

# Kṛṣṇa-sevā

*The Theology of Deity Worship in Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism*



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**This Thesis is dedicated  
to all my teachers (parents and brothers included),  
most especially my teacher of Kṛṣṇa-Bhakti,  
Śrī-Śrīmad A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda,  
who has brought the practice of arcanam to the western world;  
and to all my colleagues  
who are striving to practice these teachings.**

## **Acknowledgements**

I first want to express my gratitude to the members of my Thesis Committee for their help in guiding me through the process of completing this project. My Advisor, Professor John Hilary Martin, O.P., has helped me gain some understanding of thoroughness and precision in scholarship, and he has patiently rendered helpful guidance to bring this work into presentable form. Professor Durwood Foster, out of pure kindness and well-wishing spirit, has agreed to be on this committee as part of his determination not to let retirement stand in the way of continued active academic life. Professor Richard Payne has provided helpful insights and suggestions and has been a source of encouragement and support. I am also very grateful to Professor Francis X. Clooney, S.J., who has given me valuable guidance and encouragement on the path of comparative theology.

I wish to sincerely thank the members of the Institute of Vaiṣṇava Studies for encouraging me to take up study at the Graduate Theological Union, especially Dr. Howard Resnick (Hridayānanda Das Goswami) Dr. William Wall and Robert Cohen. I am also grateful to the residents of the

New Jagannatha Puri Temple in Berkeley for extending their welcome and tolerating my minimal participatory presence these last two years. I have to especially thank my student Mādhurya-kadambinī Dāsī for her constant assistance and excellent cooking, as also my student Dhanurdhara Dāsa for his help in numerous capacities. This project would not have been possible for me to execute without the gen-erous financial assistants of numerous members of the Vaiṣṇava community, especially in Europe, to each of whom I am ever grateful. I offer my praṇati to them all. (Kṛṣṇa Kṣetra Swami)

## **Pronunciation Guide**

This thesis makes reference to several terms in Sanskrit, for which a minimal guideline on pronunciation may be helpful. The system of transliteration of Sanskrit and Bengali used in this work is a standard system in scholarly publication. Briefly (and roughly), the vowels generally are pronounced as in Italian, with a line over the vowel indicating twice the length of pronunciation of those without (“ā” = aa). The letter “c” is always pronounced as “ch” in English; “ś” is as in the German word sprechen, “ṣ” is as in the English word shine. The visarga (ḥ) indicates a slight repetition of the vowel immediately before it. Thus visargaḥ would be pronounced “visargaha.” The anusvāra (ṁ or ṅ), indicates a nasalization of the vowel before it, roughly equivalent to the English “ng”. The aspirate consonant “th” is pronounced as in the double consonant in “hothouse”. Other aspirated consonants follow the same principle.

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The following works quoted in the text have been accessed through the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase CD-ROM (see above):

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# Introduction

The story of the revival and propagation of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti spirituality, inspired in the 16th century especially by Śrī Caitanya of Bengal, is one that continues to unfold at the present time both in India and throughout the world. The chanting of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mahā-mantra<sup>1</sup> by groups of Kṛṣṇa-devotees has in recent years been a striking presence on street corners and other public places, and popular musicians have recorded several renditions of the chant, beginning with the musical Hair.<sup>2</sup> Much less known and less understood by most Westerners are the various Kṛṣṇa temples in which the same chant is performed along with an elaborate program of daily worship of Kṛṣṇa in his arcā-vigraha, or worshipable image, as an integral feature of vaidhi-bhakti-sādhana, or the regulated practice of devotional spirituality. As a contribution to the understanding of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti spirituality, this thesis will be an attempt to present aspects of Vaiṣṇava theology<sup>3</sup> as it pertains to image worship, a theology of divinity of visible form as an integral complement to the audible form of divinity, the harināma, or divine name, especially as understood by the tradition of Vaiṣṇavism originating in Bengal.

A fair amount of literature has appeared in English on the history of Caitanya (Bengal) Vaiṣṇavism,<sup>4</sup> focusing on a number of aspects.<sup>5</sup> Yet there has been little attempt to explain to any significant extent the theology of the worship of images in the Caitanya tradition. Neither do we find any significant attempt to place the theology of image worship next to possible theological objections or reservations to image worship, especially as articulated in the Judeo-Christian traditions. The worship of Kṛṣṇa-images in temples and in homes is becoming increasingly part of the worldwide religious landscape. Varying degrees of unfamiliarity with the tradition make people think it foreign and exotic, if not threatening and demonic. Hence there is a need of attention to the theology of image worship to bring understanding and perhaps appreciation thereof. In light of this need for greater understanding of a tradition with growing popularity and growing presence due to an expanding worldwide Indian



population, this thesis will be concerned to explore a central theological issue: In what sense, according to Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, can an apparently inert material form be seen as divine and therefore worshipable, and in what ways is this practice of arcanam (formal worship of images) considered a solution to the problem of approaching or being approached by God in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition?<sup>6</sup>

The answers to these questions will be located in the interconnection between avatāra (divine-descent) theology and devotional praxis, in which the Caitanya vedāntic doctrine of acintya-bhedābheda-tattva-vāda, or inconceivable simultaneous oneness and difference of the one supreme Being in relation to the multiplicity of being, is pivotal.

Since praxis is central to the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology of image worship, I will briefly describe some specific daily ritual procedures in arcanam, such as the bathing and dressing of images, the offering of food, the waving of lamps, and the use of mantras. But as many of these details will appear similar to those in other image worship practices in South Asia, it will be important to direct attention to particularities of avatāra-theology in Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. These particularities are highlighted in aspects of a certain festival, the Jagannātha-Rathayātrā, or public chariot-pulling festival of the image of “the Lord of the Universe,” and in scriptural narratives which celebrate the devotional accomplishments of Kṛṣṇa-devotees.

The method employed in this thesis will be essentially theological explanation<sup>7</sup> and comparison, written from the perspective of a long-time practitioner and teacher of arcanam and Kṛṣṇa-bhakti within ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness).<sup>8</sup> I intend to show that image worship in this tradition is sustained in the dynamic relationship between the bhakta, or devotee, and Kṛṣṇa, inasmuch as the presence of the deity is experienced through the practice of bhakti. Seen from a ‘functional’ perspective, as the focus of formal ritual in Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, the practice of image worship can be understood as a means to bring vital immediacy to the central message of bhakti, understood as a sustained transformational devotional attitude characterized by active

service to the supreme divine Being, conceived in Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism to be Kṛṣṇa in his fullest manifestation. This immediacy of bhakti is suggested in the expression “Kṛṣṇa-sevā,” or “(direct) service to Kṛṣṇa,” in which central importance is placed on the idea that the Lord makes himself accessible to devotees through active service performed according to a prescribed system of worship which might be thought of as “sustained hospitality.”

I use the word functional with caution, for it may appear to invite readers to entertain a reductionistic perspective of the subject under discussion. However this would be utterly opposed to my purpose. Rather, my underlying aim in this project is to explore the dynamics of interaction between what is understood to be the transcendent realm of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti and the contingent realm of this world in which the practice of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti is necessarily manifested. In this context, attention to image worship is most fitting, in that the tangible image is understood by the practitioner to demonstrate the ultimate reality of the supreme Being in terms of relationship: bhagavān, the supreme Person, is understood as the absolute source of paramātmā (the principle of Self animating all beings) and brahman (the absolute conceived as nondual being). Rūpa Gosvāmī, one of the main Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theologians of the 16th century, identifies bhagavān as akhila-rasāmṛta-mūrti, or the very form of the nectar of unbounded spiritual relationships.<sup>9</sup> The Sanskrit term rasa (liquid, taste, essence), which dominates Indian aesthetic discourse since ancient times, embodies a central concern in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, inasmuch as the ultimate objective of worship is to participate in an eternal relationship with Kṛṣṇa in terms of a particular modus of loving exchange. It will be necessary therefore to look briefly at rasa theology as it relates to image worship, particularly since the latter is generally associated with the less esoteric praxis of vaidhi-sādhana-bhakti, where the following of rules and regulations predominates. Image worship as practiced on this level is oriented toward the attainment of increasingly advanced levels of spirituality; hence the practice is sustained and enriched by reference to a body of narratives involving worship of images by bhaktas recognized as adepts in the exchange of rāsa with Kṛṣṇa and therefore considered to be on the highest levels of spiritual progress.



The structure of this presentation is as follows. After a brief look at Caitanya Vaiṣṇava epistemology, I will make a brief presentation of avatāra-theology in this tradition, with reference to the Vedāntic formulation of “inconceivable simultaneous oneness and difference.” I will then explain basic principles of bhakti-theology and the concept of sādhana or practice, and how sound and form interrelate to allow a sentient being to become spiritually elevated. The third chapter will focus on rāsa-theory and the experiences of adepts in relation to images.

The fourth chapter, “Arcanam versus Idolatry,” aims at comparative theology, whereby image worship in the Kṛṣṇa-bhakti tradition of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism is juxtaposed with biblical objections to image worship. Here again, the focus is on the nature of bhakti, conceived as the ultimate modus of spirituality, leading toward and bringing about prema, or unfettered love for the supreme Being, God, or Kṛṣṇa.

# Chapter One

# Theology of Divine Descent

*Of course it is bewildering, O soul of the universe, that You work, though You are inactive, and that You take birth, though You are the vital force and the unborn. You Yourself descend amongst animals, men, sages and aquatics. Verily, this is bewildering.*<sup>10</sup>

— Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.8.30.

## I.1 pramāṇaḥ – Sources of Knowledge

To understand the theology of image worship in any Indic tradition, and no less the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, demands entrance into the galaxy of discourse revolving around the Veda, a group of ancient Sanskrit texts considered within the whole of the tradition to be apauruṣeya, without human origin, or divinely revealed. Without dwelling on the complex web of texts which are considered to be elaborations of the original Vedic texts, one may simply note here that within philosophical or theological writings leading to radically differing conclusions, epistemology has been a primary concern, especially in Vedāntic discourse, consisting of texts aiming at a systematic explication of the Upaniṣads.<sup>11</sup>

The particular strain of theological tradition and reflection we are concerned with received elaborate articulation in the writings of the Six Gosvāmīs. These disciples of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu<sup>12</sup> (who himself wrote naught but an eight-verse summary of his teachings), were commissioned by their master to compile and systematize teachings on bhakti spirituality found within existing texts and elaborate on these texts on the basis of their own insights. Of the Six Gosvāmīs Jīva Gosvāmī, in consultation with his colleagues, composed the most comprehensive exposition on Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, the Ṣaḍ-sandarbhā, or ‘Six

Treatises,’ of which the first, Tattva-sandarbha, deals exclusively with epistemology.<sup>13</sup>

Near the beginning of this work, in preparation for establishing the centrality of one particular text for Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, Jīva declares his faith in Vedic revelation:

*Human beings are bound to have four defects: they are subject to delusion, they make mistakes, they tend to cheat, and they have imperfect senses. Thus their direct perception, inference, and so forth are deficient, especially since these means of acquiring knowing cannot help them gain access to the inconceivable spiritual reality (alaukikācintya-svabhāva-vastu-sparśā-yogyatāt).*

*Consequently, for us who are inquisitive about that which is beyond everything, yet the support of everything—which is most inconceivable and wondrous in nature—direct perception, inference, and so on are not suitable means of gaining knowledge. For this purpose the only suitable means is the Vedas, the transcendental words that are existing without beginning. They are the source of all mundane and spiritual knowledge and have been passed down in paramparā (disciplic succession).<sup>14</sup>*

For Jīva Gosvāmī’s audience, little endeavor was thought necessary to establish the primacy of the Vedas as infallible sources of truth over against other sources of knowing.<sup>15</sup> He quickly moves from the original Vedas to a consideration of related texts, the Purāṇas, and through a process of elimination carefully supported by proof texts, Jīva identifies one particular work, the Bhāgavata-purāṇa<sup>16</sup> (also known as Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam), as the revealed text (śabda) which is most essential, must lucid, most appropriate,<sup>17</sup> most authoritative, and accessible to all, including non-brāhmaṇas.<sup>18</sup> He also recognizes it as Śrī Vyāsa’s<sup>19</sup> own commentary on the Brahma-sutra.<sup>20</sup> Thus Jīva declares that his six

treatises will essentially be a commentary on the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam whereby he will sometimes, but not always, follow previous commentators.<sup>21</sup> The Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, not unlike other Paurāṇic texts, deals extensively with the concept of avatāra, or divine descent, identifying Kṛṣṇa as avatārin, or the source of all avatāras.<sup>22</sup>

To facilitate analysis of the contents of the Bhāgavatam, Caitanya theologians classify the contents in three categories. Sambandha, ‘relationship,’ is concerned with the relation of Īśvara, or God, to jagat, the world; of Īśvara to jīva, the living beings; and of the living beings to the world. Abhidheya, ‘process,’ is concerned with the means by which living beings, on the basis knowledge of these relationships, can approach God, which is prayojana, the ‘purpose’ for understanding sambandha and practicing abhidheya.<sup>23</sup> In this first chapter of the thesis dealing with avatāra theology we are concerned primarily with the principles included in the first category (sambandha). The second chapter, concerned with bhakti, is the substantial principle of abhidheya; and the third chapter will focus on prayojana, especially through the principle of rāsa, the aesthetic active principle in perfected relationship between the devotee and the Lord.

## I.2 Ontology: Vaiṣṇava-vedānta

### I.2.1 Īśvara – The Controller

The five major traditions of Vaiṣṇava vedānta<sup>24</sup> are all concerned to refute the monistic vedānta interpretations of Śaṅkara and his followers by preserving an ontological distinction between living beings and God and thus denying the monistic assertion that multiplicity is māyā, or illusion. The central question in Vedānta is, how is the immutable brahman, or Absolute Being, related to the contingent world. Madhva (1197-1276) emphasizes the difference between brahman and the contingent world with his dvaita, or ‘dualism’ philosophy. Less radically dualistic, yet decidedly

rejecting monism, is Rāmānuja (1050?-1137) whose viśiṣṭādvaita ‘qualified monism’ features a concept of the universal ‘body of God’ to reconcile the God/world dichotomy. The Caitanyas have attempted to reconcile these two latter positions with their acintya-bhedābheda doctrine, the ‘inconceivable simultaneous identity and difference’ of the supreme Being with the multiplicity of being. O.B.L. Kapoor, paraphrasing Jīva Gosvāmī, states the problem and its solution as conceived by the Caitanyas:

*The history of philosophy bears evidence that neither immanence nor transcendence can solve the problem of relation between God and the world. The concepts of identity and difference are both inadequate to describe the nature of being. Exclusive emphasis on the one leads to a virtual denial of the world as illusion [monism], while exclusive emphasis upon the other bifurcates the reality into two and creates an unbridgeable gulf between God and the world. Both the concepts, however, seem to be equally necessary. Identity is a necessary demand of reason and difference is an undeniable fact of experience. An ideal synthesis of identity and difference must be the cherished goal of philosophy. But the synthesis, though necessary, is not possible or conceivable. This is the final test of human logic. It fails. But the logic of the infinite succeeds where our human logic fails. In the perfect being there is no conflict between necessity and possibility. Here, what is necessary actually is.*<sup>25</sup>

The solution as proposed by the Caitanyas, recognizing the metaphysical problem of reconciling identity and difference, is based on scriptural evidence;<sup>26</sup> it rests on the notion of acintya-śakti, or the inconceivable energy of God, an energy by which reconciliation of mutually exclusive concepts is perfectly accomplished in a ‘higher synthesis.’ The doctrine receives elaboration in the notion of śakti-parināma, or ‘transformation of energies,’ to preserve the immutability of brahman: God, the absolute Being, is not himself transformed or altered

by multiplicity; rather multiplicity is but transformation of the energies of God, which are inseparable from him.<sup>27</sup>

This solution is further nuanced by the notion that, depending on perspective, brahman (‘the greatest’) can be conceived in two other equally valid expressions, namely paramātmā (‘supreme Self’) and bhagavān (‘supreme possessor of opulences’). Although these three perspectives have equal validity in one sense, they can also be graded in terms of advancement of realization. To substantiate this, Jīva Gosvāmī quotes the Viṣṇu-purāṇa, another scripture revered by the Vaiṣṇavas:

*The (impersonal) brahman is unmanifested; not aging; inconceivable; unborn; without and diminution; indescribable; formless; without hands, feet and the like; it is omnipotent; omnipresent; eternal; the origin of all material elements; causeless; pervading everything, yet nothing is situated in it; that from which everything comes. The demigods [highly evolved souls] see that brahman as the supreme abode, the object of meditation for those who aspire after liberation. Brahman is the subtle (spiritual effulgence) and abode of Viṣṇu described in the mantras of the Vedas. It is brahman that is denoted by (the) bhagavān (aspect of the Absolute), and the supreme Self (paramātmā) is the (partial) manifestation of the transcendental form of the imperishable (supreme) Person, bhagavān.*<sup>28</sup>

Bhagavān, or God, is defined as ‘the supreme being, who possesses six types of bhaga, or opulence, in unlimited magnitude.’<sup>29</sup> It is the identification of bhagavān as the possessor of all potency which qualifies him as the supreme person, puruṣottama, and identifies him as saguna-īśvara, or the Lord possessing qualities, superior to nirguna-brahman – the unqualified absolute.<sup>30</sup> It is this supreme person who, we shall see, is considered the unique source of all avatāras, or divine descents into the world.



## I.2.2 Jīva – The Living Entity

Quoting Viṣṇu Purāṇa again, Jīva Gosvāmī holds that bhagavān exhibits his energy in three aspects, namely svarūpa-śakti (essential power), tatastha-śakti (medial power), and bahirāṅga-śakti (extraneous power).<sup>31</sup> Tatastha-śakti, literally ‘energy situated on the border,’ is also known as jīva-śakti, or “energy of the living beings”; bahirāṅga-śakti is identified as the energy of illusion (māyā-śakti). As Manju Dube puts it, “Jīva-śakti is responsible for the very being of the individual souls and Māyā-śakti is responsible for the creation, sustenance, and dissolution of the world. Paramātman as their supporter acts as the regulator of the souls and the world.”<sup>32</sup>

In the Vaiṣṇavas’ concern to position themselves strongly against the monistic notion that both the world and the living beings are without substance and against the collapsing of individual, personal identity into one conscious Being, they want to preserve the eternal master-servant relationship between God and creatures. Living entities, being products of the medial energy, and being anu, or intrinsically minuscule, exist in a relationship of dependence on God, who is vibhu, or infinitely great. Although as such they are meant to function in accordance with the svarūpa-śakti as eternally liberated souls, out of avidyā, ignorance, they subject themselves to the māyā-śakti – the potency through which the contingent world is created, maintained, and destroyed, and through which the living entities’ seemingly independent desires are facilitated.

Vaiṣṇavism can be contrasted to most forms of Śaivism, which seek to diminish the difference between the jīva and Śiva to the point that the individual self may realize a degree of “śiva-ness” (śivatva) comparable to Śiva himself.<sup>33</sup> While in some forms of Śaivism, as in all forms of Vaiṣṇavism, the eternal individuality of each living being (jīvātmā) is asserted, in Vaiṣṇavism the jīva remains a dependent minuscule portion of bhagavān, never an independent entity. As in practically all forms of Indic religion, Vaiṣṇavism identifies the fundamental problem for the living entity as bondage in the cycle of repeated birth and death (saṁsāra). For

the Vaiṣṇavas this bondage is due to ignorance of the living entity's real identity in relation to bhagavān; the solution to the problem is liberation (mokṣa or mukti), which can only come about by re-establishing the relation of service by shedding the false conception of oneself as independent doer, controller, or master (ahaṁkāra). This in turn is afforded by bhagavān's initiative, by making himself accessible to the bound living beings as avatāras. Moreover, as the 'knower of the field' (kṣetra-jña) or knower of the bodily condition of the living entity, as supreme Self (paramātmā), bhagavān acts from within the heart of the living entity to guide it out of bondage.

### I.2.3 Jagat – The World

Through māyā-śakti, or the energy of illusion of bhagavān, the jīvātmā is facilitated to sustain a condition perfectly appropriate for the fulfillment of its desires. The arena of facilitation is jagat, 'that which is in flux,' the contingent world of transient names and forms. Each living entity is supplied with a configuration of sensory apparatus, the aggregate of which makes up its physical body, which is subjected to the constraints of matter.

Seen from another perspective, God is revealed through his māyā-śakti, that which produces the inanimate world. As God is real, so his energy and hence its manifestation – a transformation of the energy, not of the energetic source – is real. The world, as a transformation of the energy of God, is not God-in-illusory-form; it is not compromised in its status as existent, and hence the experience of the bound living beings – of happiness and distress, of hope and fear, (as also the existence of moral responsibility for action) – is not trivialized. The world is a real effect of the real cause; as such it is one of the unsurpassed attributes of the Lord.<sup>34</sup> In his comparison of the five major Vaiṣṇava theologies, Dube notes,

*The reduction of the material world to the Māyā-śakti is an important characteristic of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. This view strengthens the conception of ultimate Reality as one without a*

*second. The conception of ‘acintya bhedābheda’ tries to solve the difficulty of reconciling both identity and difference between śakti and śaktimat [the possessor of śakti]. [The] Bengal school does not regard one as real and [the] other as unreal but attributes [to] them a relation which is supralogical and inconceivable.*<sup>35</sup>

The world facilitates the living entities, but it also facilitates the Lord. The eighteenth century Caitanya Vaiṣṇava commentator Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa (eighteenth century, d. after 1764) gives an analogy from the Bhāgavatam (11.9.21) to illustrate this:

*Just as a spider creates a web out of itself, maintains it for some time and then reabsorbs it into itself similarly the Lord creates the universe, maintains it for some time and then reabsorbs it eventually. The sentient part of a spider does not change into web, but it is its non-sentient body from which the web comes out.*<sup>36</sup>

The spider takes up a position on its creation, its web; similarly the eternal, omnipotent Lord takes up a position within his creation for the purpose of exhibiting līlā, or pastimes, with the aid of his svarūpa-śakti.<sup>37</sup> This he does in the form of his various avatāras, which appear in various forms at various times within the cosmos.

## **I.3 Cosmology**

### **I.3.1 Creation, Maintenance, and Destruction**

Cosmic creation and destruction are understood much in the same way as found in the classical Indian Sāṃkhya philosophical system.<sup>38</sup> Creation is a process of unfolding of several elements and principles – each emerging from the one before it – from which the bodies of living

entities are constituted. Cosmic destruction, after set astronomical periods of time, reverses the process of creation.<sup>39</sup> Bengal Vaiṣṇavism basically accepts the descriptions of the Purāṇas and Pañcarātra<sup>40</sup> literature of how bhagavān participates in this process by a fairly elaborate process of expansion or manifestation in various forms with specific jurisdictions of lordship. Each of these are considered manifestations of the Lord conceived as puruṣa, the primal Person; hence, because they descend within the world which they bring about, they are known as puruṣa-avatāras.

According to the Bhāgavatam, a second level of creation, maintenance, and destruction are facilitated by a second type of avatāra, the three guṇa-avatāras Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. At this level, ambiguity enters into the picture in relation to two of these three avatāras, Brahmā and Śiva. Whereas Viṣṇu (‘he who enters’) is a ‘plenary’ form of bhagavān, and therefore is viṣṇu-tattva, (‘of the viṣṇu-suchness’ or ‘of the viṣṇu-category’), Brahmā is generally of the jīva-tattva, the category of living entities subject to being fettered within the world; yet occasionally, according to Caitanya Vaiṣṇava commentators, he may be viṣṇu-tattva. Śiva is considered by Vaiṣṇava preceptors to occupy his own category, called (not surprisingly) śīva-tattva. One text important for the Caitanyas, the Brahmā-saṁhitā, compares Viṣṇu and Śiva to milk and yogurt, respectively: From milk one can produce yogurt, but yogurt can not be turned back into milk. There is close affinity, yet milk must be considered superior to yogurt by virtue of being the source of yogurt.

At this level of creation and of increased differentiation of the extraneous potency (bahirāṅga-śakti) a slight degree of adverse influence of that energy accrues to Brahmā and Śiva, whereas Viṣṇu, as bhagavān, remains fully transcendent and aloof from material blemish. For this reason it is through the agency of Viṣṇu that the delicate balance of the material manifestation is maintained – not only in a physical sense but a moral sense as well. It is as Viṣṇu that bhagavān performs the functions expected of majestic lordship by overseeing the invisible moral superstructure governed by the principle of karma, or (proper and improper) action.<sup>41</sup> And it is through Viṣṇu that the numerous līlā-avatāras

descend, to perform their triple function of blessing the righteous, subduing the unrighteous, and reinstating dharma – religious principles – all as elements of their līlā, divine pastimes.

After listing the more important of these līlā-avatāras, the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam summarizes their essential qualities, then identifies the means by which this subject can be comprehended:

*The Lord, whose activities are always spotless, is the master of the six senses and is fully omnipotent with six opulences. He creates the manifested universes, maintains them and annihilates them without being in the least affected. He is within every living being and is always independent. The foolish with a poor fund of knowledge cannot know the transcendental nature of the forms, names and activities of the Lord, who is playing like an actor in a drama. Nor can they express such things, neither in their speculations nor in their words. Only those who render unreserved, uninterrupted, favorable service unto the lotus feet of Lord Kṛṣṇa, who carries the wheel of the chariot in His hand,<sup>42</sup> can know the creator of the universe in His full glory, power and transcendence.<sup>43</sup>*

### **I.3.2 Expansion and Descent: Increasing Availability**

As bhagavān expands and descends, he becomes in successive categories of expansion increasingly accessible to the jīvas who are fettered in the world of saṁsāra. Āgama literature<sup>44</sup> describes this increasing accessibility to highlight the importance of the arcā-vigraha, also referred to as arcāvatāra – the worshipable physical image. This idea is nicely explained by the Śrī Vaiṣṇava<sup>45</sup> scholar Srinivasa Chari:

*The arcāvatāra which constitutes the foundation for image worship is considered more significant than the other incarnations [sic] of God.<sup>46</sup> The transcendental form of God (para-rūpa) is beyond the approach of human beings since it exists only in the transcendental realm. The vyūha forms [quaternary emanations] too are unapproachable to us. The vibhava forms [forms appearing in the world for specific functions or pastimes] have already taken place in the remote past and as such are not available to us at present for direct worship. The presence of God as the indwelling spirit in our heart (antaryāmin) though close by is also beyond the scope of worship because the physical sense organs cannot perceive Him. Thus, the Divine Being present in the form of arcā-vigraha is always easily available to us for offering worship.<sup>47</sup>*

Chari goes on to explain that later Vaiṣṇava literature speaks of four types of arcāvatāras in terms of their apparent origins.<sup>48</sup> Svayamvyakta, ‘self-manifest,’ are believed to have appeared by the direct will of bhagavān; daiva, ‘related to a deva, or higher mortal,’ are said to have appeared on the instigation of one of several cosmic administrative agents<sup>49</sup>; saiddha, ‘related to a siddha, or sage,’ appear at the behest of an ascetic by virtue of his highly concentrated will; and mānuṣa, ‘of a human being,’ are images formed and consecrated in accordance with scriptural specifications and procedures, out of one of eight types of material.<sup>50</sup> We might well object that in all cases these images are, at least in some sense, made of ordinary materials such as wood, metal or stone, and hence are clearly perishable. Being of the same substance as all matter, they surely participate in grossness, impurity, and inferiority. Moreover, the images are of particular shape which suggest imperfect human form. Clearly they show none of the characteristics of puruṣottama, the ‘highest person.’ Yet all these apparent disqualifications are, for the Vaiṣṇava, countered by the one basic qualification recognized by the faithful devotee, namely accessibility.

John Carman quotes from a commentator who followed Rāmānuja, illustrating the complementarity of paratva, or ‘supremacy’ and saulabhya, or ‘accessibility’ in the Lord:

*How can a lame man climb on an elephant if you tell him to do so? Likewise how can an insignificant soul in this imperfect world . . . approach the Lord of all . . . ? The answer is surely that the elephant can accommodate itself, kneeling down so that the lame man can mount. God likewise makes Himself very low so that He can be worshipped by the soul in this imperfect world.*<sup>51</sup>

According to Rāmānuja<sup>52</sup> beauty of bodily form is an attribute of God which demonstrates both his majesty and his accessibility as avatāra.<sup>53</sup> As we shall see, this quality will be stressed in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology as one basis for identifying Kṛṣṇa as avatārin, or the source of all avatāras, the puruṣottama himself.

## **I.4 Kṛṣṇa as the Supremely Attractive Lord**

Caitanya commentators quote extensively from Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam to support the position that Kṛṣṇa is svayam bhagavān, ‘God himself,’ the source of all avatāras.<sup>54</sup> Their concern is to show that although he appears in the world, apparently as an avatāra of Viṣṇu, it is he who is the actual source of not only Viṣṇu but also of Nārāyaṇa, the majestic form of bhagavān worshipped as supreme in Pañcarātra literature. This is a salient point of distinction between the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas (who mainly follow the Viṣṇu-purāṇa) and the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, who follow Caitanya’s lead in privileging the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam over other scriptures. But for the Caitanyas, the issue is not reducible simply to differing scriptural authority. Rather, they draw a polarity between aiśvarya, or lordship, and mādhyura, or sweetness – the latter, we may note, having some affinity with, and some significant difference from, Carman’s notion of accessibility as articulated by Rāmānuja.



Whereas lordship (aiśvarya) is considered a peripheral or accidental quality (tatastha-lakṣaṇa) of bhagavān, sweetness (mādhurya) is referred to as his svarūpa-lakṣaṇa, or intrinsic quality.<sup>55</sup> However much this argument may appear to defy reason (i.e. denying lordship as a principal feature of the Lord), the Caitanyas want to make a statement not only about the nature of God, but also about the nature of the jīvātmā, the individual soul: Although the jīva is doubtless the eternal subordinate of God, his inclination to serve, and hence his ability to approach God intimately, is afforded not by God's lordship as such, but by his beauty and sweetness – by aesthetic qualities. To the Caitanyas, Kṛṣṇa is the supreme being who demonstrates these features. O.B.L. Kapoor, an Indian scholar and practicing Vaiṣṇava, conveys something of this conviction:

*[Kṛṣṇa] is not the incarnation of Viṣṇu as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja think, but the hypostasis of Viṣṇu and all other gods. The historical Kṛṣṇa is the de[s]cent of the eternal Kṛṣṇa, in whom are embodied supreme puissance, supreme love, and supreme bliss. He is both concrete and expansive. By his infinite nature he encircles the whole universe, but his infinitude is centred in a concrete form. He is all-embracing in the organic unity of his being. His concrete form does not make him limited or restricted in freedom, because the modulations of his being spread everywhere in the infinite expanse of existence. He combines wideness of spirit with intensity of modulations, the eternal peace and calm of perfection with the dynamism of eternally self-revealing and self-fulfilling creative activity, and quickness of movement with intensive harmony and gracefulness. His flute wakes up such modulations in our being that our demands for love, knowledge and peace are all satisfied in an integrative synthesis. It provides freedom, elasticity, harmony and everything that makes for the richest and the most complete spiritual life.*<sup>56</sup>

Along with his mādhurya, or sweetness, Kṛṣṇa's 'concreteness' is also central to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism.<sup>57</sup> It is Kṛṣṇa who historically

appeared in Vṛndāvana, or Vraja, a tract of some 168 square miles of land including the present city of Mathurā, between Delhi and Agra.<sup>58</sup> It was in relation to hundreds of specifically identified places within this holy land that Kṛṣṇa is remembered for performing his līlā the first eleven years of his childhood and youth with his parikaras, or associates. It is the ‘concrete,’ tangible and specific features of this land which, for devotees, bear witness to the presence of Kṛṣṇa not only at that time, but in the present – in every stone, tree, and cow of Vraja. And it is the thousands of ‘concrete’ arcā images of Kṛṣṇa housed in temples, shrines, and religious communities (āśramas) which receive the daily devotions of local residents and pilgrims.

I have briefly sketched the theology of the avatāra in general terms under the category of sambandha, ‘relationship,’ and indicated by it both the significance of the arcāvatāra as the object of worship and the significance of Kṛṣṇa as the most accessible, supreme divinity for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas. We must now consider the category of abhidheya, ‘process,’ which is bhakti, ‘devotional service,’ by which prayojana, the ‘goal,’ namely pure love of God, is attained. It is through bhakti that the practice of image worship is nourished and sustained.

## **Chapter Two**

## Bhakti as Means and End

*The manifestation of unadulterated devotional service is exhibited when one's mind is at once attracted to hearing the transcendental name and qualities of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, who is residing in everyone's heart. Just as the water of the Ganges flows naturally down towards the ocean, such devotional ecstasy, uninterrupted by any material condition, flows towards the Supreme Lord.*

— Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 3.29.11-12.<sup>59</sup>

### II.1. Definitions

#### II.1.1 Negative Definition of Bhakti

Prompted by their understanding of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theologians have been concerned to isolate bhakti from all practices they consider<sup>60</sup> distinct from bhakti, specifically karma, jñāna, and yoga, not to completely reject these latter three, but to highlight bhakti as the active, integrative principle through which they come to perfection.<sup>61</sup> Karma in this context refers to all efforts made in expectation of gaining material rewards, be they immediately tangible or scripturally promised future rewards (a future auspicious birth, material gains in the next life, etc.). Jñāna in this context has to do with the aspiration to gain gnosis, or spiritual knowledge out of a desire for liberation from material, bodily existence. Its perfection consists in the realization of nirviśeṣa-brahman, or the non-differentiated, 'impersonal' absolute.<sup>62</sup> Yoga as included here refers to the practice of aṣṭāṅga-yoga – the classical eight-fold system aimed at realization of paramātmā, but which is criticized from the bhakti perspective on the grounds that it tends to distract the

practitioner with the acquisition of occult powers which may lead to self-aggrandizement.

These latter three types of practice, profusely extolled throughout Vedic literature, although not held entirely in contempt in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava school, are regarded with caution as all belonging to the category of ‘other desires’ (anyā-bhilāṣitāḥ) which serve mainly to perpetuate material existence over against the valued, genuinely spiritual desire of service to bhagavān, which is represented by bhakti.<sup>63</sup> Only bhakti leads one to realization of the bhagavān feature of the absolute, albeit with possible assistance from the other three in the beginning stages of bhakti spiritual practice.<sup>64</sup>

This emphasis in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava conception of bhakti places the latter in a position somewhat exclusive from the traditional social structure, the varṇāśrama system (which came to be known in the West in its more recent form as the ‘caste’ system). Whereas varṇāśrama caters mainly to the three above mentioned lesser pursuits by focusing on material bodily concerns, Kṛṣṇa-bhakti goes beyond varṇāśrama and thereby fulfills its (varṇāśrama’s) actual purpose. In his Bhakti-sandarbha, Jīva Gosvāmī quotes from the Bhāgavatam:

*It is therefore concluded that the highest perfection one can achieve by discharging the duties prescribed for one's own occupation according to caste divisions [varṇa] and orders of life [āśrama] is to please the Personality of Godhead.*<sup>65</sup>

He then elaborates:

*Pure devotional service [śuddha-bhakti] is utterly the best (of spiritual paths). By this verse, therefore, it is said that devotional service is superior to the activities of varṇāśrama-dharma. Next he (Sūta Gosvāmī) describes the nature of bhakti: Because bhakti is naturally and spontaneously blissful, it is unmotivated (ahaitukī), that is to say it is without the search for any result other than the service itself; also it is uninterrupted (apratihatā), which means because there is an*

*absence of either happiness or distress in (reference to) anything (other than devotional service), therefore it cannot be stopped by anything. When bhakti is characterized by attraction (ruci) (to the Lord), then the practice of bhakti (sādhana-bhakti), characterized by hearing (about the Lord) and so on, commences.*<sup>66</sup>

Caitanya and the Six Gosvāmīs do not reject the established social system of class division (unlike some bhakti movements, such as that of Kabir<sup>67</sup>), yet they subordinate it to the attainment of a higher goal, Kṛṣṇa-bhakti. Since the visible practice of bhakti spirituality is significantly related to the temples where images are worshipped, this attitude to varṇāśrama becomes important. In accord with the Pañcarātra scriptures which concentrate on the ritual aspect of Vaiṣṇava theology and practice, the Gosvāmīs acknowledge that bhakti is for everyone regardless of class membership by birth, in that anyone can become qualified to receive initiation into the practices which constitute the cultivation of bhakti – especially the chanting of mantras, or mystic utterances,<sup>68</sup> and the worship of divine images (mūrtis). Class distinctions are preserved for ordinary social dealings, but they are simultaneously transcended on the higher level of bhakti.<sup>69</sup>

Bhakti is also contrasted with another categorization of human pursuits, or puruṣārthas, namely ‘mundane religiosity’ (dharma); the pursuit of wealth (artha); the satisfaction of sense desires (kāma); and liberation (mokṣa) – all of which, again, are facilitated by the varṇāśrama social structure. Whereas mokṣa is seen in almost all formal religious traditions of India as the ultimate human goal (including most Vaiṣṇava systems, which emphasize bhakti as the exclusive means to liberation), for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas bhakti is the goal itself (sādhya), and therefore it is inclusive of the four subordinate goals, especially liberation. The importance of all the ordinary human goals is thought to be insignificant in comparison to śuddha-bhakti, pure devotion.

## II.1.2. Positive Definition of Bhakti

If bhakti is held to be in contradistinction to most ordinary human goals, what is its positive aim? Or if it is inclusive of all other accomplishments, what is its specific characteristic? For the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, bhakti is devotion specifically to Kṛṣṇa or one of his many forms, for the exclusive purpose of pleasing him.<sup>70</sup> Jīva Gosvāmī substantiates the first aspect of this position with a proof-text from the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (7.14.34):

*O king of the earth, it has been decided by expert, learned scholars that only the Supreme Personality of Godhead<sup>71</sup>, Kṛṣṇa, in whom all that is moving or non-moving within this universe is resting and from whom everything is coming, is the best person to whom everything must be given.<sup>72</sup>*

Since it is the Lord in whom “all that is moving or non-moving within this universe is resting and from whom everything is coming,” he is compared to the root of a tree which deserves the attentions of watering and nourishment for the benefit of the entire tree; serving him is further compared to human nourishment by the normal process of eating, by which the body’s metabolic system assures the proper distribution of energy to all its organs and senses (Bhāg. 4.31.14). The word bhakti comes from the Sanskrit verbal root bhaj, ‘to divide’ or ‘to share.’<sup>73</sup> Often translated simply as ‘devotion,’ the Caitanya school emphasizes its active quality, as a constant practice of service to the supreme. Since the svarūpa-lakṣaṇa, or essential characteristic, of the jīvātmā (the individual self) is service, and since the jīvātmā has an eternal connection to bhagavān (as a ray of sunlight is connected to the sun), the natural object (viṣaya) of service and devotion is bhagavān.

That bhakti has the aim of satisfying bhagavān is also indicated in Rūpa Gosvāmī’s (1488-156?) definition of the superior (uttama) form of bhakti.<sup>74</sup> It is ānukūlyena kṛṣṇānuśīlana, or the repeated and devoted service to Kṛṣṇa which is ‘according to the current,’ i.e. favorable to



Kṛṣṇa. This svarūpa-lakṣaṇa, or essential characteristic, of bhakti, is a function of the svarūpa-śakti, the essential, ‘internal’ energy of bhagavān.<sup>75</sup>

Bhakti is also inherently existing in a dormant condition in the jīvātmā (a product of tatastha-śakti, or medial potency, as mentioned in Chapter One) who is under the sway of the bahiraṅga-śakti, the extraneous potency of bhagavān. In other words, the living entity, by virtue of its eternal relation to bhagavān, has spontaneous, natural devotion to him;<sup>76</sup> but this devotion has been obscured to a greater or lesser degree by habituation (since time immemorial, from untold previous births) to selfish pursuits inspired by the attractions of the extraneous potency. How one breaks with habit and awakens devotion is ultimately a matter of grace (kṛpā, prasāda, vadānyatā, anugraha), received from bhagavān by one or more of several means, all based on the ontological relationship of the jīva to bhagavān.<sup>77</sup>

Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja, one of two principle sixteenth century biographers of Caitanya whose writings are considered canonical by all Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, claims that the goal of bhakti, namely pure love of God, is eternally available within the living being, waiting to be awakened by proper means:

*Pure love for Kṛṣṇa is eternally established in the hearts of living entities. It is not something to be gained from another source (sādhya). When the heart is purified by hearing and chanting, the living entity naturally awakens (C.c. Madhya 22.107).*

‘Hearing’ and ‘chanting’ are types of sādhana, or practice which help the sādhaṇa, or practitioner, to awaken the dormant kṛṣṇa-prema, or unadulterated love for Kṛṣṇa. The Bhāgavatam presents a nine-fold group of interrelated practices conducive to the perfection of bhakti which include śravaṇam, or hearing topics related to the Lord from qualified sources, and kīrtanam, or chanting, speaking about, glorifying the Lord. Also included within these nine is arcanam,<sup>78</sup> or worshipping the Lord

formally, especially by the procedures of mūrti-sevā, or service to the divine image. It is this practice with which we are concerned in this paper, hence our next topic will be bhakti in practice, or sādhana-bhakti.

## II.2 Vaidhi-sādhana-bhakti – Bhakti as Means

### II.2.1 Regulating the Senses

A contemporary scholar of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, Joseph T. O’Connell, gives us a brief explanation of the term sādhana:

*. . . [S]ādhana is basically a pattern or program of religious practices. The Sanskrit root, sadh, means “to accomplish” or “to attain” something. Sādhana is the means or the program that one goes through to attain the sādhyā (“that which is to be attained”) or the siddhi (the “perfection” or the “goal”). In this case, the goal is a yet more perfect experience of bhakti, or devotion to the Lord. The sādhanaka is the person who is striving to attain such perfection.*

*Sādhana is a program . . . in which the Vaiṣṇava uses not only his or her mind but the physical senses also—eyes, ears, voice—to develop the underlying capacity for devotion into a more perfect culmination of it.*<sup>79</sup>

In one of the most important theological writings for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava community, the Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu (‘The Ocean of the Nectarean Taste of Devotion’), Rūpa Gosvāmī treats bhakti in three categories, the first of which is sādhana-bhakti, or devotion in practice.<sup>80</sup> This has two subdivisions, vaidhi, or “in reference to regulations,” and rāgānuga, or “following spontaneously.” For the majority of practitioners, the path of following regulations is prescribed, since it is understood that the binding effect<sup>81</sup> of habitual engagement in mundane activities has rendered one more or less incapable of acting on the platform of

spontaneous devotion, at least in any sustained way. Following the directions of one's guru, or spiritual preceptor, and of śāstra, or scripture, the practitioner learns to orient all of his or her physical and mental activities toward the service of the Lord. Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja, after quoting Rūpa Gosvāmī's definition of uttama-bhakti (see previous section), elaborates on anukūlya, or "favorable" practice, with sarvendriye, or "with all one's senses," (whereby in Indian philosophical traditions the mind is considered the interior sense). He then quotes Rūpa further, who in turn gives reference to Pañcarātra scripture:

*Bhakti means the service of the supreme Lord of the senses with (one's own) senses. Such service (renders one) free from all material [temporary] designations and (renders the senses) pure.*<sup>82</sup> (C.c. Madhya 19.170 / BRS 1.1.12).

Kṛṣṇa is known by the epithet hr̥ṣīkeśa, or "Lord of the senses." The effect of māyā, the deluding potential of matter, is to support the bound jīva's misconception of his own lordship by facilitating sense activity in relation to sense objects for pleasing results. In the practice of vaidhi-sādhana, the practitioner learns to dedicate all activities of the senses to the "Lord of the senses," recognizing bhagavān's sensate nature. Thus, for example, one's ability to see is counted as a minute expression of God's unlimited power of sight; similarly the functions of all the other senses are considered testimony to the unlimited sensory power of the Lord, whose desire it is that the jīva dedicate its sensory activities to his service as a token of bhakti. Dedication of sensory activity to the Lord is rewarded by genuine satisfaction of the senses.

The Bhagavad-gītā, revered by most Hindus, especially Vaiṣṇavas of all traditions, is generally recognized as a text which emphasizes the importance of bhakti.<sup>83</sup> Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas revere it as an essential manual on bhakti spoken directly by Kṛṣṇa to his companion Arjuna. Near the end of the ninth chapter (verse 27), which deals specifically with bhakti, the general concept of dedicating one's activities to the Lord is expressed:

*Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer or give away, and whatever austerities you perform—do that, O*

*son of Kuntī [Arjuna], as an offering to Me [Kṛṣṇa].*<sup>84</sup>

This is a generalization of the statement of the previous verse:

*If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower,  
fruit or water, I will accept it.*<sup>85</sup>

These brief statements indicate the essential theology of sensory engagement as devotional service directed to the Lord – a principle which is extensively elaborated in the Gītā itself as also in other scriptures, especially the Bhāgavatam. The Pañcarātra literature treats this same principle in more technical ways, especially as formalized ritual.

Consolidating and systematizing the numerous injunctions for regulated practice is one of the projects of the Gosvāmīs. Rūpa Gosvāmī offers a list of sixty-four items important for vaidhi-bhakti-sādhana, all of which relate directly or indirectly to the worship of the Lord in the arcā-vigraha. These injunctions range from basic principles, such as the acceptance of apprenticeship under a properly qualified guru, to more specific injunctions, such as the necessity to follow behind processions in which portable vijaya-mūrtis, or festival images, are carried. Within this list is found the injunction to worship the image by a daily procedure which is itself elaborated into sixty-four upacāras, or items offered, in yet another text, the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa, attributed to Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī.<sup>86</sup>

## **II.2.2 Ritual Service Aimed at Devotion**

It may be helpful to consider briefly some of the contents of the practice of image worship in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition. It should be noted that the basic structure and considerable content of this practice is similar to that of other Vaiṣṇava traditions. It has not gone unnoticed by scholars that there is considerable similarity in ritual procedures among Indic traditions; so for example the Śaiva-siddhānta tradition of south India<sup>87</sup> and even “heterodox” traditions, especially Jainism and

Buddhism<sup>88</sup> may have almost identical sequences of offering items to the respective object of worship.<sup>89</sup>

Since the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam holds central scriptural authority for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, and since its specific description of image worship procedure is quite brief and relatively undetailed, we can take advantage of it to become acquainted with the basic elements of worship.

In the twenty-seventh chapter of the eleventh book of this work, Kṛṣṇa himself is quoted as he outlines the process for his dear friend Uddhava:

*Now please listen faithfully as I explain exactly how a person who has achieved twice-born status (dvijatvam prāpya)<sup>90</sup> through the relevant Vedic prescriptions should worship me [in the arcā-mūrti] with devotion (māṁ bhaktyā).<sup>91</sup>*

The Hari-bhakti-vilāsa deals at length with the qualifications one needs to achieve “twice-born” status.<sup>92</sup> A person must receive proper initiation from a qualified guru and be trained in sad-ācāra – proper Vaiṣṇava behavior – before he or she can worship the arcā-mūrti directly.<sup>93</sup> Such a dvija is then expected to follow a strict daily regimen of actions in relation to the service of the Lord, who may be represented in a small image enshrined in one’s own home, or in a mandira, or temple, of lesser or greater size. The day begins at the brahma-muhūrta, or one-and-a-half hours before sunrise, when one rises to immediately prepare oneself physically and mentally for approaching the Lord.

*The worshiper should first purify his body by cleansing his teeth and bathing. Then he should perform a second cleansing by applying marks to the body with earth and chanting both Vedic and tantric mantras (Bhāg. 11.27.10).<sup>94</sup>*

These and related activities make up abhigamana, or acts preparatory to approaching the Lord for worship. Abhigamana is one of five divisions

(pañcāṅga) of pūjā, or worship with paraphernalia, found in Pañcarātra literature dealing with the procedures of daily image worship.<sup>95</sup> The second of these is upādāna, or gathering items for worship, including collecting offerable flowers and foodstuffs and preparing these and other items for offering, by purification procedures and, in the case of food, proper cooking.

*One should worship me in my forms, etc., (pratimādiṣu)<sup>96</sup> by offering the most excellent paraphernalia (dravyaiḥ prasiddhaiḥ). But a devotee completely freed from material desire may worship me with whatever he is able to obtain, and may even worship me within his heart with mental paraphernalia (hr̥dibhā-vena).<sup>97</sup>*

The third division is yoga, linking oneself (especially internally), or identifying oneself as a servant of God. Ritually this includes a process called bhūta-śuddhi, purification of the elements;<sup>98</sup> a brief<sup>99</sup> meditation (dhyāna) on the particular form of the Lord one is worshipping (following scriptural descriptions); and mānasa-pūjā, or a mental rehearsal of the procedures of worship.<sup>100</sup> Kṛṣṇa's description of meditation on his form in this section of the Bhāgavatam is as follows:

*The worshiper should meditate upon my subtle form—which is situated within the worshiper's own body, now purified by air and fire—as the source of all living entities. This form of the Lord is experienced by self-realized sages in the last part of the vibration of the sacred syllable om̐.*

With the next step, avāhana, or 'calling (the Lord) down,' the worship proper can begin:

*The devotee conceives of the supreme Self (paramātmā), whose presence surcharges the devotee's body, in the form corresponding to his realization. Thus the devotee worships the Lord to his full capacity and becomes fully absorbed in him. By touching the various limbs of the image and chanting*

*appropriate mantras, the devotee should invite the paramātmā to join the image, and then the devotee should worship (prapūjayet) me [in that image].*<sup>101</sup>

The fourth of the five aspects of worship, iḥyā, is the offering of several articles and services in a specific order and with appropriate mantras, or sacred verbal expressions.<sup>102</sup> As mentioned earlier, sixty-four of these articles and services, or upacāras, are delineated in Hari-bhakti-vilasa, all of which together constitute a full day's worship from early morning until late evening, including activities of waking, bathing, dressing, decorating, offering food, entertaining, and putting the Lord to rest. In offering these services, the Lord is treated as either the honored guest in one's home or the lordly monarch in his own palace. In both cases, within vaidhi-sādhana (regulated practice) the emphasis will be on careful attention to rules; however, individuals worshipping a home image are less likely to perform such elaborate service daily; more likely all the sixty-four (or more)<sup>103</sup> would be offered in a large temple, with greater attention to punctuality, and not all by one person. Rather, several pūjārīs, or ritual specialists, would offer the appropriate services for different times in the course of a day. This temple nitya-sevā, or daily program of service, is carried out seven days per week throughout the year; a home image might be worshipped very simply on most days of the week, with a more elaborate service performed once per week or once per fortnight.

Iḥyā, the offering of items and services, concludes in a festive mood:

*Singing along with others, chanting loudly and dancing, acting out my transcendental pastimes, and hearing and telling stories about me, the devotee should for some time absorb himself in such festivity.*<sup>104</sup>

Although the subject of this chapter of Bhāgavatam is arca-nam, the formal worship of the arcā-mūrti as one of nine practices of bhakti, this injunction to sing, chant, and hear in relation to the Lord is also present as both an aspect of arcanam and as the substance of the first two most important categories of devotion, śravaṇam and kīrtanam (hearing and



chanting), as we discussed in Section II.1.2. It is also related to the last of the five divisions of arcanam, namely svādhyāya, literally “self-study.” Svādhyāya refers to reading, recitation, and study of sacred texts, alone rather than with others. Svādhyāya is the reflective aspect of the practice of arcanam which facilitates the cultivation of spirituality and aids the practitioner in avoiding the dangers of routinization, or preoccupation with the details of rules at the expense of the essential purpose of the rules, namely to develop one’s natural devotion to the Lord through an attitude of service. Since the texts studied (especially the Bhāgavatam and the Caitanya-caritāmṛta for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas) emphasize other types of service related to the service of the arcā-mūrti, the study and recitation of scripture as an aspect of arcanam points to the necessity of participating in these other types of service. These revolve around such activities as vaiṣṇava-sevā, or service to Vaiṣṇavas; nāma-sevā, or service to the divine names of God (again, through recitation and singing); ātīthi-sevā, or reception and service to guests; prasāda-sevā, or distributing and eating sanctified food; and dhāma-sevā, or service to sacred places associated with the Lord. By careful practice of these sevās, the practitioner is expected to progress from a less mature stage of consciousness (characterized by neglect of other jīvas on the plea of attentiveness to the arcā-mūrti) to a more mature stage of awareness and behavior. This essential aspect of arcanam is thus attentive to scriptural warnings such as the following, (attributed to Kapila, counted in the Bhāgavatam as an avatāra of bhagavān):

*One who offers me respect but is envious of the bodies of others and is therefore a separatist (bhinna-darśī) never attains peace of mind, because of his inimical behavior toward other living entities. O sinless one, even if one worships with proper rituals and paraphernalia, a person who is disrespectful of living entities (being not aware of my presence in them) never pleases me by the worship of my image in the temple.*<sup>105</sup>

## II.3 Bhakti as Goal

### II.3.1 Leading Into Līlā: Reciprocation

Having outlined the practices of vaidhi-sādhana, or practice according to regulations, we can step back to view the entire progression of devotional practice as it is conceived in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, specifically as articulated by Rūpa Gosvāmī in Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu.<sup>106</sup> He identifies an eight-fold progression, beginning with initial faith (śraddhā) leading to association with other practitioners (sadhu-saṅga) with whom one undertakes regulated practice (bhajana-kriyā). Substantial progress is then experienced as the cessation of unholy practices (anartha-nivṛttiḥ), at which time one becomes firm in conviction (niṣṭhā) regarding the efficaciousness of the practice of bhakti, and thus one becomes steady in the practice.

In the next stage, one begins to experience ruci, or a genuine “taste” or inclination for bhakti, especially an inclination for śravaṇam, devotional hearing about the Lord. Out of ruci develops āsakti, or a strong, unshakable attachment to the Lord, out of which develops bhāva, or “transcendent emotion.” As this experience of emotion intensifies and deepens, it allows prema, or supreme love of God (that which, as we noted earlier, is considered dormant present in all living entities) to manifest in the heart.

A similar progression was elaborated some five centuries earlier by the Śrī-Vaiṣṇava Rāmānuja in his Vedārthasaṁgraha. In the conclusion of his account of the unfolding of bhakti, he stresses the experience of the Lord’s grace and the experience of bhakti as a goal in itself:

*The supreme person, who is overflowing with compassion, being pleased with such love, showers his grace on the aspirant, which destroys all his inner darkness. Bhakti develops in such a devotee towards the highest person, which is valued for its own sake, which is uninterrupted, which is an*

*absolute delight in itself and which is meditation that has  
taken on the character of the most vivid and immediate vision.  
Through such bhakti is the Supreme attained.*<sup>107</sup>

Thus bhakti is conceived as both a means and an end. It is the means of attaining the supreme person, but once the goal is attained bhakti is not given up, for it is the very principle of exchange which constitutes the relationship of bhagavān and the jīva. Viewed from this perspective, bhakti is recognized to be the fundamental modality of transcendent living which alone insures unmediated experience of the Lord's presence. The Nārada-bhakti-sūtras, in the typically terse style of the sūtra-genre of Sanskrit literature, state, "When one attains this love in bhakti, one sees only God, one hears only God, one knows only God."<sup>108</sup> It is at this stage that the accessibility of God is experienced fully, so that his majestic quality fades to insignificance, giving way to a sense of intimacy. This topic will be treated in more detail in a later section. For now we need simply to note the Vaiṣṇava claim that it is when bhakti fully develops and is comprehended as an end in itself that the qualification is reached whereby the presence of the Lord can be properly appreciated and fully experienced – whether as avatāra appearing for a particular function, or as antaryāmin (the "dweller in the heart"), or as arcā-vatāra (the consecrated image).

### **II.3.2 Sound and Form as Media of Exchange**

The stage of śuddha-bhakti, or pure devotion, is also the stage at which one is said to comprehend "non-material"<sup>109</sup> sound and form. Classical advaita (monistic) vedānta sees all sound and form as manifestations of māyā (illusion) and saṁsāra (the phenomenal world), to be meditated upon by various techniques called upāsanās, or "means of approach," in order to ultimately go beyond sound and form. Since sound and form are the objects of the senses, whose activities (karma) must cease in order to allow one to gain gnosis (jñāna), an aspirant of gnosis must withdraw attention from them. Since such cessation of sense activity

is extremely difficult, the upāsanās are offered as transitional practices to perfection.

In contrast to advaita-vedānta, and like other theistic schools of India, Vaiṣṇavism gives central ontological significance to divine sound and form, as direct revelations from God. Perhaps more than other schools of Vaiṣṇavism, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas emphasize the notion of revealed nāma, or divine name, as a type of “avatāra” by which the Lord becomes most accessible, especially in this present age.<sup>110</sup> Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja quotes Śrī Caitanya as saying,

*In this Age of Kali, the holy name of the Lord, the Hare Kṛṣṇa mahā-mantra, is the incarnation [avatāra] of Lord Kṛṣṇa. Simply by chanting the holy name, one associates with the Lord directly. Anyone who does this is certainly delivered.*<sup>111</sup>

He goes on to contrast ordinary and divine name, form, and personality:

*The Lord’s holy name, his form and his personality are all one and the same. There is no difference (bheda nāhi) [no nonidentity] between them. Since all of them are absolute,<sup>112</sup> they are transcendently blissful. There is no difference [/distinction, basis for distinction] between Kṛṣṇa’s body and himself or between his name and himself. As far as the conditioned soul [jīva] is concerned, these are all [categorically] different from each other. One’s name is different from one’s body, from one’s original form and so on.*<sup>113</sup>

And then he applies this distinction to the problem of approaching the unlimited supreme with prakṛta-indriya, limited material senses (quoting from Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu of Rūpa Gosvāmī):

*Therefore material senses cannot appreciate Kṛṣṇa's holy name, form, qualities and pastimes. Yet simply when one eagerly renders service by using one's tongue (jihva) [to chant the Lord's holy name and taste the remnants of the Lord's food] and other senses, [because the senses become purified] Kṛṣṇa himself manifests in the world.*<sup>114</sup>

Thus Kṛṣṇa's descent as avatāra, to be comprehended, demands response from the jīva by activation of the sense organs. To the argument of the advaitin (monist) that this means undertaking karma, by which the jīva becomes further implicated in illusory existence, Vaiṣṇavas would answer that this type of sense activity, even if appearing to be karma, is in fact bhakti, which has the effect of freeing one from bondage. It is stated in the Bhagavad-gītā (9.28) immediately following the statement I have previously quoted (see Section II.2.1):

*In this way [by dedicating activities to me, the Lord] you will be freed from bondage to work (karma-bandha) and its auspicious and inauspicious results. With your mind fixed on me in this principle of renunciation, you will be liberated and come to me.*

As we have discussed previously, in bhakti the senses are employed in service to the “Lord of the senses,” and this becomes the basis of reciprocation with the Lord. By the Lord's grace through the medium of sacred sound in particular, the impure jīva can, in a sense, retrace back to the position of purity in which communion with God is possible. Central among the sense organs to be employed in this process of return is the tongue, with its double function of articulating language and tasting edibles.

Pañcarātra literature developed an elaborate theology of sacred language interrelating it with cosmogonic and salvific activities of God.<sup>115</sup> This involved a relationship between sound and form much as formulated in earlier speculations. Sanjukta Gupta explains:

*Already, in the early Upaniṣads, the world is said to consist of names (nāma) and forms (rūpa). In systematic philosophy, this same relation becomes that between word (śabda) and referent (artha). In Pāñcarātra theology, as in all tantric theology, this relation is applied to mantras and their deities: a mantra designates a deity.*<sup>116</sup>

The relation between mantra, or potent utterance, and the divinity it designates came to be understood increasingly in terms of bhakti in later Pāñcarātra literature and practice, wherein the mantra is a manifestation of the anugraha, or favor of God. In earlier Pāñcarātra texts the faithful utterance of the mantra received from one's guru was understood more as a means to gain power and identity with the referent deity of the mantra. The emphasis was on personal effort and meditation, following yogic tradition. In the later formulations mantras become embodiments of God's favor, means of attaining communion with God by his grace, which is an emotional experience rather than a meditative one. The earlier and later conceptions were quite disparate, yet a reconciliation was found in the practice of Pāñcarātric upāsanā, or meditation combined with worship, in which equal importance was placed on the use of mantra and the worship of a physical image.<sup>117</sup>

The Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas give central importance to mantra recitation as the means by which the tongue's ability to articulate language is engaged for the Lord's service. While there are several mantras from both Vedic and Pāñcarātric sources used in the daily worship of images, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, following the teaching and example of Caitanya, has put greatest emphasis on the so-called mahā-mantra, or primary mantra. This mantra uses three divine names (hare, kṛṣṇa, and rāma) repeated in different combinations, all in the vocative grammatical case (unlike most mantras which refer to the divinity worshipped in the dative case).<sup>118</sup> There is considerable literature within the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava corpus dealing with the significance, way of practice, obstacles to avoid in the practice, and transformative results of the devotional chanting of the mahā-mantra, including Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja's biography of Caitanya, the Caitanya-caritāmṛta. There he describes how Caitanya

demonstrated the integration of image worship and the chanting of the hare kṛṣṇa mahā-mantra during the latter part of his life (until 1533) when he resided as a renunciant (sannyāsī) in Jagannātha Pūrī, on the central east coast of India. The followers of Caitanya enjoyed a daily festival in the massive temple of Jagannatha, the “Lord of the universe,” with Caitanya leading them in loud chanting of the mahā-mantra and exuberant dancing before the smiling images of Jagannātha and his associates.

This ancient temple<sup>119</sup> is the shrine of four large wooden images collectively known as Jagannātha, but individually as Jagannātha, Subhadrā, Baladeva, and Sudārśaṇa—considered by the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas to be special forms of Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa’s sister Subhadrā, their older brother Baladeva or Balarāma, and Kṛṣṇa’s fiery disc weapon. Here Caitanya demonstrated harināma-saṁkīrtana, or the congregational glorification of the Lord by his divine names, indicating that this is the most simple and efficacious means of approaching and pleasing the Lord. For Caitanya’s followers it became clear that all the regulations governing ritual worship of the Lord were to be subordinated to a primary rule with two aspects, namely to “always remember the Lord and never forget him.”<sup>120</sup> They were also convinced by Caitanya’s ecstatic behavior that the temple images were to be worshipped as direct manifestations of the Lord.<sup>121</sup> The Caitanya-caritāmṛta reports incidents in which the devotees experienced some reciprocation with the images, confirming for them the reality of divine presence in these forms.

An important way in which the followers of Caitanya would experience the presence of the deity in Jagannātha was through the tasting of his prasāda, or remnants of food ritually offered to him. One of the special features of this particular temple even today is the centuries-old tradition of offering enormous quantities of cooked food prepared by brāhmaṇas according to exacting regulations and following recipes said to be unchanged since the temple’s beginning. The daily saṁkīrtana festivals of Caitanya would always culminate in a communal feast consisting of such offerings, in which Caitanya would encourage his followers to eat “up to the neck” (ākaṇṭha).<sup>122</sup> Thus in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition the

second function of the tongue, namely tasting, is considered an essential—indeed joyful—means of practicing bhakti, through food exchange. As noted earlier, in the Bhagavad-gītā the Lord promises to accept offerings of food which are given with devotion. Although no physical transformation may be evident, the devotees are confident that the accepted offering has been relished by the Lord, and that what remains on the offering plates has become infused by his sanctifying glance to make its eating a transformative, liberating experience. The Bhagavad-gītā (3.13) also speaks of this:

*The devotees of the Lord are released from all kinds of sins  
because they eat food which is offered first for sacrifice.  
Others, who prepare food for personal sense enjoyment, verily  
eat only sin.*<sup>123</sup>

Food exchange among the practitioners completes the exchange between one practitioner and the Lord. In his book Upadeśāmṛta (“Nectar of Instruction”), Rūpa Gosvāmī includes the giving and receiving of food among six forms of loving exchange among devotees of the Lord.<sup>124</sup>

The climax of these interactions with Jagannātha as demonstrated by Caitanya were experienced during the annual Ratha-yātrā, when the four images were taken on procession in three towering wooden carriages along the main road of the city.<sup>125</sup> This festival, which even today draws three-to five-hundred thousand pilgrims, took on an esoteric significance for Caitanya and his followers, the explanation of which brings us back to our earlier mention of Vraja, the land identified as Kṛṣṇa’s childhood residence and place of intimate līlā with his friends and family members. In Caitanya’s ecstatic identification of himself as Kṛṣṇa’s consort Rādhā, his effort to draw the carriage of Jagannātha becomes a re-enactment of Rādhā’s effort to bring Kṛṣṇa back to Vraja some years after his departure to Mathurā, as described in the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam.

In the detailed account of this event in Caitanya-caritāmṛta, the occasional inability of the devotees to keep Jagannātha’s carriage moving is interpreted as Jagannātha’s refusal to move until coaxed by Caitanya,



who miraculously<sup>126</sup> brings the massive vehicle into motion single-handedly. For the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, this event demonstrates the primacy of rasa, or aesthetic-emotional mode of reciprocation, as the substance which sustains the relationship between the Lord and his devotee. Whereas arcanam as a practice of bhakti is governed largely by rules related to exoteric behavior, the goal (prayojana) toward which this behavior is aimed is an essential component of our understanding of image worship in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition. This is the topic of the next chapter, in which aspects of image worship more specific to the Caitanya tradition should become more evident.

## **Chapter Three**

# Bhakti-Rasa: The Aesthetics of Devotion

*When You go off to the forest during the day, a tiny fraction of a second becomes like a millennium for us because we cannot see You. And even when we can eagerly look upon Your beautiful face, so lovely with its adornment of curly locks, our pleasure is hindered by our eyelids, which were fashioned by the foolish creator.*

– Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 10.31.16<sup>127</sup>

## III.1. Kṛṣṇa-śakti Revisited

We have been discussing the mode of bhakti known as arcanam as the formal offering of worship by the bhakta, or devotee, to bhagavān, the supreme person. In the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, however, Kṛṣṇa is not worshipped alone, but rather with Rādhā, who is considered to be pūrṇa-śakti, or the full complementary embodiment of the “energy” of Kṛṣṇa, who is pūrṇa-śaktimān, the full possessor of infinite divine energies. Kapoor explains Rādhā this way:

*Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the ultimate source of the infinite [in number] partial manifestations of the divine personality, and Rādhā is the ultimate source of the endless divine energies of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. The relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā is that of inconceivable identity and difference. They are, in essence, one and the same entity, which assumes two different forms to enjoy the bliss of divine sports (Caitanya-caritāmṛta Ādi. 4.85). Rādhā is one with Kṛṣṇa, as she is identical with the highest development of the Hlādinī-śakti [energy of bliss] of Kṛṣṇa. But she is different from him, because she is the predominated moiety [prakṛti], while Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the predominating moiety [puruṣa] of the absolute. It is on account of this distinction that Śrī Kṛṣṇa in his intrinsic*

*selfhood appears in the form of a male, while Rādhā appears in the form of a female. The relationship between them must not, however, be likened to the physical relationship between a male and a female on the mundane plane. The body of Rādhā, like that of Kṛṣṇa, is made of bliss [ānanda] and consciousness [cit] and the love between the two is spiritual.*<sup>128</sup>

As Kṛṣṇa expands into various avatāras (which are generally “male”), Rādhā expands into countless female assistants, as gopīs, or milkmaids, who assist Rādhā in pleasing Kṛṣṇa in the land of Vraja by participating in his amorous pastimes (līlā). But there are other types of assistants to Kṛṣṇa in Vraja who, though not seen as expansions of Rādhā, are nevertheless manifestations of Kṛṣṇa’s hlādinī-śakti inasmuch as they eternally associate with him for the sole purpose of assisting in his pastimes. These devotees may act as friends and relatives of Kṛṣṇa, but also as animals (especially cows, monkeys, peacocks and parrots), or even as inanimate plants and trees – each effectively contributing to the ever-increasing pleasure of the Lord.

Each of the associates of Kṛṣṇa relate to him exclusively in terms of bhakti, in accordance with his or her particular rasa, or relationship of taste or feeling with him. Just how Kṛṣṇa is identified as the reservoir of types of relationships is illustrated in a famous passage in the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, which describes Kṛṣṇa after he has left Vṛndāvana to confront and finally kill Kāṁsa, the demonic king of Mathurā:

*The various groups of people in the arena regarded Kṛṣṇa in different ways when He entered it with His elder brother. The wrestlers saw Kṛṣṇa as a lightning bolt, the men of Mathurā as the best of males, the women as Cupid in person, the cowherd men as their relative, the impious rulers as a chastiser, his parents as their child, the King of the Bhojas as death, the unintelligent as the Supreme Lord’s universal form, the yogīs as the Absolute Truth and the Vṛṣṇis [Kṛṣṇa’s clan] as their supreme worshipable deity.*<sup>129</sup> (Bhāg. 10.43.17).

One of the early commentators on the Bhāgavatam, Śrīdhara Svāmī (14th to 15th centuries), identifies ten rasas or types of relationship represented in this passage. Later, Rūpa Gosvāmī systematized the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava rasa-theology in his Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu and Ujjvala-nīlāmaṇī, listing twelve rasas, of which seven are minor and five are major.<sup>130</sup> Central to his rasa-doctrine is that Kṛṣṇa is akhila-rasāmṛta-mūrti, the very embodiment of the nectar of all rasa. Of all possible divinities or semi-divinities<sup>131</sup> one might choose to evaluate, none match Kṛṣṇa for his capacity to elicit the emotions of rasa to such extent, depth, and sublimity. More importantly, none but Kṛṣṇa exhibits the mādhyura-rasa (conjugal attraction) in any way comparable to him, for this is the ādi-rasa, the original or most fundamental rasa, to which the other rasas are related, or from which they derive their significance.<sup>132</sup> But Kṛṣṇa's pre-eminence is as it should be, recalling that Kṛṣṇa is not just one among the many avatāras, but the very reservoir of all avatāras, or avatārin. Even that he is the source of the created universe is secondary<sup>133</sup> to the fact that he is the source of the “universe of feelings,” as Klaus Klostermaier expresses it,<sup>134</sup> a universe which has as its purpose the perpetuation of a symphony of rasa in which every living being participates in eternity with the Personality of rasa. It is rasa which distinguishes Kṛṣṇa from and above even Viṣṇu:

*Even though there is no difference between the true natures of the Lord of Śrī [Viṣṇu] and Kṛṣṇa (according to established dogma), the true nature of Kṛṣṇa is made more excellent by rasa. This is the position of rasa (BRS 1.2.59).*<sup>135</sup>

Because rasa necessarily involves relationship, the devotee of Kṛṣṇa wants to worship him not as advaya-jñāna-tattva, the “truth of non-dual gnosis,” but rather as advaya-rasa-tattva, the “truth of non-dual feeling.” For the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas especially this means to worship Kṛṣṇa together with Rādhā.

The worship of male divinities together with their female counterparts or consorts has a long history in India.<sup>136</sup> In the Śrī-Vaiṣṇava

tradition of south India, following Pañcarātra texts, the Lord is worshipped mainly as Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa together with his consort Lakṣmī or Śrī. The relationship between Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu is considered to be that of a married couple, or svakīya-rasa, in contrast to the relationship between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, which seems to be one of paramourship, or parakīya-rasa. In the realm of image worship this became a problematic issue in the eighteenth century for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, whose practice of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa worship was severely criticized by another Vaiṣṇava group known as Rāmānandīs.<sup>137</sup> When the issue came to a head in Galtā, Rajasthan, a debate was staged between the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava scholar Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa and Rāmānandī pundits. The latter had no objection to worshipping Kṛṣṇa alone, but to worship him together with Rādhā was, they insisted, to condone irreligious behavior. Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition tells us that the Rāmānandī pundits had to accept defeat by Baladeva, who quoted from his own commentary on the Brahma-sūtras.<sup>138</sup> There he argued that the propriety of Rādhā's relationship with Kṛṣṇa is not an issue, since they are eternally related ontologically as śakti and śaktimān – as energy and energetic source. If anyone is sanctioned to associate with Kṛṣṇa, it is Rādhā, for she is the divine heroine of a divine drama, the ultimate model of devotion to God, and hence the embodiment of perfect chastity. That Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa's relationship appears to be illicit simply heightens the romantic element of the drama, inviting the worshiper to abandon the distractions of this world to enter into the transcendent realm of rich and exciting transcendent rasa.<sup>139</sup>

## III.2. Vraja, Land of Sweetness

In section I.4 I have briefly mentioned Vraja, the land of Kṛṣṇa's childhood and youth, as the arena where Kṛṣṇa's concreteness together with his essential feature of sweetness are demonstrated. Sweetness and concreteness combine in Vraja to make Kṛṣṇa – or more precisely the divine couple Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa – the accessible recipient of informal devotion, in contrast to the more formal worship afforded to the Lord of the

universe, Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa (and his feminine counterpart, Lakṣmī or Śrī). If Kṛṣṇa is the embodiment of rasa, he is also the embodiment of līlā, the full meaning of which is demonstrated most fully by Kṛṣṇa in Vraja. David Kinsley remarks,

*In Vṛndāvana [Vraja] Kṛṣṇa is removed from the ordinary world and the necessity of acting according to pragmatic considerations. In Vṛndāvana he need not play a role but is free to express his essential nature in every action. In the cowherd village, removed from the world of his mission as an avatāra, there are no inhibitions to acting freely. Vṛndāvana is a playground, a magic place, where Kṛṣṇa can revel freely and continually as a playful child.*<sup>140</sup>

Certainly there is an element of aimlessness in Kṛṣṇa's Vraja pastimes, in the sense that they are not part of the realm of mundane necessity or pragmatic purpose.<sup>141</sup> But in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, for all the apparent lack of purpose there is a deeper purpose in this play, which is to draw the bound jīvas out of their stupefaction typified by striving for worldly accomplishment. According to the Bhāgavatam, the basis of increasing worldly inebriation is aspiration after aristocratic birth (janma), wealth (aiśvarya), learning (śruta), and bodily beauty (śrī). To remove these aspirations by the spell of his own transcendent charms, Kṛṣṇa displays his beautiful form (mādhurya-rūpa) in Vraja, the particular place which is so enchanting because it is itself a display of Kṛṣṇa's beauty and charm. In facetious words Rūpa Gosvāmī warns his readers,

*My dear friend, if you are indeed attached to your worldly friends, do not look at the smiling face of Lord Govinda [Kṛṣṇa] as He stands on the bank of the Yamunā [River] at Keśīghāṭa [a particular place for bathing, in Vṛndāvana]. Casting sidelong glances, He places His flute to His lips, which seem like newly blossomed twigs. His transcendental body, bending in three places, appears very bright in the moonlight.*<sup>142</sup>

Thus Kṛṣṇa's beauty in Vraja poses a threat to one's status quo of mundane preoccupations, which cannot be mixed with Kṛṣṇa-bhakti-rasa. If one wants to perpetuate those preoccupations (and thus the sufferings of saṁsāra – repeated birth, death, old age and disease), one should stay clear of Vraja. Vraja is a dramatic stage which, if one enters, one will become transformed by, as one is transported to the spiritual realm of perpetual, unpredictable love. John Stratton Hawley highlights this quality of Vraja, contrasting it with other holy places of pilgrimage in India, known as tīrthas, or “places of crossing over”:

*As a song often sung in the rāsa līlā [folk dramas staged around Vraja] says, its [Vṛndāvana's] streets swirl with the floods of love: no order there. And once the unwary traveler is caught in the tide, there is no hope of escape. Safe passage is hardly what one expects at Vrindavan. One comes not to cross [as at a tīrtha] but to drown, to drown in love's uncharted sea, and to find in that drowning a tranquillity unknown on dry land.*<sup>143</sup>

Kṛṣṇa-bhaktas aspire to “drown in love's uncharted sea” by residing, at least for some time, in Vraja. Rūpa Gosvāmī counts living in Vraja as one of five main principles among the sixty-four practices of vaidhi-sādhana-bhakti. By residing there, the benefits from observing so many regulations of service will be multiplied by the attractive force of Kṛṣṇa's felt presence not only in an image housed in a temple, but in the countless places of Vraja associated with his pastimes. And equally or even more important, one will be blessed by Rādhā, known in Vraja as “Vṛndāvaneśvarī,” the presiding goddess of Vṛndāvana, to participate in the divine play, in service to the all-attractive Lord.

But most persons will not have opportunity to reside in Vraja; for them pilgrimage to and around Vraja is the means of entering into the transcendent realm of Vraja, to be transformed at least for some time into a participant in Kṛṣṇa's līlā. Since the sixteenth century Vraja has been a center of pilgrimage with presently more visitors per year than the Taj Mahal.<sup>144</sup> People come there as lone travelers, as families, and in



organized groups numbering hundreds and even thousands, to circumambulate (parikramaṇa) the town of Vṛndāvana (a four-mile walk), or Govardhana Hill<sup>145</sup> (a fourteen-mile walk), or the whole of Vraja (some two-hundred-mile-walk, camping en route). Nowhere on these routes can one go without encountering temples of Kṛṣṇa, each in a particular place associated with a particular līlā of Kṛṣṇa as described either in canonical scripture or from local tradition. As one progresses (if done “properly,” then barefoot, out of respect for the sacred land), one “has darśana,” or receives a blessed viewing, of one after another of the images of Kṛṣṇa. And as one thus gains the vision of Kṛṣṇa, nurtured by the devotional hearing of his līlā, the mundane self-conceptions<sup>146</sup> (or rather misconceptions) by which one lives in alienation from the Lord become undermined. The senses become “Kṛṣṇaized,” or immersed in the experience of Kṛṣṇa’s presence in all the objects of the senses, and it becomes possible to comprehend the transcendent nature of Kṛṣṇa’s name, form, qualities, pastimes, and abode. On this platform of consciousness, the limitations of time and space give way to the ocean of bhāva, or transcendent emotion.

### **III.3 Complementary Paths to Perfection: Bhāgavata-mārga and Pāñcarātriaka-mārga**

Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas worship images of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, but they do so thinking of themselves as servants of Śrī Caitanya, whom they identify as none other than the “combined form” of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. As accessible as Kṛṣṇa makes himself, most of the bound jīvas of this age of Kali, a cosmic period of spiritual de-generacy, fail to appreciate him and direct their devotion to him. Therefore, Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja tells us, Kṛṣṇa makes a special descent, to make even easier for the jīvas the means to approach him. This time, as Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Mahāprabhu, he descends “playing the part” of his own bhakta in order to demonstrate in all detail the mood and behavior of a Kṛṣṇa-devotee.

*The loving affairs of Śrī Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are transcendental manifestations of the Lord's internal pleasure-giving potency. Although Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are one in their identity, they separated themselves eternally. Now these two transcendental identities have again united, in the form of Caitanya. I bow down to him, who has manifested himself with the sentiment and complexion of Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī although He is Kṛṣṇa himself. (C.c. Ādi 1.5)<sup>147</sup>*

Thus in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava practice of image worship, at least since the last two centuries or longer,<sup>148</sup> Caitanya's image has been generally also worshipped along with images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. But just as often his image will be seen together with that of his closest associate Śrī Nityānanda Prabhu, identified as Balarāma,<sup>149</sup> Kṛṣṇa's brother in Vṛndāvana-līlā. Iconographically, both figures are seen generally with raised arms in dancing pose. The two together are remembered for their missionary spirit of travel and vigorous preaching of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti as portrayed in Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, for their emphasis on harināma-saṁkīrtana, or congregational chanting of Kṛṣṇa's names, and for their ideal example as servants of Kṛṣṇa's devotees.

In Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology Caitanya and Nityānanda exemplify that aspect of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti spirituality which emphasizes these last three practices – the study and teaching of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam and related scriptures, the congregational chanting of Kṛṣṇa's names, and service to Vaiṣṇavas. These practices make up what came to be known as the bhāgavata-mārga, literally the “path of the servants of bhagavān”.<sup>150</sup> Associated with this “path” is also an emphasis on practice of bhakti which is inspired by and follows the example of direct associates of Kṛṣṇa, rāgānugā-bhakti-sādhana. Here the emphasis is on spontaneous devotion as opposed to the following of scripturally imposed regulations, but it is nevertheless sādhana, or practice. Hence some elements of regulation persist beyond the rule-governed practice of vaidhi-bhakti-sādhana.

Complementary to the bhāgavata-mārga is the pañcarātriaka-mārga, characterized by the features of vaidhi-bhakti-sādhana which I have

already discussed in Chapter Two, especially the practice of regulated worship of the arcā-vigraha. Just how these two “paths” are complementary to each other is best understood through devotional narratives such as are found in the Caitanya-caritāmṛta, in which incidents involving bhaktas recognized as spiritually elevated souls and mūrtis of Kṛṣṇa are described. Also, for the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas who read or hear these accounts which often contain an element of the “miraculous,” these are confirmations of the efficacy of faithful practices of bhakti and the reality of the Lord’s reciprocating presence in worshipped images.

One example of these narratives may serve to illustrate this sense of complementarity between these two “paths.” This story centers around Mādhavendra Purī (ca. 1420-1490), an ascetic highly revered by the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas as the guru of Caitanya’s guru. Having been ordered in a dream by his Kṛṣṇa deity in Vraja (named Gopāla) to obtain sandalwood<sup>151</sup> in Jagannātha Pūrī, Mādhavendra set out alone to make the long journey. On the way, near his destination, he stopped in Remuṇā where he visited the temple of Gopīnātha (another name of Kṛṣṇa). While there, it occurred to him that he could do some research on behalf of Gopāla:

*Mādhavendra Purī thought, “I shall inquire from the priest what foods are offered to Gopīnātha so that by making arrangements in our kitchen, we can offer similar foods to Śrī Gopāla.” When the brāhmaṇa priest was questioned about this matter, he explained in detail what kinds of food were offered to the Deity of Gopīnātha. The brāhmaṇa priest said,*

*“In the evening the Deity is offered sweet rice in twelve earthen pots. Because the taste is as good as nectar [amṛta], it is named amṛta-keli. This sweet rice is celebrated throughout the world as gopīnātha-kṣīra.”<sup>152</sup> It is not offered anywhere else in the world.”*

*While Mādhavendra Purī was talking with the brāhmaṇa priest, the sweet rice was placed before the Deity as an offering. Hearing this, Mādhavendra Purī thought as follows.*

*“If, without my asking, a little sweet rice is given to me, I can then taste it and make a similar preparation to offer my Lord Gopāla.”*

Mādhavendra Purī became greatly ashamed (lajjā pāñā) when he desired to taste the sweet rice, and he immediately began to think of Lord Viṣṇu. While he was thus thinking of Lord Viṣṇu, the offering was completed, and the āratī ceremony began.<sup>153</sup> After the āratī was finished, Mādhavendra Purī offered his obeisances to the deity and then left the temple. He did not say anything more to anyone.

Mādhavendra Purī avoided begging. He was completely unattached and indifferent to material things. If, without his begging, someone offered him some food, he would eat; otherwise he would fast. A paramahansa like Mādhavendra Purī is always satisfied in the loving service of the Lord.<sup>154</sup> Material hunger and thirst cannot impede his activities. When he desired to taste a little sweet rice offered to the Deity, he considered that he had committed an offense by desiring to eat what was being offered to the Deity. Mādhavendra Purī left the temple and sat down in the village marketplace, which was vacant. Sitting there, he began to chant. In the meantime, the temple priest laid the Deity down to rest.<sup>155</sup> Finishing his daily duties, the priest went to take rest. In a dream he saw the Gopīnātha deity come to talk to him, and he [the Lord] spoke as follows.

*“O priest, please get up and open the door of the temple. I have kept one pot of sweet rice for the sannyāsī (Mādhavendra Purī). This pot of sweet rice is just behind my cloth curtain. You did not see it because of my tricks. A sannyāsī named Mādhavendra Purī is sitting in the vacant marketplace. Please take this pot of sweet rice from behind me and deliver it to him.”*

*Awaking from the dream, the priest immediately rose from bed and took a bath before entering the deity’s room. He then opened the*

*temple door. According to the deity's directions, the priest found the pot of sweet rice behind the cloth curtain. He removed the pot and mopped up the place where it had been kept. He then went out of the temple. Closing the door of the temple, he went to the village with the pot of sweet rice. He called out in every stall in search of Mādhavendra Purī. Holding the pot of sweet rice, the priest called,*

*“Will he whose name is Mādhavendra Purī please come and take this pot! Gopīnātha has stolen this pot of sweet rice for you! Please come and take this pot of sweet rice and enjoy the prasāda with great happiness! You are the most fortunate person within these three worlds!”*<sup>156</sup>

*Hearing this invitation, Mādhavendra Purī came out and identified himself. The priest then delivered the pot of sweet rice and offered his obeisances, falling flat before him. When the story about the pot of sweet rice was explained to him in detail, Śrī Mādhavendra Purī at once became absorbed in ecstatic love of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>157</sup> Upon seeing the ecstatic loving symptoms manifest in Mādhavendra Purī, the priest was struck with wonder. He could understand why Kṛṣṇa had become so much obliged to him (Mādhavendra), and he saw that Kṛṣṇa's action was befitting. The priest offered obeisances to Mādhavendra Purī and returned to the temple. Then, in ecstasy, Mādhavendra Purī ate the sweet rice offered to him by Kṛṣṇa (C.c. Madhya 4.115-139)*

The narration concludes with the ascetic hastening on his journey to avoid attention from crowds of pious local citizens the next morning.

In this account, a temple priest, attentive to the regulative (vaidhi-sādhana) worship of the temple image, wins Kṛṣṇa's grace in the form of insight into the intimate dealings between the Lord and his spiritually advanced devotee. The ascetic Mādhavendra, with his elevated devotional sensibilities, feels shame for even thinking to taste a food offering to the deity while the Lord was receiving it, even though his thought was not really inappropriate (since his idea was to taste it after the completion of

the offering). Kṛṣṇa, usually a seemingly passive recipient of worship and offerings in his arcā-mūrti, on this occasion suddenly becomes an active agent “by a trick” (māyayā) to assure his devotee that his thought was not offensive. The all-knowing Lord Gopīnātha (who subsequently becomes famous as “Kṣīra-cora-Gopīnātha,” “the Lord who stole sweet-rice”), recognizing that Mādhavendra’s desire to taste the offering was motivated exclusively by the desire to improve service to himself (Kṛṣṇa) in his form as Gopāla, turns the situation into an opportunity to act as the servant of his devotee. He breaks the rules, so to speak, as a “thief” to prove that his devotee has not broken any rules but rather has proven the purpose of the rule (that one should not think of enjoying anything unless it has been offered to the Lord for his pleasure). Simultaneously Kṛṣṇa acts as guru to his priest-servant by pointing out to him the elevated spiritual status of Mādhavendra.<sup>158</sup> Finally, the narrator has us understand that the priest is not unable to comprehend the import of what has transpired; rather, his faithful and humble attention to his duties (including details such as bathing before approaching the Lord, even in an extraordinary circumstance)<sup>159</sup> qualifies him for such a blessing.

Aside from showing how the “path of devotion” and the “path of rules” are complementary in the context of arcanam, this narrative is typical of many which serve to demonstrate to the devotees the active presence of the Lord in his arcā-mūrti. As in this account, in others the Lord sometimes “breaks the rules” of ordinary laws of nature, not so much to demonstrate his power, but rather the opposite – to demonstrate his accessibility and readiness to become servant to his servant (thereby breaking the “rule” that he is always the master).

### III.4 Nuanced Presence in Narrative

As accessible as the Lord becomes in his arcā-mūrti, rasa can nuance the sense of presence with the opposite sense – of absence: Among the five major rasas mentioned earlier, since the time of Mādhavendra Purī Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas single out mādhyura-rasa, the mood of conjugal love,

as the modus of love for God par excellence.<sup>160</sup> The Caitanya poets and theologians have been attentive to yet one particular aspect of mādhyarasa, namely the sense of separation from the beloved (vipralambha, or viraha), or the sense of the beloved's absence.<sup>161</sup> Again, it is Mādhavendra Pūrī whom Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas celebrate for offering one brief but seminal prayer to Kṛṣṇa in this mood. He is therefore credited with sowing the seed of Kṛṣṇa-prema in its most exalted expression, which later, in the form of Caitanya Mahāprabhu, became a great tree.

*O my Lord! O most merciful master! O master of Mathurā!  
When shall I see You again? Because of my not seeing You, my  
agitated heart has become unsteady. O most beloved one  
(dayita), what shall I do now?*<sup>162</sup>

Mādhavendra Pūrī served his Gopāla deity, feeling in him the presence of Kṛṣṇa enough to consider a dream as his direct message, convincing him to undertake a difficult and dangerous journey on the Lord's behalf; and yet in this final prayer he expresses his feeling of separation from the Lord. The Lord is present, but in some sense he is not sufficiently present.

Similarly Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī, the south Indian brāhmaṇa who compiled the book of Vaiṣṇava ritual Hari-bhakti-vilāsa, longed for the direct sight of Kṛṣṇa even as Kṛṣṇa was present before him in the form of Śālāgrāma-śīlas (sacred stones considered direct manifestations of Nārāyaṇa, or Viṣṇu). In his case the Lord satisfied his desire as the “self-manifest” image Rādhāramaṇa (‘he who gives pleasure to Rādhā’).<sup>163</sup>

Another type of nuancing of the Lord's presence in the arcā-mūrti involves the highlighting of Caitanya's identity as Kṛṣṇa. Essentially the theme presented in these narratives is that the image (of Kṛṣṇa) is no doubt directly the Lord (sākṣāt bhagavān), but in some sense Caitanya Mahāprabhu is even “more so,” or more importantly so. I want to briefly recount two such narratives before ending this section on prayojana, the goal of bhakti and hence arcanam.

The first of these (again involving food offerings and pranks, but with a different turn) occurs when Caitanya is a small child (known at that time as “Nimai”) in the home of his parents in Navadvīpa (in present-day West Bengal). A brāhmaṇa mendicant guest receives conscientious hospitality by Nimai’s parents, only to have their efforts utterly spoiled twice in the same evening by their naughty child: Each time the brāhmaṇa is about to complete the worship of his deity of Kṛṣṇa with an offering of rice, Nimai pleases himself by barging in the room and stuffing the rice in his mouth. The profusely apologetic parents convince him to make a third offering (fearing a brāhmaṇas potent curse). By the time the brāhmaṇa completes the third offering the household is sleeping soundly – except of course Nimai, who repeats his prank for a third time. This time, Kṛṣṇadās informs us, Nimai manifests his real identity as Kṛṣṇa before the good gentleman, letting him know that he is the very one to whom he has been offering such devotion in the form of the Śālagrāma-śīla.<sup>164</sup>

The second narrative involves Caitanya’s first visit to the temple of Jagannātha. After taking to the renounced order (sannyāsa) as a young man, on his widowed mother’s behest he had agreed to make the town of Jagannātha Pūrī his headquarters, from where she could receive news of him. Arriving in Pūrī ahead of his friends, he goes immediately to the temple to receive the Lord’s darśana (sight, vision).

An ordinary temple-visitor, after prostrating him or herself, rises to stand before the deity with folded hands, offering prayers or simply looking attentively at the form and noting the particular dress and ornamentation of the day.<sup>165</sup> Or the devotee might then bring an offering forward, such as fruit, flowers or sweets, to be offered by a priest to the Lord with appropriate mantra after purifying the items by sprinkling water. He or she might then join with others in singing songs of praise to the Lord, or sit for some time in the temple simply to be in the Lord’s presence.

But on this occasion, we are told, as soon as Śrī Caitanya sees the Lord he swoons, remaining unconscious while priests and others wonder what to do. Finally Sarvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya, the senior-most court



pundit of the king, has the unknown mendicant brought to his home, sensing that this is no ordinary sannyāsī. After some hours Caitanya returns to waking consciousness, and after some time agrees to accept instruction in Vedānta philosophy from Sarvabhauma. Instruction lasts for seven days, during which the young sannyāsī remains silent, until Sarvabhauma coaxes his pupil to indicate what he had learned. Caitanya responds candidly (Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya-līlā 6.130-32):

*I can understand the meaning of each aphorism [of the Brahma-sūtra] very clearly, but your explanations have simply agitated My mind. The meaning of the aphorisms contain clear purports in themselves, but other purports you presented simply covered the meaning of the sūtras like a cloud. You do not explain the direct meaning of the Vedānta-sūtras. Indeed, it appears that your business is to cover their real meaning.*

Caitanya then proceeds to expound on Vedānta, refuting the monist interpretation which he had just heard from his teacher. He concludes by giving a learned analysis of a famous verse from the Bhāgavatam, the “Ātmārāma-verse”:

*All different varieties of ātmārāmas [those who take pleasure in ātmā, or spirit self], especially those established on the path of self-realization, though freed from all kinds of material bondage, desire to render unalloyed devotional service unto the supreme Lord. This means that the Lord possesses transcendental qualities and therefore can attract everyone, including liberated souls.*<sup>166</sup>

Sarvabhauma becomes humbled, suspecting that his student could be none other than the Lord himself to be able to display such profound knowledge. As Sarvabhauma prostrates himself, begging forgiveness, Caitanya appears to him as the supreme Lord, first as the majestic Lord Viṣṇu and then as the accessible Lord Kṛṣṇa, to receive his prayers.

The account ends, once again, with the theme of food exchange: The next day Sarvabhauma demonstrates his newfound faith in Caitanya and

spontaneous devotion by happily eating some of Jagannātha's remnants received from Caitanya in the early morning upon rising from bed, before making any preliminary brahminical purificatory observances. Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja concludes:

*From that day on, Sārvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya did not know anything but the lotus feet of Caitanya Mahāprabhu, and from that day he could explain the revealed scriptures only in accordance with the process of devotional service.*<sup>167</sup>

Again, this narrative brings the arcā-mūrti, in this case Jagannātha, into juxtaposition with, we might say, the “hero” of the entire work, such that Jagannātha's divinity is shown to be fully comprehended only through the mercy of the Lord himself. The Lord appears in two forms here – as the served (sevya) and the servitor (sevaka), namely Caitanya Mahāprabhu. When Sarvabhauma Bhaṭṭācārya is brought to understand the ontological position of Kṛṣṇa as bhagavān – superior to the non-personal conception of the Absolute brahman – then he is able to grasp that Caitanya is that very Kṛṣṇa himself. And at that point it becomes possible for him to fully comprehend the identity of the arcā-mūrti Jagannātha by properly honoring the prasāda (offered food) of the deity. The Lord makes himself accessible through his image, but only fully so via his śuddha-bhakta, or pure devotee.

In these three chapters I have sketched the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology of image worship in terms of Caitanya's three-part classification of the subject matter of Vedic literature, namely sambandha, or “relationship,” abhidheya, or “process,” and prayojana, or “final goal.” My final step in conveying how the apparently material images worshipped in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition are understood to be worshipable will be to look at this theology from the perspective of one Western religious tradition, that of Judaism.

## **Chapter Four**

## Thinking Across Religious Boundaries, or, Are Vaiṣṇavas Idolators?

*And now they add sin to sin, they smelt images from their silver, idols of their own manufacture, smith's work, all of it. "Sacrifice to them," they say. Men blow kisses to calves!*

*Hosea 13:2*

*You are not an idol; (rather, you are) directly the son of King Nanda (Kṛṣṇa). Now, for the brahmin's sake, do something unprecedented.*

*Caitanya-caritāmṛta 2.5.97*

A recent article in the New York Times, "A Religious Tangle over the Hair of Pious Hindus" (July 14, 2004) reminds us that the word "idolatry" is very much current as a blanket term for religious otherness negatively construed. According to a group of Orthodox Jewish rabbis in Israel, to wear a wig made with even one strand of hair that was ritually tonsured constitutes idolatry. And since the hair for many wigs worn by Jewish women (for religious reasons) had come from Tirupati, south India, where daily thousands of pious Hindus have their head shaved as a gesture of devotion to the temple image of Lord Venkaṭeśvara, the recent rabbinic proscription has led to public wig-burning by pious Jewish women.

A salient self-defining characteristic of the major West Asian "monotheisms" has been pointed condemnation of everything construed as idolatry, the improper worship of God, or the worship of any being other than God. Indeed, preoccupation with idolatry and the necessity to spurn it eventually becomes for these traditions a key element in the conceptualization of monotheism: Where God is properly worshiped, there must be absence of idolatry, and where there is idolatry, there is failure to

properly worship the “one true God.”<sup>168</sup> This attitude and its associated rhetoric were typically exercised by nineteenth-century Protestant Christian missionaries in India, many of whom sought to eradicate what they perceived as idolatry from the sub-continent. For them, the ubiquitous worship of sacred images in temples was the very epitome of all that was wrong about the religion of the “Hindoos,” only waiting to be undone by the Christian gospel. In this atmosphere, western efforts to understand Indian worship practices or the theological reflections associated with these practices were rare. There was, so the missionaries reasoned, little or nothing to be understood about practices steeped in superstition and vicious habit, contradicting biblical prohibition of image worship (Copley, 12).

Far less now than in the nineteenth century does the term “idolatry” enter western public discourse about non-western religious traditions. Yet as the condemned head-cover example above shows, the term has not disappeared, serving still in western, Abrahamic traditions as a shorthand marker for improper, ill-conceived, or depraved practices masking as religious practices. Indeed, the term idolatry continues to color western thinking about non-western religion, and still surfaces as a pejorative term in that context. With this state of affairs in view, here I will explore the notion of idolatry from the other side of the fence, positing a more or less generic Vaiṣṇava reflective, if somewhat apologetic, response (with a Caitanyaite Vaiṣṇava leaning). In an exploratory spirit I will invite the concept of idolatry to challenge the practice of image worship in the traditions of Vaiṣṇava temple life and associated notions of Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa/Kṛṣṇa’s divinity. Though hardly a “dialogue,” my aim points in that direction, as an invitation for further, hopefully more detailed discussion between two apparently very distant worldviews.

Although historically it has been largely Protestant Christian missionaries with whom Vaiṣṇavas of north India have encountered the challenging rhetoric of idolatry, here I will focus on the notion as articulated in Judaic religious tradition, this being clearly the source for conceptions of idolatry expressed later by Christians. By juxtaposing Vaiṣṇava mūrti-sevā and Vaiṣṇava bhakti theology with Jewish

conceptions of idolatry, I question the presumed simple antithesis between these two ways of approaching divinity or avoiding divine wrath by looking for (or perhaps better, “sounding out”) ranges of resonance between them. To do this I will draw on comparatist scholar Robert Neville’s threefold construal of “religious truth” as a “fuzzy comparative category,” showing that both traditions are concerned to avoid or overcome error, deceit, and failure – three opposites of religious truth as proposition, expression, and cultivation.<sup>169</sup>

Following a cue from Mosche Halbertal and Avishai Margalit (1992) I will structure this “sounding” around five ways the concept of idolatry has been articulated in Jewish tradition as expressed in biblical texts, expanded in rabbinical writings, and interpreted by modern Jewish scholars. Betrayal, representation, error, false practice, and myth are these five ways of conceiving idolatry, circumscribing most if not all of the term’s semantic horizon in Jewish thinking. I will juxtapose these themes, one after the other, with Vaiṣṇava thought and practice, largely as expressed in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Bhagavad-gītā, and Caitanyaite Vaiṣṇava sources, to sketch some ways one might think about Vaiṣṇava image worship and bhakti practice in the face of what could be viewed as a severe indictment of it.

## **IV.1. Idolatry as Betrayal**

According to Halbertal and Margalit, the sense of idolatry as betrayal is the one most developed within the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, proper. Within this text, or collection of texts, the notion of idolatry is located in the understanding that there is a unique relationship between the Lord and the people of Israel, a relationship set in the language of human family structures of obligation in monogamous marriage.

*Exemplar of monogamy, God has married only Israel and has taken only the Israelites out of Egypt. The biographical conception of the sin [of idolatry] thus also defines those to whom the sin does not apply: It does not apply to those who do*

*not share the history that created the exclusive obligation. The ban on idolatry is not universal because it was shaped by the metaphor of an exclusive relationship.*<sup>170</sup>

The exclusive nature of this relationship is amplified by warnings of the consequences of not honoring it: When individuals or the entire nation of Israel<sup>171</sup> offer worship to “other gods,” or “play the whore”<sup>172</sup> with other political powers (by making treaties, etc.) they are to be seen as adulterous, in a social milieu where adultery was a most heinous crime, punishable even by death.<sup>173</sup> To be unfaithful to God by worshiping other gods is to call upon oneself (and the nation) painful consequences inflicted by God himself. And yet, having either exacted punishment or at least threatened punishment, reconciliation eventually takes place and the exclusive relationship is restored.<sup>174</sup>

The Book of Wisdom (14:27) lists various evils of personal conduct which concludes, “[f]or the worship of infamous idols is the reason and source and extremity of all evil.” A modern commentator on these passages notes that the essential character of the evil of idolatry expressed here is preoccupation with the “self,” as a lifeless being cut off from God (NIB 1997, vol. 5, 551). In order to restore the relationship with God, the moral depravity which is both a source and consequence of idolatry must be purged.

Exclusivity of relationship with Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa finds varied expression in Vaiṣṇava bhakti literature such as the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Such exclusivity frequently aims to emphasize the strength of relationship that bhakti affords between the Lord (Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu, or an “expansion” of either) and his devotee or devotees (individuals or groups, never a nation). Sometimes this is portrayed as an undisturbed human relationship, as in the Ninth Book of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (4.68), where Viṣṇu declares:

*The devotees are within my heart, and I am in the heart of (my) devotees. They do not know anything but me, and I know none else but them.*<sup>175</sup>

Just prior to this verse Viṣṇu compares himself to a faithful husband (sat-pati) who is brought under the control of a faithful and loving wife (sat-strī), compared in turn to the sādhu, or devotee (9.4.66). Verse 68 elaborates: Viṣṇu's devotees are portrayed as being not attracted to anyone or anything other than the Lord, who reciprocates their devotion with his own feeling of exclusive devotion to them. Here exclusivity is portrayed as not threatened by betrayal or adultery, but as a state of complete security based on unquestioning faithfulness.

The social sanctity and security of marriage can symbolize a proper relationship with God in both Jewish and Vaiṣṇava traditions. Yet in contrast to Viṣṇu-bhakti, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa conceives devotion to Kṛṣṇa in its most exalted aspect in terms of a relationship not socially sanctioned – indeed, as extra-marital conjugal rather than marital, socially sanctioned love. In this conception there is much danger of betrayal, but the danger comes from Kṛṣṇa rather than from his devotee, for it is Kṛṣṇa who is the ontologically free and independent Lord, and it is he who, as the best of lovers, is also the most difficult to possess. Inspired by the Bhāgavata, in the attitude of a paramour Śrī Caitanya (1486-1534) suggests such asymmetry of obligation, declaring loyal acceptance of Kṛṣṇa's unrulèd character:

*He (Kṛṣṇa) may embrace me or trample me underfoot, or by not appearing he may break my heart; let him do his liking, for he is a debaucher after all! (Yet) he only, and no other, is the lord of my life. (Caitanya-caritāmṛta 3.20.47).*

Such asymmetrical loyalty endures the threat of divine inconstancy by strength of exclusivity. Yet in such a conception of human/divine relationship, questions of obligation seem to collapse in the face of devotional fervor. Whereas the spouse imagery of the biblical God/Israel entails the danger of adultery on the part of human beings, the Vaiṣṇava lover/paramour imagery entails the threat of inconstancy on the part of Kṛṣṇa and indeed the certainty of inconstancy on the part of his most celebrated devotees, the gopīs, in relationship to their (so-called) husbands. In both cases there are dangers in having a relationship with divinity owing to the threat of disrupted relationship.



All such dangers could be loosely grouped within the category of deceit as that which is opposite to religious-truth-as-expression. True or honest expression of dedication to another person (or here, dedication to God or between God and devotees) is in sharp opposition to expression that betrays such truth or honesty.

In the Bhagavad-gītā we find other, quite different, portrayals of endangered relationship with the divine, often expressed in terms of delusion. Here Kṛṣṇa extensively calls for exclusive devotion to himself, graphically contrasting this with non-devotion by manifesting a theophany that literally consumes the entire collectivity of non-devotion, preserving none but the faithful Pāṇḍava brothers (Ch. 11). And later in the Gītā (16.19-20), concluding his description of the demonic character type (asura-bhāva), Kṛṣṇa warns:

*Those envious and cruel persons, inauspicious lowest of humankind, I hurl perpetually into demonic species. Fallen birth after birth into demonic wombs, these bewildered ones, not attaining me, go to the lowest destiny.*

Here character traits like envy and cruelty are understood to be the product of active denial of Kṛṣṇa's supremacy, in turn the product of bewilderment (mūḍhāḥ) which in turn could be construed as self-deception. Persons actively fostering such traits are objects of severest divine wrath with no apparent hope of reconciliation.

In a milder spirit, Kṛṣṇa judges devotees of other gods (anya-devatā-bhaktāḥ, Gītā 9.23). Such persons, Kṛṣṇa assures, are in fact worshiping him, but in the wrong way (avidhi-pūrvakam). The danger in such worship is serious, in that one must anticipate perpetuated bound existence on one's own account. But here is little sense of moral condemnation; rather, the Bhagavad-gītā asserts that one is always rewarded fittingly for one's endeavors. Worshipers "go to" (yānti) whomever is the object of their worship, and there is hope and possibility of becoming free from delusion. Deceit, the opposite of truthful expression, is essentially self-deceit; and this can be overcome by becoming attuned to the truth of obligation to the supreme Lord.

## IV.2. Idolatry and Representation

To show affinity of themes I will consider error and representation under the same heading. The highly influential thinker of later rabbinic Judaism, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), gives his view on representation and its faults in *The Guide for the Perplexed* and in his *Code of Jewish Law*. Though this is not biblical Judaism *stricto sensu*, it is an important articulation of the metaphysical position that has fueled via negativa theology ever since. In terms of religious truth and the lack of it, representational idolatry highlights both error – the mistake of conceiving God in a corporeal way – and deceit, the consequent corporeal misrepresentation of God.

Maimonides defines religion in terms of two principles – the unity of God and the prohibition of idolatry (Kellner, 23). These two principles imply each other. The unity of God, Maimonides insists, precludes the possibility of divine corporeality, and where there is not a clear understanding of the unity of God, idolatry is at hand. Where corporeality seems to be indicated in scripture, it is due to a misunderstanding of the word *zelem* (form), to be distinguished from the ordinary sense of form expressed by the Hebrew word *toar*.

*This term [toar] is not at all applicable to God. The term zelem, on the other hand, signifies the specific form, viz., that which constitutes the essence of a thing, whereby the thing is what it is; the reality of a thing in so far as it is that particular being. In man the “form” is that constituent which gives him human perception: and on account of this intellectual perception the term zelem is employed in the sentences “In the zelem of God he created him. (Maimonides, 13)*

Similarly Maimonides expounds on the homonymous character of several biblical terms that superficially indicate bodily features, such as *panim* (face), *afor* (back), and *leb* (heart) (*ibid.*, 52-54). According to Maimonides, from superficial (mistaken) understanding of scripture one

lapses into making images, initially as intermediaries to God. But preoccupation with the rites of worship of such images leads to the error of substitution. A picture or statue, if worshiped as a representation of God, may easily become the sole focus of the worshiper rather than the Person whom the image represents. From this error, a physical representation can become a fetish, “an object to which people attribute powers that it does not have,” especially if the representation, by that error, gains “some control over its worshipers” (Halbertal, 42). When substitution occurs, the image takes the place of the god being worshiped in the eyes of the worshiper. The real object of worship, says Maimonides, loses all importance. In his Code of Jewish Law Maimonides describes the genealogy of idolatry, concluding:

*As time gradually passed, the honored and revered Name of God was forgotten by mankind, vanished from their lips and hearts, and was no longer known to them. All the common people and the women and children knew only the figure of wood and stone and the temple edifice in which they had, from their childhood, been trained to prostrate themselves to the figure, worship it, and swear by its name. Even their wise men, such as priests and men of similar standing, also fancied that there was no other god but the stars and spheres, for whose sake and in whose similitude these figures had been made. But the Creator of the universe was known to none, and recognized by none save a few solitary individuals . . . . (Laws Concerning Idolatry and the Ordinances of the Heathens 1:2). (Twersky, 72-73)*

While Maimonides gives credit to idolators for not thinking that a stone or metal image is in and of itself the creator of the world, their problem, he claims, is that they “only notice the rites, without comprehending their meaning or the true character of the being which is worshipped,” and hence they “renounce their belief in the existence of God” (Maimonides, 52).

If pictorial representation is a dangerous deception resulting from erroneous, superficial reading of Torah leading to wrong worship, it seems

almost a necessity in Hindu theistic traditions, especially among Vaiṣṇavas, as a way of approaching the divine. Here the error that opposes Vaiṣṇava religious truth is the conception that God is formless and by implication of lesser stature than beings of this world. The consequent misrepresentation would be the denial of the possibility to visually represent God. According to avatāra-theology (especially as developed in the Śrī-vaiṣṇava tradition), Bhagavān's descents into the world invite pictorial as much as linguistic representation that serve to extend divine presence temporally. Since he appears to participate in the world, and since his purpose relates specifically to increasing accessibility to bound beings (jīvas), Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa allows, or even invites, pictorial representation as an appropriate response to his appearance. This is especially the case when such representation is considered in some way the product of spiritually elevated souls' special vision.

According to this understanding, although occasionally Bhagavān reveals himself in the world as avatāra, it is the spiritually adept sage (ṛṣi) or pure devotee (śuddha-bhakta) who can receive divine form as unmediated vision (darśana), and can then communicate that vision for others to hear, repeat, meditate upon, and then sculpt. Such adepts are considered to be beyond error, and hence not subject to making false expression or misrepresentation. A form faithfully sculpted to the specifications of such visionaries' descriptions (in Āgama- or Śilpa-śāstra) can, after proper consecration and invocation of the deity, then be worshiped by prescribed procedures. If attentively followed, such practice is expected to enable practitioners to gain the same vision of the Lord as the sages or devotees who see him directly.

Such practiced seeing becomes recognizing – in the sense that one cognizes the transcendent form of the supreme Person within one's own heart (hr̥dy-anta-stha). At this stage, the value of the pictorial image does not become diminished, as it might in radical non-dualist (advaitic) traditions, in which the image serves a purely instrumental purpose. Rather, because bhakti is itself the goal, Vaiṣṇavas find in the image a genuinely re-presentational presence, made even more so by the power of bhakti to attract the Lord. Far from making an “error of substitution,” a

bhakta would claim that he or she is, with divinized senses and mind, making a correction in perception: The error of not perceiving divinity in the world is corrected by the process of bhakti, which enables one to receive the Lord's grace in the form of divine sight.

Notwithstanding the cataphatic leaning of much Vaiṣṇava discourse on divine form, awareness of the danger of substitution and resultant lost attention to divine transcendence is also acknowledged. Perhaps somewhat nervously, Vaiṣṇavas acknowledge the well-known riddle-like description of God from the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad (8.13)

*He moves swiftly, but he has no feet; he grasps, but he has no hands; he sees, but he has no eyes; he hears, but he has no ears. He knows what is there to know, but there is no one who knows him. They call him the first and immense Person. (trans. Patrick Olivelle)*

Such paradoxical language, holding the tension between form and formlessness,<sup>176</sup> suggests more the sense of divine mystery and majesty than divine accessibility and intimacy sought in Vaiṣṇava traditions. These seek to contain the tension within a distinction between “material form” and “spiritual form.” The former is characterized by limits of time and space comprehended by the bound jīva; the latter is characterized as partaking of the “form of eternal-cognizant-bliss” (sat-cit-ānanda-vigraha) which is the essential nature of God. “Spiritual form,” while accommodating physical representation, also defies it, as one might conclude from the following verse favored by Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas:

*I worship that primal Lord Govinda [Kṛṣṇa], whose radiant form is constituted of being, knowledge, and bliss. All his limbs serve all the senses, ever seeing, maintaining, and impelling forth the worlds. (Brahma-saṁhitā 32)*

Here, abstract attributes (sat-cit-ānanda) and “parts” or limbs that function as interchangeable senses combine to assert divine sentience. God can appropriately be said to have a “body,” but every “part” of that body can function in the same way as any other “part.” Thus a Vaiṣṇava

response to the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad verse might be to say that it does not deny form or image or body with appendages as such. Rather, it denies form or image in reference to God conceived as having the same sorts of limitations as those mortal beings experience. In this way God's infinity is preserved without compromising his omnipotence. Further, as suggested above, for Vaiṣṇavas the omnipotence of God is demonstrated by his providing adepts with divine sight and with the power to communicate that sight to others. Moreover, his unity is preserved by conceiving it in organic terms. As any living being possesses unity by virtue of the organic coordination of its bodily functions, so God's unity is similarly conceivable.

Such notions of "spiritual form," however unacceptable they might have been to Maimonides, nevertheless resonate with his desire to preserve some notion of form in his comments on *zelem* and *toar*. What we can note here is that there is perhaps not such a wide chasm between deciding that a notion of essential form should lead to forbidding graphic representation and that it can and should lead to enjoining graphic representation. The aim in both cases is preservation of divine perfection and relationality.

## **IV. 3a. Idolatry as False Practice**

Halbertal and Margalit contrast Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides with the twelfth-century Jewish thinker and poet R. Judah Halevi (ca.1075-1141). Halevi replaces Maimonides' anxiety over error with an anxiety over false practice. The philosopher's concern is the proper object of worship, determined by philosophical reasoning; hence there is less attention to the proper means of worship. For Halevi the problem is the opposite. In his view (addressed to his Jewish audience), since for the rabbinic Jewish tradition the Object of worship is already determined by tradition (according to the *halakhah*), the central concern is with establishing a model of proper worship "determined in general by the intention, sincerity, and seriousness of the worshiper" (Halbertal and

Margalit, 189). Within Neville’s threefold scheme of religious truth, here we are dealing essentially with anxiety over failure, the opposite of successfully cultivating appropriate religious sensibilities.

Vaiṣṇava traditions also show anxiety about potential failure and concern for proper practice, centered in rituals of image worship (arcanam) but including the whole gamut of devotional activity. One evidence of this, apart from extensive detailed prescription with regard to such practices, are purāṇic lists of worship transgressions to be avoided. These are analogous to what might be considered offensive behavior before a superior person in human society. For instance, one is warned not to be in an unclean condition in the presence of the temple image; one is urged not to display pride before the image; or one should not fail to offer seasonal fruit to the image, and so on. Worship transgressions of this sort (sevāparādha) are generally considered relatively serious, but they are pardonable by sincere observance of prescribed penances.

For Caitanyaite Vaiṣṇavas, more serious than sevāparādha is nāmāparādha, transgressions in belief, attitude, words or practice in regard to the divine names of the Lord, ten of which the tradition delineates. Since the sacred names of the Lord have an equivalence with the Lord (abhinnatva – “non-difference” or identity), negligence in the pronunciation or repetition of the names (hari-nāma) reflects on one’s behavior in relation to the Lord. Of these, the most serious offenses are three: disrespect (especially verbal, ninda) toward bhaktas; disobedience to the preceptor (guru) under whose guidance one is learning the practice of bhakti; and indulging in sinful practices or attitudes (pāpa-buddhi) with the idea that the sin will be counteracted by further meditation on the names. It is expected that the beginning practitioner will be subject to committing nāmā-parādhas, for which the solution is to continue the practice of chanting-meditation while simultaneously cultivating a prayerful desire not to commit them.

Overlapping with some nāmāparādhas and judging from degree of emphasis in texts such as the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the most serious type of transgression would seem to be vaiṣṇavāparādha, or the offending of a fellow practitioner of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti, either with one’s body, words, or

mind. The only means of reconciling such transgressions is to beg forgiveness and receive pardon from the offended person, as it is warned that even the Lord himself is not in a position to counteract them (9.4.69-71).

This progression from lesser to greater weight of transgression mirrors a progression of identity with the Lord. Identity between the Lord and the image of the Lord is in some sense trumped by a “greater identity” between the Lord and his name, which is again trumped by the identity between the Lord and his devotee.<sup>177</sup> As we discussed in the context of idolatry as betrayal, Viṣṇu declares in Bhāgavata Purāṇa (9.4.68) that he considers the devotees to be his very heart. “My devotees do not know anything else but me, and I do not know anyone else but them.” If Halevi’s criteria for proper worship is determined by “the intention, sincerity, and seriousness of the worshiper,” certainly similar criteria find place in the Vaiṣṇava worldview where devotees of Viṣṇu, viewed by Viṣṇu as “his very heart,” are surely deemed to possess the right motivation. And right motivation assures that failure will not overcome Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa’s devotee in his or her progress toward the Lord.

## **IV. 3b. Idolatry and Myth**

Conceptualizing idolatry as myth construes myth negatively, as “false story.” As deviation from religious truth, this conception amalgamates the three opposites to religious truth in Neville’s scheme, bringing error, deceit, and failure into a single principle of religious untruth. To consider idolatry as myth from a Vaiṣṇava perspective I first turn to a study of early Isrealite religion by Yehezkel Kaufmann (who is also referred to by Halbertal and Margalit). Kaufmann argues that the Judaic notion of idolatry became inseparable from the notion of paganism. And yet, he notes, the Bible is “utterly unaware of the nature and meaning of pagan religion” (Kaufmann, 7-20). The Bible conceives only the “lowest level” of paganism, typifying idolatry as the worship of pagan gods that are “the handiwork of man,” or “wood and stone,” (Deut. 4:28;



28:36, 64). The Bible does not, Kaufmann claims, show any knowledge of what he calls the “mythological features” of the gods it condemns. The battle against idolatry waged in the Bible is solely based on the argument of fetishism and nowhere argues against the existence of the gods being worshipped in the images, nor against the truth of those gods’ mythologies. “The Bible nowhere denies the existence of the gods; it ignores them.” Kaufmann continues,

*The Bible’s ignorance of the meaning of paganism is at once the basic problem and the most important clue to the understanding of biblical religion. It underscores as nothing else can the gulf that separates biblical religion from paganism. A recognition of this gulf is crucial to the understanding of the faith of the Bible. Not only does it underlie the peculiar biblical misrepresentation of paganism, it is the essential fact of the history of Israelite religion. (Ibid., 20)*

Setting aside the historical complexities in the origins and use of the term “paganism,” if by definition it means that which is condemned – every religious practice other than Israelite religion or worship of gods other than the God of Israel – then the gulf between Israelite idolatry polemic and Vaiṣṇavite religious understanding is surely unbridgeable. Such an exclusionary definition forces one to identify as idolatry all religious belief and practice other than those of Jewish tradition. But let us forge ahead with our exercise in reflective comparison, next summarizing Kaufmann’s four distinctions between Israelite and pagan religion.

The first contrast is between limited power of pagan gods and the absolute will of God. Whereas pagan gods are limited by fate and nature, God creates the world “by his word and not by war” (Halbertal & Margalit, 68-69). Kaufmann writes,

*The mark of monotheism is not the concept of a god who is creator, eternal, benign, or even all-powerful; these notions are found everywhere in the pagan world. It is, rather, the idea of a god who is the source of all being, not subject to cosmic*

*order, and not emergent from a pre-existent realm . . . The High gods of primitive tribes do not embody this idea.*  
(Kaufmann, 29)

Second, according to this view, the absolute divinity of God determines the nature of ritual as distinct from that related to pagan gods. Whereas the latter rites are characterized by magic, whereby some form of control of the gods is won (they being bound to primordial nature, which one ritually manipulates), biblical ritual functions within the context of covenant: “God consents to do what man asks of him because his will has been fulfilled, and not because he has been compelled, by a magical or ritual technique, to act on man’s behalf.” Kaufmann finds in paganism a “confusion of realms,” there being a “common womb” out of which both gods and the world have appeared, and hence there is a removal of “any fixed bounds between [the gods] and the world of men and other creatures.”<sup>178</sup>

Third, the type of mediation between man and the divine is different: In pagan prophecy there is requirement of skill on the part of the prophet or priest, in contrast to biblical prophecy whereby God selects a messenger to communicate his will.

Fourth, pagan morality is embedded in nature, in contrast to biblical morality originating in the will of God.<sup>179</sup> In these writers’ view, pagan myth can be further characterized by a multiplicity of independent beings participating in the drama of a sacred story, unlike monotheistic narratives, in which there is no multiplicity of beings “with a will capable of limiting the divine will.”<sup>180</sup>

Followers of Vaiṣṇava traditions might conclude, after hearing these construals of pagan religion, that none apply to their own. They are likely to say that neither do these descriptions of paganism fit the Vaiṣṇava conception of Bhagavān and his pastimes (līlā) which include cosmic creation, nor do they comprehend bhakti, the devotional worship directed to him. Indeed much of Vaiṣṇava commentarial tradition is devoted to arguing theological principles that counter the above characterizations of

paganism with regard to the identity of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa and his worship. In this respect, the tradition also shows concern to be free from the aggregate of oppositions to religious truth.

Regarding the first point of limited power versus absolute will of God, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa is at pains to assert the absolute, transcendent position of the supreme being, svayam bhagavān, beginning with the opening verse. The four verses considered to be the core of the entire work, found in the Second Book, treat of this theme as well. The first of these (9.33) states,

*It is I [Nārāyaṇa/Viṣṇu] alone who existed prior to and beyond both existence and non-existence, when there was nothing else; and it is I (alone) who exist now and hereafter; and it is I (alone) who remain (after annihilation).*

Second, in light of such divine independence, Vaiṣṇavas are quick to contrast Kṛṣṇa-bhakti with other types of worship. As noted already, in the Bhagavad-gītā (9.23) Kṛṣṇa refers to worship of “other gods” as being in fact worship of himself, but performed “in a wrong way” (avidhi-pūrvakam). Whereas performers of such worship seek favors of the devatās (administrative cosmic beings), thus performing rites which are meant to manipulatively (or one might say magically) compel those beings, Kṛṣṇa condones only direct approach to the absolute Lord, which can be accomplished properly only by means of non-manipulative bhakti. Returning again to Bhagavad-gītā (18.55), Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna:

*By devotion (bhakti) one understands me as I am in truth. Then, knowing me truly (tattvato jñātvā), one enters my unending abode (viśate tat-anantaram).*

However, such apparently unmediated character of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti needs qualification. In response to the third distinction between pagan and Jewish religion, Vaiṣṇavas might insist that authentic bhakti comes about only by learning from qualified bhaktas, referred to in the Bhagavad-gītā as “seers of thatness,” or “seers of truth” (tattva-darśinaḥ, 4.34) whose powers of spiritual understanding have been awakened by the Lord’s favor.

These “seers of truth” may not conform entirely to the biblical concept of prophets as messengers chosen by God, but neither are they magicians or skilled priests mediating the petitions of favorseekers. Rather, their special qualification is fixity in comprehension of brahman, the Absolute, as indicated by freedom from material preoccupations. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa (11.3.21) advises,

*Therefore one desirous to know the ultimate good must submit to a spiritual preceptor (guru). Such a guru, whose shelter is tranquility, is fixed in brahman, both as articulated in and beyond Veda.*

Fourth, concerning the moral dimension of interaction between Bhagavān and living beings, Vaiṣṇavas point to the Vedic corpus as the source of cosmic/moral order (ṛta, and later dharma), which according to Vaiṣṇava texts has its origin in the “breathing” of Bhagavān. Hence Bhagavān is seen as the author of the moral order as well as its sustainer, especially in his function as the jīva’s inner guide, paramātmā. Viṣṇu’s avatāras also serve this function. Yet it is understood that when an avatāra of Viṣṇu battles with opponents, the primary purpose is divine amusement (līlā) with Viṣṇu’s servants specifically deputed as viable fighting partners. Thus there is no “multiplicity of independent beings” in these sports. Rather than opposing and limiting the divine will, these beings participate in and enhance it.

Further, to defend their worship of Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu in images, Vaiṣṇavas might point out a corollary to the Lord’s independence: The creation is, as a manifestation of Bhagavān’s extraneous energy (what Caitanyaitees call bahiraṅga-śakti), always subordinate to him. He is never under the control of primordial nature; rather, he enters into the world as avatāra for the purpose of expanding his līlā and sustaining dharma. With the same argument Vaiṣṇavas would claim that as arcāvatāra, worshipable image-descent, by his will Bhagavān can “enter into” such an image to receive the worship of his devotees and reciprocate with them. Vaiṣṇavas recognize that such images are composed of physical substance, subject to decay. However Bhagavān is free to transform physical substance by divine presence precisely because it is subordinate to him.

Finally, insofar as myth is construed as “untrue story” by West Asian religious traditions aiming to mark paganism negatively, Vaiṣṇavas would likely respond by pointing to the hermeneutical matrix within which their sacred narratives are told and explained. This matrix is circumscribed by the tradition of gurus for whom the purpose of scripture – the attainment of pure devotion for the Lord (prema-bhakti) – is always paramount. The truth of sacred narrative, they would claim, is attested by the progress toward pure devotion of practitioners accomplished in hearing such narratives from qualified teachers. Moreover, the truth of sacred narrative is to be found in the notion of līlā, which confounds morally constrained conceptions of untruth by allowing of God the freedom to act according to his own necessities, which are only limited by the constraints of devotional relationship. For Vaiṣṇavas, the myth to be overcome is the untrue story of permanent happiness within the temporal world.

## **IV.4 The Boundaries Remain**

To state perhaps the obvious, it would be wrong to conclude that Jews and Vaiṣṇavas are in overwhelming agreement about what is true and what is false religion. It might be argued that the selected point of comparison, namely the vague category “religious truth,” is simply too vague, too abstract, distant and malleable, to bring the two worldviews into meaningful conversation. Even if the category is elaborated in subcategories like propositional, expressive, and embodied/practicing truth, as Neville and his colleagues have done and as I have followed, much more work could be done to see where meaningful conversation and possible bridging of worldviews could take place. Here the attempt is merely to suggest a beginning point.

This has been a very brief exploration of Jewish notions of idolatry, representing how Vaiṣṇavas (more or less generically construed) might view their own worship practices, especially image worship, in light of the idolatry charge. For the sake of brevity I will conclude with a numbered

summary list of observations of similarity or points of resonance between the two traditions with regard to the notion of idolatry:

**1. Betrayal:** Both Jewish and Vaiṣṇava traditions explore the dangers of a broken relationship with God, and celebrate the fixity of such relationship. In a strict sense, idolatry as betrayal for Jews can only be attributed to Jews who turn away from the God of Israel. More broadly, Jewish idolatry in this sense is a moral wrong, whereas Vaiṣṇava distraction by lesser gods than Viṣṇu constitutes ignorance, delusion, or weakness of heart, rather than moral turpitude.

**2. Error and Representation:** Both traditions hold to some idea of divine or essential form, and both the forbidding of graphic representation and enjoining graphic representation have the same aim, namely to preserve God's unity, infinity, and omnipotence. Vaiṣṇava bhakti theology recognizes the necessity of upholding the perfection of God, but it sees multiplicity and complexity as expressions of his perfection. Vaiṣṇavas emphasize the truth of bhakti over the danger of error: Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa is above all a God of reciprocal love.

**3. False Practice:** Both traditions see improper worship (failure in practice) as a danger that interrelates offense to God with offense to his devotee, who embodies the proper motivation of proper worship. Whatever might be the causes of failure, both traditions enjoin preventive and corrective measures for practitioners to remain or return to the track of successful practice. Vaiṣṇavas view bhakti as the counterpart to divine power enabling both successful practice and attainment of the goal, which itself is bhakti.

**4. Myth:** Both traditions exhibit concern to identify real over against unreal objects of worship. For Judaism this led to blanket condemnation of all religious practice that is non-Jewish, as paganism. Vaiṣṇavas have their own share of exclusivist polemic, and are at pains to establish Viṣṇu's absolute supremacy and the special character of his worship. To that extent they might be found to agree in some measure with Jewish thought that the worship of other gods is to participate in idolatrous, i.e. inauthentic, activities.

Such an exploratory exercise is not likely to influence Jewish rabbis intent on condemning hair tonsure at Tirupati. Nor are Venkateśvara's devotees intent on surrendering their hair to express their devotion likely to desist from their practice. What could be facilitated, however, is the Venkateśvara devotee's and the rabbi's listening to each other explain why each thinks and acts as he or she does, and reflecting by each of them on what keeps them from appreciating the other's thinking about the Other.

## Conclusion

I have raised the questions at the beginning of this paper, “In what sense, according to Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, can an apparently inert material form be seen as divine and therefore worshipable, and in what ways is this practice of arcanam considered a solution to the problem of approaching or being approached by God in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition?” The question betrays a suspicion about worship in relation to tangible objects, a suspicion which finds its full expression in the biblical prohibition against the making and worship of images of any kind. The biblical prohibition is intrinsic to the biblical conception of monotheism: To worship the one Living God means above all, at least in terms of negative injunctions, to not worship images, either of the one God or of “other gods.”

In sharp contrast to the biblical tradition, Vaiṣṇavism in general, and Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism as a particular case, strongly encourages or even prescribes the worship of holy images of God, as an integral aspect of proper religious human behavior and spirituality. What is more, Vaiṣṇavas (of all sects) consider themselves to be also monotheistic, although certainly their conception of “monotheism” is radically different from that of Near Eastern religions. One might well conclude that the term “idolatry” in reference to this tradition would not be a very accurate or descriptive term for what is going on. In this paper the attempt is to offer an alternative description, allowing the scriptures of the tradition to speak on behalf of those who dedicate themselves to this practice.

Much as Judaism is a religion of scripture, so also is Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism a scripturally oriented tradition.<sup>181</sup> I have tried to call attention to some portions of the scriptural basis for the worship of Kṛṣṇa and show thereby that it is by no means an unreflective practice, or a case of naive confusion of categories. Rather it has reference to a systematic theology which is a solution to the problem of God’s supremacy and consequent apparent inaccessibility. This theology takes into account the nature of



materially embodied existence on the one side and the omnipotent nature of God on the other.

As the worship of the arcā-mūrti is not unreflective or naive, it is also not whimsical or amoral in its practice. Rather the worship of Kṛṣṇa is strictly regulated by scriptural injunctions, guru's instructions, and tradition which aim always to maintain purity and propriety as necessary prerequisites allowing genuine devotional interaction with the Deity to occur.<sup>182</sup>

We can also see that Caitanya Vaiṣṇava worship is, in its practice, a solution to human imperfection which affirms the potential for human beings to act and experience on a platform of devotional perfection, allowing one to transcend the limitations imposed by bodily existence. Bhakti is the via media of contact by which the bhakta is allowed to enter into the “universe of feelings” where Kṛṣṇa reigns as reservoir of spiritual emotion, or rasa. In Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, this takes place specifically at a stage of development of bhakti known as bhāva. The dualities under which bodily existence is normally conducted are superseded by darśana, or divine vision, whereby God and his name, God and his image, as well as God and his description are experienced as non-different from each other.<sup>183</sup>

Biblical polemic against image worship often dwelled on the seeming deadness, inactivity, and helplessness of the images worshipped. We might ask, what does Kṛṣṇa as arcā-mūrti actually do? Vaiṣṇavas would answer first that in fact it is he who is ultimately doing everything, including giving us the mental ability to ask this question. The arcā-mūrti is one of several means by which the Lord bestows grace to conditioned souls. As such it belongs to the category of avatāras. In general avatāras, or divine descents, do several things. First, they make the Lord accessible to bound souls (making it possible for them to transcend the bondage of action [karma-bandhana]); second, they execute divine justice (especially punishing the wicked [duṣkṛti-nāśana], thereby releasing them also from the bondage of action); third, they reestablish obscured or lost religious principles (dharma-saṁsthāpana), the central principle being the necessity

to offer oneself to the Lord (kṛṣṇa-samarpanam). In the original form of Kṛṣṇa the Lord descends additionally to attract bound souls, awakening their innate devotion, through his divine name, form, qualities, pastimes and associates. Also, as arcā-mūrti Kṛṣṇa accepts devotional offerings (of food, flowers, wealth, cloth, or prayers), and reciprocates by bestowing “remnants” (nirmālya) of those offerings as his prasāda, or mercy. He thus makes possible the practical application of his injunction (Bhagavad-gītā 9.34) to fix one’s mind on him, worship him, and offer obeisances to him.

Still, one might argue, the arcā-mūrti is obviously not doing anything in the sense of moving or speaking. Vaiṣṇavas would likely respond that indeed this form of avatāra, while the most accessible to bound souls, seems to be the least active so that the devotee is given opportunity to take on the active role by rendering all types of services with his or her body, mind and senses. In this active role one is engaging in the “serious play” of being hospitable to the Lord, subordinating one’s own desires to his wishes. The aim is to be constantly engaged (rather than to become inactive as classical monistic schools advocated), for, as noted in our discussion of bhakti, service must be unmotivated and uninterrupted in order to completely satisfy the self. Through such constant engagement the bhakta experiences increasingly the primary agency of the Lord, in relation to whom one is a secondary actor.

In this undertaking of acting on behalf of Kṛṣṇa, the practice of bhakti manifests its transformative character, whereby everything ordinary which is involved in the practice becomes redefined in terms of service to Kṛṣṇa (kṛṣṇa-sevā) thus becoming extraordinary.<sup>184</sup> Within arcanam ritual, the place of worship, the objects offered in worship, the utensils and language used, one’s own senses and mind – all are transformed into spirit (cit-śakti) in order to facilitate the transformation of the worshipper into a śuddha-bhakta, a pure devotee of the Lord. As practice (or rehearsal) transforms into perfection, action becomes performance, and the place of performance (a Kṛṣṇa temple) becomes not an ordinary place, but Vraja, the extraordinary land of Kṛṣṇa where “The trees are wish-fulfilling trees, the land is made of touchstone, the water is nectar, words are musical vibrations, and all movements are dancing.”<sup>185</sup> It is in Vraja that the

confines of linear time are overcome<sup>186</sup> as one becomes adept at participating in the Lord's perpetually variegated, ever fresh pastimes of love.

From this presentation one could suspect that the process of arcanam in Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism is a highly individual enterprise, with little or no reference to a community or society. In fact it is quite the opposite case in the tradition following Caitanya, for whom congregational worship was of central importance. Through the practice of harināma mantra chanting Caitanya is credited with having “plundered the storehouse of love of God” together with his most intimate associates Nityānanda, Advaita, Gadadhāra, Srivāsa and others.<sup>187</sup> By accepting as qualified bhaktas persons from lower castes, infusing those he met with ecstatic love of Kṛṣṇa he is celebrated for having made available to the world what was previously the property of a very few, transforming the world itself rather than merely some isolated individuals.

I mention this missionary aspect of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition because it has resulted in the presence of a contemporary worldwide mission which endeavors to expand the number of participants in Kṛṣṇa-bhakti practices, including arcanam. The fact that this practice of image worship is going on in temples outside India, among westerners perhaps less familiar with the cultural context in which arcanam flourishes in India, could provoke the question, what role does this theology of image worship as delineated by the tradition's theologians actually play in the practice as found in these new situations? The answer would of course be a study in itself, with attention perhaps more on sociology than theology. It is my own hope both that persons engaged in the practice will be well informed in the theology of the tradition as much as the practices, and that other persons encountering the practices of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti may become sufficiently informed about the theology behind the practice of worshipping the arcā-mūrti of Kṛṣṇa.

This hope for an informed observance of Kṛṣṇa-sevā as well as an informed practice of Kṛṣṇa-sevā suggests my further hope – that the subject of this thesis might develop into a topic of interfaith dialogue, not

only between practitioners of Vaiṣṇavism and of Judaism, but also between the former and practitioners of Christian and Islamic faiths, both of which have dealt in different ways with the issues raised here. Such discussion, in turn, might generate additional useful work in comparative theology of the worship of images (particularly, I am thinking, in regard to the tradition of icon veneration in Orthodox Christianity) which would be helpful for the Vaiṣṇava communities to promote better self-understanding, out of which more meaningful communication with members of other religious communities could take place. This thesis is but an attempt to sketch a few contours of a topic which has yet to be filled in with the rich and subtle colors of more qualified devotion and scholarship to make fully accessible the presence which is the arcanam process of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti. It is hope that it will serve a purpose in generating further discussion. END.

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## About the Author

Krishna Kshetra Swami was born on the 18th of December 1950 in New York as Kenneth Russel Valpey. In 1969 he became an Architecture student at the University of California in Berkeley.

He joined ISKCON in 1972 immediately after meeting the devotees, in Stuttgart, Germany, soon taking residence in Heidelberg, in the temple at Rohrbacher Strasse. Less than a month later, in July 1972, he went with the German devotees to Paris to see Shrila Prabhupada, from whom he then received initiation.

From 1973 to 1975 he distributed Shrila Prabhupada's books in the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany and he became a pujari in Amsterdam and Schloss Rettershof. In 1977 he travelled with Ghanashyama Prabhu (Bhakti Tirtha Swami) placing orders for books in libraries. That year he saw Shrila Prabhupada at Bhaktivedanta Manor in London for the last time. That same year until 1979 he visited Poland, USSR, Hungary, former Yugoslavia, former Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Rumania, preaching together with Harikesha Swami, Dhira Krishna Prabhu (now Bhakti Sudhir Goswami), Dvarakesha Prabhu and Devamrita Swami.

In August 1980 he settled in Simhachalam, where in 1982 Lord Nrisimhadeva was installed. He took care of His worship until 1985. In 1984 and 1985 he preached together with Shachinandana Swami, travelling through Europe encouraging many Nama Hatta centers in Krishna consciousness.

In 1987 the Governing Body Commission of ISKCON appointed him as an initiating guru and he humbly accepted this service. From 1991 to 1994 he was appointed as the GBC monitor for the Deity Worship department in ISKCON. Meantime he traveled around Europe preaching and inspiring devotees in different temples. The highlights of this preaching were the concerts performed by the Gauranga Bhajan Band.

In 1994 he compiled a handbook for Deity worship, Pancharatra Pradipa, in order to establish a standard of worship in ISKCON temples. From 1991 to 1995 he helped to develop the Vaishnava Library at the Gurukula in Mayapur, and also passed the Bhakti-shastri exam in Vrindavan.

With the encouragement of Hridayananda Das Goswami and Tamal Krishna Goswami, aiming to help in developing ISKCON as an educational institution, he took up studies at the University of California in Santa Barbara. There he completed his Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in Religious Studies. In the meantime, in the memorable Prabhupada Centennial year he promoted the idea of raising spiritual standards in ISKCON. From January 1997 until December 1998 he lived at the Berkeley temple, continuing studies at the Graduate Theological Union, near the University of California at Berkeley. At the GTU he successfully completed his Master of Arts degree with a thesis on Vaishnava Deity worship theology (now available as a book: “Krishna-Seva: The Theology of Image Worship in Gaudiya Vaishnavism.”)

From 1999 to 2000 he took up studies at the Oxford University and became involved in the Oxford Center for Hindu Studies while completing a Master of Studies degree in the Study of Religion.

In 2003 he completed his doctoral study in Gaudiya-Vaishnava Theology at Oxford University. Based on his doctoral dissertation he then published “Attending Krishna’s Image: Chaitanya Vaishnava Murtiseva as Devotional Truth” with Routledge (2006; paperback reprint, Recensia Press, 2013). In the year 2006 he taught courses in the Religion Department at the University of Florida, and he continues (since 2002) to teach at the Bhaktivedanta College in Radhadesh, Belgium. From 2007 to 2011 he has also taught courses at the Chinese University of Hong Kong as a visiting scholar.

In 2014 he requested the GBC for permission to enter the renounced order of life (sannyasa-ashrama) and received unanimous approval. He has formally received sannyasa initiation from his godbrother and friend, His



Holiness Shachinandana Swami, at Goloka Dhama in Germany, on  
Janmastami 2014.

## Notes

[←1]

See Sanskrit & Bengali transliteration pronunciation guides, p. iv.

[←2]

Guy L. Beck, “Churning the Global Ocean of Nectar: The Devotional Music of Śrīla Prabhupāda,” *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* vol. 6 no. 2 (Spring 1998): 133-35. The musical started its run on Broadway in New York in April 1968. See *Sanskrit & Bengali transliteration pronunciation guides*, p. iv.

[←3]

It might be more accurate to speak of a 'matrix of propositions that constitute the world within which [Vaiṣṇavas] conceptualize and practice ritual,' as Richard Davis puts it. Richard H. Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshiping Śiva in Medieval India*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 22.

[←4]

The term “Vaiṣṇava” is derived from “Viṣṇu,” a principle name of Bhagavān, or God. Vaiṣṇavas are generally contrasted with Śaivites, or worshipers of Śiva as the Supreme. Although Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas worship Viṣṇu, they understand him to be an expansion of Kṛṣṇa; hence it is Kṛṣṇa, not Viṣṇu as such, who is central to the tradition; alternative designations of the tradition are Bengal Vaiṣṇavism and Caitanyite Vaiṣṇavism.

[←5]

See Rahul Peter Das' chapter "Recent Works On Bengali Vaiṣṇavism," in *Essays on Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal*, (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1997), for a comprehensive bibliographical survey for Bengali Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal. For studies on its presence in the West, especially as ISKCON, see works by Charles R. Brooks, Stillson Judah, Kim Knott, Burke Rochfurt, and Larry Shinn, among others.

[←6]

arcanam is pronounced “archanam”. There is no apparent etymological connection to the Latin word referring to secrecy or occult knowledge.

[←7]

Paul Griffiths notes that the “doctrinal study of doctrine” is on the wane in the academic study of religion, giving way to analyses of doctrine in terms of social, political, historical, and psychological contexts. In his book *On Being Buddha* Griffiths offers a theory of doctrine “intended to make possible the properly doctrinal study of doctrine.” Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 2. My method here will hardly be so exacting as his, but perhaps the spirit is similar.



[←8]

In this thesis I will be presenting the perspective of a practitioner in a contemporary, missionoriented expression of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti, since I have been a member of ISKCON the greater part of my life (since 1972). Although this “insider” position may be seen as an academic disqualification by some, others acknowledge that “insider/outsider” distinctions are of questionable value, suggesting the possibility that a long-time practitioner of a tradition could offer a degree and quality of understanding of that tradition which would not be accessible otherwise.

[←9]

Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.1.1

[←10]

janma karma ca viśvātmann ajasyākartur ātmanaḥ / tiryakṇ-nṛṣiṣu yādaḥsu tad atyanta-  
viḍambanam --- All translations from Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam, Bhagavad-gītā, and Caitanya-  
caritāmṛta, unless noted, are by A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda, a member of the  
disciplic succession of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava preceptors descending from Caitanya  
Mahāprabhu. At times I will offer alternative or more literal translation of a word or phrase  
if it seems pertinent, or may include in parentheses the Sanskrit word or phrase to which an  
English word or phrase refers. I also include the transliterated Sanskrit text for each  
translation in footnotes. The edition of Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (also known as Bhāgavata  
Purāṇa) used by Prabhupāda for translation was: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahā-purāṇam, ed.  
Kṛṣṇa-śaṅkara Śāstrī (Ahmedabad, India: Śrī Bhāgavata Vidyā-pīṭha, ND) (present  
available edition: 1968).

[←11]

The Upaniṣads are a collection of philosophical texts, some said to be composed as early as ca. 800 BCE, ranging up to ca. 200 CE (Holdrege, 449n).

[←12]

“Mahāprabhu” is an honorific term, lit. “great master.”

[←13]

The other five were Rūpa, Sanātana, Gopāla-Bhaṭṭa, Raghunātha Bhaṭṭa, and Raghunātha Dāsa

[←14]

Satya Nārāyaṇa Dāsa, Śrī Tattva-Sandarbhā of Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī Prabhupāda, (Delhi: Jiva Institute for Vaiṣṇava Studies, 1995), 18, 27.

The primacy of Vedic evidence was accepted by all six of the orthodox Indian medieval schools of philosophy, each of them allowing subordinate, supportive positions to two or more additional types of evidence (pramāṇas). Jīva Gosvāmī (and later Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa) accept direct perception (pratyakṣa) and inference (anumāna) as inclusive of all other standard pramāṇas, again, as subordinate and supportive of Veda (śabda-pramāṇa) as far as they go to illuminate ordinary existence. One might recall Thomas Aquinas' distinction between knowledge and articles of faith: What cannot be known automatically belongs to the realm of faith, to which belong certain revealed items of doctrine. Yet the Vedas and their corollaries describe experience by persons of superordinary existence. Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa, an eighteenth century Caitanya commentator (following all the reputed Vaiṣṇava commentators as well as Śaṅkara) designates the Vedas (śruti—'that which is heard') as direct experience (pratyakṣa) and the corollaries to the Vedas (smṛti—'that which is remembered') as inferred (anumāna) (Narang, 30-42). Guy Beck observes, "To be sure, reason, or rational thinking, in the Western sense has an important and unique place in Indian thought. Yet it runs second place to revelation. The Vedas—revealed texts and thus 'non-rational,' or numinous, from a certain outlook—are the basis of all truth for the Hindu. . . . The use of reason in Indian thought (namely, Indian philosophy in the strict sense) is thereby limited to the attempt to reconcile these revelations with human experience and empirical observation." Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995), 10-11. Jitendra Mohanty, after presenting his own philosophical analysis of what he sees as weakness in the theory of śabda-pramāṇatva (superiority of revealed testimony), concedes, "Śabda's claim to be a pramāṇa may be weakened by my arguments . . . but it is restored to its foundational status of defining the parameters of the central core of Indian thinking." Jitendra Nath Mohanty, *Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought: An Essay on the Nature of Indian Philosophical Thinking*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 259.



[←16]

Modern scholarship dates this work at ca. 900 CE. The text claims itself to be from the dawn of the Age of Kali, some five thousand years ago. The present redaction may indeed be from the tenth century, with a probability that its oral tradition extends much further back in time.

[←17]

Most appropriate for the present age, the 'kali-yuga', or era of spiritual darkness.

[←18]

brāhmaṇa: the intellectual class, according to the traditional Indian varṇa social system

[←19]

Vyāsa: Kṛṣṇa-Dvaipāyana Vyāsa – the traditionally accepted compiler of the Sanskrit epic Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas.

[←20]

Brahma-sūtra – the most important commentary on the Upaniṣads in the form of extremely dense aphorisms, the standard work upon which all vedāntic schools were expected to offer commentary. O.B.L. Kapoor, *The Philosophy and Religion of Śrī Caitanya (The Philosophical Background of the Hare Krishna Movement)*, (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1977), 70.

[←21]

Especially Śrīdhara Svāmī, Rāmānuja, and Madhva.

[←22]

Purāṇas are Sanskrit texts which deal largely in narrative form with sacred history on a cosmic scale. Scholars consider them to have been composed from the third or fourth centuries CE up through the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. Within the tradition they are held to be much older, from shortly after the commencement of the present cosmic era, beginning around 3000 BCE.

[←23]

Kapoor, 74-75.



[←24]

Followers of Rāmānuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha, and Caitanya. For a survey of the Vedānta systems of each of these, see Manju Dube, *Conceptions of God in Vaiṣṇava Philosophical Systems*, (Varanasi: Sanjay Book Centre, 1984).

[←25]

Kapoor, 152.

[←26]

Dube, 41. We may note that the issue is indeed a metaphysical issue, not simply a “test of human logic” as Kapoor claims, since logic is a mode of functioning of the human mind, over and beyond which lies a metaphysical paradox of a different order than human mental functions.

[←27]

It might be interesting to compare this notion of energies of God with that of Orthodox Christianity, which asserts that the closest one might come to seeing God directly would be to see the energies of God.

[←28]

yat tad avyaktam ajaram acintyam ajam avyayam / anirdeśyam arūpaṣ ca pāṇi-pādādy  
asaṁyutam / vibhuṁ sarva-gataṁ nityaṁ bhūta-yonim akāraṇam / vyāpy avyāptaṁ yataḥ  
sarvaṁ tad vai paśyanti sūrayaḥ / tad brahma paramaṁ dhāma tad dhyeyaṁ mokṣa-  
kāṅkṣibhiḥ / śruti-vākyoditaṁ sūkṣmaṁ tad viṣṇoḥ paramaṁ padam / tad eva bhagavad  
vācyaṁ svarūpaṁ paramātmanaḥ / vācako bhagavac chabdas tasyādy asyākṣayātmanaḥ  
(Viṣṇu Purāṇa 6.5.66-69, quoted in Bhagavat-sandarbha 3.2. My translation).

[←29]

aiśvaryasya samagrasya vīryasya yaśasaḥ śriyaḥ / jñāna-vairāgyayoś caiva saṇṇām  
bhaga itiṅgana (Viṣṇu Purāṇa 6.5.47, quoted by Swami Prabhupāda in The Science of Self  
Realization, Chapter 1). The six opulences, according to Viṣṇu Purāṇa, are strength, fame,  
wealth, knowledge, beauty, and renunciation. See note 54 on six further opulences, or  
attributes, associated with the accessibility of bhagavān.

[←30]

Dube, 5, citing Viṣṇu Purāṇa 6.5.12-14 (VP. edition not stated).

[←31]  
Dube, 44.



[←32]  
Dube, 44.

[←33]

Davis, 84, 135.

[←34]

Sudesh Narang, *The Vaiṣṇava Philosophy According to Baladeva Vidyābhū-ṣaṇa*,  
(Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1984), 77.

[←35]  
Dube, 76.

[←36]

Narang, 82.

[←37]

Svarūpa-śakti is conceived as further divided into a triad of energies, one of which facilitates the pastimes of the Lord free from the danger of blemish which the external energy affords.

[←38]

Narang, 83. There is also therefore much parallelism with Śaiva Siddhānta cosmology, which, like Vaiṣṇavism, rejects monism and considers māyā as substantive (vastutā), not illusory (Davis, 44).

[←39]

This general pattern is also accepted in several other Indian religious and philosophical systems. Davis gives an interesting elaboration of the symmetries of ‘emission’ and ‘reabsorbtion’ which constitute the ‘oscillations of the universe’ in Śaiva Siddhānta, and how ritual pūjā procedures are linked to these conceptions (Davis, 42-74).



[←40]

A branch of Sanskrit literature dealing extensively with the theology and practice of image worship, which emphasizes the concept of vyuha, or emanation, of different forms of the deity from one primal form. More discussion of Pañcarātra is to come. See A. K. Majumdar, Caitanya, His Life and Doctrine: A Study in Vaiṣṇavism, (Chowpatty, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969), 296-97, for a brief look at particularities of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava school in relation to Pañcarātra literature.

[←41]

I am using John B. Carman's expression from his book *Majesty and Meekness: A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994).

[←42]

‘who holds the wheel of the chariot in his hand’ is a reference to Kṛṣṇa’s pastime at Kurukṣetra in which he demonstrated his partiality to his devotee at the cost of breaking his promise not to fight in the battle – an incident described in the great epic Mahābhārata.

[←43]

sa vā idaṁ viśvam amogha-līlaḥ sṛjaty avaty atti na sajjate ‘smin / bhūteṣu cāntarhita  
ātma-tantraḥ śāḍ-vargikaṁ jīghrati śaḍ-guṇeśaḥ / na cāsyā kaścin nipuṇena dhātur avaiti  
jantuḥ kumanīṣa ūtīḥ / nāmāni rūpāṇi mano-vacobhiḥ santanvato naṭa-caryām ivājñāḥ / sa  
veda dhātuh padavīṁ parasya duranta-vīryasya rathāṅga-pāṇeḥ / yo ‘māyayā santato  
yānuvṛtṭyā bhajeta tat-pāda-saroja-gandham (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.3.36-38).

[←44]

Pañcarātra is one portion of Āgamas, a group of texts associated closely with image worship, both in the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions. The Vaiṣṇava Āgamas are often referred to as pañcarātra-āgamas.

[←45]

Śrī Vaiṣṇava: the Vaiṣṇava tradition said to descend from Śrī, or Lakṣmī, of which Rāmānuja is the principle founding teacher.

[←46]

‘Incarnation’ is the term often used by writers, both Indian and Western, to translate avatāra. This is somewhat of a misnomer, although John Carman, well aware of the difference, also uses the term ‘incarnation’ sometimes in referring to avatāras. For his comparison of the two, see Carman, Chapter 10, *passim*, including fn. 9 p. 196, which reviews others’ work on this topic.

[←47]

Srinivasa S.M. Chari, *Vaiṣṇavism: Its Philosophy, Theology and Religious Discipline*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 224. See also Carman, 195-96.



[←48]  
Chari, 225.

[←49]

“Cosmic administrative agents” are the numerous devatās such as Indra, Candra, Agni and Vāruṇa described in Vedic and Paurāṇic literature – powerful jīvas granted these positions temporarily as reward for outstanding piety.

[←50]

Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.27.12 states, “The Deity form of the Lord is said to appear in eight varieties—stone, wood, metal, earth, paint, sand, the mind or jewels.” Three verses earlier the Bhāgavatam offers alternative, aniconic objects as possible representations of bhagavān: “A twice-born person should worship Me, his worshipable Lord, without duplicity, offering appropriate paraphernalia in loving devotion to My Deity form or to a form of Me appearing upon the ground, in fire, in the sun, in water or within the worshiper’s own heart.”

[←51]

Vadakku Tiruvidi Pillai, Uḍu 1.3 intro., quoted in Carman, Majesty and Meekness, 93.

[←52]

In the Introduction to his commentary on Bhagavad-gītā. Cited in Carman, 91.

[←53]

Carman (p. 91) lists the six attributes of majesty as knowledge, untiring strength, sovereignty, immutability, creative power, and splendor. Rāmānuja's six attributes showing accessibility are compassion, gracious condescension, motherly love, generosity, concern for his creatures' welfare, and tender affection. Apparently 'beauty of bodily form' would be counted as a seventh attribute in each set.

[←54]

An important verse for Jīva Gosvāmī comes from an early portion of the text: “All of the above-mentioned incarnations are either plenary portions or portions of the plenary portions of the Lord, but Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the original Personality of Godhead. All of them appear on planets whenever there is a disturbance created by the atheists. The Lord incarnates to protect the theists (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.3.28). ete caṁśa-kalāḥ puṁsaḥ kṛṣṇas tu bhagavān svayam / indrāri-vyākulaṁ lokaṁ mṛdayanti yuge yuge

[←55]

Kapoor, 123.



[←56]

Kapoor, 107.

[←57]

This might be equally said for the followers of Vallabhācārya, the “Puṣṭi-mārga,” as also of the followers of Nimbarka (Rudra-sampradāya).

[←58]

‘Historically’ perhaps not for Western scholarship, but for the Vaiṣṇavas certainly so, if in a sense of historicity which recognizes the possibility of spiritually significant events taking place in historic time which may become obscured to those of fettered perception. For an apropos contemporary Vaiṣṇava discussion on this issue, see Sadāpūta Dāsa, “Rational ‘Mythology’: Can a rational person accept the stories of the Purāṇas as literally true?” (A lecture presented at the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Chicago, 1993) Back to Godhead (Jan/Feb 1994).

[←59]

mad-guṇa-śruti-mātreṇa mayi sarva-guhāśaye / mano-gatir avicchinnā yathā  
gaṅgāmbhaso 'mbudhau / lakṣaṇaṁ bhakti-yogasya nirguṇasya hy udāhṛtam / ahaituky  
avyavahitā yā bhaktiḥ puruṣottame

As Walter G. Neevel Jr. has noted in another context regarding an earlier Vaiṣṇava theologian, Yāmunācārya, the writers we are concerned with would not have seen themselves as adding anything to the sources they were drawing from. When I say ‘they consider,’ it is a bow to modern preconceptions, as Neevel notes, about the importance of individual originality. The Six Gosvāmīs would have considered their task simply “to recover and restate clearly the meaning of [their] sources so as to make it available to [their] contemporaries.” Walter G. Neevel, *Yāmuna’s Vedānta and Pāñcarātra: Integrating the Classical and the Popular*, (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), 58.

[←61]

Kapoor, 182.

[←62]

Kapoor, 177.

[←63]

anukūlyena kṛṣṇānuśīlanam bhaktir ucyate: ‘that is said to be bhakti (which) is conducted for the favoring of Kṛṣṇa.’



[←64]

Kapoor, 180.

[←65]

Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.2.13, quoted in Bhakti-sandarbha 3.3.

[←66]

Bhakti-sandarbha 3.3. My translation.

[←67]

Rabindra Kumar Siddhantashastree, *Vaiṣṇavism Through the Ages*, (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985), 168-71.

[←68]

mantra: lit. ‘instrument of thought,’ a sacred text or speech; ‘a sacred formula addressed to any individual deity.’ Sir Monier Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, New Edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).

[←69]

This is discussed also by Bhaktivinoda Thākura in his work Śrī Caitanya Śikṣāmṛtam. Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinoda, Śrī Chaitanya Shikshamṛtam, tran. (Madras: Sri Gaudiya Math, 1983), 98-99.

[←70]

We may call attention to Krishna Sharma's thesis that the current (at least up to 1987) academic definition of bhakti has been unwittingly adopted from the conception of bhakti represented in the Caitanya school of Vaiṣṇavism. While there may have been some truth to this for some time, I think careful scholarship would show a more nuanced picture today. Krishna Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective*, (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987), *passim*, esp. Supplement II, 255-279.

[←71]

See Graham M. Schweig, “Universal and Confidential Love of God” *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* vol. 6 no. 2 (Spring 1998), 106, for an excellent explanation of Prabhupāda’s use of the expression “Supreme Personality of Godhead” to translate the Sanskrit word bhagavān. The Sanskrit verse uses the name Hari, an epithet of bhagavān.



[←72]

Quoted in Bhakti-sandarbha 286.44.

[←73]

Monier-Williams on verbal root bhaj: “to divide, distribute, allot or apportion to, share with, to grant, bestow, furnish, supply; . . . [in this context, from which bhakti as ‘devotion’ is derived:] to serve, honour, revere, love, adore.” Bhakti, in this context, he defines as “attachment, devotion, fondness for, devotion to, . . . trust, homage, worship, piety, faith or love or devotion (as a religious principle or means of salvation, together with karman, ‘works,’ and jñāna, ‘spiritual knowledge.’”

[←74]

Rūpa, one of the Six Gosvāmīs, states this definition as the svarūpa-lakṣaṇa, or essential characteristic, of uttama-bhakti in his book Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu.

[←75]

Sanjukta Gupta explains the general Pāñcarātra concept of the śakti of bhagavān as the aggregate of his six bhagas, or glories: “[T]hese six attributes of god [sic], taken together, constitute his Śakti, which may be translated as his power, potency, and potentiality rolled into one. . . . Śakti is god’s essential nature, his personality or “I-ness” (aham̐tā) . Sanjukta Gupta, “The Pāñcarātra Attitude to Mantra,” in *Mantra*, ed. Harvey P. Alper, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 225. Majumdar elaborates on svarūpa-śakti in *Caitanya: His Life and Doctrine*, 287-90.

[←76]

Bhaktivinoda, 170.

[←77]

Kṛpā: lit. ‘pity, tenderness, compassion;’ prasāda: lit. ‘graciousness, kindness, kind behaviour, favor, aid, mediation;’ vadānyatā: lit. ‘bounty, liberality, munificence;’ anugraha: lit. ‘favour, kindness, conferring benefits assistance’ (Monier-Williams).

[←78]

The other six are smaraṇam, remembrance of the name, form, qualities and pastimes of the Lord; pāda-sevaṇam, literally ‘serving the feet,’ i.e. rendering menial service to the Lord and his devotees; vandanam, offering prayers to the Lord; dāsyam, ‘servitude,’ or participating in the mission of the Lord; sākhyam, cultivating intimate friendship with the Lord; and ātma-nivedanam, surrendering oneself fully to the Lord.

[←79]

Joseph O’Connell, “Sādhana Bhakti,” in *Vaiṣṇavism: Contemporary Scholars Discuss the Caitanya Tradition*, ed. Steven Rosen, (New York: FOLK Books, 1992), 229-230.



[←80]

The other two are bhāva-bhakti, spontaneous devotion beyond practice, and prema-bhakti, pure ecstatic devotion. We will discuss these later.

[←81]

One might equally speak of the “blinding effect” of habitual engagement. Through habitual preoccupation with mundane affairs one becomes unable to perceive one’s spiritual identity in relation to the Lord. But the end effect is bondage in material existence (saṁsāra).

[←82]

sarvopādhi-vinirmuktaṁ tat-paratvena nirmalam / hr̥ṣīkeṇa hr̥ṣīkeśa-sevanaṁ bhaktir  
ucyate (Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 19.170, quoting Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu  
1.1.12)

[←83]

This is not to say it is exclusively revered, as should be obvious from our frequent mention of other scriptures.

[←84]

yat karoṣi yad aśnāsi yaj juhoṣi dadāsi yat / yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruṣva mad-  
arpaṇam

[←85]

patraṁ puṣpaṁ phalaṁ toyaṁ yo me bhaktyā prayacchati / tad ahaṁ bhakty upahṛtām  
aśnāmi prayatātmanaḥ

[←86]

Sanātana Gosvāmī seems to have been involved in its compilation to some extent. See Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1986), 125-45.

[←87]

Davis, *passim*.



[←88]

See Lawrence Babb, *Absent Lord: Ascetics and Kings in a Jain Ritual Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) for an exploration of Jaina worship and some comparison to Buddhist, Śaiva, and Vaiṣṇava worship.

This might suggest similarities in theologies among Indic traditions on levels deeper than their declared differences – a topic for another paper! One useful theoretical distinction in regard to food offering and acceptance (an important aspect of most Indic worship) has been pointed out by Paul Toomey (pp. 5-8): Whereas one group of anthropologists accounts for food offering and receiving ritual in terms of “ranked relationship between worshipper and deity, enacted transactionally,” for other anthropologists (including Toomey) who seem to give more recognition to the dynamics of bhakti, a “notion that prasad [offered food] is a unique cultural idea” is upheld. He goes on to compare prasad to the Christian Eucharist. Paul M. Toomey, *Food from the Mouth of Krishna: Feasts and Festivals in a North Indian Pilgrimage Center*, (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing, 1994), 5-8. Another general approach to this topic could be to consider worship as offering hospitality, a common theme in many Asian forms of worship.

[←90]

The expression “twice-born” is a standard literal translation of dvija, a reference to a member of the three upper classes who receive initiation (upanayanam) into the study of Vedic literature, considered as a second birth from the “mother” of the Veda. It is not to be confused with the western expression associated with evangelical Christianity.

[←91]

yadā sva-nigamenoktam dvijatvaṁ prāpya pūruṣaḥ / yathā yajeta māṁ bhaktyā  
śraddhayā tan nibodha me (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.27.8, trans. of all 11th Book verses by  
H.D. Goswami)

[←92]

The Pañcarātra system opens up the possibility for persons of all classes to practice arcanam by developing the appropriate qualifications of behavior.

Kṛṣṇa-kṣetra Dāsa, ed., *Pañcarātra-pradīpa: Illumination of Pañcarātra*. Supplement to Volume One, Daily Service. GBC Deity Worship Group, (Mayapur, India: ISKCON-GBC Press, 1995), 11. “Proper Vaiṣṇava behavior” especially refers to the observance of strictures regarding diet (vegetarian), sexual behavior (cohabitation only within marriage, for the purpose of procreation), and complete avoidance of intoxication and gambling.

pūrvam snānam prakurvīta / dhautā-danto 'nga-śuddhaye / ubhayair api snānam /  
 mantrair mṛd-grahanādinā (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.27.10) Despite elaborate (mainly  
 western) theorizing over brahminical preoccupation with purity, the explanation for this  
 concern within the tradition is rather straightforward, summed up in our Western adage,  
 “cleanliness is next to godliness.” To approach God, who is supremely pure, calls for  
 purity; but purity (especially of the heart, or consciousness) is ultimately bestowed by God.  
 Yet one can, it would be argued, practice acts enjoined directly or indirectly by God which  
 are conducive to purity, beginning with simplest of these, bathing. Perhaps in no other  
 religious tradition of the world does one find such elaborate and detailed specifications for  
 ablution than in brahmanical texts of India, so it is obviously important. Vaiṣṇavas would  
 argue that its importance cannot be reduced to only a concern to maintain social  
 boundaries; rather the contrary: it is the bound souls’ disinterest in purity – especially  
 internal purity – which perpetuates its exclusion from direct association with God.

[←95]

Chari, 311-16.



[←96]

pratimā: lit. ‘an image, likeness, symbol; picture, statue, figure; reflection;’ ādi, lit. ‘having as beginning,’ i.e. ‘and so on,’ here suggests that the Lord can also be worshipped in various aniconic substances or elements, as was mentioned previously (see Note 50).

[←97]

dravyaiḥ prasiddhair mad-yāgaḥ pratimādiṣv amāyinaḥ / bhaktasya ca yathā-labdhair  
hṛdi bhāvena caiva hi (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.27.15).

[←98]

We may note tangentially the distinction recognized here between persons of lesser and greater qualifications to worship. The greater the internal qualification, the lighter the injunctive stricture on high-quality offerings. The Hari-bhakti-vilāsa elaborates extensively on things fit and unfit for offering, perhaps giving most detail in the matter of offerable and unofferable flowers, for which an entire chapter (out of twenty) is dedicated.

[←99]

Āgama texts describe an elaborate procedure of mentally ‘deconstructing’ one’s material body and then ‘reconstructing’ it with purified material elements. Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas simplify this to the point of a simple meditation on oneself as eternal servant of the Lord, free from all social class (varṇa) and life-stage (āśrama) designations.

[←100]

Manasa-pūjā involves mentally offering each of the items, just as one will offer them physically after concluding the manasa-pūjā, however within the mind there is possibility to embellish the procedure, especially with greater (visualized) opulence than might be possible in the physical worship.

[←101]

piṇḍe vāyav-agni-saṁśuddhe hṛt-padma-sthāṁ parāṁ mama / aṇvīṁ jīva-kalāṁ  
dhyāyen nādānte siddha-bhāvitām / tayātma-bhūtayā piṇḍe vyāpte sampūjya tan-mayaḥ /  
āvāhyārcādiṣu sthāpya nyastāṅgaṁ māṁ prapūjayet (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.27.23-24.)  
Verse 24 suggests worship of a temporary, as opposed to a permanent mūrti. Vaiṣṇavas  
mainly worship permanently consecrated images, although the Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam seems  
to give the option of temporary worship as well.

[←102]

I will discuss mantra-utterance in the context of arcanam in Section II.3.2.

[←103]

I am told that the commentator to Hari-bhakti-vilāsa points out that service is potentially unlimited, the specifically prescribed items being listed as sixty-four. Hence within the scope of worship under regulations room for spontaneity is suggested.



[←104]

upagāyan gr̥ṇan nṛṭyan karmāṇy abhinayan mama / mat-kathāḥ śrāvayan śṛṇvan  
muhūrtaṁ kṣaṇiko bhavet (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 11.27.44).

[←105]

dviṣataḥ para-kāye mām mānino bhinna-darśinaḥ / bhūteṣu baddha-vairasya na manaḥ  
śāntim ṛcchati / aham uccāvacaḥ dravyaiḥ kriyayotpannayānaghe / naiva tuṣṭye 'rcito  
'rcāyām bhūta-grāmāvamāninaḥ. ( Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 3.29.23-24.)

[←106]

Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.4.15-16.

[←107]

Klaus K. Klostermaier, *Mythologies and Philosophies of Salvation in the Theistic Traditions of India*, Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1984), 105. Translation of *Vedārthasaṃgraha* by S.S. Raghavachar.

[←108]

Nārada-bhakti-sūtras, Sūtra 55. tat prāpya tad-evāvalokayati tad-eva śṛṇoti tad-eva cintayati. Graham Schweig, trans., “The Bhakti Sūtras of Nārada: The Concise Teachings of Nārada on the Nature and Experience of Devotion.” in *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* vol. 6 no. 1 (Winter 1998), 148.

William H. Deadwyler, “The Devotee and the Deity: Living a Personalistic Theology,” in *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India*. Joanne Punzo Waghorne and Norman Cutler, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 79. Deadwyler faults the advaita philosophy for assuming an equation ‘form=material’, noting that ‘formless’ must also be a material idea, interdependent with the idea of ‘form.’ ‘spiritual form’, or ‘non-material form’ is for the bhakta not an oxymoron, for saguṇa-brahman, the Absolute with qualities, is not, as advaita doctrine has it, in any way inferior to nirguṇa-brahman, the Absolute conceived without qualities (which the Vaiṣṇavas interpret as “without material qualities”).

[←110]

Paurāṇic literature divides cosmic time into repeating cycles of four yugas, according to which we are presently (and for the next 428,000 years) in the Kali-yuga, a time of degradation in which most of us have little or no inclination or capacity for spiritual cultivation. For Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas chanting the Hare Kṛṣṇa mahā-mantra (harināma-kīrtana) is central to the practice of bhakti especially in the form of loud chanting in groups (harināma-saṁkīrtana). (Beck, in Vaiṣṇavism, 275).

[←111]

kali-kale nāma-rūpe kṛṣṇa-avatāra / nāma haite haya sarva-jagat-nistāra. (Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 17.22)



[←112]

“Since all of them are absolute” is not, strictly speaking, in the verse, but is explanatory as a gloss on *bheda nāhi* (having no distinction). “Absolute” is often used by Prabhupāda as an English equivalent of “non-dual” (*advaya*), perhaps also to be understood as “irreducible”.

[←113]

‘nāma’, ‘vigraha’, ‘svarūpa’—tina eka-rūpa / tine ‘bheda’ nāhi,—tina ‘cid-ānanda-rūpa’ /  
deha-dehīra, nāma-nāmīra kṛṣṇe nāhi ‘bheda’ / jīvera dharma—nāma-deha-svarūpe  
‘vibheda’ (Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya-līlā 17.131-32). I have added words in brackets  
which I think aid the understanding of this translation.

[←114]

ataḥ śrī-kṛṣṇa-nāmādi na bhaved grāhyam indriyaiḥ / sevonmukhe hi jihvādaḥ svayam  
eva sphuraty adaḥ (quoted in Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya-līlā 17.136)

[←115]

Gupta, 225. Prior to and contemporary with Pañcarātra literature was already considerable linguistic speculation within other schools, especially by the Mimāṃsakas and the Grammarians. But already in the Ṛg Veda hymns there is discussion of divine speech, or Vāc.

[←116]

Gupta, 230.

[←117]

Gupta, 231.

[←118]

This is the well known hare kṛṣṇa hare kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare, hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare. “hare” is the vocative for both “harī” and “harā”, the former a name for bhagavān, the latter a name for the feminine śakti of bhagavān.

The present temple was probably constructed in the twelfth century CE., however any number of speculations abound regarding its origins along with the origins and significance of the cult of Jagannatha. Legends regarding both the images and the temple abound in Paurāṇic and other literature. These images are striking for their unusual, semi-iconic appearance, explained as being the result of royal devotional impatience to see the carving work in progress, thus breaking a promise to leave the artist undisturbed. The Lord then communicates that this ‘unfinished’ form is in fact complete, his desire all along being to receive worship in this particular form. Gopinath Mohapatra, *Jagannātha in History & Religious Traditions of Orissa*, Orissan Studies Project No. 13, (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1982), 45, 380-82).



[←120]

smartavyaḥ satatam viṣṇor vismartavyaḥ na jātucit (Padma-purāṇa, quoted in Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya 22.113)

About the word “ecstasy” I have noted elsewhere: “To explore the relationship between devotional ecstasy and yogic ‘enstasy’ it behooves us to consider also the relationship of the former with shamanic ecstasy. Mircea Eliade, in his discussions on the relation of shamanism and Yoga, compares the ecstasy of the shaman with the ‘enstasy’ of the yogin. While the former is characterized by a ‘desperate effort to attain the condition of the spirit to accomplish ecstatic flight,’ the latter is characterized by ‘perfect autonomy,’ or withdrawal within to a state of liberation, as a *jivan-mukta*, or a soul liberated in this life. See Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 339-40. As one might expect, a sharp contrast between shamanic ecstasy and devotional ecstasy also exists, as June McDaniel has noted in her book *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Referring to Mircea Eliade’s etymology of ecstasy, namely ‘to stand outside’ or ‘to be outside,’ she emphasizes that devotional ecstasy is ‘a radical alteration of perception, emotion, or personality which brings the person closer to what he regards as the sacred... The ecstatic often passes through a stage of disintegration, but ultimately experiences an integration that brings parts of the self, or the self and the Divine, into a closer relationship or union’ (McDaniel, 2). Whereas ecstasy of the shaman ‘manifests the separation of the soul’ and thus ‘anticipates the experience of death,’ that of the *bhakta* involves a supra-consciousness in which all the senses are surcharged or infused with awareness of the worshipable object, the Lord.” Kenneth R. Valpey, “Arcana: Der Yoga der Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas,” *Tattva-viveka* (German) Nummer 5 (Oktober 1996), 8-9.

[←122]

Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya-līlā 14.23-46

[←123]

yajña-śiṣṭāśinaḥ santo mucyante sarva-kilbiṣaiḥ / bhuñjate te tv aghaṁ pāpā ye pacanty  
ātma-kāraṇāt (Bhagavad-gītā 3.13).

[←124]

The other four are giving and receiving gifts, and speaking and enquiring confidentially. (Nectar of Instruction [Upadeśāmṛta] 4).

[←125]

From this event has come the English word juggernaut. Webster defines it thus: “1. Any large, overpowering, destructive object; 2. Anything requiring blind devotion or cruel sacrifice; 3. an idol of Krishna at Puri in Orissa, annually drawn on a huge cart under whose wheels devotees are said to have thrown themselves to be crushed.”

The concept of miracles in relation to images is explored in Richard Davis's collection of articles, *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998). One article by Robert Brown discusses "expected miracles" which is suggestive of what may have taken place in the account of Caitanya in the Rathayātrā festival. For our purposes in this paper we may tentatively accept the Oxford Unabridged Dictionary definition of Miracle: "A marvellous event occurring within human experience which cannot have been brought about by human power or by the operation of any natural agency, and must therefore be ascribed to the special intervention of the Deity or of some supernatural being."

[←127]

aṭati yad bhavān ahni kānanaṁ / truṭi yugāyate tvām apaśyatām / kuṭila-kuntalaṁ śrī-  
mukhaṁ ca te / jaḍa udīkṣatām pakṣma-kṛd dṛśām



Kapoor, 98. Another explanation of Rādhā's identity given by A.K. Majumdar may be helpful: "Rādhā is Kṛṣṇa's hlādinī-śakti, but she is neither a part nor even the representation of the śakti; she is the śakti herself in its fullest amplitude. Rādhā is the pūrṇa-śakti... Rādhā is the realization of the principal emotion being the concretized form of the ideal hlādinī-śakti (the energy of bliss), indeed its substratum (sāra), in whom the cognizable properties or qualities or attributes or accidents of things have been conceived as inhering in or affecting the essential nature underlying the phenomenon of mādihura-rasa... In the rasa-maṇḍala [rasa-dance arena]... the dance of duality ends in ultimate unity... From this unity of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa emerges the ultimate rasa: raso vai sa... 'He indeed is rasa' [Taittirīya-upaniṣad]. By himself, Kṛṣṇa is advaya-jñāna-tattva [the truth of non-dual gnosis], with Rādhā He is advaya-rasa-tattva [the truth of non-dual taste, or feeling].

[←129]

mallānām aśanir nṛṇām nara-varaḥ strīṇām smaro mūrtimān / gopānām sva-jano  
'satām kṣiti-bhujām śāstā sva-pitroḥ śīśuḥ / mṛtyur bhoja-pater virāḍ aviduṣām tattvaṁ  
paraṁ yoginām / vṛṣṇīnām para-devateti vidito raṅgaṁ gataḥ sāgrajaḥ

The seven minor rasas are: anger (raudra); wonder (adbhūta); humor (hasya); chivalry (vīrya); pity or mercy (dayā); fear (bhayanaka); horror or ghastliness (bibhatsa). The five major rasas are: peacefulness (śānta); servitude (dāsyā); friendship (śakhya); parenthood (vatsalya); and conjugal attraction (mādhurya or śringāra). Rūpa is noted for systematically combining traditional Indian aesthetics with theology, though before him and before Caitanya some thought and writing went in this direction. Klaus Klostermaier writes: “References to the ontology of beauty, the grounding of feeling in an ultimate reality, were not absent in the literature that developed the rasa-theory. To that extent Caitanya’s religion of feeling had strong roots in contemporary culture. Equally, the celebration of love between man and woman, based on the attraction of the body as much as on the merging of the souls, its projection unto the divine couple of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, all this was present before Caitanya appeared on the scene.” Klaus K. Klostermaier, “A Universe of Feelings,” in *Shri Krishna Caitanya and the Bhakti Religion*, Studia Irenica 33, Edmund Weber and Tilak Raj Chopra, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1988), 115.

[←131]

Devas or devatās, numbering up to thirty-three million in Vedic / Paurāṇic literature, are classified in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology as jīva-tattva, or of the same ontological status as human beings, animals, and plants. By piety they have gained status which is “divine” only insofar as it is markedly above human qualifications. However such status is temporary, and like any jīvātmā, the devatās are subject to death.

[←132]

Indian aestheticians traditionally argued for either peacefulness (śānta-rasa) or pity / compassion (dayā or karuṇā) as the axial emotion. Caitanya Vaiṣṇava focus on mādhyura-rasa is concomitant with the doctrine that in relation to Kṛṣṇa it comprehends the most perfect expression of love, the inverse of worldly conjugality which is characterized by lust.

[←133]

The subordinate value placed on the material creation is further underlined by identifying Kṛṣṇa as the source of the puruṣa-avatāras – the forms of Viṣṇu considered the creators of the external world.

[←134]

Klostermaier, “A Universe of Feelings”, 113.

[←135]

Neal Delmonico, “Rādhā: The Quintessential Gopī,” *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* vol. 5 no. 4 (Fall 1997), 117.



[←136]

See David R. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) for an overview of goddesses in relation to gods in Hinduism.

[←137]

Rāmānandīs are a north Indian branch of the Śrī-Vaiṣṇavas of south India descending from the fourteenth-century reformer Rāmānanda. See Dayānanda Dāsa, “Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa: The Caitanya Vedāntist,” *Back to Godhead* (January-February, 1991), 32.

[←138]

Dāsa, Dayananda, 32 (Pt. II). Their source for this tradition is a Bengali work, Śrī Śrī Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Abhidāna, Śrī Haridās Dās, Haribol Kutir, Śrī Dhāma Navadvīpa, 1955. It would of course be interesting to know what the Rāmānandī tradition has to say about the incident. Practically nothing is written about the history of Rādhā's appearance next to Kṛṣṇa in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava temples (or of other sects, especially the followers of Nimbarka). S.K. De notes that there is no mention of Rādhā in the Hari-bhakti-vilāsa of Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī. The ritual worship of Rādhā with Kṛṣṇa apparently developed after the sixteenth century. De, 508.

[←139]

Scholars argue that the doctrine of unmarried love between Kṛṣṇa and the gopīs did not prevail until some time after the Six Gosvāmīs. Jīva Gosvāmī presents a case for married love (svakīya-rasa) between them, based on inferences from scripture, and also from rasa-śāstra, or standard texts of aesthetics, which he says disapprove of illicit conjugal affairs. (De, 348-9). See also Jan Brzezinski, “Does Kṛṣṇa Marry the Gopīs in the End?” *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* vol. 5 no. 4 (Fall 1997).

[←140]

David R. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute: Kālī and Kṛṣṇa—Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 76.

[←141]

A useful exploration of the varied meanings of the word *līlā* and a related term *krīḍā* in Vaiṣṇavism is offered by Clifford Hospital in his article “*Līlā* in Early Vaiṣṇava Thought,” in *The Gods at Play: Līlā in South Asia*, William S. Sax, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[←142]

smerāṁ bhaṅgī-traya-paricitāṁ sāci-vistūrṇa-dr̥ṣṭīṁ / varṁśī-nyastādhara-kīśalayāṁ  
ujjvalāṁ candrakeṇa / govindākhyāṁ hari-tanum itaḥ keśī-tīrthopakāṇṭhe / mā  
prekṣiṣṭhās tava yadi sakhe bandhu-saṅge 'sti raṅgaḥ (Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu 1.2.239,  
quoted in Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 5.224).

[←143]

John Stratton Hawley, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan*.  
(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 51.



[←144]

David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation: A Study of Rāgānugā Bhakti Sādhana*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 193 (fn. 55).

[←145]

Govardhana is a very sacred hill in Vraja, said to have been lifted and held like an umbrella by Kṛṣṇa for seven days and nights to protect the residents of Vṛndāvana from the wrath of Indra and his pouring rain.

As Steven Gelberg points out, anthropologist Victor Turner calls our attention to the common theme in pilgrimage experience in terms of social marginality, liminality, and consequent experience of *communitas*. Gelberg notes, “Pilgrimage to Vrindaban (and, more so, residence there) is nothing if not a radically liminal experience. More than a vacation from society, it is a vacation from the world itself.” Steven J. Gelberg, “Vrindaban as Locus of Mystical Experience,” *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* vol. 1 no. 1 (Fall 1992), 23. David Haberman critiques Turner’s ideas on pilgrimage in his book *Journey Through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 69-71, with respect specifically to Vraja-pilgrimage. See also A. W. Entwistle, *Braj, Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage*, (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1987), 105-107, on special features of Vraja pilgrimage and resistance to generalized anthropological theorizing. Another interesting if rather “monistic” exploration of pilgrimage in the Indian context is that of E. Valentine Daniel in *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), Chapter 7. Daniel analyzes it (after undertaking a pilgrimage himself) in terms of Charles S. Peirce’s phenomenological categories of “Firstness,” “Secondness,” and “Thirdness” of experience.

[←147]

rādhā kṛṣṇa-praṇaya-vikṛtir hlādinī śaktir asmād / ekātmānāv api bhuvi purā deha-  
bhedaṁ gatau tau / caitanyākhyāṁ prakāṣam adhunā tad-dvayaṁ caikyam āptaṁ / rādhā-  
bhāva-dyuti-suvalitaṁ naumi kṛṣṇa-svarūpam (Caitanya-caritāmṛta Ādi-līlā 1.5)

[←148]

As with the history of the worship of images of Rādhā, the history of worship of images of Caitanya is difficult to trace. S.K. De (pp. 227-30) considers the theology of Caitanya / Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa identity a later development, after the writings of the Six Gosvāmīs. However it would not have been very long after, as Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja, who articulates this doctrine quite extensively in his Caitanya-caritāmṛta, apparently had some association with them.

[←149]

Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Ādi-līlā 5, passim.

Historians trace the existence of two more or less distinct cults of Vaiṣṇavism back to early centuries of the Christian era or earlier, one called Bhāgavatas and the other called Pāñcarātras. According to one scholar, “The main difference between the Bhāgavatas and the Pāñcarātras seems to lie in the fact that whereas the Bhāgavata devotees of Nārāyaṇa had accepted the brāhmaṇical social order, the Pāñcarātras were indifferent to and were perhaps against it.” See Suvira Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism: Vaiṣṇavism from 200 BC to AD 500*, (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981), 46. However, in Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Brahmasūtras he refers to the followers of Pāñcarātra texts as Bhāgavatas. See Swami Gambhirananda, trans., *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965), Sūtra II.ii.42, 440. In any case, the terms bhāgavata-mārga and pāñcarātra-mārga used here take on a different emphases. As far as my research goes (querying per E-mail a group of ISKCON scholars), this present usage became especially emphasized by Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, the prominent missionary of the early part of the twentieth century.

[←151]

Sandalwood, when ground to a paste, has a cooling effect when smeared on the body.  
It is one of the standard items offered to respected persons and images in India.



[←152]

Kṣīra is milk or condensed milk. “Sweetrice” is a favorite sweet preparation consisting of rice cooked slowly in boiled down milk, with sugar. More precisely it would be called kṣīrāṇna (milk and grain/rice), but it is commonly called simply kṣīra.

[←153]

ārati or ārātrika is a short ceremony of offering various items to the image by waving them in circles while standing and ringing a bell. The main items offered are a lamp (burning camphor or cotton wicks soaked in clarified butter or oil) and a conch shell filled with water. In most temples this ceremony will occur five to eight times in the course of the day, after food has been offered. It is a public event, whereby viewers will either observe silently while offering prayers, or they will sing songs considered appropriate for the particular deity. For an interesting Christian perspective on this ceremony, see Fr. Prasanna-bhai, “Jesus the Arati Personified—the Eucharist as our Mahā-ārati,” *Vidya-jyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* no. 60 (1997), 192-199.

[←154]

Paramahansa = “great, swanlike person,” an appellative for spiritually advanced ascetics.

[←155]

Śayana-sevā, “resting service”: Images are placed in small beds in the evening, unless they are too large and heavy, in which case an utsava-mūrti, a smaller, usually metal, version of the main image will be placed in a bed, re-presenting the main image.

[←156]

“Three worlds” refers to a common Indic cosmogonic conception of earthly, celestial, and intermediary cosmic regions.

[←157]

“Absorbed in ecstatic love,” prema-āviṣṭa: literally “saturated with love.”

[←158]

It is also significant that as this particular narrative continues, Mādhavendra simply proceeds on his mission to obtain sandalwood for his deity Gopāla. Although it is understood that he has already reached spiritual perfection (he is referred to as a paramahaṁsa sannyāsī), and that perfection is further confirmed by the incident with Gopinātha, he does not therefore retire into inactivity to be aloof from the world. Whereas classical sannyāsī followers of the advaita school are generally known to renounce all endeavors in an effort to terminate karmic reaction, the Vaiṣṇava sannyāsīs remain always active, taking liberation as the departure point to eternal service to the Lord. Even in liberated status, a Vaiṣṇava will observe some regulations in worship for the purpose of teaching persons less advanced.

[←159]

The priest's humility is implied by his not showing any pride for having been the recipient of special attentions by the Lord in the form of a dream.



[←160]

Friedhelm Hardy suggests 1420-1490 as plausible dates for Mādhavendra Purī. See Hardy's article, pp. 23-41, for a careful analysis of the verse quoted below. Friedhelm Hardy, "Mādhavendra Purī: A Link Between Bengal Vaiṣṇavism and South Indian Bhakti," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1974).

[←161]

Vipralambha: lit., “deception, disappointment; separation of lovers; disunion, disjunction.” Viraha: lit., “abandonment, desertion, parting, separation (esp. of lovers), absence from, lack, want” (Monier-Williams).

[←162]

ayi dīna-dayārdra nātha he / mathurā-nātha kadāvalokyase / hṛdayaṁ tvad-aloka-  
kātaṛaṁ / dayita bhrāmyati kiṁ karomy aham (Caitanya-caritāmṛta Āntya-līlā 8.35).

This story begins with Caitanya meeting the young Gopāla Bhaṭṭa during his travels in south India. Becoming Caitanya's follower, he undertook to fulfill his guru's instructions to make the long and arduous trek to the source of the Kali Gandaki River in the Himālayas, on the border of presentday Nepal and Tibet; from there he should bring back several śālagrāma stones – round black stones revered by Vaiṣṇavas as images of Viṣṇu – to join the other Gosvāmīs in Vṛndāvana and practice the daily rituals of worship prescribed for such aniconic forms.

This Gopāla Bhaṭṭa did for several years, waiting for the fulfillment of Caitanya's promise to him that eventually he would receive his (Caitanya's) darśana until one morning in the Spring of 1542. The night before, Gopāla Bhaṭṭa is said to have lost consciousness while lamenting his unworthiness to see Kṛṣṇa directly, despite all his efforts to worship him with devotion and proper rituals. The next morning he awoke, to notice the lid of the basket in which he kept the śālagrāmas hanging overnight askew, and thought that a snake might have entered the basket. Failing to nudge the lid closed with a stick he opened it to find, in place of the stones, a beautiful eleven and one-eighth inch tall image of Kṛṣṇa in his famous triple-bent pose playing a flute and with the distinct marks of one of the śālagrāma stones embedded in his shoulder – a svayam-vyakta, or 'self-manifest' image. This is the only arcā-mūrti of Kṛṣṇa among those of the Six Gosvāmīs which has not been removed from Vṛndāvana to other towns outside Vraja (mainly eventually to Jaipur, Rājasthān) out of fear of Muslim attack. Rādhāramaṇa's worship continues today (in a temple built in 1826), much according to the same standards established by Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī (Entwistle, 79, 185-86, 413).

[←164]

This narrative is found in the Bengali work Caitanya-bhāgavata of Vṛndāvanadāsa, Ādi-khaṇḍa, fifth chapter.

[←165]

Women, according to some scriptural injunctions, should offer obeisance by kneeling, with the head touching the floor.

[←166]

ātmārāmāś ca munayo / nirgranthā apy urukrame / kurvanty ahaitukīṁ bhaktiṁ /  
ittham-bhūta-guno hariḥ (Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam 1.7.10, quoted in Caitanya-caritāmṛta  
Madhya-līlā 6.186)

[←167]

Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya-līlā 6.237.



[←168]

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “monotheism” first appears in 1660. My thanks to Francis X. Clooney S.J. for pointing this out to me. See J. Z. Smith (271, 276) on the term “idolatry” as an early (17th c.) anthropological classification for all religion other than Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

[←169]

Neville 2001b, 149-59. “Religious truth” was employed by the Comparative Religious Ideas Project at Boston University, conducted from 1995 to 1999 under the direction of Robert Cummings Neville, as the final of three major “vague categories” for comparison after extensive discussion among the Project’s participants (Neville 2001a: Chs. 8 & 9; 2001b: xvi-xvii).

[←170]

Halbertal & Margalit, 22-23. However, as Yehezkel Kaufmann notes in *The Religion of Israel*, although Isaiah, like the other prophets, does not consider idolatry a sin for other nations, “he envisages a time when the nations will forsake idolatry and cleave to the God of Israel.” And indeed, Kaufmann observes, there is a complete reversal of attitude in Second Temple times from what prevails during the First Temple, from Israel being a “terra incognita to the outsider” to it becoming a hub of mission to eradicate idolatry and paganism from the world.

[←171]

Yehezkel Kaufmann notes that “though some sin of idolatry is found among the people, the people as a whole never apostatize,” rather, all are considered answerable for the sins of a few. For example, the sin of worshiping the golden calf is considered the sin of the whole people, although only a small minority are said to have been punished for it (Kaufmann 230). The novelty of the Sinaitic covenant was its being given to an entire people through one person, the prophet Moses. Hence “[a]ll the laws of the Torah are given to the nation, and the nation as a whole is answerable for their violation” (234). This perspective makes particularly intriguing the fact that the metaphor of adultery is so much used to describe idolatry: Adultery involves a breach of faith between two individuals, but in connection with idolatry the idea is being applied to one individual and a nation. Thus the nation becomes identified as an individual person (and perhaps one step further, personhood becomes redefined as something which exists only as a collectivity).

[←172]

Halbertal & Margalit, 16, quoting Ezekiel 16:15-26, 28-34.

[←173]

Ibid., 30. The authors note that the biblical equation of idolatry and adultery worked as long as adultery was understood to be such a grave moral offense. In modern society the relatively relaxed attitude toward adultery results in the “fading of the metaphor.”

[←174]

Ibid., 18-20. As the authors explain, the reconciliation between God and Israel involves extensions and transmutations of the marriage-adultery metaphor.

[←175]

This and other Sanskrit verses, unless otherwise noted, are my own translations.



[←176]

There is a parallel between this form / formlessness tension and the “finite/ infinite” dichotomy which Robert Cummings Neville discusses in his book *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). In his theological analysis of symbol, he sees images or symbols as border-limits or boundary-markers between the finite and infinite which mediate between the two (p. 69). When they fail to accurately mark that boundary, symbols become idolatrous: “Religious symbols can be false by being idolatrous, that is, identifying their referent with the meaning of some finite, non-divine, or profane thing and not indicating how the meaning does not apply quite adequately” (p. 20).

[←177]

This “greatest identity” is, however, not to be misconstrued as ontological identity, which would utterly contradict Vaiṣṇava assertion of the jīva’s eternally distinction as servant of the Lord.

[←178]

Kaufmann, 35.

[←179]

Halbertal and Margalit, 69. The authors cite Yehezkel Kaufman as the source for these distinctions. Along with Ernst Renan and Henri Frankfort, he considers myth “a form of expression unique to paganism.” The authors consider whether this is a fair assessment, or whether the Bible is not itself myth, generally concluding that whether or not he has given the best definition of myth, he “has indeed put his finger on an essential difference between the two worlds, and this difference exists even if it is not analogous to the difference between mythological and nonmythological literature” (p. 71). The authors go on to qualify their own view that the God of the Bible is characterized more by personhood than absolute will, which involves him in “emotional interdependency” “in a complex relationship with the world and gives the biblical story a mythic dimension even in Kaufmann’s own terms. . . . The dependency we have identified is like a person’s dependency on his beloved, or upon prior obligations” (p. 73).

[←180]

Halbertal and Margalit, 79.

[←181]

This is not to ignore the vast differences in the way scripture is conceived in both traditions, beginning with the Jewish emphasis on the written text versus the Indic attention to the spoken or chanted text. See Barbara A. Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). There is important similarity simply in that both traditions identify themselves largely in terms of their respective scriptures, which hold positions of some kind of absolute authority.

[←182]

The Six Gosvāmīs of Vṛndāvana put particular emphasis on scriptural authority in this regard, possibly in response to perceived improprieties at the time. Rūpa Gosvāmī warns in *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* (1.2.101) that devotional service which does not conform to the injunctions of all the various canonical scriptures (śruti-smṛti-purāṇādi pañcarātra-vidhim) is simple a public calamity (utpāta eva), a disturbance of social order.

[←183]

William Deadwyler explains that this identity between word and object “constitutes an immediacy of apprehension for which the term literal hardly serves,” whereby it becomes possible to consider the literal meaning of terms as valid only when they apply to God. “Our worldly experience does not reveal to us the literal meaning. God and the kingdom of God, after all, constitute the real and original world, while this world is its imitation and reflection. Yet God is able to manifest himself within this world in the form of words and images, and by concentrating one’s mind and senses on the words that describe God and on the images that depict God, the mind and senses gradually become purified, and then one can at last apprehend the literal meaning” (Deadwyler, 86-87).



[←184]

As suggested in a previously quoted verse from Padma Purāṇa, even the water which has bathed the image is afterward served as caraṇāmṛta, or the “ambrosia from the feet of the Lord”. What is insignificant in this world becomes most significant and sanctifying in the transcendent realm.

[←185]

Brahma-saṁhitā 5.56.

[←186]

The Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theologians have articulated an elaborate doctrine of equivalency between the earthly Vraja identifiable in present-day India and a celestial Vraja, also known as Goloka or Goloka-Vṛndāvana, whereby the earthly Vraja can yield direct access to the celestial Vraja for one who is properly qualified by a pure heart.

[←187]

Caitanya-caritāmṛta Ādi-līlā 7.20-21.

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Works Consulted

The following works quoted in the text have been accessed  
through the Bhaktivedanta Vedabase CD-ROM (see above):

Sanskrit Texts

About the Author