

Re-Visioning ISKCON: Constructive Theologizing for Reform and Renewal

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Since the demise of its charismatic founder in 1977, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) has faced a growing institutional disaffection among its initiated membership. In outreach, if results are judged quantitatively, a slackening of missionary fervor has failed to attract new recruits to replenish the diminishing ranks of its full-time members. An official survey conducted in 1998 has found ISKCON's underlying problems to be largely sociological.¹ Rarely is the theology deemed suspect. It is regarded as sacrosanct, as if to tamper with it is to court disaster.

ISKCON's founder A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977), a disciplic successor to the 16th century ecstatic Sri Caitanya (1486-1534), emphasized clear literary sources and sub-continental enculturation to validate social change in the contemporary global order—a future he hoped to forge by legitimating a re-envisioned past. But any amalgam of past and present is never entirely homogenous. For a self-consciously traditional movement, fixed on the one hand by the mammoth literary canon of its founder, confronted on the other by the ever-changing conditions of time, place, and circumstance, consequent tensions are a natural outcome.

ISKCON's initial efforts within the counterculture and its reverse missionary endeavors in India and the Hindu diaspora are well documented, as is the post-charismatic turmoil that has beset its ranks. To date, however, this large body of social scientific research has at best exposed the strain of ISKCON's premodern appeal against modern realities and postmodern assumptions, stopping short of in-depth theological analysis and problem solving. This paper begins to fill the lacuna by identifying likely locations—flexible postulates and porous boundaries—hospitable to theological construction.

The authors, both active leaders within ISKCON and at the same time academics, feel a dual obligation, on the one hand to ISKCON, on the other to academe. Ideally, one finds in one's different affiliations a mutuality of interests and methods; practically, this is not always the case. As a work in progress meant to encourage dialogue within and between these two fields of discourse, the position advanced in this paper is at best exploratory, not advocacy. If ISKCON feels our probing too insistent, or if the academy feels we have held back and not dug deeply enough, we request each to recognize the constraints under which we operate and to appreciate that ours is indeed a delicate tightrope act.

The term 'theology,' despite its obvious Christian currency and in some ways perhaps because of it, has circulated widely enough now to defy sectarian limits and finds

¹ See Rochford 1998.

acceptance even amidst non-theisms: thus ‘Buddhist Theology.’² It should therefore come as no surprise that ISKCON’s founder Prabhupada, ever willing to adopt “skillful means,” also takes possession of the term to describe his theology.³

We, too, will theologize, but we will do so employing a long-respected Gaudiya Vaisnava hermeneutic that organizes theological inquiry into *pramana* [the means to acquire valid knowledge] and a three-fold *prameya* [the object of valid knowledge]: *sambandha* [relationship], *abhidheya* [process], and *prayojana* [motive or goal].⁴ Prabhupada’s explanatory translation to a defining Gaudiya text unpacks the terms’ essential meanings:

The Vedic literatures give information about the living entity’s eternal relationship with Kṛṣṇa, which is called *sambandha*. The living entity’s understanding of this relationship and his acting accordingly is called *abhidheya*. Returning home, back to Godhead, is the ultimate goal of life and is called *prayojana* (CC *Madhya-līlā* 20:124).⁵

The great advantage of this schema is the in-house confidence it has enjoyed from Sri Caitanya’s earliest theologians to his most recent exponents. The congeniality of a familiar system is obvious, particularly when for most traditions explicit doctrinal originality is regarded not as a virtue but as a deviation. Let us start by discussing *pramana*.

In contradistinction to the current aversion towards an absolute, ahistorical vocabulary of any sort, Gaudiya Vaisnavism insists upon the capacity of *valid* knowledge [*prama*] to reveal and circumscribe the true nature of an object as it actually is. For the Gaudiyas, *sabda* [from *sabd*, to sound] is revelation, not just verbal testimony, and is the only ultimate source of valid knowledge in which epistemological certainty resides. In addition to the Vedas and Upanisads, *sabda*’s divine status is extended to all of the tradition’s chosen texts. Jiva Gosvamin [1513-1598], the tradition’s pre-eminent theologian, lists ten *pramanas*, which he then collapses into three—*pratyaksa* [sense perception], *anumana* [inference], and *sabda*—before concluding that only the last, *sabda*, is independently reliable in revealing the absolute. Prabhupada follows Jiva.⁶

The Gaudiya tendency to diminish other *pramanas* like *pratyaksa* [sense perception] and *anumana* [inference] allows Prabhupada to make remarkably little allowance for modernity. His exegetical method, while clear and theological, above all, is literal. Applied to texts like the *Bhagavata Purana* (also known as the *Srimad Bhagavatam*), replete with detailed cosmographies and genealogical histories, he considers the intent of the original authors and the meaning for the believing community today to be

² For the rationale, see the essays, particularly those of Jackson, Cabezon, Gross, and Coreless in Jackson and Makransky 2000.

³ For Prabhupada’s use of the term, see his morning walk conversation with disciples June 26, 1975, Los Angeles.

⁴ *Pramana* and *prameya* are not specifically Gaudiya categories of investigation. “These are the three parts of all textual argument: What the matter of the discourse is (*sambandha*), what the argument will be, or the means of reaching the conclusion (*abhidheya*), and the resolution (*prayojana*)” (Dimock 1999, 640 n. 109). Though the term *abhidheya* normally conveys the meaning “what is signified,” Stuart Elkman notes that Jiva Gosvamin “qualifies the term with the expression *vidheyasaparyaya*, i.e. ‘in the sense of something to be performed’” (Jiva Gosvamin 1986b, 73 n. 2). According to MMW, *saparya* means “worship, homage, adoration;” specifically, *vidheya-saparyaya* is “worship, devotion, etc. that is to be performed.”

⁵ *veda-sastra kahe*—‘*sambandha*’, ‘*abhidheya*’, ‘*prayojana*’

‘*krsna*’—*prapya sambandha*, ‘*bhakti*’—*praptyera sadhana*

⁶ For Jiva Gosvamin, see Elkman 1986, 73. For Prabhupada, see his commentary to *Caitanya Caritamṛta* 2.6:135.

the same, with the conviction that the plain meaning discernible in the text *now* is what it was *then*. As an example, Prabhupada reads as inerrant the Puranic accounts of creation, without reducing them, either historically or culturally. Whatever there is in his exegesis of theological reflection, ritual performance, or moral obligation is not sufficiently sophisticated to impress those who decry his explications as naïve realism (an unsupportable one-to-one correspondence between depiction and reality)—though whether such judgment of any well-reasoned perception is fair may be seriously questioned.⁷

In ISKCON, literalism often is equated with intellectual chastity. Thus: “The members of ISKCON, who live perpetually at the feet of Srila Prabhupada, may speculate *how* Srila Prabhupada’s statements are true, but they may not challenge his statements, or claim that they are false. This is precisely what it means to accept Srila Prabhupada as the founder-*acarya*” (Hrdayananada 1996, viii). The author of this statement is paraphrasing an instruction he himself received from Prabhupada. Indeed, this view is the guiding ethos for VAST [Vaisnava Academic Studies], a moderated ISKCON Internet forum.

If ISKCON wishes to avoid the label of naïve realism, a number of strategies suggest themselves. One is to also acknowledge the strength of *pramanas* other than *sabda* in order to make conditional allowances for historically contingent, “relative” knowledge. Prabhupada himself shows that this may be done. While certainly favoring revelation over reason and perception, for audiences unfamiliar with the text tradition he makes ample use of logic and everyday examples. Further, following the lead of 19th century theologian Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838-1914),⁸ ISKCON can re-examine its traditional texts and re-appropriate them in ways consistent with modernity, discerning the symbolic through critical scholarship. As with Bhaktivinoda’s experiments, this would provide a new dimension to *sambandha*, the area to which we next move.

Sambandha’s connotative sense embraces numerous ontological categories. As well as the Godhead’s nature, the living being, and the world, *sambandha* signifies the action of the Godhead and the Godhead’s infinite energies as they relate with each other, a subject treated in a manner unique to this school under the axiomatic principle of *acintya-bhedābheda* [inconceivable simultaneous difference and identity].

To Bhaktivinoda, matters of phenomenal knowledge (i.e., Puranic history and cosmology) are particularly amenable to rational analysis, even if transcendence (i.e., Krishna, *bhakti*, etc.) is not. In his innovative *Krishna-samhita*, thousands of *yuga*-cycles of Prajapatis and Manus are compressed to conform to an Indian history of some 6,000 years complete with migrating Aryans, and Mogul and British rule. The same time frame is linked to a progressive intellectual history encompassing all major texts, assigning the *Bhagavata*, for example, to an anonymous 9th century Dravidian origin. Krishna and his abode’s supremacy are rationally established, his incarnations tied to human evolution, his *lila* framed within a discussion of the limitations of human language, and his destruction of demons related metaphorically to the removal of corresponding obstacles to devotion.

Whether a clearly 19th century Bengali *bhadralok* hermeneutic responding to historically and culturally specific assumptions is any longer appropriate is not the issue; that a person who is widely credited with inaugurating modern Gaudiya Vaisnavism makes

⁷ See Matilal 1986, 1.

⁸ For the most authoritative work on Bhaktivinoda, see Shukavak 1999.

every effort to accommodate modern intellectualism, is. More important than the particular hermeneutic is its motive and method. Similar progressive theologizing may be necessary if ISKCON is to embody Sri Caitanya's mood of magnanimity [*audarya*]. Unlike many of Bhaktivinoda's contemporaries who willingly sacrificed much about Krishna that offended them,⁹ revisionism along the lines Bhaktivinoda practiced need not be revolutionary. Moderate theologizing that harnesses "tradition as a modality of change" (Waldman 1986) can express fidelity and continuity with the past while forging connections to the present and future.

The status and role of women within ISKCON is an area to which this approach may be applied to great advantage. Normally a topic for the praxis-rich province of *abhidheya*, its problems may be traced to ontological confusions; hence, its placement under *sambandha*.

Some of Prabhupada's statements seem blatantly sexist, yet he opened his movement to women. Though offered fatherly affection by Prabhupada, women in the eyes of his male disciples were like Maya (the illusory energy)—both encoded female. Like Maya, they were seen as threatening to men's spiritual progress. Accorded initial equality by Prabhupada, women in ISKCON were gradually disenfranchised, tolerated more than welcomed. With disastrous consequences: their stigmatization affected ISKCON's social fabric to such an extent that at present, despite much conscious effort to right the situation, ISKCON has yet to recover.¹⁰

Kim Knott (1995) has problematised ISKCON's difficulties reconciling traditional models with modern realities, juxtaposing the theoretical gender equality of a soul-based theology in which the feminine divine Radha is the exemplar *par excellence* with *stri-dharma* [the duty of a woman] understood as three distinct levels of meaning within Prabhupada's teachings—*bhagavat-dharma* [divine duty], 'Vedic' *varnasrama-dharma* [ancient notion of duty based on orders and stages of life], and 'Hindu' *varnasrama-dharma* [its modern interpretation].

The multivalent weighting of the founder's statements has, and will continue to have a decisive bearing on ISKCON's history. If ISKCON is to be rid of residual sexism, a theology is needed that interprets his comments in the spirit of *bhagavat-dharma*, taking into account the hard realities of present life, even if in doing so the principles of *varnasrama-dharma* are set aside. The unfair sexual bias implied by the Maya narrative needs reworking to reflect the Gaudiya perspective of the feminine gender generic to all souls including those who are male-embodied. This would certainly be in keeping with the spirit of *bhakti* in pan-Indian religious history, as Fred Smith points out: "In Sanskrit grammar, *bhakti* is feminine, just as *yoga*, *dharma*, and *yajna* (sacrifice) are masculine. Not just grammatically, however, but substantially, did the rise of *bhakti*...redress the imbalance of the masculine and feminine forces in (official) Indian religion" (Smith 1998, 30).

Can our agenda be pushed further? A radical discontinuity with Gaudiya theology within the realm of *sambandha* might mean, for example, blurring the divide that separates

⁹ Few subjects seem to vex outside representations as Krishna does. Christian missionaries, Orientalists, Hindu reformers, the Krishna-Christ debaters, and figures such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee—the varying agendas of 19th and 20th century colonial discourse—all share a communal discomfort; see Haberman 1994.

¹⁰ For an overview of the history of women in ISKCON and their present status, see Visakha, et al, 2000.

personalists from impersonalists. Traditionally, Vaisnavism has defined itself over and against Advaita Vedanta. The Gaudiyas have framed their entire discussion of *sambandha* around explicating the nested tripartite model of ultimate reality as *brahman*, *paramatma*, and *bhagavan*. While maintaining that *bhagavan* alone is the full expression of this highest truth, under the school's axiomatic principle of *acintya-bhedabheda* [inconceivable difference and identity simultaneously], they can claim, much as Advaita Vedantists do, that reality is non-dual and one without equal [*advaya-jnana-tattva*].¹¹

Still, only faint praise is given *brahmavadins*, while *mayavadins* are censured with the harshest rhetoric.¹² Indeed, Prabhupada defines his mission in terms of their defeat.¹³ To be fair, the reverse is equally true: those adhering to the *advaita* viewpoint often depreciate the Vaisnavas. Impersonalists and Vaisnavas rarely perceive each other as fellow travelers, despite having much in common. For ISKCON, at times this has meant alienating many in its diasporic Indian congregation who feel confused if not deeply offended by what they perceive to be sectarian conflict in ISKCON's condemnation of revered persons, past and present, because of impersonal beliefs.

Can this rhetoric of exclusivity be toned down to move towards an internal pluralism? In the *Gita* (4:11), Krishna exemplifies a spirit of responsiveness: "As they surrender unto Me, I reward them accordingly."¹⁴ It should be possible to adjust the balance that presently favors difference over identity without sublating the unique realization either of the *jnanin* [*brahman*], the *yogin* [*paramatma*] or of the *bhakta* [*bhagavan*].¹⁵

Looking outside the Gaudiya tradition, apparently competing, extra-traditional views of the Godhead may be assessed in proportion to their fruitfulness to marshal numerous relational models of the Godhead, the living entities, and the world. Images of transcendence from beyond the tradition that resonate with Gaudiya theology could amplify the understanding of Krishna's multiple roles in Vrndavana as friend, son, and lover, and through his expansions and incarnations, in numerous other relationships, not the least as overseer *paramatma* of the bound *jiva*.¹⁶ Both outside and inside, the flexibility of ontological categories needs to be tested further if a theology of accommodation is to replace one of exclusion.

Within the tripartite schema of *sambandha-abhidheya-prajojana*, asymmetrical disjunctions between inherited tradition and actual contingency are most noticeable within the division of *abhidheya*—process or execution—to which we now turn. Here, *bhakti*, devotional practice, is the process leading to the ultimate goal of Krishna-*prema*. Over

¹¹ See *Srimad Bhagavatam* 1.2:11: *vadanti tat tattva-vidas tattvam yaj jnanam advayam | brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti sabdyate*||

¹² *Brahmavadins* recognize *bhagavan* but prefer *brahman* while *mayavadins* ultimately recognize only *brahman*. Examples of the former, before their meeting with *bhagavan* Narayana, are the four sages Sanat-kumara, Sanatana, Sanandana and Sanaka; see the *Bhagavata Purana* canto three, chapter fifteen. The followers of Samkara typify the latter.

¹³ Prabhupada composed an invocational prayer to himself for ISKCON's liturgy: "You are kindly preaching the message of Lord Caitanya and delivering the Western countries, which are filled with impersonalism and voidism [*nirvisesa-sunyavada*];" see Bhaktivedanta Book Trust 1974, 15.

¹⁴ *ye yatha mam prapadyante tams tathaiva bhajamy aham |*

¹⁵ For instances where Prabhupada emphasizes commonalities shared by the *jnanin*, *yogin*, and *bhakta*, see for example his lecture on SB 1.2:10 in Bombay, December 28, 1972, or his Bombay press interview on December 31, 1976.

¹⁶ For example, through a Christian, process hermeneutic, Sally McFague tests the notions of 'God as mother, lover, and friend of the world as God's body;' see McFague 1988.

centuries, *bhakti's* discursive formulations have massaged whatever traditional rigidities resisted the flux of contingency.

Bhakti receives detailed explication throughout the Gaudiya Vaisnava canon. Despite *bhakti's* inclusivist character, both its definition and eulogy emphasize transcendent efficacy and superiority: *bhakti* as a mode of living is thoroughly different from and independent of *karma*, *jnana*, and *yoga*, those orientations or practices otherwise typically celebrated in pan-'Hindu' texts.¹⁷ Rupa Gosvamin (1489-1564) and other systematizers following Sri Caitanya offer what they believe to be a comprehensive program of practice leading to spiritual perfection. Rupa's elaboration on *bhakti* begins with a sixty-four item list comprising "rule-governed practice" [*vaidhi-sadhana-bhakti*] followed by "attraction-governed practice" [*raganuga-sadhana-bhakti*]. These are followed in turn by matters pertaining to our third methodological category, the goal [*prayojana*]*—bhava-* and *prema-bhakti*.¹⁸

Flowing underneath Rupa Gosvamin's several categories and subcategories of Krishna-*bhakti* are two orientations, one "vertical," the other "horizontal" or "lateral." "Vertical *bhakti*" (O'Connell, unpublished) refers to all aspects of practice and attitude emphasizing hierarchy, the paradigmatic distinction being that of the Godhead Krishna and the *bhakta* (i.e., the Vaisnava practitioner as subordinated servant of Krishna). "Lateral *bhakti*" refers to not only the dimension of mutuality that characterizes devotional feelings between one *bhakta* and another but between the Godhead and the *bhakta*, wherein sweetness and proximity supercede majesty and distance. To date, ISKCON's missionary priorities, arguably, have made greater purchase on the vertical, hierarchical vector. An important constructive strategy would be the recovery of a neglected principle of balance and interdependence between these two modalities.

A point of departure is an often-quoted verse fragment from the revered 17th century Vaisnava poet Narottama Das: *Sadhu-sastra-guru bakya, hrdaye koriya aikya*, "making the statements of saintly persons, scripture, and preceptors unified within my heart [. . . may I attain prema]."¹⁹ Saintly persons, scripture, and preceptors comprise the body of authority we are referring to here as tradition. Emphasizing the vertical principle of authority, ISKCON members often inadvertently distance themselves from Narottama Das' verse, failing to recognize that the living practitioner, as a recipient of tradition, is the implied "final arbiter" between these three representatives of traditional authority. Indeed, the practitioner is not simply a passive recipient of tradition; rather, through active engagement, she or he participates in and inevitably reinvents tradition. When examining these three sources of authority in terms of lateral reciprocity, the role of the practitioner is of crucial importance on the vertical/lateral grid.

Such an exercise might best begin with the last of the aforementioned three authorities, the guru.²⁰ Gaudiya Vaisnava literature abounds in narratives and explications

¹⁷ Paul Griffiths' discussion on 'comprehensiveness,' 'insurpassability,' and 'centrality' as phenomenal characteristics of all religious accounts offers a useful framework for understanding the Vaisnava concern to establish *bhakti's* preeminence within their system of practice; see Griffiths 1999, 3-13.

¹⁸ For Rupa Gosvamin's classic treatise on *bhakti*, see Bhakti Hridaya Bon 1965 and Prabhupada's summary study (1982).

¹⁹ The verse appears in a song from the collection entitled *Prema Bhakti-candrika*; see translation of Bhumipati dasa.

²⁰ "Last" in order of mention though not in order of importance based on the Mimamsa rule that weights a later statement.

about guru-disciple relations that emphasize the guru's authoritative position. Scriptural lessons instruct a disciple to regard him or herself as a veritable fool in the presence of the guru, who is to be seen and worshipped as a direct manifestation of the Supreme Lord, Krishna.²¹ Obviously, such a theology is open to potential abuse, as ISKCON experienced after Prabhupada's demise. The excesses of the hierarchical model of guruship victimized many of the successor gurus and their followers. Yet a careful study of Gaudiya literature also reveals a counter-narrative of intimacy and collegial reciprocity which nuances the hierarchical emphasis. Arjuna, for example, reminds readers of the *Bhagavad-gita* of his intimate relationship to Krishna even as he begs pardon for any indiscretions before Krishna's Virat-rupa (universal form).²² In Krsnadas' *Caitanya-caritamrta*, Sri Caitanya receives instruction from Ramananda Raya, who otherwise serves as Caitanya's follower if not disciple.²³

If, as Gaudiya Vaisnavism claims, the relationship between guru and disciple in some ways replicates that of the *bhakta* and Krishna, one would expect to see in it a parallel dynamic of reciprocity based on de-emphasizing vertical polarity. As suggested earlier, a notable Gaudiya strategy is to undercut divine majesty to make way for unrestrained intimacy between the Lord and his associates. Similarly, the guru, to further a disciple's understanding of and participation in Krishna's intimate pastimes, may subdue his own authority in favor of cooperative reciprocity, thus encouraging the disciple to think and act as a *partner* in the mutual pursuit of spiritual perfection.

An important consequence of this element of partnership in the traditional master-servant model would be a deeper sense of spiritual community. Hierarchy emphasizes exclusionary relationships: identification with one's guru to the exclusion of collegial relations (with *all* spiritual aspirants, Vaisnava or otherwise), results in sectarianism. Within the guru-disciple relationship, tempering hierarchy with communality would develop a much-needed mutuality among fellow practitioners in ever-widening circles of participation.

Participation is central to the Gaudiya Vaisnava account of *bhakti*. Karen Prentiss in her recent book *The Embodiment of Bhakti* argues that *bhakti* is most fully understood to be "a theology of participation in God and the ability to reach God (Prentiss, 27)." Participation suggests reciprocity, the idea of exchange or sharing contained in *bhakti*'s verbal root—*bhaj*. What is further implied is a 'cybernetic' principle of *appropriateness of response*—a sensitivity to immediate circumstance—in other words, the pragmatic dimension of *bhakti*. Openness and flexibility in interpretation permits the revelatory basis of the tradition to remain susceptible to contemporary experience, to coalesce as a crystallized conviction within each practitioner's heart.

Looking at Narottama Das's second source of traditional authority—the *sadhu*—through a *Bhagavata Purana* definition, one finds virtues that deny any specific cultural identity. One who exhibits tolerance, mercy, friendliness to all, peacefulness, and is without enemies is a *sadhu* (Bhag. 3.25.21). This suggests that persons beyond those accepted customarily as *sadhus* in India deserve to be considered as such. This non-sectarian reckoning obliges Gaudiya Vaisnavas to acknowledge and welcome a wide range of

²¹ See *Caitanya-caritamrta* 1 chap. 1. For a discussion of the oneness and difference of the Supreme and the guru as it relates specifically to ISKCON, see Hridayananda 2000.

²² *BG* 11: 41, 42.

²³ *CC* 2 chap. 8.

persons as genuine spiritual participants from whom wisdom may be gleaned.²⁴ But what of their spiritual practices? Must these fall within Rupa Goswamin's 64 categories to be accepted as *bhakti*? Perhaps not. Gaudiya practices centered on chanting names of God, hearing and recitation of devotional texts, and worship of divine images need to be reexamined in the context of a broader spectrum of practitioners.

To the objections that our proposed reassessment of guru and *sadhu* will wither before the stipulations of Narottama Das' third source of authority, namely, *sastra*, our basic claim is that interpreting scripture is a perpetual process of reappraisal by the reader or hearer. Practitioners must admit this openly for tradition to serve a vital, liberating function in their lives. That for the disciple the guru is the central interpreter and that *sadhus* are secondary interpreters cannot obscure the fact that the "end user," the practitioner, is the final interpreter.²⁵ As "Protestant" as this may sound, it simply recognizes that although scripture maintains boundary structures to delimit those qualified to interpret, the very nature of print culture and mass distribution democratizes the system.

The hermeneutical circle or interpretative horizon of scripture for modern readers has exploded out into the entire range of presently available texts drawn from an ever-increasing spectrum of religious and secular traditions. Canonical works can no longer enjoy the seeming autonomy they once had, nor are they impervious to scrutiny from outside readers. The top-down, 'vertical' process of receiving spiritual truth from infallible scripture is now, more than ever before, faced with the pervasive presence of a multiplicity of voices which ever challenge the privileged position of any one of them.

Sri Caitanya is remembered best perhaps as one constantly given to ecstatic states, absorbed in Krishna-*prema* [love of Krishna]. This, after all, is the *prayojana*, the motive or goal to which Gaudiya Vaisnavas aspire, and the final division of our study. Much of the Gaudiya prescriptive as well as narrative literature conduces to bring about *prema*, the ripened fruit of *bhakti*. Liberation is conceived not as the non-dual union of Advaita Vedanta but in terms of active *seva* [cherished service] in relation to the Godhead, ideally, an intimate reciprocity between the *sevyā* and the *sevaka*—Krishna and his devotee.

While love for Krishna (*prema*) remains the tradition's normative goal, its achievement is open to question. Since the passing away of ISKCON's founder, its members often appear uncertain, in practice if not in theory, about the basis of attaining Krishna and about how to recognize such love once it manifests. The texts abound in theory, and narrative exemplars are plentiful enough. The confusion arises largely from the importance the founder, Prabhupada, gave to his mission and to his stress upon "rule-governed practice" [*vaidhi-sadhana-bhakti*] rather than "attraction-governed practice" [*raganuga-sadhana-bhakti*]. This latter emphasis, though in apparent contradistinction to previous preceptors, closely parallels that given by his own guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati [1874-1937].²⁶

²⁴ This ethos shaped ISKCON's official statement on its relationship with "people of faith in God;" see Saunaka Rsi 1999, 1-9.

²⁵ Madhva's notion of the "inner witness," or arbiter of all experience, deserves investigation in this regard; see Lott 1980, 11, 91-92.

²⁶ Shukavak Dasa raises the question whether an ISKCON more concerned with the exoteric mode embodied in *vaidhi-sadhana-bhakti* can in fact offer the esoteric depth of *raganuga-bhakti-sadhana* for which the tradition is principally known; see Shukavak 1998.

In framing the problem, polarities suggest themselves: Is Krishna consciousness a state of internal ecstasy or manifest missionary enthusiasm? If the latter, did Prabhupada alter the traditional understanding of *prayojana*, or did he act in fulfillment of Sri Caitanya's mission by his emphasizing proselytizing more than the practice of *raga*? Stated in another way, in a tradition that views *bhakti* both as its means and end, to what extent are the words "Back to Godhead" (the title of ISKCON's monthly magazine) world affirming or world denying? Evolving theological constructs that replace this either/or dichotomy with a both/and synthesis would demonstrate that these seemingly competing moods are in fact outward and inward expressions of the same Krishna consciousness, reflecting the esoteric and exoteric nature of Sri Caitanya's own appearance.

One might begin by justifying Prabhupada's sacralization of a broad range of missionary endeavors as *sankirtana*—the celebrated glorification of the Lord. Beyond the public chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra popularized by Sri Caitanya, Prabhupada exploited diverse resources to publicize Krishna's glories, at the same time promising that all such efforts are a powerful, transformative force, purifying the consciousness and enabling one gradually to come face to face with God.

One might continue to theologize by suggesting that with the advance of Kali-*yuga*, the present age of degradation, a more contemplative mood now appears inadequate and difficult. Few are prepared to renounce the world and those who are not lack the purity to stay in it. The solution? *Sankirtana*, taking part in Sri Caitanya's mission, which compensates for all personal insufficiencies by attracting Krishna's special mercy. Does Krishna not state in the *Gita* 18:69 that those who preach his message are the most dear to him?

While such facile theologizing may be textually and pragmatically legitimized, it easily can (and has) spawned disquieting modalities: e.g., "mission as warfare," and the no less savory, "mission as business." Devotees transform into soldiers, temples into arsenals, stockpiling caches of time-bombs (cases of books), zealously deployed at airports amidst unsuspecting souls—the result: "Hare Krishna Explosion!"²⁷ Similar mercantile metaphors can easily be derived.²⁸ Its leadership scandalized, its population decimated, and a whole generation of Krishna-kids feeling forlorn as parents trooped off to fight battle after battle, much in ISKCON needs fixing.

If within the realm of *prayojana* mission is to retain the premier status Prabhupada assigned it, "compassion" will have to replace "warfare" as the appropriate modality as the members of both ISKCON and those of mainstream society increasingly integrate. Prabhupada writes:

One who is interested in his own salvation is not as advanced in Krishna consciousness as one who feels compassion for others and who therefore propagates the Krishna consciousness movement. Such an advanced devotee will never fall down for Krishna will give him special protection.²⁹

Brahmins are especially dear to Krishna. Will he not be pleased if ISKCON members exchange brahmanic compassion for a past aggressive militancy and mercantile acquisitiveness? For this to happen, proselytization will need to be balanced with more

²⁷ See the title of Hayagriva 1985.

²⁸ For an analysis of ISKCON's changing missionary strategies in relation to its economy, see Rochford 1985.

²⁹ See the commentary to Srimad Bhagavatam 6.2:36.

contemplative practices. Rupa Gosvamin emphasizes five items that are most potent: residence in Mathura-Vrindaban, divine image worship, recitation and hearing of the *Bhagavata*, chanting of the holy names, and service to exalted Vaisnavas. With the turn inwards, attraction [*raga*] more than rules [*vidhi*] gradually will govern personal development.

These changes are taking place already. Seminars offered to devotees during the past decade have largely centered upon missionizing ethics, personal lifestyle, and individual realization, indicating an unquestionable shift from quantitative to qualitative evaluation.³⁰ Conferences on women, on youth, and on family are signs of social maturation, as much as the refreshingly honest and open *ISKCON Communications Journal*, now in its tenth year of publication, forecasts an increasingly healthy intellectual muscularity. And another sign of change: the transition from monastic ashram life to private households that has characterized ISKCON demographics since the founder's demise has not necessarily been a move away from contemplative life. Instead, sacred space is increasingly defined in terms of the individual/familial rather than communal/collective. Unable to worship daily at the temple due to work and, consequently, with less institutional pressures, individuals are free to pursue their own perfection, which now most often occurs in the context of family life.³¹ A profusion of newly published titles—many of them translations into English from the standard Gaudiya corpus—now support the cultivation of *raganuga-sadhana-bhakti*. Devotional biographies of recently deceased ISKCON Vaisnavas hint at their attainment of *Krishna-prema*.³² All these developments indicate the dichotomous questions noted earlier are being resolved naturally—even while a theology that endorses the solutions is yet to be articulated officially.

This paper, an attempt to suggest the directions such theologizing might take, lays the groundwork by organizing inquiry along the divisions of *sambandha*, *abhidheya*, and *prayojana*. Their usefulness here leads us to recommend them as investigative categories for other Hinduisms and beyond. The authors have explored as a possibility an open-ended, gender equal, less culturally specific, and less hierarchical theological model that attempts to engage diverse theological communities and to serve as a comparative frame for other Hinduisms while retaining a Vaisnava *bhakti* outlook. In doing so, we have taken for granted a plurality of religious perspectives as a healthy, commonplace fact of life. ISKCON members clearly are obliged to recognize and interact with a field of ideas and worldviews much broader than pre-modern Gaudiya Vaisnavas ever encountered. If they continue to equate literalism with intellectual chastity, if they hesitate to contextualize and properly interpret the words of their founder, there will be little room for acknowledging and welcoming this multiplicity of voices in the pursuit of a wider spiritual community. We believe that the principle of balancing what we referred to as 'lateral' and 'vertical' coordinates can and must be extended beyond present devotional relationships if ISKCON members are to recognize their responsibility to themselves and to the tradition they hope to represent.

³⁰ Seminars are held occasionally in various ISKCON centers and annually in Mayapur and Vrindaban, India, Gita Nagari in Pennsylvania, and Radhadesh in Belgium.

³¹ See Rochford 1995 and 1998, as well as personal correspondence with Tamal Krishna Goswami on 27 August 2001.

³² See for example Bhakti Balabh Puri Goswami 2001.

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