

1 · INTRODUCTION

1·1 WESTERN INSPIRATIONS



As a pastor, I was impressed with Marcus Borg's book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, in which he re-imagined what Jesus may have been like. More recently, I read his *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*, in which he takes on the even bigger task of re-visioning God and the Christian faith based on this "new" vision of God. This is the sort of scholarship I admire in the Christian tradition—the ability to bring out alternative voices and interpretations from scripture and tradition.

Borg and others like Matthew Fox, Dominic Crossan, and John Spong present new, exciting ways of thinking about faith rooted in the mystical wisdom tradition, which remains relevant today. While these leaders are not universally accepted, they are respected by persons seeking a more progressive Christian vision, and a large segment of the church is clearly moving in that direction.

These leaders were all part of the theological environment at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, where I studied for three years. They do not work in isolation, but as integral parts of mainline Christianity's emphasis on educated clergy and intellectual integrity. The Reformed tradition, of which I am a part, considers itself reformed and always reforming. This is important. Otherwise, faith can become stale and dead.

I would like to see such a progressive reform movement develop within the followers of Radha-Krishna devotion in the West. So far, this has been slow, and dissident voices tend to be squashed or marginalized. I do what I can, and am slowly attracting like-minded intellectual, spiritual colleagues.

Progressive Christian thought grounds my theological approach. Many similarities exist between Christian devotion and Radha-Krishna devotion. Their basic essential concepts are transferable because they are somewhat universal.

Borg begins *The God We Never Knew* by discussing how we think about God, and he presents panentheism as an alternative to the distant monarchical model of God. He next goes into how we imagine God and Jesus along with why and how it matters. He then discusses how we can live with God, which is the heart of spirituality. This is more a matter of relationship with God than following God's requirements. God's compassion and grace predominate. We need simply remain open to God's grace and turn our lives over to his-her care and guidance. It is not as difficult or complicated as some would have us think.

The "dream of God," or the "kingdom of God," leads to a politics of compassion, which influences how we conduct ourselves in this life. Borg concludes by asserting that salvation begins in this life as we are liberated from bondage, reconciled with God, enlightened, forgiven, and loved just as we are. This does not negate salvation in the after-life, but we really have no way of knowing just what that will be like.

Ben Reist, my reformed theology professor, said, "If a little Buddha rubs off on Jesus, and a little Jesus rubs off on Buddha, so much the better for both of them." As an eclectic universalist, I firmly believe the cross pollination of religions brings us a higher understanding of truth. The liberal reformed tradition welcomed my background as a Radha-Krishna devotee as an asset for my Christian ministry, and I saw my Christian ministry as a Western version of my Radha-Krishna devotion.

Now that I no longer minister in the Christian church and focus on my Radha-Krishna devotional practices, I find that most Radha-Krishna devotees are fundamentalist literalists who think they have the ultimate answers to

Truth and that their answers are superior to anyone else's. When I interned at Calvary Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California, Pastor Larry Peterson said, "Remember, your truth is truth with a small 't' just like everyone else's."

We live in a relativistic, pluralistic world open to truth in all forms. Our unique opportunity at this time allows us to take the best teachings and practices of all paths and integrate them into a multifaceted whole, which gives a more complete picture of Truth than any one path alone could.

I happen to find the eternal association of Radha-Krishna in their spiritual realm of Braj to be the most attractive vision for eternity. Yet, I feel a need to update it, give it a new look, and adjust for life in the West. In this way, I present a nonsectarian version of Radha-Krishna devotion, which I feel pleases my grand-guru, the nineteenth-century visionary, Bhaktivinode Thakur.

Current books and information on the Internet about all sorts of religion and spirituality present an unparalleled opportunity to create a much broader understanding of God-dess and the means to God-dess. Yet, we realize that all language and human understanding are inadequate. We can never really fully comprehend God-dess. Rather, we attain glimpses through grace. Each religious or spiritual path contains its own particular view of God-dess from the perspective of their culturally derived realizations.

Bhaktivinode conceived of the modern theologian as an essence seeker who goes beyond the limits of his or her own religious circle and values the spiritual essence of other traditions. My long periods of immersion in Chaitanyaism and Christianity as an ordained religious leader along with study and practice of other traditions certainly qualifies me in this regard.

I use the term God-dess to recognize that the Ground of All Being is both masculine and feminine, the Divine Couple, Radha-Krishna whom I choose to worship. God-dess does not limit us to previous understandings of Radha-Krishna or the patriarchal image God invokes.

1·2 UNIVERSALIST PIONEERS IN CHAITANYAISM

Bhaktivinod Thakur (1838-1914) was influenced by Christian Unitarian thought and advocated for using the scholarly techniques of British orientalists. He saw the revelation of truth as progressive. He understood that essential truth is of two varieties—its original form and the way people receive it.

This relates to exegesis and hermeneutics, the process of using scholarly techniques to understand what a scriptural passage meant in its earliest setting for the original intended audience, and then using an interpretive process to derive its meaning for the audience being addressed today.

Bhaktivinod realized that there are essential truths in the scriptures, but they need to be reinterpreted for every new generation, especially when the persons receiving that truth are of a different cultural and religious background from the originating culture. So, maintaining the essential truth of a passage, we apply it differently today than we would have say 500 years ago, or even yesterday, or from one audience to the next. Each audience calls for a particular, unique performance of the truth according to its understandings and needs. Everyone is at a different stage of spiritual experience. Therefore, they need a different word of truth. As Martin Luther said, “That may be the word of God for you, but it’s not for me.”

India, especially Vrindaban, is extremely conducive to developing love of Radha-Krishna. There is a tremendous amount of cultural support for spiritual life, which is quite different from what we find in the West. Radha-Krishna devotion is a product of Indian spiritual culture developed over millennia. To most Westerners, it seems quite foreign. Yet some of us are able to bridge the spiritual, cultural divide and appreciate its essential spiritual truths. On the other hand, some Westerners even adopt Indian lifestyles and attempt to follow the practices as much like Indians as possible. Such persons also tend to be literal funda-

mentalists in their perspective. However, some relish the spiritual essence, live a more Western lifestyle, and try to adapt the teachings to Western culture to reach a broader audience and not create unnecessary personal, social, and cultural disruption.

Bhaktivinode wrote,

“Progress certainly is the law of nature and there must be corrections and developments with the progress of time.” ☛ *Bibl.* 19
(5)

According to process theology, everything is in process, including God-*dess*, who is beyond our understanding, and yet, our collective and individual understanding of God-*dess* develops over time. If faith does not grow and develop, it stagnates and dies.

Bhaktivinode further says,

Liberty then is the principle, which we must consider as the most valuable gift of God. We must not allow ourselves to be led by those who lived and thought before us. We must think for ourselves and try to get further truths which are still undiscovered. In the...*Bhagavata* we have been advised to take the spirit of the Shastras [scriptures] and not the words. The *Bhagavata* is, therefore, a religion of liberty, un-
mixed truth, and absolute love. ☛ *Bibl.* 19
(32)

Bhaktivinode was a nineteenth-century, British-educated magistrate. He was trained to hear the testimony, view the evidence, and draw a conclusion regarding the truth of the matter. He approached spiritual truth the same way, studying various religions and philosophies, both Eastern and Western. He concluded the teachings of the *Bhagavat* were the best, but he also found errors in it and the writings of its most revered commentators. He trusted himself, his intelligence, and natural intuition to guide him. He sometimes broke with tradition and took controversial stands. This is also how I practice my faith. I worked on the Westernization of Radha-Krishnaism for over thirty years. I shed most of the Indian cultural externals of Chaitanyaism

and maintain the spiritual essence. Bhaktivinode separated the phenomenal and the transcendental aspects of faith and distinguished between faith and belief. This frees me to experiment with the task of creating a lifestyle where by Westerners can use the spiritual practices of Chaitanyaism without becoming alienated from Western culture or pursuing the life of a renunciate. We need not imitate Indian dress, social orders, customs, and antiquated belief systems.

Bhaktivinode's faith was based on natural intuition, which is also my mode of operation. It allows freedom and creativity for new revelations of spiritual truth that are not bound by the past.

1-3 UNIVERSALIST AWAKENING — A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Bhaktivinode's son and disciple, Lalita Prasad Thakur initiated me into the path of natural Radha-Krishna devotion, which enables us to become eternal residents of the spiritual abode of Braj. It de-emphasizes rules and regulations and allows us to experience the esoteric spiritual aspects of natural devotion. Thus, I live a modern, Western life conducive to my spiritual growth. This is what I try to describe through this book.

† *Glossary*
p. 156

Radha-Krishna devotion was introduced to the West with an emphasis on the next life by my former guru†, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Swamiji). He said to me once, "You have had so many lifetimes of sense gratification. Why not make an experiment and sacrifice this one life for Krishna and see what is the result?" He taught that this life is of no importance except for the realization of Krishna. Love, wealth, family, prestige, happiness, comfort, etc., are not important. All that was important was to follow the guru's instructions, along with his rules and regulations, and develop love of Krishna.

I was a twenty year old hippie living in Haight Ashbury when I became his disciple. At the time, I could not imagine living past thirty. I was a serious spiritual seeker will-

ing to do whatever it took to become enlightened. I lived with a young woman. She became his disciple too, and he married us. However, Swamiji held up the ideal of being a celibate renunciate as the best lifestyle for spiritual advancement, and he discouraged sex even within marriage. This led to the breakup of our marriage and my entry into the renounced order of life.

I spent three years in India and planned to live there permanently. However, even as a renunciate, Swamiji ordered me to do fund-raising and temple construction when I really hated that kind of work. In comparison, Lalita Prasad Thakur taught me natural devotion and told me to go back to the West and preach sharing my experience with all persons where it is most needed.

Sudama Maharaj, who oversaw the Pacific region of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), invited me to the Honolulu temple where I could do my devotional practices and preach. I went to Honolulu, found they needed a new temple, and by visiting with and teaching Alfred Ford, I got a wonderful estate in the consulate district donated by the Ford Foundation.

Swamiji immediately ordered me to Fiji to start a new temple there. However, I had been out of management for over a year, and I was deep into my spiritual practices. Being thrown back into management and politics was not appealing or conducive to my spiritual growth.

When I was around twenty-eight, I started thinking, "What if I do live a long time? Am I going to go on like this?" I had to make a decision. I went into the Fiji hill country for a week to discern a course of action. This led me to return to Honolulu and resign from ISKCON within a couple of days along with Sudama Maharaj and the temple president. ISKCON was corrupt then and no longer conducive to either my spiritual growth or preaching. I could no longer recommend it to anyone.

However, I did not lose faith in Radha-Krishna, and since 1974, I live a Western lifestyle, giving up most of the

cultural externals of the devotional practices as well as the rules and regulations by which Swamiji bound us. I continue to practice the natural style of devotion Lalita Prasad taught me.

I often thought, “There must be more of a purpose to life than just trying to escape from this material plane to a spiritual plane. There must be a reason why I’m here no matter how hard I try to transcend. There is work to be done on this plane and lessons to be learned along the way.”

The Vedic tradition strongly emphasizes celibacy and renunciation. This goes with a negative world view having fall and redemption motifs similar to (if not derived from) Christianity. However, more life affirming strands of Chaitanya’s followers say we come from the unmanifest within God-dess and are growing spiritually. There was no fall. Life is a blessing, not a curse, although it is meant to evolve into something higher. Sixteenth century saint and mystic, Krishna Chaitanya said:

Do not show people outward renunciation, but as is appropriate enjoy worldly things, without attachment to them. Be steadfast in your heart, and outwardly do the work of the world, and soon Krishna will rescue you.

• *Bibl. 7*

[2.16.236-237]

Internal faithfulness, not external practices, is most important. This passage guides me.

I have faith in God-dess, Radha-Krishna, not in a particular set of dogmas and doctrines, rules and regulations I learned from someone else. The particulars of belief may change over time, and as a matter of fact, sometimes I choose not to believe in anything so that I may better simply see what is with a beginner’s mind. As Bhaktivinode pointed out, belief and faith are different. Steady faith is important.



After Chaitanya took vows of renunciation and moved to Puri, he sent his friend Nityanand Avadhut, who accompanied him to Puri, back to Bengal with the recommendation to marry so people would not think it necessary to be

a renunciate to be devoted to Radha-Krishna. Nityanand married two sisters—one of whom, Jahnava Thakurani, founded our line of disciplic succession.

Renounced priests are considered the pinnacle of the Vedic social order. However, that social order does not exist in the West. Swamiji introduced it here and his followers try to follow it, but there was no way I could continue living as a renunciate priest in the U.S. without the institutional support of ISKCON. Therefore, I married, and while living a fairly renounced life compared to most Americans, I am very much in the world and enjoy the simple pleasures of life to their fullest with no guilt.



Unlike Chaitanyaism, Christianity offers a more incarnate approach to spirituality, seeing acts of love and compassion in this world as an important part of the way. I benefited greatly by my involvement in the church for about twenty years. Adopting the professional standards of progressive Christian clergy allows me to find a balance between the immanent and transcendent, this world and the next. Indeed, if we cannot love persons here, how can we love Radha-Krishna? If we do not love ourselves, how can we love others? How can we appreciate the next life, if we do not appreciate this one?

Chaitanya's philosophy is one of "simultaneous oneness and difference," which means material and spiritual are both the same and different. Unfortunately, Swamiji emphasized the difference between the material and spiritual worlds presenting a strong dualistic view. I prefer to see the spiritual world interpenetrating the material world. When we develop spiritual vision, we see that and act spiritually within this world. That is more life affirming and less dualistic. Is this God-given life really meant to just be rejected?

Swamiji taught that we had to meet many requirements only to be finally saved by God's grace because no matter

how much we try we cannot attain the spiritual world by our own efforts. He often said, “By the mercy of the spiritual master one receives the benediction of Krishna. Without the grace of the spiritual master, one cannot make any advancement.” In other words, we had to stay on his good side and do what he told us to do or we were doomed. His requirements covered everything such as eating, passing stool, how we wore our hair, bathing, sex life, etc. With me, it was also things like “raise money and build a skyscraper in Vrindaban,” or “go to Fiji and start a temple.” “It is my order. You must do it.”

After years of studying Swamiji’s books, as well as the few writings by Bhaktivinode in English available at the time, I began having inklings that there was more to this than just following rules and regulations. When I went to Vrindaban, my suspicions were confirmed. I found out about the path of natural devotion—following the mood of the residents of the spiritual Vrindaban. This is the next stage of devotional practice which following the rules and regulations is supposed to lead to.

However, Swamiji discouraged us from even thinking we were qualified to follow our heart’s natural spiritual inclinations. We needed only to follow his instructions without question and not read books other than his or go to other teachers. This was not acceptable to me, so I continued to pursue the teachings I sought. I secretly went to Lalita Prasad Thakur, who like his father Bhaktivinode, practiced and taught natural devotion.



Since 1974, I follow the path of natural devotion, not rules and regulations. I followed rules and regulations for eight years under Swamiji; they did their job, my heart opened, and I understood I no longer needed them. Whatever spiritual practices I follow now, I do because I want to. I realize I am truly incapable of effecting my own salvation and am totally dependent on the grace of Radha-Krishna, which is

there for me unconditionally.

In the *Bhagavat Puran** Krishna explains how we can fully realize him and his spiritual pastimes through his causeless mercy. He also says in the *Bhagavad Gita*,

“Abandon all kinds of religion and surrender to me alone. I will free you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear.”

* *Bibl.* 2
[2.9.31]

• *Bibl.* 16
[18.66]

Bhaktivinode wrote that all the rules of regulated devotional practice are simply meant to help us remember and never forget God-dess.† When we reach the stage of desire-less devotional practice, we may stop depending on rules and regulations because we are attached to God-dess through natural devotion and spontaneously become absorbed in thoughts of Radha-Krishna.‡

† *Bibl.* 20
(49)

‡ *Bibl.* 20

Following the natural path, I do not aspire for goodness per se or worry about my salvation. I figure whatever I do is good, and God-dess will make up any deficiency. I serve by sharing my teachings and experience with others and working for peace, justice, and the environment.

(53)

Following the path of natural devotion, I feel I am part of the global community, and I feel moved to work on a systemic level to relieve the suffering of others. I worked for peace, a living wage for all, an end to poverty, gay rights, holistic health care, alternative energy development, bio-regionalism, protection of the environment, and other causes. Rather than setting myself apart from others, I recognize our common humanity and oneness with all things. God-dess unites all.

Radha-Krishna are believed to live eternally on a spiritual planet beyond this material universe. Many books available in English describe their lives there in elaborate detail including their appearance, dress, associates, pastimes, foods, etc. I read a number of them and found some parts thoroughly delightful, while some portions I found disturbing due to descriptions of dysfunctional behavior based on ancient Indian social customs and aesthetics. This distinctly Indian cultural imprint throughout makes

it difficult for me to accept them as a purely literal description of the spiritual world.

Frankly, how can anyone know just what the spiritual world is like or just what God-dess looks like and does? How can words ever adequately describe such things? They are metaphors, myths, and symbols which point to that which is beyond human comprehension. This does not mean that they are without meaning and value, but we should not mistake the pointing finger for the moon at which it points.

Many devotees argue that these things were revealed when Radha-Krishna incarnated on earth 5,000 years ago, were accurately recorded, and handed down through the disciplic succession. Also, Chaitanya and his followers revealed these truths even further only five hundred years ago. In seminary, I studied how the myth of Jesus was created and developed over the ages. I saw how A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami was mythologized in my own lifetime. I also studied myths and ancient history enough to understand the basics and the limits of human knowledge. A spiritual, mystical experience is one thing. When it is put into written words, it is something else.

We need not believe in a spiritual world “out there.” It is also right here, pervading everything in a different dimension. We can relate to the immanent presence of God-dess right here. When we begin a personal relationship with God-dess in our daily lives, we become self-realized through grace and are able to feel his-her presence. We need not simply believe in God-dess but can know for ourselves. Yet all our knowing remains just a glimmer of God-dess’ glory. Do we believe in God-dess, or do we believe in a particular set of dogmas, doctrines, and writings in old books?

Yet those old books also contain descriptions of a sacred reality that is “right here”:

There is no truth superior to me. All rests on me, as pearls strung on a thread. I am the taste of water, the light of the

sun and moon, I am the syllable Om in the Vedas, the sound in ether and ability in human beings. I am the original fragrance of the earth, the radiance in fire. I am the life of all that lives, the penance of all ascetics. I am the seed of all beings, the intelligence of the intelligent, and the power of the powerful. I am the strength of the strong, free of passion and desire, and I am desire that accords with the spirit.

☛ *Bibl.* 16

[7:7-11]

Krishna explained to his girlfriends that they could never ever be separated because he is all pervading like the elements, earth, water, fire, air, and ether. As they exist in all created things, so he exists within everyone.†

† *Bibl.* 2

These passages are not much emphasized today, but they and others present a more immanent spiritual presence to which we can readily relate.

[10.47.29]

When we go beyond sectarian understandings and take the best of each tradition, we cannot but benefit. The world is so divided, and yet, we are so close. So much of the violence we see has at least some religious overtones, and religion often seems to divide more than unite. We cannot afford to live like this any longer. We must learn to see the unifying essentials of all faiths, realize God-dess is One, and we are all one family of God-dess.