

## I. Introduction

### 1. Preliminary Notes

In New York, in 1966, Bengali-born Abhay Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami, in short *Bhaktivedanta Swami*<sup>1</sup> (September 1, 1896–November 14, 1977), founded ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness), commonly known in the West as the “Hare Krishna Movement.”

Technically speaking, Bhaktivedanta Swami’s movement belongs to Hinduism. Within Hinduism, it is part of the theistic Saṅgā religions of the Vaiṣṇavas, who worship Viṣṇu and whose tradition is called Vaiṣṇavism. And within Vaiṣṇavism, ISKCON is a branch of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, which originated in Bengal (Gauḍa-deśa is an old name for Bengal). The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava movement was formed in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the religious ecstatic Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya, whose followers worshiped him as an *avatāra* (incarnation) of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. The religious practice of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas is centered around the devotional worship (*bhakti*) of Kṛṣṇa and his eternal consort Rādhā.

Bhaktivedanta Swami belongs to a disciplic succession within that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition. Thus, within Hindu society ISKCON is a fully recognized religious group.

For the sake of completeness it should be mentioned in this connection that in the West ISKCON is not the only representative of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Among others, one of the spiritual relatives of Bhaktivedanta Swami, i.e. another disciple of his spiritual master, has become known as a spiritual authority outside of India. *Bhakti Rakṣaka Śrīdhara* also founded a religious organization for spreading the teachings of Caitanya that, like ISKCON, has its headquarters in Navadvīpa, India.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. State of Research

Worldwide there is a good number of recent scientific publications about the traditional and modern manifestations of the Vaiṣṇava religion.<sup>3</sup>

In these publications, however, Bhaktivedanta Swami’s extremely liberal attitude toward Christianity has been almost completely neglected, or explored rather inad-

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<sup>1</sup> Later he was addressed with the honorary title *Prabhupāda*. (Words in italics are explained in detail in the glossary.)

<sup>2</sup> Over the last few years there are even attempts to unify the different branches of Vaiṣṇavism under one parent organization. On November 18, 1994, nineteen Vaiṣṇava institutions (among them ISKCON and the Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Matha of Bhakti Rakṣaka Śrīdhara as well as the Sri Caitanya Bhakti Association in Berlin) have united as the “World Vaiṣṇava Association.” One of the purposes of this organization is to promote the mission in the English language.

<sup>3</sup> There is a voluminous compendium of the most important publications by Edmund Weber (ed.) entitled *Krishna im Westen*, Studia Irenica vol. 30, Frankfurt 1985.

equately. To date, a systematic research of this subject has not been undertaken. In some works, this matter has been touched upon, but with a different focus.<sup>4</sup> Considering the great importance that dialog with Christianity held for the Swami, and still holds for the present relationship between Vaiṣṇavism and Christianity, this represents and highlights a real lack within religious science.

### 3. Purpose and Structure of This Study

This study reconstructs Bhaktivedanta Swami's perspective on Christianity and his resultant strategy for interreligious dialog. In the final part, I depict on this subject the current official view of ISKCON as presented by Śubhānanda Dāsa. I will demonstrate a clear digression from Bhaktivedanta Swami's views.

The complete works of Bhaktivedanta Swami in the English language (his published books, letters, magazines as well as transcriptions of recorded lectures, discussions, conversations, TV interviews, and other utterances) has been published by the Bhaktivedanta Archives as a CD/ROM.<sup>5</sup>

In general one can observe that Bhaktivedanta Swami's attitude to the other world religions is extremely equivocal. This ambivalence has also manifested in his way of describing or interpreting other religions:

(1) Buddhism deserves a special consideration. Due to Bhaktivedanta Swami's interest in this philosophy standing in opposition to his own, dualistic conceptions

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<sup>4</sup> Taking the viewpoint of a Christian religionist, Harvey Cox (*ibid.*, pp. 10–12) has investigated the question: "Has Kṛṣṇa consciousness something to offer to Christianity in regards to theology?" A. L. Basham (*ibid.*, pp. 145–8) has made a comparison of the Hare Kṛṣṇa Movement and various Christian monastic orders. Klaus Klostermaier (in *Contemporary Scholars Discuss the Gauḍīya Tradition*, Steven Rosen (ed.), Delhi 1994, p. 219 f.) has characterized the general view of Jesus by the Vaiṣṇavas. Inge von Wedemeyer (*Sri Krishna und Jesus Christus: eine Hinführung zur Bhagavad-gītā und eine Zusammenschau mit Worten der Bibel*, Inge von Wedemeyer, Calw 1994) has tried to compare *Bhagavad-gītā* with the Bible. However, Bhaktivedanta Swami is only quoted through a short excerpt from his *Bhagavad-gītā* translation. Edmund Weber (in "THEION—Annual for Religious Culture," vol. II, *Interreligiöse Beziehungen, Konflikte und Konvergenzen*, Hans Christoph Stoodt / Edmund Weber (eds.), Frankfurt am Main 1993, pp. 155–67) has shown evidence for the religious affinity between Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya and Martin Luther, and thus between Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and the Protestant Christianity. In another study of the relationship between Vaiṣṇavism and Christianity, Weber has reformulated the religion of ISKCON and Bhaktivedanta Swami's religious evaluation of Christianity in terms of diacritical theology (The Religion of the ISKCON Vaishnavas in the Perspectives of Diacritical Theology. In: *Journal of Religious Culture* 11 / 1997 (Internet)).

<sup>5</sup> *The Bhaktivedanta VedaBASE, featuring the Complete Teachings of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda*, Version 2.01, Sandy Ridge, North Carolina, U.S.A., 3 / 1995. The Bhaktivedanta Archives are a department of The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust International, the publishing arm of ISKCON.

of the world and God, it is mentioned almost as much as Christianity (the name “Buddha” alone appears 619 times in his complete works).<sup>6</sup>

(2) Islam appears to take a much less important role in Bhaktivedanta Swami’s interreligious debate. For example, he refers to Mohammed (the different ways of spelling already taken into consideration) a mere 37 times, and the word “Islam” is mentioned only 42 times. Considering that the majority of Bengal’s population are Muslims, this is a remarkable fact.

(3) Judaism, mentioned only 3 times, is an insignificant side issue for Bhaktivedanta Swami.

These observations alone already confirm the special importance Bhaktivedanta Swami gave to Christianity and to interreligious dialog with Christians.

The study will be conducted in the following steps: First, beginning in part II, we will elaborate upon Bhaktivedanta Swami’s expositions concerning the Bible, Jesus and Christian history (as found in the above-mentioned sources). In the first chapter, appreciative and critical statements about the holy scripture of the Christians will be discussed separately.

Concerning Bhaktivedanta Swami’s comparison of the Bible and the *Bhagavad-gītā*, an explanation of his conception of the general purpose of religion is necessary, and thus is included.

The second chapter is a study of Bhaktivedanta Swami’s perspectives on Jesus. Due to the large amount of source material, this chapter is divided into several subsections dealing with the forms of Jesus’s address, his character, mission, and function as a model. In this connection, Bhaktivedanta Swami’s criticism of Christian forms of piety and his concepts of Jesus’s enemies are also discussed.

Further insertions deal with Bhaktivedanta Swami’s concept of sin. In this regard, his conversation with a French cardinal about the alleged Christian neglect of the Fifth Commandment is taken into special consideration. The subject of the last section is Bhaktivedanta Swami’s rarely mentioned ideas of Jesus’s stay in India, as well as his etymological comparison of “Kṛṣṇa” and “Christ.”

The third chapter concludes the exploration of source material with an exhibition of Bhaktivedanta Swami’s knowledge and evaluation of the history of Christianity, especially of Protestantism and Christian mysticism. Next, in order to determine the origin of Bhaktivedanta Swami’s views on Christianity, the results of the previous chapters are placed into a broad biographical context. Besides important findings about Bhaktivedanta Swami’s childhood and youth, of special significance is the discovery of the influence of his Calcutta college education on his views on Christianity. Further, there is a detailed study of the life and work of Bhaktivedanta

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<sup>6</sup> In *Der Hindu Buddha in der Theologie des bengalischen Vaiṣṇava ācārya Bhaktivedanta Swami* (in *Journal of Religious Culture*, 15/98 (Internet)), Edmund Weber has described Bhaktivedanta Swami’s view on Buddhism and has given evidence for the irenic nature of his strategy also in relationship to the Buddhists.

Swami's college teacher, the Scottish Reverend Dr. William Spence Urquhart, who was highly esteemed by him. In this connection, we highlight the points of commonality and difference between the theological positions of both teacher and student.

This chapter is concluded by two short insertions: the first, about Bhaktivedanta Swami's views on the differences between the sexes, and the second about his youth (based on the official ISKCON biography).

The analysis of the origin of Bhaktivedanta Swami's vision on the Christian religion would remain incomplete without considering the great influence of previous Vaiṣṇava scholars. Based on an examination of the works of Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura and his son Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, we will show that this theological influence took place only during adulthood.

In the fifth and last chapter of this part, Bhaktivedanta Swami's statements about Christianity are compared and contrasted with his views on interreligious dialog. Further points of discussion are the principles underpinning his desire for dialog, his conclusions for future interreligious contact as well as the various initiatives taken up during the early years of ISKCON in the West. In this connection, a letter to Pope Paul VI and a conversation with high Vatican representatives are noteworthy, and are thus explored in some depth.

Part III of this study picks up on the different approaches to interreligious dialog taken by the disciples of Bhaktivedanta Swami—from ISKCON's earlier years right on up to the present day. We examine ISKCON's official standpoint to show the evolution of the interreligious concept within the Society. The chapter contains an analysis of a discussion between Bhaktivedanta Swami and some of his leading disciples concerning Christian theology and the principles behind dialog with Christians (this took place in the 70s and was to remain the only discussion of its kind).

In principle, this study consistently refers to the complete works of ISKCON's founder, i.e., all the primary sources that are available have been taken into consideration.

Also the source material related to Bhaktivedanta Swami's Vaiṣṇava teachers could only be used in limited fashions. But recent publications of original writings of these Ācāryas on the Internet allow for a well-founded judgment on how much their ideas have influenced Bhaktivedanta Swami's relationship to Christianity.