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Shape and Origin of Bhaktivedanta Swami's Image of Christianity An Essay

By

Peter Schmidt

0. Introduction and theses. 1. Bhaktivedanta Swami's view of Christianity. 1.1. The Bible; 1.2. Jesus; 1.3. History of the church. 2. Bhaktivedanta Swami's religious socialization. 2.1. Childhood; 2.2 College; 2.3. Vaishnava-teachers. 3. Final summary and appendix (with glossary)

0. The Bengal Vaishnava Swami Abhay Caranaravinda Bhaktivedanta, briefly called Bhaktivedanta Swami, lived from 1896 to 1977. Eleven years before his death he founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in New York, abbreviated: ISKCON, for the most of you better known as the "Hare-Krishna movement".

One may not consider Bhaktivedanta Swami as the founder of a sectarian group, today described as a "new religious movement"; his religion rather is based on a century old, genuine Hindu faith tradition.

1. Bhaktivedanta Swami's view of Christianity - under an almost exclusive consideration of the Bible - is extensive and characterized by a high valuation of the person of Jesus Christ. References to the origin of this position are supported by his numerous remarks about a religious education highly influenced by Christianity in his adolescence.

To this day there is no serious scientific publication about Bhaktivedanta Swami's life that could take into account his points of view about the Christian

religion in an acceptable way. The official posthumous ISKCON-biography has to be seen as extremely problematic in this context.

One can place Bhaktivedanta Swami's organization into the big complex of monotheistic Hinduism. Although all other forms of religion found within the Indian subcontinent, such as animism, shamanism, polytheism, pantheism, and monism belong to Hinduism as well, the way of worshipping a higher Being, with the idea of a personal God, is the basis of Bhaktivedanta Swami's religion, a part of the so-called Vaishnavism (or Vishnuism). Besides Shivaism and Shak-tism it is one of the three largest religions in India.

It is a religious tradition which was started in the 3rd Century AD and is found mainly in Bengal, in which God Vishnu, or one of his incarnations, like Rama or the extremely popular Krishna, is adored. One of the literary bases in this context is the Bhagavad-Gita, a philosophical-didactic teaching poem drawn up in the same time period.

The supporters of the Vaishnavism, the so-called Vaishnavas, do not cultivate any homogenous cultural and theological traditions. One speaks of four big philosophical trends. All were formed in the Middle Ages and named after their founders who mainly were from south India. This includes, for example, the school of Madhva who developed the dualistic philosophical system of the Dvaita in which God, and all earthly souls, have to be understood as totally distinguishable spiritual units.

As a rule the Vaishnavas were leaders of movements that were aimed at the ritualistic piety of the hierarchically organized Brahmanic religion. God should be more easily accessible and more available to every single creditor for the striven salvation of the cycle of existence. Concretely it meant that highly complex fire rituals, ceremonial songs and complicated offerings by the Brahmanic priesthood should yield to simple acts also performed by laymen and guided by Bhakti, the selfless love and devotion to God. For example the admiration of images in temples and the chanting of the different names of God were introduced as the best ways of worship in the communities.

In the first half of the 16th century the movement by the preacher Caitanya, came into Bengal from Mayapura. Considered as an Avatara, an incarnation of God, that founder of the so-called Gaudiya-Vaishnava-tradition concentrated the religious experience on a devoted worship of God Krishna and his eternal female companion, Radha. Bhaktivedanta Swami's movement for Krishna-consciousness also came from this line of the Vaishnavism. They see their main task in a worldwide spreading of the common praise song of God's names, the Nama-sankirtan.

To complete the thought one has to mention that ISKCON is not the only representative of the Gaudiya-Vaishnavism in the western world. One of the spiritual relatives of Bhaktivedanta Swami, i. e. another pupil of their religious teacher, introduced himself as an authoritative spiritual preacher of the same time outside of India. It was Bhakti Rakshaka Sridhara who also founded a religious organi-

zation for the distribution of the teachings of Caitanya. Its head office is in Navadvipa, India.

As already mentioned, there are a large number of newer scientific publications about the traditional, as well as the modern tendencies of the Vaishnava religion worldwide. While sorting out the available scientific literature about Bhaktivedanta Swami it became clear that particularly his relationship to other world religions - especially to Christianity - have not been treated at all or only very briefly. Hardly any scientifically well-founded discussions until now have taken place with this subject.

Exactly this is the main object of my doctoral work, in which I have particularly worked through the complete works of Bhaktivedanta Swami, including exclusive consideration of his viewpoints of Christianity, and the resulting strategies of an inter-religious dialogue. In addition to that I have followed the question of origin of Bhaktivedanta Swami's opinions about Christianity in his religious socialization process.

A CD-ROM which contains the complete collection of his books, letters and articles, as well as the copies of all tape logs of his lectures and various discussions in the English language served as my primary source.

In the following I should like to introduce you to the most important results of the first section of my work, and will pick up my second thesis:

1.1. In the opinion of Bhaktivedanta Swami the question of a so-called Shastra, a sacred scripture, which documents God's will authentically, is not only constitutive for the Christian religion. He regards the Bible as a part of the oldest Hindu literature, the so-called Vedic scriptures, and presents it moreover as a book that can be used as a source of information about the life and work of the Christian incarnation of God, Jesus Christ.

Regarding the quality of the Bible it has to be understood as a kind of simplified summary of the divine message, which can be found much more detailed in the Bhagavad-Gita (comparison paperback dictionary - larger encyclopedia). But the statements of that sacred document aren't untrue, however the target groups of both works are different, particularly in their intellectual ability. Therefore, the message of the divine love is presented much less clearly in the Bible.

Principally everybody could strive for the purpose of a religion with the Bible successfully. For Bhaktivedanta Swami this consisted in the guidance of all people to a loving relationship with God, i. e. in the development of what he called "Krishna-consciousness".

However, for Bhaktivedanta Swami the person of Jesus wrongly became a unique savior of the world. The reasons for this are numerous forbidden manipulations of the text of the Bible, an event which may be understood as an evidence of the faith, but which cannot be tolerated in any way. Through this the claim of absolute truth would be lost. Such a revision of the Bible (he called it "manufacturing") can always be seen if Christians deliberately and willfully ascribe direct speeches to Jesus, although they probably were written long after his crucifixion.

In a letter written in 1969 Bhaktivedanta Swami reported that he had heard, through the reading of a church circular (whose author remains anonymous), by the examinations of certain Prof. Charles Smith. This establishes, as he described the contents of the circular, that generally there are great doubts about the authenticity of all biblical words of Jesus. For example: numerous passages considered to have been said by Jesus originally are by the author of the fourth Gospel. He particularly mentioned John 14.6., where Jesus is quoted with "I am the way, the truth and the life; nobody comes to the Father unless through me". Here Bhaktivedanta Swami took into consideration that - if one follows the theses of Charles Smith - this statement, which is important for the Christian self-confidence, might also have been added later.

Smith, a theologian in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was mentioned by Bhaktivedanta Swami only once. For this reason it seems to be obvious that the Indian knew Smith's book "The paradox of Jesus in the Gospels" only through the secondary source of the church circular. My own investigations, which brought me to the Loyola University of New Orleans, yield that this thesis by Charles Smith, who in those days was engaged in the biblical demythologization, nevertheless was quoted correctly.

Examining Bhaktivedanta Swami's competence with respect to the contents of the Bible, one notices that he never goes into concrete details respectively to the context in any of his 14 Bible quotations. The reconstruction of the Bible's historical frame also doesn't play any part for him. In his discussions he rather frequently scattered Bible words to which he thought to have discovered an identity with his own philosophy. One important subject was the love which man should develop towards God, as well as the infinite power of God and the dependence of man on Him.

His preferred Bible quotation was the Fifth Commandment which can be located in 158 quotations, much more often than any other Bible quotation. Bhaktivedanta Swami called it the "first commandment of the Bible" that, although it is in the center of the Christian philosophy, it is violated frequently.

In his commentary of 1975 on the "Srimad Bhagavatam", a central Vaishnava document about Krishna, Bhaktivedanta Swami referred to the twelve year old Jesus in the temple (Luke 2, 41-52). By using not identifiable secondary sources he presented an incident of grave consequence for Christianity: to his knowledge the adolescent Jesus was shocked by the Jewish practice of animal sacrifice in the synagogues (!). Consequently he declined the Jewish faith and started his own religion, i.e. Christianity, with a "thou shalt not kill" finally correctly understood.

On another occasion Bhaktivedanta Swami justified the necessity of the confirmation of the fifth commandment with the argument that people of the biblical period would have been so accustomed to killing, that they couldn't grasp the real meaning of this law.

Nowadays the situation has escalated, because animals are killed not only as objects for sacrifices but also for inadmissible food purposes in slaughter-houses.

Since the killing of living beings, as a matter of principle should be condemned as an abominable and merciless action, one has to describe Christians, who tolerate or support such a deplorable state, as incapable of realizing the true nature of God.

At the same time Bhaktivedanta Swami ascribed a steadily fading influence of the Bible on the urgently necessary religious recovery of the modern western world. It's decay is based on an extremely materialistic and egotistical way of life, particularly of many Christian clergymen. More on this topic in a moment.

Summarizing Bhaktivedanta Swami accepted the biblical texts as the work of a divine revelation and even recommended studies in the Holy Book now and then. Although the words of Jesus are not quoted as a first source, for him the Bible includes all considerable guidelines for the practice of a true religion. Now I would like to go into details on the meaning intended for Jesus in this connection.

1.2. In his complete teachings Bhaktivedanta Swami used the name of Jesus 861 times and the title "Christ" even 1083 times; in comparison: Judaism is mentioned merely 3 times, Mohammed 40 times, Buddha 619 times and Krishna 81.826 times.

Jesus for whom titles like "Lord" or "Son of God" are used has shown an overwhelming sympathy towards all creatures on this planet, moreover a remarkable tolerance (particularly towards his enemies) as well as a self-sacrificing modesty without any material adherence to this world. He has proven an infinite confidence and an absolute dedication to God's powerful greatness.

It is interesting that Bhaktivedanta Swami also used terms of the Hindu tradition: Jesus would have been a real Vaishnava-teacher, a guru, and a powerful "Devotee". This term describes a purely religious and pious man who serves God voluntarily and with infinite devotion. The title "Avatara" is also very important to Bhaktivedanta Swami.

Again and again the exemplary fundamental attitude of Jesus, regarding the serving obedience towards God, is emphasized. Before His earthly existence, while in heaven, it is thought that He might have been without anything to do, and therefore were very bored. On earth however, Bhaktivedanta Swami said, he made efforts toward all other living beings in a truly Vaishnava and exemplary way.

Bhaktivedanta Swami agreed uncompromisingly with the biblical version of Jesus' fate, despite his doubts about the authenticity of the Gospels. He was convinced that there was a divine order for His salvation giving death at the cross. This also applies to the following resurrection. The latter remained second-rated for him, in view of the meaning of Jesus as a sublime, divine ambassador and reformer, towering above everything. The people of the biblical times should have been guided back to the godhead Krishna by developing a more unpretentious - please allow me this expression! - "light-"version of the Vaishnava-philosophy.

Jesus therefore is also indisputably in the tradition of all important religious reformers. His magnanimous and selfless attitude most likely consisted in taking over and wiping out once and for all the sins of mankind, with his self-sacrifice. The after-death interpretation of Jesus' noble deed however, had nothing to do with the original intention, said Bhaktivedanta Swami. For him the practice of the Christian religion rather was based on the creation and preservation of a tricky and disastrous contract which has been concluded in Jesus ever since biblical times. Jesus had the function of a kind of scapegoat to forgive the sins committed in the past, present and future.

This reproach is only comprehensible through Bhaktivedanta Swami's definition of sin, namely the human disobedience towards God and his commandments. No "rotten" contract with Jesus but devotional service to God alone, integrated in daily life prevents the origin of new sins. Every man therefore incessantly and only has to strive activities dedicated to God.

No word of disapproval of the divine concept of forgiveness of sins for the world's salvation is said; only the misunderstanding, and thus abnormal behavior of the supporters of Jesus which in Bhaktivedanta Swami's critical crossfire by undermining morality, even to this day. So to speak as a counterweight to the faultless and perfect Jesus, Bhaktivedanta Swami reproached Christians of all times for being helplessly lost in a purely materialistic life, intolerant fanatics towards other religions, without any kind of world saving philosophy, in return well equipped with inconsistent, corrupt and selfish ethics. All of this proved to be fatal for Bhaktivedanta Swami because in the Ten Commandments there is an acceptable and potentially suitable normative basis for a truthfully meek life. Nevertheless, he had great confidence that the younger generations will prevent the decline of western society. Bhaktivedanta Swami considered a strong rejection of his movement as a measurable degree of public success for himself.

1.3. A portrayal of Bhaktivedanta Swami's critical view of Christianity would be incomplete if his sparse statements about the history of the Christian church were not mentioned.

Within Christianity, the Roman-Catholic Church appeared to him to be the only authorized opponent. He never justified this attitude and it certainly had to do with his rudimentary knowledge of the history of Protestantism, which he severely condemned. He equated the origin of this denomination with the development of the Church of England: a certain King John, so he told the audience in several lectures, is said to have "rotested" against the power of the Roman-catholic clergy without any justification. As a result this king founded the since then so-called Protestant Church, which in Bhaktivedanta Swami's opinion is to be called "notoriously discontent". Of course Bhaktivedanta Swami didn't mean King John without land, but Henry VIII. The subject was never extended, consequently no European reformers were ever mentioned.

So much to Bhaktivedanta Swami's view of Christianity. Coming to the third thesis we have to consider the factors which in whole have contributed to Bhak-

tivedanta Swami's religious development and which are believed to have been the decisive influences on his opinions towards Christianity.

There are numerous descriptions of Bhaktivedanta Swami's development from childhood to puberty in the already mentioned ISKCON-biography of 1980. In that the author Satsvarupa das reports on the child and even the adolescent student, who still is called Abhay Charan De, as continuously thinking about religious and philosophical subjects. At the same time he already should have received a sound philosophical training in the Vedic scriptures by his father, and faced western philosophers skeptically and negatively. Conscientiously he is to have listened to his father's descriptions about the eternal soul, Krishna's will and the doctrines of the Vaishnava religion and understood every word of it. Abhay was absolutely indifferent to worldly sciences and their discoveries, never felt any fascination for these subjects.

So far the "facts" written in the biography's first volume. My analysis of Bhaktivedanta Swami's childhood and adolescence however, shows that those descriptions have to be seen as incorrect. I would like to give some detailed reasons for this observation.

2.1. In fact Bhaktivedanta Swami's first contact with a religion was in his childhood, namely by the Vaishnava world of his pious father Goura Mohon, a cloth merchant in Calcutta who observed numerous ritualistic duties and feasts. Till up into his high age, the son remembers his own playful-imitating attempts of Krishna-worship. Yet the theological meaning, he later has to confess retrospectively, remained completely unknown or misunderstood in those days. And his childlike and naive fascination for the solemnity and mystery of the religious cult gave him no insights into the sacred Vaishnava literature.

Instead, Abhay was already confronted with the extremely contrasting and nevertheless enticing culture of the British colonial society. Without any contradiction from his father, he left the religious roots of his ancestors as a pupil and still more sharply as a student. As a teenager his life was defined by religious phenomena, progressive thinking and modern technologies. There were gramophones and ventilators that were moved by invisible dwarfs, he was interested in the driving technology of tramcars, he was fond going to the cinema and drinking 7up, which he was still mad about in his late seventies, and he liked to play football. Altogether Bhaktivedanta Swami gave lectures on this sport 44 times. He, for example, compares the technique of playing football with the theory of reincarnation: "The football has no place. As soon as (it) comes (to) somebody's feet, he kicks. He goes to another body. ... So we are just like football. We are being kicked up. Now I am American. Next time I shall be kicked up to China ..." (lecture about the Bhagavad-Gita in New York, 20th Dec. 1966).

2.2. From 1916 to 1920 Abhay was a student at the Scottish Churches College in Calcutta. Here the trends of his childhood and youth continued. In the classes he was confronted with the purely western way of Christian culture. Through the contact with west Europeans a generally existing affinity to the western lifestyle emerged among the students.

In his old age Bhaktivedanta Swami often remembered one of his college-teachers, a Scottish Reverend by the name of Dr. William Spence Urquhart, the late headmaster of the College. This person obviously had a lasting influence on the student, which was expressed in an extraordinary affection and paternal bond, completely independent of the Christian background of the teacher, at least in the eyes of the young Bhaktivedanta Swami.

With regard to the religious and philosophical knowledge the student behaved more than loyal towards his favorite teacher: Rev Urquhart's daily and obligatory Bible classes in front of 150 (!) students can be considered as the primary source of Bhaktivedanta Swami's Bible knowledge. His frequent reference to this teacher leads me to further investigations of Urquhart's person and theological work. During my two trips to Edinburgh, Scotland I was very successful.

The most important results are: Bhaktivedanta Swami predominantly adopted Rev. Urquhart's introductions of Jesus which are embossed by thoughts of a liberal theology. This particularly applies to the idea of Jesus' divine order as an exemplary religious teacher and as an authority that sets important moral standards. For both scholars the death of Jesus by crucifixion was essential. Neither of them ever doubted the historical authenticity and the divine origin of the biblical words of Jesus. Every now and then the Indian even chose exactly the same Bible quotations and Christian theological terms in his works which his college-teacher also valued. (Interestingly Rev. Urquhart had lively contact to Rudolf Otto in Marburg and spoke German fluently; they visited each other in Germany and in India.)

During his College years Abhay's knowledge of his paternal childhood religion vanished completely, or rather was rejected by the student now and then. Instead, according to his own statements, he developed a real longing for western identity and modern city life; he dreamed of trips to New York or London (the cities which later should become the first centers of his missionary activities), he admired the first skyscrapers as he used to the streetcars and regularly read scientific magazines, for example "The Scientific American".

So much for Bhaktivedanta Swami's own statements about his own religious development in childhood and adolescence. Some more words to the ISKCON-biography. Quite obviously it tries to create an indisputable ideal of Bhaktivedanta Swami's religious personality full of legends, a procedure which is academically little commendable and laudable. For this reason it isn't further surprising that the author has completely ignored the influential person of the Scottish Reverend Urquhart.

2.3. Finally, let's have a look at Bhaktivedanta Swami's theological career as an adult. Although one cannot find any reference to Christianity in the traditional Vaishnava-theology, the changed conditions during the British rule in India made contacts possible to Christian missionaries. This phenomenon also began to show in the writings of Bhaktivedanta Swami's spiritual Vaishnava-teacher, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati and his physical father, Bhaktivinoda Thakura Swami. Their theological positions to Christianity also influenced the views of

the ISKCON-founder. I could verify these assumptions via Internet only after arduous literature research.

Bhaktivinoda Thakura Swami saw Jesus as a religious reformer who - as others before Him - engaged in the fulfillment of the divine law on earth. He said that Jesus set an example by having all qualities of a Savior with a strong loving dedication to the paternal God. However He was not understood adequately by His contemporaries who in turn resulted in an interpretative distortion of the Holy Bible. Bhaktivinoda Thakura emphasized that the divine message has a global character so that Christians finally could come to quite similar religious findings as the Vaishnavas.

Bhaktivedanta Swami adopted the fundamental distinction of religious philosophies, which was originally believed by Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, his actual Vaishnava-guru (the initiation had been carried out in November 1932, ten years after their first meeting).

Both clearly mark off a unique "religion" from a so-called "practice of faith", with the examples of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. To be concrete, one has to understand religion as the learning and the lifelong exerted rehearsal of obedience towards God and His laws. Since today it is possible to convert from one denomination to another - like changing one's mind - one could not speak of a true religion in that case, but merely of piety (in the sense of "having confidence in something" or "standing up for a spiritual point of view"). Nevertheless Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati concluded, like his pupil Bhaktivedanta Swami later on, that it would be possible for a true Christian to keep his belief, because this "religion" also has the powerful potential, for reaching the aim of the claimed Krishna-consciousness.

The criticism of the members of clerical institutions is strongly defined in the scriptures of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati. He claimed that spiritual dignitaries all throughout the world are prototypes of human corruption, since they hinder any spiritual development and simultaneously promote the growth of hypocrisy, the mania of sensuality, the addiction to intoxication and the killing of animals.

Just like Bhaktivedanta Swami his teacher had confidence in the reforming power of the younger generations and called on a religious offensive by authoritative and missionary activities religious emissaries, for example by distributing religious books. Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati's order for Bhaktivedanta Swami shortly before his death in 1937 to preach in western countries has to be understood with this background information.

3. At the end of this lecture let me now summarize the most important facts. During his missionary activities, the Vaishnava-teacher Bhaktivedanta Swami again and again fell back upon his Bible knowledge and his concrete introductions of Jesus, which supposes many years of education under a genuine Christian background.

The emotional bases for the religiousness of the Indian were already anchored in his paternal education, although he was totally alienated from every Vaishnava-

piety as a college-student and not instructed to substantial elements of the philosophy at all.

Bhaktivedanta Swami's childhood and early adolescence - this yields the examination of his own statements - had no direct influence on his subtly differentiated view of the Christian religion. Thus the western college-education has to be regarded as the only valid source of the Indian's Christian theology. In this connection it has to be kept in mind that his ideas of a loving God, who engages His Son in the Salvation of the world, originate from the biblical lectures of a theologically liberal Scottish missionary. Only the inter-religiously open-minded education of two Vaishnava-scholars made the development of a trusting and simultaneously critical acceptance of the Christian religion possible. The Swamis already knew and tolerated a lot of Christian faith elements and could not foresee the far-reaching consequences of their pupil by virtually supporting the theology of Bhaktivedanta Swami's college-teacher Urquhart.

Certainly we can speak of the coincidence of numerous and favorable circumstances in the life of Bhaktivedanta Swami. If one tries to sketch up his spiritual and - concerning Christianity particularly tolerant - career: it comes to the picture of a traditionally educated Vaishnava-Hindu who over many years was socialized in a profound Christian-protestant way, simultaneously and who finally in his high ages would evolve to a leadership figure of Vaishnavism, not only to the western world.