

THE HARE KṚṢṂA MOVEMENT AND WESTERN CULTURAL IDENTITY EDUCATION, PREACHING, CONVERSION

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Most scholars familiar with ISKCON would probably agree that it is not yet quite clear what will turn out to be the historical significance of Śrīla Prabhupāda's mission to the West, built on the preparatory work of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī and Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura. My argument in this article is that whether or not the potential significance that ISKCON's supporters identify will be realised depends on how the organisation and its work are received in the West by Westerners, and that this, in turn, depends on the extent to which they succeed in achieving a deep, long-term, selective translation and integration of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava spirituality into the historically evolved culture and society of the West.

Needless to say, the mission of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, bringing something that was missing in the West, is also to change it. But what I will argue is that this is not possible without taking its particular characteristics and history into account in a more conscious, deliberate, and discerning manner than has heretofore been done. While I will do this, I also want to call attention at the outset to the fact that the mission conceived by the *ācāryas* was from the beginning and often still is a controversial one *in India*, and that this controversiality concerns its very possibility.

THE PERILS OF PREMATURE DETACHMENT

At one of the Communications Seminars at Radhadesh, Belgium, in the 1990s, Ravīndra Svarūpa Dāsa told of some of the curious misconceptions and abuses that existed in the movement in its early days in the West. He

had, for instance, found a few leaders who taught that mothers should not develop affection for their young babies, and even that those small babies should not be allowed to develop affection for them. That was considered to be material, ignorance, *māyā*. It allowed undue attachment to develop; affection should be directed only towards Kṛṣṇa.¹

This is an extreme example. But it serves to illustrate what is wrong in principle with the teaching that any other identification than that as ‘spirit soul’, as it is called in ISKCON, and any other attachment than that to Kṛṣṇa should always and in every case be treated as simply wrong, an illusory material conditioning which should be ‘renounced’ as soon as possible and by almost any means. There is a whole range of problematic applications of this teaching. For people who are far from having reached the spiritual level where they constantly experience themselves as transcendental to conditional identifications and attachments, it can become positively dangerous, reduced to an abstract faith or dogma or ideology embraced with a fanaticism that only compensates for and fills the vacuum of the absence of real insight. Those who do have genuine realisation take a quite different and more nuanced view of how spiritual advancement actually happens, and the principles pertaining to this are of course clearly stated in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

I will here discuss the mistaken application of the position regarding spiritual and conditional identities to the question of cultural identities, or, more precisely, to the cultural identity of Westerners. This does not mean that the general principles regarding cultural integration and bridge-building which I will invoke are not also valid for the cultures and identities of the world which are not Western, or rather, to the extent that they are not Westernised. Indeed, some of the more specific reasoning too *will* be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*. It is just that the Western identity and culture are the ones I know best, and also ones which, for better and worse, have had a global impact. And that it is a fact that they are the identity and attachment of people to the preaching to and conversion of whom Śrīla Prabhupāda, for various historical reasons, gave most of his attention.

I want to point out parenthetically that in having recently decided to build in the most sacred *dhāma* of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in the rural village of Mayapur, India, in accordance with Śrīla Prabhupāda’s perceived instructions, a temple emulating the United States Capitol, i.e. in the ultra-urbane

¹ Ravindra Svarūpa Dāsa, ‘Issues of Reform in ISKCON since 1977’, *ISKCON Convention Europe*, Radhadesh, Belgium, June 29–July 3, 1999.

and symbolically highly charged Renaissance and neo-classicist style of the modern West, ISKCON is making for centuries, perhaps millennia, a statement about its being fundamentally and primarily linked to that West.

THE CAUSES OF APPARENT ISOLATION

The preaching of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement in the West and the conversion, in a general sense of this word, of Westerners, whether from Christianity or Judaism or atheism or something else, raises vast and as yet often unanswered questions. On outsiders, the movement long made the impression of being an isolated sect, deliberately and voluntarily set apart from Western society and culture. On closer inspection, it turned out it did indeed often regard itself as a 'transcendental' phenomenon, a perfect, self-contained movement which just needed to be and to practice in the West everything that it had been and practiced in India.

Part of the reason for this was undoubtedly the truth of the teaching on transcendence and the corresponding realisation of Śrīla Prabhupāda, the sheer force of his preaching, and the freshness, attractiveness and richness in both form and substance, which made many Westerners willing to adopt the whole culture and lifestyle that was offered. After all, many small Christian and semi-Christian churches have long been isolated sects with much less of those qualities.

But there are also other explanatory factors which have to do partly with specific historical conditions obtaining at the time of Śrīla Prabhupāda's presence in the West. I was once told by one of his disciples who followed him on his first tour of Australia that he said that Australians had to be given this whole new culture – for the reason that they simply had no culture. This, I think, did not reflect merely a disdain for the one-sided materialism of Western modernity in general. Nor, perhaps, did it have to do only with the actual cultural state of Australia. It was probably also a response to the particular kind of young Westerners with whom, as sociologists saw from the beginning, he primarily came into contact: the young Westerners of the counterculture, the hippies.² And insofar as this was so, it was valid not only for Australia, but for all of the West. Most of the Westerners who were attracted were so partly because of their self-marginalised position within Western society and their previous countercultural mode of renouncement of the predominant culture and lifestyle in their own countries.

² See Judah (1974).

As has often been observed, Śrīla Prabhupāda came at the right time inasmuch as it was a time of openness to and receptiveness for his message. Eastern spiritual teachings had been spreading in the West on an informal yet sometimes rather broad basis ever since the romanticism of the first half of the nineteenth-century, and the countercultural movement was obviously a continuation of romanticism, with added elements of Western esotericism mixed with further imports of Eastern spirituality.³ There was a higher side to hippiedom, a legitimate reaction against the materialism and shallow rationalism of the whole post-war era. Despite the specifically Western romanticisation and the confused and ‘*tamo-gunic*’ nature of the hippies’ spirituality, many of them *were* groping for spiritual enlightenment. While rejecting what they took to be Western culture, or its currently prevailing forms, they already sought to fill the void with a new and higher substance. Some serious further appropriation of the Eastern traditions and an integration of them, albeit confused and unconscious, with congruous elements of at least Western romanticism in a broad sense, did take place at this time. To the degree that their spiritual need was authentic, they were in a sense, and to an extent, right to ‘drop out’, and there was clearly a kind of subjectively unconscious yet higher providential wisdom about some of them doing so, inasmuch as they were destined to receive and carry on Śrīla Prabhupāda’s mission, present and waiting when he arrived.

Another common observation, adduced against those who emphasise too strongly the factor of the counterculture and are indeed inclined to identify the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement with it along with the passing California cults, is that Śrīla Prabhupāda saved the hippies and redirected their confused drug-spirituality into disciplined forms that transformed them into something completely different. This too is true; it sets his movement apart from those cults and accounts for its continued existence and institutional consolidation in the West.⁴

³ The nature and import of the counterculture’s continuity with romanticism is still poorly understood, mainly because most of the scholars who write about the counterculture are themselves more or less consciously ‘romantics’ in the broad sense in which I suggest the term be understood, and do not see the whole romantic current from any critical vantage point outside it. I discuss the continuity in Bengtsson (2001).

⁴ Which among the cults are rightly described by this term, and which ones are passing, of course often remain open questions. But in the case of ISKCON, the questions are not open, at least not to the same extent.

PROBLEMS WITH THE LEGACY OF THE COUNTERCULTURE

Still, there are also remaining problems with the counterculture's relinquishment of the native Western civilisation, a civilisation which, for all the continued propagation and commercialisation of further developed, re-packaged, broadly countercultural ideas by the mighty media, for all of the reintegration of the drop-outs into the establishment and their assumption of positions of power, is still there and needs to be reckoned with and addressed in ways that the hippies could not be sufficiently aware of. Without this implying any disparagement of the spiritual achievements of the early ISKCON, I suggest the onesidedness of its first Western basis in the counterculture tended to make it poorly equipped to meet the distinctly *cultural* requirements for and challenges of preaching and converting in this part of the world.

While it long seemed to become in fact what has been called a 'transcendental bubble',⁵ a world of its own, its countercultural origins, ever highlighted by the media, prevented the reception on the part of most Westerners. It took the focused efforts of the significantly named ISKCON Communications, supported by the presence of an increasing number of ISKCON members in academia, to begin to deal with this state of affairs when its nature, its extent, and its seriousness were fully realised. Unfortunately, it also took absurdities of the kind broached by Ravindra Svarūpa Dāsa.

THE INEVITABILITY OF CULTURAL INTEGRATION

The lesson of history is unambiguous. Religions do not permanently and successfully spread in new parts of the world as transcendental bubbles, soaring forever untouched through alien air. They do so by means of new cultural syntheses which supplement and transform rather than completely replace existing cultures and identities. This can be seen not just in the way in which the rise to power of the small Jewish sect of Christianity would have been impossible without its assimilation of parts of the pre-Christian Hellenistic culture as well as its taking over the organisational forms of the Roman empire, and its being Germanised not only as it spread north but also by the Germanic peoples who took over the Roman empire itself. Christianity could hardly have been accepted in Scandinavia if Christ had not been presented as a big Viking warrior, but as a suffering servant

⁵ Bhaktavatsala Dāsa (1999).

on the cross—and even this was not quite enough (I am not commenting here on the spiritual value of the conception of the suffering servant on the cross). The phenomenon can also be seen in the variations Islam came to assume in the many different parts of the world in which it spread, as well as in the transfer of Buddhism to China, where it soon entered into a new synthesis primarily with Taoism, a synthesis which, in turn, reached Japan and assumed the form of Zen.

Whether or not such transformations imply fatal compromises or legitimate adaptations and even enrichments is of course a contentious issue and produces never-ending discussion in all such cases. But whatever position is taken with regard to these questions, it is a crystal clear historical fact that the adaptations do happen, that they are inevitable. For this reason, the issues should be reconceived as the one question of the possibility of such necessary adaptations as do not imply undue compromise.

And even if transcendental bubbles were theoretically possible, in the case of divine avatars and great saints perhaps, it is also a fact that the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, while both seeing itself and being seen as such a bubble, was not one in reality. Even when they claim to reject them, its Western converts are inevitably and deeply shaped by Western culture and society in ways that determine their psychology and their understanding of the world, and thus their preaching and the meaning of *their own* conversion.

While focusing on the integrality of the culture he brought, Śrīla Prabhupāda was aware of the mentioned necessity. This is clear not least from what he told his first Swedish disciples: ‘I don’t know the West, you have to help me here’. Instructing them to preach to ‘the intelligent class of men’, to invite that class of men to their homes, i.e. not the temples, and to ‘put the emphasis on philosophy and culture’, he seems to have anticipated the kinds of issues which I suggest must henceforth be increasingly in the forefront of the minds of his educated Western followers.⁶

ŚRĪLA PRABHUPĀDA AND THE STREAMLINED SWAMIS

Śrīla Prabhupāda differed from other representatives of the Vedic tradition going West in that he brought with him much more of the traditional Hindu culture of India: not just the general spiritual teachings, and not even just the Puranic mythology, or what is perceived as such in the West,

⁶ These things have been repeatedly stated by Ajit Dāsa and Vegavan Dāsa in conversations with me.

but a whole historical set of cultural, moral, and social values and principles, even clothes and food. The historical Vedic tradition in India is not just a religion existing alongside and separate from the surrounding society, but an integral, traditional, societal-cosmological-cyclical culture.⁷ Preaching is not something that takes place in such a culture in the same way as it does in the modern, secular West even in the case of new missionary representatives of that culture itself. And conversion has a different meaning in the case of such a culture than in the case of Christianity, even when that culture converts people in the same modern, secular West. The same holds for ‘mission’, another word I have nonetheless already used and will have to continue to use. This marked Indian-ness not only posed more of a challenge to his early Western followers than did the message of other yoga and meditation teachers—the ‘streamlined swamis’, in A. L. Basham’s term.⁸ After four decades, it still raises in a sharper form the question of the significance of conversion for the cultural identity of people shaped by Western civilisation in a broader and deeper sense.

As part of the integrality of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s message, this Indian-ness contributed strongly to the impression of authenticity. But on the other hand the cultural baggage was often such as to raise questions about the viability of the integral vision – most pointedly, perhaps, in his teaching of the *varṇāśrama* system in the West and his many remarks on politics, women, sex, race, etc., which even most of those who reject the current political correctness in the West find to be in need of a considerable degree of contextualising and other interpretation and explanation in order for potentially destructive critical attacks on ISKCON to be forestalled.⁹

It is possible to note that the perceived self-sufficient clinging to the specifically Indian forms and the perceived cultivation and unusual outward display of religious apartness have had an unnecessarily alienating effect, without endorsing the particular adaptive approaches of the streamlined

⁷ My understanding of such a culture, of the most important differences between such a culture and the modern West, and of their partial causes in the differentiatonal shift in Abrahamic religion and Greek philosophy, is influenced by the work of the traditionalist school of René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and others, and by that of Eric Voegelin and Mircea Eliade.

⁸ Gelberg (1983), p. 166.

⁹ For the definition and the question of the analytical and theoretical legitimacy of the term ‘political correctness’, see Hildebrandt (2005), Hughes (2010), and Lee (2009). See also Schönbohm (2009), and, for a comprehensive view of the background of the phenomenon, Sévillia (2000).

swamis. For beyond the degree to which the question of the relation of the outward forms to the spiritual substance is open, I would insist on the need for an integrity of forms in the temples and their traditional practices.

UNIVERSALITY AND PARTICULARITY

But the objective inevitability I have pointed to comprises the truth that for the long-term success of preaching in converting Westerners, the latter need subjectively to feel that the Hare Kṛṣṇa religion is their own, not just in terms of its attractive novelty, and not even just in terms of its universal truth, but also in terms of something that connects to or is, if possible, identical with their own existing cultural identity, their own past, their history and traditions. Universal truth as such, the truth of teachings quite apart from contextual cultural and historical factors, is certainly powerful, in particular when it is not a matter of the pseudo-truth of speculative, abstract, rational constructs as in the case of the ideologies of Western modernity, but of real truth, the deepest, suprarational metaphysical and spiritual truth. Yet historically, it seems clear that the more of the contextual factors that can be mobilised in support, that can be used to build bridges to, that can be identified as convergent with the 'new' teachings, the more successful the latter will be. Even universal spiritual truth is transmitted in traditional forms which vary between cultures, so that even *its* emphasis benefits from identifying and, as it were, incorporating the various concrete local modes of expression.

Kṛṣṇa is all beauty? Then take the opportunity to visit San Marco, San Lorenzo, the Duomo, the Uffizi, and the Palazzo Pitti when in Florence,¹⁰ and you will perchance be closer to Kṛṣṇa than when you see the American kitsch art and architecture too often produced by ISKCON.

THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

It is relentlessly argued by broadly postmodern and multiculturalist ideologists that cultural identities on the psycho-physical level are fluid, complex, multiple, and unstable, and this is certainly to a considerable extent true in today's world. But insofar as this refers to an actual state of affairs,

¹⁰ This article is based on a paper read at the third *ISKCON Studies Conference*, held at ISKCON's Villa Vrindavan centre outside Florence in July 2010. I have made only very minor changes in the text, and decided to retain this local reference.

it refers, I contend, partly to the result of the massive propaganda from precisely those ideologists about this nature of identity, and, above all, of the concomitant, long-standing policies of the driving forces and principal agents of the main current of modernity, which, properly understood, are also those of postmodernity.

Vaiṣṇavism teaches that historical, cultural and ethnic identities are *not unreal*. There is a material plurality and manifold which can even, in some sense and to some degree, be seen as reflecting the spiritual. And their reality cannot in principle be denied by those who stress the mentioned aspects of their relativity, even if it is seen by them as the reality of social constructs only. Moreover, they are in some cases obviously less fluid, multiple, etc. than in others. In all cases, regardless of their complexity and instability, and regardless of our understanding of their ultimate nature, the identities must be taken into account and dealt with, and this is as decisive for the long-term establishment of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement in the West as it has been for other religions spreading in new parts of the world in the past.

Even as unmixed through multiculturalism with non-Western elements, the Western identity is in itself composite and multi-layered, and seldom fully subjectively conscious and articulated. This is quite as much the case in Western ISKCON members as in other Westerners, and the deeper levels of this identity of course transcend the distinction between early ex-hippie and later post- and non-hippie members.

WESTERN CULTURAL IDENTITY

They all share with Westerners in general a mind-set shaped by the two wings of Western modernity, on the one hand the rationalistic and empirical, most fully expressed in a scientific worldview, and on the other the romantic, sentimental, and irrational, which is quite as strong, or stronger, in the current intellectual climate.¹¹ Their surface clashes cannot hide the deeper fact that these wings have also been mutually supportive, in a complex dialectic that extends over centuries. Their common traits become obvious

¹¹ With reference to the relation between rationalism and romanticism, my understanding of Western modernity is based to a considerable extent on the analysis of the American 'new humanist' Irving Babbitt, his French precursors, and of his followers today, like Claes G. Ryn. See, for instance, Babbitt (1991), with an extensive introduction by Ryn. It is also based on the work of the Swedish representative of the traditionalist school, Täge; see, for instance Lindbom (1983).

when it is seen how they diverge from the historical layer of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its selective appropriation of the intellectual and moral heritage of classical antiquity. But the Judaeo-Christian tradition and classical antiquity too are in central respects distinctly Western and have come to shape the West in specific ways, in comparison with the East, primarily through what Eric Voegelin has described in terms of a process of differentiation in relation to the preceding and parallel cosmological cultures.¹²

All of these layers of specific Western developments signify radical differences in comparison with the Vedic and Bhāgavata worldview. They are sources of potentially endless distortions, and the authentic integration of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement's teachings into Western culture depends on a conscious, deliberate historico-philosophical *Auseinandersetzung* with them.

Only on the deepest level there enters into the Western cultural identity the various elements of pre-Christian Europe, not just that of classical and pre-classical antiquity but also that of the Germanic world, etc., in which are found clear continuities with cosmological Vedic culture.

No matter how ignorant or historically unaware a Westerner may be, no matter how absorbed in and subjectively reduced to the prevailing popular mass culture, all of those layers objectively enter in various proportions into his personal, mental constitution, and have decisive effects on the way in which he receives the teachings of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement. The uneducated too are shaped by these deep and, for the West, constitutive currents in the modes they assume in popular culture itself.

UNDERSTANDING MODERNITY

They produce many more or less contradictory positions, but it is as viewed in terms of the general question of Western identity that they can all be seen to enter in various combinations into the mindset of all Westerners. Large parts of Ravindra Svarūpa's lectures in the 1990s on the foundational principles of *varṇāśrama dharma* can in fact be seen as meditations on the modern liberal Western-ness of ISKCON members, and its implications.¹³ The way in which devotees actually behave, with what they engage, how they align

¹² See in particular Eric Voegelin's *Order and History*, I–V (corresponding to volumes 14–18 in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* published by University of Missouri Press).

¹³ Ravindra Svarūpa Dāsa, 'Foundational Principles of Varṇāśrama', *ISKCON European Convention*, Radhadesh, Belgium, July 1–5, 1997.

themselves in the inescapable surrounding Western society—sometimes after decades as leading ISKCON devotees—speaks volumes about their Westernness and compels us to take conditional identities seriously. For it is only without any analytical awareness that those identities so easily produce dysfunctionality in the reception and assimilation of Vaiṣṇavism. Due discernment and selectivity with regard to the various elements and layers of Western identity are absolutely necessary if they are to become a resource for rather than an obstacle to ISKCON's Vedic mission.

ISKCON devotees often focus on specific Western scientific and philosophical ideas of the past which seem to support or agree with those of the Vedic tradition, and this is of course not unimportant. But it is also necessary to study the more general cultural history of the West, the deeper and broader currents, the transformations of worldview, moral sensibilities, imagination. In conjunction with the gradual formation of distinctive material interests, the dynamic of Western modernity with its two underlying wings has produced positions which largely amount to what, with Voegelin and many others, I define as ideology in contradistinction to philosophy in a proper sense, and, I add, to traditional knowledge or *jñāna* in the proper sense. This is a pre- and partly non-Marxist concept of ideology, as becomes evident as it includes Marxism itself as a typical ideology, with its diffused, adjusted, and further developed forms of cultural studies in which it remains influential today. Under the influence of this dynamic, unadulterated mainstream modernity has moved away from both the partial spiritual and moral/humanistic insights of the deeper levels of Western identity, and primarily as such its problematic and unacceptable implications from the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement's perspective should be obvious.¹⁴

But the two wings have also assumed higher forms, constituting what I call an alternative modernity, which, overcoming the limitations of the

¹⁴ In addition to the works of Voegelin and those of Babbitt and Lindbom (see note 11), my understanding of Western modernity builds on the analyses of others in the traditionalist school to which Lindbom belongs and a central formulation of whose perspective is found in Guénon (1945). The most extensive and detailed analyses of Western modernity produced by this school are, however, those of Lindbom, but only a few of his works exist in English translation (and they are the same works that exist in French, German, and Spanish translation). The school's analyses of Western modernity are part of a broader analysis of the West as such in comparison with the East, and to some extent, although in a different way, this is true also of Babbitt's. While the latter keeps to the humanistic level (with his own definition) and sees counterparts in the East, the traditionalist analyses are basically spiritual and, in its own distinct sense, metaphysical.

institutional form which the insights of the older layers assumed in the pre- and early-modern Christian monoculture, without being simply negative or destructive, needs to be identified and affirmed from the same perspective. I will not have time to discuss those particular developments here, but I do so at length in other publications.¹⁵

THE CONTINUED CONTROVERSY OF INTEGRATION

The question of what precisely is the Western identity, or identities, the various elements of it that need to be understood and in some respects adapted to, as well as the question of what in Western society is conducive to and compatible with the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement's mission and what is not, are inseparable from the question of various possible—and impossible—strategies or avenues of cultural integration and bridge-building, of sinking roots into the existing West, of planting seeds in more or less fertile soil. When the question of other relations to the surrounding Western society than simply imposing on it and subordinating it to the Indian culture of ISKCON became inevitable, various options, given with the current state and trends of that society, naturally presented themselves. While they have by now all been pursued in various combinations for a comparatively long time—in the perspective of the whole of ISKCON's history in the West—and with a higher or a lower degree of awareness and success, it is still at this point of the inevitable consideration of those pressing issues of cultural bridge-building and integration that the movement stands.

The issues arise against the background of the fact that there are those who still deny their inevitability and their possibility except as inadmissible compromises, who still insist that ISKCON needs only to be and to practice in the West what Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism was and practiced in India. I once debated a very *un*-streamlined swami who charged that the ISKCON devotees in academia were 'licking the boots of rascals' instead of kicking the rascals with their boots, as he thought they should.¹⁶ Even if they study only the history of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in India, those devotees of course represent cultural integration inasmuch as they have accepted Western academia and

¹⁵ See, for instance, Bengtsson (2006), chapter 5, and Bengtsson (2000), where I deal with the Swedish philosopher Folke Leander's concept of a 'higher romanticism' which supplements Babbitt's analysis and which has been developed further, not least with regard to the partial truths of modern idealism, by Leander's student Ryn (see note 10), particularly in Ryn (1997).

¹⁶ The charge was made by the swami in an article in a minor American ISKCON journal.

its canons. In my reply, I defended the ISKCON academics I knew, said that the swami was too undiscerning in his perception of who are rascals, and briefly reviewed all of the major issues involved.

Since with this, I had the last word, I may to some extent have convinced this particular swami. If this was so, I think that what contributed to it must have been, in particular, my point that liberalism, or a simple watering down of Śrīla Prabhupāda's teachings and principles through adaptation to the prevailing worldly ideologies, was not at all, as he thought, necessarily implied in the conception of cultural integration as such.

Yet the swami's point, although rudely formulated, is valid inasmuch as there is not only the obvious risk but already the no less obvious reality of a cultural integration that is tantamount not just to harmful compromise but to unnecessary harmful compromise. Such integration is an integration with the wrong things. When I say it is unnecessary, I mean that, while integration itself is necessary, the harmfulness is not so, that selectivity is possible with regard to its substance, even when unnecessary harmful compromise is already actual.

AVENUES OF INTEGRATION

Becoming involved in the Western academy; pursuing interfaith dialogue and emphasising similarities with the Abrahamic traditions; merging with the New Age movement and its pop-psychology; joining the general liberal and radical intellectual and cultural trends in the belief that they make room for the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement; relying on the Indian Hindu communities in the respective Western countries and adopting the distinctly modern Western policies of multiculturalism—all of these things come most naturally to ISKCON members, and I will use them here to illustrate the kinds of questions I want to underscore. They involve problems as well as possibilities. In adopting them, the specific yet often hidden Western cultural identity of the devotees is inevitably involved, and inevitably determines the outcome. It is involved to the point of often revealing itself as being still their strongest identity, and, given the particular version of Western identity of which it is for the most part a question, it gives pause to see my conservative swami interlocutor sometimes vindicated.

The mentioned avenues of integration are seldom found in isolation from each other. In individual devotees, several are normally found together and variously mixed and interrelated. The emerging syntheses are complex, and

it is of course not possible to survey in its entirety the process and its results. Yet I contend it is easy to see the in many respects common problems of all of them. Most have to do with the nature of the prevailing, specific ideologies of the West today, with the relation to Western modernity. It is in this respect above all that deep discernment and judgement is needed.

Moving outside the transcendent bubble, or even just understanding its real nature and situation, is not only to move into the field of possible constructive cultural integration and synthesis, but also into the matrix of the forces of what is conceived in the Vedic tradition in terms of *Kali-yuga*. And for the purposes of conversion and preaching, the latter needs to be understood in more specific terms than the ones outlined in the *Bhāgavatam*. For in more and less subtle ways, it is institutionalised in the basic political, economic, and ideological structures of the modern world. Those structures have developed through historical processes, the dynamic and mechanisms of which should be grasped in some detail by those who want to work seriously with the long-term issues I am highlighting. And this will inevitably have to involve also some close self-scrutiny on the part of the Western devotees themselves *qua* Westerners.

ACADEMIA

The academic integration is a natural and obvious avenue, but those who are unprepared for it not just because of a shallow assimilation of ISKCON's own teachings, but also because of unconscious Western conditioning and a lack of adequate historical understanding of the West in line with spiritual insight, are hardly able to resist the modernist, ideological pressures that are often brought to bear even more intensely in the universities than in politics and the entertainment and news media. Often, it does not take long for devotees to discover how modernist they actually are, on most issues, beneath surface confessions of the traditional Indian principles and values to which they happened to devote a few years of their youth.

Rightly pursued, academic integration will remain essential for the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, as it achieves the scholarly introduction of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in the terms of the Western academy itself, i.e., not in terms of direct preaching at all. But after having long insisted on its importance, being now satisfied that there will be no shortage of academic devotees, and having seen their achievements, I have in recent years found reason to stress the supplementary but no less important truth about its limitations in principle.

The canons of modern Western academia are of course not those of the Vedic intellectual tradition; and not even the dogmatic and theological work of the Abrahamic traditions is, or could in principle be, pursued within its institutional confines, despite the fact that those religions have all assimilated parts of the academic legacy of antiquity and one of them created the medieval universities.

It seems to me that the main body of ISKCON's intellectual work must be done within the movement, and not even just within its own Western academic institutions, but within non-academic brahminical councils under intra-traditional doctrinal authority. Such councils should establish contact with academic institutions in and out of the movement, but not be identified with them.

The necessary difference between the intra-traditional intellectual life and that of the academy of course becomes more obvious as the academy is further, and increasingly, redefined in substantial terms at odds not just with the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement's tradition but even with its own modern Enlightenment presuppositions and basic principles, terms far beyond the familiar, long-standing ones of historical criticism for example, and an ever-expanding secular, purportedly emancipatory ideological agenda is being imposed.¹⁷ It is still possible to insist on the open and more neutral Enlightenment principles, and, here and there, even to some extent on a partly relevant legacy of the early-modern and pre-modern university, and thereby to establish to some extent a niche academy not directly at odds with and more useful for the purposes of ISKCON scholars. But it is not clear how long this will be so, and under all circumstances it is essential for the future of spiritual culture in general that intellectual life is not monopolised by the institution of the modern academy controlled by secular state and private power and funding, but is also carried on in other qualified institutional settings.

When the further intellectual requirements of the present are clearly perceived, what is also desirable on the part of academic devotees, beyond what they are currently doing, is the clarification precisely of the preconditions as well as the substance of constructive long-term cultural integration along the lines I am here suggesting. At present this requires at the very least much extracurricular reading, but I think it is safe to say that it *must*, in order not

¹⁷ There is by now a vast literature analysing this development; one of the most important critics is discussed in some detail in Bengtsson (2001).

to be derailed, receive support in the form of special preparation inside the movement provided by the kind of intra-traditional intellectual institutions I mentioned. When I taught Western philosophy at Bhaktivedanta College together with Ravindra Svarūpa, I stressed strongly, in discussion with him, the need to include these things in ISKCON's own educational programs.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Interfaith dialogue also comes quickly to mind for ISKCON Communicators. But here too, unpreparedness can make them fall into characteristic traps. Being deep down, and often all the way up, modern Western liberals, they are easily misled by the general humanitarian catchwords which sometimes veil sinister and indeed anti-humanitarian agendas.¹⁸ In the case of interfaith dialogue, standard modernity often imposes a mandatory framework, which largely corresponds with developments within the participating religions. Believing in the common truths shared by all religions, that all teach basically the same thing, the peaceful, enriching coexistence and harmony, etc., many hold inadmissibly superficial views. Preaching only 'religion' in general can have unintended consequences.

When Rādhikā Ramaṇa Dāsa told Pope Benedict last year that he represented *monotheistic* Hinduism, a world of fundamental differences was—and perhaps on that occasion had to be—ignored. A world of differences between the Vedic tradition and both the traditional orthodox forms of the Judaeo-Christian religion historically dominant in the West, and its typical, current liberal forms.

But it is in the latter that Christianity represents a secularisation which often reduces its message to the common ideology of abstractly universal human rights, egalitarianism, democratism, feminism, gayism, multiculturalism, and globalism, all embraced by the cloudy haziness of all-inclusive this-worldly pantheistic love and tolerance and benevolence that it blindly calls God.

ISKCON's sometimes misapplied teaching that 'we are not our bodies', 'we are not Americans, Germans, Indians etc.', that we are all spiritually the same and all material identifications and attachments are ignorance, can easily be interpreted by the immature as, and transformed by them into, something very close precisely to this ideology: an advocacy of the identical, anonymous,

¹⁸ This charge has been made against, for instance, the organisation The United Religions Initiative by Lee Penn (2004).

rootless, sexless, ageless, nationless, wholly manipulable, exchangeable and disposable humanoid units of production and consumption that are de facto produced by the powers that be. And since it is not the orthodox but the liberal forms of those religions which normally pursue dialogue, it is with them that communicating devotees enter into contact, and thus them that they may be prone to emulate.

Proper discernment on the basis of thorough historical and theological knowledge is needed to discern and to rightly relate to the higher elements of Abrahamism, and thus for interfaith dialogue to become a project which helps the higher spiritual mission rather than one which could in a roundabout manner play into the hands of and entangle devotees in the service of interests very different from the ones they might still think they are serving through it, forces which hinder rather than facilitate their mission and indeed spiritual enlightenment in general.

THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT

The danger of the preaching which seeks to merge Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism with the New Age movement is the unqualified affirmation of the same pantheistic looseness which we find in liberal Abrahamism, but this time outside of Abrahamism. The New Age movement continues and reinforces the project of liberal Abrahamism of transforming it into this pantheism which feeds into and provides a pseudo-metaphysical legitimisation of ideological modernity. But a New Age identical with such modernity is not one in which the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement or any genuine Vedic spirituality will flourish. The slogan about ‘awakening to global consciousness’ is insidiously ambivalent.¹⁹

At the same time, the New Age movement has by now rather thoroughly

¹⁹ See Charles Upton’s *The System of Antichrist: Truth and Falsehood in Postmodernism and The New Age* (2001). Despite the title, the author’s perspective is not exclusively Christian; indeed, the author is not a Christian at all. The book explores similarities in different traditions’ conceptions of a spiritually dark age, and applies them (including the conception of *Kali-yuga*) to the present. The book is also an autobiographical account of how a gullible countercultural poet comes to understand the problematic nature of New Age spirituality, and to discover tradition. Being new to this perspective, however, the author’s grasp of the nature of modernity, postmodernity, and contemporary politics and political ideas, to which latter he devotes much space, is still not always firm, and what could perhaps be called elements of residual gullibility are evident in some areas. As in the case of most of the earlier authors of the traditionalist school, I also have reservations with regard to some elements of Upton’s historical accounts of the respective religions. Cf. Lings (1987).

shaped the mainstream of Western cultural identity. The advance of spiritual enlightenment has to do with changing the general modes of thought, the general sensibilities, perceptions, and worldview, not just institutionalised religions. The incorporation of *parts* of Eastern spiritual traditions is now more widespread in the West than ever.

While having the mentioned problematic aspects, and its obviously simply superficial and kitschy forms, in other forms, and on a deeper level, there enters into the New Age movement also the powerful current of the Western esoteric and idealistic tradition. Under the leadership of Marsilio Ficino and others, this tradition was systematised and enhanced here in Florence²⁰ during the Renaissance, but reaches all the way back, through the Christian Middle Ages, to pre-Christian antiquity, and thus to the deepest and oldest layer of Western culture. As is increasingly realised by historians, this is the third great tradition of Western thought, distinct from both the dominant forms of orthodox exoteric Abrahamism on the one hand and scientism and materialism on the other.²¹

While the personalism of Vaiṣṇavism resembles in *some* respects orthodox Abrahamitic monotheism, the general metaphysical and spiritual setting of that personalism places it closer to that of Western esoteric idealism, a fact which must not be hidden from view by the latter's impersonalist forms. Selectively appropriated and responsibly managed, as it were—and this involves not least discernment with regard to its relation to the rationalist and romantic wings of Western modernity—it is probably the most important component in Western civilisation to which new Vedic missions could build bridges, for the simple reason that, while sometimes assuming particular Western forms, it is in substance often so close to the Vedic tradition as to be in some respects almost identical with it.

The New Age movement also slowly begins to produce more culturally refined and sophisticated products, and an increasing number of people within it might, I think, be reasonably expected to be able to accomplish needed adjustments and modifications, on a new intellectual level and with the help of the sometimes formidable resources of idealistic esotericism in its earlier manifestations. Representing a sometimes unbroken line of originally Eastern-inspired spirituality in the West, reinforced by later, further assimilation of the Eastern traditions, also the prospects of its project of

²⁰ See note 10.

²¹ For introductions to Western esotericism, see Goodrick-Clarke (2008) and Godwin (2007).

seizing on the mystical and esoteric elements taken up in the Abrahamic traditions themselves, of restoring them, and, indeed, of reinterpreting the whole of Abrahamism so that it comes to converge towards the spirituality of the East and its Western counterparts, will then be radically improved, freed from the characteristic modernist, rationalist and romantic distortions.

Only then will we begin to see the dawning of a truly spiritual New Age, free from the current pseudo-illuminative reinterpretations at the hands of mainstream modernists. Real, tradition-based Vedic spirituality differs from the New Age movement, from the counterculture, from the rationalised and romanticised Western esotericism of the past few centuries, and from neo-Vedantist streamlined swamis who adapt to that modern cultural climate. It does so not least in having a firm grasp of the nature of those forces and thus in rejecting the various simplistic modernist views of linear progress. For the future intellectual leadership of such Vedic spirituality, that grasp needs to be finely differentiated and structured with regard to historical particulars, so that what could perhaps be called the dynamic of Kali-yuga as manifested in the West can be understood with an adequate degree of specificity, and the right discernment exercised with respect to new Western manifestations of spirituality.

LIBERAL RADICALISM

Next, we have those devotees whose Western cultural identity is such that they are either so repelled by what they perceive as the narrow-mindedness of Christian fundamentalists and conservatives and/or already in themselves so thoroughly liberal and radical that they cannot but aggressively affirm the current politically correct secular ideology taken in equal and not contradictory parts from contemporary America and the former Soviet Union. They sometimes even do so not just in the hope that the world its politics produces will give room for the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement, but, their problematic Western cultural identity having gained the upper hand, they also tend towards turning their own engagement in Kṛṣṇa consciousness into another subversive weapon in the arsenal of this ideology with its general mindset and goals. Thus they quickly become stuck in the patterns of a mundane ideological propaganda machinery whose real nature, motives, and import they fail to understand.²²

²² This problem was of course implicit in and part of the other mentioned avenues of cultural bridge-building, but it also exists separately from them.

To take but one example, in ISKCON too, it is today not only possible but widely popular for homosexuals to flaunt their sexuality in a way that would never be tolerated in the case of *heterosexual* devotees. I advocate a creative traditionalism; I do not understand Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism's scriptural literalism (although this is partly because I find it difficult to square with the Vedic tradition itself); and what I call for here is the need for an integration which comprises the partial truths of modernity in the form of what I call an alternative modernity, truths including those regarding some of the attitudes towards homosexuals, but also pertaining to the position of women, etc. But I insist quite as strongly that these truths must be sharply distinguished from their systematic exploitation and radicalised distortion as part of and for the purposes and interests behind the comprehensive ideological hegemony of contemporary liberal democracy.

The pattern, both in the churches and in society in general, is familiar. Exposed to the force-field of the current decay, the women in particular, with their specific good qualities distorted and exploited as transposed outside their proper domains (their many proper domains), and with their need for material security, their need to be accepted, to be part of the group, to be fashionable, are, in ever-deepening confusion, increasingly enticed to promote every new radical trend and the whole range of politically correct campaigns. *Some* male leadership is needed here as elsewhere. But as weak men wimp out and fail to provide it, the women, disappointed at heart, are compensatorily pushed further in the direction of desolate fanatical militancy in their centrifugality and subversion. Since ISKCON, for the reasons I have indicated, seems intellectually ill-prepared to understand the nature of the dominant secular modernity and its instruments of power, its philosophical presuppositions, and its historical development, finding this pattern in ISKCON too would not be surprising.

I have already stressed that there are important differences between Christianity, and Abrahamism in general, in both its orthodox and liberal forms, on the one hand, and the Vedic tradition, including Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, on the other—differences which dialogicists often tend to ignore. Yet when it comes to *siding with secular Western modernity* and its principles as a means of overcoming the obstacles represented by the differentness of Abrahamism, the utmost discernment and maturity of judgement is required, given the nature of this modernity and the difficulty of properly understanding it. This is why I put special emphasis on the concept of an alternative modernity. Contrary to the other avenues of integration, where

I distinguished the problematic and unwanted elements from the necessary and promising, I would dismiss the avenue of the superficial modernist and postmodernist Western devotee radicals out of hand. It is an avenue of false integration which, along with illusory short-term benefits, spells the end of ISKCON in anything even vaguely resembling the *ācāryas* at the same time integral and integrating vision.

ISKCON has in fact already sometimes become *more* streamlined than at least some of the streamlined swamis, and to that extent no longer holds any moral or traditional high ground in comparison with them. While the streamlined swamis unduly adapted to modern Western modes of thought, they could perhaps also be credited for simply having a better understanding of them.

THE HINDU COMMUNITIES

Finally, I want to mention what seems to be ISKCON's increasing reliance on Indian Hindu communities in the West. While obviously natural and in many respects uncontroversial, it has little to do with Śrīla Prabhupāda's mission of preaching to and converting Westerners, and unduly focusing on it can, it appears, be a revealingly compensatory diversion from the task of cultural integration which *is* inseparable from that mission. It is pertinent here, however, insofar as it might involve the acceptance of the specifically Western ideology of multiculturalism.²³ Neither in its nominal promotion of the coexistence of cultures of immigrants with Western culture, nor in its hidden, real purpose to integrate the former with the latter's current ideological substance and thus to transform and destroy them along with what is left of the traditional West, is multiculturalism compatible with the needed cultural integration and thus with ISKCON's interests.

The last time I attended the Janmāṣṭamī festival at Bhaktivedanta Manor outside London, I counted the participants carefully, sitting near the narrow passage leading to the tents where *prasādam* was served, and through which all had to pass after being whisked out of the temple and the brief *darśana*. *Less than one in a thousand was non-Indian*. And that does not mean that the less than one was necessarily Western. The whole festival was run by Indians, and the lectures were given in Indian languages. When I have visited the big temples in North America, the situation has been the same: I can only

²³ On some aspects of the general nature of multiculturalism, see Hildebrandt (2005), and Gottfried (2002).

describe them as *empty*, except for the festivals, when half of the local Indian community attends.

Lest the many Indians lead us to think that ISKCON's future in the West is guaranteed even if Westerners are not converted, it should be recalled that Muslims are coming in much greater numbers, and that India itself is undergoing with ever increasing speed and intensity its grotesque, wholesale adaptation, as an allegedly independent state, to Western and globalist modernity, its ideologies, its mass culture, and its rapacious materialism, the focus shifting only between the insignificantly different alternatives of socialism and capitalism. New generations of Indians in and out of India are ever further removed from traditional Vedic culture. It is not enough to rely on them for the purposes of Śrīla Prabhupāda's specific mission.

THE INTELLECTUAL CULTURE OF INTEGRATION

The Vedic tradition is broad and deep. It is universal and it is eternal. ISKCON is but one small part of it; indeed, it is but one part of the broader Hare Kṛṣṇa and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava movement. The tradition's nourishing spread in the West would continue, in other forms, even if ISKCON's Western preaching and conversion proper, as uniquely accomplished by Śrīla Prabhupāda—albeit partly under circumstances which no longer obtain—would peter out. But I have explained in outline the ways in which I think ISKCON must seek to translate and inscribe the tradition into the West if *this* organisation is to continue to take hold as such and remain a leading force in this necessary process of genuine spiritual enlightenment.

There are only two alternatives. Either ISKCON is lost in what has this far been mainstream Western secular modernity, or it achieves a qualified, mature cultural integration with Western civilisation at its best, modern and pre-modern, which preserves its spiritual essence and allows it to flourish in new lands. There is no third.

And if the integration and flourishing are to be possible, a new, supplementary intellectual culture must be created in ISKCON; a cadre of intellectuals of a kind heretofore missing must emerge.

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