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Shape of the image of Christianity in the Vaishnava News Network
(VNN)

By

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1. Introduction and intentions

The Vaishnava News Network (VNN; Internet-address: <http://www.vnn.org/>) is a "network of collaborating Vaishnavas worldwide providing the world Vaishnava community with news and forums of communication", offering its news service free of charge. Founded in 1997 by an international group of Vaishnavas it calls itself an "independent, comprehensive and universal information source and communication center". Anyone can participate, i.e. write articles for the VNN which does not censor any news "as long as it conforms with the VNN Standards of Publication."

VNN tells the virtual community about the theological background that, "although primarily founded by students of A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swami, (it) holds no partiality whatsoever towards any group or divisions of any Vaishnava school" and "is not affiliated, dominated, funded or controlled by any particular Vaishnava organization or group other than its correspondents, senior editors and staff". It is aligned with the philosophical path delineated by their spiritual

preceptors in line with the teachings of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, known as Gaudiya Vaishnavism."

In this essay different views of Christianity of several correspondents, senior editors and other staff members of VNN shall be treated. The text sources of the investigation were confined in time to one calendary year (1998). All relevant writings published by VNN can be looked up by means of the VNN internal search engine, concentrating on the key words "Jesus Christ", "Christianity" and "Bible".

The results in this piece of work will be compared steadily to the scriptures of the Bengal Swami Abhay Caranaravinda Bhaktivedanta (1896-1977), briefly called "Bhaktivedanta Swami" or with the honorary title "Srila Prabhupada", mainly because of his predominant and fundamental influence on the modern Vaishnava community, not only in the western world of this outgoing 20th century. Especially Bhaktivedanta Swami's conception of an inter-religious dialogue with the Christian faith will be taken into consideration.

With that the author wants to examine the execution of his plans, the extent of possible changes and the seriousness performed by Bhaktivedanta Swami's pupils resp. by ISKCON devotees introduced after his death.

2. Aspects of Christianity

Throughout 1998 15 VNN-articles of different length and on numerous occasions are found which more or less deal with Christian subjects. Most of the time the authors speak of Jesus Christ or the Bible, usually in brief passages, displaying them either on a pure Vaishnava philosophical background, e.g. by discussing specific issues of the bhakti philosophy or, in a few cases, presenting their own interpretations of Christianity.

2.1. Jesus Christ

2.1.1. Titles

Every VNN-article applies various titles to Jesus Christ. As a rule, all their meanings do not deviate from those used by Bhaktivedanta Swami himself.

Sometimes Jesus is depicted in the usual way Christians would name Him, too, such as "Son of God" (Text 12, 13, and 15), "Lord" (6, 10, 14) or "Messiah" (7). Once He is described as the "Son of David and Salomo" (10), but most of the time the authors present Jesus in a way that understands His role in Christianity through the "translating" lens of a Vaishnava background: "guru of the Christians" (5), "sadhu" (14), "acarya" (10) or "pure devotee of the Lord" (1, 12, 13, 15).

A more interpreting point of view recognizes Him as a real "Vaishnava" (1, 14, 15), who works as a representative (9, 10, 14) or as a "servant of God" (12). According to one article, Jesus' position can't be outstripped by any other man on

earth, because He was the "most famous human being throughout history" (10). But one can't look properly upon the view of Jesus Christ at VNN without taking into consideration the way His character and divine mission are presented.

2.1.2. Character and mission

Jesus, a so-called self-realized, whole soul who has the right knowledge of God (15), functions in several cases as a historic example for a deeply religious and thus pious person. He is on His way of purifying Himself by passing conflicts with the devil (1) and seriously exercising yoga (10) by loving and glorifying His Father in pure bhakti (10, 14, 15). Having a personality to trust and depend on (15) and particularly claiming that He was son of God with the power to forgive sins (13) and reveal the nature of the Father by His own words (15), Jesus is only doing what the Lord is saying (14). This can be confirmed by His "new mantra" that He gave to the biblical world, the Lord's Prayer (10).

For one author Jesus didn't care for social customs, i.e. didn't damn former sinners (13), nor was He advertising Himself resp. claiming that He is the Father Himself. He rather went to hell to fulfill His father's plan (10). Therefore it was easy for Him to feel the connection with the Supreme Lord while preparing the place for many devotees to follow Him (15).

One author has fully adapted Bhaktivedanta Swami's opinion that Jesus was betrayed and crucified by impious men and before that had a hard time with people accepting and understanding His spiritual mood properly (13).

2.2. The Bible

The outstanding importance of the holy Christian book is accepted throughout all passages of the five VNN articles mentioning the Bible. Two of them describe it as a shastra (14, 12), another compares it - following the tradition of Bhaktivedanta Swami - with the Bhagavad-Gita, saying both are devotional scriptures with the one fundamental difference that the Bible is not that "clear" in its divine message (15). For the Vaishnavas the book is "true" and "useful for Jesus Christ's teachings" and gives the world "two important prayers", the Lord's prayer and the Hail Mary (10).

In three cases the authors decidedly use quotations (only!) of the New Testament, all of them direct speeches of Jesus and never mentioned by Bhaktivedanta Swami, always to put stress on arguments of a purely Vishnavan background. The words are drawn out of their context; the meanings of the statements are never explained from a Christian position.

Concretely, in Gaurahari das' article (15), a direct comparison of the two scriptures, several passages of the Four Gospels are used: Matthew 6:24 is stated to prove everyone that following "the principle of pure devotional service ... is ... that you have to chose your master."; 10:41 is quoted ("You have to find a person who is actually a real prophet.") and 11:27 ("Jesus said ... Vaishnava princi-

ples for attaining God consciousness."); there is Luke 4:18 ("Anyone who has realized God becomes whole again and what happens is that they feel their connection with the Supreme Lord.") and John 14:3 ("...very few people had the devotional qualification to go where Jesus was going.").

One should not forget to mention that there is one more so-called quotation of the Bible, whose origin couldn't be traced back, because the author seemed to have changed the original version thoroughly: "Jesus was saying here in this next verse, 'As the scriptures say, whoever believes in me streams of life-giving water shall pour out from his heart.'"(1).

Mahaksa das (10) cites Jesus only once to underline the duty of loving obedience towards God: "Whether at home with the Lord and away from the body or at home with the body and away from the Lord, our business is to serve the Lord." That sentence resembles Luke 4:8.

Last but not least, Damodara das, a pupil of Gaurahari das, an initiating guru, speaks of a so-called "Jesus' disciple", when he quotes a passage of St.Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (2. Cor. 3:3) to confirm the feelings of a scholar towards Holy Scriptures: "Like one of Jesus' disciples said, 'I don't want the scripture to be carved in stone, I want it to be written in my heart.' This is just what I feel like ..." (2).

2.3. Criticism

In all articles one can find a phenomenon that already turns up in the work of Bhaktivedanta Swami. There is no critical word, no negative remark upon the person, the mission and the character of Jesus Christ Himself. The only field for objections spoken out in connection with the Christian religion is the behaviour and the nature of His followers in every historical epoch.

Generally spoken, Christian people seem to be unable and not qualified at all to understand the truth of Jesus' message of God's love towards all living beings. Following his great example Bhaktivedanta Swami, it is again Gaurahari das who detects certain deficits among the Christians. They have not enough devotional capability to follow their master Jesus (not only in biblical times), because they think that just believing in Christ would save them and bring them back to the Godhead. Neither do Christians (as well as members of other religions, too) worship a pure devotee of the Lord in a suitable way nor do they understand his real intentions (15). In another essay Gaurahari das compares the "materialistic" Christians with the much more "advanced" Vaishnavas who wouldn't close their eyes to "new prophets", like the followers of Jesus Christ (9).

Mahaksa das, too, is convinced that the Christians as a whole are "eternal materialists", only interested in missionary achievements while at the same time they only "serve Jesus' shadow", something that seems to be "useless and offensive to Jesus Christ's teachings" (10). He also criticizes that the Christian scripture canonization had been stopped after the Council of Trient, whereas he affirms

for his religion that all spiritual scriptures of Vaishnavism are accepted "as valid as the original Vedas" (14).

Besides that there is one more article completely in the tradition of Bhaktivedanta Swami's thoughts, claiming to know the persons to blame for the death of Jesus: His own disciples, who had accused and betrayed their spiritual master in the worst and lowest way ever possible (4).

2.4. Bhaktivedanta Swami

2.4.1. Comparison with Jesus

Several authors publishing at VNN develop a totally new connection between Jesus Christ and their own founder acarya Bhaktivedanta Swami. All of the aspects of this direct comparison can't be found in the complete teachings of this Vaishnava teacher. More than that, most of the assumptions only now, after Bhaktivedanta Swami's death, are made possible, because these statements create a legendary like aura, trying to construct relationships in the essence of both persons and their messages to the world. Jesus' mission so to say leads directly to the work of Bhaktivedanta Swami.

First of all, it is generally assumed that both had "the same ideas", trying to prepare "a place for many devotees", speaking the absolute truth, polarizing society and finally not going with public opinion (15).

Therefore it is comprehensible for the authors that Bhaktivedanta Swami found no other words than to call Jesus a Vaishnava (14), a pure devotee and a servant of God (12). It makes sense to them that Bhaktivedanta Swami liberally gave access to Jesus Christ's teachings after reading and accepting them wholeheartedly (10). Isa dasa remembers that Bhaktivedanta Swami even created similarities resp. identities in the personal names of Christ and Krishna (3).

After all, Mahaksa das refers to his knowledge of Bhaktivedanta Swami's habits in speaking about Jesus. He reports truthfully that Bhaktivedanta Swami had seen no need to change either religion, as long as, for example, Christians used God's holy names correctly. He cites Bhaktivedanta Swami describing his own role as the leader of "the true followers of Jesus Christ", mentioning his displeasure that "Christians are not following Jesus". Mahaksa das comes to the conclusion that Bhaktivedanta Swami's mission was "not unlike that of Jesus Christ" (10).

Within the ISKCON-internal "rittvik-debate" one author is determined to say that during Christian history there had been no indication that "besides following Jesus Christ every Christian should take another diksa guru" (6).

There is only VNN essay that mentions another Vaishnava Swami, Bhaktivinode Thakura Swami (1838-1914), who knows of Jesus Christ. The author Mahaksa das (14) states that already Bhaktivedanta Swami's own spiritual master "depicts Lord Jesus Christ as a Vaishnava, one who worships the supreme source of all energies" and therefore can be called, thus, a sadhu.

2.4.2. Deviations

Besides countless additional Bible quotations already mentioned above, one can find several statements in the VNN articles that deviate from or go far beyond those of Bhaktivedanta Swami. Nevertheless some of them are set up as new aspects in the inter-religious discussion with Christianity. Principally originating from a wider, not automatically more truthful range of knowledge, these devotees state several detailed assumptions about the biblical and Christian history.

Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary are interpreted as important mantras demonstrating pure bhakti (10). Mahaksa das knows for sure that the Three Wise Men (Mt 2:1f.) were three mystic travelers practicing bhakti and yoga and finally became enlightened by that service. Moreover he tells the reader stories about the young Jesus who allegedly had traveled between the age of twelve and thirty in Bengal, Tibet, Yucatan and Iraq.

One idea, already known from Bhaktivedanta Swami, is that Jesus was accused and betrayed by some of His own disciples. This has been extended in a quite delicate letter by disciples of the former ISKCON-Swami Harikesa. While publicly threatening with mass suicide, they compare their own fate with the destiny of Jesus' most devoted supporters (4).

Referring to the weak faith of Jesus' remaining disciples, another author uncritically states that even His performance of many wonders and His final resurrection didn't convince these people of His spiritual importance (15).

Besides that there are a few attempts aiming at a serious inter-religious dialogue, when one author arranges a comparative analysis of God's names in Vaishnavism and Judaism (3) or when an article of a Christian newspaper is quoted in direct speech for showing that Christians, too, could be strict vegetarians (11). These are means about which Bhaktivedanta Swami himself never felt the necessity to think.

Two last but tender ideas should be presented at the end of this chapter, because their philosophical background seems to be completely in opposition to that of Bhaktivedanta Swami's. First, there is the idea that "all devotees must be willing to be nailed to the cross" (1). This notion - intentionally? - could be understood in a literal or in a symbolical way. Secondly, there is the determined, nearly aggressive demand not to change one's faith to Christianity and to Jesus, not leaving "the process to aim towards the highest goal", to Vaishnavism. The author Vaishnava dasa strictly argues against the process of an inter-religious dialogue, stating that there "is no need to add the picture of Jesus on our altars or chant his name" (12). This concept with all its grave consequences is never to be found in Bhaktivedanta Swami's lifelong expectations of a dialogue with Christianity. On the contrary, he decidedly tried to get a vivid contact with Christian theology and its authorized representatives.

3. Final summary

There is a scarcely homogeneous image of Christianity in the analyzed 1998 VNN articles dealing with or at least mentioning Christian subjects. It could be shown that numerous Christian and Vaishnavan titles are used for the description of the outstanding role of Jesus Christ. He is presented in a way not deviating from Bhaktivedanta Swami's ideas as a historic example for a deeply religious and pious person, having the right knowledge of God and thus practicing pure bhakti, trusting in and accepting the Lord's plan to prepare the biblical people to follow His example. Following Bhaktivedanta Swami's speculation that Jesus was betrayed by impious, ignorant men who were unable to realize the divine truth in Him, there is also no reference to the Christian explanation of the liberating meaning of the cross. Even the resurrection is only presented as a magic, but futile means to impress the mob.

The Holy Bible is considered a real but, compared to the Bhagavad-Gita, more unclear shastra. Several, for Bhaktivedanta Swami still unknown passages of the New Testament are used, but the words again are drawn out of their context and the original meanings of the statements are never explained from a Christian position. In the same way Jesus is functional for the proper way of exercising bhakti and the Bible quotations stand as a sort of proof for the valuable authenticity of the Vaishnava philosophy, most of the time not as an argument for the reinforcement of an inter-religious dialogue with Christianity.

Like before in the work of Bhaktivedanta Swami, objections to Christianity are only spoken out in connection with the behaviour and the nature of Christ's followers in every historical epoch, even nowadays. Christians, unable or unqualified to understand pure love towards God, lack devotion and spiritual intelligence, but are full of harmful materialistic thoughts.

Some VNN authors create a legendary like aura around their spiritual master when they find idolizing similarities between the fates and missions of Bhaktivedanta Swami and Jesus Christ Himself. Besides that, the remembrance of the Vaishnava teacher always is truthful; the reference to other Vaishnava scholars is an exception.

In the end, several other statements towards Christianity go far beyond those of Bhaktivedanta Swami. They confront the reader with astounding new details of the Three Wise Men and Jesus' travels in His youth. Besides that there are a few attempts aiming at a serious and profound inter-religious dialogue. Completely in opposition to Bhaktivedanta Swami's thoughts is only the idea that deals with the fundamentally penetrated religious perseverance claimed from all Vaishnavas, connected with the call for religious separation from Christianity for the sake of spiritual success in Vaishnavism.

4. Sources

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Text 12: "Jesus Christ is Lord Brahma?"; author: Vaishnava dasa; date of publication: 03.12.
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