

The Western Mind and Universalist Radha-Krishnaism  
by Steve Bohlert

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"The best intellectual history of the West in one volume I have ever seen."

--Huston Smith, author of *The World's Religions*

*The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (PWM) by Richard Tarnas gives an engaging presentation of the vast sweep of western thought through the ages. In my *Universalist Radha-Krishnaism* (URK), I say, "Universalist Radha-Krishnaism adapts Radha-Krishna devotion to the current western context. [45]" Using *The Passion of the Western Mind*, I expand on what that western context entails and its correspondences with Universalist Radha-Krishnaism as a dialogue between PWM and URK.

Richard Tarnas writes:

That long battle of ideas called “the Western tradition” has been a stirring adventure whose sum and consequence we all bear within ourselves. . . .

Today the Western mind appears to be undergoing an epochal transformation, of a magnitude perhaps comparable to any in our civilization’s history. I believe we can participate intelligently in that transformation only to the extent to which we are historically informed. Every age must remember its history anew. [xiv]

Bhaktivinode . . . wrote his seminal work *Krishna Samhita* in 1880 . . .

In the preface, he described the benefits of using a logical, intellectual method to study history and concepts of time. [URK 68]

It is crucial to the Platonic understanding that these Forms are primary, while the visible objects of conventional reality are their direct derivatives. Platonic Forms are not conceptual abstraction that the human

mind creates by generalizing from a class of particulars. Rather, they possess a quality of being, a degree of reality, that is superior to that of the concrete world. Platonic archetypes form the world and also stand beyond it. They manifest themselves within time and yet are timeless. They constitute the veiled essence of things. [PWM 6]

Bhaktivinode wrote that these symbols are not based on material conceptions, but on what western thinkers like Plato, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell call archetypes. This world emanates from the spiritual world. Therefore, patterns seen here are derived from there, not vice versa. People do not project their patterns onto the spiritual world, but rather, this world acts like a distorted reflection of the spiritual world. [URK 77]

Everything in the sensible world is imperfect, relative, and constantly shifting, but human knowledge needs and seeks absolutes, which exist only on the transcendent level of pure Ideas. [PWM 9]

The material universe exists as a reflection of the spiritual world, like a tree reflected on water. The tree is real; the reflection is ephemeral, yet based in reality. The material universe exists as a temporary modification of the spiritual world. (Plato's theory of forms is a similar concept.) It appears real like the dream world sleepers inhabit seems real, but they wake up and realize its temporary nature. People consider the waking world real, but it forms another level of dream. However, it shares many features of the real spiritual world. [URK 102]

The archetypal realm, far from being an unreal abstraction or imaginary metaphor for the concrete world, is here considered to be the very basis of reality, that which determines its order and renders it knowable. To this end, Plato declared direct experience of the transcendent Ideas to be the philosopher's primary goal and ultimate destination. [PWM 12]

This transitory life involves much suffering even in the best of times. Therefore, practitioners only pass through the material plane and evolve their consciousness to enter an eternal spiritual existence beyond spacetime. They then dwell in the world of Radha-Krishna with their eternal spiritual associates. [URK 40]

Not infrequently, these personified archetypes are used in his [Plato's] most philosophically earnest moments, as if the depersonalized language of metaphysical abstraction were no longer suitable when directly confronting the numinous essence of things.

We see this memorably illustrated in the *Symposium*, where Eros is discussed as the preeminent force in human motivations. [PWM 13]

God-dess manifests on three clear levels, as undifferentiated oneness, cosmic consciousness, and personal God-dess according to three paths of approach-- respectively knowledge, meditation, and

devotion. Of these three forms, each succeeding form supersedes and philosophically speaking, includes the preceding. God-dess, the highest manifestation, supersedes and includes undifferentiated oneness and cosmic consciousness.

Universalist Radha-Krishnaism identifies God-dess with the supreme persons, Radha-Krishna, the source of all incarnations, the ultimate ground of being in whom infinite grandeur, infinite powers, and infinite modes of divine bliss exist. [URK 83]

Plato often criticized poets for anthropomorphizing the gods, yet he did not cease from teaching his own philosophical system in striking mythological formulations and with implicitly religious intent. Despite the high value he placed on intellectual rigor . . . the distinct implication in many passages of the dialogues is that the imaginative faculty, both poetic and religious, was as useful in the quest for attaining knowledge of the world's essential nature as any purely logical, let alone

empirical, approach. . . . Plato resolved, tenuously yet with weighty and enduring consequences, the central tension in the classical Greek mind between myth and reason. [PWM 15]

Books such as the *Bhagavat* are superb myths that provide a fantastically beautiful worldview for this life and the next. They certainly contain high-level spiritual revelations. Yet people need not understand them as literal histories of occurrences on this physical plane of existence, although some correspondences may exist. They point to unknowable (but transcendentally actual) events in metaphorical language people understand, but they do not correspond to historic events.

Vedic scriptures contain revealed knowledge of God-dess, but that revelation came through Indian culture at different times. They represent how God-dess spoke to Indians in antiquity. What do they have to say to us today? This requires an interpretive leap.



Bhaktivinode foresaw the introduction of Chaitanyaism to the West as an evolutionary step employing a rational approach to faith rather than emotional superstition. Thus, Universalist Radha-Krishnaism accepts a scholarly view of scripture and history. It does not ask people to believe the unbelievable and deny their innate intelligence or a scientific view of manifest reality. [URK 72-3]

The religious and mythological background of Greek thought was profoundly pluralistic in character. [PWM 16]

Universalism - the pluralistic perspective of essence seekers who find truth in all authentic spiritual paths and see them as manifestations of the perennial philosophy. It is a stance that remains open to truth in all its varied forms. It does not claim to be the only way. Rather, it seeks common ground with divergent spiritual communities. However, it does not uncritically consider all paths equal. [URK 198]



Anaximenes introduced the crucial idea that a basic essence could remain itself while undergoing many transformations. Thus the notion of *arche*, which had previously signified the beginning or originating cause of things, now took on the additional significance of "principle"--something that eternally maintains its own nature while transmuting itself into the many transient and changing phenomena of the visible world. [PWM 471]

Devotees experience the interrelatedness of all things as finite emanations of God-dess. They relate to creation as part of God-dess and care for it as they care for themselves. People depend on Earth, and it depends on humans. Creation lives, and God-dess constitutes its spirit. Expressed in the language of contemporary science, God-dess expanded through the big bang to become all things. The one became many but remains one. [URK 42]

The dichotomy of religion and reason seems to have not so much pressed Pythagoras antithetically away from one in favor of the other, but rather provided for him an impetus toward synthesis. [PWM 22]

While science and religion remain separate fields, their cross pollination can produce wonderful results. Religious interpretation adds meaning to science, and science grounds religion in twenty-first century cosmology. They complement each other and can peacefully coexist. When both views are held simultaneously a fuller understanding of multidimensional reality develops through an interpretive shift and the will to do so. [URK 102]

According to Sophists such as Protagoras . . . Truth was relative, not absolute, and differed from culture to culture, from person to person, and from situation to situation. Claims to the contrary, whether religious or philosophical, could not stand up to critical argument. [PWM 27]

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. [URK 11]

The belief that the universe possesses and is governed according to a comprehensive regulating intelligence, and that this same intelligence is reflected in the human mind, rendering it capable of knowing the cosmic order, was one of the most characteristic and recurring principles in the central tradition of Hellenic thought. [PWM 47]

God-dess pervades creation and constitutes its guiding, ordering, designing principle, the ground of being, cosmic consciousness, the one from which many flow. Individuals exist as parts of God-dess, and like a piece

of hologram or fractal, they contain the image of the whole. God-dess within guides and directs through persuasive love. People choose how to respond. God-dess manifests most fully in devotees open to his-her transformative presence. [URK 54]

Faith transcended reason, but was not opposed by it; indeed, they enriched each other. Rather than view the workings of secular reason as a threatening antithesis to the truths of religious faith, Aquinas was convinced that ultimately the two could not be in conflict and that their plurality would therefore serve a deeper unity. [PWM 188]

The existence of God-dess cannot be conclusively proved or disproved. God-dess exists beyond spacetime, reason, and conception as well as in spacetime, reason, and conception. Therefore, people can know God-dess to the degree they comprehend his-her self-revelation at the moment. So, it comes down to faith aided by intuition and reason. Faith is not contrary to reason, however, certain aspects of faith cannot be

fully understood by us now and remain the great mystery. [URK 81]

To begin by doubting everything was the necessary first step, for he [Descartes] wished to sweep away all the past presumptions now confusing human knowledge and to isolate only those truths he himself could clearly and directly experience as indubitable. [PWM 276]

So, doubt and question everything. Certainly God-dess is not offended by these things. Rather, they are signs of a true seeker. Doubting and questioning help practitioners realize truth and in the process, faith develops and evolves dynamically. Question scriptures. Question tradition. Question teachers. If they are offended by questions or do not answer satisfactorily, they may not be the right person to follow. [URK 79]

The deity recognized by Rousseau was not an impersonal first cause, but a God of love

and beauty whom the human soul could know from within. [PWM 313]

Devotees may even focus on a mental image. The point is to fix the mind on Goddess. Material representations or symbols of Goddess remain simultaneously one and different from Goddess. What better way to portray Goddess than through the highest aesthetic ideals of beauty, truth, and love? [URK 128]

Blake recognized "Imagination" as the sacred vessel of the infinite, the emancipator of the bound human mind, the means by which eternal realities came to expression and consciousness. Indeed, for many Romantics, imagination was in some sense the whole of existence, the true ground of being, the medium of all realities. It both pervaded consciousness and constituted the world. [PWM 369]

Natural devotion imitates perfect devotion. A person in a physical body cannot attain the perfect devotion of the eternal

associates. Natural devotion prepares them to ultimately attain it in their perfect transcendental body. As long as devotees remain in a physical body they go on hearing, chanting, and performing other devotional practices outwardly, while inwardly imagining themselves in a transcendental body associating with Radha-Krishna constantly. Constant remembrance makes the transcendental love play come alive in the imagination.

The practitioner's imagined spiritual body is not wholly imaginary. It constitutes a mental image of the spiritual body Goddess imparts to devotees out of infinite grace. Goddess imparts a transcendental body like the one desired because it is essential for enjoyment of that particular mode of devotion. The imagined spiritual body exists as an imperfect replica of the spiritual body. It is the actual spiritual body in the making. [URK 129-30]

the Romantic . . . found in tradition something more mysterious--a repository of collective wisdom, the accrued insights of a

people's soul, a living, changing force with its own autonomy and evolutionary dynamism. Such wisdom was not merely the empirical and technical knowledge of the scientific mind, but spoke of deeper realities, hidden to common sense and mechanical experiment. [PWM 371-2]

Likewise, Universalist Radha-Krishnaism presents perennial wisdom in a contemporary manner to create a life-affirming, sex-positive spiritual path today. It removes centuries of accumulated detritus and explains what remains in contemporary language to present a sustainable model for spiritual growth. [URK 36]

God was rediscovered in Romanticism--not the God of orthodoxy or deism but of mysticism pantheism, and immanent cosmic process; not the juridical monotheistic patriarch but a divinity more ineffably mysterious, pluralistic, all embracing, neutral or even feminine in gender; not an absentee creator but a numinous creative



force within nature and within the human spirit. [PWM 373]

Universalist Radha-Krishnaism comes under the heading of panentheism, which the *Oxford American Dictionary* defines as “the belief or doctrine that God is greater than the universe and includes and interpenetrates it.” God-dess manifests personally as Radha-Krishna, impersonally as the undifferentiated one, and as an immanent, all-pervading presence--cosmic consciousness. [URK 45-6]

Art provided a unique point of conjunction between the natural and the spiritual, and for many modern intellectuals disillusioned with orthodox religion, art became the chief spiritual outlet and medium. . . . In art, the disenchanted modern psyche could yet find a ground for meaning and value, a hallowed context for its spiritual yearnings, a world open to profundity and mystery.

Steve Bohlert’s photography offers glimpses of the spiritual in the earthly. . . . He enjoys

shooting and sharing photographs of the Big Island, its flora, and people. He's an active member of the [Hilo Photography Club](#). . . . Steve lives a contemplative life, and his photography expresses it. [stevebohlert.com]

Jung found evidence of a collective unconscious common to all human beings and structured according to powerful archetypal principles. [PWM 385]

God-dess, the spiritual realm, this universe, heavens, hells, gods, and goddesses all live within people in what Carl Jung called the collective unconscious. Natural devotion makes relating with God-dess conscious through constant invocation of Radha-Krishna's presence. [URK 54]

The critical search for truth is constrained to be tolerant of ambiguity and pluralism, and its outcome will necessarily be knowledge that is relative and fallible rather than absolute or certain. [PWM 396]

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." [URK 11]

Reality is in some sense constructed by the mind, not simply perceived by it, and many such constructions are possible, none necessarily sovereign. [PWM 396]

Progressive scholars accept that human reality is not fixed or the only reality. By examining realities that exist now or in the past on this planet alone, people can understand that their reality is not a given. Culture wars experienced locally, nationally, and internationally are clashing cultural constructions of reality. They are also called paradigms that rapidly fluctuate in a battle for dominance. [URK 137]

In the politics of the contemporary Weltanschauung, no perspective--religious, scientific, or philosophical--has the upper hand, yet that situation has encouraged an

almost unprecedented intellectual flexibility and cross-fertilization, reflected in the widespread call for, and practice of, open “conversation” between different understandings, different vocabularies, different cultural paradigms. [PWM 402]

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. [URK 10]

In this view, although there exist many defining structures in the world and in the mind that resist or compel human thought and activity in various ways, on a fundamental level the world tends to ratify, and open up according to, the character of

the vision directed toward it. The world that the human being attempts to know and remake is in some sense projectively elicited by the frame of reference with which it is approached. [PWM 406]

The technique of meditating on and participating in the stories of Radha-Krishna's play throughout the day is often called remembering, but it is not like remembering a past event or a departed loved one. Rather, it entails visualizing and experiencing an ongoing, alternate idealized reality that is ultimately more real than this.

Throughout the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna says this technique is the way to reach his abode (e.g. BG 8.5-8). That we live in our mental projections is a common assumption all through the history of Vedic thought. Indians take the world of imagination much more seriously than most westerners. [URK 150-51]

The more complexly conscious and ideologically unconstrained the individual or society, the more free is the choice of

worlds, and the more profound their participation in creating reality. [PWM 406]

Because humans are not bound by instincts like other animals, they are free to choose which realities to inhabit. Devotees work diligently on the plane of spacetime reality to make this world a better place for all. It is important that people not neglect this aspect of reality in the name of spirituality.

Devotees also follow the path to a transcendent reality inhabited by Radha-Krishna and their friends. Both realities are important and interconnected as long as practitioners are physically embodied. Due to their world-openness, devotees inhabit more than one world at once. [URK 138]

Considered as a whole, the feminist perspective and impulse has brought forth perhaps the most vigorous, subtle, and radically critical analysis of conventional intellectual and cultural assumptions in all of contemporary scholarship. . . . In certain respects the implications, both intellectual and social, of feminist analyses are so

fundamental that their significance is only beginning to be realized by the contemporary mind. [PWM 408]

Chaitanya and his followers' acknowledgement of Radha's supreme position constitutes a major theological development. Elevation of the feminine devotional principle to the position of supreme goddess went hand in hand with elevation of women's status in society. Even western women still struggle for religious, economic, and social equality. Seeing the feminine in God-dess helps mitigate the situation. Christian feminist theologians struggle to make that connection, but here a case more readily exists. [URK 65]

Jung began to move toward a conception of archetypes as autonomous patterns of meaning that appear to structure and inhere in both psyche and matter, thereby in effect dissolving the modern subject-object dichotomy. Archetypes in this view were more mysterious than a priori categories-- more ambiguous in their ontological status,

less easily restricted to a specific dimension, more like the original Platonic and Neoplatonic conception of archetypes. [PWM 425]

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After studying PWM, I consider myself a postmodern, romantic idealist.