

Rational "Mythology"

Can a rational person accept the stories of the Puranas as literally true?

A lecture by Sadaputa Dasa

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In Vivekananda Swami's famous lecture on Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions in 1893, he began by outlining some of the salient features of traditional Hinduism. He mentioned karma, reincarnation, and the problem of evil in the material world. He went on to explain that the solution to this problem depends on seeking refuge in God. God is that one "by whose command the wind blows, the fire burns, the clouds rain, and death stalks upon the earth."¹ He is the source of strength and the support of the universe. He is everywhere, pure, almighty, and all-merciful. And we are related to God as a child to a father or mother and as a friend to a beloved friend.

Vivekananda said that we are to worship God through unselfish love, and he pointed out that the way to achieving love of God was "fully developed and taught by Krishna, whom the Hindus believe to have been God incarnate on earth."² Through love we are to perfect ourselves, reach God, see God, and enjoy bliss with God. On this, he said, all Hindus are agreed.³

But he went on to say that in the final stage of realization, God is seen to be impersonal Brahman. The individual then ends separate existence by realizing his identity with Brahman. Making an analogy with physical science, he said, "Physics would stop when it would be able to fulfill its services in discovering one energy of which all the others are but manifestations, and the science of religion [would] become perfect when it would discover - One who is the only Soul of which all souls are but delusive manifestations."⁴

The Pros and Cons of Pure Monism

Vivekananda's strictly monistic concept of God has a long history. The idea has always been linked with the rational, speculative approach to reality. For example, in the fifth century B.C., the Greek philosopher Parmenides concluded by speculative arguments that "only One Thing can possibly exist and that this One Thing is uncreated, unchangeable, indestructible, and immovable. Plurality, creation, change, destruction, and motion are mere appearances."⁵

Parmenides argued that the One must have no parts distinct from one another, for otherwise it would be not One but many. Thus he concluded that the One must be a sphere of perfectly uniform substance. But even a sphere has an inside and an outside, and so it is marked by duality, not oneness. The idea of absolute oneness, or pure monism, may seem alluring, but it requires us to give up all conceivable attributes and finally give up thought itself.

Vivekananda recognized this problem, and he argued that in the Hindu religion specific forms of gods and goddesses serve as symbols to help

us visualize the inconceivable. Thus he said, "The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realized, or thought of, or stated, through the relative, and the images, crosses, and crescents are simply so many symbols, so many pegs to hang the spiritual ideas on."⁶

The idea of religious imagery as a symbol for the unthinkable Absolute sometimes turns out useful in the modern age. Vivekananda was born in Calcutta in 1863 as Narendranath Datta, and he grew up during the high noon of British dominance in India. During this period, European rationalism, based on the famous French Enlightenment, made a strong impact on India. Reformers like Rammohan Roy and Devendranath Tagore founded the Brahmo Samaj in an effort to revise Hinduism and make it compatible with modern Western thinking.⁷ This effort required the solving of two problems: (1) the problem of religious plurality and (2) the problem of the clash between modern science and old religious beliefs.

The old philosophy of pure monism, or advaita, is well suited to solve these problems. First of all, if religious imagery has only a symbolic meaning that refers to something inconceivable, then many different systems of symbols should work equally well. In this way, all major religious systems can be reconciled. This was Vivekananda's idea, and he greatly stressed the equality of all religions.

Likewise, if religious imagery is simply symbolic, then there is no question of a conflict between religion and science. A religious story that seems to conflict with established scientific facts can simply be interpreted as a symbolic clue pointing to the One beyond the grasp of the finite scientific mind. Vivekananda also mentioned that the stark simplicity of the impersonal Brahman fits with the simplicity sought by physicists in their hoped-for Grand Unified Theory of nature.

But in pure monism, what becomes of love of God, or indeed, love of anyone? If the ultimate reality is pure oneness, and personal existence is illusory, then love is also illusory. Love requires two, and not just two of anything. Two persons are needed for a relationship of love. If such relationships do have spiritual reality, then at least two spiritual persons must eternally exist. In traditional Hindu thought, there are, in fact, two categories of eternal persons: (1) the jiva souls that live in individual material bodies and (2) the original Supreme Personality of Godhead and His countless spiritual expansions. As Vivekananda pointed out, Hindus believe that the Supreme Being incarnated on earth as Krsna, who expounded on the ways of loving devotional reciprocation between Himself and individual jiva souls.

Unfortunately, after making this point, Vivekananda rejected both Krsna and the individual soul as illusory. In his monistic approach to religion, all conceivable features of the Absolute are ruled out. Beingness, knowledge, and bliss are three, and they must be discarded from the One as earthbound misconceptions. The same is true of the might and mercy of the Lord. Likewise, if the real truth is absolute

oneness, all personal relationships of admiration, friendship, parental love, or conjugal love must be given up as delusions.

The Vaisnava Alternative Given by Bhaktivinoda Thakura

It is natural then to ask if some other solution is available to the problems posed when modern rational thought meets the multiplicity of religious systems. To explore this, I now turn to the life of Bhaktivinoda Thakura, a contemporary of Swami Vivekananda.

Bhaktivinoda Thakura was born in 1838 as Kedaranath Datta in the Nadia district of West Bengal. As a young man he acquired an English education, and he used to exchange thoughts on literary and spiritual topics with Devendranath Tagore, the Brahmo Samaj leader and Vivekananda's early teacher. In due course he studied law, and for many years he supported his family as a magistrate in the British court system.

Bhaktivinoda Thakura deeply studied the religious thought of his day. He scrutinized the works of European philosophers, and he was greatly impressed with the devotional teachings of Jesus Christ. At first, his Western education inclined him to look down on the Vaisnava literature of devotional service to Krsna. Indeed, he wrote that the Bhagavata, one of the main texts describing Krsna, "seemed like a repository of ideas scarcely adopted to the nineteenth century."⁸

But at a certain point he ran across a work about the great Vaisnava reformer Lord Caitanya, and he was able to obtain the commentary Caitanya had given on the Bhagavata to the advaita Vedantists of Benares. This created in him a great love for the devotional teachings of Krsna as presented by Caitanya.⁹ In due course he achieved an exalted state of spiritual realization by following Caitanya's teachings, and he wrote many books presenting those teachings to people both in India and abroad.

A Historical Interlude

Before we go into Bhaktivinoda Thakura's spiritual teachings, let me give an explicit idea of the intellectual climate in which he was operating in late nineteenth-century Bengal. To do this, I will quote a passage from the writings of Sir William Jones, a jurist who worked for the British East India company and was the first president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. In an article on Hindu chronology written in 1788, Jones gave the following account of the close of Dvapara-yuga, the Third Age of the Puranas and the Mahabharata:

I cannot leave the third Indian age, in which the virtues and vices of mankind are said to have been equal, without observing, that even the close of it is manifestly fabulous and poetical, with hardly more appearance of historical truth, than the tale of Troy, or of the Argonauts; for Yudhisthira, it seems, was the son of Dherma, the Genius of Justice; Bhima of Pavan, or the God of Wind; Arjun of Indra, or the Firmament; Nacul and Sahadeva of the Cumars, the Castor and

Pollux of India; and Bhishma, their reputed great uncle, was the child of Ganga, or the Ganges, by Santanu, whose brother Devapi is supposed to be still alive in the city of Calapa; all which fictions may be charming embellishments of an heroic poem, but are just as absurd in civil History, as the descent of two royal families from the Sun and the Moon.¹⁰

What Jones is referring to here is the story in the Mahabharata of events in India at the time of Krsna's advent. According to Hindu tradition, these events took place about five thousand years ago, when the Dvapara-yuga gave way to the present epoch, called the Kali-yuga. Yudhisōhira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva are the five Pandava brothers who figured in many of Krsna's pastimes.

We can see from Jones's comments that he does not regard the story of the Pandavas as true history. Why not? For many of us, the problem is that the story contains elements simply not credible to a person trained in the modern rational viewpoint. We know that people don't descend from demigods. All documents putting forth such nonsense are rejected by responsible historians, so objective historical accounts hold no such absurdities. Such things never happened, and our history books abundantly confirm this.

Sir William Jones was clearly thinking along these lines, but he was not exactly a modern rationalist. Jones was a Christian who believed fully in the Mosaic chronology of the Bible. The table on page 26 shows how Jones at-tempted to reconstruct Hindu chronology to bring it in line with Christian.¹¹ Jones, it seems, was able to scorn Hindu myths as absurd while at the same time accepting as true the supernatural events of the Bible.

It is perhaps poetic justice that the same scornful treatment Jones applied to the Mahabharata was soon applied to the Bible. During Jones's lifetime, the "higher" scientific criticism of the Bible was being developed in Germany, and it was unleashed in England in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1860, the Anglican theologians Benjamin Jowett and Baden Powell stole attention from Darwin's newly published book *On the Origin of Species* by a controversial essay that rejected miracles, on scientific grounds.¹² The Darwinists and the higher Biblical critics quickly joined forces, and Darwin's supporter Thomas Huxley began quoting German Biblical scholars in his essays on the interpretation of Genesis.¹³ As the nineteenth century drew to a close, rational, scientific skepticism became the only acceptable path for a scholar or intellectual in any respectable field of study.

The Bhagavata

Bhaktivinoda Thakura was confronted with this hostile intellectual climate in his efforts to present spiritual knowledge to the young Bengali intellectuals of his day. After drinking in from their British teachers the ideas of William Jones and other Western orientalist, these young people were not at all inclined to give credence to old myths. How then could the teachings of Krsna on love of God be

presented? Bhaktivinoda Thakura judiciously chose to give a partial picture of the truth that would introduce important spiritual ideas without invoking rejection due to deep-seated prejudices.

In a lecture delivered in Dinajpur, West Bengal, in 1869, he focused on the Bhagavata, or Bhagavata Purana, as the preeminent text on the nature of the Supreme and the means of realizing our relation with the Supreme. Rejecting pure monism as a useless idea, he held that God is an eternal person. Thus he said, "The Bhagavata has - a Transcendental, Personal, All-intelligent, Active, absolutely Free, Holy, Good, All-powerful, Omnipresent, Just and Merciful and supremely Spiritual Deity without a second, creating, preserving all that is in the universe."¹⁴ The highest object of the soul, he went on to say, is to "serve that Infinite Being for ever spiritually in the activity of Absolute Love."¹⁵

Bhaktivinoda described the material world as the product of maya. Here maya means not illusion but the eternal energy of the Supreme that He uses to bewilder souls who desire to live outside of harmony with Him. The creation of the material world through maya is actually an aspect of the Lord's mercy, since He thereby allows independent-minded souls to act in a world from which God is apparently absent.

All these ideas are taken from the Bhagavata without modification. But in describing what the Bhagavata says about the details of the material universe, Bhaktivinoda Thakura adopted an indirect approach. Thus he said,

In the common-place books of the Hindu religion in which the Raja and Tama Gunas have been described as the ways of religion, we find description of a local heaven and a local hell; the heaven is as beautiful as anything on earth and the Hell as ghastly as any picture of evil. - The religion of the Bhagavat is free from such a poetic imagination. Indeed, in some of the chapters we meet with descriptions of these hells and heavens, and accounts of curious tales, but we have been warned in some place in the book, not to accept them as real facts, but to treat them as inventions to overawe the wicked and to improve the simple and the ignorant.¹⁶

In fact, the Bhagavata does ascribe reality to hells and heavens and their inhabitants. It describes in great detail the higher planetary systems and the various demigods who live there, including Brahma, Siva, and Indra. Not only does the Bhagavata say that these beings are real, but it gives them an important role in the creation and maintenance of the universe. It also gives them a role in many of Krsna's manifest pastimes (lilas) within the material world. For example, in the story of the lifting of Govardhana Hill, it is Indra who creates a devastating storm when Krsna insults him by interfering with a sacrifice in his honor.

Bhaktivinoda Thakura chose to sidestep these "mythological" aspects of the Bhagavata in an effort to reach an audience of intellectuals whose mundane education ruled out such myths as absurd fantasy. Indeed, he

went even further. In 1880 he published a treatise entitled Sri Krsna Samhita in which he elaborately explained the philosophy of Krsna consciousness.¹⁷ In this book he also put forth a reconstruction of Indian history similar to the one introduced by Sir William Jones to bring Hindu chronology into line with the Mosaic timetable of the Bible. This involved converting demigods and Manus into human kings and reducing their total span of history to a few thousand earthly years.

I should point out clearly that Bhaktivinoda Thakura did not personally accept the modified version of the Bhagavata he presented to the Bengali intellectuals. He actually accepted the so-called myths of the Bhagavata as true, and he presented them as such in many of his writings. For example, in his book *Jaiva Dharma*, Bhaktivinoda said this:

I have said that the Vaishnava religion came into being as soon as the creatures came into existence. Brahma was the first Vaishnava. Sriman Mahadeva is also a Vaishnava. The ancient Prajapatis are all Vaishnavas. Sri Narada Goswami, who is the fancy-born child of Brahma, is a Vaishnava. You have seen the Vaishnava religion of the beginning of the creation. Then again when Gods, men, demons, etc., have been separately described, we get Prahlada and Dhruva from the very start. Manu's sons and Prahlada are all grandsons of Prajapati, Kashyapa. There is no doubt about it - that the pure Vaishnava religion began with the beginning of history. Then the kings of the solar and lunar dynasties and all great and famous sages and hermits became devotees of Vishnu.

This passage was written in response to challengers who argued that Vaisnava dharma is a recent development. The passage takes it for granted that beings such as Brahma, Mahadeva, Narada, and Prahlada literally exist as described in the sastras, or Vedic scriptures. Many similar examples can be found in Bhaktivinoda Thakura's writings.

Now, if Bhaktivinoda Thakura accepted the literal truth of the sastras, how could he justify making presentations in which he denied it? His grand-disciple Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada has pointed out that there is a precedent for making such indirect presentations of sastra. An interpretation of a text that adheres directly to the dictionary definitions of its words is called *mukhya-vrtti*, and an imaginary or indirect interpretation is called *laksana-vrtti* or *gauna-vrtti*. Srila Prabhupada pointed out, "Sometimes - as a matter of necessity, Vedic literature is described in terms of the *laksana-vrtti* or *gauna-vrtti*, but one should not accept such explanations as permanent truths."¹⁹ In general, one should understand sastra in terms of *mukhya-vrtti*.

The Theology of Visions

One might grant that Bhaktivinoda Thakura was justified in modifying the sastras to reach out to intellectuals trained to scorn old myths. But serious questions can still be raised: What is the scope for

making such a presentation of religion today, and to what extent can such a presentation be regarded as true? Is the mythological material in the Hindu sastras unimportant, so that one might present it as true to people who believe in it and false to people who disbelieve? Or should we accept from modern knowledge that Hindu myths really are false and try to formulate a philosophy that preserves the essential idea of love of God while dispensing with superannuated ideas?

To answer these questions, let us see how we would have to reformulate Vaisnava philosophy to make it readily acceptable to Western intellectuals in the late twentieth century. To do this we must deviate to some extent from the prevailing materialistic framework of modern science. Physical scientists tell us that the mind, with all its conscious experiences, is simply a product of the brain. If we accept this, then all religious experience, whether it be the bliss of Brahman or prema-bhakti, love of God, is simply hallucinatory. If this is true, we can forget about religion—unless, of course, we like hallucinations.

For an alternative viewpoint, I will turn to the psychologist William James. Although James was a man of the nineteenth century, he was a Western scientist who applied the methods of empirical scientific research to the phenomena of religion. Thus his observations are still relevant today.

As a result of his studies, James reached the following conclusions:

The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely "understandable" world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose.- Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects with-in another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal.²⁰

One could take this idea of a mystical or transcendent dimension and arrive at the following version of Vaisnava philosophy: Such a transcendental region does exist, and it is the eternal abode of Krsna. Advanced souls can perceive that realm in meditation by the grace of Krsna, and so they are able to enter into Krsna's eternal loving pastimes. But all Puranic descriptions of events within the material world have to be understood rationally through modern scientific knowledge. On the whole, the myths in the Puranas are not literally true. But the stories of Krsna's pastimes are not simply fantasy. Rather, they are spiritual transmissions into the meditative minds of great souls, and they refer not to this world but to the purely transcendental domain.

This is a philosophy that might appeal to many, and I will refer to it

as the theology of visions. It allows one to retain the idea of love of God, while at the same time avoiding disturbing conflicts between mythological tales and modern knowledge. It also appears implicitly in the work of some modern scholars of religion who study the bhakti tradition.

To illustrate this, I will briefly consider an article, "Shrines of the Mind," by David Haberman, Assistant Professor of Religion at Williams College.²¹ In this article, Haberman argues that Vraja, the traditional place of Krsna's manifest lilas, is first and foremost a mental shrine, a realm that can be entered and experienced in meditation.

He argues that the physical Vraja, a tract of land near the North Indian city of Mathura, has only been a major center for the worship of Krsna since the sixteenth century, when the followers of Caitanya Mahaprabhu and other Vaisnavas "rediscovered" the lost sites of Krsna's pastimes. In fact, says Haberman, these sites never really existed before the sixteenth century, and so they weren't rediscovered. Rather, they were projected onto the physical landscape of Vraja from the transcendental landscape perceived in meditation.

Haberman gives a number of interpretations of what happens when a person meditates on a mental shrine. These range from the contemplation of imaginary scenes in the ordinary sense to entry into "an eternal transcendent world which is perceptible only to the mind's eye and is reached through meditative technique."²² Since Haberman seems to lean toward the latter, it could be said that he is hinting at a version of the theology of visions: One can enter into Krsna's transcendental world by meditation, but Krsna never had any actual pastimes in the physical world. Physical, worldly history followed the lines revealed by modern scholarship. This means that many centuries ago in Vraja there may have been various primitive tribes following animistic cults, but there was no Krsna literally lifting Govardhana Hill.

Although this religious theory allows one to avoid certain conflicts with modern scholarship, it does have a number of drawbacks. A few of these are the following:

1. This theory is contrary to Vaisnava tradition, so it calls into question the thinking of the many great souls who have supported the tradition. Since those great souls are the very meditators who have seen visions of Krsna, how can those visions be real? In other words, why should persons who see the absolute realm believe in the truth of myths that even worldly scholars see to be false?
2. This theory doesn't explain why the worship of Krsna should be a recent affair, as scholars claim. If there is an eternal realm of Krsna that can be accessed by meditation, why did people begin to access it only recently?
3. What does this theory say about the multiplicity of religions? Are

the visions reported in other religious traditions real? If not, then why is it that Vaisnava visions alone are real? If so, then are there many transcendental realms, one for each religion? Or is it that people see in one transcendental realm whatever they are looking for?

4. This theory greatly limits the power of God. If God only appears in visions, what becomes of His role as the creator and controller of the universe? If we let modern science explain the material world, God's role is whittled down to practically nothing.

5. The theology of visions can easily be transformed into a purely psychological theory of religious experience. After all, this is the view that will be overwhelmingly favored by psychologists, neuroscientists, and physical scientists of all varieties.

In view of objections (1) through (4), objection (5) is almost unavoidable. We are left with a totally mundane theory that explains religion away. In the case of Krsna's lilas, this line of thinking leads us to especially unpleasant conclusions. Thus Haberman describes meditation on Krsna lila as follows: "The desired end is a religious voyeurism and vicarious enjoyment said to produce infinite bliss."²³ Such sad conclusions are avoided in the more balanced approach taken by traditional Vaisnavas, who stress Krsna's roles as the supreme creator and the performer of humanly impossible pastimes on earth.

Shifting the Boundary Between Myth and Science

Yet if we start from the theology of visions and proceed in the inductive manner of scholars, we can see how it could serve as a steppingstone toward a more satisfactory theory. A starting point for developing such a theory can be a story related by Haberman about the Vaisnava saint Narottama Dasa Thakura.²⁴

It seems that Narottama was once meditating on boiling milk for Radha and Krsna. When the milk boiled over in his meditation, he took the vessel off the fire with his bare hands and got burned in the process. When Narottama awoke from his meditation, he discovered that his hands were actually burned.

There are many stories like this, and I will briefly mention two more. In the second story, Srinivasa Acarya, a contemporary of Narottama Dasa Thakura, was meditating on fanning Lord Caitanya. In Srinivasa's meditation, Lord Caitanya placed His garland around Srinivasa's neck. When Srinivasa awoke from meditation, the unusually fragrant garland was actually there, around his neck.²⁵

In the third story a Vaisnava saint named Duhkhi Krsna Dasa was sweeping the site of Krsna's rasa dance in Vraja. He found a remarkable golden anklet and hid it, since he thought that it was very important. Later, an old lady came to him and asked for the anklet. It turned out that the old lady was really Lalita, one of the transcendental maidservants of Radha and Krsna. The lady finally revealed that the anklet belonged to Radha Herself, and then she

disclosed her true form as Lalita.²⁶

What are we to make of such stories? The story of the burned hands might be accepted by many scholars. After all, it is well known that Catholics meditating on the crucifixion of Christ sometimes develop stigmata, in which the wounds of Christ appear on their hands and feet. If meditation can somehow cause bleeding wounds, then maybe it can also cause burns.

The story of the miraculous garland goes one step further. Here a tangible object is said to materialize. This may seem fantastic, but it turns out that there is an extensive literature on materialization. For example, Stephen Braude, a professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, has argued that many cases of alleged materializations produced by spirit mediums are backed up by solid empirical evidence that deserves serious study.²⁷ If materializations by spiritualists might be factual, why not materializations of beautiful garlands by saintly persons?

This brings us to the third story. Although this story seems "far out," there are many similar stories in which a transcendent person seems to step into our material continuum, perform some action, and then disappear. Another example would be the story from Caitanya-caritamṛta in which Kṛṣṇa, as a small boy, approached the saint Madhavendra Puri, gave him a pot of milk, and then mysteriously disappeared. Madhavendra Puri drank the milk, thus showing that it was tangible. Later that night he had a dream in which Kṛṣṇa revealed the location of the Gopala Deity, which had originally been installed by Kṛṣṇa's grandson Vajra and had been hidden during a Muslim attack.²⁸

The stories of the burned hand, the miraculous garland, and the transcendental visits are progressively harder and harder to accept from a conventional scientific standpoint. But it is hard to see how to draw a line between such stories that might possibly be true and ones that definitely cannot. And all the stories seem to hint at energetic exchanges between spiritual and material energy that might add an important new chapter to our scientific knowledge, if only they could be properly studied.

When we study a body of empirical evidence, we always evaluate it with our limiting assumptions. In the end, the conclusions we derive from the evidence may reflect our limiting assumptions as much as they reflect the evidence itself. If the assumptions change, the conclusions will also change, even though the evidence stays the same.

Consider what might happen if all the available evidence about the history of human experience were to be studied not through nineteenth-century rationalism but through a new science in which spiritual transformations of matter were considered a real possibility. The result might be a completely different picture of the past from the one now accepted by scholars.

For one thing, the objections that Sir William Jones expressed about

the story of the Pandava brothers might not seem so weighty. If higher beings can step into our continuum from another realm, then humans might well descend from such beings. The new picture of the past might prove much more compatible with traditional spiritual teachings than the one that now prevails.

In the late twentieth century there are signs that a broader approach to science may be developing. In the days of Vivekananda and Bhaktivinoda Thakura, mechanistic, reductionistic science appeared to be marching unimpeded from triumph to triumph, and many people believed that it would soon find explanations for everything. But in the late twentieth century this triumphant march has been checked on many different fronts.

For example, physics in the 1890s looked like a closed subject, but in the early decades of the twentieth century it entered a phase of paradox and mystery with the development of relativity theory and quantum mechanics. The mysteries of quantum mechanics continue to inspire scientists to contemplate ideas that would have seemed outrageously mystical at the turn of the century.^{29, 30, 31}

But now physics has encountered an even more serious obstacle. The bold architects of universal physical theories are now realizing that these theories can never be adequately tested by experiment.³² Thus the Harvard physicist Howard Georgi characterized modern theoretical physics as "recreational mathematical theology."³³

In the mid-twentieth century, computer scientists believed they were on the verge of proving that thought is mechanical, thereby fulfilling La Mettrie's eighteenth-century dream of man as a machine. But in more recent years, even though computers have become more and more powerful, the dream of simulating human intelligence has seemed to recede further and further into the future.

With the discovery of the DNA spiral helix by Watson and Crick in 1953, many scientists thought that the ultimate secret of life had been revealed. Since then, molecular biologists have had tremendous success in shedding light on the mechanisms of living cells. But as molecular biology unveils the incredible complexity of these high-precision mechanisms, the goal of explaining the origin of life seems progressively more difficult to attain.³⁴

These are just a few of the many areas in which the program of mechanistic reductionism seems to be reaching ultimate limits as the twentieth century draws to a close. Perhaps as a result of these developments, many professional scientists are now showing a willingness to consider theoretical ideas and areas of research that have traditionally been taboo.

For example, we now find organizations of professional scientists who openly study phenomena lying on the edge between physical science and the realms of mysticism and the paranormal. Examples are the International Association for New Science (IANS), the Society for

Scientific Exploration (SSE), the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS), and the International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine (ISSSEEM). These all sponsor regular scientific conferences.

Some of the phenomena these groups study seem similar to the "mythical" phenomena so often reported in old religious texts and in recent accounts of religious experiences. A synergistic interaction between scholars of religion and these new scientific organizations might prove to be a valuable source of new insights for both groups of researchers.

The Direct Presentation Of Vaisnava Teachings

We have discussed how Bhaktivinoda Thakura found it necessary to present a modified version of the Vaisnava teachings to young Bengali intellectuals at the high noon of British political and ideological imperialism. But as the sun began to set on the British empire, his son and successor Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati began a vigorous program of directly presenting the Vaisnava conclusions throughout India. This program was taken abroad by his disciple Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who boldly celebrated the ancient Rathayatra festival of Jagannatha Puri in London's Trafalgar Square.

In the changing climate of scientific opinion in the late twentieth century, the time may have come to openly introduce the traditional teachings of bhakti to the world's intellectual communities. The once jarring conflicts between rationalism and traditional religion may progressively fade as science matures and becomes open to the study of mystical phenomena. This opens up the possibility of an approach to religion that is intellectually acceptable and at the same time satisfies the soul's inner desire for love in a transcendental relationship.

This leaves us with one possible objection. Could it be that the Vaisnava teachings, with their specific emphasis on Krsna as the Supreme, are guilty of sectarian disregard for other religious traditions? The answer is that, of course, any doctrine can be put forward in a narrow, sectarian way. But as Bhaktivinoda Thakura pointed out in his essay on the Bhagavata, the Vaisnava teachings are inherently broad-minded and acknowledge the value of all religious systems.

The following prayer shows the approach to other religions taken in the Bhagavata:

O my Lord, Your devotees can see You through the ears by the process of bona fide hearing, and thus their hearts become cleansed, and You take Your seat there. You are so merciful to Your devotees that You manifest Yourself in the particular eternal form of transcendence in which they always think of You.³⁵

This verse states that God appears to His devoted worshipers in many

different forms, depending on their desires. These forms include the avatars of Krsna described in traditional Vaisnava texts, but are not limited to those forms. Indeed, it is said that the expansions of the Supreme Personality of Godhead are uncountable, and they cannot be fully described in the finite scriptures of any one religious community.

The following verse gives some idea of the different religious communities in the universe, as described by the Bhagavata:

From the forefathers headed by Bhrgu Muni and other sons of Brahma appeared many children and descendants, who assumed different forms as demigods, demons, human beings, Guhyakas, Siddhas, Gandharvas, Vidyadharas, Caranas, Kindevas, Kinnaras, Nagas, Kimpurusas, and so on. All of the many universal species, along with their respective leaders, appeared with different natures and desires generated from the three modes of material nature. Therefore, because of the different characteristics of the living entities within the universe, there are a great many Vedic rituals, mantras, and rewards.³⁶

This statement is explicitly "mythological," and one can well imagine how Sir William Jones might have reacted to it. But it offers a grand picture of countless races and societies within the universe, all given religious methods suitable for their particular natures. Here the word "Vedic" cannot be limited to particular Sanskrit texts that now exist in India. Rather, it refers to the sum total of religious systems revealed by the infinite Supreme God for the sake of elevating countless societies of divinely created beings.

As always, the distinguishing feature of the Vaisnava teachings is that God is a real person and His variegated creation is also real. Thus the Vaisnava approach to religious liberality is to regard all genuine religions as real divine revelations. Likewise, the Vaisnava teachings of love of God aim to set in place a relationship of loving service between the real individual soul and the Supreme Personality of Godhead, the performer of real transcendental pastimes.

Notes

1. Vivekananda, 1963, pp. 10-11.
2. Vivekananda, 1963, p. 11.
3. Vivekananda, 1963, p. 13.
4. Vivekananda, 1963, p. 14.
5. Jordan, 1987, p. 27.
6. Vivekananda, 1963, p. 17.
7. Majumdar, 1965.
8. Thakur Bhaktivinod, 1986, p. 5.
9. Thakur Bhaktivinod, 1986, p. 6.
10. Jones, 1799, p. 302.
11. Jones, 1799, p. 313.
12. Moore, 1986, p. 334.
13. Moore, 1986, p. 344.
14. Thakur Bhaktivinod, 1986, p. 30.

15. Thakur Bhaktivinod, 1986, p. 30.
16. Thakur Bhaktivinod, 1986, pp. 24-25.
17. Rupa-vilasa dasa, 1989, pp. 138-39.
18. Thakur Bhakti Vinod, 1975, pp. 155-56.
19. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1975, *Adi-lila*, Vol. 2, p. 95.
20. James, 1982, pp. 515-16.
21. Haberman, 1993.
22. Haberman, 1993, p. 31.
23. Haberman, 1993, p. 26.
24. Haberman, 1993, p. 33.
25. Rosen, 1991, pp. 63-64.
26. Rosen, 1991, pp. 119-39.
27. Braude, 1986.
28. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1975, *Madhya-lila*, Vol. 2, pp. 12-19.
29. Bohm, 1980.
30. Penrose, 1989.
31. Jahn and Dunne, 1987.
32. Weinberg, 1992.
33. Crease and Mann, 1986, p. 414.
34. Horgan, 1991.
35. *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, 3.9.11.
36. *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, 11.14.5-7.

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