

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Western Inspirations*



When I served as an ordained United Church of Christ (UCC) pastor in the midwestern United States from 1991-2002, I was impressed with Marcus Borg's book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, in which he re-imagined what Jesus was like. Later, I read his *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*, in which he took on the even bigger challenge of re-visioning God and the Christian faith based on that new vision. I admire this kind of scholarship in the Christian tradition that uses alternative interpretations from scripture and tradition.

Borg and others like Matthew Fox, Dominic Crossan, and John Spong present exciting ways of thinking about faith from the mystical wisdom tradition that remain relevant today. While these leaders are not universally accepted within the church, they are respected by people looking for a more progressive Christian vision within the church and among unchurched seekers.

These leaders and others were part of the progressive 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. In the progressive Reformed Christian tradition where I served as a pastor, I was impressed by how the church was reformed and ever reforming. It is always in process. Through the ages, it managed to change and adapt to time and place with reasonable success. Some rare churches actualize this ideal more than others and provide shining examples in a sea of mediocrity. I apply

the ideal model to Radha-Krishnaism.

Progressive Christian thought grounds my theological approach in the western tradition. Many similarities exist between Christian devotion and Radha-Krishna devotion. Their basic concepts are transferable because of their universal nature.

Borg began *The God We Never Knew* by discussing how people think about God. He presented pantheism as an alternative to the distant monarchical model of God. He next described how people imagine God and Jesus along with why and how it matters. He then discussed how people can live with God, which is the heart of spirituality, as more a matter of relationship with God than following God's requirements. God's compassion and grace predominate. People need simply remain open to God's grace and turn their lives over to his-her care and guidance.

The dream of God or the kingdom of God, leads to a politics of compassion, which influences how believers conduct themselves in this life. Borg asserted that salvation begins in this life as people are liberated from bondage, reconciled with God, enlightened, forgiven, and loved just as they are. This does not negate salvation in the afterlife, but there really is 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 cross pollination of religions brings a fuller understanding of truth. The liberal reformed tradition welcomed my background as a Radha-Krishna devotee as an asset for Christian ministry, and I saw my Christian ministry as a western version of Radha-Krishna devotion.

I no longer minister in the Christian church and focus on Radha-Krishna devotion. Most Radha-Krishna devotees are fundamentalist literalists who think they have the ultimate answers to truth and that their answers are supe-

rior 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."

Modern people live in a relativistic, pluralistic world open to truth in all forms. This unique opportunity allows seekers to take the best teachings and practices of all paths and integrate them into a multifaceted whole, which gives a fuller picture of Truth than any one path alone could. Universalist Radha-Krishnaism evolved out of a lifetime study of spiritual paths.



I use the term God-dess as a universal expression that recognizes the ground of being is both masculine and feminine—the Divine Couple, Radha-Krishna. God-dess is not limited to previous understandings of Radha-Krishna or the patriarchal image God invokes. God-dess, a less familiar term than God, frees people to imagine new images of the divine.

The proliferation of books and Internet articles about religion and spirituality present an unparalleled opportunity to broaden understanding of God-dess. However, all language and human understanding remain inherently inadequate. Humans can never fully comprehend God-dess. Rather, people get glimpses through grace. Each religious or spiritual path contains its own particular view of God-dess from the perspective of their culturally derived realizations.

I 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. Thus, I present a nonsectarian version of Radha-Krishna devotion inspired by my grand-spiritual-teacher, the nineteenth-century visionary, Bhaktivinoda Thakur who began the process of Westernizing and universalizing the teachings.

1.2 *Bhaktivinode—Universalist Pioneer*

Bhaktivinode Thakur (1838–1914) saw a progressive revelation of truth. He pictured modern theologians as essence seekers who go beyond the limits of their own religious circle and value the spiritual essence of other traditions. He pioneered the movement of Radha-Krishnaism from India to the West. As a college-educated civil servant in British colonial East India, Bhaktivinode synthesized western analytical thought, Unitarian Christian theology, and traditional Chaitanyaism to appeal to other well-educated Bengalis. He felt that when Radha-Krishnaism migrated to the West, as it now has, Radha-Krishnaism would benefit by the interaction.

Bhaktivinode did not believe in rote repetition from one generation to the next. Each generation contributes to the evolution of thought. More complex forms evolve from simpler forms. He understood 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 today's audience.

There are essential truths in the scriptures that need reinterpretation for every new generation, especially when the people receiving that truth are of a different cultural and religious background than the originating culture. While maintaining the essential truth of a passage, people may apply it differently today than they would have say five hundred years ago, or even yesterday, or from one audience to the next. Each audience calls for a unique performance of 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." Practitioners need not accept everything the tradition says.

India, especially Vrindavana, is extremely conducive to developing love of Radha-Krishna. There is a tremendous amount of cultural support for spiritual life. Radha-Krishna devotion is a product of Indian spiritual culture developed over millennia. To most Westerners, it seems quite foreign. Yet some people bridge the spiritual, cultural divide and appreciate its essential spiritual truths. Some Westerners adopt Indian lifestyles, attempt to follow the practices as much like Indians as possible, and tend to be literal fundamentalists. Universalist Radha-Krishnaism practitioners relish the spiritual essence, live a western lifestyle, and harmoniously adapt the teachings to western culture.

Bhaktivinode wrote,

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, unmixed truth, and absolute love. (32)

Bhaktivinode was a magistrate trained to hear the testimony, view the evidence, and draw conclusions regarding the truth of the matter. He approached spiritual truth the same way and studied eastern and western religion and philosophy. He concluded the teachings of the *Bhagavat Puran* were best, but he found errors in it and in 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.

Bhaktivinode separated the experiential and transcendental aspects of faith and distinguished between faith and belief. This frees practitioners to creatively use the spiritual practices of Chaitanyaism within western culture. Devotees maintain the spiritual essence of Chaitanyaism but

need not imitate Indian dress, social orders, customs, and antiquated belief systems.

Bhaktivinode's idea of faith based on natural intuition allows freedom and creativity for new revelations of spiritual truth free of past tradition. I adapt his teachings and approach for thoughtful Westerners. It may take several generations of experimentation for this process to mature, but someone must begin it. Forgive me for my boldness. I worked on this project for over thirty-five years shedding superfluous Indian cultural externals of Chaitanyaism while maintaining the spiritual essence.

1.3 A Personal Journey

My search began at an early age. As a high school senior, I was confirmed in the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, a conservative denomination, which I soon left. After graduation, I read Jack Kerouac and went on the road as a dharma bum ever since. The existential literature I studied in college led to Paul Tillich's existential theology. I attained mystical experiences through use of entheogens like cannabis and LSD as a hippy in the early days of Haight Ashbury (1965-67).

It was also there that I met A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Swamiji), founder of the western Krishna movement. He first initiated me in February 1967. In July, during the Summer of Love, at his request, I hitchhiked to Santa Fe, New Mexico to start a temple. I spent the next eight years as one of Swamiji's leading disciples and furthered his worldwide mission. He initiated me as a renounced priest and gave me the name Subal Das Goswami.

Swamiji introduced Radha-Krishna devotion to the West with an emphasis on the next life. He said to me, "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 realization of Krishna. Human

love, wealth, family, prestige, happiness, comfort, etc., are not important. He taught us that only devotion to Radha-Krishna by following his instructions was necessary.

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 willing to do whatever it took to become enlightened. I lived with a young woman. She also became his disciple, and he married us. However, Swamiji promoted 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.

In the early 1970s, 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. I traveled extensively but preferred living in Vrindavana, the town associated with Radha-Krishna's pastimes.

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

Swamiji discouraged disciples from thinking they were qualified to follow their heart's natural spiritual inclinations. They needed 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.

Dr. O.B.L. Kapoor (b. 1909) befriended and mentored me. He was a retired philosophy professor and longtime

devotee of Radha-Krishna. Although Dr. Kapoor was originally initiated by Swamiji's teacher, Siddhanta Saraswati, Gauranga Das Babaji taught him the way of natural devotion. Dr. Kapoor led me to the way of natural devotion and my teacher, Lalita Prasad Thakur (1880-1980), and I remain indebted to him.

Dr. Kapoor's book, *The Philosophy and Religion of Sri Caitanya*, is the best scholarly summary of Chaitanya's philosophy available in English, although it is technical and difficult to read. In this book, I put its complex, technical philosophy into simple English. I also omit and change some ideas, extracting the essence and leaving the rest. That is the way of progressive thought. Dr. Kapoor was a progressive thinker and essence seeker. He would appreciate and bless my humble attempts to adapt Chaitanya's philosophy and make it relevant for twenty-first century Westerners.

As he advised, I went to Bengal and visited Lalita Prasad, son and disciple of Bhaktivinode, a couple of times. I returned in January 1974 and lived with him while he taught me the esoteric practices of natural devotion, which enables practitioners to become eternal girlfriends of Radha in the spiritual abode of Braj. It de-emphasizes rules and regulations and allows people to experience the esoteric spiritual aspects of devotion.

Lalita Prasad was a very old man, humble, and down to earth. He had no airs about himself. He was kind and generous in his teachings and did not impose anything. When I asked him to reveal my spiritual identity as Radha's associate in the spiritual world, he said I could envision it myself. I then said I would feel better if he helped me. He asked Bhakta Ma, his assistant, to help pick out my name. He asked me what age I wanted to be in Radha-Krishna's eternal pastimes and how I liked to serve Radha-Krishna best. Then, he revealed the eleven aspects of my spiritual identity based on my desires.

My first spiritual teacher, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami

said there was no need for initiation to a spiritual identity as we would realize it in due time on our own. Gauranga Das Babaji (the spiritual teacher of Dr. Kapoor mentioned earlier) advised me never to leave Vrindavana because everyone there meditates on Radha-Krishna and their pastimes, which would strengthen my meditation. However, Lalita Prasad Thakur revealed my spiritual identity, taught me how to visualize and meditate on serving Radha-Krishna in Braj. Then he told me to return to the West and spread these teachings as his disciple.



Sudama Maharaj, who oversaw the Pacific region of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), invited me to the Honolulu temple to do devotional practice and preach. I went to Honolulu and found they needed a new temple. I visited Alfred Ford in Wyoming, and he donated a wonderful estate in the consulate district through the Ford Foundation.

Swamiji immediately ordered me to start a new temple in Fiji. I was out of management for over a year, and I was deep into spiritual practice. Being thrown back into management and politics was not conducive to my spiritual growth.

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 and no longer conducive to either 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 cultural externals of devotional practice 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 the 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 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 devotional thought says individual spirits come from the unmanifest within God-dess and are here to grow spiritually. There was no fall. Life is a blessing, not a curse, although it is meant to evolve into something higher.

Krishna Chaitanya (1486-1533) was a Renaissance person, a contemporary of Martin Luther (1483-1546). He 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. (*Chaitanya Charitamrita* 2.16.236-37)

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

I have faith in God-dess, Radha-Krishna, not in dogmas learned from someone else. The particulars of belief may change over time. Sometimes I choose not to believe in anything so that I may simply see what is with a beginner’s mind. 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 my line of teachers.

Renounced priests are traditionally considered the pinnacle of the Hindu social order. However, that social order did not exist in the West until Swamiji introduced it here. I could not live as a renunciate Hindu priest in the U.S. without institutional support. Therefore, I married, and while I live a fairly renounced life compared to most Americans, I enjoy the simple pleasures of life to their fullest without guilt.



Chaitanya's philosophy is one of simultaneous oneness and difference, which means material and spiritual are both simultaneously the same and different. Unfortunately, Swamiji emphasized the difference between the material and spiritual worlds by presenting a strong dualistic view. I see spirit in matter. When people develop spiritual vision, they see that interpenetration and act spiritually within this world in a life affirming, non-dualistic paradigm that honors and affirms this God-given life.

Swamiji taught his disciples to meet many requirements only to be finally saved by God's grace because no matter how much people try, they cannot attain the spiritual world by personal effort. 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, disciples had to stay on his good side and do what he told them to do or they were doomed. His requirements covered everything—eating, passing stool, hair length, bathing, sex, etc. With me, it included things like "raise money and build a skyscraper in Vrindavana," or "go to Fiji and start a temple." "It is my order. You must do it."



Since 1974, I follow the path of natural devotions. I followed regulative devotion for eight years under Swamiji. It worked. My heart opened, and I understood I no longer

needed it. Whatever spiritual practices I follow now, I do because I want to. I realize I am incapable of effecting my own salvation and totally depend on the grace of Radha-Krishna, which is there for everyone unconditionally.

In the *Bhagavat* 2.9.31 Krishna explained how to fully realize him and his spiritual pastimes through his causeless mercy. In the *Bhagavad Gita* he said, “Abandon all kinds of religion and surrender to me alone. I will free you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear.” (18.66)

Bhaktivinode wrote that all the rules of regulated devotional practice are meant to help devotees remember and never forget God-dess. (*Shikshamrita* 49) When they reach the stage of desire-less devotional practice, they may stop depending on rules and regulations because they are attached to God-dess through natural devotion and spontaneously become absorbed in thoughts of Radha-Krishna. (53)

Preaching within a western context, I worked in the New Age Movement, then the church. I attended the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) and learned to understand faith using critical, analytical methods and to participate in the ongoing process of religious reform and reinterpretation. In 1991, I graduated with a Master of Divinity degree and was ordained in the UCC. I served as pastor and teacher of three midwest congregations until 2002.

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 balance immanent and transcendent. Indeed, if people cannot love others here, how can they love Radha-Krishna? If people do not love themselves, how can they love others? How can people appreciate the next life, if they do not appreciate this one?

Some major Christian influences on my formation of Universalist Radha-Krishnaism are:

Matthew Fox: *Original Blessing and The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*—drew me to Christianity with his interfaith, panentheistic, life-affirming mystical views. He demonstrates that original sin is not biblical and that life is a blessing. The cosmic Christ corresponds to cosmic consciousness, the universal teacher, pervading all. This understanding formed the basis of my Christology.

Jim Wallace: *Sojourners and Call to Renewal*—is a progressive Evangelical prophet who tirelessly crusades for peace and justice in a broad ecumenical context.

Marvin Chaney: Old Testament professor and mentor—taught me to see scripture in a postmodern deconstructionist way and still be a person of faith able to embrace the myth and its meaning for people today.

John Shelby Spong: *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* and *Here I Stand*—one of the leading reformers and critics of the church for decades, especially around such issues as racism, sexism, and homophobia. He tries to bring the church into the twenty-first century and discards untenable early Christian beliefs.

Paul Tillich: *Dynamics of Faith*—like Bhaktivinode, supplies an understanding of faith as something separate from belief and thereby allows people to explore the realm of faith without clinging to outmoded beliefs.

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Prophet—provides a shining example of the practical application of the gospel to a contemporary social context.

These people represent many others I had the good fortune to know personally and through their writings.



Following the natural path, I do not aspire for goodness per se or worry about 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.

I am part of the global community. I worked for peace, an end to poverty, gay rights, holistic health care, women's

rights, alternative energy development, bio-regionalism, protection of the environment, and other causes. Rather than setting myself apart from others, I recognize my 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 describe their lives 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 outmoded behavior based on ancient Indian social customs and aesthetics. The 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 people should not mistake the pointing finger for the moon to which it points.

In seminary, I studied how Christians developed the myth of Jesus 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 limits of human knowledge.

When people go beyond sectarian understandings and take the best of each tradition, they cannot but benefit. The world is so divided, and yet, people are so close. So much violence has at least some religious overtones, and religion often seems to divide more than unite. Humanity cannot afford to live like this any longer. People need to realize the divine is one, and everything is interconnected. Universalist Radha-Krishnaism offers such a vision.