ISKCON COMMUNICATIONS JOURNAL

VOLUME 12 • 2021

ISKCON
COMMUNICATIONS
JOURNAL

PUBLISHER
ISKCON Communications Europe asbl

EXECUTIVE EDITOR
Mahāprabhu Dāsa

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ADVISORY BOARD
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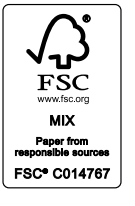
COVER DESIGN
Māyāpriya Devī Dāsī (bookwrights.com)

LAYOUT
Rūpa Sanātana Dāsa

SUBSCRIPTIONS & SALES
Bhaktivedanta Library Services asbl (See page 158.)

Digital back issues of ICJ are available at
content.iskcon.org & iskconcommunications.org



ISSN 1358–3867

ISKCON COMMUNICATIONS JOURNAL

VOLUME 12 • 2021

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS
Founder-*Ācārya:* His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda

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BOOK REVIEW

Foreword

I am pleased to see, after a fifteen-year hiatus,[1] this first issue of the revamped *ISKCON Communications Journal*. I congratulate Śrīmān Mahāprabhu Dāsa, the Director of ISKCON Communications Europe and the journal's driving force. I am grateful to him and his devoted, professional team.

Our ISKCON Communications Ministry operates on two truths: that we, as a global Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava religious tradition and community, have much *to offer* the world and much *to learn from* the world. Promoting this dialogue is largely the journal's purpose, so it makes a significant contribution to ISKCON's mission.

Serving as the Global Minister of Communications for twenty-some years, I've learned that I am at my personal best not only when I espouse the superexcellent stature of Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa but also when I try to hear His voice in the words of others. When I listen to and interact with others in this frame of mind, opportunities abound and partnerships flourish.

My dear friend the Reverend Doctor Kenneth Cracknell tells of his experience as a young Methodist minister, sent to Africa to share the message of Christ. As a missionary, his mind was filled with inspiring images of bringing God to a forgotten people. Upon his arrival in Africa — seeing the joyful spirituality of the people — he recognized, to his surprise, that God was already there. Indeed, he was there long before Reverend Cracknell.

That story should resonate with all Vaiṣṇavas. As humble servants of the Lord (and His servants), we are meant to share our truth with humility — as eager to learn as we are to teach. This was ordered by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, the sixteenth-century saint and avatar: "Be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige, and ready to offer all respect to others" (*Śrī Śrī Śikṣāṣṭakam* 3). Part of that humility is realizing that ISKCON and its members are a work in progress.

In a letter to a disciple, Śrīla Prabhupāda succinctly said: "If you make some of the big government officials interested in our movement, then our strength will increase. Because we are in the material world, sometimes we require that help" (letter to Tejīyas, 15 August 1973). Gaining such help is one purpose the journal serves.

Since Śrīla Prabhupāda founded ISKCON in 1966, it has achieved many things. It has hundreds of beautiful temples; active and growing congregations; half a billion books and magazines in print; the largest vegetarian food-relief program worldwide; networks of ecovillages and restaurants. Moreover, ISKCON has hosted heads of state; dialogued with imams; met popes; created museums of sacred art and award-winning films; held festivals and parades for tens of thousands in Los Angeles, New York, London, Durban, Kolkata, and many more cities. On Kṛṣṇa's Janmāṣṭamī festival, some ISKCON temples alone host several hundred thousand worshipers. These achievements make every ISKCON member proud.

Yet ISKCON has faced challenges — some minor, some severe. This journal helped ISKCON navigate through those difficult times by serving as an instrument of self-reflection. Past issues carried the voices of Catholic archbishops and Protestant ministers; professors of sociology and history; leaders of organizations that protect new religious movements and leaders of organizations that fight the abuses of cults; women's advocates; children's advocates; ISKCON's governing body members; communication specialists and more. Articles have scolded ISKCON to study its own history, enlightened ISKCON about its tradition's teachers and reformers, encouraged ISKCON with insights on its progress, and shocked ISKCON with reports of child abuse within its own schools and communities.

This revived journal will continue to discuss ISKCON's growth and its hopes and shortcomings. From its pages, readers will better understand ISKCON's role as a global Vaiṣṇava society and its potential to uplift people worldwide. I believe that ISKCON's future is bright — *if* we keep shining the lights of self-reflection, self-assessment, and self-improvement.

In "The Seven Purposes of ISKCON," Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote that ISKCON's first purpose is "To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values

in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world." That's a lofty goal, and one we ISKCON members should not shrink from. Such an inspired mission cannot be achieved without continuously and honestly examining ourselves. We need to better understand what we have to offer the world and what we need to learn from it. By continuing to promote that needed introspection and dialogue, *ISKCON Communications Journal* will help us fulfill the monumental ambitions that Śrīla Prabhupāda placed before us.

Anuttama Dāsa
Global Minister of ISKCON Communications

NOTES

1 The *ISKCON Communications Journal* (ICJ) was published from 1993–2005 under the direction of Shaunaka Rishi Das, at that time the director of ISKCON Communications Europe. He moved on when he needed to serve exclusively as the executive director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. Later, the journal morphed into the *ISKCON Studies Journal* (ISJ), from May 2009 (Volume One) to September 2014 (Volume Two). Owing to a lack of focus, perhaps, and our energies going elsewhere, ISJ ceased to continue after those two issues. The Communications Ministry made it a priority to relaunch ICJ. Thus it is gratifying to see this issue.

Preface

It is with great joy, humility, and excitement that I again present the *ISKCON Communications Journal* (ICJ). The last issue was published sixteen years ago, in 2005. The ICJ was and hopefully will be again an important voice for ISKCON and the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, which the Hare Krishna movement represents and embraces.

For a little more than a decade, the ICJ covered topics and issues that were crucial in ISKCON.

Bi-annual issues appeared from 1993–99, and five issues between 2000–05. All nineteen back issues can be found online at content.iskcon.org & iskconcommunications.org. Shaunaka Rishi Das and Lāl Kṛṣṇa Dāsa were instrumental in the first run of the journal. Thanks to their vision and perseverance, scholars from within and outside ISKCON addressed dozens of important issues and challenges, along with some crises that ISKCON faced. I am grateful and indebted to both of them for dedicating many years to the ICJ and to Shaunaka for his continuous support and encouragement to revive the ICJ.

These twenty articles are some of the past highlights:

"Religion and Modern Rationalism"
by Richard Thompson
Vol. 1, No. 2, 1994

"Leadership: The Supreme Management Skill"
by Sefton Davies
Vol. 3, No. 1, 1995

"Congregational Development in ISKCON"
by Kṛpāmoya Dāsa
Vol. 3, No. 1, 1995

"ISKCON's Response to Child Abuse: 1990–98"
by Bhārata-śreṣṭha Dāsa
Vol. 6, No. 1, 1998

"Why Should ISKCON Study its Own History?"
by Thomas J. Hopkins
Vol. 6, No. 2, 1998 and addendum in Vol. 7, No. 1, 1999

"Fundamental Human Rights in ISKCON"
by Rādhā-devī Dāsī
Vol. 6, No. 2, 1998

"ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God"
by Shaunaka Rishi Das
Vol. 7, No. 1, 1999

"For Whom Does Hinduism Speak?"
by Hṛdayānanda dāsa Goswami
Vol. 7, No. 1, 1999

"Pillars of Success: The Principles and Practices of Reform in ISKCON"
by Ravīndra Svarūpa Dāsa
Vol. 7, No. 2, 1999

"A Personal Reflection on Virtue and Values in the Kṛṣṇa Consciousness Movement"
by Śeṣa Dāsa
Vol. 10, 2002

"Dealing with Difference: A Catholic Point of View"
by Felix A. Machado
Vol. 11, 2005

"Editing the Unchangeable Truth: An Overview of the Editorial History of the Books of His Divine

Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda"
by Jayādvaita Swami
Vol. 11, 2005

The ICJ is returning to continue this sort of work, begun almost thirty years ago. While the ICJ was discontinued, ISKCON Communications in Europe has never stopped working on behalf of ISKCON. It put energy into organizing annual conferences at ISKCON's European temples and celebrated ISKCON's fiftieth anniversary in 2016.

This first issue of the revived, revamped ICJ addresses timely, important topics: interfaith dialogue, the empirical study of consciousness, environmental priorities, the welfare of cows, the benefits of ethics and moral philosophy, and relations between ISKCON and the Gaudiya Maths.

In forthcoming issues, we will publish articles on various forms of interfaith dialogue, ISKCON's stance on obstacles to religious freedom, and ISKCON's positions on contemporary ethical matters, such as environmental challenges. ICJ would also like to continue to address various forms of abuse (domestic, pastoral, etc.), the diverse approaches to sexuality among ISKCON followers, and ways to reconcile controversial statements in Śrīla Prabhupāda's writings. ICJ remains committed to presenting articles on a range of scientific topics and Vaiṣṇava philosophical thought. In this way, we hope that ICJ will serve both the ISKCON community and the larger society with whom we share interests and concerns. Our audience includes academics, the media, Hindu organizations and other faith communities, and political leaders and decision makers and more. ICJ will appear every year.

We recently formed a highly qualified advisory board to guide ICJ's course into the future: Kṛṣṇa Kṣetra Swami, Rāsamaṇḍala Dāsa, Shaunaka Rishi Das, Rādhika Ramaṇa Dāsa, and Gopīnāthācārya Dāsa.

I would like to thank Anuttama Dāsa, the Global Minister of ISKCON Communications, for his encouragement to revive the ICJ, an important voice in ISKCON; the worldwide team of ten regional directors of ISKCON Communications, who meet weekly in cyberspace and discuss topics that need to be addressed at conferences and in our journal; the expert and patient editors, Tattvavit Dāsa

and Rūpa Sanātana Dāsa (who also does the layout); the professional Māyāpriya Devī Dāsī for the new cover; Viṣṇu Mūrti Dāsa and Lakṣmīpriyā Devī Dāsī for agreeing to distribute the ICJ; and, of course, the contributing writers for this issue: Anuttama Dāsa, Gerald T. Carney, Akhaṇḍadi Dāsa, Ravi M. Gupta, Kenneth R. Valpey, Rāsamaṇḍala Dāsa, Ferdinando Sardella, and Tattvavit Dāsa.

We dedicate this first issue of the revived ICJ to Śrīla A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of his birth. We now practice Kṛṣṇa consciousness worldwide, thanks to his wisdom, vision, compassion, and dedication. He transplanted a profound spiritual tradition — Gauḍīya or Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism — by publishing a vast number of books and starting an international society of devotees of Kṛṣṇa.

Mahāprabhu Dāsa
Executive Editor &
Director of ISKCON Communications Europe

Vaiṣṇava-Christian Dialogue: A Model of Respect, Cooperation, and Learning

Anuttama Dāsa
ISKCON's Director of Communications

The sages of world-recognized religious sects who believe in God must come out of their secluded places and preach the science of God, the Supreme Will, to the people in general. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and the members of other sects that have convincing faith in the authority of God must not sit idly now and silently watch the rapid growth of a godless civilization. There is the supreme will of God, and no nation or society can live in peace and prosperity without acceptance of this vital truth.

A. C. BHAKTIVEDANTA SWAMI PRABHUPĀDA
LIGHT OF THE BHĀGAVATA [1]

We live in a multifaith world. In the distant past, mountain ranges, rivers, oceans and other natural boundaries limited religious interactions. More recently, national boundaries or ethnic and racial discrimination would keep diverse peoples separated. But in the last few decades, increased travel, immigration, modern communications, and the explosion of social media have practically forced us to acknowledge the religious "other."

At the same time, interactions between religious communities and the relations between them and governments, secular institutions, and other social bodies have not always been congenial, cooperative, or even peaceful. There have been a staggering number of recent conflicts based on or inflamed by religious differences and animosity. Quite often conflicts build on ignorance, misunderstanding, and negative projections of the other. Even in the United States, which has prided itself on religious freedom and the separation of church and state, there is growing polarization between religious communities, or between the religious and nonreligious.

It is my belief that interreligious conflicts can be minimized, if not mitigated, through dialogue. We have seen that even where strongly felt religious animosities are held (often intertwined with complex geopolitical conflicts), patient and respectful dialogues have led to mutual understanding among religious players, acceptance of the validity of other faith communities, and agreements to live peacefully with one another.[2] At less polarized levels of social tension or separation, dialogue has helped differing religious communities build mutual respect, reduce animosity, work on shared social issues, and increase tolerance and often outright appreciation between different sects.[3]

There is a tremendous need for religious individuals and communities—especially those that hold to a view of inclusiveness and mutual respect—to help increase understanding through interfaith, or interreligious, dialogue. To understand another person or group, and to overcome whatever distance, tension, and mistrust exist in any relationship, we must be willing to listen to each other. Dialogue begins with listening.

ISKCON members can and should play an important role in promoting and supporting dialogue wherever we are present in the world. Although I wrote this article to report on more than twenty years of Vaiṣṇava-Christian dialogue in the capital city of the United States, I also appeal to members of ISKCON to begin dialoguing. To do so promotes ISKCON's mission: "to achieve real unity and peace in the world" — and it enhances spiritual growth within ourselves and our communities.

ISKCON's founder-*ācārya,* His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, wrote the "Seven Purposes of ISKCON." The first is "To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world."[4] I consider these words a mandate for ISKCON members to actively promote understanding, unity, and peace. It is quite natural to do so, based on the inclusive theology, culture, and tradition we have received from our founder, previous teachers, and scriptures. At least some ISKCON members with sufficient maturity and interest can strive to systematically build relationships with people of other faiths, based on respect and a shared desire to know and serve God.

ISKCON's mission, in the simplest terms, is to "spread Kṛṣṇa consciousness." Often this is understood as bringing new people into the practice of the Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava faith. In short, to "make more devotees." This definition is too narrow. While we should not minimize the importance of engaging those in spiritual need in the practice of *kṛṣṇa-bhakti,* "spreading Kṛṣṇa consciousness" also necessitates spreading its principles. These include teaching about and promoting God's centrality; the four "pillars of religion": cleanliness, truthfulness, self-discipline (austerity), and mercy; humility; respect; protection of the vulnerable and the environment, and so on. Our mission is promoting the values that will help bring about the unity and peace that Śrīla Prabhupāda envisioned, even when that does not directly bring someone to the personal practice of *bhakti-yoga*.[5]

In this context, we should be clear that we do not expect all people to embrace our Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava faith. Even when Lord Kṛṣṇa appeared in the world some five thousand years ago, not everyone accepted His divinity. The same is true of Śrī Caitanya Mahaprābhu some five hundred years ago. All across the Vedic culture, there is diversity in understanding dharma.

Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava teachers have understood the reality of this diversity of faith. Śrīla Prabhupāda nicely touched on this topic in the quotation I cite at the beginning. Prabhupāda underscored his

respect for religious diversity in a lecture in 1969: "Everyone should follow the particular tradition or *sampradāya,* the regulative principles of your own religion. This is required as much as there are different political parties, although everyone is meant to serve one country."[6] There are multiple examples of this understanding from ISKCON's founder. My favorite one is when Śrīla Prabhupāda was asked (during a visit to Tehran in 1976) whether chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa is better than reciting the name of Allah, and he responded, "Why are you trying to make me sectarian?"[7]

Vaiṣṇava foundations for dialogue

> ISKCON members are encouraged to be respectful to people of faith from other traditions and to see the need for people of different faiths to work together for the benefit of society as a whole and for the glorification of God.
>
> — *ISKCON and Interfaith: ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God* [8]

While some people find differing religious scriptures, modes of worship, dress, and concepts of God to be sources of confusion, anxiety, fear, or resentment, a mature Vaiṣṇava responds differently, knowing that the urge to seek God is within every human being. It simply lies dormant or is differently expressed by various people and cultures. Vaiṣṇavas believe that all souls are eternal servants and lovers of God. We souls have just forgotten our spiritual identity. Human life is the opportunity to awaken our natural love of God. Religious systems vary, but at their core they seek the same outcome: reconnecting with the Divine.

Śrīla Prabhupāda explains this in his purport to the *Bhagavad-gītā* text 4.7, in the section of the *Gītā* wherein Lord Kṛṣṇa says that He comes to the world, time and again, to reestablish religious principles and benefit those who have forgotten Him. Prabhupāda comments:

> In each and every incarnation, the Lord speaks as much about religion as can be understood by the particular people under their particular circumstances. But the mission is the same — to lead people to God consciousness . . . Sometimes He descends personally, and sometimes He sends His bona fide representative in the form of His son, or servant, or Himself in some disguised form . . . Two plus two equals four is a mathematical principle that is true in the beginner's arithmetic class and in the advanced class as well. Still, there are higher and lower mathematics. In all incarnations of the Lord, therefore, the same principles are taught, but they appear to be higher and lower in varied circumstances.[9]

Understanding that core principles of faith are taught by various traditions in different ways is a source of inspiration to Vaiṣṇavas, and thus we seek opportunities for dialogue with others. We perceive dialogue as an opportunity to grow with those similarly inspired in a search for God.

Types of dialogue

> ISKCON views dialogue between its members and people of other faith as an opportunity to listen to others, to develop mutual understanding and mutual trust, and to share our commitment and faith with others, while respecting their commitment to their faith.[10]

The benefits of dialogue with open-minded men and women of faith, particularly in the Christian community though not exclusively with that community, are yielding tremendous benefits — practical and theological, social and psychological, cultural and intellectual. There are many types of valuable dialogue. Father Thomas Ryan, former Director of the Paulist Office for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, is a longtime partner in our Vaiṣṇava-Christian dialogue in Washington. He described these four types:

1 *The dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit;

2 *The dialogue of action*, where people of diverse faiths collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people;

3 *The dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding and appreciate others' spiritual values;

4 *The dialogue of religious experience*, in which persons share their spiritual riches — for instance, prayer and contemplation.[11]

The Vaiṣṇava-Christian dialogue has been a blend of the last two types: the dialogues of theological exchange and of religious experience. We discuss our deepest beliefs, theologies, and understandings of God and a godly life, and we share in the experience of faith, worship, and spiritual practice.

We also take part in the practice of *prīti-lakṣaṇam,* the loving exchanges described in *Upadeśāmṛta,* or *The Nectar of Instruction*: "Offering gifts in charity, accepting charitable gifts, revealing one's mind in confidence, inquiring confidentially, accepting *prasāda* and offering *prasāda* are the six symptoms of love shared by one devotee and another."[12] Some might question how this text, describing typical exchanges among Vaiṣṇavas, can apply to meeting people of other faiths. In answer, I must refer to my personal realizations and the comments of participants in the dialogue. Genuine dialogue shared by committed followers of different traditions in confidential, heartfelt ways, is a deep, spiritually inspiring experience, during which we feel ourselves brought closer to God. Many insights on God and how to reach the Divine are shared, and there is no greater gift than this. An essential part of our meetings has been the enjoyment of delicious, sanctified vegetarian meals, or *prasāda*.

Śrīla Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, a nineteenth-century leader in the Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava tradition and a principal figure in ISKCON's lineage, writes:

> When we have the occasion to be present at the place of worship of other religionists at the time of their worship, we should stay there in a respectful mood, contemplating thus: "Here is being worshiped my adorable highest entity, God, in a different form than that of mine. Due to my practice of a different kind, I cannot thoroughly comprehend this system of theirs. But seeing it, I am feeling a greater attachment for my own system. I bow down with prostration before His emblem as I see it here, and I offer my prayer to my Lord who has adopted this different emblem that he may increase my love toward Him."[13]

Prabhupāda reinforces this view and the need to give up our critical mentality when he writes: "We should not criticize others' methods of religion. . . . A devotee, instead of criticizing such systems, will encourage the followers to stick to their principles."[14] Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura developed the idea of inclusivity by discussing the term *sāraqrāhī,* or "essence seeker," that is to say, a person sufficiently wise to appreciate the dedication and spiritual advancement of others, even those outside one's tradition. He advocates relishing the association of like-minded souls, though one's culture and practices may differ.[15]

My inspiration to dialogue

I am from a nominally Protestant Christian background. I committed to the Vaiṣṇava discipline in August 1975, when I moved into the ISKCON ashram in Denver. I was aware of the overlapping ideas and appeals to the heart present in the Vaiṣṇava and Christian traditions. I never doubted that experimenting with different paths helped

me progress to a full-time commitment to spiritual discipline. The evening I began living in the Rādhā-Govinda temple, I prayed as sincerely as I could to Jesus, Allah, Buddha, and Kṛṣṇa for guidance in my search. I prayed that if the Vaiṣṇava way is not a legitimate, progressive path toward God, "please reveal this to me" so that I can continue searching. That was forty-five years before writing this article. Today, I still attend occasional church services and remain inspired by the Christian call to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

A brief history

In January 1996, my colleague Shaunaka Rishi Dāsa, then the head of ISKCON Communications in Europe, organized a dialogue between Christians and Vaiṣṇavas in Wales. I did not attend, but I was inspired by his entreaties that I organize something similar in the United States. With his support, I soon arranged a two-day event. I invited Protestant and Catholic scholars and leaders whom I knew about through their studies of Vaiṣṇavism, ISKCON, and new religious movements. Our first dialogue in America was held near Boston in September 1996. Numerous ISKCON leaders attended, including scholars, gurus, Governing Body Commissioners, and thoughtful elders.[16] After this dialogue's success, we moved the venue to the Washington area, where I live, and invited many participants also based in that area, though some traveled from other parts of the U.S. Apart from one dialogue held at the historic Fisher Mansion in Detroit, now home to the ISKCON temple, the American Vaiṣṇava-Christian dialogues have continued annually in Washington.[17]

To help plan the initial dialogue in Washington, I reached out to several Christians, most notably Dr. John Borelli of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. We discussed a format, topics, and invitations, and decided on two days and ten participants from each side. This form of dialogue proved to be a hit, and we maintained it, or a similar concept, for the past twenty-three years. Many participants commented that this dialogue is a highlight of their year.

The ethos of our dialogues is simple. We are a group of faithful people, some scholars and all scholarly, who wish to learn about each other's tradition and grow through the process. The dialogue is held in the spring.[18] For almost two decades, we met at Rockford Manor, a beautiful retreat center in suburban Washington, but when the fees became too costly, we moved to another facility nearby, with all members arranging housing on their own. In 2017, we met at St. Anselm's Abbey, a Catholic community, hosted by our long-standing dialogue partner Abbot James Wiseman. In 2018 and '19 we were hosted by ISKCON of Potomac, Maryland. Both religious sites offered us opportunities to visit the chapel and temple, respectively, to observe the Vespers service and see the Deities.

Catholics and Protestants participate, while from the Vaiṣṇava side, primarily Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇavas take part, but some from the Madhva, Śrī Vaiṣṇava, and Nimbārka communities attend. For many years a Hindu friend or two, favorable to the Vaiṣṇava tradition, also came.

The topic of discussion is decided a year in advance by the participants. Typically, a member from the Christian side and a member from the Vaiṣṇava side prepare a paper or academic presentation on the topic.[19] The dialogue begins on Friday afternoon at one, with individual updates from each participant on the past year. These reports have often included degrees earned, books published, new jobs or positions, new babies, and new goals identified. Some years, sadly, we've begun with remembrances of deceased dialogue partners.

Then the two papers are presented, followed by an afternoon of discussion and introspection on the ideas raised. Our loosely structured conversation ebbs and flows with the inspiration and curiosity of individual members. We end with a sumptuous evening meal prepared by ISKCON. Our mealtimes are often the most rewarding, as the informal dinner hour allows new and old friends gathered around a table to discuss the day's topics, inquire about shared comments or religious insights, or just tell stories about adventures or family photos. In the early years of our dialogue,

dinner was followed by devotional entertainment, but latterly we just interact after dinner.

On Saturday morning we begin with an early breakfast catered by ISKCON, usually followed by two separate prayer services. In alternating years, we are led first by a Christian, followed by a Vaiṣṇava. (Professor Carney's article, which follows mine, mentions a few details.) Members of the dialogue observe or participate as they feel comfortable. After a short break and a longer dialogue time, lunch is served. Then we spend a few hours discussing the papers, morning services, or other topics that arise. Near the end of the afternoon we plan our next year's dialogue. [20]

Lessons learned

I will highlight a half-dozen benefits I found most significant: friendships, spiritual growth, self-criticism, strengthening ISKCON, shared issues, and advancing our mission.

Friendships

Our dialogues are opportunities to build long-lasting friendships. Many participants have attended for more than twenty years, others for five to ten years; others are newcomers. All become close friends. While our traditions differ, we have truly been on a journey of the heart, sharing openly with dialogue partners our human and often flawed efforts to understand and serve God.

Spiritual growth

The dialogues help me go deeper into my commitment as an aspiring servant of God, a Vaiṣṇava. My faith is increased annually during the dialogues, as I learn more about Christian faith and practice, and hear from Vaiṣṇava elders and scholars how our tradition addresses key concepts and questions on various topics. My faith is stretched and deepened by learning from wise, devoted people, including those who think and believe differently than I do.

As a member of ISKCON, a community that expresses a centuries-old Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition yet organizationally is just over fifty years old, I benefit by learning from leaders of other, more established organizations. I hear how they address opportunities and problems as teachers, leaders, and practitioners. I learn to be more self-critical in a healthy way. For ISKCON to grow, we need to be fearless about asking other communities how they have faced similar social, organizational, and philosophical challenges. And, in a spirit of seeking improvement and growth, we need to measure ourselves against their progress. Through dialogue I learn that we mature when we understand the way others think and do things, because this can shed light on new and better ways for ISKCON's expanding global community to solve problems and realize opportunities.

Strengthening ISKCON

Śrīla Prabhupāda writes in a letter that "because we are in the material world, sometimes we require . . . help."[21] He advised reaching out to "sympathizers" who can appreciate the positive contributions we are making to the world. It behooves ISKCON centers worldwide to build a network of friends, allies, and amiable critics. A principal means of doing this is through interfaith dialogue. This often means that we are invited to important events, welcomed into networks of influential people, and given the honor of meeting world leaders.[22]

Shared issues

My friends from the dialogues have networked with me on issues of shared concerns, including environmental protection and religious freedom. I sometimes asked for help when ISKCON faced adversities, and from our side, ISKCON has signed amicus briefs (court documents) to help protect the rights of Christians and others. For instance, ISKCON supported (1) an order of Catholic nuns who sought exemption from a U.S. law that obliged them to pay for abortions via their employee health-care plan (an eventual Supreme

Court victory) and (2) the Washington, D.C. Catholic Diocese's ability to promote Christmas on public buses (a case lost in court).

Advancing our message

Clearly, ISKCON's mission involves sharing with other religious leaders the teachings and wisdom of Lord Kṛṣṇa and Śrī Caitanya Mahaprābhu. An essential part of dialogue is teaching others the profound and practical contributions of the Vaiṣṇava tradition in a proper mood of respect and mutual exchange.

Broadening the scope

Peace among different peoples, cultures, and faiths must be predicated on mutual respect and understanding. Dialogue is a powerful instrument to lay the foundation of such peace. I pray that more ISKCON devotees worldwide, spiritually motivated by a mature desire to learn and grow while sharing our tradition's amazing insights and wisdom, take up this aspect of Śrīla Prabhupāda's mission. To succeed in dialogue requires just a few things of our faithful members: to be deeply rooted and secure in our tradition of *kṛṣṇa-bhakti,* and a willingness to see how the Supreme Lord is revealed within other traditions and to learn from them how to better glorify and serve the all-attractive Lord.

NOTES

1 *Light of the Bhāgavata,* commentary on Plate 6. Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1984.

2 The peace initiatives in Ireland and between Egypt and Israel come to mind.

3 Emphasizing the role of dialogue and open communications in problem-solving does not minimize the severity of some of the problems, nor does it ignore the role that religiously motivated terrorism has played in recent years. I do not blindly assume that violent extremism can be addressed solely by dialogue. Here I

promote the need for reasonable, albeit skeptical people to learn to communicate with and learn from each other and thus promote a more respectful, tolerant, and ultimately appreciative culture. That said, even those who promote hatred, bigotry, and violence have sometimes been guided to give up deeply held animosity through dialogue and open communications.

4 The "Seven Purposes of ISKCON" were first recorded in the incorporation documents of ISKCON's original temple in New York City, in 1966.

5 It is interesting to note that in Prabhupāda's first purpose for ISKCON, he employed the generic language of propagating "spiritual knowledge" and "spiritual life." It is only in his second purpose (as well as 3, 4 and 5) that he directly mentioned Lord Kṛṣṇa or Lord Caitanya.

6 Cited in *ISKCON and Interfaith: ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God*; p. 6, ISKCON Communications, 2004

7 This is a well-known anecdote told by Ātreya Ṛṣi Dāsa, who witnessed the conversation.

8 Ibid, p. 3. This document was developed by the ISKCON Interfaith Commission and authorized by ISKCON's Governing Body Commission Executive Committee. Published in 2004 by the ISKCON Communications Ministry.

9 *Bhagavad-gītā As it Is*, Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2001.

10 *ISKCON and Interfaith: ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God*. Part One, page 2. ISKCON Communications, 2004

11 Cited in *Speaking of Faith: The Essential Handbook for Religion Communicators,* 7th Edition, 2004, Religion Communicators Council, p. 125.

12 *The Nectar of Instruction,* text 4. An English presentation of Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Śrī Upadeśāmṛta*, by His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda. Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1997.

13 *Śrī Caitanya-śikṣāmṛta*, Introduction.

14 *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 4.22.24, purport.

15 For more on this, see *Hindu Encounter with Modernity* by Shukavak N. Dāsa, ŚRĪ Publications: Sanskrit Religious Institute, 1999.

16 Details of that dialogue can be found in my article "Thoughts

14 on the History and Development of the Vaiṣṇava-Christian Dialogue," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Volume 20, No. 2, 2012.

17 This dialogue has also inspired an annual Vaiṣṇava-Christian Dialogue in India, the first of which was held in January, 2015, and which follows a similar format.

18 In 2020, because of the need to adjust to a pandemic, our group met virtually in September. As expected, there were modifications of the program, but we tried to stay close to our standard format.

19 The topics discussed during twenty-three years of dialogue in Washington included: "The Everlasting Soul" (1998); "The Soul and Its Destiny" (1999 & 2000); "Spiritual Growth" (2001); "Saint Bernard of Clairvaux's 'On Loving God' and the 'Narada-Bhakti Sutra'" (2002); "Suffering" (2003); "Spiritual Disciplines" (2004); "Love and Suffering" (2005); "God as a Devotee" (2006); "Theodicy" (2007); "Why Dialogue?" (2008); "Relating to the Non-Spiritual: Views and Strategies In Our Religious Traditions" (2009); "Love and Fear" (2010); "*The Song of Solomon* and *Gita Govinda*" (2011); "The Hidden God" (2012); "The Holy Name" (2013); "The Mother of God" (2014); "Prayer" (2015); "Sonic Theology" (2016); "Religion and the Environment" (2017); "Monasticism" (2018); "Cultivation of the Heart" (2019); and "Union with God; Separation from God" (2020).

20 Readers interested in more about the Washington, D.C. dialogues can see the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies,* Vol. 20, No. 2, 2012, dedicated exclusively to articles about the Vaiṣṇava-Christian dialogues. Authors include Francis X. Clooney, John Borelli, Kenneth Cracknell, James Reddington, James Wiseman, Carole Crumley, Ravīndra-svarūpa Dāsa, Tamāl Kṛṣṇa Goswami, Ravi Gupta, Graham M. Schweig, Sara Adams, and others.

21 Letter to Tejīyas Dāsa, dated August 15, 1973.

22 Two examples: The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops invited Dr. Ravi Gupta (Rādhikā-ramaṇa Dāsa) to meet Pope Benedict XVI in Washington, D.C. on behalf of Hindu American youth, during the papal visit of April 2006. During ISKCON's fiftieth anniversary gala in Washington in 2016, Father Leo D. Lefebure (a Professor of Theology at Georgetown University) and Reverend Charles P. Gibbs (the Founding Executive Director of Unit-

ed Religions Initiative) — both dear friends and participants in the Vaiṣṇava-Christian dialogues — spoke on stage and offered words of appreciation.

ANUTTAMA DĀSA joined ISKCON in 1975. He was initiated by Śrīla Prabhupāda in 1976 and served as a *saṅkīrtana* leader until 1983. From 1983–6 he was president of the Boulder, Colorado temple and was subsequently appointed president of the Denver temple, a post he held until 1993. He joined the ISKCON Governing Body Commission (GBC) in 2000 and served as its Chairman in 2014–2015. He enacts his leadership goals globally by teaching seminars including: "ISKCON's Leadership and Management," "ISKCON Communications Course," "The Guru Seminar," and the "ISKCON Disciples Course," all of which he helped co-author with teams of other senior Vaiṣṇavas.

Besides his GBC duties, Anuttama has served as ISKCON's International Director of Communications for twenty years. He is a regular contributor and senior editor for *ISKCON News* and has authored articles for the *ISKCON Communications Journal* and several interfaith publications outside of ISKCON. Furthermore, he co-founded the annual Vaiṣṇava-Christian Dialogues (USA and India) and Vaiṣṇava-Muslim Dialogue (USA).

The Vaiṣṇava-Christian Dialogue: The Power of a Conversation

Gerald T. Carney
Hampden-Sydney College, Virginia

For twenty-three years, a group of committed Vaiṣṇavas and Christians has gathered yearly in a Washington suburb to share the visions of their faith, with a focus on particular themes that are foundational for their religious lives. (In the spring of 2020, the meeting was postponed to September and took place via Zoom.) What is this Vaiṣṇava-Christian dialogue? What function does it serve for us as Christians and Vaiṣṇavas? And what do we talk about?

The conversation is between believers, speaking of and out of their own faith, within their own faith traditions, and joining with other participants to address a chosen question. In dialogue, in the presence of other believers, we try to see things differently. My seeking to understand the divine presence in the world and in my life finds expression in the prologue to the Gospel of John (1.1–14): the eternal Word of God, source of all life, shedding light to all, present in the world, giving new life to all who accept him, full of grace and truth. But we choose to read this text in tandem with select passages from the *Bhagavad-gītā* that talk of Kṛṣṇa's love for those who have renounced the fruits of action, not clinging to self, with discerning mind focused on him alone, to whom he reveals the supreme

secret: such ones are dearly loved by Kṛṣṇa, none more dearly, and they come to him (18.68–9). Reading these passages with the eyes of faith sets off echoes and resonances when re-reading texts from one's own tradition.

This kind of learning is not restricted to scriptural texts. The story of the "widow's mite" in the Gospels of Mark (12.41–4) and Luke (21.1–4) recounts the response of Jesus to seeing the big contributions to the temple treasury by wealthy worshipers in contrast with the small coins of a poor widow: "This poor widow has given more than all those . . . for the others who have given had more than enough, but she, with less than enough, has given all that she had to live on (Mark 12.43–4). There has never been a morning at *maṅgala-ārati* in the Radharaman temple, in Vṛndāvana, when I have not been awed by the candle stubs offered to the deity by poor widows, even as I wish that their lives were more secure. Their devotion surely far exceeds that of the visiting *vīdeśī* [foreign] scholar!

So the dialogue is about core beliefs and between believers. This kind of dialogue differs from others in that it does not take place between religions or denominations with the objective of arriving at some form of consensus or action document. These kinds of dialogue are important and contribute much in our fractured world, but this dialogue is not one of those. While a few papers have been published by dialogue participants and an entire issue of the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* (Vol. 20.2, Spring 2012) was devoted to its first fifteen years, this dialogue is addressed to the participants themselves: The work is what happens there and what results from that. Nor is there an effort to translate intellectual and spiritual sharing into some mode of agreement. The Christian and Vaiṣṇava traditions (and all their variations) remain essentially different, but there is a sense in which each tradition has been experienced as nondifferent: the profound truth of difference-in-nondifference (*bhedābheda*) on experiential and mystical levels. Deep bonds of friendship have formed over these years as witness of our shared journey.

The first meeting took place on a single day, but it was immediately clear that more time was needed for sufficient reflection and interaction. All subsequent meetings lasted two days: Friday 1 p.m. to Saturday 4 p.m. Texts related to the Christian and Vaiṣṇava presentations are usually sent out prior to the meetings. We gather

around 1 p.m. (lunch on our own) and shortly start a process of introducing ourselves and providing an update. This welcomes new members and lets them get to know the rest of the group, a process that can take a while (despite gentle nudges to be brief). Then we begin the first presentation, alternating each year as to whether Christian or Vaiṣṇava goes first. There is time for questions of clarification following the presentation. The second presentation follows a short break. That leaves about an hour and a half to two hours available for open discussion before dinner. When most of the group stayed overnight at Rockwood Manor (and some of us were younger, truth be told), there were music and dance presentations in the evening. Now everyone scatters after dinner.

After breakfast, the second day begins with sharing prayer, a practice in itself as well as a teachable moment about each prayer form and its texts and symbols. Christian prayer has included chants from the monastery of Taizé; monastic morning prayer of psalms, scripture, and commentary; singing hymns traditional and modern; and significant time for silence. Sam Wagner has combined his sitar playing with Taizé prayer forms as an invitation to centering and inner silence. Christian rituals that would exclude Vaiṣṇava participation, like the Eucharist, simply cannot be used. Vaiṣṇava prayer includes explanation of the various symbols from the Gauḍīya tradition but also illustrates the vocabulary of *bhajana*, *ārati*, *mahā-mantra*, *kathā*, and commentary. Christians and Vaiṣṇavas have a rich vocabulary of prayer that can inform and form dialogue participants, a process central to the dialogue. Then the group returns to points raised in the presentations and questions remaining (or arising overnight). Lunch is routinely postponed to give additional space for discussion, which continues after lunch. The last task is for the group to look forward to the next year's date and program. There are always too many possible topics to address, but the decision hinges on the topic, those who could facilitate its presentation, and their willingness to attend and do the presentations. Most of the work of this dialogue is self-directed both in the discussions and in the development of future programs: The group is self-perpetuating!

During one three-hour segment of the *aṣṭa-kālīya-līlā-smaraṇa,* I counted at least five servings of food for Kṛṣṇa's cowherd friends,

not counting a raucous food fight. Yes, meals — besides hearing about them — are an essential part of the dialogue process for they offer an opportunity to sit and speak with other participants, to explore some points raised in the discussion, and to strengthen relationships forged over the years. Mealtime is important for the Vaiṣṇava group as well, as they reconnect with their colleagues. One of my Vaiṣṇava friends lives only a few hours away, but I see him only at the dialogue (my bad). The informal images I have saved from previous dialogues show much of the work of the dialogue taking place in twosomes and threesomes outside the program's formal structure. Over these years we have become friends, partners in more than dialogue. When Jesuit Father Jim Redington suffered a life-threatening "event," one of our Vaiṣṇava colleagues immediately got ready to drive to Scranton, Pennsylvania, to encourage Jim in his recovery — bonds beyond dialogue.

Participation in such a dialogue is a function not only of professional interest but of each one's life story. I started graduate work at Fordham expecting to focus on the Christian scriptures, the New Testament. Then I took Thomas Berry's Introduction to the History of Religions. There I read for the first time the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad-gītā*, but also Confucius, Mencius, and Lao Tzu. I did not run away when Thomas suggested that I stay after class in the evening to "do a little Sanskrit." In 1971, I participated in a seminar on "Appolonian and Dionysiac Currents in Religion" and chose to drive down to Henry Street in Brooklyn to study the devotees and try to understand the mix of ecstasy and discipline in Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Many of the neophytes I met were but a few days off the streets, but their enthusiasm was real. Thomas Berry was convinced that the vernacular poets, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava, breathed new life into their traditions, and I spent a summer reading their works in translation. Preparing for a doctoral exam topic on "the erotic aspects of Kṛṣṇa mysticism," I read the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Gītā Govinda* and re-read the *bhakti* poets. The departmental secretary, sure that the professor had erred in spelling, first transcribed the topic as "exotic."

When the time came for a dissertation topic, my mentor, who had despaired of my flowery gloss of theological texts, assigned me Kavikarṇapūra's *Caitanya-candrodaya-nāṭakam*. He wanted his students to do work in each of the main devotional and

theological traditions, and he supported my topic as an approach to the Gauḍīya tradition. One might see where this is leading . . . When I went to India for the first time in 1980, Diana Eck urged me to visit Vṛndāvana and sent me to Shrivatsa Goswami. He, in turn, invited me to return a few weeks later for Janmāṣṭamī. It was unbearably hot, I was sick, and I'd been robbed, but I knew that I would return, as I have, again and again, the last forty years. While I try to be a disciple of Jesus, I also inhabit and am nurtured by the grace of participation in the Vaiṣṇava traditions. Some dialogue friends wonder which side I am on. But this kind of serendipitous journey is reflected in so many different ways by the other Christian participants in this dialogue. Vaiṣṇavas and Christians alike bring our own stories to the dialogue as a gift to share.

This ongoing dialogue has been gifted from the start by a number of mentors from Christian and Vaiṣṇava traditions. They include Bill Cenkner, Frank Clooney, Kenneth Cracknell, James Wiseman, and David Rodier from Christian traditions, and Ravīndra-svarūpa, Tamāl Kṛṣṇa Goswami, Bhakti Tīrtha Swami, and Graham Schweig from the Vaiṣṇava. The moderation of the dialogue was shared by John Borelli and Anuttama Dāsa. Then there were the usual suspects: Carol Crumley, Clark Lobenstine, Jim Redington, Ed Shirley, Philip Simo, Leo Lefebure, Pim Valkenberg, Judson Trapnell, Erick Schwarz, Sam Wagner, and me; and Sara Adams, David Buchta, Vineet Chander, Gopal Gupta, Ravi Gupta, D. C. Rao, Rukmini Walker, Brahmachari Vrajvihari Sharan, Giri Govardhan, and Haridas Das. A succession of interreligious affairs officials at the Catholic Bishops' Conference attended meetings of the dialogue. The accumulated experience and wisdom of these mentors and participants have made the dialogue possible and breathed life into its sessions. It is very important to identify those "elders" (even in their youth!) who bring inspiration and challenge to this enterprise.

This dialogue has developed with the explicit support of critical documents about changed attitudes toward interreligious relations in the Catholic Church and ISKCON. These documents were an important agenda item of the dialogue's meeting in 2000. The document known as *Nostra Aetate,* which the Second Vatican Council adopted in 1965, praised the beliefs of Hindus "for in Hinduism men and women contemplate the divine mystery and express it through

an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiries. They seek freedom from the anguishes of our human condition either through ascetical practices or through profound meditation or through a flight to God with love and trust." In response to this, "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of acting and of living, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the one she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all." The document then points to the central Christian belief that Jesus Christ is " 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life' (Jn 14.6) in whom men and women may find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself." This statement reflects the tension between seeing and respecting the divine light in the beliefs and lived experience of other believers and the call to proclaim in word and to witness in life to the truth which Christians believe. But, despite such tension, the Church goes on to urge "her sons and daughters to recognize, preserve, and foster the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among the followers of other religions. This is done through conversations and collaboration with them, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life." Thus dialogue is a positive response to other religious traditions as well as a mutual and shared witness. Pope John Paul II invited representatives of thirty-two Christian denominations/organizations and eleven other religions to a shared prayer in Assisi in 1986, an action which spoke loudly of the commitment to live shared lives for the sake of the world.

But we meet also against the background of "ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God," a document developed by a group of scholars and devotees and approved by the Executive Committee of ISKCON's Governing Body Commission. ISKCON, is "a Vedantic, monotheistic Vaiṣṇava tradition" that has a profound missionary impulse with universal scope. Vaiṣṇavas and, in particular, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, hold that *śrī-kṛṣṇa-svayaṁ-bhagavān* and "keval, keval, keval Hare Nam" in addition to their beliefs about Caitanya Mahāprabhu: These core beliefs in a missionary tradition — about Kṛṣṇa's identity as the Supreme Personality of Godhead and about his divine name as the sole refuge — would not seem to anticipate a

path of dialogue. However, this ISKCON document expresses esteem for followers of other theistic and scripture-based traditions, affirms the value of dialogue with members of these other traditions, denies that any tradition can claim a monopoly on truth, and calls for ISKCON members always to approach others with respect and humility, following the command of Mahāprabhu: "One should be more tolerant than a tree, more humble than a blade of grass, and ready to offer all respect to everyone and yet expect no respect for oneself. In such a humble state of mind one can glorify the Lord with pure devotion." (*Śikṣāṣṭakam* 4) The document goes on to explain, "While cherishing our own spiritual culture and working to proclaim our faith in Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana, we consider it inappropriate and unbecoming for a Vaiṣṇava to try and attract people to the worship of the Supreme by denigrating, misrepresenting, or humiliating members of other faith communities. . . . From a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava perspective, we work not at 'conversion' but spiritual development. Through dialogue, theistic people and those engaged in the pursuit of Absolute Truth can encourage one another to be more true to their own practice. Dialogue offers a challenge of faith to devotees of every tradition. This challenge is a necessary and welcome part of spiritual life in a multi-faith world. Such dialogue can help strengthen the faith and character of individuals, the integrity and vision of institutions, and the support and appreciation of those who expect enlightened spiritual leadership. Thus dialogue can lead to a profound realization of mission, in the broadest sense of the term." Dialogue is faithful witness by believers, and it advances ISKCON's mission of spreading Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

We returned to examine "Why We Dialogue" in 2008, with consideration of Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura's *Śrī Caitanya-śikṣāmṛta* and dialogue documents from the World Council of Churches (largely Protestant Christian) tradition, including texts by Diana Eck and S. Wesley Ariarajah, whose title *Not Without My Neighbor* suggests the wider ecumenism of this perspective.

The strategy of our dialogue from 2001 to the present has included selected texts from each tradition, available in advance and forming the basis of the presentations and discussions. Embracing this strategy provided a common ground for participants and was a critical choice of our style of participation and interaction. It bears

repeating here that our dialogue was based on the shared experience of prayer that was described earlier.

Broadly speaking but with considerable overlap, the other sessions of the dialogue can be grouped under three headings: unfolding the core beliefs and their implications in the lives of believers, the process of spiritual growth from neophyte to advanced, and the tensions within the heart of our traditions, both historically and in the contemporary period. In each case, these topics were developed to make explicit the implications in the life of the believer. Going forward, there was no fixed plan but the topics and discussions developed from the interests and resources of the dialogue participants.

Discussion of core beliefs

We devoted one complete session to discussion of the Vaiṣṇava and Christian understandings of divine presence through incarnation. In both cases, there is a complex theology, including Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, Caitanya, and the Pañca-tattva on the Vaiṣṇava side, described by Ravīndra-svarūpa, and the various forms and layers of Christology, explained with clarity in a long article by Ed Shirley (published in *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Vol. 20.2, Spring 2012). But, at each dialogue, the display of Vaiṣṇava faith symbols has encouraged further dialogue on this central focus of faith. Both traditions place the believer within the dynamism of the divine, as participants in the heart of God.

We moved from consideration of the divine to our relation with the material world, the non-divine, even the non-spiritual. Jon Pahl challenged us with spiritual elements lodged in American consumer culture—the shopping mall as sacred place, a stairway to heaven. In the Christian prayer time, Pahl led us with his rousing and enthusiastic hymn-singing. While Pahl's presentation was descriptive and sociological, Rukmini Walker shared Clare Robison's treatment of texts from the *Bhagavad-gītā,* the story of Prahlāda from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a passage from the *Mahābhārata*, and a reflection by a contemporary Vaiṣṇava author, Satsvarūpa Dāsa Goswami, on "Vaiṣṇava Compassion." These differing styles show a greater engagement with secular social science among Christian

Core Beliefs	Spiritual Growth and Practice	Tensions in Tradition and the Dynamics of Life and Heart
Incarnation and Tattvas 2006	Spiritual Growth 2001	Spirit in the World: Affirmation and Renunciation 1999, 2000
Relating to the Non-spiritual 2009	Stages of Awakening Love of God 2002	Suffering 2003
Song of Solomon and *Gītā Govinda* 2011	Spiritual Disciplines 2004	Love and Suffering 2005
The Holy Name 2013	Prayer 2015	Theodicy 2007
The Mother of God 2014	Sonic Theology 2016	Love and Fear 2010
	Monasticism 2018	The Hidden God 2012
	Cultivation of the Heart 2019	Religion and the Environment 2017
		Union with God, Separation from God 2020
		Women in Leadership Roles 2021

theologians as well as the varied and productive ways that Vaiṣṇavas use their textual traditions.

We generally have a single presenter about texts from their tradition but tried to expand the conversation by having insider/outsider respondents to the text of the *Song of Solomon* ("The Song of Songs," Graham Schweig and James Wiseman) and the *Gītā Govinda* ("The Indian Song of Songs," David Buchta and Gerald Carney). We developed some interesting resonances because of the varied personal and professional views but it proved too cumbersome to repeat.

We chose to look at the role of the holy name in religious life and practice. It is central in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition ("keval hare nam"), but what about the Jewish and Christian traditions? It became clear that the revelation of the personal intimate name of God to Moses and the Jewish people was central to Judaism: God's name in their history and written on their hearts. This sacred revealed character of God's name carries over into the Christian tradition with emphasis on the name of Jesus, saving and sanctifying, as well as the name by which Christians call upon God with the intimate "Father."

We turned also to see how our traditions present the Mother of God, building on the 2004 study by Frank Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary.* Leo Lefebure showed how the title "Mother of God" reflects a core theological affirmation about the figure of Mary. He illustrated her role through three Marian prayers: the *Memorare*, *Salve Regina*, and *Stabat Mater*, reflecting her intercession, her revelatory character, and her participation in the cross and redemption. Anuttama Dāsa explained the yoga of *vātsalya-rasa*, centered on not one but two mothers of God, Yaśodā and Śacīdevī.

Spiritual growth and practice

Emphasizing the engaged and practical basis of dialogue, we have returned repeatedly to the ways in which we embrace and deepen the spiritual path we follow. The first session described spiritual growth through Bonaventure's *The Soul's Journey into God* (James

Wiseman) and Viśvanātha Cakravartī's *Mādhurya-kadambiṇī* (Ravīndra-svarūpa). Unfinished with the subject, we looked the next year at "Stages of Awakening Love of God," in Bernard of Clairvaux's *On Loving God* (David Rodier) and selections from the *Nārada-bhakti-sūtra* (Graham Schweig). In a third meeting, we focused on the specific dynamics of spiritual disciplines found in the *Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* (James Redington) and Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* (Ravīndra-svarūpa). The emphasis in both of these texts about the dynamic process of entering into the heart of tradition created significant resonance both within and between our traditions.

Rather than looking at prayer in general, in 2015, we were tasked to bring examples of how we pray and how we practice. To provide a context for this sharing, James Wiseman spoke about the structure of monastic prayer (the "Liturgy of the Hours") and "mental prayer." I underlined the importance of prayer in personal transformation, with the proviso that what is absolutely essential is service to the poor and downtrodden, as described in chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. Abhishek Ghosh drew prayers from the *Bhagavad-gītā* (11.1–55), the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (1.8.18–43), the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (*Madhya* 15.158–71), and the *gopīs'* prayers of *virāha*, or separation (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.31.1–9).

The following year we explored "Sonic Theology," the way in which sound and music and mantra create resonance on the heart. The theme came from Pim Valkenburg, who led us on a journey through music specifically designed for a liturgical context and other religious music directed to popular audiences, even secular ones. Such classical music allows for many levels of audience participation in the mysteries of the life of Jesus, especially yearning expectation of his coming, accompanying his passion, and experiencing his resurrection — theological tensions resolved through music. Gopal Gupta placed our discussion within the traditional structure of Vaiṣṇava aesthetics. In the Christian prayer session there was an interplay within the experience of Taizé-style prayer of long periods of silence, broken with words from the heart and with simple mantra-like songs. This resonated with the theme of Vaiṣṇava prayer: *hearing* Kṛṣṇa, not about, but straining with the ear and heart for a hearing that cleanses heart and mind. In

Bhagavad-gītā 7.1, Kṛṣṇa promised "You shall know me completely… *hear* about how this is so." This is the invitation to *kīrtana*, drawing texts from Bhaktivinoda, the Pañca-tattva, and the *mahā-mantra* itself. All this increases the eagerness to *hear* the sound that cleanses: the holy name of the Lord.

One of our Christian members, James Wiseman, a Benedictine monk of Saint Anselm's Abbey had been elected abbot there. He offered us the Abbey as our meeting site in 2017, and we had the opportunity to observe the evening prayer of the monastic community. No coincidence, then, that we chose to examine monasticism from Christian and Vaiṣṇava perspectives the following year. Brahmachari Vrajavihari Sharan, a renunciant in the Nimbārka-sampradāya and Hindu chaplain at Georgetown University, presented the fundamental dimensions of monasticism as practiced in several Vaiṣṇava traditions, especially the years-long process before entering that path. Abbot James highlighted the centrality of life together in a community of prayer and work, prayer in common (along with private prayer and Lectio Divina) and the shared work of the monastery. We have enjoyed having another Benedictine priest, Philip Simo, as a frequent participant in the dialogue.

Under the title "Cultivation of the Heart," we opened the question of how a believer develops from an initial conversion or epiphany moment into a mature and tempered faith. Relationships to mentors and institutions change over time in tandem with deepened conviction and personal autonomy. This point is both theological and socio-psychological. Haridas das (Harvey Stempel) gave a candid account of his own religious journey to the present, and I suggested some touchstones of scripture and doctrine along the path to adult faith and commitment.

Tensions in traditions and the dynamics of life and heart

Two of the earliest meetings of the dialogue emphasized the tensions and polarities in religious life. Yes, there is the Divine, the Spirit, but it is manifest, present, in the world. What is the relationship between Spirit and the world? How does the individual affirm

that presence but still stand apart in some manner of renunciation? How are these tensions reconciled in life and practice?

Examining the topics treated in the dialogue shows an emphasis on confronting suffering, love and suffering, the hidden God, and the tension between unity with God and separation from God. One session explicitly dealt with Christian and Vaiṣṇava theodicy, the attempt to give faithful meaning to the experience of evil and suffering. But the titles don't tell the whole story of the texts and the underlying themes discussed. "Suffering" focused on the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (James Redington) and the dance of the *gopīs* with Kṛṣṇa from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Graham Schweig). These core narratives and their symbolic representation in cross and *rāsa-maṇḍala* reflect the central experience of Christian and Vaiṣṇava faith and life, respectively. "Love and Suffering" introduced readings from St. John of the Cross on the stages of mystical love, including the dark night of the soul (Steven Payne, a Carmelite priest) and from the last chapter of the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (*Antya* 20) with the description of Caitanya's *virāha*, or separation from Kṛṣṇa, resolved only in *saṅkīrtana*, and the establishment of *kṛṣṇa-prema* as the highest end of life (*Madhya* 23), chosen by Vṛndāvana Dāsa Ṭhākura. "Love and Fear," a conversation between Benedictine monk Philip Simo and David Buchta, addressed the polarity of divine majesty, *aiśvarya,* and sweetness, *mādhurya-līlā* and *bhāva*. While there is fear of judgment and punishment, there is the "holy fear" of offending the beloved and the "sacred awe" of approaching God as sinners and mere humans. Graham Schweig and Ed Shirley presented "The Hidden God" as revealed to our hearts and obscured from our human sight through a return to Bonaventure's *Mind's Path to God* together with the *Mystical Theology* of a writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius. The Vaiṣṇava sources were drawn from Schweig's translations of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and the chapters on the *rāsa-līlā* in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* with its many layers of intimate revelation, but lost to the grasping mind. Finally, in the most recent meeting of the dialogue, on "Union with God, Separation from God," James Redington presented Ignatius's "Contemplation to Attain Love of God," which reaches its climax in the surrender of everything we have and are.

He links this with the intimate participation in divine life experienced by Catherine of Siena and Thérèse of Lisieux but contrasts it with Mother Teresa of Calcutta's experience of desolation that is again resolved by simple and complete surrender. Rukmini Walker commented on the texts of *Caitanya-caritāmṛta Antya* 8.1–35, which reflect Mādhavendra Purī's yearning to attain Kṛṣṇa, to abide with him in Vṛndāvana, and to satisfy the thirst for *prema*.

To explain evil and suffering, theologians try to make sense of God's role through "theodicy," to "justify the ways of God to humans" in John Milton's phrase. I showed how suffering was taken seriously by the Jewish tradition in the book of Job, by the Christian mystery of the cross, and by Augustine's long struggle to believe in God in a world that contains evil. He suggested that, with "liberation theology," the only solution to evil and suffering is to live a life to overcome it: Where is God? — God is in our response. Ravi Gupta presented a view of suffering as beyond karma, or destiny — as the direct will of God. In the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, he showed the hope that "devotional heroism" can overcome all obstacles by turning eye and heart to Kṛṣṇa.

In all of these examples of presence and absence, of union and separation, there is one lesson: it is complicated. This is never more so than in addressing the religious response to environmental destruction, especially as we become aware of our collective — and even personal — complicity in this destruction. Presenting a Vaiṣṇava vision of eco-theology, Krishna Kishore spoke of a theological framework in which the earth is not just material stuff but the earthly manifestation of God's powers, calling all to establish renewed personal and familial relationships: *bhakti* breaks traditional social structures in favor of sustainability and symbiotic development. Tom Ryan reviewed the changes in Christian environmental thought since the 1970s, starting with the World Council of Churches and leading to Pope Francis's letter *Laudato si'*. Living on earth, we are in the Lord's temple with the obligation to develop an integral ecology for the earth as a collective good that must not be exploited. Christians are summoned to enter into the story of creation with fidelity and imagination. We were not creating solutions but sharing our diverse commitments to the environment. We have chosen to address the roles of "Women in Leadership Positions" in

our respective traditions during our dialogue in 2021. Theme, speakers, and texts will challenge us anew.

What matters…

This long narrative of our journey together these past twenty-three years is argument itself for the lessons we have learned, for the space of dialogue that we have created within and between our traditions, and for our deep bonds of understanding and friendship. It illustrates the power of a sustained conversation to establish relationships. I would like to close with some points that characterize what we sought to do. Some of these points are clearer in retrospect; others may apply only in our circumstances. But they have made us what we are and sustain our dialogue.

- *Mentors matter*. Let them guide the early development of dialogue with wisdom.

- *"Street creds" matter*. Prior participation in interreligious and interfaith groups creates credibility, an audience, and resource people.

- *Size matters*. Twenty people or so are participants. At a certain point, participants become an audience. Dialogue is a participant game.

- *Topics matter*. It is best to look together at a topic that has a shared resonance. The topic serves to let us see together . . . and to see each other.

- *Texts matter*. Reading texts together in advance, selected from each other's tradition, promotes a common experience.

- *Belief matters*. We are not all scholars; all the scholars are scholar-practitioners; we are all believers and practitioners.

- *Lives matter*. We are here today because of the kind of lives and faith that we have lived. Time spent introducing ourselves is an essential investment in meeting each other.

- *Food matters*. We bond over shared food; conversation flourishes as we can seek out people we want to talk to over meals.

- *Time matters*. Not clock time but enough prime time for discussion and listening. And so…

- *Breaks matter*. Dialogue is not about talk but conversation that happens in twosomes and threesomes. This does not have to be organized; leave space for this to happen.

- *Prayer matters*. Sharing one's form of prayer can be a profound experience; so is going as deep as one can into the prayer of another. This prayer should be inclusive at least to the level of everyone appreciating what is happening and why.

- *Ownership matters*. Joint decision-making for the year's dialogue and for another meeting is very important. What do the participants want to think about? What questions do they have for each other? Who else would you recommend coming to the dialogue?

- *Planning matters*. We make commitments a year in advance to date, topic, and presenters. Of course, life happens, but this kind of participation and planning cements the next steps. Notice goes out to those who attended (and not) about the next steps right after this year's dialogue. Reminders go out several months, then again weeks before the event. There is a magic

multiplier in "reply all" that does more than fill in-boxes.

- *Flexibility matters*. All this could be wrong for you, for us. Nothing is written in stone. There is a power of Spirit and *līlā* [divine play] that is really running the dialogue. This we believe.

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Why Consciousness is a Big Deal for Science

Akhaṇḍadhī Dāsa
Founder of the Science and Philosophy Initiative

This paper is derived from a talk I presented at the Consciousness in Science Conference in Gainesville, Florida (January 2019).

Philosophers and scientists don't always have a comfortable relationship. I have heard scientists say, "At best, you can go to philosophers for questions, but don't ever rely on them for answers." Perhaps that is disingenuous, as scientists usually don't like the questions philosophers raise. And philosophers become frustrated that scientists prefer to answer questions other than the ones philosophers pose. There is an old joke that much scientific research can be likened to a drunk man who stumbles up the path to his front door, drops his keys there, but then goes back out to the street to search for them under a streetlamp, where the light is better. My role as a philosopher is to raise uncomfortable questions and ask scientists to search for the answers *not* in places they are habituated to — where they feel comfortable looking — but rather where they have a better chance of finding answers. Nowhere is this more vital than in the study of consciousness.

What is consciousness? At a 2016 seminar, Anil Seth, a British neuroscientist, referred to it as a mystery in our face at every moment. He said that consciousness is "at once the most familiar and the most mysterious feature of our existence."[1] However, there is still no broadly accepted definition of what we mean by consciousness. Mostly, Seth said, we have only "folk intuitions." In that spirit, one of my favorite definitions is: "Consciousness — that annoying period between naps." [2] Yes, it is that weird phenomenon that bothers us from morning to night.

But what, more precisely, do we count as consciousness? Is it simply the content of our inner world: thoughts, ideas, emotions, feelings? Or is it the processing of neural activity that produces such mental content? Is consciousness the felt experiences of mental content? Or is it the property that enables that awareness? Perhaps consciousness is that which possesses the property of subjective awareness and the ability to experience.

The empirical study of consciousness tends to focus on aspects that are, so to speak, at arm's length from the seat of our actual conscious awareness. These aspects — particularly processing mental content correlated with neuroscientific studies of the brain — are hugely important but only part of the picture, since the empirical approach ignores both the subject and the experience of the subject of experience.

Here is a profound question: Do you exist? We do believe we exist, even if we postulate that we may not exist in the ultimate issue. Therefore, we have to confront our current status as persons conjecturing on existence. What leads us to believe that we exist? We intuitively accept ourselves to be entities experiencing life, with the conviction that we are the subjects of our personal experiences, and not just now, but that we have been the same witnesses experiencing life since the earliest event lodged in our memories. What, then, is that entity who is the subject of all our experiences?

Descartes, in his second Meditation, tries to address the question, What can I know for certain? His conclusion is: The only thing I can be utterly certain of is that I am the entity contemplating that question. I am a thinking thing. The thoughts I think may be full

of error, illusion, and foolishness, but the fact that I am the person experiencing them is my only certainty. I don't have much regard for Descartes's further development of this insight, but the proposition that each "I" infers itself to be a coherent self, experiencing the mind's vagaries, has remained the challenge of subjective consciousness for philosophers and scientists since the historic Eastern contemplative traditions down to this day. For instance, Patañjali's *Yoga-sūtra* describes the self as the observer of the mind's relentless machinations. A recent online comment I read expressed a similar idea: "My mind is like my internet browser: Seventeen tabs are open, three of them are frozen, and I have no idea where the music is coming from."

After decades of behaviorism and cognitive neuropsychology, the study of subjective consciousness started its real comeback around 1990. We have Stuart Hameroff to thank for encouraging its re-emergence, by organizing the first Science of Consciousness conference, in 1994. At that event, up stepped the young, long-haired David Chalmers, who challenged the consciousness community with the call that the experience of qualia must be central to any theory of consciousness. Moreover, he introduced the phrase that continues to haunt neuroscientists and philosophers: the hard problem of consciousness.[3] Chalmers says: "The hard problem of consciousness is subjective experience. . . . How does a bunch of 86 billion neurons, interacting inside the brain, . . . produce the subjective experience of a mind and of the world?"[4]

Or as John Searle posed it: The essential trait of consciousness that we need to explain is "unified qualitative subjectivity."[5] Any explanation of consciousness, however attempted, must provide due regard for the conscious self as the unified, singular, coherent subject of its experience. (I stress the distinction between the conscious self and the types of bodily, psychological, social, and other selfhoods that I, as that conscious self, may adopt and identify with.) Such an explanation must also address the qualitative nature of our experiences, which leads us to a concept at the very heart of the discussion on consciousness: qualia.

"Qualia" (singular "quale") is a term derived from Latin. A quale is defined as "the internal and subjective component of sense perceptions, arising from stimulation of the senses by phenomena."[6]

Unfortunately, dictionary definitions don't do the concept justice. After Charles Sanders Peirce coined the term "qualia" in the mid-nineteenth century, Clarence Lewis developed its usage in the 1920s, but despite the concept's significance, it was largely ignored during the trends of the twentieth century. However, Michael Tye, compiler of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on qualia, comments: "The status of qualia is hotly debated in philosophy, largely because it is central to a proper understanding of the nature of consciousness."[7]

Analysis of qualia

Qualia are most commonly related to sensory stimuli. Scientists describe them as the qualities of our internal experiences, arising from the input of data from our senses to our brain. Consider our visual experience and the archetypical example of qualia: the redness of red. Experiencing redness is different from experiencing blueness. Here scientists are not talking about possible emotional responses to color, which may be a subsequent secondary psychological reaction. Rather, the quale of redness is actual experience of redness — not as an external physical property, but as the internal conscious experience of redness — that is, what it is like for me to undergo the color of red as redness.

Invoking physics, let us follow a path from object to brain to experience. For instance, light bouncing off a red ball is mostly of a certain wavelength, about 700 nanometers. That light enters our eyes, which act like video or phone cameras. The lenses focus the light onto light-sensitive plates called retinas. This particular wavelength activates certain receptor cone cells. They fire. (Other cones, e.g., receptive to stimulation by light around 470 and 530 nanometers, relate to blue and green, respectively.) Signals from cones and rods gather as a bundle at the top of the optic nerve, sending a binary signal down the nerve to the brain's visual-processing cortices. The brain has a complex pattern of digitalized electrical data.

The question arises, Why is our conscious experience of that neural data now in the format of a picture possessing the qualia properties of redness and roundness? To affirm this by suggesting

"I see a picture because the outside world is picturesque; there is the red ball, and I see its image" would be naive. After the image of the external scene is focused within the eye on the retina, it is transformed into electricity and sent down the optic nerve. The question, therefore, is, Where in the brain is that picture in the format of an image that my consciousness is experiencing? The brain certainly has digital data related to both the object and how the eye obtained light from it, but it does not contain that data as a picture, much less a picture that is a beautiful color, providing you with the phenomenal experience of redness.

The issue is that the brain contains much information but not in the format of our experiences, that is, as a picture of form and color. The aspects of color and imagery are the qualities of our experience — qualia. But how have the qualities we experience been generated from the brain's neural processes? This is the big problem for neuroscience and no generating mechanism has been identified, nor even satisfactorily theorized. This conundrum is well known. Here is an illustration produced by Christof Koch, which shows the same process.[8]

This diagram follows the path of rays of light as they enter the eyes and become focused on the retinas. Then it shows how the stimulation of cones and rods sets up biochemical electrical signals that travel to the brain. And, within the brain, those signals are presented as a network of electrical connections amongst an array of neurons. The stimulation of the eyes and the electrical signals arising from them are effectively a set of digitized data. This is standard and noncontroversial, so far.

But Koch's diagram contains a sleight of hand, for it claims that, somehow or other, the brain's digital data converts into the phenomenal experience of the image with its associated qualia. This is a jump that cannot be left unchallenged. There is no explanation offered for how, why, or where this process takes place. It simply is the presumption of physicalist or reductionist ideology that the brain must have generated conscious experience. This is a prime example of a theory of consciousness that seeks to avoid the actual "hard problem."

To give credit, though, Crick and Koch do state, "The most difficult aspect of consciousness is the so-called 'hard problem' of qualia — the redness of red, the painfulness of pain, and so on. No one has produced any plausible explanation as to how the experience of the redness of red could arise from the actions of the brain. It appears fruitless to approach this problem head-on."[9] Nonetheless, they and other scientists hope that further study of neuroscience may yield some progress.

More than two decades after Chalmers introduced "the hard problem of consciousness," two things are clear: There is still no plausible explanation for qualia, and if anything, there is less confidence that a neuroscience-based theory will explicate consciousness and the problem of qualia. My position, in company with Searle's "unified qualitative subjectivity," is that if you cannot explain the subjective experience of qualia, you do not have a theory of consciousness.

Qualia are real

So significant are qualia that many scientists have attempted to deny that qualia exist. It would take much space to address each of their arguments, so I will refer to Michael Tye's conclusion. He explains that our own experience of them, at this and at every moment, should be enough to establish their actuality. "In this sense," he says, "it is difficult to deny that there are qualia."[10]

Typically, it is accepted that qualia are certainly present within experiences arising from sensory stimuli and internal sensations (hunger, thirst, pain, and so on); tentatively in emotional states (happiness, sadness, fear, etc.); but perhaps less certainly within memory, ideas, thoughts, and desires. I contend that for any aspect of mental content, specific what-it-is-like qualia can be established. My definition of qualia is that they constitute the qualitative nature of the experience of all forms of mental content.

Qualia are apprehended

There are no such things as subconscious qualia, since they are what is actually experienced — regardless of how inattentive we are to them or how unappreciative we are of the phenomenon. However, mindful introspection and attention are valuable in helping us ascertain the actuality of qualia as we regularly experience them in our everyday life.

Qualia are subjective, private, ineffable

It is impossible to communicate the actual subjective nature of our experiences of qualia to another person. Imagine how you might explain to a person with monochrome color-deficiency vision what it is like to experience the redness of red. Comparatives would be useless in that context — as they are even when communicating the experience to a person with chromatic vision. Similarly, how would you convey the experience of music to someone with the total inability to hear sounds?

Qualia possess inexplicable qualities

After all their incredible progress, neuroscientists cannot currently explain the nature of qualia with reference to the brain's known functions, properties, and attributes.

Reductionist theorists suggest that qualia — seemingly endowed with unique qualities — are really qualities somehow contained in the properties of the objects that stimulate them. This is the idea of supervenience, by which the properties of a higher-level, for example, qualia, might be somehow determined by the properties of a lower-level such as, in this case, the properties of light. Suppose, for instance, that we experience colors because color is a property of light. This proposition can be challenged with a simple experiment: Close your eyes tightly, completely cover them with your hands, shutting out any light from your eyes, and then apply gentle but firm pressure to your eyeballs. The result is that you will experience colors even though no light energy was involved. Instead, the pressure stimulated the cones to fire, then the brain received the stimuli as neural electrical data, after which color qualia were experienced within your mind. Hence, qualia related to color are features of inner experience, not external properties. There may be correlations between the properties of sensory stimuli and what we experience, but we can be certain only that the qualia we experience exist internally. We have no way of confirming their presence in this form elsewhere, and we seem led to accept that there is an intractable difference between the digital data contained in the brain and the subjective experience of the qualia related to that neural state.

The Hard Problem remains

Returning to Crick and Koch's diagram (above), it seems that the process of exploring the physics, biology, and neuroscience of light traveling from an object to our eyes, instigating biochemical signals to the brain, and establishing a network of neural correlates represents the *easy* problems defined by Chalmers.[11] But the hard problem of how we perceive digital data as an image-form of qualia remains. According to Michael Tye, many scholars thus see qualia as de facto evidence of consciousness being non-neural. Indeed, if

qualia are irreducible to any known physical properties or processes, what does this say about the conscious self, who experiences itself as the observer of qualia? Does it not follow that this also must be irreducible to physical properties?

Perception and the brain

Qualia, the self, and subjectivity are not the only issues facing a model of perception that entirely relies on brain functions. The following are two more examples.

(*1*) *Sparseness*

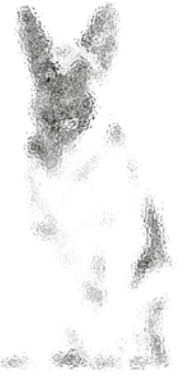
Sparseness is a feature of all sensory reception, but here I will consider only visual sparseness. When our eyes regard a scene, the number of bits of information passing through the pupils and hitting the retinas is about six billion. After reception by the cones and rods, and collection, the total amount of data ready to be transmitted down the optic nerve has been significantly reduced. By the time that data is received at the visual processing area of the brain, the data volume is a small fraction of the original. This suggests that there should be a significant disparity between the paucity of data that the brain contains and the richness of our perception.[12]

Many neuroscientists, therefore, conclude that the brain makes its best guess at what is going on, based on sensory input. Andy Clark suggests that we are "nature's own guessing machines, forever trying to stay one step ahead by surfing the incoming waves of sensory perception." [13] However, does this really explain the detail and accuracy of veridical perception — the direct perception of stimuli as they exist?

No doubt, a function along the lines of predictive processing — by which our mental model of the environment is generated and updated to *best accord with actual sensory input* — may be a real feature of our experience. But is it certain that it is a purely neural process? We already demonstrated that brain activity cannot account for qualia, and, similarly, we cannot explain in neural terms the image-enhancement of qualia that we factually experience. A

guessing brain could not assure us that the picture of reality we observe is accurate, especially considering a second issue: the time lag between the processing of different sensory inputs.

What you see.



What the brain has available for you to see.

(2) *Time lag*

Consider the example of witnessing a handclap close by. The light and the vibration from the clapping reach our eyes and ears at roughly the same instant, and in your mind, you hear the clap and see the hands meeting as a unified synchronous event. But this is a mystery in neuroscience, because it takes the brain longer — up to a half-second longer[14] — to process data from our eyes than from our ears. This has profound philosophical implications. If there is a significant delay between when the brain has dealt with the input from our ears and when it completes the processing of input from our eyes, then how is it that our consciousness experiences them simultaneously? Two options have been suggested to address this issue. One is that the brain holds back awareness of the sound until it has completed processing the image to go with it. The other is that on the basis of the sound it processed, the brain then tries to predict and generate an image to go with it, in advance of actually having the definite data. Neither option is satisfactory. Either our

conscious experience of the world is a fraction of a second after the fact, or our visual impressions are guesswork. This fact of the brain's inability to handle perception led Anil Seth, the UK's most prominent consciousness scientist, to say, "If hallucination is a kind of uncontrolled perception, then perception right here and right now is also a kind of hallucination, but a controlled hallucination in which the brain's predictions are reined in by sensory information from the world." [15]

Brain model

The proposition that neural functions alone account for all aspects of consciousness ends up as a view of perception, experience, and our sense of self that's unrecognizable to our everyday understanding. The physicalists, therefore, appeal to our tendency to be deluded by the brain. Somehow, they claim, the brain casts up higher-order echoes that create an illusion of the self, qualia, experience, and free will. Yet howsoever we may be fooled by our thoughts and self-conceptions, it requires a real self to be the subject who experiences erroneous thoughts or illusions.

This brain-model perspective, which denies the self and its subjective experience, arises not from any positive evidence to substantiate how consciousness can be attributed to physical and neural processes. Rather, it is an abductive speculation that fails to show how the brain alone can be responsible for (a) the existence of a self, (b) the conscious awareness of qualia or even everyday perception, and (c) treasured human values or metaphysical aspirations. Taking into account all the evidence regarding both our experience and what we know of neuroscience, I suggest that the brain model fails as an account of consciousness. We need a bigger and better model.

An alternative approach

My prior analysis was intended to establish the inordinate, perhaps intractable, difficulties of the physicalist enterprise to explain how 1.4 kilograms of biological matter can produce the conscious

experience we know to be our actuality. While no one can unequivocally rule out the possibility that scientists might someday find the key to consciousness within physics and neuroscience, none can claim that such success is guaranteed. Hence, an intellectual society should remain open-minded and encourage the exploration of a range of options to explain consciousness. I am not suggesting that all researchers should abandon their quest for a neural basis of consciousness but just that the physicalist presumption is too limited to explore consciousness and should not, therefore, be our sole approach to it.

The dilemma Carl Hempel identifies in *The Theoretician's Dilemma* is whether the notion that physics can explain all phenomena refers to our current or future physics. Clearly, physics as currently understood is incapable of handling — or to be kind, too incomplete to handle — all issues, including consciousness. But physicalism is not rescued by claiming that it will be a future physics that explains consciousness. Indeed, what sort of physics might that be? Should physics not extend the scope of reality to include other fundamental phenomena like consciousness?

With this in mind, I present an alternative approach: What if consciousness is irreducible to currently known physical properties? What if it is a distinct, fundamental aspect or property of reality? And what if we took that idea seriously? By this I mean that we do not examine or judge consciousness from the standpoint of our assumptions about physical matter. For when we regard consciousness as a fundamental feature, a function, or a property in its own right, it becomes inevitable that we raise questions about how we observe and frame our description and modelling of the physical world. This is important because the suggestion that consciousness is irreducible and fundamental often invokes mind-matter dualism and interactionism — the very issues that for centuries have plagued consciousness research.

Muddied waters

Although it should be clear from our analysis that physical properties are distinct from the qualia properties of our mental experience

and that both are distinct from the conscious perception of functions and properties of matter, still we tend to forego the analysis of these functions and properties and muddy the waters by asking about substance: What is consciousness made of?

But this question is epistemologically unfair. Physics cannot answer this question even for matter, so why demand an answer for consciousness? The deeper physics delves into the constitution of matter, the more amorphous and insubstantial it seems to be. We end up with subatomic particles whose nature and existence are modelled and defined by the properties we need them to have in order to explain the behavior we observe. Physicists then gleefully inform us that even these so-called particles aren't absolute but are transitory products emerging from a sea of probabilities. Science is the study of our experience of the world, but all we know of matter is what it appears to be like and what it appears to do — not what it is.

Our study of physical matter examines its distinct properties and functions — without defining its ontological substance. I argue that we should adopt the same approach with consciousness. Our inability to ascertain the actual substance of matter, mind, and consciousness does not render them unreal; it simply highlights what the scientific method allows us to explore. Perhaps, once we better understand the functions and relationships of these various phenomena, we may unravel the substance issues.

Eastern insights

This is, of course, not the first time these issues have been pondered on. For millennia, Eastern contemplative traditions engaged in radical study and arduous subjective experimentation to isolate the function of conscious awareness from the various states and properties of thoughts, sensations, and experiences stirred up by the mind. Such insights are still available to us within the corpus of Vedic philosophies, particularly Vedānta, Sāṅkhya, and Yoga. There is a range of interpretations applied to these schools of thought, many tending toward idealist or immaterialist notions associated with monism. But perhaps the best fit to the evidence of modern science is the interpretative perspective of *bhedābheda* theory.

This ontology posits that the forms and properties of the world are real, along with the reality of the consciousness that observes those forms and properties. *Bhedābheda* refers to a recognition of the simultaneous oneness (*abheda*) and difference (*bheda*) present in an ontological relationship of two facets of reality. Some might consider this inherently contradictory or a heinous violation of philosophical logic. However, it is the routine way in which we regard the world around us and a founding principle of science and mathematics.

For instance, mathematics is built on our ability to count and manipulate quantities. Counting requires us to distinguish one item from another, so they may be individually enumerated. But unless we determine criteria for also assigning commonality to a group of objects or a set of members, our counting would never stop or be meaningful. In this way, mathematics recognizes both the individuality and the distinctiveness of each of the members of a set (i.e., their difference or *bheda*) and the commonality that relates them to the set (their oneness or *abheda*). Equations and formulae follow the same principle: in $E = mc^2$ both sides are simultaneously different and equivalent.

According to this approach, a single ontological reality manifests as diverse yet interrelated fundamental functions. Hence, we may reframe matter as a particular form of reality that possesses energy and information and manifests specific physical properties and consciousness as that form of reality with the property to observe the information inherent within physical properties. Although the properties and functions of matter and consciousness are distinctly different, there is also a natural interactive relationship between them based on the sharing of information.

Ātmā

Like many physical fields that exhibit particle properties, most Vedic philosophical schools also suggested that there is a fundamental unit of the field of consciousness, called *ātmā* in Sanskrit. I have adopted this helpful term because of its precise meaning and definition: the smallest individual entity possessing consciousness

and constituted of the property of consciousness. The *ātmā* is the subject of our personal experiences; it is the I, the "who I am," the unitary conscious self that has the fundamental experience of personal existence, identity, and conscious selfhood.

The Vedic traditions explore how the *ātmā* may extend its conception of itself by identifying with an extraneous persona. Personae are forms of selfhood derived in terms of the physical body, mental constructs, social relationships, and so on. There is a clear distinction between the *ātmā* as the conscious self, that is, the entity capable of subjective consciousness, and the various aspects of psychological content and conceptions, including notions of our self-image.

Sānkhya and the mind as interface

For this model to be credible, it must help explain the mechanisms by which consciousness observes the properties of matter. In the Sāṅkhya analysis, the interaction of the conscious self with the physical world's properties is facilitated by a set of non-neural cognitive functions acting as a form of interface. In simple terms, this concept equates to the traditional function referred to rather generally as "mind." The Sāṅkhya concept of the mind as an interface is considered a non-neural psychic organ with the non-sentient cognitive function of decoding the information of physical systems and representing it in qualia formats available for consciousness to apprehend. Modern philosophy of mind tends to lump consciousness, cognition, emotion, awareness, and all our mental baggage into one vague concept called the mind and then confuses the issue still further by conflating all of them with brain processes.

In essence, the Sāṅkhya system clarifies the particular roles of the conscious self, the mind, and the brain. This threefold model is a brilliant insight of timeless wisdom. It offers definite utility for clinical psychology, however you regard the ontology. And it has parallels with modern technology. Consider the four functions involved in computer processing: sensors, CPU, screen, and operator. Sensors gather information for processing within the CPU. Such data in a digital format is sufficient for the computer's analysis and response

output. So, what is the point of the screen? It is not for the CPU's benefit. Rather, it is the device by which the computer's internal workings become comprehensible to the observer, which is something other than itself. The screen acts as an interface by allowing communication and the sharing of information between two very different things: a silicon chip and a human being.

Similarly, the non-neural nature of qualia and mental content is evidence that the brain requires some form of interface between its data and an independent observer. Computing's four functions correlate with the senses, the brain, the interface of the mind, and the *ātmā* observer. This matches our intuitive understanding. Although the detail is beyond the scope of this article, it is possible to use the principle of a non-neural interfacing mind to account for the two examples of visual sparseness and the processing time-lag without resorting to claiming that all our perception is an illusory hallucination or happens after the fact.

Volition

To appreciate the implications of this approach, we could ask a further question: Is this conscious entity, the *ātmā*, merely an observer, or does it also possess volition? The Sāṅkhya system provides a detailed analysis of the mind as a set of cognitive subfunctions, intricately modelling their interactions as they process the information flow and its transformation from physical properties exhibited by our surrounding world to internal subjective experiences of qualia. Sāṅkhya describes perception as decoding the properties of physical objects and neural data to mental content. In parallel with physics, the proposition is that the properties of matter are a manifestation of inherent information. And the interactions of physical matter with mind, and mind with consciousness, entail not only the exchange but also the transmutation of the format of that information.

If the process of perception facilitates the flow of information from the external world to that of our inner mental experience, then volition is the reverse process. The traditions of Vedānta, Vaiṣṇava Sāṅkhya, and the *Yoga-sūtra* assert that consciousness is causal

in that it is a source of original information that affects change in physical systems. Volition, or free will, may be defined as the *ātmā's* wish to vary its experience.

The *Yoga-sūtra* clearly describes the sequence. Volition expressed by the *ātmā* generates some particular mental content in the form of intent, desire, strategy, and so on. The contents of such intention or purpose (*arthavattva*) are encoded in a set of data in terms of specific combinations of the three *guṇas* (modes or qualities). This *guṇa* data forms the *avyaya*, or constitutional information content, which then specifies the subliminal sensory qualities, the *tan-mātras* (subtle sound, touch, form, taste, and smell). And when the *tan-mātras* with those *guṇa* specifications inhere on the fields of the five elements, or *mahā-bhūtas* (earth, water, fire, air, and ether), the particular observable properties of the *mahā-bhūtas* are manifest and can be observed by our senses.

This is the phenomenon that Robert Jahn and Brenda Dunne so diligently explored within the Princeton Engineering Anomalous Research (PEAR) experiments carried out between 1979 and 2007.[16] This program was set up to study the interaction of human consciousness with sensitive physical devices. The authors concluded: "The enormous databases produced by PEAR provide clear evidence that human thought and emotion can produce measurable influences on physical reality." The Vedic model is consistent with these findings, and thus a number of researchers are exploring ways to examine the volition of non-neural consciousness and its interaction with various physical and biological systems.

Source of novel information

What does this mean for the rest of science? My view is that all scientific study relates to the information content that defines the properties and interactions of systems — whether they be physical, chemical, or biological. However, there are numerous situations wherein research encounters anomalous changes in entropy and information content. The standard recourse is to attribute such effects to vague stochastic or random processes. But why rely on chance and randomness with such certitude? After all,

these conceptual ideas do not qualify as scientific theory, for they explain nothing, cannot be tested, and, rather, discourage further investigation.

Perhaps a certain openness to a known source of novel information is called for, a consideration that information generated from conscious intention may be responsible for the increased, specified, or integrated information content that we may observe in systems? For those who suspect that consciousness cannot be reduced to neural complexity, such an approach seems imperative, not a mere fancy. PEAR's findings and other studies have demonstrated the impact of conscious intent arising from individual and coherent group consciousness. It may well be time to conduct far greater research into the link between conscious volition, psychological intent, and the change or manipulation of information content in physical, biological, neural, and quantum systems. For instance, I believe that the work of Stuart Hamerof (though I know he holds a different interpretation) regarding Orchestrated Objective Reduction[17] indicates a potential route by which non-neural consciousness could affect quantum states within microtubules and produce non-deterministic neural firing.

What if the effect of intention, whether from localized, conjoint, or pervasive sources of consciousness can be shown to play a vital role in the formation of higher-informational structures and processes in physics and biology? Where should we see this effect? Perhaps in situations in which a high-information state or a precisely specified system has appeared from low-information sources and processes. Or wherever there is specificity emerging from a state of the equivalent of white noise — for instance in biology, physics, cosmology, etc. Or where an initial state possesses inexplicable low entropy or fine-tuning of its parameters. Or where there are nonlinear interactions among components of a system producing emergent complexity.

The PEAR results indicated that the effect of intention was enhanced when subjects identified with the system they were trying to influence or when a group of subjects shared coherent intention; also, that such effects could be achieved regardless of distance from the equipment and even if the intention was applied before or after the measurement. There were also preliminary studies of

the influence on random-event equipment from the psychological intent of other species.

To summarize, there is a clear rationale for proposing that consciousness is an irreducible property. Compared with purely physicalist approaches, the perspective of non-neural consciousness as a fundamental feature of reality far more comprehensively accounts for perception, psychological factors, and subjective experience. Such a perspective also offers a way to integrate our sciences and humanities with the personal convictions and intuitions most of us have about the nature of our own existence and may open up immense possibilities for research and discovery. Indeed, it may well lead us to developing new technologies, new applications, and new advances and could unlock many conundrums plaguing current theories on the origin of life, speciation, cosmic fine-tuning, universal structure, quantum phenomena, and so on. All in all, science gains from embracing consciousness rather than ignoring it. Consciousness is not just a missing piece of the scientific puzzle — it is the missing foundation.

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Keeping Cows in the Center: Cow Care in ISKCON

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Almost from the beginning of Śrīla Prabhupāda's mission in the West, in 1965, he expressed the desire to develop farm communities that featured "cow protection," or the lifelong care and maintenance of cow and bull bovines. In much of his writing and speaking, he elaborated on his concern for cows (we use the word "cows" in this gender-inclusive sense). As his mission began growing, some of his followers accepted the challenge to develop such communities, and up to the present day the number of them has gradually increased to a hundred. My central question is, What is the current trajectory of cow protection in ISKCON, and in what ways might this remarkable feature become a more substantial component of ISKCON's culture and missionizing profile? First, I aim to show that a very gradual progression in some aspects of cow protection has led to a sense of urgency within the international organization to foster a spirit of acceptance of cow protection's importance in the Vaiṣṇava community and among the wider public. Second, there are indications that concerned ISKCON members are developing a better understanding of the practical requirements for implementing viable cow protection programs. And third, broad

changes worldwide (especially mainstream environmentalism and the popularization of veganism) can be more effectively brought to bear and be demonstrably responded to, by ISKCON members, for the wider public to pay attention to the Society's "plain living and high thinking" message.

To frame this discussion, I begin by sketching the historical background to the cow protection efforts before giving a brief history of the practice within ISKCON, bringing us to the present-day situation. Next I describe current organizational efforts on the Society's global level, especially through the Governing Body Commission (GBC) Ministry of Cow Protection and Agriculture. Finally, after considering obstacles to progress, I conclude with hopeful indicators.

Contexts for ISKCON's cow protection program

In an early lecture in America, Śrīla Prabhupāda said, "This Krishna consciousness movement is for the protection of brahminical culture and cows."[1] While his brief mission statement calls for unpacking, we may first ask how this idea came about.

From many more comments Prabhupāda made on the topic, it is clear that passages in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* or *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam,* were foundational. Of particular relevance was the text's frame-story episode (in Canto 1, Chapters 16 and 17), which involves the torture of a cow and a bull — embodiments of mother earth and father dharma, respectively — by Kali, the personification of the current age of moral decay, Kali-yuga. Prabhupāda also invoked several other scriptural references, especially Krishna's description of duties for *vaiśyas,* which include *go-rakṣa*, the protection of cows (*Bhagavad Gītā* 18.44). To be sure, for centuries these same texts grounded the teachings of other Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava preceptors, yet — with notable exceptions — these preceptors didn't call persistent attention to protecting and taking care of cows as a key principle for practicing *bhakti-yoga*.[2] Was there, then, a more immediate impetus for Prabhupāda's outspokenness on this matter?

I would suggest that India's prevailing *zeitgeist* of modernization and industrialization spurred in Prabhupada a sense of urgency

to launch *bhakti*-centered and cow-centered agricultural projects beyond India. Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi seems to have been a likely key source of inspiration. Of course, Prabhupāda's dedication to Gandhi's Indian independence movement fell away as he wholeheartedly adopted the mission of his spiritual preceptor, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, from the time they met, in 1922. Nevertheless, my hunch is that with respect to economics and its links to technology, as well as concern for animals, especially cows, Gandhi was Prabhupāda's key source of inspiration. For Gandhi was outspoken about the importance of cow care and protection and sought to demonstrate his convictions by establishing model agrarian communities.[3]

Another, related hunch is that Prabhupāda experienced deep disappointment when he saw the newly formed independent Indian state pursue economic policies favoring industrialization and urbanization, which constituted an about-face from the village- and farm-centered socio-economic traditions that Gandhi had much championed. In the vision of Jawaharlal Nehru, the new nation's first prime minister, huge dams were to be modern India's temples. Traditionalists like Gandhi, however, considered such ideas and policies as rank neglect of the spirituality of her ancient temples and *tīrthas* (that is, sacred features of the built and natural landscapes). Worse, as state-level legal measures to protect cows were seen as largely compromised and ineffectual, hope that newly independent India would finally realize the dream of establishing cow protection as a national priority was fading.[4] Rather, Indian farmers were rapidly adopting mechanization, especially in the form of tractors — thereby making ox-power redundant, and they were accelerating the production of dairy products, consigning increasing numbers of nonproductive cows and bulls to the slaughterhouse to supply a growing overseas market for beef and leather. Such trends seemed to show a continuity and even expansion of a British imperial-style industrialized economy, rather than a recovery of time-tested direct dependence on land and cows — still seen functioning to some extent in villages of post-independence India.

Keep in mind that Śrīla Prabhupāda retired to Vrindavan (on and off, starting in the mid-1950s), where he would have appreciated and identified with the local culture's reverence for cows. *Gośālās*

(cow shelters) run by temples, pious householders, or sadhus would have given Prabhupāda a sense that this land of Krishna's eternal pastimes affirmed Krishna's presence by virtue of the presence of cared-for cows. Thus, any replication elsewhere of this most sacred land could be successful only if cows would be similarly cared for and protected from harm.

After leaving India in August of 1965, Śrīla Prabhupāda's first destination in America was the modest-sized industrial town of Butler, Pennsylvania, the home of his official hosts, Gopal and Sally Agarwal. On the bus ride to Butler from New York, once clear of the metropolis and its New Jersey suburbs, Prabhupāda would have noted the verdant rolling-hill landscape of farmland with grazing cows. He may have thought — as many settlers had thought for generations — that America might be just the place for a fresh start. But Prabhupada's fresh start would be different from that of both previous settlers and latter-day back-to-the-land farmers. The agriculture he would establish would have at its center the care of cows throughout their natural lives. This was at odds with slaughtering cows and other animals, which many assumed was necessary for sustenance. Americans were open to new ideas, so why wouldn't they accept this apparently new but actually ancient idea of keeping kine as respected partners in "plain living and high thinking"?[5]

After a brief stay in Butler, followed by two years of struggling to establish himself with the help of a small band of followers in New York City, Prabhupāda began expressing his desire to develop a country ashram or farm community.[6] When a farm in West Virginia was purchased, Prabhupāda expressed eagerness for it to become a place for his followers to practice forgoing most modern conveniences for the ideal of cultivating Krishna consciousness. In June 1968, he wrote to his disciple Hayagrīva:

> . . . Better to live there without modern amenities. But to live a natural healthy life for executing Krishna consciousness. It may be an ideal village where the residents will have plain living and high thinking. For plain living we must have sufficient land for raising crops and pasturing grounds for the cows. If there

> is sufficient grains and production of milk, then the whole economic problem is solved.[7]

The slogan "sufficient grains and production of milk" became a cornerstone of Śrīla Prabhupāda's idea for how his followers — and human society — could live simply but well. He insisted that "the whole economic problem is solved" by farming, integral to which would be the care of cows for milk and the engagement of bulls or oxen in draught work. His confidence in this formula inspired some followers to take up his challenge. But with little or no experience in country living, farming, or cowherding practices, the prospect proved to be not as simple as they had hoped.

From early ISKCON cow care to the present—four phases

Kālakaṇṭha Dāsa, the current GBC Minister for Cow Protection and Agriculture, suggests that ISKCON's history of cow protection can be divided into four phases: (a) the pioneering phase (1968–1974), (b) a phase of growing experience (up to 1988), (c) a ten-year setback (1988–98), and (d) a revival and expansion phase of substantial investment in cow protection (1998 to the present).

New Vrindavan, in West Virginia USA, was ISKCON's first farm project. After a slow start on the initial 133 acres — carried out with considerable excitement and enthusiasm, if little or no experience — the devotees allowed the cow population to increase with the aim of having a substantial milk yield. Indeed, at its peak around 1990, New Vrindavan had 160 to 180 bovines, with a yield of some thousand gallons of milk per day. Much was sold to nearby dairy companies. But from several perspectives, this situation proved unsustainable, as became clear by 1992. Beginning much earlier, in 1974, managerial attention shifted away from agriculture and cows toward constructing Prabhupāda's Palace of Gold, an elaborately ornamental edifice dedicated to ISKCON's founder-*ācārya*. This shift prompted Paramānanda Dāsa, the manager of the cows, to relocate to a new farm in Pennsylvania (acquired in 1975), a project that Śrīla Prabhupāda named Gita Nagari.[8]

Gradually, additional farm projects were undertaken,[9] but from 1988, compounding challenges in ISKCON's spiritual and managerial leadership led to a ten-year setback in farming and cow protection. Numerous devotees left farm projects as well as urban temples; financial support for farming and cow protection dropped to a minimum; tools and technology for maintaining functional cow care was lacking; and with agriculture and cow care services carrying a low prestige factor, few devotees were inclined to dedicate themselves. (In contrast, book distribution was the high-prestige activity, attracting most devotees).

The year 1998 marks a major change in this story, which shifted from the U.S.A. to Europe, India, and Australia as loci for new agricultural communities in which cow care held a prominent place. A matured concern for sustainability prevailed, driving careful management and substantial investment.[10] Of particular note in Europe is New Vraja Dhama (NVD), in southwestern Hungary, a 280-hectare farm community (the land was acquired in 1993). NVD has developed with considerable planning and organizational structuring, with a strong priority to realize the ideal of integrating cow protection and care with agriculture. The managers keep the modest-size herd of some fifty cows and bulls to a total of sixty bovines, calculated as the maximum sustainable number on the available land.[11] Some forty liters of milk per day goes mainly for food preparations offered daily to the temple's presiding deities, Rādhā-Śyāmasundara. Three trained pairs of oxen are currently engaged in draught activities for food production.

Assessing ISKCON's current cow care programs

Over the fifty-plus years of ISKCON's expansion, the ideal of agricultural activity with cows persisted, with a modest number of such communities being established outside India and significantly more in India. As of 2020, there are practically a hundred projects maintaining cows: 60 in India, 17 in Europe, 8 in North America, 5 in Asia, 3 in Latin America, 3 in Australia, 2 in Africa, and 1 in Russia. Most projects have only between five and ten cows. Gita Nagari in Pennsylvania has almost 100. In India, Mayapur's cow sanctuary

(*gośālā*) has about 360 cows, and Tirupati has the highest number of cows worldwide, some 500 in three separate *gośālās*. The total number of cows worldwide is an estimated 5,000 — about 4,000 of them in India.

Of course, these numbers tell little about the quality of cow care, nor do they reveal the economics of the projects and the trajectory of further cow care activities. One may ask what relation these activities have to ISKCON's preaching, and how and to what extent cow care is enhancing it. Does cow protection have a role in attracting people to practicing Krishna consciousness? And in practical terms, do people see ISKCON's cow care activities as a viable model for nonviolent agrarian life that could be learned from and successfully imitated? We may answer these questions positively, but only with considerable qualifications.

To assess current ISKCON cow care and protection in all its aspects, it may be helpful to apply an analogy of a building, with its foundation, structure, and roof.[12] The foundation is the principle that all cows and their offspring are to be protected for their entire natural lives. The structure of this activity is lifelong quality care for the cows — indicated by whether the cows are given ample nourishment and freedom of movement in the open; whether the calves are given sufficient time with their mothers and sufficient nursing; whether bulls and oxen are being properly (gently) trained and engaged in work; whether proper medical care is given; and the extent to which these animals receive affection from human community members. The roof is the cows' and bulls' positive contribution to the community, both in tangible and intangible products and results. Milk, dung, and urine are the main tangible products; work (hauling, plowing, energy generation) are the oxen's tangible products; and inspiration, health and well-being, and a positive impact on the public are less tangible results.

Each individual project would have to be assessed with respect to each of these three components to accurately build a broad picture, but we may be able to make some general and preliminary observations. As expected, the foundational dimension — protecting cows lifelong — is practiced in all projects, and this can safely be called a non-negotiable principle. The second principle, care, is sure to vary considerably from project to project. A general theme does

seem to prevail in most projects, indicating shortcomings: the lack of sufficient and qualified staff. Cowherding and farming generally are low-prestige occupations in ISKCON, typically on the opposite end of the prestige enjoyed in "front-line preaching" such as book distribution and public speaking and *kīrtana* engagements — the sort of activities that new recruits are initially exposed to and would have been attracted to take part in. Further, even in rural ISKCON communities, many residents may not be particularly inspired by the simple-living paradigm, and something that is not a strong community value can become discouraging for the new recruits to pursue. Moreover, the few dedicated and qualified cowherds and farmers tend to be relatively invisible, making their services less attractive to potential recruits. Also, with managers concerned to maintain properties and expand the international mission, cow care and farming may hold a lesser priority in terms of attention and funding, or the tendency may be to keep expenses for these activities to a minimum — what is deemed sufficient for basic maintenance and the ability to show the public, and especially donors, that cow protection is being done.

With respect to the third principle, the cows' positive contribution to the community, again, this will vary greatly among the various projects. To generalize, it must surely be said that the economics of cow care in ISKCON is far from what one would like it to be. On the positive side, one could point to the Gita Nagari farm in Pennsylvania where, since 2013, the community has become an example of a moderate success in terms of milk production. Milk is professionally processed and legally sold to ISKCON restaurants, temples, and devotee families in cities in nearby states (as was specifically advised by Śrīla Prabhupāda).[13] Gita Nagari residents have also noted remarkable changes in attitude among visitors, especially students, after interacting with the cows. This points to the intangible benefits of cows in relation to ISKCON's mission.

One could also consider New Vraja Dhama in Hungary, where careful sustainability monitoring and detailed calculations are made. The estimate is that the cow department runs at 50% sustainability, against an over-all sustainability index for the project standing at 33%.[14] The Hungarian project can also be appreciated for its prioritizing bull training and engagement in farm-related work.

Another project, New Govardhan, in eastern Australia, deserves mention as a promising model, with its highly successful engagement of young volunteers through its Krishna Village program, along with its efforts to implement syntropic farming techniques.

Surely the most challenging aspect for ISKCON farm projects is the engagement of bulls and oxen in productive work. The need for qualified and dedicated teamsters is strongly felt, even if a given project has sufficient land to meaningfully engage the bulls. Devotees are acutely aware of Śrīla Prabhupāda's warning that if the bulls are not engaged, the tendency will be to see them as a burden.[15]

Transcending cultural inertia

The challenges of maintaining and engaging bulls or oxen call attention to a broader question with respect to cow protection and cow care in ISKCON, revolving around what must be seen as the necessity for radical changes in economic models. In turn, to entertain the idea that radical changes are necessary raises the question to what extent it is even possible to establish practices of self-sufficiency and sustainability with cows and bulls in the present-day social, political, and economic conditions.[16] Prabhupāda generally showed firm confidence that radical changes are possible and necessary, given the utter frailty of the current economy and extractive, fossil fuel-based technology. Yet to translate Prabhupāda's confidence into enduring, successful agriculture-and-cow-based practice is a challenge that seems to be a long way from being met and embraced in ISKCON.

No doubt there is a deep-seated resistance to change within ISKCON, owing to the prevailing economic system's apparent continuing success. Modern Vaiṣṇavas are deeply habituated to enjoying the seeming comforts and conveniences of an extractive techno-economy, with little sense of urgency to make fundamental lifestyle changes.[17] As much as they value austerity in principle, in practice they are quite happy to limit austerity largely to the observance of the "regulative principles of freedom."[18] Nonetheless, in recent years the increasing volume of mass-media attention to human negative environmental impact has awakened a growing

concern within ISKCON to make more consequential efforts to work toward the ideal. A significant (if still little known among rank-and-file ISKCON members) indicator of this concern is the extent to which organizational work is being undertaken in the last five years by the ISKCON-GBC Ministry of Cow Protection and Agriculture (IMCPA).

Specifically, the IMCPA has been organizing annual farming conferences on a rotating basis on each continent, gradually calling attention to the need to generate more attention to this program, assessing present practices and facilities, pooling knowledge, and developing resources for an expansion of existing projects and the initiation of new projects. The Ministry is currently preparing a series of courses, addressing the need for practical skills such as cow management and syntropic farming. Furthermore, a high-quality resource center is being planned that will offer information — especially in digital form — for researchers. This center will also serve as a hub for receiving personalized guidance in all areas related to sustainable agriculture and cow care.[19]

Trends and issues: vegans, ahimsa milk, "balancing" industrial milk use

To close out this sketch of cow protection, I should mention that another trend has been having an impact within ISKCON: veganism, the dietary practice of avoiding all animal *and* dairy products.

It has become increasingly clear that industrial dairy practices are fully implicated in cow slaughter, since bulls birthed by milk cows have no economic value and are therefore sold for eventual slaughter, and since milk cows are sold for slaughter when their milk production reduces. So increasing numbers of Vaiṣṇavas question whether it is right to purchase industrial (or even small-scale) dairy. The status-quo argument is made that by offering such dairy to Krishna, the cows receive benefit, possibly such that they become elevated at least to human life subsequent to the present life. One version of this position argues for "ahimsa balancing," which has suggested that industrial dairy consumption need not be reduced, so long as one donates equivalent monetary amounts spent on

such consumption for one or another cow protection program.[20] The same approach could be taken as a transitional approach, which aims for eventual transition to pure ahimsa-milk use, by encouraging its expansion and ultimately eliminating patronage for the former. Other Vaiṣṇavas find these positions less than satisfying, given that the goal is to offer milk to Krishna that has been given by cows who are protected and cared for, such cows being seen as specifically dear to Krishna and therefore giving the best milk. Those identifying with this latter position see it as imperative for Vaiṣṇavas to accelerate the process of making ahimsa-milk sufficiently available by themselves restricting their own diets with respect to dairy products, to only consuming ahimsa-milk. With respect to this last position, one concern is that some immature adherents of this view will make it their mission to preach against the use of milk by devotees altogether, which could be particularly problematic for the health of children and youth.

As an initiative to encourage ISKCON temples to move toward making arrangements for at least the temple deities to receive offerings with dairy only from protected cows, from the 2019 annual general meeting of the GBC came a guideline urging temples to have a plan in place to implement this standard by Lord Krishna's appearance festival in 2022.[21]

Summary reflections

Almost since its inception in the mid-1960s, ISKCON has had a mandate from its founder-*ācārya* to establish farms where male and female cows have an integral role in the communities' economic and spiritual life. Since 1968, the attempts to realize his vision met with limited success on relatively small scales. The challenge is to go beyond what might be called symbolic cow protection to actual engagement and integration of cows in truly productive farming that serves to sustain the physical nourishment of Vaiṣṇava communities, with radically reduced dependence on the fossil-fuel–based techno-economy worldwide. The aim is to establish farming communities that can also serve as models for emulation by members of the wider Vaiṣṇava community and people in the wider society, because they

fully function in practical terms. Intentional community building has a long history — mainly one of short-lived enthusiasm followed by internal conflicts and final breakdown. Can ISKCON farm community projects demonstrate the sort of intentional living that can function long-term, in actually sustainable ways, in which cow protection and cow care are an integral component? The Vaiṣṇava tradition, rooted in remembering and celebrating Lord Krishna as the divine cowherd, says that it is both possible and necessary. Much work is before us to realize this. Much of the work to be done is well defined, while much is yet to be further understood to turn the vision into a reality. With up to five decades of experience in ISKCON's efforts to establish agricultural communities with cows, several members of ISKCON are helping these communities, as can a wide variety of alternative farming experts. Prabhupāda wrote (in an early letter), "I do not know whether these ideals can be given practical shape," suggesting the experimental nature of trying to implement the vision. Vaiṣṇavas cherish the hope that it *is* possible, given the simple reality that there is no change to the fact that our sustenance comes from the earth, farming is the systematic cultivation of our sustenance, and cows have a special relationship to the earth that is critically valuable to humans and the earth, if the cows are properly cared for throughout their natural lives.

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1 December 4, 1968, Los Angeles. And in a lecture in Vrindavan (November 10, 1976), Śrīla Prabhupāda said, "Kṛṣṇa is first of all interested to see whether the *brāhmaṇa* and the cow are properly respected in society. *Namo brāhmaṇya-devāya go-brāhmaṇa-hitāya ca*. His first business is to see that the *brāhmaṇa* and cow are being properly honored. Then *jagad-dhitāya* [*Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 1.19.65] — automatically the whole world will be peaceful. This secret of success, people now do not know. Nobody is prepared to become a *brāhmaṇa,* and cow protection is in oblivion. This is the whole world's position. Therefore the world is in a chaotic condition. It must be, because it is just an animal society when these two things are neglected, and then other animal qualities and paraphernalia follow."

2 Research could perhaps tell us whether it was a common practice among Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava householders to own cows and to what extent Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura's Gauḍīya Math institutions maintained cows. "Notable exceptions" include mentions of concern for cows in the sacred biographies of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu. Typically, though not exclusively, these appear in the context of reported exchanges between Mahāprabhu and local Muslim leaders.

3 Valpey, Kenneth R. [Krishna Kshetra Swami], forthcoming: "In the service of all that lives: Gandhi's vision of engaged nonviolent animal care". In *Animal Theologians,* Oxford University Press. Valpey 2020 *Cow Care in Hindu Animal Ethics,* Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature / Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 63–7. Digital copy available through Open Access: https://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9783030284077 Further: the "simple living, high thinking" motto seemed to be championed by Gandhi, though Paramahamsa Yogananda is also credited with the phrase: www.sloww.co/simple-living-high-thinking/ (accessed 16-11-19).

4 See Valpey, *Cow Care in Hindu Animal Ethics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 55–6 and notes 4 and 5; pp. 100–1; and pp. 236–38 for a brief elaboration on state and legal dimensions of cow protection in modern India.

5 A story yet to be written is how Śrīla Prabhupāda's mission coincided with and departed from the American communalist and back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as a response to Cold War anxieties. This account would need to look further back ideologically to the American Transcendentalists of Boston in the 1840s, who derived substantial inspiration from recent English translations of Sanskrit sacred literature. For a relevant analysis of the American communalist movement, see, for example, Turner, Fred, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), especially pp. 73–9.

6 A further note about influences on Prabhupāda's thinking related to country living: During his first months in New York, his interactions with Dr. Ramamurti S. Mishra (later Shri Brahmananda Saraswati) included occasional visits to Ananda Ashram, the latter's quite charming country retreat center in Monroe, north of New York City.

7 In the same year, Prabhupāda wrote about his vision for New Vrindavan in West Virginia, making a connection between the "bona fide divisions of society" (the *varṇāśrama* system) and agrarian life that would include cow care: "Vrindaban conception is that of a transcendental village, without any of the botheration of the modern industrial atmosphere. My idea of developing New Vrindaban is to create an atmosphere of spiritual life where people in the bona fide divisions of society—namely, Brahmacharies [celibate students], Grihasthas [householders], Vanaprasthas [the retired], and Sannyasis [renounced holy men] will live independently, completely depending on agricultural produce and milk from the cows" (8/17/68). With concern for New Vrindavan's orientation toward cow protection, Prabhupāda wrote: "We must have sufficient pasturing ground to feed the animals all round. We have to maintain the animals throughout their lives. We must not make any program for selling them to the slaughterhouses. This is the way of cow protection. Krishna by His practical example taught us to give all protection to the cows, and that should be the main business of New Vrindaban. Vrindaban is also known as Gokula. Go means cows, and Kula means congregation. Therefore the special feature of New Vrindaban will be cow

protection, and by doing so, we shall not be the losers. . . . The whole idea is that people residing in New Vrindaban may not have to search for work outside. Arrangements should be such that the residents will be self-satisfied. That will make an ideal ashram. I do not know whether these ideals can be given practical shape, but I think like that, that people may be happy in any place with land and cow, without endeavoring for the so-called amenities of modern life — which simply increase anxieties for maintenance and proper equipment. The less we are anxious for maintaining our body, the more we become favorable for advancing in Krishna consciousness." (6/14/68).

8 Gita Nagari was intended to provide the New York City temple with farm products, including dairy from cows. Substantial quantities were produced from early on. Gita Nagari also included a sawmill and engaged bulls in bringing wood from the forest — everything Prabhupāda had wanted in New Vrindavan. Another "trend" took place (1974–76), according to Rohit Dāsa, who cared for cows for more than two decades at the New Talavan farm in Mississippi: A few small cow protection initiatives in America closed within two years and sent their cows to New Talavan.

9 Some projects undertaken in the 1970s were New Talavan, Mississippi; New Mayapur, France; Krsnuv Dvur, Czech Republic; Bhaktivedanta Manor, outside London; and farms near Secundarabad, India, and Mayapur, West Bengal. In the 1980s, four farms were begun: in Australia, Sweden, Germany, and Brazil.

10 In 1998, Bhaktivedanta Manor increased its herd to 24 cows and bulls and the cows gave 12,254 liters of milk, much of which was cooked by Kulāṅganā Dāsī into highly artistic and tasty milk sweets offered daily to Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Gokulānanda, the temple deities.

11 This calculation is based on a reckoning of one hectare (2.47 acres) of land per cow or bull, sufficient for both grazing and winter fodder. With the average cow's life expectancy at fifteen years, the managers allow four cows per year to become pregnant (so that any cow may bear a calf twice in her life). See note 3, Valpey 2020, pp. 218–24.

12 Credit for this analogy goes to Aṣṭottaraśata Dāsa, the son of Hare Kṛṣṇa Dāsī, Śrīla Prabhupāda's American disciple who wrote a column on the value of cow protection for *Back to Godhead*

magazine in the 1990s and compiled a book of Śrīla Prabhupāda's instructions on instituting the Vedic social order.

13 Gita Nagari, despite charging a high premium on its milk, has found that this price does not entirely cover the expenses of production. Nevertheless, as an example of a CSA — community supported agriculture — project, since recently diversifying into organic vegetable production, Gita Nagari offers a model that could be followed. Another initiative is the private project of Sītārāma Dāsa, with his Ahimsa Milk farm, near Leicester, U.K. He notes that the demand for his cows' milk far exceeds the supply. This shows that people are willing to pay a considerable premium on the milk, knowing that the cows are being cared for and protected throughout their lives.

14 The 33% calculation is an average based on wide-ranging factors drawn from some fifty different departments of activity in relation to the project. On one side, the managers informed me that the hope is to increase the sustainability percentage to 80% for the cow department, seen as a maximum possibility. On another side, in case of a general economic collapse in the wider society, managers see the project as being able to transform immediately into a 100% self-sustaining project. That said, it was also noted that a significant challenge to the project is social sustainability — the ability of the community to foster and maintain a strong spirit of resolve to remain there lifelong and bring up children and grandchildren with similar resolve.

15 Balabhadra Dāsa, in his concern especially for the care and training of bulls, established his own project, the International Society for Cow Protection, now located near Alachua, Florida. He offers courses — in person, online, and when invited to ISKCON farms worldwide — on how to train bulls with voice commands, thereby minimizing or eliminating physical force in the control of bulls or oxen.

16 Śyāmasundara Dāsa, former ISKCON Global Minister for Cow Protection and Agriculture, has emphasized the need to identify a viable economic model for sustainable cow care, one that can bring monetary profit to those who would take up the responsibility of cow care. This means, for example, selling milk for at least the actual cost of producing the milk — a cost

that is considerably higher than (subsidized) commercial dairy. While recently visiting Gita Nagari farm, when Śyāmasundara was told by the *gośālā* manager that its price for one gallon of milk is $16.00, but that it costs $20.00 to produce that one gallon, Śyāmasundara concluded, "So this is not economically viable." (I was present during this exchange.) See also note 13. Several factors determined by local conditions will necessary make for varied economic conditions for cow care. ISKCON's challenge is to understand how to engage with these factors to make the practice of cow protection and cow care practically functional.

17 One might also see a fundamental tension between the missionary thrust of ISKCON and the demands of farming and cow care. In contrast to, for example, the Amish tradition, which minimizes travel by several restrictions, ISKCON members tend to be mobile to an extreme, as is considered necessary to expand the Society's mission.

18 I am referring here to the four "regulative principles" that Śrīla Prabhupāda identified as essential prerequisites for substantial progress in spiritual life, namely, abstention from illicit sexual activity, from gambling, from all intoxicants, and from eating meat, fish, and eggs.

19 Other projects and plans of the IMCPA: It has largely completed an assessment of the current status of cow protection and agriculture in worldwide ISKCON. It is considering a five-year plan to increase the number of cows worldwide from 5,000 to 10,000 (along with acquisition of the additional land required to properly maintain and care for them). It is organizing teams of devotees on each continent to oversee cow care and agriculture activities. The aim is to register every cow, with a system of tracking their conditions at all times. And it is developing a Certification of Readiness for new projects to be permitted to have cows, along with a system for certifying *gośālās*. See also https://mcpa.iskcon.org and https://www.facebook.com/imcpa/

20 For a recent representation of this argument, see https://iskconnews.org/introducing-ahimsa-balancing,6833/ (accessed December 20, 2019).

21 Resolution 406.2 (Guideline): By Janmaṣṭami 2022, all ISKCON centers should develop a plan whereby all milk and milk

products — butter, ghee, yogurt, etc. — offered to the deities are procured from protected cows. The centers may approach the International Ministry of Cow Protection for assistance.

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Trees in Trouble, Humans in Need: Competing Environmental Priorities in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

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Religion and ecology are indelibly linked in India. Sacred texts, devotional narratives, and religious convictions often motivate environmental action and provide cultural resources for ecological initiatives. Examples abound: M. C. Mehta, the successful environmental attorney who fought Ganges pollution; the Chipko anti-deforestation movement; and the Rajasthani Bishnoi community's ecologically aware practices. All these actors are deeply motivated by values grounded in sacred texts and devotional traditions.[1] As a number of scholars have shown, it is implausible to claim that Hinduism, or any religious tradition, is inherently environmentally friendly, for a religion's ecological impact is not a result of some absolute theological measure but of the individual interpreters wielding its manifold doctrines, practices, and histories.[2] For this reason, it is paramount to mine a tradition for theological resources that can support sustainable ecological relationships. This is, indeed, what happens on the ground: Religious concepts and stories are reinterpreted by practitioners, who employ an endless process of meaning-making in the service of new environmental challenges.

When it comes to Vaiṣṇava Hinduism, particularly the various traditions devoted to Kṛṣṇa, there can be few theological resources as influential as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,*[3] which has remained the consummate Kṛṣṇaite scripture for at least seven centuries and has thus been employed in several recent ecological initiatives. Take, for example, the movement to protect the Yamuna River in Vrindavan, the major pilgrimage center in North India regarded as Kṛṣṇa's childhood home. The movement's leaders draw upon the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa's* story of Kāliya, a multi-hooded, venomous cobra that took up residence in the Yamuna River, poisoning the plants, animals, and people of Vrindavan. Kṛṣṇa fearlessly jumped into the river to fight the serpent and eventually dispatched it to the sea and thus protected his home. Today's activists argue that Kāliya is back, its hoods replaced by the many pipes of raw sewage flowing into the Yamuna and turning the river into poison for all who depend on her holy waters (Haberman 2006: 150). The term *yamunā-sevā* (service to the Yamuna), which is typically used to describe the ritual worship of the river goddess, has been reinterpreted to mean the loving act of protecting the river from pollution (Haberman 2006: 179–80). Another example comes from the Chipko movement: activists, often women, have resisted logging operations by tying *rākhīs* (amulets) on trees and embracing trees, while listening to *Bhāgavata* storytellings (*kathās*), particularly accounts of Kṛṣṇa's protection of Vrindavan's forests (James, 2000: 513).[4]

Besides the story of Kāliya, there are other narratives we might examine to ascertain the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa's* attitudes toward the environment. There is Kṛṣṇa's worshiping and then lifting Mount Govardhana to protect the people of Vrindavan from torrential rain (10.24), or his extinguishing a forest fire (10.19), or his dispatching a demon who was preventing villagers from accessing a forest (10.15).[5] Outside Kṛṣṇa's narratives, we may consider the story of the demon-king Hiraṇyākṣa casting the earth into the cosmic waters, causing Viṣṇu to appear as a boar, who lovingly lifts the earth from the depths (3.17–19). There is also King Pṛthu's threatening to kill the earth-goddess because she refused to supply food to the world's people and animals (4.14–23). And near the *Purāṇa's* end, we hear from the earth herself, singing in bemused and sarcastic tones about all the kings who have tried to rule her — ever intent

on expanding their domains — only to be killed by the inexorable power of time (12.3).

Many of these accounts share a common theme, namely, the relationship between a king's dharmic rule and the earth's fertility. This relationship is attested throughout Indic literature, including the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The king is the embodiment of Viṣṇu and husband of the earth (*bhūpati*); so, with his righteous rule, the earth will serve as a nourishing mother for her offspring. As David Kinsley explains, "Indeed, it was held that without the king's beneficial influence, without the manly vigor of the king, the earth's fecundity would remain untapped; the earth would remain unproductive. The king entered into a relationship with the earth in which he could stimulate her, a relationship that was understood as not unlike marriage" (1997: 70). Thus, in the absence of a king, or in the absence of a *virtuous* king, the earth could withhold her bounty.

We find this pattern at play in the *Bhagavata Purāṇa*. When the world is ruled by the cruel and lawless King Vena, for example, the people suffer for lack of food and natural resources. In desperation, the *brāhmaṇas* kill Vena and replace him with the virtuous Pṛthu, whom the *Bhāgavata* regards as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. Pṛthu is surprised and angered by the earth's refusal to nourish her children and threatens to kill her. The earth assumes the shape of a cow and flees Pṛthu's arrows, only to eventually give up and seek his protection. She then reasons with the king, saying, in essence: "I was being exploited and misused by the terrible Vena, and so I withheld my bounty, even as a cow's milk dries up when she has no caretaker and no child. Now that you, the righteous Pṛthu, are ruling, you can milk me and receive what you need" (4.18.2–11). At this point, all types of beings in the world — humans, animals, trees, gods, and demons — transform their respective leaders into calves, and milk the earth for what they need, be it grain, *soma* juice, or liquor. The point is clear: Dharmic leadership brings about the earth's flourishing. The earth flourishes not *despite* human cultivation, but *because of* it, even as a cow flourishes when she is domesticated. The connections between the earth, cows, and female gender roles are strong and abiding in the *Bhāgavata*.

When cultivation turns into exploitation, however, Viṣṇu is compelled to intervene, whether it be because of Hiraṇyākṣa's

aggression toward the earth, which led to the boar *avatāra*, or Vena's misuse of nature's bounty, which prompted Viṣṇu's appearance as Pṛthu. One finds two patterns at work in these narratives: the first is of the dharmic king and the earth working as a cooperative couple to abundantly provide for human beings and animals; the second involves the non-dharmic king selfishly exploiting the earth, so that the earth can no longer provide for her offspring. None of the narratives we discussed thus far allow for a third possibility, namely, the dharmic king who wants to provide for his subjects but finds that the earth cannot provide enough to satisfy their needs. The *Bhāgavata* seems to be making a theological statement: A shortage of natural resources *always* indicates the lack of dharmic leadership and the resultant uncontrolled exploitation of the earth, since by definition the earth has enough for her children.

While we might make do with this binary, a third possibility does emerge in a short and little-known narrative in the fourth book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, namely, the story of the ten Pracetās.[6] These ten brothers were sons of King Prācīnabarhi, and on their father's request, they set out to perform ascetic practice and thus prepare themselves to rule the kingdom. They found a beautiful reservoir and decided to meditate underwater, holding their breath. They meditated on Viṣṇu, using a mantra given to them by Śiva, and after their ten thousand years of meditation, Viṣṇu appeared before them and blessed them with prosperity, future progeny, wisdom, and devotion. When the Pracetās emerged from the water, however, they saw that the earth was covered with trees, and this incited their anger (4.30.44). Commentators explain that while the Pracetās meditated, their father had retired, and without the king's oversight, trees had covered the earth, which left no space for agriculture or human habitation.[7] The Pracetās' anger knew no bounds, and using their yogic power, they released fire and air from their mouths to burn down the trees, determined to make the earth treeless. Seeing this impending extinction of the trees, the four-faced creator, Brahmā, hurried to the spot and calmed the Pracetās' anger by appealing to their reason. In case reason was not enough, though, Brahmā advised the trees to offer their beautiful daughter, Mārīṣā, in marriage to the Pracetās (4.30.47). The brothers accepted her, making this one of a few instances of polyandry in Sanskrit

literature, and then took up the rule of the kingdom and eventually raised a worthy son.

Philip Lutgendorf points out that clearing forests for human use is a common task for kings in the *Mahābhārata,* and they do so unapologetically. "The forest is for them primarily a zone for exploitation and consumption, and there is no sense in the epics [*Mahābharata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*] of the modern notion of the 'fragility' or endangerment of the forest ecosystem" (2000: 279). This bleak assessment of the epics is difficult to sustain in relation to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* given its several narratives of praise for and protection of forests.[8] The story of the Pracetās is especially noteworthy because of its acknowledgement, by both the text and its commentators, of the "fragility" (or at least the limited availability) of the forest environment. The narrative seems to acknowledge that scarcity of natural resources is possible even without demonic leadership, owing to a more simple cause, namely, the ever-growing needs of human actors.[9] The situation here is substantively different from others we have discussed — the Pracetās' action was not motivated by overt selfishness, as in Hiranyākṣa's conquering of the earth, nor was the food shortage caused by the earth's defensive withdrawal of resources, as in the case of the tyrant Vena. Rather, the earth was simply flourishing in a way that made human habitation difficult, and the Pracetās got carried away by doing what kings are meant to do, namely, provide space and facility for their subjects to flourish. The problem is one of balancing the genuine (if somewhat overblown), competing needs of humans and other living beings.

Indeed, the story of the Pracetās is significant not just for the way it frames the environmental problem, but for the type of solution it offers. Here, the earth is not treated simply as an object of veneration, nor depicted merely as a passive target of exploitation. Rather, the earth, and particularly its trees, are given agency and voice in the narrative, as persons who display intelligence, negotiate their needs, and struggle for their survival. As David Haberman showed in his book, *People Trees,* the acknowledgment of personal agency, autonomy, and intelligence in trees is a widespread facet of Hindu traditions from Purāṇic times to the present.[10] The *Bhāgavata's* assertion of personhood for trees aligns well with its Sāṁkhya theology,

wherein material nature, *prakṛti*, is regarded as active, dynamic, and adaptive matter that is animated by numerous, individual *puruṣas*. Indeed, in its discussion of the creative process in Book Three, the *Bhāgavata* lists trees as the first creation by Brahmā and immediately accords to them both consciousness and feeling: Although trees are "mostly in darkness (*tamaḥprāyāḥ*)," they "seek life upward (*utsrotasaḥ*)" and "have feeling within (*antaḥsparśāḥ*)." (3.10.20)

Haberman argues that the "common-sense" divide between humans and nonhumans, characteristic of post-Enlightenment Western cultures, makes little sense in the context of widespread Hindu tree-worship, where the question "Who is a tree?" is far more appropriate than "What is a tree?"[11] I quote:

> [S]uch concepts as animism and anthropomorphism are implicated in a modern Western cultural construction of nature that sets a firm boundary between the human and nonhuman. The cultural construction of nature in Indian society has resulted in much greater continuity between the human and nonhuman, which are both regarded as parts of the same whole. (2013: 190)

While the Pracetās' story does not involve veneration of trees of the type documented by Haberman, something equally significant happens — marriage with trees. The *Bhāgavata* here bridges the boundary between human beings and the natural world through one of the most effective means of boundary-blurring in Indic traditions: intermarriage. To be sure, this is not a case of tree-marriage of the kind that Vijaya Nagarajan discussed in her article on the embedded ecologies of Tamil village life (2000). In the contemporary Indian context, tree-marriages are mostly done in order to redirect human suffering onto a tree. The bride or groom marries a tree to, say, prevent malefic astrological influences from affecting a future human partner, or to have the tree absorb the unfortunate karmic forces preventing the bride or groom from finding a suitable match.

> It is believed that trees have an enormous capacity to absorb suffering, since they have an abundance of auspiciousness, goodwill, and generosity. As part of the greater natural world, their sacredness is inherently more encompassing than that of humans. Therefore, if the marriage to a tree is arranged first, the tree will bear the burden of human suffering and, in a sense, transform the suffering and inauspiciousness into auspiciousness. . . . Including the tree in a form of kinship — a familiar category with expectations of particular responses — is another manifestation of embedded ecologies." (Nagarajan 2000: 459)

In the case of the Pracetās, their wife is the trees' adopted daughter — a young woman born from the union of the sage Kaṇḍu and the heavenly nymph Pramlocā, but then abandoned by them and raised by trees. Nevertheless, the text makes it clear that the trees regard her as their daughter (*duhitaram*), and this point is not lost on commentators. The Mādhva commentator Vijayadhvaja Tīrtha asks how *kanyādāna*, the sacred and emotional act of giving one's daughter in marriage, could take place when the grooms and the trees were adversaries (4.30.47). In other words, why would either side trust the other? Vijayadhvaja concludes that their willingness was a result of their trust in Brahmā, who recommended the match and must have reassured them of its success.[12]

Interestingly, none of the commentators finds a need to justify the agency ascribed to trees in this story — particularly their ability to perform *kanyādāna*, the ultimate act of giving — thus reinforcing the notion that the personhood of trees is common sense and commonplace in Hinduism, resulting in the cultivation of personal relationships with particular trees. As Nagarajan puts it, "In general, the ritual of arranged marriages in India is used to cement the bonds between separate families. Establishing relationships with the natural world is as important for the family's survival as the marriage between humans" (2000: 459). Here, the situation is the inverse of contemporary Indian tree-marriage: by marrying into the family of trees, the Pracetās essentially create a bond with them that guarantees the *trees'* future survival. While logic and good argument may

or may not have provided sufficient protection from the Pracetās' fury, entering into bonds of kinship gave the trees a greater degree of reassurance.

And therein lies the most valuable theological resource of this short narrative. The Pracetās emerged from their meditation to see the earth's surface covered by trees, and their depersonalized view of the trees allowed them to scapegoat the trees for their own absence as kings. The trees take the fall for the Pracetās' anger, which knows no bounds until Brahmā forces the Pracetās to recognize the trees' agency, autonomy, and sentience. This recognition is secured and deepened through personal relationship — in this case, marriage — thus making the trees *sajātīya*, part of the same kinship networks as human beings. The Pracetās' story provides Vaiṣṇavas with a starkly honest perspective on human beings' potential for ecological destruction while also offering hope and direction for transformed relationships with the natural world. For all its readers, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* offers an opportunity to re-examine our "common-sense" assumptions about the divide between human beings and the natural world. It encourages us to broaden our notion of personhood to include all beings who share in the struggle for survival.[13]

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NOTES

1 For a discussion of Mehta's motivations, see Haberman, *River of Love* [...], p. 146. For the religious underpinnings of the Chipko movement, see George A. James' "Ethical and Religious Dimensions of Chipko Resistance" (2000). Pankaj Jain did an extensive study of the ecological and devotional facets of the Bishnoi community in his *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities* (2011).

2 Vijaya Rettakudi Nagarajan writes, "I want to point out here the false leap or slurring that we sometimes allow within environmental discourse between identifying a belief or a way of life as ecological because a natural object is imbued with sacrality and the belief that it is thus necessarily conservation-oriented. . . . More broadly, one could say that, although non-Western religions may have a reverence towards landscapes and therefore may contain innumerable embedded ecologies, these beliefs do not necessarily lead to ecological practices that resemble conservationism in the sense that the West has come to know it. While it is true, to a certain extent, that the infusion of the natural world with notions of sacrality does affect the behavior of people towards the natural world, I have misgivings about the implications that Indian culture, because of its notions of sacredness, has intrinsic checks and balances to restrain the rapaciousness of human greed" (1998: 283–84). Kelly D. Alley (2000: 357) and David L. Haberman (2006: 132–33) noted how faith in the all-auspicious and purifying power of river goddesses can engender a complacency toward, or even denial of, environmental pollution, while Lance E. Nelson (1998) argued that Advaita Vedanta's view of the natural world as illusive can justify indifference toward its ecological condition.

3 The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa's* nearly eighteen thousand Sanskrit verses resist easy categorization into any genre of Sanskrit literature. Its

narratives hold together tightly as a coherent literary work, and its linguistic expression is on par with the finest Sanskrit poetry. Nevertheless, the *Bhāgavata* is more than a collection of books; most Hindus encounter the text through its manifold retellings in vernacular literature and its performative traditions in liturgy, storytelling, dance, drama, architecture, sculpture, painting, and film. For an introduction to the contents, structure, and reception history of the *Bhāgavata*, see Gupta and Valpey, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Sacred Text and Living Tradition* (2013) and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa: Selected Readings* (2016).

4 In addition to the examples given above, another instance of *Bhāgavata*-related ecological activism is the Govardhan Ecovillage near Mumbai, formed in 2003, which aims to embody a sustainable village-based lifestyle grounded in the values of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. (http://www.ecovillage.org.in/)

5 All references to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in this essay are given by book (canto), chapter, and verse number(s) (e.g., 4.18.7). When an entire chapter is referenced, I provide only the book and chapter numbers (e.g., 4.18). I have used Kṛṣṇaśaṅkara Śāstri's edition for the text and commentaries, except for Prabhupāda's commentary, which comes from the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust edition.

6 The Pracetās' story is spread across eight chapters in the *Bhāgavata* (4.24–31), because of an intervening narrative about their father, King Prācīnabarhi. The section of the story that is relevant for our purposes is found in chapter 30, and the narrative largely follows the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa's* version.

7 In a commentary to 4.30.44, the celebrated fourteenth-century commentator Śrīdhara Svāmī explains that Prācīnabarhiṣa's absence allowed the trees to overrun the earth: "*tadā hi prācīnabarhiṣaḥ pravrajitatvād arājake karṣaṇādy abhāvāt drumair bhūmiś channābhūt.*" Meanwhile, the eighteenth-century Caitanya Vaiṣṇava commentator Viśvanātha Cakravartī explains the underlying reason for the Pracetās' anger: They had been asked by Viṣṇu to rule the earth, but how would they fulfill the Lord's order if trees covered the earth? Where would human beings live? Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977) follows Śrīdhara and Viśvanātha, but then identifies the problem specifically as the lack of agriculture: "The sons, the Pracetās, were ordered by

the Supreme Personality of Godhead to come out of the water and go to the kingdom of their father in order to take care of that kingdom. However, when they came out, they saw that everything had been neglected due to the King's absence. They first observed that food grains were not being produced and that there were no agricultural activities. Indeed, the surface of the world was practically covered by very tall trees. . . . They desired that the land be cleared for crops." (4.30.44)

8 These include Kṛṣṇa's extinguishing a forest fire (*Bhāgavata* 10.19), his praise for the beauty of the forest (10.15), his removal of the Dhenuka demon who claimed exclusive rights to a palmyra forest (10.15), his frolicking and dancing in the forested landscape (10.20 and 10.29), and, of course, the story of the Pracetās presently under discussion.

9 An acknowledgment of resource scarcity, albeit due to demonic leadership, is also found in commentaries on the Pṛthu episode. In verse 4.18.7, the earth explains that she withheld seeds and herbs for the purpose of *yajña*, sacrifice, which was not being performed during Vena's rule. The Śrīvaiṣṇava commentator Vīrarāghava, following Śrīdhara's lead, argues that all plants would have been destroyed to their roots by evildoers intent on unrighteous consumption, and so the earth had to protect them for future performances of *yajña* and other virtuous acts.

10 See, for example, Haberman's survey of textual views of the *pīpal* (*aśvattha*) (2013: 71–4). He concludes in his final chapter: "Current acts of tree worship, however, are perhaps the strongest ethnographic confirmation that beliefs about the sentience of trees that go back thousands of years are still very much alive and functional in India." (2013: 186)

11 Haberman describes his experience as an ethnographer of Indian tree-worship: "I asked many people on numerous occasions this question (most simply in Hindi: 'Ye vriksh kaun hai?' ['Who is this tree?']) and received a variety of answers without any hesitation or indication that it was an odd question. Whereas the human-nonhuman divide has characterized much modern Western thought, which insists that personhood applies only to human beings, here we encounter an application of the concept of personhood that includes more than human beings, extending even

to trees. Many tree worshipers informed me, 'Trees are persons just like you and me.'" (2013: 190–1)

12 Vijayadhvaja writes in his commentary on *Bhāgavata* 4.30.47: "*pratipakṣabhūtair vṛkṣair dīyamānaṁ kanyādānaṁ niḥśaṅkaṁ kathaṁ saṅgacchata iti tatrāha … āptatve brahmaṇo vacanaṁ kāraṇaṁ ity arthaḥ*."

13 The worries about (and charges of) anthropomorphism, animism, idolatry, mythology, and superstition that often dissuade Western cultures from taking a personal view of nonhuman beings have deep historical roots that are discussed insightfully and critically in the introduction and conclusion of Haberman's *People Trees*.

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ISKCON and Ethics: The Benefits of Paying Explicit Attention to Moral Philosophy

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In this essay, I seek to advance three proposals. First, ISKCON and its members would benefit from more explicit and deliberate engagement with moral, ethical, and social issues. Second, to achieve this, devotees must be adequately qualified — and systematically educated — to apply Kṛṣṇa's teachings to moral questions (Greene 2013: 116). And third, to achieve both these ends, the Society requires an ISKCON ethics; a coherent moral philosophy, standing largely independent of its metaphysics, soteriology, and epistemology.[1] This last proposal rests on a broader premise: the view that ISKCON's global context and the practical orientation of Vaiṣṇava knowledge require not a unitary "theology" but a spectrum of Kṛṣṇa conscious disciplines (Rāsamaṇḍala Das 2018: 8), capable of authentic dialogue with "the knowledge that contemporary society has" (King 2013: 49).

Moral and ethical challenges

To support these proposals, I initially examine two sets of challenges confronting ISKCON, which I call "moral issues" and "ethical

issues."[2] By "moral issues," I refer to examples within ISKCON of both moral incontinence and deliberate transgression — together, instances in which moral shortcomings appear conspicuous against the Society's own backdrop of standards. One salient example is the historical prevalence of divorce, as discussed by Deadwyler (2004b: 158–9). By "ethical issues," I refer to cases of relative uncertainty about what constitutes good or bad conduct, such as contention over devotees' propriety in purchasing milk from sources implicated in violence (Valpey 2020: 42n39).

In seeking solutions, I turn to Simon Blackburn's exposition on the ethical environment, which he defines as "the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live" (Blackburn 2001: 1). Significantly, the current ethical climate in the Western world has departed from the optimistic, open-minded ethos of the 1960s,[3] the decade of ISKCON's incorporation. Over half a century later, today's moral sensibilities present ISKCON with unfamiliar threats and novel opportunities. The attendant moral discourse falls within two main classes: academic (expressed via books and teaching) and popular (voiced through affirmative action and cultural media). I discuss both arenas, touching on their complex interrelationships (for an insightful analysis, see Russell 1996: 571). By interrogating the prevalent ethical climates within and beyond ISKCON, I infer the need within ISKCON circles for more explicit moral dialogue, spanning three domains: personal well-being, devotional community, and social contribution. I examine all three in depth. Next, I discuss recent features of Anglo-American moral philosophy, and especially the renewed interest in virtue ethics, the Western approach perhaps most aligned with India's moral deliberation (Prabhu 2005: 357). After appraising the relevance of moral dialogue to ISKCON's trajectory, I present six practical proposals.

Moral issues

There is a history to the discourse on ISKCON's moral foibles. Initially, most keen to advertise them were the Society's detractors: anti-cult groups objecting to conversion (Shinn 1992) and newspapers favoring "a rather negative and uncomprehending press" (Lipner

2013: 58). Naturally, it was relatively easy to deflect such charges by claiming biased motive or flawed worldview. It was less easy, however, when criticism started to emerge closer to home, for example, from a disenfranchised devotee publishing her exposé (Muster 1997) or splinter groups alleging abuse of power and privilege (Desai, Awatramani, and Das 2004). However, responding reflectively became critical when shortcomings were identified by less-partial academics — for example, Burke Rochford, who mapped the Society's record on child abuse and its "systematic denigration of married life" (Rochford 2007: 7). More recently, John Fahy's ethnographic research in India revealed cases of alleged corruption linked to "land speculation and property development." (Fahy 2020: 2)

Over time, disquiet with moral turpitude shifted centripetally to afflict mature, committed devotees — even early on, some questioned the Society's book-selling tactics (Rochford 2004: 283). As a result, ISKCON-backed publications, such as this journal, began to address rising concern over human rights (Rādhā Devī Dāsī 1998), women's issues (Rukmiṇī Dāsī 2000), and frailty in spiritual leadership (Deadwyler 2004b). Collaborative ventures between devotees and academics explored further social and moral challenges (Bryant and Ekstrand 2004; Dwyer and Cole 2007, 2013).[4] This literature revealed another trend: Moral culpability was increasingly attributed closer to center, and to ISKCON's founder, Śrīla Prabhupāda, rather than his "young, immature disciples" (Deadwyler 2004b: 254). This made it even harder to sidestep accusations of moral laxity. Devotee scholars thoughtfully, and with historical awareness, responded to charges leveled against ISKCON, and against Śrīla Prabhupāda himself (Gupta 2005; Broo 2006).

To some degree, then, the moral issues have been both acknowledged and addressed. Nonetheless, I wish to qualify this statement in two ways. First, pleas for honest disclosure (Deadwyler 2004b: 158) still meet resistance. Although ISKCON has achieved much of which to be proud, an appetite for "presenting a rosy picture" (Resnick 2004: 254) continues to mask its internal problems. In favoring a generous interpretation, I take the view that most devotees balk at dialogue not through misplaced intention but on account of feelings of inadequacy, often underpinned by a lack of specialized training (Deadwyler 2004a: 346–7). Second, despite

mounting awareness of moral issues and recent discourse drawing on many disciplines (sociology, psychology, theology, religious studies), only a few studies have framed ISKCON's problems with direct reference to morality and ISKCON's theoretical frameworks (Chatterjee 1996, Sesa Das 2002, Greene 2013, Fahy 2020). The apparent (but declining) aversion to deal with moral issues[5] and address them from a well-informed ethical perspective is not new. O'Connell (2016: 137) notes "the reticence of the [Caitanya Vaiṣṇava] tradition's scholars to chalk out explicit ethical theory."

Positive acknowledgement

The two main hurdles (i.e., moral reticence and sparse or diffuse ethical theory) may be connected. For example, enhanced ethical literacy (underpinned by coherent theory) may help devotees disclose and redress moral issues with greater confidence. Here, Western moral philosophers yield two insights. First, "there is always . . . a gap between the real and the ideal" (Frede 2013: 137). Moral shortfall is to be expected. The attendant discomfort is also natural, since "To think about the virtues is to take measure of the distance separating us from them . . . to think about our own inadequacies" (Compte-Sponville 1996: 5). However, I make a further reassuring claim: The unsettling "aperture between precept and practice" (Fahy 2020: 20) can be attributed less to devotees' low levels of conduct, and more to ISKCON's commendably high standards. Despite this positive assessment, the downside is that the resultant wide divergence equally attracts feelings of failure and charges of hypocrisy. Even with lofty intentions, the gulf separating personal practice from precept must still be acknowledged and traversed.

Extending the same theme to the societal level, the second insight of Western moral philosophers is that ethical discourse inevitably occurs in societies that are morally flawed. Matilal (2002c: 75) notes how modern Western democracies, despite their (somewhat tedious) critique of caste, are still haunted by their own class inequalities.[6] On the societal level, then, moral shortfall is also inevitable. Reflecting this realistic and sobering outlook, Deadwyler (2004b: 150) calls for a shift of attention: "The real problem for

ISKCON has not been its natural failings but rather an incapacity to deal constructively with them."

The apprehension of moral arrears has been met in various ways, as in other religious traditions.[7] These include attempts to "explain away the embarrassing elements" (Blackburn 2001: 13) and rallying calls to return to basics, rebolster ideals, and cement spiritual practices. ISKCON has been especially censured for "raising the drawbridge" (Lipner 1994) and defending the "sacred fortress" (Squarcini 2000: 256). More positively, scholars, inside and out, have championed various types of reform: doctrinal (Joseph 2004), educational (Lipner 2013: 66) and structural (Deadwyler 2004b: 160). Gelberg has called for an epistemological audit to rectify the "tenacious defense of received truth in the face of potentially discomforting realties" (Gelberg 2004: 397). However, the thesis I wish to advance is that many of the hurdles facing ISKCON are essentially *moral*, and solutions should be undergirded, in part, by ethical theory. Moral philosophy should lie at the heart of ISKCON's civic debate.

In promoting frank yet constructive dialogue, I strive to avoid both evasive denial and rancid finger-pointing. Therefore, to affirm both ISKCON's moral tenacity and its natural fragilities, I sketch out a few initial conclusions. Perhaps most importantly, the Society has tremendous moral potential. Through his research, Fahy (2020: 9) commends the movement's many "moral exemplars" and members who exhibit "relentless introspection" (ibid., 76). All initiates vow to follow the four regulative principles (Deadwyler 2004b: 154, Fahy 2020: 65–7) and to cultivate the corresponding virtues (listed in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.17.24 as austerity, cleanliness, mercy, and truthfulness).[8] We may note, however, how these strengths mainly fall within the personal sphere. This may be attributed to ISKCON's sharing the Platonic view that there is "no just political order except one populated by just citizens" (Blackburn 2001: 4).[9] Plato holds that for social flourishing, moral individuals are necessary but insufficient.[10] He thereby hints at ISKCON's two main challenges: (1) despite high personal standards (vital to any moral society), devotees often fail to maintain them (Fahy 2020: 9); (2) explicit redress of moral anomaly in the Society's public domain is relatively frail.

Ethical dialogue, then, may help individuals and societies to

admit moral blemish. It may also reveal hidden strengths. I wish to take the argument a step further. Well-informed discourse may address moral anomaly, and fortify resilience, by furnishing answers to the underlying metaethical[11] questions. In ISKCON's case, a comprehensive theory may explicate the important causal links between morality's personal and public spheres. For example, several seemingly intractable problems revolve around sexual incontinence (Gelberg 2004: 398–9). Blackburn (2001: 39) uses the example of celibacy to suggest that physical and genetic determinism often tightly constrain the scope of moral agency. Many young adults cannot avoid sex, despite sincerity of purpose, strength of will and "technologies of control" (ibid.). Blackburn suggests that futile attempts to "change fixed nature" lead to debilitating feelings of shame, guilt, and subservience. Put another way, these are the results of laying blame where free will and agency are wrongly presumed. This was the case in ISKCON's early years. Its rhetoric not only applauded celibacy — as it still does (Fahy 2020: 66, 74) — but its "leadership pressured [men] to remain *brahmachari* (celibate), held up as the natural state" (Deadwyler 2004b: 158). Marriage was belittled as an aberration, an indecorous fall from grace (Andrew 2007: 61–2). To redress such fallacies[12] and their consequences, Vaiṣṇava teachings also provide sophisticated moral insights on the relentless dialectic between free will and determinism (for a useful study, see Dasti and Bryant 2014). Such ethical acuity may assist ISKCON in constructively regulating sexual practices; for example, by attributing standards to members according to their respective degrees of conditioning (as exemplified by Caitanya himself).[13]

These observations are germane. When asking, Why has moral turpitude occurred in ISKCON?, responses need to be nuanced, looking beyond just the direct perpetrator and toward the disparate causes of moral deficiency.

Ethical issues

The second area of concern is a burgeoning array of "ethical issues." In contrast to the previously discussed "moral issues," these debates are fired by relative uncertainty over what constitutes right or good

conduct. Let me highlight just three controversies. One polemic revolves around conflicted responses to women's appeal to be *dīkṣā* gurus.[14] This controversy is often construed as religious or theological. However, the questions raised are distinctly and essentially *ethical;* for example, about moral and cultural relativism (for a lucid discussion, see Blackburn 2001: 17–26). A second polemic is the charge of hypocrisy brought against devotees consuming commercially produced milk. The dilemma is whether to respect the virtue of nonviolence, *ahiṁsā,* or the sanctified moral status granted to cow care (Valpey 2020) and dairy products (considered essential to a good, or sattvic, life). Some devotees advocate conversion to veganism;[15] others resist the move.[16] [17] The third controversy is ISKCON's response to those homosexually disposed or experiencing gender dysphoria (King 2013: 52). There is a palpable tension between scriptural passages that reprehend homosexual practices (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 3.20.26p) and "the cardinal virtues of love and compassion" (Chatterjee 1997: 75), which call for no one to be excluded from Vaiṣṇava practices.[18]

In addressing these debates, devotees must navigate a judicious course between "the soggy sands of relativism and the cold rocks of dogmatism" (Blackburn 2001: 26). They must also mediate between premodern and late-modern sensibilities. Without mature conversation and granting due attention to both enduring principles and changing contexts, ISKCON's ethical issues can readily create schism (Lipner 2013: 68).[19] As with moral issues, my hypothesis is that without ethical fluency, it is difficult to redress these theoretical topics without falling victim to the pitfalls that plague moral discourse (for a list of popular but unsound arguments, see Blackburn 2001: 9–38).

The ethical environment

Reflection on ISKCON's moral issues naturally invites the question, How did *this* happen? Or more pointedly, How did this happen to *us*? The problems "were simply not supposed to happen," observes Deadwyler (2004b: 150). The same angst-ridden queries attended the revelation of Nazi atrocities, which "to a great extent [were] committed by persons with a 'proper' upbringing and the requisite

cultural background" (Frede 2013: 144). For insight, Blackburn turns to the ethical environment, the surrounding climate of ideas and moral sentiment (2001: 1–7). Unlike a physical environment, the ethical environment often operates covertly, undetected; at least until the results manifest. Only with hindsight was the reformer Martin Luther blamed for helping foment the anti-Semitism that later erupted in nineteen-thirties Germany (Eldridge 2006: 154–5).

But Blackburn notes that reflection on the ethical climate extends beyond "the private preserve of a few academic theorists in universities" (2001: 5). It engages drama, literature, and poetry. The "satirist, cartoonist, and novelist also comment on the ethical climate." (ibid.) Politicians manipulate it to evoke feelings of pride or shame, hope or futility, endearment or outrage. Blackburn observes more profound effects: According to Hegel, the ethical environment "shapes our very identities." (ibid.) Understanding an ethical climate, therefore, is crucial. Finely cultivated, it sustains human flourishing; exploited or neglected, it allows depravity to take root. As Blackburn affirms, "An ethic gone wrong is an essential preliminary to the sweatshop or the concentration camp and the death march." (2001: 7)

The contemporary ethical climate

An ethical climate changes. For many contemporary thinkers, social activists, and policy makers, the moral queries from the 1960s have been answered; some say conclusively. Today's non-negotiable rejection of privilege[20] and hierarchy impacts ISKCON. For example, scholars insist that the Society (along with its broader traditions) abandon *varṇāśrama-dharma* (King 2013: 56–7, Parekh 2007: 349, Bryant and Ekstrand 2004: 435–7).[21] Further modern traits, quite conspicuous in the popular domain, include the prevalence of vicious, polarized debate (fueled by social media), adoption of human rights as "the currency of moral/political arguments" (Sumner 2013: 354), and vengeance toward the symbols and vestiges of (purportedly) outdated moral sensibilities.[22]

Through this analysis of the contemporary moral environment, a third impetus for embracing ethical discourse emerges (beyond

the "moral issues" and "ethical issues"). By today's moral standards, ISKCON appears less "cool" than during the counterculture years (King 2013: 44). Contemporary preoccupation with social justice, identity politics,[23] and what Midgley calls "the socially-homogenizing notions of equality" (McElwain 2019: 116)[24] may have exacerbated the negative criticism of Śrīla Prabhupāda and his teachings. In the twentieth century, he has been charged with denigrating sex, women, and Mayavadins (Lorenz 2004a) and imposing a hierarchical social structure (Lorenz 2004b). In response, ISKCON scholars have called for giving greater attention to context (Broo 2006), hermeneutics (Andrew 2020: 733), and historical criticism (Delmonico 2004). However, few have used the discipline of moral philosophy to appraise the negative critique of ISKCON and the broader impact of today's ethical discourse on the Society's trajectory.

Ethics and culture

Before appraising ISKCON's own (distinctive) ethical climate, I examine areas of overlap, the space in which different moral sensibilities meet and converse. King notes how "ISKCON's values will to some extent be shaped by the values and attitudes of the wider society" (2013: 53). One possibly inherited trait is the vitriolic tone of much moral debate in ISKCON, especially when conducted over the internet. However, not all shaping has been so receptive or assimilatory. Instead, a good deal has been insular and reactionary. Squarcini particularly censures ISKCON's perpetuating the "myth of a direct 'sabotage' of the materialistic social system" (2000: 262). The underlying anti-establishment tenor may have roots in the nineteen-sixties counterculture. Despite Śrīla Prabhupāda's disavowal of hippy standards (Deadwyler 2004b: 153), his movement failed to sever these umbilical ties (Goswami 2012: 50). As a result, new recruits were urged to "abandon their previous ethical norms" (Shinn 2004: *xviii*) and discard their indigenous cultural capital, which, according to Best (2013: 128), "for the non-Indian [was] essentially useless." However, that practice appears inconsistent with Śrīla Prabhupāda's views on the moral ground shared by all religiously shaped cultures:

"The principles of religion, namely, *austerity, cleanliness, mercy and truthfulness,* . . . may be followed by the follower of any faith. . . . Sticking to the dogmas . . . without attaining the real principles is not good" (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.17.32p). In practical terms, a belligerent stance toward 'other' cultures leaves many ISKCON recruits stranded in a morally vacuous "no man's land" (Bryant and Ekstrand 2004: *xviii*).

A similar (maybe more recent) trend leans toward commending the Indian culture, usually associated with premodern goodness, and denigrating the West, considered the sole culprit for modernity's ills (Dwyer and Cole 2013: 9). However, it is here that ethics, though insightful, is also disturbing (Blackburn 2001: 7). India's moral status, in contrast to its spiritual kudos, casts doubts on claims about India's cultural superiority. In *The Difficulty of Being Good,* Gurcharan Das bemoans how moral failure "pervaded our public life and hung over it like Delhi smog. One out of five members on the Indian parliament elected in 2004 had criminal charges against him" (Das 2009: *xxxiii*). Media coverage of rape has further eroded India's moral credibility. Siddharth Singh infers a "twisted moral compass."[25] It may, therefore, be best, as I propose, that devotees should not adopt Indian culture wholesale but retain and cherish their homegrown moral assets. Sardella affirms that the aspiration of Bhaktisiddhānta, founder of the Gaudiya Math, "was not that the West would become the East, but rather that it would embrace the core of Caitanya's teachings from its own sociocultural standpoint" (Sardella 2013: 178).

These debates are sensitive. My purpose is neither to homogenize nor to criticize Indian culture. Instead, I have three aims. First, I suggest that Indians draw on their own rich moral resources to address their internal issues, especially as linked to social justice (Prabhu 2005: 366). Second, I wish to highlight the need to avoid both absolutism and relativism, especially by resolving the tug-of-war between two competing imperatives: (a) the need to ground ethics in particulars and to acknowledge that "Morality which is no particular society's morality is to be found nowhere" (MacIntyre 2007: 265–6) and (b) the drive toward non-sectarian universals and anchoring judgements "in 'objective', necessary or absolute criteria independent of the mores, customs and practices of a given culture, society or civilisation" (Bilimoria 2007: 5). Simplistic answers fail to

resolve this long-standing subjective-objective debate and similar tensions.[26] My third aim is to nurture justified skepticism toward similarly simplistic or unhelpful traits within ISKCON's own ethical discourse.

ISKCON's ethical environment

Exploring further this third aim, I interrogate ISKCON's mainstream narratives:[27] the moral messages conveyed through lectures, leadership rhetoric, and corridor talk. I draw on Fahy's ethnographic fieldwork in Mayapur.[28] Fahy scrutinizes the pivotal role of failure in spiritual growth, using interviews, focus groups, and participant observation (Fahy 2020: 16). Through an anthropological lens, he provides authentic glimpses into the inner, everyday workings of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. His study, despite its many commendable traits, has a glaring weak spot. While surmising devotees' preference to "inhabit the moral system" rather than "opting out" (ibid., 3), Fahy fails to assess the *quality* of the embedded conversation.[29] Similarly, he little appraises his conclusion that "the narrative of moral failure itself becomes a privileged mode of self-cultivation." (ibid.) Indeed, his perception that "moral failure is a way of defining oneself as a devotee" (ibid., 85) alerts us to the possibility of an unhealthy ethical climate.

In an earlier diagnosis of ISKCON's moral malaise, Deadwyler perceived a "virulent antinomianism," the endemic view that "the saved are beyond the law" (2004b: 154). Fahy detects the same ethos, backed by the view (which he attributes to devotees) that "Kṛṣṇa consciousness does not necessarily depend on strict adherence to a moral code" (2020: 67). This view appears mistaken. Despite tangential or apparent scriptural support for transcending morality,[30] Deadwyler (2004b: 154) asserts that the *Bhagavad Gītā* resists this conclusion.[31] Fahy's research, then, confirms Deadwyler's diagnosis and, by extension, implies the departure of ISKCON's lived and expressed moral philosophy from its textual roots. I will now consider further conversational anomalies, often related to antinomianism and to alternative forms of seeking distinction or exclusivity, such as attempts to exalt spirituality over morality, or *bhakti-yoga* over the paths of *karma* and *jñāna*.

The main tendency is to deflect attention away from explicit and nuanced moral dialogue. This is expressed in three main ways. The first is to downplay the ethical dimensions of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In common with many scholars, devotees view the text — like others on Vedānta and Sāṅkhya philosophy — as a treatise on "ontology, logic and epistemology" (Perrett 2016: 21). Ethics, distinct from metaphysical doctrine, is more clearly identified (by scholars and devotees) with other texts, such as the *Manu Smṛti*. However, the *Gītā's* opening verse and Arjuna's subsequent "moral predicament" (Agrawal 1989) attest to the book's status as "one of the central *ethical* texts of the [Hindu] traditions" (Prabhu 2005: 359).

Related to the *Bhagavad Gītā,* a second tendency is to portray moral growth as passive, devoid of mindful striving. In my judgment, this view partly rests on a misreading of Prabhupāda's use of the term "automatic" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 13.8–12p), by which he conveys *bhakti's* ability to fulfill the aims of all other yogas. However, he discounts the interpretation of "automatic" as meaning "unconscious" and instead commends reflection on one's virtues and vices, not just as a moral exercise but as a tool of spiritual self-assessment (ibid.). By this account, it is a mistake to divorce *bhakti* from dharma (Valpey 2020: 6), which itself demands rationality and deliberation (Matilal 2002b).

The third tendency is overreliance on rules and timeworn, threadbare narrative. Both disregard the fluidity and intricate texture of moral discourse. This disposition has a religious impetus, especially in attempts to sanctify and preserve (or fossilize) moral truth. Blackburn observes: "For many people, ethics is not only tied up with religion but is completely settled by it. Such people do not need to think too much about ethics, because there is an authoritative code of instructions, the handbook of how to live" (2001: 9).[32] Authors sympathetic to religion have detected similar traits within ISKCON, including scriptural literalism (Shukavak Das 2004) and widespread imitation of Prabhupāda, especially by "trotting out" his moral statements (Knott 2013: 78).[33]

In endorsing a more reflective approach, Kuṇḍalī Dāsa (1994) highlights another problem. He argues that devotees largely dismiss

the *triguṇa* framework — consisting of *sattva-guṇa* (goodness), *rajo-guṇa* (passion), and *tamo-guṇa* (ignorance) — and the requirement to attain goodness before one can transcend it. Some devotees even decry goodness as the most dangerous *guṇa*.[34] Popular ISKCON discourse also conflates (and thus equally denigrates) *rajo-* and *tamo-guṇa,* or views them as little different (e.g., Kripamoya Das 2015: 66). In contrast, the Vaiṣṇava theologian Bhaktivinoda draws a wider distinction, granting *rajo-guṇa* a measure of credence by describing it as morally neutral (1936: 386).[35] He prescribes its cultivation as a (temporary) antidote to the degrading addictions of *tamo-guṇa* (ibid.). ISKCON's departure from Bhaktivinoda's view, and members' reticence to engage with the *triguṇa* in nuanced and meaningful ways (e.g., as a moral framework), may be fueled by antinomianism — in this case, a self-appraisal that prematurely elevates devotees above the *triguṇas'* grasp (*Bhagavad Gītā* 14.26); this despite the salutary warning that advanced devotees never even consider themselves Vaiṣṇavas[36] and especially not exalted *uttama-adhikāris,* situated in the third and final phase of spiritual progress.

My conclusion is that ISKCON's prevalent moral discourse is devolving.[37] The reflective dialogue favored by the *madhyama-adhikāri,* or intermediate practitioner (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.2.46),[38] is increasingly overshadowed by the static rhetoric dear to the *kaniṣṭha-adhikāri,* or neophyte (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.2.47).[39] By restricting Kṛṣṇa's presence and moral gaze to the temple, the novice barely extends his or her moral sensibility into everyday life. Intent on serving Kṛṣṇa, the *kaniṣṭha* may neglect respectful dealings with fellow devotees and members of the public. This trend is further marked by a bent toward labeling all nondevotees "demons" (i.e., nonvirtuous), thus failing to discern the pious from the malicious (as does the *madhyama*). As Nietzsche observes of Western religionists, neophytes shun direct "affirmation of their own way of life" and favor "negation of someone else's" (Craig 2002: 96–7). At the immature level, then, moral standing is ascertained by material designation (often based on religious affiliation), despite Kṛṣṇa's warning that illusory notions of the self are the root cause of strife and immorality (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.11–13). This regressive trend in moral thinking raises the question, Who is responsible for shaping the ethical climate?[40]

We turn, then, to the obligations of leaders, who are traditionally classified as managers (*kṣatriyas*) and educators (*brāhmanas*). Devotee-educators have long acknowledged, or at least interrogated, the importance of character formation as an explicit pedagogical aim (Rāsamaṇḍala Dāsa 1997; Best 2007: 6). Although teachers fashion the moral ambience of their classrooms, their tuitional aims are helped or hindered by the wider culture in which they invariably operate, over which they have little control. The surrounding ethos is largely molded by governance. Śrīla Prabhupāda affirms that administrators bear the prime responsibility for shaping the social and ethical climate, to "prepare the ground for the reception of . . . spiritual knowledge" (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.17.45p). We may surmise that there can be no successful ISKCON without effective governance, especially for its capacity to socially embed values aligned with scripture and conducive to spiritual growth.

However, many ISKCON leaders appear hesitant to assume moral responsibility. In part, this is reflected in the sweeping appeal to chanting of the holy name as the panacea for all personal and societal problems. I do not question this theological truth, if properly understood.[41] However, devotees have expressed disquiet with the routine prescription of *only* spiritual solutions. Second-generation Yudhisthira writes, "I strongly disagree that leaders of ISKCON should respond to crimes and immoral behavior . . . with only a so-called spiritual prescription" (Yudhiṣṭhira Dāsa 2001: 14).[42] Wider disquiet was revealed by a recent small-scale ethnographic study into "devotee care." A predilection for "placing the onus on the devotee to become detached to solve all problems" (Rāsamaṇḍala Das 2017: 18) was deemed an abdication of responsibility. This complaint finds scriptural sanction, most notably in the story of King Rantideva (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.21.2–18). The king did not appease his hungry supplicants by recommending chanting or detachment, but by donating his own food, despite suffering the effects of a forty-eight day fast. This narrative implies the need to complement the (often pedestrian) appeals for enhanced *sādhana* (personal spiritual practice) with virtuous governance and socially oriented moral strategies.

Further concerns about leadership and its different functions were revealed by the research into "devotee care." Participants expressed reluctance to seek counsel from "those in positions of authority" (Rāsamaṇḍala Das: 17) on account of a perceived conflict of interest. Devotees suspected that guidance received from office holders was compromised by institutional and personal interests. This raises questions about possible dissonance between the respective values[43] required of teachers and managers. I share the view expressed by Dante, and echoed by Luther, that "The Church had debased itself and sullied the moral landscape by confusing its secular and religious roles, by fusing the vengeful sword [with] the pastoral crook" (Malik 2014: 161). In ISKCON's somewhat different context, we may infer that the roles of educator and administrator should not be amalgamated. I write this not to advocate a normative imposition of the *varṇa* system, but to acknowledge its rationality, based on recognizing conflicting sets of moral and professional values.

Seeking to extend this argument beyond educators and managers, I claim that ISKCON's moral reductionism — while promoted mainly by leaders — also afflicts other members. By valorizing the generic devotional qualities, the Society often glosses over the virtues specific to each individual. As a consequence, devotees may slip and slide, even opportunistically, between the duties and virtues yoked to each *varṇa* and *aśrama*.[44] Although this phenomenon is couched here in the language of *varṇāśrama-dharma,* it is not exclusive to Indic thought. English philosopher Bernard Williams lampooned deontologists and utilitarians for favoring universals and neglecting the moral worth of particulars, especially as revealed within personal, affectionate relationships (1972: 82–98). He thus advocated "a shift in focus from *obligation*, as a property of rules, to *virtues*, as a property of persons."[45]

In ISKCON's case, we may surmise that eulogizing the devotional virtues *alone* smacks of the impersonalism that ISKCON seeks to avoid (*Bhagavad Gītā* 7.24).[46] It certainty falls foul of Kṛṣṇa's warning to never adopt another's duties, even when deemed morally superior (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.35). This form of "values indeterminacy" also permits managers to select and promote values that subsume individual interests beneath institutional and fiscal imperatives, as when "exalting the principles of humility and service to ensure

that the floors get swept and the bills paid" (Gelberg 2004: 397). Concerns over manpower and finance, although valid, hardly reflect the virtues expected of the noble *kṣatriya,* whose primary concern was the protection of dependents, and especially five groups of innocents: cows, women, children, *brāhmanas,* and the elderly (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.8.5p). I conclude that ISKCON administrators must embody these specific virtues.

The interplay between ethics and governance is relevant for two more reasons. First, faith in Lord Kṛṣṇa is mediated through not only gurus (educational leaders) but also managers. They, too, corrode or burnish trust (Ravīndra-svarūpa Das 2000). Second, texts indicate that traditionally it was mandatory for governors to study ethics — as a future *kṣatriya*, even Kṛṣṇa was so educated (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.45.34).[47] Without well-informed attention to ethics, a society's prevailing ethical discourse may degrade to impede the individual's personal growth. In this respect, Greene attributes ISKCON's moral paucity, in part, to a "*sannyāsī* dominated leadership" and an organizational ethos that privileged world-negation and the pursuit of salvation (2013: 122).

Three areas of moral discourse

Fahy likewise observes how ISKCON's moral dialogue tightly orbits the quest for liberation (2020: 3). In contrast, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura paints a wider moral landscape that encompasses the world. He sketches out three domains, each sustained by a specific virtue. First, in relationship to the Lord, the devotee aspires for *nāma-ruci* (taste for the holy name). Current dialogue underscores this, through the burgeoning popularity of mass *kīrtana* events. However, Bhaktivinoda acknowledges the scriptural conclusion that the all-important "taste for spiritual hearing" is contingent on the virtue of *vaiṣṇava-seva*, or service to Vaiṣṇavas (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.16).[48] He thus broadens the moral conversation from self (and God), to community, the second moral domain. The third area of moral interaction embraces the broader public, undergirded by the virtue of *jīva doyā* (empathy for all living beings).[49] According to Bhaktivinoda, an absence of such empathy indicates only "a semblance of devotion"

(Ṭhākura 1979: 185–6). Therefore, devotional fidelity requires attention to all three domains. To confirm the role of morality in each, and to refute counterclaims, I next explore these three arenas.

Personal spiritual life

Amongst ISKCON's members, concern over moral turpitude was roused by threats to institutional credibility (Rochford 2013: 12). However, those early admissions, while laudable in themselves, deflected attention from other consequences. These include the repercussions of moral deficit on the well-being of individual members (Deadwyler 2004a: 346),[50] including their spiritual growth. We have already noted how the devotee attains *kṛṣṇa-prema,* love for Kṛṣṇa, only after reaching the level of *sattva-guṇa,* goodness (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.1.1p).[51] I present three further philosophical insights. First, an enduring spiritual taste depends on achieving the stage of *anartha-nivṛtti,* purging the heart of selfish desires. Consequently, without moral resilience, claims to spiritual advancement may be reliably dismissed (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 2.3.24p). Second, a moral deficit corrodes the mind and blunts the capacity for reflecting honestly and fixing the mind on the Supreme.[52] Third, morality provides a safety net for the devotee experiencing spiritual frailty. Those attempting to (prematurely) surpass morality are more prone to a calamitous fall from grace.[53]

In further discussing morality's contribution to spiritual growth, textual and historical evidence is compelling. Schweig (2002: 431–3) cites Caitanya's strict observance of ethical norms. Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī states, "One hostile to morality or fallen from it can never be a spiritual man" (MacNaughton 1988: 88). In disabusing the claim that moral neglect is justified by transcending duality, Śrīla Prabhupāda writes (Bhaktivedanta Swami 1985: 12):

> Yes, ethics form the basic principle of purification. We cannot be purified unless we know what is moral and what is immoral. Unfortunately, everything in this material world is more or less immoral, but we still have to distinguish between good and bad.

Despite such statements, devotees' skepticism toward morality persists. It rests significantly on the authority of one text which asserts that the Vaiṣṇava develops "all the good qualifications of the demigods" (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.18.12). However, there are two main ways of interpreting this verse, depending on the direction of causal deliberation. Favoring one view, a devotee concludes: "I am a devotee and therefore have all good qualities." Adopting the opposite view, another reflects, "To what extent do I exhibit these qualities? To that degree, I may be a devotee."[54] This second option, intimating that devotees are recognized by their virtues, is supported by the prayer Śrī-*guru-vandanā,* sung daily in ISKCON temples. In this prayer, the spiritual master is glorified (hence is *qualified*) *because of his character.*[55] Thus, if devotees claim that character formation, and values education (Rādhikā Ramaṇa Dāsa 2017b: 13), fall short of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, they may be hard pressed to identify that "extra component" without *some* recourse to virtue.[56] I conclude that personal virtue is essential to spiritual progress. The virtues may even be an impetus to receiving divine mercy, as Viṣṇu reveals to Pṛthu Maharaja: "My dear King, I am very captivated by your elevated qualities and excellent behavior, and thus I am very favorably inclined toward you." (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 4.20.16)[57]

ISKCON communities

A moral perspective is also vital to building resilient communities. However, Fahy suggests that ISKCON's inherited doctrine obstructs this aim, since "... founded on notions of the individual as the moral unit of salvation where detachment is a central virtue, Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism's 'devotional ethics' and 'community' exist in an antagonistic relationship" (Fahy 2015: 3). I suggest that Fahy is both right and wrong. He is right to negatively appraise ISKCON's capacity for community cohesion by measuring it against some observed praxis. Nonetheless, he is wrong to attribute blame to Caitanya's actual precepts. As earlier discussed, immature devotees often misconstrue the Caitanya theology by privileging detachment over the "natural human affections" (Wolf 2004: 329). Green calls this "salvationist Kṛṣṇa consciousness" (2013: 118). Gelberg reproaches the

underlying, fear-driven attempts to avoid the world (2004: 395). By these accounts, Fahy errs in his critique of ISKCON's inherited theology. He misses the full significance of Caitanya's rejection of a desire for liberation (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Antya* 20.30)[58] and his exaltation of *kṛṣṇa-prema* as the ultimate goal of life, "the fifth *puruṣārtha*,"[59] which goes beyond even *mokṣa* (Mahadevan cited in Sharma 1999: 249). Caitanya's move appears innovative, not just metaphysically but *from an ethical perspective,* because he unequivocally calls for his devotees to refute world-negation and, by extension, moral apathy.[60]

Another corrective to moral indifference, and a cold, clinical approach, has been offered by ISKCON's devotee-care initiative. It redresses the temptation to offer only narrowly defined spiritual solutions, especially when they are generic rather than individually tailored. While many ISKCON leaders still fall back on the efficacy of chanting Hare Kṛṣṇa — and I doubt neither its spiritual status nor its key role in moral development — there remain pressing questions about *other* solutions. As implied by both the devotee-care research report and by textual study, wider-ranging solutions often relate to governance, and an obligation to nurture the right ethos and mode of discourse. In this respect, ISKCON has recently seen positive developments, such as the implementation of strategic planning and a GBC-training initiative.[61] It remains to be seen how much these projects boldly tackle ISKCON's own moral, ethical and hermeneutical challenges.

However, moral reticence should not be prejudged as totally misled. Behind it may lie reservations that are legitimate and deserve careful attention. I perceive two main misgivings. First, scriptural injunctions and narratives censure undue criticism of others, especially gossip and back-biting. Devotees are sensitive to avoid the most grievous offense: blasphemy of Vaiṣṇavas (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.74.40). This is more significant for the counterpoised apprehension that fear of transgression and its dire consequences have been conscripted to stifle dissent or, indeed, any ruffling of the standard narrative.[62] The second reservation is prompted by suspicion toward the outside world, its ethical climate, and its corrupting influences. Prabhupāda disparaged democracy (Lorenz 2004b: 369). His followers suspect that the contemporary stress on rights may

undermine the traditional status given to dharmic accountability. Devotees may be aware of the (often unintended) consequences of social justice, such as resentment, an inflated sense of entitlement, and a culture of blame and compensation, with its "excesses of right claims" (Bilimoria 2013: 296). A further concern is that much moral reasoning may itself be little more than self-consolation and cheating, as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* affirms (1.1.2).[63]

Despite valid misgivings over addressing ISKCON's internal moral and ethical issues, these controversies show little sign of abating. Without resolute redress, they will continue to corrode members' sense of belonging. There is, then, a pressing need to "grasp the nettle," to boldly address these issues without falling prey to the pitfalls we have discussed. I underscore this conclusion by making a further observation: ISKCON absolutely needs meritorious communities, led by virtuous leaders, to support its wider social contribution.

Outreach and social contribution

I propose that ISKCON broaden its appeal and influence by giving well-informed attention to morality and ethics. To forward this argument, I first examine how "insiders" and "outsiders" respond to each other morally, especially through mutual appraisal of their respective vices and virtues.

Moral arrears become acutely poignant when devotees perceive their colleagues' moral stature, or even their own, as relatively low in contrast to nondevotees. For example, in my early interaction with educationalists, I admired their relative courtesy in running meetings. To my mind, "our" values appeared less worthy than "theirs." This phenomenon is not without precedent: We may cite the case of Scottish philosopher David Hume. Because he was critical of religion, his palpable virtue and infectious good cheer (even when facing death) riled some religious colleagues.[64] They struggled to reconcile Hume's "secular sainthood" with the exclusive position they granted Christianity (Mossner 2001: 604–8). How, then, are devotees to respond to the palpable goodness of "outsiders"?

One response has been to deny its reality. This is not unlike St. Augustine, who condemned virtues (for him, "vices") that were

not "rightly referred to God" (Wetzel 2015: 128). The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* seems to agree, since "a person devoid of devotional service . . . has no good qualities" (5.18.12). This verse, I suggest, has been largely misunderstood. The dictum that nondevotional virtues are unreal cannot indicate nonexistence in the more literal monist sense. Fidelity to Vaiṣṇava Vedānta compels admission that such values are "unreal" only on account of their transience.[65] When a person "hovers on the mental platform" — as the textual passage also asserts — values and goodness itself are fragile,[66] contingent, and prone to loss. But the underlying virtues, albeit viewed dimly through matter, are real. For Vaiṣṇavas, virtue is rooted in the absolute, Lord Kṛṣṇa, the "reservoir of all good qualities" (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 4.20.27). Consequently, a mature devotee avoids deprecating the goodness of others. Prabhupāda set a precedent by describing the vice-chancellor of his college, Professor Urquhart, as "a perfect and kind-hearted gentleman" (Goswami 1980: 22).

Having discussed devotees' attitudes, I look now to others. How might a devotee expect the public to react to ISKCON's moral dissonance? How should they respond to, say, a dirty ashram? How far does the defense that "we are devotees" stretch, before ISKCON members measure moral credibility solely against institutional affiliation? Greene (2013: 120) decries this approach. Deadwyler (2004b: 149) notes his early recognition that "the line between the godly and ungodly is not congruent with the line separating ISKCON from non-ISKCON."[67] From this discussion, we conclude that success in outreach is contingent on virtue. Prabhupāda confirms: "We must all become ideal in our character and then people will be very impressed with such purity. A devotee is faultless. He has no flaws."[68]

Prabhupāda affirms the need for exemplary conduct. However, when devotees reflect on teaching others, a further question arises: How much, and in what manner, should Vaiṣṇavas engage with contemporary moral issues? In this regard, Indian scholar Sushil Kumar De was scathing of ISKCON's literary heritage:

> . . . there is also a self-centredness . . . and a lack of moral purpose, which . . . leave little scope for the moral struggles and aspirations of mankind. The whole literature of Caitanyaism, its elaborately composed

> theology, poetry and drama, is callously unmoral [sic] in ignoring this aspect of humanity, with the result that the larger humanity in its turn has practically ignored it. (De 1942: 432)

I forward the view that De's assessment of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava literature and its apparent neglect of morality is misguided (for a similar view, see O'Connell 2006: 158–61). De's conclusion may be based on an appraisal of popular, misconstrued practices rather than Vaiṣṇava ideals. Bhaktivinoda, living half a century earlier, alluded to a similar moral shortfall, indeed hypocrisy, when writing:

> Men of brilliant thoughts have passed by the work (the Bhagabat) in quest of truth and philosophy, but the prejudice which they imbibed from its *useless readers and their conduct* prevented them from making a candid investigation." (Bhaktivinoda 1936: 376; emphasis added)

Bhaktivinoda underscores the need for integrity. De, then, may be responding to practitioners who, though religiously well-attired, lack moral substance.

However, De goes further, to charge the Caitanya lineage with a callous lack of moral purpose, even theologically. But textual evidence implies otherwise. In likening Caitanya's ideal of benevolence to the example set earlier by King Rantideva, Sharma (2009: 249) concludes that *mokṣa* "has been altruistically transcended." He affirms the Vaiṣṇava notion that morality — and a palpable moral purpose — exist in the spiritual realm, beyond karma's egoism and *jñāna's* nihilism. In examining ISKCON itself, the allegedly missing moral impetus is also revealed, within the first of the Society's "seven purposes":

> To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all people in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world.

Here, the phrase "in order to" canonizes the nurture of virtue, elevating it above doctrine and praxis, and placing it as their goal. De, then, appears mistaken in his critique of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava literature. Despite this failing, he astutely points out that people seek help in their moral struggles and that many genuinely seek moral truth, even while rejecting religion (such as the type censured by Bhaktivinoda). They may feel neglected if ISKCON is unwilling or unable to help — or merely prescribes top-down solutions.

Textual evidence, then, endorses the need to enrich ISKCON's public engagement with authentic moral discourse. Green supports this view but laments a deficiency: "I don't know too many people who are able to take Lord Kṛṣṇa's teachings and apply them to areas of armed conflict, poverty, HIV/AIDS, education, women's rights, children's rights, [and] ecology." He concludes: "We are not relevant yet. For 99% of the world we don't matter" (Green 2013: 117). He would perhaps support De's statement about humanity's rejection of Kṛṣṇa consciousness when presented devoid of moral plenitude and generosity. More positively, Greene cites examples of devotee contributions to applied ethics (for further examples, see Prime 2002, Gor 2010, Devidasi 2011). However, this essay calls primarily for the support of a normative moral philosophy, which must be a coherent, exacting discipline, true to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism yet capable of authentic dialogue in Western academic space. Fortunately, in academia at least, "late modernity is turning its ethical gaze towards the ways of the ancients." (Nussbaum cited in Bilimoria 2013: 304)

Hindu and Vaiṣṇava ethics

From the 1950s on, tangible shifts in the course of Anglo-American philosophy favorably influenced the reception of Indian and Hindu ethics as a nascent and respectable discipline. There were two salient trends. The first, attributed to Anscombe, Williams, and MacIntyre, among others, was the "rehabilitation of virtue theory" (Prabhu 2005: 357). This revival, fueled by angst over the state of modern moral philosophy — viewed as male-dominated, historically repetitive, or even "empty and boring" (Williams 1972: *xvii*) — nurtured an academic environment receptive to alternative views. Scholars now

trace the genealogy of virtue theory back beyond ancient Greece to Daoism (Huang 2015), Buddhism (Goodman 2015), African ethics (Metz 2013), Chinese Confucianism (Ivanhoe 2013), and Indian thought (Bilimoria 2013).

It is not surprising, therefore, that Hindu moral deliberation attunes to virtue ethics, as lately reclaimed and reconstructed in Western academic space. Amongst academics, virtue ethics is often construed as a "third approach" to challenge (or complement) the two prevailing theories of deontology and utilitarianism (Perrett and Pettigrove 2015). The particularism typical of Hindu thought (Bilimoria 2013: 304),[69] while favoring virtue-discourse, sits less comfortably with the mental abstraction that underpins "Kant's negative view of emotions" (Hursthouse 1999: 108) and Bentham's "calculative elegance" (Jenkins 2006: 47). However, since many Hindu and Vaiṣṇava scholars favor holistic thought, they may champion reconciliation of all three models — for instance, by privileging virtues while admitting the respective roles of rules and reason, and of happiness and foresight. *Bhakti* scholars, recognizing "the strong connection between emotions and virtue" (Bilimoria: 2013: 298), will also appreciate the recent literature on the morally determinant roles of the emotions (Bagnoli 2011). Devotional lineages, venerating male and female divinities, may be especially amenable to ideas on feminine moral sensibility (Gilligan 1982) and to innovative developments in care and relational ethics[70] (Ruddick 1980, Noddings 1984). Overall, renewed interest in virtue ethics suggests an academic ethos receptive to Vaiṣṇava voices.

The second shift or trend is a revitalized interest in applied (or practical) ethics. By affirming the "close kinship between humans and other manifestations of human nature" (Prabhu 2005: 357), Hindu theory has proved pertinent to contemporary issues such as animal rights (Singer 1975), bio-ethical dilemmas (Crawford 2003), and the environment (Framarin 2014). These trends look set to continue. However, equally conspicuous is the lack of attention given to normative ethics. One main challenge, then, is that "the definitive statement of Hindu Ethics has yet to appear" (Creel 1976).[71] ISKCON scholars, proficient in cross-cultural discourse, may be well placed to fill this lacuna.[72]

Indeed, a Caitanya Vaiṣṇava ethics might assist the Society's outreach, by broadening its interest base and establishing its relevance. There is a case for suggesting that dharma (central to ISKCON's identity) is better translated as "ethics" (albeit theistic) rather than "religion" (maybe ethical). Ethical literacy might also facilitate confident redress of the Society's natural shortcomings. We have also ear-marked an obligation to attend to the moral narrative, especially to resist a predilection towards self- and world-negation and a moral discourse that tacitly approves monistic and nihilistic views. This may be the natural consequence of construing morality as necessarily "material," thus inferring in transcendence a moral void; on the contrary, morality and virtue may be expressions, even when imperfect, of a bountiful and generous love for Kṛṣṇa. What may be fitting, then, is not a "transcendence of ethics" but a "transcendental ethics." Indeed, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* commends *bhakti* as "the highest dharma" (1.2.6). Furthermore, love may be the highest virtue — an insight not exclusive to Vaiṣṇavism. British-Irish philosopher Iris Murdoch (2001: 45) affirms, "We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central." In asserting love as a virtue — and yet its paradoxical transcendence of virtue — Compte-Sponville (2002: 290) writes: "Love commits us to morality and frees us from it. Morality commits us to love, even in its absence, and must yield before it." My proposal is that devotees acknowledge such insights, and furthermore, that Caitanya's fifth *telos, prema,* be accommodated with a coherent moral philosophy, despite its surpassing morality's lower, selfish, and binding expressions.

Based on this study, and on the notion of love as practical service, I submit six recommendations for devotees' further consideration. ISKCON leaders might:

1 Resolutely redress ISKCON's moral and ethical issues. Define standards primarily against virtues.[73] This would include promoting those virtues associated with the individual's station in life.

2 Include ethics in training administrators, especially to help them: (a) shape the apt ethical climate, (b) promote moral success as conducive to spiritual life, and (c) develop the noble (*kṣatriya*) virtues.

3 In educational theory and praxis, prioritize values/virtues, which at the mature stage coexist with (a) fluid practice and (b) realization, which is more important than rigid philosophical conformity.

4 Collaboratively write (a) professional codes of conduct for various services and (b) a "vision, mission, and values statement" for each ISKCON project.

5 Formulate a coherent moral philosophy, especially to (a) answer key questions, such as, "What is the ultimate good?" and "Where does, or should, moral authority reside?" (b) consider the role of the *triguṇa,* and (c) define the unique contribution of devotional practices to moral growth.

6 Actively enter the moral conversation in a well-informed way to promote the relevance of Kṛṣṇa consciousness to contemporary world problems.

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1 Although robustly engaging with them and addressing the much-discussed "fact-value" dichotomy. (Putnam 2002)

2 The terms "morality" and "ethics" are often used interchangeably (Harper 2009). However, their conflation may blunt discernment. Some respective meanings are shared, others radically different. Therefore, in this essay, I use "morality" to refer to any phenomenon linked to "right and wrong," or "good and bad." I use "ethics" more precisely to refer to the well-informed consideration of moral principles, and of their systematic articulation and application. Ethics, then, in this essay, refers largely to the long-standing discipline of "moral philosophy." It also refers to more recent professional "codes of conduct" as applied to, say, law, medicine, and business. (For helpful historical overviews of moral philosophy, see Russell 1996, MacIntyre 1998, Malik 2015.)

3 Anna King (2013: 44) discusses "the subjective turn to the East" in the 1960s and ISKCON's then "cool image."

4 This second publication, *The Hare Krishna Movement: the Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant*, has been criticized for offering "a very narrow window on the Hare Krishna Movement" by confining its purview to the past, the United States, and temple communities (Gupta 2005). It may be, therefore, that some of the issues are not so widely shared, are historical, or have already been redressed.

5 This is despite devotees' relative zeal in addressing the immorality they perceive in "the world looming outside the walls of ISKCON." (Gelberg 2004: 402)

6 Furthermore, citing select instances of misdemeanor is insufficient to condemn an entire culture or religion, as when the caste system, the *satī* rite, and idolatry have been highlighted to undermine the moral credibility of all Hindu thought (Fahy 2020: 12). On the basis of such practices alone, one cannot legitimately dismiss Hinduism as irrational. (Matilal 2002b)

7 I am hesitant to designate ISKCON as a "religion" for fear of construing it too narrowly. As I later suggest, the word "ethics" may be a more apt (although incomplete) translation of dharma. It may be that the trend toward the Hinduization of ISKCON has

been contingent on accepting the religious label, which brings its own cultural baggage. For example, I question the wisdom of adopting the term heresy, which Resnick does (2004).

8 Although the latter component is often little stressed during the initiation ceremony. This privileges rules over virtues and runs counter to the tenor of virtue ethics in which "virtues and vices will be foundational…and other normative notions will be grounded in them" (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2016). The *Bhagavad Gītā* appears to valorize virtues; for a useful list see Gupta (2006: 374).

9 ISKCON's founder more graphically suggests that for animals (i.e., those without moral discretion) no political order or social contract will avail. Whatever the system, citizens, and leaders especially, must be virtuous. (Bhaktivedanta Swami 1985: 136)

10 I refer, of course, to Plato's *The Republic*.

11 Moral philosophy is often divided into three categories: (1) applied ethics, (2) normative ethics, and (3) metaethics.

12 ISKCON wrongly exalted the virtue of celibacy over integrity. Lord Caitanya taught otherwise when he punished the renunciant Choṭa Haridāsa for a relatively minor moral infringement and embraced Śivānanda Sena when his wife gave birth to a child. Śrīla Prabhupāda concludes, "So sex life is not forbidden in this movement, but hypocrisy is forbidden. If you become hypocrite, then there is nowhere to… That is Caitanya Mahāprabhu's teaching." See Śrīla Prabhupāda's lecture on *Bhāgavatam* 6.1.23, given on 23 June 1976 in Honolulu, Hawaii; available at: vedabase.io/en/library/transcripts/760523sbhon/ (accessed on 3 September 2020).

13 See previous note.

14 See Jordan Blumetti's article " 'It's Latent Misogyny': Hare Krishnas Divided over Whether to Allow Female Gurus" in the *Guardian* newspaper, dated 04/06/2019. Available at: theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/04/hare-krishna-india-hinduism-florida-women (downloaded 20 March 2020).

15 See "Why I Became Vegan" by Gauri Dāsa on the *ISKCON News* website, dated 29 September 2017. Available at: iskconnews.org/why-i-became-a-vegan,6298/ (accessed on 20 March 2020).

16 See the article entitled "Should ISKCON Devotees Become Vegan?" by Hṛdaya Caitanya Dāsa, dated 28 February 2020, and

published on the *Dandavats* website. Available at: dandavats.com/?p=83049 (accessed on 18 March 2020).

17 An innovative third solution has been offered by the UK-based Ahimsa Dairy Foundation, which supplies devotees with karma-free milk. More information is available at: https://www.ahimsamilk.org/ (accessed on 5 May 2020).

18 See "Vaiṣṇava Moral Theology and Homosexuality" by Howard Resnick, available at: hdgoswami.com/essays/Vaiṣṇava-moral-theology-and-homosexuality (downloaded on 24 April 2020).

19 Braja Bihārī Dāsa (2005) presents a helpful overview of schisms within ISKCON and the various underlying motives. I make the claim that poor moral conduct, especially by leaders, is also a key factor.

20 Not just *abuse of privilege*, but privilege itself, perhaps based on the ideals of distributive justice, as addressed by John Rawls in his book *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

21 Chatterjee (1997: 75) concludes that "Chaitanya denounced" *varṇāśrama-dharma*. Śrīla Prabhupāda, seemingly aware of historical contextualization, considered otherwise. See "*Varṇāśrama* Must Be Introduced," available at: vedabase.io/en/library/transcripts/770214r2may/ (accessed on 3 September 2020).

22 There are many other traits. For example, since morality is mainly addressed through law, issues densely populate the public domain. For this reason, moderns "think that modern democracies are fine regardless of the private vices of those within them" (Blackburn 2001: 4). With neglect of the personal arena, the term "virtue" has become "obsolete if not unintelligible" (Frede 2013: 142). Singer (2011: 1–2) hastily (and with little rationale) dismisses sexual mores as "Victorian" despite a current preponderance of media coverage on sexual predation. Today, the tendency is to consider "mutual consent" to be the sole criterion for legitimizing sexual practices though some contest this. (Primoratz 2001)

23 Diamond (2012: 64) traces this back to the 1970s and defines it as "collective activism based on embodied experiences of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity or nationality."

24 This tendency for social hominization stands in contrast to the Hindu disposition to articulate and validate difference (Dumont 1980: 8-11).

25 See "A Social Explanation of Our Twisted Moral Compass" by Professor *Siddharth Shekhar Singh.* Available at: livemint.com/opinion/online-views/opinion-a-social-explanation-of-our-twisted-moral-compass-1554402045227.html (accessed on 3 September 2020).

26 For useful studies, see Nagel 1986, Putnam 2002, Barua 2020. In critiquing science, Midgely (2003) warns about assuming moral authority by making spurious claims on objectivity. Blackburn (2001: 16) alerts religious figures to the temptation to "drape our own standards with the stories of divine origin as a way of asserting their authority."

27 This is similar to what Squarcini (2000: 265n19) calls the "peculiar thought style adopted by ISKCON."

28 Over fourteen months during 2013 and 2014. (Fahy 2020: 22)

29 Blackburn (2001: 3) suggests that Nazism flourished not because people didn't think but because they *did* think — that is, wrongly.

30 These include Mādhavendra Purī's renouncing his worldly duties (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 2.4.3–4p), and the exaltation of the *avadhūta* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 4.29.11p). However, my argument is not that "the Vaiṣṇava is not transcendental" but that the problem rests in thinking or advertising that one has attained this platform. To such claims, Śrīla Prabhupāda responded, "We don't claim that we have become a perfect Vaiṣṇava. We are not so impudent." See his lecture on *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.8.41 (dated 21 October 1974 in Mayapur). Available at: vedabase.io/en/library/transcripts/741021sbmay/ (accessed on 3 May 2020).

31 For example, Kṛṣṇa refuses to exempt even himself from the obligation to establish moral precedent. (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.22–24)

32 I do not doubt that religious authority can be a useful source of moral guidance. However, such guidelines do not enable humans to evade all moral complexities nor do they provide the absolute certainty some may seek. (Matilal 2002a)

33 Matilal warns how this resistance to change turns a tradition into a museum piece (2002d: 253). Deadwyler decries literalism by concluding that "realization alone makes the difference between a living and a dead tradition." (2007: 120)

34 I base this on insights that devotee colleagues shared with me while I wrote this article. This misunderstanding may be based on

the notion that goodness (*sattva-guṇa*) binds the transmigrating self to a sense of happiness and knowledge (*Bhagavad Gītā* 14.6). However, this hardly makes *sattva* the most dangerous of the three *guṇas*.

35 Prabhupāda similarly suggests that "The *rajas* stage of life gives a slight clue to the realization of the Absolute Truth in the form of fine sentiments in philosophy, art, and culture with moral and ethical principles . . ." (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.24p)

36 "Wherever there is a relationship of love of Godhead, its natural symptom is that the devotee does not think himself a devotee." (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Antya* 20.28)

37 This is my own thesis, and not all ISKCON members will agree. For example, Best suggests (while exploring the Hinduization of ISKCON) that "the Indians are bringing a lot of moral stability to ISKCON" (2013: 129). The trajectory of moral discourse is clearly complex. Nonetheless, whatever the factual historical changes, I stand by the point that the *madhyama* discourse should predominate or at least be promoted as the aspirational standard.

38 This verse reads: "An intermediate or second-class devotee, called *madhyama-adhikārī,* offers his love to the Supreme Personality of Godhead, is a sincere friend to all the devotees of the Lord, shows mercy to ignorant people who are innocent and disregards those who are envious of the Supreme Personality of Godhead."

39 Perhaps due to changing sources of income. In the early days, ISKCON relied on having many *saṅkīrtana* devotees, whose service of book distribution required a *madhyama* mindset. Later, "temple authorities [were] more concerned with attracting patrons" (Rochford 2013: 18), whose Kṛṣṇa consciousness was more temple oriented and whose commitment was based on traditional affiliation rather that philosophical persuasion. This, of course, is a generalization, and does not hold true for all. The translation of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.2.47 is: "A devotee who faithfully engages in the worship of the Deity in the temple but does not behave properly toward other devotees or people in general is called a *prākṛta-bhakta*, a materialistic devotee, and is considered to be in the lowest position."

40 A related query revolves around how much gurus and teachers should acquiesce to the demands of popular moral discourse. In

my judgment, one danger lies in offering entertainment rather than education and thereby merely "reinforcing pre-existing persuasions born of the emotions." (Kripamoya Das 2015: 88)

41 I understand that the results of chanting include the development of character and the virtues, including those aligned to administration (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.18.12). Virtues, then, are linked to proficiency, to the Vaiṣṇava quality of expertise (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 4.20.16p), and to the skills sets required to push forward the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement.

42 Muster recounts how during a three-month health crisis she was prescribed only "rest and chanting" (2004: 312).

43 Which in today's world may be embedded in codes of conduct.

44 For example, an ISKCON administrator may assume the power and privilege of a *kṣatriya*. To dependants seeking shelter, he may proffer the advice traditionally considered the prerogative of a *brāhmana*. And, in strategic planning, he may favor the financial expediency of the *vaiśya.* (See Gelberg 2004: 397)

45 Baril and Hazlett 2019: 227.

46 The debates over personalism and impersonalism are often framed as metaphysical. I suggest that there are conspicuous ethical dimensions which, if considered, help reveal impersonal tendencies despite formal belief in a personal Supreme.

47 In the summary study of the Tenth Canto of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* known as "the Kṛṣṇa book," Prabhupāda appears to translate "ethics" as "dharma" in text 10.45.34. Scholars similarly suggest that "dharma" may be translated as "ethics" and that "The Sanskrit [word] for ethics is Dharma." (Crawford 2003: 11)

48 Service to devotees is traditionally guided by codes of etiquette. See *Vaiṣṇava Etiquette*, by Bhakti Charu Swami, available at: bhakticharuswami.com/2010/12/vaishnava-etiquette/ (accessed on 24 August 2020). For a useful study of etiquette more generally, and especially the virtue of politeness, see Compte-Sponville 1996: 7–15).

49 I am grateful to Ravi Gupta for pointing out that some of the "three ideals" may extend beyond the corresponding three moral domains identified by me. For example, empathy for all beings may include devotees. My intentions are to adopt a best-fit model and to help build a framework for ethics that extends beyond the

individual's immediate relationship with God, which may reflect a degree of moral immaturity.

50 In isolation, those admissions seem to favor the institution over the individual, and expedience over integrity.

51 We might note the moral connotations of Prabhupāda's translation for *sattva-guṇa:* goodness.

52 Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura affirms that with neglect of regular human rules, "one will not be able to take the mind . . . and direct it to thoughts of God." (Ṭhākura 2004)

53 This is supported by Prabhupāda's statement about "falling down into the mode of goodness." The story is available at: bhakti charuswami.com/2010/12/vaishnava-etiquette/ (accessed on 20 April 2020).

54 I am grateful to Anuttama Dāsa for this observation, made during a lecture given in May of 2019, near Florence, Italy.

55 The line in *Śrī-guru-vandanā* is (in translation): "The Vedic scriptures sing of his character." Available at: harekrishna.com/col/books/RP/SVA/gur-van.html (accessed 12 March 2020).

56 Or skills linked to virtue ethics, such as critical thought. The aim ". . . to build a deep, rational and emotional relationship with Kṛṣṇa," mentioned by Rādhikā Ramaṇa Dāsa (2017: 12), is certainly distinctive. Even then, that relationship may not be entirely divorced from virtues (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 4.20.16). If one claims that truth is a key aspect of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, that, too, cannot be divorced from virtuous intention. (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.1.2)

57 This refutes the idea that mercy overrides personal qualification. According to Deadwyler (2004: 152), a similar mistake is to consider the process cheap (rather than easy) not only by accepting that anyone (however qualified) can take to the process of *bhakti,* but by thinking it is equally acceptable to *remain* unqualified.

58 In this verse from *Śikṣāṣṭakam,* Caitanya rejects the desire for liberation by expressing the higher aspiration to serve Kṛṣṇa "birth after birth." This verse also makes it clear that his ultimate rejection of the desire for liberation is not a regressive step toward a morality based on worldly success. This is a third option in which *mokṣa* is "altruistically transcended." (Sharma: 1999: 249)

59 The four *puruṣārthas* are dharma (religiosity), *artha* (economic development), *kāma* (sensual satisfaction), and *mokṣa* (libera-

tion). Sharma and others list them in different orders. He also notes how Caitanya's positing a fifth goal of human life is not "conventional." (Sharma 1999: 249)

60 This is connected to the controversial idea that *mokṣa* transcends dharma (Perrett 2016: 23). I am inclined to the idea that a world-denying worldview inevitably leads to moral indifference. Many scholars do not refute this so much as the underlying premise that Hindu spirituality is indeed life-negating. (Prabhu 2005: 358)

61 See the GBC College for Leadership Development, available at: gbc-college.com/ (accessed on 9 August 2020).

62 Based on my experience, the tension between avoiding offense and airing grievance is widely discussed in ISKCON. Lorenz makes some reference to it, largely in the context of the special respect offered to the guru. (Lorenz 2004b: 374, 390/n170)

63 However, this may beckon not for mere dismissal of the unworthy "other" but for a positive alternative, that is, a moral philosophy calling for greater attention to truth and truthfulness. Nondevotee philosophers have also noted the human capacity to embrace illusion and shun reality (Murdoch 1971: 71) and to be driven by the "fat relentless ego." (ibid., 51)

64 Most notoriously, James Boswell (Mossner 2001: 604–8).

65 I do not dispute the possibility of pretense, or the idea that, to some degree, this afflicts most humans.

66 Nussbaum makes the case for this in *The Fragility of Goodness* (2001). There is a long-standing dialectic between agency and contingency especially in law and political debate.

67 We might replace "godly" with "virtuous" and "ungodly" with "vicious."

68 A letter by Śrīla Prabhupāda to Batu Gopala on 1 February 1975. Available at: vedabase.io/en/library/letters/letter-to-batu-gopala-7/ (accessed on 10 April 2020).

69 However, Perrett (2016, 324–5) disagrees with the view of Hindu ethics as "anti-theoretical particularism."

70 Barua (2020) notes the Hindu notion of "identity-through-interconnection," which according to much Vaiṣṇava theology continues even after liberation; that is, one perceives the true self in relationship to Vishnu or one of his forms.

71 This observation was made in 1976 but appears to still be true.

72 Carey (1983: 481) has also noted how ISKCON is well-equipped educationally, and also notes "a clear set of moral and ethical directives."

73 Without virtues, fidelity to praxis and doctrine remains empty and unfulfilled. The *Gautama Dharma Sutra* confirms this: "A [Brahmin] man who has performed the forty sacramental rites, but lacks [the] eight virtues does not obtain union with or residence in the same world as Brahman. A man who may have performed just some rites, but possesses these eight virtues, on the other hand, does." (Olivelle 1999: 91)

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ISKCON and the Gaudiya Maths: Conflicts, Schisms, Growth, and Aspirations

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Between 1918 and 1920, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī established two Vaiṣṇava *maṭhs* in Bengal: the Sri Chaitanya Math (1918) located in Mayapur, West Bengal, and the Gaudiya Math (1920), an ashram located at Ultadanga Junction 1 in Calcutta. The former is generally considered more important owing to its connection to the nearby *yoga-pīṭha,* the birthplace of Caitanya that was identified by Bhaktisiddhānta's father, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura. Indeed, Sri Chaitanya Math became the spiritual root of all subsequent Gaudiya Math branches. The total number was sixty-four *maṭhs* in India and one each in London, Berlin, and Rangoon, Myanmar.[1]

On January 1, 1937, Bhaktisiddhānta passed on. Shortly thereafter a power struggle ensued between two leading members of the Gaudiya Math. This caused a schism and a court case, which was settled in 1948, though acrimony, friction, and mutual criticism continued long after.[2] Schisms are common phenomena in the history of religions, often beginning with rivalries, antagonisms, setbacks, and revolutions, out of which certain factions survive while others dwindle or even disappear. On the positive side, however, schisms often serve as catalysts for innovation, development, and

expansion. With respect to the Gaudiya Math's crisis (after Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta's departure), what started as an acrimonious contest between rivalling factions eventually became a positive attempt by several emerging leaders (gurus, *ācāryas*) to re-enable growth by establishing their own independent Gaudiya Maths. It is these developments that we explore herein.[3]

The court case

Immediately after Bhaktisiddhānta passed on, the fate of the Gaudiya Math hinged upon the relationship between Kuñjabihārī Vidyābhūṣaṇa Dāsa (1894–1976) and Ananta Vāsudeva Dāsa (1895–1958), the opposing protagonists in the legal dispute.[4] Both individuals were respected senior disciples, the former being responsible for various administrative duties and the latter for publishing books, magazines, and journals. On December 31, 1936, the day before his passing, Bhaktisiddhānta dictated his last wishes, advising disciples to form a governing body to manage his mission, with the qualification that "Kunja Babu [Kuñjabihārī Vidyābhūṣaṇa] will manage for as long as he lives."[5] In his final remarks, Bhaktisiddhānta never named a particular successor guru. Thus his disciples were left to decide upon this important matter. In June, 1937, disputes over a number of post-charismatic issues led Kuñjabihārī Vidyābhūṣaṇa to initiate a legal proceeding at the High Court of Calcutta, naming Ananta Vāsudeva as the defendant. The latter had been specifically selected by the governing body to act as the Gaudiya Math's new *ācārya,* which Kuñjabihārī accepted. Problems arose, however, because the governing body was unwilling to accept Kuñjabihārī in the role of the Math's general administrator, leading him to feel disrespected. The court case revolved around the fair and proper distribution of Bhaktisiddhānta's goods and properties.

To support his case, Kuñjabihārī presented a 1923 will apparently signed by Bhaktisiddhānta, naming Kuñjabihārī, Ananta Vāsudeva, and Paramānanda as the will's executors. Kuñjabihārī's aim was for the court to validate the will and accept the three executors — an arrangement that effectively would hand control of the Gaudiya Math to him, since Paramānanda, the third executor, was

already on his side in the dispute. Their ultimate goal was to invalidate the new structure (the governing body) and install Kuñjabihārī as the factual administrator, along the lines of Bhaktisiddhānta's final remarks.[6] Instead, the court's final decision, in 1940 — accepted by both parties in 1948 — ordered the disputants to divide the Gaudiya Math's asset into two parts, virtually creating two distinct institutions: the Gaudiya Mission, headed by Ananta Vāsudeva,[7] and the Sri Chaitanya Math, headed by Kuñjabihārī.[8] As a consequence of the court's final decision, Ananta Vāsudeva officially registered the Gaudiya Mission for the first time, the sort of proceeding that Bhaktisiddhānta himself had apparently considered unnecessary.[9] The temple and ashram at Bagh Bazar became the official Gaudiya Mission headquarters, while Kuñjabihārī acquired the Sri Caitanya Math and centers in its proximity. Afterward, on March 25, 1948, Kuñjabihārī accepted the renounced order of *sannyāsa* and received the name Swami Bhakti Vilāsa Tirtha.[10] While resolving the court case, however, the institution largely lost its momentum and severely damaged the Gaudiya Math's reputation.

The aftermath of the dispute and court case

The Gaudiya Math's internal conflict, along with the eleven-year court case, gave rise to other serious institutional consequences. Ananta Vāsudeva and Kuñjabihārī both had loyal followings among the Gaudiya Math's senior and junior members and its congregation, who followed their respective leader regarding the divisions dictated by the court. However, others, especially among Bhaktisiddhānta's senior disciples, considered the entire affair an unpleasant, undesirable distraction from the Math's spiritual mission, since the dispute and settlement disregarded Bhaktisiddhānta's advice that disciples cooperate and the institution be managed by a governing body, not by an appointed single hierarchical head.

The response of those dissatisfied with the new status quo, and thus unwilling to adapt, is key to understanding the developments between 1948 and 1966. Basically, the unified entity — the Gaudiya Math, Bhaktisiddhānta's pan-Indian movement with numerous temples, several printing presses, and thousands of initiated and

congregational members — more or less ceased to exist. In its place arose a number of offshoots independent of those under Ananta Vāsudeva's and Kuñjabihārī's leadership and control. The new heads were many of the dissatisfied senior men. While most of the numerous new entities remained relatively small, some grew as large as the original Gaudiya Math. Two examples of such success are the Sri Gaudiya Vedanta Samiti, established in 1940 by Swami Bhakti Prajñāna Keśava (1898–1968), and the Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math, established in 1941 by Swami Bhakti Rakṣaka Śrīdhara (1895–1988). Among the large independent offshoots, one more stands out: the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), founded in New York City in 1966 by Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta (1896–1977).

Bhaktivedanta Swami

Bhaktivedanta met Bhaktisiddhānta in 1922 at Ultadanga Junction 1 in Calcutta. At that time, being very impressed by Bhaktisiddhanta's religious understanding and intellectual prowess, Bhaktivedanta resolved to commit himself to this guru — a commitment he formalized in 1932 by accepting initiation from him. During their first meeting, Bhaktisiddhānta suggested that Bhaktivedanta, a Western-educated Bengali, present Caitanya's teachings to the English-speaking world, an instruction he reiterated in a letter written shortly before his demise.[11]

Although in his heart Bhaktivedanta accepted Bhaktisiddhānta's suggestion as an order and his primary mission, he was both a husband and father and therefore spent most of his adult life on the periphery of Bhaktisiddhānta's movement. He earned a living by selling natural pharmaceuticals. As such, during the years of litigation Bhaktivedanta remained distant from the dispute, with no role in the court case and no desire to take sides in the power struggle. In 1973, while reminiscing how in July 1935 he had been advised to live in the Bombay Gaudiya Math, he said, "I was never with them, either this party or that party. Guru Mahārāja also recommended: 'When there will be need, he [Bhaktivedanta] will do [everything] himself. There is no need of his living with you. It is better that he lives apart from you.'"[12] As a prominent

congregational member, he had been aware of the uncooperative spirit and the disruption it had caused — something he later referred to as "the fire in the Math."[13]

In 1944, to stay focused on Bhaktisiddhānta's specific instruction to him, Bhaktivedanta began publishing *Back to Godhead*, an English magazine that presented Caitanya's teachings and related them to contemporary issues and events. Furthermore, between 1944 and 1959, Bhaktivedanta completed an English translation of *Bhagavad Gītā* (1948), wrote Bengali articles for a Gaudiya Math publication (1946–59), founded a short-lived India-based institution named the League of Devotees (1952–53), and fully transitioned out of married life (1954). On September 17, 1959, Bhaktivedanta accepted *sannyāsa,* the renounced order, so as to fully dedicate himself to Bhaktisiddhānta's order. In 1965, after spending the previous years writing, publishing, and printing a three-volume English translation, with commentary, of the First Canto of *Srimad Bhagwatam,* Bhaktivedanta traveled with three trunks of the books by cargo ship to New York City to present Caitanya's teachings to the Western world. He observed his sixty-ninth birthday at sea.

When Bhaktivedanta arrived in New York on September 16, 1965, he was alone. He came to America with no means of support, just a handful of tenuous contacts, and modest expectations. After passing his first year without much success, he settled into a small apartment on the Lower East Side, which his early followers located for him, and also rented the building's storefront to hold his classes. He founded ISKCON. Bhaktivedanta had never set foot outside India prior to this journey, so he had little understanding of the daily lives of Americans. Although that first year was relatively unproductive, it laid the groundwork for future developments by affording him the opportunity to interact with and observe the people and culture of the United States. On the basis of these interactions and observations, Bhaktivedanta introduced a number of innovations to attract American (and later European) youth and accommodate their lifestyles and sensibilities — innovations that provoked negative responses from some Gaudiya Math leaders.

On November 14, 1977, ten years after founding ISKCON, Bhaktivedanta passed away in Vrindavan, India, surrounded by disciples from all parts of the world. Remarkably, in the years between

his arrival and demise, Bhaktivedanta attained all that he had set out to accomplish and more. He had spread Caitanya's teachings to major cities in North and South America, Europe, Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand, Russia, and the Far East; initiated around five thousand disciples; established just over a hundred temples and farms; and published some sixty volumes of traditional Vaiṣṇava works, millions of which had been distributed in a dozen or more languages worldwide. In other words, within eleven years, Bhaktivedanta had achieved a level of international penetration that went far beyond the previous reach of all the traditional Vaiṣṇava communities in India. He had managed, along the way, to make the Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra an internationally known expression. By so doing, he is said to have fulfilled Caitanya's prediction to that effect[14] — something that most Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas had come to regard as more of a figurative statement than a literal foretelling.

Relations between ISKCON and various Gaudiya Maths

After Bhaktivedanta passed on, his global movement continued developing at the same pace in some places. However, just as problems arose in the Gaudiya Math shortly after Bhaktisiddhānta's demise, problems arose in ISKCON after Bhaktivedanta's departure, largely owing to the missteps and shortcomings of leading disciples who were supposed to function as initiating gurus. As a result, during the 1980s and 90s, hundreds of Bhaktivedanta's disciples felt both disaffected with such authorities and estranged from ISKCON. They drifted back into old patterns of life, formed alternative institutions, or gravitated to one or another Gaudiya Math, where they thought they might find more mature spiritual guidance.

This third outcome created tremendous friction between ISKCON's leaders and the Gaudiya Maths that sheltered former ISKCON members — institutions such as Narāyana Swami's Gaudiya Vedanta Samiti, which welcomed over a hundred ISKCON members, with some accepting *sannyāsa*, and Śrīdhara Swami's Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math, where a small number of leading Bhaktivedanta disciples received *sannyāsa* initiation and began offshoots of Śrīdhara Swami's Math in the United States and other parts of the world.

Even prior to these events, the general attitude in ISKCON toward the Gaudiya Maths, before and after Bhaktivedanta passed on, was to refrain from association and interaction. This avoidance was in response to negative attitudes held by Bhaktivedanta's godbrothers regarding the innovative manner in which he had conducted and spread ISKCON and had differed here and there from the standards of the Gaudiya Math. For example, during his first few years in America, Bhaktivedanta — having observed that men and women mixed without restriction, and wanting to provide all persons with the opportunity to practice *bhakti-yoga* and become Kṛṣṇa conscious — offered *brāhmaṇa* initiation to both men and women and allowed single men and women and married couples to reside and work together in his temple ashrams. This was unprecedented in the all-male, monastically structured Gaudiya Math.[15]

Gaudiya Math leaders also objected to Bhaktivedanta giving "low-class" Westerners *brāhmaṇa* initiation; appointing them as leaders of ISKCON; allowing them to conduct deity worship, perform marriages, and oversee various brahmanical rites and rituals; allowing *sannyāsis* to perform marriages; allowing women to do the brahmanical work of caring for temple deities; and allowing disciples to address him as "Prabhupāda," a honorific title that Bhaktisiddhānta's disciples reserved for Bhaktisiddhānta alone. Bhaktivedanta, however, by now in his seventies, knew not how long he might live and so was intent on quickly spreading his mission as widely as possible. He therefore maintained a broad focus on distributing Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism's sacred texts to the general public, an approach that some Gaudiya Math gurus considered inappropriate.

In judging Bhaktivedanta, some godbrothers may have overlooked the fact that Bhaktisiddhānta himself had introduced innovations that rankled many of Bengal's upper "goswami" caste: establishing several presses in temples to print religious books; using automobiles as regular means of transportation; constructing large temple complexes such as Calcutta's Bagh Bazar; and accepting Vaiṣṇava initiates regardless of class, race, or ethnicity as long as the persons were qualified in terms of knowledge, practice, and moral behavior.[16] In other words, Bhaktivedanta's willingness to adjust certain features of his movement according to time, place, and circumstance appears in keeping with Bhaktisiddhānta's approach,

which was based on the principle known in Sanskrit as *yukta vairāgya*, that is, "renouncing the propensity to enjoy the objects of the world while actively engaging those objects in God's service."[17]

In responding to such criticisms — sometimes expressed directly to his fledgling Western disciples — Bhaktivedanta expressed the need to protect them from this sort of disparagement. Thus he discouraged them from corresponding or associating with or having anything to do with members of the Gaudiya Maths.[18] At other times, he softened this tone and instructed disciples to maintain cordial, respectful, friendly relations with the Gaudiya Maths with the hope of future cooperation. In this regard, Bhaktivedanta notes in *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* that an "*ācārya* who comes for the service of the Lord cannot be expected to conform to a stereotype, for he must find the ways and means by which Kṛṣṇa consciousness may be spread."[19] Currently, ISKCON is the largest Vaiṣṇava institution worldwide with more than half a billion books distributed, its members numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and its Indian and non-Indian congregation numbering in the millions.[20]

Areas of cooperation

Despite (ongoing) tensions between ISKCON and the Gaudiya Math, over the years there have been several cooperative endeavors. In 1995, Jayapatākā Swami, the leading disciple of Bhaktivedanta who has always headed ISKCON Mayapur, established the Sri Sarasvata Gaudiya Vaishnava Association. Its work consists of coordinating efforts by ISKCON and the Gaudiya Math to maintain Mayapur's infrastructure and accommodate the millions of pilgrims who visit this sacred area year round. Its aims are to cooperatively spread Caitanya's teachings and to develop Vaiṣṇava communities in Mayapur.[21] The inspiration for this project is said to have come from Bhaktivedanta, who, in 1977, established the Bhaktivedanta Swami Charity Trust, which was designed to unite the followers of Lord Caitanya, especially those descended from Bhaktisiddhānta (i.e., the Gaudiya Math and its offshoots).[22]

A second example of cooperation is the work of ISKCON's Kolkata-based Bhaktivedanta Research Centre (BRC), founded in

2008. One of its primary aims has been to gain complete access to all available Vaiṣṇava works, including the writings of Bhaktisiddhānta and Bhaktivinoda. The problem was that in the aftermath of the Gaudiya Math schism, the full collection of Bhaktisiddhānta's many writings and journals had been scattered, along with numerous valuable volumes of Vaiṣṇava works, including some that are extremely rare. Eventually, most of these valuable documents and texts were gathered together and stored in Mayapur's Sri Gopinath Gaudiya Math under the care of B. B. Bhodayan Swami, a disciple of Bhaktivedanta's godbrother Bhakti Pramode Puri Goswami. Gradually, through numerous friendly exchanges between the BRC scholars and Bhodayan Swami, he agreed to transfer the entire library (over three thousand books, manuscripts, and documents) to the Bhaktivedanta Research Centre.[23]

A final example of cooperation was the founding of the World Vaishnava Association (WVA), in 1994, by leading members of ISKCON and the Gaudiya Maths. Its primary purpose is to enable Vaiṣṇavas worldwide to communicate with one another. As explained by the WVA, it is not another branch or mission of the *sampradāya* and will neither open temples nor promote a particular *ācārya*.[24] Rather, its aim is to create common ground for all Vaiṣṇava missions to share information about their services.

Conclusion

The creation of the Gaudiya Math and the development of its local and international offshoots was inspired by Bhaktivinoda's and Bhaktisiddhānta's devotion to Caitanya. Bhaktisiddhānta founded his Calcutta-based institution in 1918, and though the Gaudiya Math's progress as a unified entity was hindered by squabbling, the schism itself inadvertently set the stage for a blossoming of various successful offshoots, including Bhaktivedanta Swami's ISKCON, which spread Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism almost throughout the entire world. ISKCON's extraordinary international success helped establish that Caitanya's teachings are relevant not only to the populations of Bengal and India but to varied populations worldwide.

Today, all of Bhaktisiddhānta's leading disciples have passed on, as have most of his regular disciples, and the relationship between ISKCON and the Gaudiya Maths is entering a new phase, which involves new generations of leaders and devotees. Prior to this, ISKCON's Governing Body Commission had attempted to avoid unnecessary friction by passing certain positive resolutions. At present, although a certain number of second- and third-generation ISKCON members have shifted their affiliation to the Gaudiya Math, the earlier problem of ISKCON's dissatisfied members gravitating toward one or another Gaudiya Math seems largely resolved as ISKCON becomes a more mature, stable, and congregational global organization. The Gaudiya Maths' criticisms of ISKCON for so-called deviations have lessened since they have become more like ISKCON, some incorporating Westerners and other non-Indians into their ranks. The question is whether these two competing institutions — adhering to the same spiritual tradition — can set aside differences, forgive grievances, and reach the point of appreciating each other and working together to advance the cause of Caitanya, especially with respect to Mayapur, the sacred space where they both reside and in which they must learn to coexist.

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NOTES

1 Of the three centers outside India, only London's center has endured to some degree. For information regarding the London and Berlin centers, see Sardella 2013, pp. 134–180.

2 For further information on the Gaudiya Math's schism, see Sardella 2013, pp. 129–132.

3 Ibid.

4 For a positive description of Kuñjabihārī, see Yati 1994, and for one of Ananta Vāsudeva, see Sasmal 2000.

5 "Minutes of Bhaktisiddhānta's last wishes," point No. 2, 1936.

6 Sardella 2020a, p. 58.

7 The headquarters of the Gaudiya Mission was located in Calcutta's Bagh Bazar. For information on the Gaudiya Mission's centers as of 1948, see http://www.gaudiyamission.org/Centers

8 The headquarters of the Sri Chaitanya Math was located in Mayapur, the site of Caitanya's appearance. Kuñjabihārī also received other properties located in that pilgrimage site as well as centers in India (e.g., the Gaudiya Math in Chennai, formerly known as Madras).

9 The Gaudiya Mission was registered in the "Certificate of Registration of Societies of 1860 [Act No. 21]."

10 Yati 1994, pp. 149–50.

11 Bhaktivedanta 2019, 681209DA–Los Angeles.

12 Ibid, 730921R2–Bombay.

13 Ibid, 760726R2–London.

14 This prediction can be found in certain hagiographical works on Caitanya's life and teachings, for example, Vṛndāvana dāsa Ṭhākura's *Śrī Caitanya-bhāgavata* (*Antya-khaṇḍa* 4.126; *pṛthivīte āche yata nagarādi grāma/ sarvatra pracāra haibe mora nāma*).

15 See, for example, Yati 1998, pp. 429–30.

16 Sardella 2013, pp. 118–19.

17 Ibid, p. 204.

18 Bhaktivedanta 2019, letter to Viśvakarma, November 9, 1975.

19 Bhaktivedanta 2019, *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Ādi-līlā* 7.31–32, purport.

20 See, for example, ISKCON in the Hindu Forum of Europe, Sardella 2020b.

21 See Tishta Mohan Krishna Das, "Sri Sarasvata Gaudiya Vaishnava Association (SGVA)," April 3, 2002, http://vaishnava-news-network.org/world/WD0204/WD03-7251.html (accessed on Feb. 29, 2020).

22 Interview with Jayapataka Swami in Mayapur on February 24, 2002. ISKCON's global leadership body, the Governing Body Commission, in 2003 passed the statement: "Jayapataka Swami is encouraged to continue his service with the Sarasvata Gaudiya Vaisnava Association and is authorized to represent ISKCON and co-opt additional representatives to attend SGVA meetings as needed," 510 Saraswat Gaudiya Vaisnava Association, 2003, http://gbc.iskcon.org/resolutions-regarding-gaudiya-math/ (accessed on July 16, 2020).

23 Bhaktivedanta Research Centre, Kolkata, http://brcindia.com/ (accessed on February 29, 2020).

24 For information on the World Vaishnava Association or Vishva Vaishnava Raja Sabha, see www.wva-vvrs.org (accessed on Feb. 29, 2020).

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BOOK REVIEW

British Idealism and the Concept of the Self. **Edited by W. J. Mander and Stamatoula Panagakou. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN 978-1-137-46670-9.**

My book review of *Anglo-American Idealism: Thinkers and Ideas*[1] evaluated intersections of Anglo-American idealism and Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism and mentioned the relevance of idealist thought to current issues and contemporary philosophical concerns. This related book, on British Idealism, discusses understanding our own selves. Selfhood is a "highly complex concept with multiple aspects, levels and depths, and one whose development has occurred gradually over centuries at the hands of many different thinkers," write the editors in the introductory first chapter. (p. 20) The nature of the concept of the self in British idealism led, again, to my discerning commonalities with Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism.

The second chapter considers three pioneers of idealist thought who "laid the grounds for the conception of selfhood which later came to prominence" (p. 11) and paved the way for more influential philosophers who, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, made Idealism a British school of thought. James Frederick Ferrier developed "an original system of idealist metaphysics"; John Grote critiqued "contemporary philosophy from an idealist perspective"; and James Hutchison Stirling offered "the first detailed analysis of Hegel's philosophy in English." (p. 32) Other champions of British Idealism assessed in the book are F. H. Bradley, Edward Caird, T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet, R. G. Collingwood, and J.M.E. McTaggart. Common to all these almost forgotten thinkers is an idealist conception of the self.

"In Ferrier's view, the *essential* fact of humanity is self-consciousness; therefore, this must be the starting point for philosophy," Jenny Keefe writes.[2] "So, throughout his philosophical works he emphasizes its importance and argues that self-consciousness is the condition of knowledge, reality, freedom and religion." Ferrier's epistemology starts with "his primary proposition: 'Along with whatever any intelligence knows, it must, as the ground or condition of its knowledge, have some cognizance of *itself*.' " (p. 27)

The editors comment on Ferrier's primary idea: "The precise relationship between experience and the subject of experience is no doubt a complex and subtle one, to be sure, but at its most fundamental, the idealistic claim that all reality lies within experience is just the thesis that so-called 'external reality' is, in truth, no more distinct from its cognition than are our thoughts from our thinking of them. Notwithstanding appearances to the contrary, knowledge of the world is really a kind of self-knowledge, and there can be no explanation of what it means to grasp the former except through an account of our knowledge of the latter. . . . If selfhood constitutes the model for fundamental reality itself, it must be conceded that the self in its deeper being is not to be mistaken for the self as it presents itself in its everyday common-sense dress. Experience *is* foundational, but appearances can be misleading." (p. 4)

Nowadays, if one rejects both theses (i.e., that selfhood constitutes the model for fundamental reality and that self-consciousness is important for knowledge — unless one thinks of "knowledge" in extremely limited ways), one could hold other ideas concerning the value of personhood, its compatibility with the natural order, and its relation to transcendence. According to one contemporary personalist, while the British idealists quickly separated personality from the rest of what is real, held it apart, and thought it "to be something other than the very energies that are organized within its manifestations," this is a mistake — a conceit on the part of human thinkers.[3]

According to Bill Mander, editor of the online *History of Oxford Philosophy*, F. H. Bradley is the greatest British Idealist because of his ground-breaking work in logic and metaphysics.[4] James W. Allard summarizes Bradley's views that "metaphysics is deeply rooted in human nature" and "is an attempt to find . . . intellectual satisfaction. . . . [W]e are naturally led to wonder about and reflect on ultimate

reality, on what 'is beyond the visible world'. For some of us who do this, 'the intellectual effort to understand the universe is a principled way of thus experiencing the Deity.' " (p. 47) Scholars seeking Bradley's intellectual satisfaction of experiencing the Deity in this way can read in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*[5] about the divine opulences of the famous Lord Viṣṇu — His spiritual body generated the universe, and all its perceivable aspects are situated within Him.

The editors say that generally, "One of the most characteristic features of British Idealism is its focus on philosophy of religion." In response to "the difficulties which originated from contemporary science and biblical scholarship (the so-called 'Victorian crisis of faith')," the British Idealists emphasized that God "is immanent in nature, and most especially immanent in the finite self; a position whose reverse expression, of course, is to say that the finite self is implicitly infinite or divine." (p. 5) The finite self's implicit infinity or divinity is delimited in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava philosophy. The self is a minute portion of divinity, analogous to a drop of ocean water — qualitatively divine, but not quantitatively so.[6]

To give you a good dose of a British Idealist's account of knowledge of the self that is neither skeptical nor dogmatic yet approximates a preliminary Caitanya Vaiṣṇava understanding, I condensed Edward Caird's rigorous philosophy. Caird describes the nature of our conscious life as "circumscribed by three ideas, which are closely, and even indissolubly, connected with each other." These three divisions within consciousness are not to be seen as an abstraction or "rigid and absolute," explains the scholar Phillip Ferreira. "In the final analysis, they must be understood as comprising a single, though internally diverse, experience." (pp. 90–91) Caird's profound three-part view of consciousness includes (1) the idea of the not-self (or object world) — simply my awareness that things 'other' than me and specific entities exist; (2) the idea of the self as my awareness that I am, and I am a being conscious of things that are separate from myself; and (3) the idea of God, or universal consciousness, as an awareness that includes but transcends both the ideas of self and the not-self.

Similarly, Caitanya Vaiṣṇava philosophers discern a three-part scheme: (1) matter (i.e., bodies, minds, and the world), (2) spirit (the self), and (3) the supreme controller of both. The self is part

and parcel of the supreme Self, or Kṛṣṇa — this is mentioned in the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gītā.* The eternal self, as a false enjoyer and predominator, misidentifies with matter under the influence of illusion (*māyā*) and interacts with matter through the agency of the supreme Self within everyone's heart, who acts as the all-pervasive observer, consenter, supporter, and the higher personal enjoyer in all bodies.

When introducing Caird, the editors note his "careful drawing out of the lessons from both Kant and Hegel about the nature of self-consciousness". (p. 12) Kant deduced that "the self and not-self imply each other," but to Caird their difference "is only possible within a common framework," which Caird — influenced by Hegel — insists "must be understood as something infinite or divine" and "cannot properly be understood 'all at once' but only gradually" through a three-fold dialectical exchange between self, not-self, and God. (p. 13)

Ferreira illuminates Caird's (and Kant's) view that "the awareness of self-continuity arises only through an act that, first, synthesizes (i.e. organizes according to rules) the contents of sense, and second, differentiates the self from those contents." (p. 96) A transcendental subject's "synthetic combination of [the] sensuous contents [of experience] is always made according to conceptual 'rules' (or categories) that establish precise relations between them." (p. 95) Caird acknowledges and insists "that the not-self/object world is law-governed and ordered throughout" (p. 91) and there are "conditions that are essential to its being but which remain merely implicit and hidden from view." (p. 92)

Within the intelligence and the object world is a shared deep structure, and self-discovery is co-extensive with the truthful apprehension of the object world. The *absence* of ideas of the self and God as somehow co-extensive with the world constitutes varying degrees of defectiveness in our apprehension of the not-self. "The highest levels of understanding require that we grasp both self and God as not just co-extensive with our awareness of the object world, but as constitutive of and necessary to its existence." (p. 92)

Ferriera concludes: "We are told that if we carefully reflect on the conditions of [conceivable] experience, we shall discover that . . . the presupposition and condition of any part can only be the

whole — the whole that possesses characteristics of what we are ultimately forced to call a 'divine intelligence'. To those who would deny this, Caird presents this challenge: Provide a self-consistent explanation of how any of the contents of experience could be known if such a whole — such an absolute — did not exist. Caird believes that this challenge cannot be met. He believes, too, that "if we think the matter through with the seriousness that it deserves, we shall see that, in the end, it is a view such as this or nothing." (p. 105)

Now I will encapsulate the rest of the book's chapters. A few are about reconciling the individual to the community. T. H. Green's stance, summarized by Janusz Grygienc, is that personally identifying with "*the common good may be an effect of conformity to a communal ethos, or individuals' moral development.*" (p.123) Rex Martin writes about Green's extended notion of the self with "three dimensions: the metaphysical, the ethical and the civic." (p. 14)

Three chapters cover Bernard Bosanquet, "a key exponent of the moral view of politics, which combines elements of ethics and metaphysics in the discussion of the nature of the state, the role of institutions, the common good, the best life, and the ideal of self-realisation." (p. 15)

Avital Simhony writes that Bosanquet highlights "the active, energetic and self-governing capacities of the relational individual" (p. 203) and "rejects the view of society in terms of 'selves and others', for it reflects 'a purely psychological individualism' that takes 'the separate body as the separate self'." (p. 216)

William Sweet focuses on Bosanquet's theory of individuality and writes, "Development of consciousness eventually leads to the Absolute, but this process of development is also dependent on the Absolute. Thus, the realisation or development of consciousness is a realisation of the Absolute, but it is the presence of the Absolute in consciousness that enables the development to occur. The Absolute is not, then, anything over and above finite things or 'appearances', but rather it is, Bosanquet argues, the totality or full realization of them. . . . It is a complete system in which all things are understood in their multiple relations to one another. . . . Though many things—for example, human persons—are loosely described as individual and concrete, only the Absolute is concrete and an individual in the sense of being fully independent and self-sufficient. For Bosanquet,

this Absolute is not only what is completely actual or real, but because it is real, it is the basis and principle of value and truth." (pp. 182–83) The first verse of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* also declares that the Absolute Truth (Śrī Kṛṣṇa) "is independent because there is no other cause beyond Him. . . . Only because of Him do the material universes, temporarily manifested by the reactions of the modes of nature, appear factual, although they are unreal."

Ian Winchester discusses R. G. Collingwood's two ways to study the entire human being: as an object in our common world (via empirical methodology), and as the self, or consciousness (experienced from the first-person point of view). Their relationship, he adds, has been the subject of study by philosophical neuroscientists.

James Connelly raises "questions about the nature of the self which arise in writing biography or autobiography." (p. 242) G. L. Cesarz discusses J.M.E. McTaggart's conception of the self and his critique of materialism. "McTaggart concludes that the self cannot be an activity of the body. This is one of his reasons for rejecting materialistic explanations of the self and affirming that it is a spiritual substance." (p. 265)

The last two chapters look at British Idealism as a whole. Leslie Armour writes that the defining mark of persons is their creativity, their power to frame or structure an intelligible world and generate value and meaning. W. J. Mander argues that "the true principle behind our own lives is at once the true principle behind the universe itself." (p. 289) He draws out four interconnected roles that the concept of the self plays in idealist thinking: "value, obligation, freedom, and purpose in life". In other words, "that which completely satisfies us [i.e., value], that which obliges us" — or is "the source of our obligation," "that which most fully would set us free" — a "proper understanding of freedom," [and] "that which is our proper goal." These living concepts, with large, diverse spheres of influence strongly "claim to characterise ultimate reality." (p. 303)

In summary, the book tells us that various kinds of understanding of true selfhood emerge from the multiple aspects of and levels of thinking about its historical development.

Tattvavit Dāsa

1 James Connelly and Stamatoula Panagakou (eds.), *Anglo-American Idealism: Thinkers and Ideas* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010). My book review (in *ISKCON Studies Journal,* Sept. 2014) is here: https://tvdas.tumblr.com/post/55339088056

2 All italics in the quotations occur in the book under review.

3 Correspondence with Randall Auxier, Professor of Philosophy and Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University (July 30, 2020), who presented a paper at the R. G. Collingwood Society Conference in Prato, Italy, where I met him, in July 2010.

4 https://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/history-oxford-philosophy#collapse387201

5 See A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda's *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (Second Canto, Sixth Chapter), (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1987).

6 See, for e.g., "The Nature of the Self: A Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Understanding" by Ravīndra Svarūpa Dāsa (*Journal of Vaishnava Studies,* Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring 2012, pp. 127–32).

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ISKCON COMMUNICATIONS JOURNAL

has been typeset at TXTcraft, Belgium, in The Brill with Antonio as display. The Brill (2011) is a neo-classical typeface designed by John Hudson of Tiro Typeworks, and Antonio (2019) is a reworking of a traditional sans-serif typeface by Vernon Adams. The cover was designed by Māyāpriya Devī Dāsī, using Formata and Granjon, at Bookwrights Design, Woods Mill, Virginia, USA. Printed on 90 gsm Multidesign natural paper by Graphius, Belgium.

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ISSN 1358 3867
€12/US$15