotations from Viśvanātha Cakravarti's commentary are drawn from the translation by Bhanu Swami (2004).

8. This necessary step, the *Bhāgavata* reminds us, is one that is permitted by the Lord but not desired by him. "Your *māyā* carries on the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe, though not desired by you . . ." (5.18.38).

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**REFLECTIONS ON THE  
VAISHNAVA CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE**



## THE VAISHNAVA-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE: A REFLECTION

Sara M. Adams (Śraddhādevi dāsī)

When I first received an invitation to attend the Vaishava-Christian Dialogue in Potomac, MD in 2007, I felt both anticipation and apprehension. Having just finished a degree in Theology from Harvard Divinity School, I had experienced my share of interfaith dialogues, both formal and informal. Connecting with people of other faiths can be incredibly enriching—it provides opportunity to extend beyond one's routine social encounters and learn more about “the other” while simultaneously enhancing one's own faith. It breaks down boundaries, generates friendships, and increases appreciation as we see each other more in terms of fellow human beings rather than beings belonging to different camps.

Still, however, I had my doubts. There was the initial trepidation of sitting at the same table as my mentors—scholars and practitioners on both the Christian and Vaiñēava side with much more knowledge and experience than I—an intimidating factor for a reserved young woman fresh out of graduate school. However, beyond this initial unease was a more pressing question, “What is the point of this dialogue?”

Each interfaith dialogue takes on its own flavor. Some intend to find ways to work together beyond religious boundaries to produce tangible community service projects, some are simple opportunities for people to get to know one another, while others aim to illustrate the likeness of each tradition with the shared desire to bring about a semblance of world peace, one dialogue at a time. While these goals are undoubtedly noble and valuable, I always hoped for deeper theological engagement—to explore the foundation of why we do what we do and to discuss the teachings of God across religious lines.

The Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue did not disappoint. Each gathering roots itself in theology—presenting one text from each tradition as the launching pad for the weekend’s discussion. On most occasions one Christian and one Vaishnava participant begins the dialogue by presenting a paper on the text and topic at hand. The discussion then opens to the table of participants and

meanders its way across, around, and through the assigned topic, often taking us to unexpected destinations. The dialogue does not stop at theology, however. We discuss its practical application, we take meals and worship together, and we get to know each other as individuals.

What is the end result? Although some practitioners outside of the dialogue may want us to report that the Vaishnavas are taking to Christianity or the Christians to Vaishnavism, that is not the case, nor the goal. Neither is it the goal to smooth over our differences and solely focus on commonalities. The Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue has developed beyond the restraints of merely two traditions in dialogue. It has created a third community—a community of serious practitioners who share a desire to discuss and discover God. Out of this, deep respect and friendship has formed, both for each other and for the two traditions.

From my experience, the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue is a viable model for other interfaith dialogues. The mix of theological engagement, shared worship, and discussion of practical application provides a solid foundation for mutual understanding, personal growth, and long-lasting friendship. I feel honored to take part in the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue, I value the relationships that have developed out of it, and I look forward to more years of dialogue to come.

## THE QUIET REVOLUTION IN POTOMAC

Vineet Chander

Every faith tradition, I think, has its divine troublemakers. These are the prophets and reformers, the always courageous and sometimes outrageous souls who upset the status quo and dare us to shift paradigms. They lead us in—to borrow a phrase from one of my teachers—a “revolution in consciousness.”

One such revolutionary from my own tradition (the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition within devotional Hinduism) was a 19th century theologian named Bhaktivinode Thakur. As cited elsewhere in this volume, among his other accomplishments Bhaktivinode championed a radically progressive view of interfaith understanding. “If one has occasion to be at the place of worship of another,” he wrote, in a passage that has become something of a mission statement for contemporary Vaishnava interfaith dialoguers, “one should think: ‘The people here are worshiping my Lord, but in a different way. Because of my different training, I cannot fully comprehend this system of worship. However, through this experience, I can deepen my appreciation for my own system of worship. The Lord is only one, not two. Therefore, I offer respect to the form I see here and pray to the Lord in this new form that He may increase my love for Him in the form to which I am accustomed.’”\*

I mention this to suggest that, in writing these words, Bhaktivinode planted a seed into the rough, uneven soil of turn-of-the-century Bengal. I believe that, more than one hundred years later and a couple of oceans away, this seed flowers every Spring in a quaint, quiet retreat center in Potomac, Maryland. And although the dialogue began in Boston, I think it is most fitting that it has found its home in Maryland at the precise time that the celebrated cherry blossoms are making their yearly debut. There, like a perennial that still manages to surprise us with its beauty every year,

\* The original is in Bengali, Bhaktivinode’s native tongue, so popular translations tend to differ in minor ways. The one I rely upon is found on pp. 9-10 of Bhanu Svami (transl.), *Sri Caitanya-siksamrita* (New Delhi: Brhat Mrdanga Press SKCBT, 2004).

twenty-something people of faith from both Christian and Vaishnava backgrounds gather together for two days to put Bhaktivinode's revolutionary concept into practice.

The Rockwood Manor's serene, placid atmosphere; the nourishing refreshments (from herbal teas and organic trail mix, to rich Indian curries and irresistible samosas, to the now-legendary scrambled *paneer* breakfast); the ease with which participants sit around a non-descript rectangular conference table armed with legal pads and ballpoint pens—all of this might disguise the magnitude of what takes place at this dialogue. Make no mistake: in such an innocuous setting, in their own quiet way, participants in this dialogue are taking part in a revolution.

Gathering together to share a meal and spiritual conversation is, of course, laudable in itself. Still, I feel that there are two aspects to this "quiet revolution" that make it particularly significant.

First, the participants walk the finest of lines in a way that I have rarely seen done before. They appreciate the universal beauty of one another's faiths while still living in an awareness (and one might even say an *embrace*) of the particularity of their own faith and that of the 'other'. Nobody at the table would deny the commonality of experience that begins to emerge there. At the same time, nobody at the table would seek to be (or compel their dialogue partners to be) anything but what they are. The result is a tension of sorts, but it is a tension that generates a heartfelt excitement about learning from the other to enrich one's own spiritual life. It is not uncommon, for instance, to hear the sounds of multiple pens frantically scratching against paper to jot down a particularly profound or striking or provocative thought uttered by one of the other participants. The Vaishnava at the table might take something that a Christian has said and find a way to connect it to her own faith; likewise, a Christian may take an idea from the Vaishnava understanding to enhance his relationship with Christ. It is rarely spoken, but one also gets the sense (humorous at times) that there is a fair amount of what Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl called "holy envy" going on, along with good-natured plans to "steal" one another's ideas for liberal tweaking and use in sermons and *Bhagavatam* discourses later.

To walk this line, dialogue partners must eschew a two-fold temptation. The first is that of sectarianism—the urge to dig one's theological heels in, close oneself to even the remotest possibility that the other has any real access to the Truth, and approach dialogue as a chance to "prove" one's faith. The second, perhaps more subtle but just as harmful, is that of syncretism—the tendency

to gloss over (or even purge out) that which makes our faith experiences different and theological positions unique, in order to create some amorphous, nebulous sense of oneness. In choosing the path of dialogue, understanding, and mutual appreciation over either one of these temptations, participants suggest something truly groundbreaking: that learning about how the Divine interacts with the other strengthens one's faith in one's own tradition.

Here, I see resonance with the advice Bhaktivinode shares in the aforementioned passage. It is, perhaps, most evident during the portion of the dialogue that invites participants to share in a joint (though not combined!) worship service such that they can each literally "be at the place of worship of another." But if we take the act of speaking about God as a form of worship—as many Christians and Vaishnavas do—then his words carry weight for the dialogical part of the gathering as well.

Secondly, I feel that the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue embodies a certain healthy integration of intellect and devotion—of the head and the heart, if you will—that is all too rare in faith communities generally, and rarer still in interfaith settings. Participants in the dialogue are theological heavyweights. They tend to speak articulately, are well-informed and well-read, and often reference obscure texts in such a thorough way that a casual observer might, at first glance, mistake the dialogue for a breakout session at the yearly American Academy of Religion convention. (Since many of the participants are, in fact, members of the academy and frequent contributors to the AAR, this is hardly surprising.) Nonetheless, if our hypothetical casual observer were to stick around long enough, he or she might also discover the amount of heartfelt devotion that participants bring to the table. They speak of their own faith experiences and realizations in candid, sometimes brutally honest terms. No matter how fascinating the topic, or intellectually rigorous the discussion, the dialogue invariably becomes personal, and participants encourage one another to draw from deep within. They freely dispense with anecdotes and personal narratives, laugh together, and—on a few occasions, at least—share tears.

The fact that this combination of thought and feeling runs throughout the dialogue seems to indicate that something larger (and, perhaps, transcendent) may be at work. Such depth and self-honesty simply cannot be faked. I believe that the dialogue itself is surcharged with it, and has become, in a very real sense, a shared sacred space for participants. It is even reflected in the sartorial choices participants make: tweed blazers, silk saris, monks' robes (East and West)—all seem to mingle freely in a fluid, graceful mash-up of scholar and practitioner.

Here too, I think the spirit of Bhaktivinode is alive and well. He was, according to many biographers, that perfect combination of head and heart. He was a man of this world—a husband and father, a government magistrate, and a Hindu apologist in an India ruled by the British and hurtling towards modernity. Much of his writing was directed towards the intellectuals and progressive thinkers of his day. At the same time, Bhaktivinode was a renowned and unabashed devotee of the Lord, and his poetry in praise of Krishna is sung faithfully in temples to this day. These songs often center around the *feeling* of Vaishnavism, and evoke a strikingly intimate sense of one's relationship with God. If anyone could reconcile intellect and devotion, and do justice to both, it was Bhaktivinode. Seen in this light, his statement about interfaith takes on an additional importance. He advises us to understand intellectually that “because of my different training, I cannot fully comprehend” the faith of the other, but also invites us into the realm of the heart-space, believing that “through this experience, I can deepen my appreciation for my own system of worship.”

In reflecting on the Vaishnava Christian Dialogue, and in describing its participants, I have used the pronoun *they*, but I must confess I have been blessed with a seat at this table too. At times I have been more of a quiet observer; at others, I have been a vocal participant. I have experienced the joy of shared understanding, and have been deeply moved by the process. I have also been humbled; I have become acquainted with the taste of my own foot planted firmly in my mouth, and have felt the growing pains and pangs of doubt or uncertainty that often accompany paradigm shifts. Above all else, I have encountered my Lord, a dark-hued and charming cowherd boy named Krishna, in ever-new forms . . . and it has only increased my love for Him in the form to which I am accustomed.

I can attest: the revolution marches—beautifully, quietly—on.

## THE VALUE OF IMBALANCE IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

David Buchta

**B**alance is often, and rightly, seen as a crucial virtue in interreligious dialogue. Participants coming from different religious traditions hope to meet on neutral ground in a discourse which can thus be clearly distinguished from proselytization or, worse, subjugation. And yet, the very diversity that underscores the value of such dialogue makes absolute balance and symmetry impossible and even undesirable. Although facing many of the same issues in the contemporary world, different religious traditions have developed in varying social and historical circumstances and are characterized by distinct concepts, practices, and emphases in their approach to encountering the divine. These differences make it important for participants in interreligious dialogue to learn *about* each other. They also entail different sets of strengths. The distinct inheritance of each tradition allows their respective contemporary adherents to learn *from* each other without the subordination of one tradition to another.

For the past four years, I have had the fortunate opportunity to participate in the Vaishnava-Christian dialogue held annually in Potomac, Maryland. The Christian and Vaishnava participants at this dialogue are some of the most warm-hearted, deeply devout and thoughtful people I know and the mood is one of friendly sharing amongst fellow worshippers from different traditions. Yet, despite the best efforts of the organizers, significant imbalances characterize the dialogue.

The very name of the dialogue shows asymmetry in the specificity of the traditions represented. A number of Christian denominations, including Catholic, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Methodist, are represented. By contrast, all but one of the regular Vaishnava participants are Gaudiya Vaishnavas and are, or have been, affiliated with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Most of the Vaishnava participants are adult converts, many having been raised in Christian families. And yet the Christian participants are not less familiar with Vaishnavism than the Vaishnava participants are with Christianity:

many of the Christian participants specialize in interfaith dialogue and a few are scholars whose research specialization focuses on Vaishnavism. There is also an unfortunate gender imbalance within each tradition. There are only a few women amongst the dialogue's regular attendees—an imbalance that I hope will be rectified in the future.

For myself, however, the most significant imbalance is a positive one and one that would likely characterize any Vaishnava-Christian dialogue: the different relationship each tradition has with the modern, secular academy. Christian traditions have developed side-by-side with the modern academy. While this relationship has had its share of tensions, Christian thinkers have been compelled to think about their own beliefs and practices against the background of modernity, addressing issues of contemporary relevance and taking into account epistemological presuppositions that characterize secular scholarship. These presuppositions include the acceptance that works of sacred literature, to which a pre-human origin has been traditionally ascribed, are in fact products of human history. On the other hand, while there have been some important Vaishnava engagements with modernity (such as that of Bhaktivinoda Thakura), these have not been as sustained and thorough and have occurred primarily outside of the academy. Thus, they have not as thoroughly addressed the incongruities between inherited teachings and secular scholarship.

My own introduction to the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition occurred at around the same time as my first exposure to the academic study of religion and Sanskrit language and literature as an undergraduate student. The practices of Gaudiya Vaishnava *bhakti* (devotion) and the writings of that tradition's theologians have been the primary source of religious inspiration in my own life, so that I identify myself as a Gaudiya Vaishnava. Yet, many of the tradition's teachings cannot be reconciled with historical and philological evidence. For the tradition to remain relevant in the contemporary world, I see it as necessary to significantly reinterpret, if not completely set aside, such teachings. By contrast, I have found a literalist and even fundamentalist approach to scripture to be predominant within ISKCON, the institution within which I initially encountered the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. For this and other reasons, I no longer consider myself a member of the institution, although I still find value in the opportunities for communal worship which ISKCON provides.

The Vaishnava-Christian dialogue has provided an invaluable forum for thinking about the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition in the modern world. While the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition has fewer resources to draw upon for such a

project, the Vaishnava participants are some of the most thoughtful and open-minded adherents of the tradition. I have found my discussions with Christian participants to be especially rewarding. I have learned not only from how they have addressed important issues within their traditions, but also from how they might address issues and what they find to be of value and relevance within my own.

Last year's (2011) dialogue, on the theme of romantic love in sacred literature, was especially valuable in this regard. Breaking with the dialogue's usual format, four talks were given: Vaishnava and Christian readings of both the biblical Song of Songs and Jayadeva's poem on the love of Rādhā and Krishna, *Gitagovinda*. Graham Schweig's Vaishnava reading of the Song of Songs highlighted the richness of the analysis of divine love within the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, drawing parallels between the biblical text and *Srimadbhagavata*'s narrative of Krishna's dance with the young cowherd ladies, the *rasa-lila*. James Wiseman's Christian reading showed a willingness to reconsider interpretations of the Song of Songs that had previously been deemed as heretical, a reading which emphasized the importance of sacramentalized human love.

This willingness to revisit issues addressed previously in one's tradition and to respectfully but clearly disagree with one's predecessors is a valuable model for contemporary Gaudiya Vaishnavas. Vaishnava traditions are full of examples of teachers contradicting their predecessors. However, as is seen throughout much of premodern Hinduism, the delicacy with which this is done often obscures the fact that there is a real disagreement. While an important lesson can be learned from the respect with which Vaishnava teachers have related to their predecessors, religious discourse within modern, secular societies seems to require a more frank acknowledgement of divergences from tradition. Wiseman's talk, and the numerous casual conversations that spring up during the dialogue weekends, provided examples of how to critique the inheritance of one's own tradition without devaluing and disrespecting it. Their reinterpretation of tradition was not a revisionist whitewashing of problematic issues, but a frank and informed acknowledgement of such problems together with a contemplation of how the best that their tradition has to offer can be made relevant to the world in which we live.

My own Vaishnava reading of *Gitagovinda* focused on the importance of a non-literal reading of the text informed by the principle of Sanskrit poetics to which Gaudiya Vaishnava theologians have made substantial contributions. Gerald Carney prefaced his Christian reading of *Gitagovinda* by acknowledging his concern that Vaishnavas might take exception to it. However, he went on to

offer a deeply moving interpretation that extracted a broad message of divine love from the specifics of *Gitagovinda* without denying the particular appeal these specifics would have for a Vaishnava audience.

Similarly, without denying the value of the specifics of the intellectual discourse, the Vaishnava-Christian dialogues have been characterized by a broader, underlying mood of friendship beyond those specifics between people who see themselves, despite differences in traditions, as sharing a common goal of connection with the divine.

## THOUGHTS ON OUR MANY YEARS OF VAISHNAVA-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

RUKMINI WALKER

“Out beyond ideas of wrong doing  
And right doing,  
There is a field.  
I’ll meet you there . . .”

This past November in San Francisco at the American Academy of Religion Conference, there was a panel entitled, “What’s Wrong with Hindu Theology?” Dr. Reeta Sherma began her thoughts with this quote from Jelaluddin Rumi. I was struck by her reference, especially in that context, in a discussion of Hindu and Christian ways of doing theology. At that time, I thought, yes, this is my experience of our many years of Vaisnava Christian dialogue.

Away from the noise that’s so prevalent in the world’s public square, there is such a field. Our dialogue has been a treasure in that field, over the last fifteen years. We are all serious practitioners of our own traditions: many of our group are monastics, several are professors, priests, ministers, three initiating gurus have attended over the last few years, and some of us are married, or lay people. We would probably all say that we’re deeply enriched by the practices of our own traditions on a daily basis. That’s a given.

But, in this dialogue, we are enriched, and sometimes challenged in wholly different ways. The atmosphere is one of respect, intellectual honesty and curiosity, and reverence for the scriptures and teachers of the each other’s tradition. The gifts we receive from these holy people outside our own flock, or sanga, are precious; in an unexpected, deeply nourishing way; intellectually, of course, but also in a deeper, more profound way. I want to say, in a game changing way, in a culture changing way.

To see the depth of knowledge, realization and holiness in these people of another great tradition, feeds my reverence for the multifaceted prism that is the mystery of the unlimited Supreme Godhead, Whom I know as Sri Krishna. It

corrects my own spiritual myopathy, and explodes the tiny universe of my own thinking. It's doing what I most like to do, with those whom I most like to do it. I didn't expect to share such resonance with people outside of our Vaishnava sangha. This dialogue has turned my understanding of *sangha* on its head.

Often our discussions become electric, not with polemical argument, but with the synergy of people passionate about topics of divinity. At those times, I often think of the people in our own communities, leaders and lay people alike, who don't understand what we do here, or why we dialogue. They are Christians and Hindus who carry burdens from both sides of colonialism: the embarrassment [or lack of it!] of the "white man's burden," the searing family tales of the 1948 Partition between India and Pakistan, and the part "the other" had to play in it all, to name a couple of specifics, and, of course, just plain sectarianism, in general.

History is full of those stories: the stories of such thinking, and its harsh repercussion. But there are other stories; often they are the ones untold. Kenneth Cracknell once quoted a British Christian minister living in India in the 18th or early 19th Century. This gentleman apparently shared the kind of dialogue we experience, when he exclaimed, "We will have another Alexandria, on the banks of the Yamuna!"

An old aphorism is sometimes used in India: that in order to chop down a tree, one must take a branch from that very tree, and join it to the sharp blade of an ax. Perhaps to chop down the immense tree of sectarianism in the world today, we each need to offer [an olive?] branch to join to the sharp blade of real wisdom, the wisdom of the saints and sadhus.

This analogy also seems meaningful in reference to the success of our group, in that each member is reverent to, and knowledgeable about the tradition of the other: by lifelong study, by travel, by cultural immersion, and through deeply personal intercultural or inter-religious friendships.

We're a small group: only that number that can fit around a large table, about twenty or so. It's a square table, but I think of it as a Round Table. We have no audience, although people often ask to sit in as an audience. Once a filmmaker, who was making a documentary about Abrahamic and Asian traditions in dialogue, came to film us with his oversized camera. He used a bit of it, but he was, frankly, disappointed to not see more tension, more disagreement, the stuff of reality TV, I suppose.

We share another reality, a reality that is unseen, but deeply felt by us all. Of course, sometimes there are misunderstandings, such as when one tries to define the other tradition by the terms of one's own tradition. With respect, there's correction, and we get back on track.

It's sometimes said that we don't remember days, but rather, we remember moments. And again, moments at home in sanga with other Vaishnavas are a given. But these moments in the field of our dialogue with Christian friends have been precious in unexpected, luminous ways. These are a few of those moments for me:

... I learned to cherish the candid, of this world/not of this world nature of the late William Cenkner, and his stories about living in a community of brothers silently jabbing each other over the wins and losses of their favorite sports teams. About what it meant to be vulnerable, living near death, and what it means when your community is praying for you.

... Our times hearing the wisdom of the late, gentle Judson Trapnell, and his work on Father Bede Griffiths, who bridged each of our worlds with such wisdom. He spoke on John of the Gospels, and on Bhakti. And he left Rose, Grace and Maria when he left this world untimely at such a young age.

... When Frank Clooney explains that dialogue is about religious communities reaching beyond their own established boundaries. And when he arrived at our dialogue in Washington, after leaving an event in his honor at his own center at Harvard, because of a commitment he had made to us the previous year.

... When John Borrelli speaks about the wisdom of *nostra aetate*, and about the many twists and turns that enrich his work in the field of interfaith dialogue.

... When David Rodier would reflect on his deference for the great Vaishnava luminary, Rupa Goswami.

... When Gerald Carney speaks with reverence about Sri Vrndavana Dham, about the holy Yamuna, the temple of Sri Radha Raman, and his friends and mentors there. And about how the Brajavasis have affectionately dubbed him, "Gulabi Baba," after they doused his white hair with pink color during Holi.

... When Susan White, being asked about her experience of the presence of God, quoted a favorite poet. She spoke of being like a lover standing under the balcony of his lover: sometimes he thinks he sees the curtain move to open a

bit, but then again, maybe not . . .

. . . When Jim Reddington speaks from his book, *The Grace of Lord Krishna*; about his travel to India with his students; and his study with the teachers of the Vallabha Sampradaya.

. . . When Ed Shirley speaks so lucidly about the incarnation of Christ. And when he puts it up on Facebook that he's in Maryland, with his Hare Krishna friends, attending a production of the Wizard of Oz, performed by their grandchildren.

. . . When Jon Paul taught us how to see with introspection the holy and the unholy in the "secular salvation" of the shopping mall of America's marketplace.

. . . One year our topic was Love and Fear. A young Vaishnava scholar, David Buchta, spoke brilliantly about the nuances of the secondary rasas of fear and ghastliness; and Philip Simo opened his heart to us. Alone, in the church, he had heard a divine voice telling him, "Philip, don't be afraid. Live the Gospel!"

. . . When Carole Crumley taught me that we are the guests the mystics talk about; that we play this music for our Host; and that everything today is for the Host.

"*satatam kirtayanto mam, yatantas ca drdha vratah . . .*" We expect to be nourished at home. But when the warm hearth of home is found in the home of another pilgrim on the path, there is another *rasa*, a different *rasa* of sweetness: a treasure in the field, a pearl beyond price.

## REFLECTING ON OUR JOURNEY

GERALD CARNEY

This Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue has developed into a model of how learning and prayer can establish a path of interreligious sensibility that goes beyond mutual understanding and respect to a deeper level of interpersonal solidarity.

*We have learned together . . .* The strategic decision, around the time of our third meeting, to focus our dialogue on texts that illustrate our diverse religious experiences and responses to a single theme, gave a pivotal direction to our annual conversations. Entering deeply into the thought and experience of the Vaishnava traditions allowed me to return with an enhanced understanding of Vaishnava faith and life, but it also allowed me to look at my Catholic Christian tradition with clearer vision. This process of deep reading at the core of another religious tradition embodies what John S. Dunne called “passing over and coming back,” entering into another living tradition with sympathetic understanding, seeing the world from that perspective, and then returning enriched to our own tradition with new insight and resources. But the fact that we were reading our own Christian sources at the same time and on the same theme meant that this process was also a form of comparative theology and comparative spiritual life and practice, with discussion touching not only on what I think and believe but also on what I do and how that experience transforms my life.

*We have prayed together . . .* Each year we display core symbols of our faith traditions and, on Saturday morning, we pray together. Prior to prayer, we explain ourselves, showing how icons and the cross focus Christian spiritual life and belief; how images of Krishna, Chaitanya, and guru lineage embody a visual theology of Vaishnava tradition. We tell about how we pray, how our beliefs and images in practice transform our lives. Then we pray, finding inclusive prayer forms, moving beyond explanation and observation

to the deepest level of participation that is possible and appropriate, leaving freedom for each individual's comfort and conviction: *Vaishnava bhajan, kirtan, puja, satsang*; Christian hymns, chants, scripture reading, preaching, contemplation. This movement beyond parallel prayer to praying together is always tentative and respectful, but I have felt our prayer has become more personal over the years, with leaders feeling free to share the core of their tradition with colleagues who have become friends.

*We have journeyed together . . .* Every year or so, at the end of our dialogue meeting, we provoke an identity crisis: who are we anyway, what have we become, what do we do? Easier to say what we are not: we are not an academic seminar, with quarterly or monthly meetings of stable membership; we have not been tasked by religious organizations to craft principled statements; we surely don't engage in detached religious study. As our long and insightful introductions show, we are committed believers, dedicated as Christians and Vaishnavas to living out that commitment in a broader ecumenism, choosing to live our religious faith in the presence of one another, during the dialogue and in personal lives and careers. Over the years we have become friends and have shared our milestones and struggles. Some of our deepest exchanges happen neither in discussion nor formal prayer but in dinner conversations or while strolling through the unfolding spring day. Interreligious hospitality is sacramental, a sign that creates what it symbolizes. This dialogue process shows how we have experienced friendship and understanding across religious boundaries and how that experience has been richly transformative for our faith and for our communities. It can be a model that encourages and challenges others to find their own path of understanding, prayer, and friendship.

*My own journey . . .* I have had the special privilege of being both an insider and outsider to Vaishnava traditions. Deeply committed as a lay Roman Catholic Christian, I have been both professionally and personally a participant observer in Gaudiya Vaishnava faith and life for over forty years. In the fall of 1971, fresh from reading the *New York* magazine article on "Who is Harry Krishna and why are they doing those strange things on 34th Street," I researched a seminar paper at the ISKCON temple on Henry Street in Brooklyn, on the tension between order and ecstasy in the Hare Krishna movement. My dissertation dealt with the emerging theology of the early Caitanya movement which found expression in the emotional sensibility of devotional drama. I devoted parts of two decades of academic work to uncovering the story of an early

Vaishnava missionary to the West, Premananda Bharati. My three-decades-long friendship with Shrivatsa and Sandhya Goswami and my respectful relationship toward Purushottam Goswami allowed me to experience the contemporary core expression of Vaishnava devotion as well as to identify with the struggle to sustain the religious sites of Vraja against environmental and commercial threats. Our annual dialogue is an opportunity for me to give back the gifts I have received and to be enriched by friendships old and new.



## **REFLECTION: CHRISTIAN/ VAISHNAVA DIALOGUE**

Rev. Carole A. Crumley

The first time that I participated in the Christian/Vaishnava dialogue weekend, I had been suffering from a debilitating viral cough. I had seen my internist who, after weeks of my non-stop coughing, had given me an antibiotic. It didn't work. Lung x-rays were clear. The doctor didn't know what else to do. My immune system would have to shake it off.

Trying to boost my immune system, I visited an acupuncturist several times. The last visit was the very morning that our dialogue began. Days later, I learned that the acupuncturist thought this cough might be a strain of tuberculosis that had reemerged in our area. She was extremely concerned. After consulting her colleagues, she had called my home and left a message urging me to see my doctor again. But I wasn't home.

I had gone to the dialogue weekend, glad to be present but feeling that my contribution would be minimal. I couldn't really speak without coughing and I was worn out with the effort. In our opening circle, I mentioned this explaining the extensive supply of cough drops by my side.

I don't remember the topic we discussed now. But I do remember the joy of the conversation, the delight in exploring faith traditions from different perspectives, and especially the delicious food provided by the Hare Krishna Hindu Temple. That night I slept soundly for the first time in many months.

When I woke up in the morning, I didn't cough. At breakfast, I didn't cough. When asked how I was feeling, I could only say, very tentatively, the cough seemed to be gone. Not really believing it was so, I waited all day for the demon cough to reappear. It didn't come back that day and never has since.

To my mind a miraculous healing happened. I've wondered how. Was it the acupuncture finally kicking in? Or was it the intellectual stimulation, the communion of like-hearted colleagues and friends, the food infused with prayer, the shared desire for God that was the final heart-strengthening medicine my body needed? I like to think the dialogue was the answer.

There are many contemporary ills to which Interfaith dialogue is seen as an

answer. While we have a more complex and uncertain world than ever before, it is also one more alive with possibilities for inter-dependence and positive change. Today's global village invites us into a deeper interfaith dialogue so that we can listen to how others see the world. It invites us to join hands across faith lines to make the world a better place. Together we can be a strong force for good. It opens our hearts to receive the beauty, poetry, music, dance and art of other traditions expanding our aesthetic appreciation and joy.

In a sense, interfaith dialogue is a thread that weaves through the traditional spiritual paths known as the good, the true and the beautiful. Ultimately, it brings all of these pathways together into a dialogue of the Holy where we seek the Holy One in our diverse ways. Such dialogue leads into a whole, healthy, full spiritual life for all. It is what the world needs now.

Our annual Christian/Vaishnava dialogue is a taste of these possibilities and joys, built on deepening friendships and understanding. In it we engage in the cosmic dance of dialogue that is both local and global, practical and theoretical, academic and mystical, healing and reconciling. May it be a blessing for our world which so hungers for this goodness.

## REFLECTIONS ON FIVE YEARS OF VAISHNAVA-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Jon Pahl

**G**rowing up in a small town in Wisconsin in the 1960s and 70s, in a religiously conservative family, it was not on my horizon to join with “Hindus” in dialogue and worship. “They” were people “we” sent missionaries to convert. I knew from age 7 that I wanted to be a Lutheran pastor, and sometimes I even imagined traveling to an exotic place like India where I might convert “heathens” to the one, true faith in Jesus Christ. Being such a missionary seemed to me at the time like the highest adventure a human could have. My engagement with the Vaishnava tradition has, I am happy to report, expanded my horizons about adventure.

My first encounter with Hinduism, and the Vaishnava tradition, came when I took a class on “Hinduism” while in Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. By then my undergraduate theology and history majors had opened up my mind a bit. My Professor, Blake Michael, had studied the Vaishnavas at Harvard and (as a practicing Methodist) knew how to translate the tradition for Christians. I loved the class. In the course of it, I produced for my own benefit a “Glossary of Hindu Terms” that I then memorized. Those terms have come in handy in the Dialogue, where they are common coins of the realm!

My first visit to an ISKCON Temple was in Chicago, about 1990. Several of my colleagues at Valparaiso University, where I taught prior to moving to Philadelphia, had been taking students to the Chicago Temple for years. I decided to do the same—and embarked with a small group of first year honors students on a “road trip” that was both bewildering yet comforting. I remember very vividly the shock of my students (many of whom were from families like mine) at the deities on the altar; I also remember enjoying a rich conversation over Prasad. I also took note of the washing machine marked “for Deity Use Only!” and have since written an entire book (*Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces: Putting God in Place*) inspired by the idea of “clothing” God (and then, naturally, washing God’s clothes!) One of the students from that class has actually gone on to become a Lutheran minister, and to complete his Ph.D. in history here in Philadelphia.

I returned to the Chicago Temple at least annually after that. I only gradually discovered *The Bhagavad Gita* and the depth of the tradition. I do wish I had more time to read in the primary sources. I now teach the *Gita* (in translation, alas!) in a class at Temple University, and in a class at Lutheran: The Philadelphia Seminary, where I have taught since 2000. I am grateful for the contributions of many Philadelphia Temple devotees who have joined me in class for dialogue about the *Gita*.

It's the Seminary that has facilitated my participation in the Dialogue. Our campus is just down the street from the Philadelphia Temple. I was delighted, on my first interview in Philadelphia, to discover a Krishna temple in the neighborhood! It seemed providential. I quickly found a friend and mentor in Ravindra Svarupa Das. One of the joys of participating in the Dialogue has been the car trip to/from Philadelphia, in the company of Ravindra, Sraddha Devi Dasa, Dvijamani Das, and whoever else happened to be with us. The trip usually turns into a dialogue of its own.

One of my favorite memories of the Dialogue is a comment made in passing, I suspect, by Garuda. We were talking about sacred space, which led to a discussion about the after life, and Garuda lamented how much pressure there would be "if we only had one life." That's when I realized that this wasn't just an academic exercise, but had to do with the most crucial matters of life and death and after-life.

There are three central insights I've gained from the Dialogue that I can highlight in this forum. The first is about reading texts. Growing up, I didn't read texts "literally," I imposed upon the Christian Scriptures a scientific hermeneutic that distorted the text badly. I wanted the Bible to be "true," and "true" meant scientifically verifiable. What my encounter with the Vaishnava tradition, and especially with the *Gita*, has taught me, is that truth is many-layered. The truth of the *Gita* doesn't have to conflict with the truth of the gospels; in fact, the truths can mutually illuminate each other (without necessarily harmonizing). The truth of texts goes beyond science.

This seems to me a vital lesson. In the wake of the Fundamentalist movement in American Christianity, and of deconstructionism (which is a fundamentalism of a different stripe) it is no longer the intention of terms in texts that matters—the living truth of the literal meaning of the text (in the original languages) and in its contexts (original and contemporary). What matters is the text as fetish; the text as incantation; the text as inerrant, inspired, and a sign of one's righteous, blessed status that one can use as a club against somebody else. Holy texts in this way of reading become not prayers addressed to a living God,

but escapist (if not callous or craven) attempts to appear pious in an effort to hold onto (or to claim) some power. To read in this way is to turn texts into what Ernest Becker called “the vital lie” that grounds the denial of death. Such reading of texts produces the kind of escapist fantasy and irresponsible eschatology that is found in the *Left Behind* series and in much of Christian apocalypticism, and is also found (so I’ve heard) in some Hindu nationalist movements. Such “literal” readings of texts promotes the kind of superstitious cant found in solemn assemblies that wish for the material blessings of God but refuse to engage seriously in economics or social policy. And as the recent documentary *Flight from Death* has documented effectively, when people are caught up in fetish worship to preserve their culturally generated vital lie, they will gladly die and kill, innocently even, on its behalf.

The second insight that the Dialogue has taught me, then, is about America: we’re changing. I knew this intellectually; I’ve read Diana Eck’s *A New Religious America*, and I’ve been aware that since 1965 immigration patterns have been changing. But the Dialogue has acquainted me with that change on the level of lived experience. It’s been fascinating to note how richly and deeply connected to India ISKCON has become in the past two decades. Of course, the same is true of Christianity in America. The last two Deans of the Seminary where I teach have both been natives of India! This change is behind a great deal of fear—much of it only indirectly expressed, in contemporary America. Much of the focus, of late, has been on Muslims. But through conversations and worship experiences like the annual Vaishnava-Christian dialogue, strangers become friends and enemies become compatriots. Communicating this truth—that change can make us stronger—is part of the responsibility of each person who participates in the gathering (and those who just read about it). We benefit from the differences between us when they foster what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks called “the dignity of difference.” This commitment to public theology—where we give reasons for what we believe in ways that are in principle open to all people as citizens, is a vital contribution of the Dialogue, as I see it.

The third insight is about our shared appreciation for nature, and the non-violence that might stem from it. One night after the sessions were over, I joined Ravindra, Sraddha, Dvija, Venkat, and others on a night-time hike in the woods. We talked, and laughed, and prayed, and walked in silence amid the beauty of the trees and crunch of the ground under our feet. It was holy. And it persuaded me then, as it continues to do today, that our shared inheritance of the “field of truth” poses for us the greatest battle, the greatest adventure, we could possibly face. Our traditions share a history of hostility and conflict;

Christianity and its missionary-soldiers especially. Yet we are cousins. We have to fight, then. We will fight. But we can fight together, seeking to convert each other (and ourselves), using the means that nature gives us as interpreted through the fragile symbols of our human frames and civilizations. We share the inheritance of nature—a grace that is wholly unmerited, yet as necessary as it is beneficial. Our texts, our dialogues, our debates, take root in this same nature: they are “pressed trees,” as the Ojibwa novelist Louise Erdrich puts it. And yet such power they convey! And so, this tragedy of the futile sacrifices we offer might just be enough. There are many paths to peace. They are one. And we walk them together.

## A DIALOGUE OF FRIENDSHIP

Samuel Wagner

I first learned of the Vaisnava-Christian Dialogue as a graduate student at The Catholic University of America. Dr. William Cenkner was my advisor as I was studying the religions of India. I recall him telling me, in the spring of 1998, that he would be attending a local Hindu-Christian dialogue. Dr. Cenkner didn't mention much else about it (nor did I ask). However, I was envious that I would not be attending!

I had the good fortune of hearing of the dialogue again soon thereafter. In the summer of 1999, I began my employment with the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (then co-sponsor of the Vaisnava-Christian Dialogue) at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). At that time, Dr. John Borelli was the Associate Director for Interreligious Dialogue. I recall being intrigued that he was (also) attending a local Hindu-Christian Dialogue that was co-sponsored by ISKCON. Unfortunately, the position that I held when I was first hired did not allow me to attend dialogue meetings. It wasn't until the spring of 2002, when Dr. Borelli was Interim-Executive Director of the Secretariat, that I finally got a chance to attend one of the meetings. I had recently been promoted to Assistant to the Executive Director, and Dr. Borelli gave me permission to attend if I completed the Secretariat's budget before the Friday of the meeting (I did!).

When I walked into the conference room at Rockwood Manor that afternoon in 2002, I was greeted by Dr. Borelli and Dr. Cenkner. Dr. Borelli then introduced me to Jerry Carney, and informed me that what I would be seeing here was unlike any other dialogue of the Secretariat. At the time, I was unsure of what exactly he meant. However, after having been a part of this group for about ten years, I now know what he meant. This dialogue is not simply a gathering of academics and theologians, but, rather, at its heart it is a meeting of friends. Christian friends, and Vaishnava friends, who though their religious beliefs may differ greatly, even radically, come together once a year to speak intimately about that which matters most to them: God.

Other members of the dialogue are perhaps better equipped to reflect on the theological significance of these meetings than I am. However, what I would like to reflect upon is this notion of a dialogue between friends. There have been, and continue to be, many participants who choose to return to this annual spring meeting year after year, sometimes traveling a great distance, for no other reason (e.g., academic or financial incentive) other than to be part of these intimate discussions about understanding God. It seems to me that the members of this group benefit from these meetings on a variety of levels. First, that of intellectual and theological interest, second, the level of friendship, and, third, there is a spiritual benefit. A Christian visitor to the dialogue once commented to me that it was unlike typical ecumenical and interreligious meetings that he had attended in that it had a retreat-like atmosphere. In fact, for many (if not most) in the dialogue group, this dialogue meeting has became, in essence, an annual spring retreat.

In 2005, I was presented with an opportunity to travel to India. Providentially, four months prior to the trip, I was invited to stay in Vrindavan by Srivatsa Goswami, who was visiting Fr. Francis Tiso at the Secretariat. While in India, I stayed at Srivatsa Goswami's ashram, Jai Singh Ghera, for five days. During my time in the famous pilgrimage town, I was able to see, first hand, the living, breathing Gaudiya Vaishnava faith as it has been traditionally practiced in India for hundreds of years. I visited many temples during my stay, but one particular temple stood out: Radha Damodar Mandir. Through the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue meetings, the names of Rupa Goswami and Jiva Goswami had become very familiar to me. So, when I visited Radha Damodar Mandir, and saw their Samadhi Mandirs (tombs), these two individuals instantly became, for me, distinctly real historical figures.

As a Lutheran, I had visited many places in Germany throughout my childhood that are of historical significance (for example, I was Confirmed in Worms, home of the famous 1521 “Diet of Worms” where Martin Luther defended himself in front of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V). Thus, on a certain level, I was easily able to appreciate the historical roots of the modern Gaudiya Vaisnava moment. To most of us in the United States, this movement, known as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or “Hare Krishnas,” is a relatively new presence on the American religious landscape. However, from a global perspective, the movement, in terms of age, in fact parallels Protestantism as a product of the 16th century.

Visiting Vrindavan not only made famous teachers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism real, but it also brought the stories of Krishna to life, as so many stories take

place in, or around, Vrindavan. As luck would have it, I visited in August at the time in which the Raslila was being celebrated. Each year, actors at Jai Singh Ghera perform Raslila plays acting out the life of Krisna every morning (the life of Chaitanya is acted out in the evening). Thus, in addition to watching these plays each morning (which, in a sense, reminded me of the variety of Passion Plays depicting the life of Christ), I awoke to some form of “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare”—the Maha Mantra—being sung from the stage.

In the years after Dr. John Borelli left the Secretariat, I found myself in a position of providing a sense of continuity on the organizational end of the meetings and working more and more closely with Anuttama Dasa, the ISKCON co-organizer. As time passed, staff changes, budget restrictions, and USCCB restructuring required the Secretariat to eventually suspend co-sponsoring the dialogue. However, I continued to attend on behalf of the office until my departure in 2009. Presently, I attend the meetings representing only myself, thus simply as a Lutheran (ELCA) Christian. I consider my involvement with the Vaishnava-Christian Dialogue to have been a great blessing. Further, I am honored to have been in a position to work on this publication project, together with Anuttama Dasa, for the past five years with the hope of making this publication a reality.



## BOOK REVIEW

*Christ and Krishna: Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges* (New York, FOLK Books, 2011), 140 pp., by Steven J. Rosen

Review by Vineet Chander

Christ and Krishna. Much has been said about these two figures. From rigorous academic comparisons of their narratives, to New Age attempts at synthesizing their teachings, to wildly speculative conspiracy theories that they were, in fact, the same historical person—the more cynical among us might conclude that nothing more can (or should) be said about this subject. Fortunately, author and scholar Steven J. Rosen is not one to let cynics get in the way of exploring what beckons to be explored. The result is *Christ and Krishna: Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges* (FOLK Books, 2011), a refreshing and engaging look at devotional Christianity and Vaishnava Hinduism in conversation. The book's diminutive size (a concise and readable 140 pages) and casual tone belie its powerful impact; it is as informative as it is informed, and as moving as it is grounded in impeccable scholarship and thoughtful analysis.

Of course, this is hardly surprising to those who are familiar with Rosen's work and qualifications. A versatile writer, he is as comfortable authoring a textbook on Hinduism (*Essential Hinduism*, Praeger, 2008) or editing a well-respected academic journal (*The Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, which he founded) as he is musing on the parallels between Star Wars and the Ramayana (*The Jedi and the Lotus*, Arktos Media, 2010). Moreover, Rosen gets interfaith. He served for many years as the director for interreligious affairs for the New York chapter of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. As a Jewish-born practitioner of a tradition with roots in India, Rosen also has a unique (if not complicated) lens through which to peer at both Abrahamic and Dharmic faiths.

In fact, my first encounter with Rosen's work came when, as a High School student perusing a bookstore in my native New York City, I chanced upon a short

book on interfaith dialogue he co-authored. The book, called *East-West Dialogues* (FOLK Books, 1989), featured transcripts of conversations between Rosen and the Rev. Alvin V.P. Hart, head chaplain at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital. As I read through the book, I became thrilled that such dialogue actually happened—and in my own backyard, as it were. Coincidentally, many years later my own vocational journey would find me serving as a chaplain at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital as well. As the only Hindu in a program that was largely dominated by and rooted in a Christian model of pastoral care, I dug up my old copy of *East-West Dialogues* (by now, well-read and dog-eared) to help me navigate through the experience.

If Rosen and Hart lay the foundation in *East-West Dialogues*, Rosen builds on that foundation in *Christ and Krishna* in order to explore intersections and parallels between the two faiths on a deeper level. This is laudable for a number of reasons. In the present review, I'd like to focus on three things about *Christ and Krishna* that particularly struck me: Rosen's stylistic choice to present the book as a dialogue between old friends; his straightforward and courageous tackling of uncomfortable issues; and his sensitivity to religious feeling as a valid aspect of interfaith dialogue.

I feel that one of the book's greatest strengths is the way in which Rosen frames the dialogue itself. By presenting the exploration of these two faiths as a fictional conversation between two childhood friends—Father Francis (Frank) and Saragrahi Maharaj (Swami)—whose lives have led them to embrace commitments to different faiths, Rosen immediately and naturally draws us away from the theoretical and into the realm of the personal. Employing a narrative involving characters makes for more engaging reading, of course, but it does much more. It also conveys the awareness that truly meaningful interfaith dialogue doesn't take place on the level of *religions* in conversation, as much as it does on the level of *people* in conversation.

This awareness seems to be on the rise. Many of us have experienced, especially in the last five to ten years, a palpable shift in the way people of faith now view interfaith dialogue. Increasingly, the institutional, formal and doctrine-driven approach that dominated the field in previous decades seems to be giving way to the personal, informal, and relational model. Rosen is able to show the obvious benefits of such an approach through Frank and Swami's interactions. As readers, we benefit from the theological insights and wisdom that Rosen writes into their dialogue, but we also get an invaluable glimpse into the context within which that dialogue takes place. We witness them eat together and walk together; we eavesdrop on them as they laugh while sharing their childhood memories; in an especially poignant scene, we find them gazing

out at the vastness of the Ganges river and waxing philosophical, coming to terms with the bittersweet truth that their paths have called them in different directions. All of this is, at least according to some of us, a critical part of what it means to “do interfaith” in the real world, and Rosen captures it beautifully.

Secondly, I feel that *Christ and Krishna* is admirable for its boldness in addressing, head on and unapologetically, thorny issues that often go untouched in Hindu-Christian dialogue. For instance, Rosen writes Frank as a former Hindu who converted to Christianity, and has Swami raise the issue of his conversion at the very outset of their dialogue, early in the book. How refreshing and courageous! Rosen could have easily avoided the uncomfortable conversation altogether. He could have had Swami remain silent on his friend’s choice, or could simply have written Frank as someone born into Christianity to begin with. Instead, he chooses to call out the “elephant in the room”, and offers us an important learning opportunity in the process.

Far too many of us steer clear of issues like proselytizing and conversion while engaging in interfaith dialogue, afraid of offending the other or opening a proverbial can of worms. We keep our true feelings to ourselves, privately maintain our prejudices and reservations, and timidly dance around the issue. It may be polite, but it usually rings hollow and keeps our dialogue on a superficial, even artificial level.

Rosen, on the other hand, reminds us that deep, meaningful dialogue demands that we ask the uncomfortable questions of one another. He demonstrates how this can be done in a spirit of respect and sensitivity, perhaps drawing on his own experiences as a convert (albeit one who went from West to East). Rosen is similarly evenhanded in his tackling of other, difficult issues. Through the course of the dialogue, he has Frank and Swami touch on a number of issues—idolatry, polytheism, and vegetarianism, to name but a few—that typically make Hindu-Christian dialogue particularly challenging.

A third way in which *Christ and Krishna* excels is in its sensitivity to the role that religious feeling and experience plays in interfaith dialogue. The two protagonists of the book are, as Rosen presents them, veritable scholars of their own traditions and religion in general. They are obviously educated and thoughtful theologians. At the same time, they are also deep feeling practitioners—as comfortable speaking from the heart-space as they are sharing their intellectual wisdom with one another. Rosen demonstrates, through these characters, that interfaith dialogue is enriched when participants can share their feelings along with their theological viewpoints or stances. Sadly, this embrace of the validity of religious feeling is all too rare in much

interfaith dialogue. By writing the characters in the way he does, Rosen gently nudges us towards a more holistic and integrated view of faith and interfaith dialogue. In this respect, we might see another layer of meaning behind Rosen's titling his book *Christ and Krishna*.

The book is less about comparing these two Deities, perhaps, than it is about the meeting of two practitioners who have fallen so deeply in love with Christ and Krishna respectively, that they can't help but share their stories with one another. Swami and Frank are, one might argue, at their dialogical best when they are expressing to one another just what it is about Christ or Krishna that has turned each of their lives so wonderfully upside down.

These strengths notwithstanding, I would be remiss to not articulate one area in which I felt this book could have been stronger. I hope that the author might consider incorporating this feedback in making revisions for any subsequent re-prints of the book, or if Frank and the Swami should meet again (as I hope they will) in a sequel.

As I stated earlier, one of the strengths of the book is that Rosen depicts Frank and Swami as deep thinking, mature men of faith. Their conversation is informed by their traditions and spiritual practices, but also by their remarkable ability to recognize the Divine even outside of their own traditions. At times, however, this may be to a fault; they are so exemplary in their spiritual maturity that we sometimes lose the "humanness" of the characters. They become distant figures, and we (the flawed readers) may feel that we are so far removed from that elevated stage that we cease to connect with them. To cut against this possibility, Rosen might have included a few more scenes in which we get to glimpse Frank and Swami experiencing struggles or hitting a brick wall or two in their dialogue.

Rosen offers a few such detours, but only sparingly and cautiously; moments of tension are too quickly and politely resolved. As many of us have experienced, however, dialogue with a member of another faith (especially an old friend or family member who has undergone a radical conversion experience) can be joyous and fascinating . . . but it can also involve feelings of frustration, alienation, and painful challenges to one's paradigm. Seeing the two characters act some of this out—even in the smallest of ways—might have helped us to see ourselves more in them.

To be fair to Rosen, this may be a bit of an unrealistic expectation for a book of this size and written for this purpose. To flesh out Frank and Swami as fuller, more sympathetic characters would require Rosen to write the book more as a novel than a fable.

A final point: as I read *Christ and Krishna*, I couldn't help but remember another book I had read a few years ago that bears some superficial similarity to this one. Ravi Zacharias's *New Birth or Rebirth: Jesus Talks With Krishna* (Multnomah Books, 2008) is also a concise, lively, and readable exploration of Hinduism and Christianity. Like Rosen, Zacharias also employs the device of parable or imagined conversation (though in his case, the conversation is between the two divine personalities themselves, rather than their devotees) to convey theological and philosophical points. However that may be all that these two books truly have in common.

While Rosen's predilections and leanings are clear from his work, he does not play favorites in the same way that Zacharias does. He allows his readers to think for themselves. Whereas Rosen uses the medium to try to give each tradition a personal voice and convey a sense of balance and mutual respect, Zacharias does quite the opposite—taking the opportunity to expose the spurious teachings of Krishna (or, more accurately, his straw-man caricature of Krishna) as inferior to the salvation offered exclusively by Jesus. A thorough critique of *New Birth or Rebirth* requires its own review, but suffice it to say that as a Hindu chaplain, Vaishnava practitioner, and frequent participant in interfaith dialogue, I find that book morally troubling, academically dishonest, and deeply offensive. It may be presented as “comparative religion” or cloaked in pseudo-intellectual language to soften the blows, but at its core Zacharias's book betrays a triumphalism, bigoted agenda.

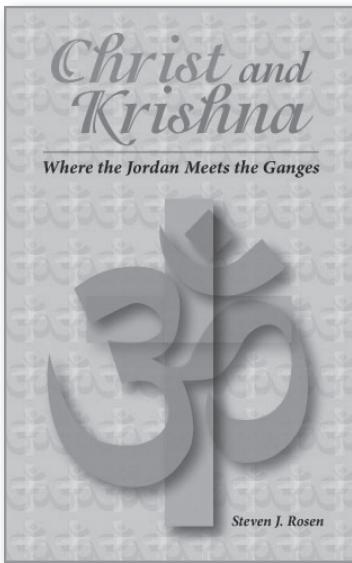
I bring this up, only because it helps me to recognize that Steven Rosen's book is fueled by an agenda of its own. Thankfully, however, Rosen's agenda seems to be one of furthering understanding and inspiring meaningful dialogue. This he accomplishes by shining light on commonality while acknowledging—and even celebrating—that which each tradition holds as unique. And this is, perhaps, the highest compliment I can pay to *Christ and Krishna*. To put it bluntly: if books like the one by Zacharias spew the poison of sectarianism and prejudice, Rosen's book provides the most effective and fitting antidote to that poison. This alone should make *Christ and Krishna: Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges* required reading for anyone serious about interfaith today.

# *Christ and Krishna*

*Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges*



*This book offers insight into the mystical aspect of the religious journey. Its intent is to highlight the harmony of spiritual truth, not the divisiveness that often separates religious traditions.*



*This is achieved through the medium of a story—a dialogue between two friends, both born and raised in India. One is a wandering mendicant in the Vaishnava-Hindu tradition and the other a Jesuit theologian. Together, they unlock the mysteries of their respective traditions, showing both similarities and differences. In the ultimate analysis, however, their paths embody an overarching oneness, allowing them to speak in terms of nonsectarianism and universal spirituality.*



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*A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti*, by Tamal Krishna Goswami, published by Oxford (2012). Two other books are forthcoming from Columbia University Press: *The Bhakti Sūtra: Nārada's Concise Teachings on Divine Love*, and *Bhagavad Gītā Concordance: Comprehensive Word Reference*.

**Kenneth Cracknell** is President Emeritus of the Cambridge Theological Federation where he also taught Comparative Religion in the University. He has served in the USA as Professor of Theology and Global Studies, Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, Texas. For ten years he was director of interfaith concerns for the British Council of Churches in London and has also been a long-time consultant for the interfaith work of the World Council of Churches. He has been associated with ISKCON since 1984. His most recent book on interfaith relations is *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (2006). He is married to Susan J. White and now lives in Vermont.

**Klaus K. Klostermaier** (born 1933 in Munich, Germany) is a researcher on Hinduism and Indian history and culture. He obtained a PhD in philosophy from the Gregorian University in Rome in 1961, and another in “Ancient Indian History and Culture” from the University of Bombay in 1969. He joined the Department of Religion at the University of Manitoba (Canada) in 1970 and he is the recipient of numerous academic awards. In 1986 he was elected “Distinguished Professor.” He was nominated in 1998 a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and was made Head of the Department of Religion at the University of Manitoba (Canada) from 1986 to 1997 (and director of its “Asian Studies Center”), 1990–1995. He was the Director of Academic Affairs at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies from 1997–1998. A *festschrift* in his honour was published in 2004. He has spent ten years in India and has researched primary sources in languages like Sanskrit, Hindi, Pali, Latin, Classical Greek, German, Italian and French.

**Tamal Krishna Goswami** (1946–2002) was one of the closest and most influential disciples of the founder of the Hare Krishna Movement, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda. Goswami was a monk, an author, and a world teacher who was interested in delving deeply into the *bhakti* theology of his own tradition in order to enter further into

interfaith exchanges. Before his untimely death in 2002 at the age of 56, he became a student of theology at the University of Cambridge, under the tutelage of Julius Lipner. Goswami's academic training at the University of Cambridge, his thirty years' experience as a practitioner and teacher, and his extensive interactions with Prabhupāda as both personal secretary and managerial representative, afforded him a unique opportunity to understand and illuminate the theological contribution of Prabhupāda. Goswami's final work was his nearly completed doctoral dissertation, which has been put into final book form and published by Oxford University Press, New York, under the title of *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential Teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda*. Goswami proves that the voice of the scholar-practitioner can be intimately connected with his tradition while sustaining a mature critical stance relative to his subject.

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**Gerald T. Carney** is Elliott Professor of South Asian Religions at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia. Following doctoral work on Vaishnava devotional drama as an expression of theological vision, Jerry has done text and field research on devotional aesthetics, Vaishnava theological systems, and the challenge of modern society to traditional pilgrimage practice. He is completing a critical biography of Baba Premananda Bharati, a Vaishnava missionary to the West in the early 20th century; a portion of this study formed the introduction to a new edition of Baba Bharati's *Sree Krishna—the Lord of Love*. Photographic documentation of devotional practice has become an increasingly central focus of Jerry's late career, especially in contrasting the growing commercialization of religious life with traditional forms. He lives in Lynchburg, Virginia, with his wife, Dr. Ellen Deluca, and their son, Peter.

**Carole Crumley** is the Senior Program Director at Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, an organization dedicated to nurturing contemplative living and leadership in the Christian tradition. Her

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**Samuel Wagner** earned a M.A. with a focus on religions of India under the supervision of Professor William Cenker at The Catholic University of America in 1999. He held the position of Assistant to the Executive Director/Office Manager at the Secretariat of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops from 1999-2009. In 2008 he project-managed two papal events for Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the United States. For the past 20 years he has been writing, recording and performing music. Following a trip to Hyderabad, India in August 2005, he became a student of Indian Classical Music and began learning the sitar. He is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and is currently a stay-at-home father.

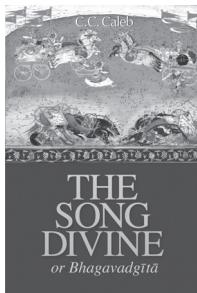
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