

# How Not to Turn ISKCON into a Religion

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This article is the fruit of my reflections on the developments taking place within ISKCON. The first generation of devotees – direct disciples of Śrīla Prabhupāda – are departing from this world and need to pass on his mission to the next generation. At the same time, ISKCON is becoming more socially integrated. Our society, which has become widespread in many countries, especially in India, is gaining recognition at various levels.

At first glance, it seems there is no cause for concern; second- and third-generation Vaiṣṇavas are taking on more responsibility, and ISKCON is confidently following the path of other religions, which have gradually evolved from persecuted sects into respected religious organizations with significant influence and authority. However, while becoming absorbed in the external successes of our preaching mission, we may fail to notice other subtle changes that inevitably accompany social integration – namely, the secularization of a spiritual movement and its transformation from a revolutionary force, which elevates the soul above matter, into yet another “contending political power within this world.”

Here is how Wikipedia describes secularization in Christianity:

“Secularization in Christianity is the process of reorienting the Church towards solving worldly issues, which contrasts with its original highly spiritual and sacred mission of saving the soul and attaining eternal life. The secularization of clergy can manifest in engaging in commerce, striving for privileges, material wealth, or prestigious positions, and merging with state authority.”

If we change a few words in this paragraph, it will paint a fairly recognizable picture of what is currently happening in ISKCON. It is clear that Śrīla Prabhupāda did not want such a fate to befall his creation. Fortunately, this reorientation has not gone far, and it is not too late to stop it and reverse its course.

In this article I analyze the current situation in ISKCON from two perspectives: seeing it as one of the religions of this world and as a scientifically based approach to search for the Absolute Truth. At the end, I propose several suggestions to address the shifts taking place.

In analyzing the problem of secularization of ISKCON, I do not claim that my analysis is complete or even that I am impartial. I deliberately exaggerate some points for the purpose of drawing attention to the problem. This article is written for every-member of our society because the choices made by each member of ISKCON effect our society’s future. Who knows, perhaps in the picture painted here, we may recognize ourselves and thus be prompted to change something in our behavior and our attitude toward our spiritual practice. After all, if many do so, it will help us preserve the purity of and fidelity to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s original vision.

Another important audience to whom this message is addressed is the leadership of ISKCON – from GBC members and spiritual masters to local *nāma-haṭṭa* leaders. In their attempts to establish the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement in this world and make it as accessible as possible to the widest audience, leaders<sup>1</sup> sometimes have to make compromises or somewhat temper the teaching. However, they may not always fully consider the potential consequences of these compromises. Nevertheless, the future of ISKCON lies in their hands, and the responsibility placed upon them is immense.

In describing the trends present in our society, I don't wish to criticize anyone. I am aware of the hard work behind every ISKCON achievement, every temple opened, every charitable program launched, and even every successful new *nāma-haṭṭa*. This article is neither a rebuke nor an accusation but an invitation to reflect on emerging challenges. If my reflections help even one leader see the situation more clearly and find solutions, I will consider my work worthwhile. For those who may become unsettled or upset by it, I apologize in advance.

This article is divided into four parts. In part one, I explain that Kṛṣṇa consciousness, or *bhakti-yoga*, is characterized by universality and rationality, and thus, by its very nature, is closer to science than to religion. In part two, I describe why religions in general are problematic and how a vibrant spiritual movement can transform into a religious institution that stifles the free spirit of its members in their search for the truth. In part three, I provide concrete examples of how the scientific approach to Kṛṣṇa consciousness differs from approaching it as a religion. In the final part, I briefly discuss steps that could be taken to prevent the Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement from becoming a mundane religious organization.

## Part 1:

### **Kṛṣṇa Consciousness: Science or Religion?**

One of the main components of Śrīla Prabhupāda's success was his profound faith in the scientific and universal nature of the principles of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. Rūpa Gosvāmī's and Jīva Gosvāmī's teachings brilliantly separate mere religious sentiments from factual spiritual quest for the Absolute Truth based on *śāstric* logic and reason. It is this understanding of Kṛṣṇa consciousness that enabled Śrīla Prabhupāda to spread the science of *bhakti* throughout the world, and allowed his followers to embrace these practices, despite their unusual external forms which are significantly different from the prevailing concepts of how to practice spirituality in the West.

Repeatedly Śrīla Prabhupāda emphasized that Kṛṣṇa consciousness is not just another religion among the many in this world. It is not a traditional creed based on unprovable postulates, nor does it promote unconditional faith which acts alone as the ticket to the kingdom of God. Neither is Kṛṣṇa consciousness some exotic cult intended for rebels and those who defy accepted norms. Śrīla Prabhupāda insisted that Kṛṣṇa consciousness, or *bhakti-yoga*, is, above all, the universal science of the relationship between the soul and God:

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, I am primarily referring to myself. I am confident that many leaders strive to foresee all possible consequences, but due to the natural limitations of human nature, this is not always achievable.

“The Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement, therefore, is basically trying to teach this science of the soul, not in any dogmatic way, but through complete scientific and philosophical understanding.”<sup>2</sup>

Many similar statements can be cited, but perhaps Śrīla Prabhupāda was most explicit in his commentary on the First Canto of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, where he described this literature as “*a technical science of spiritual values*.”<sup>3</sup>

Many preachers of Hinduism, and especially Buddhism, also insist on the scientific and nonsectarian nature of their religions, contrasting them with Judeo-Christian religions, which, in their view, are marked by intolerance and exclusivity. They argue that tolerant, inclusive Hinduism or even more so, atheistic Buddhism, are more compatible with science than religions, which emphasize faith and formal affiliation with a church. However, when Śrīla Prabhupāda spoke of the scientific nature of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, he meant something entirely different. He referred to the science of the soul and its relationship with the Absolute Truth. For this reason, he did not single out Hinduism or Buddhism as “scientific”,<sup>4</sup> nor did he contrast them with Judeo-Christian religions. From his perspective, any religion that overemphasizes faith at the cost of logic and rigorous philosophical analysis, will have a variety of problems.

“... those who are *gosvāmīs*, they place everything with *nyāya*, or logic. Their instructions are not blind, dogmatic. *Naya-kovidāḥ*. Everything what is said by Kṛṣṇa or His representative, they are not dogmas. Those who are not representative of Kṛṣṇa, they will say simply dogmas. Just like in every religion there is a dogma. But in *bhāgavata* religion, *bhāgavata-dharma*, there is no dogma.”<sup>5</sup>

How fundamental is the position Śrīla Prabhupāda is expressing here? Could it merely be a preaching strategy employed by Śrīla Prabhupāda? After all, influential religions have compromised themselves throughout their long history. And in modern New Age movements, it is common to distinguish between religion and spirituality, condemning the former and glorifying the latter. Could it be that Śrīla Prabhupāda –whose early followers belonged to the counterculture – simply wanted to distance himself from any religion, as well as from other compromised official institutions? I would emphatically say no! Śrīla Prabhupāda never used the vague rhetoric of the counterculture, nor did he adapt his fundamental teachings to these audiences. On the contrary, he placed foundational importance on the following aspect of his preaching as seen in his wording of the first purpose of ISKCON:

“To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world.”

<sup>2</sup> *Journey of Self-Discovery*, Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 1.5.11, purport.

<sup>4</sup> “Finally, one guy stuck a microphone into Prabhupada’s face and said, “How does your group differ from other Buddhists?” Prabhupada was so cool. He looked at this reporter, and without a moment’s hesitation said, “We have nothing to do with Hinduism or Buddhism. We are teaching the truth, and if you are truthful, you will accept it.” Ravindra Svarupa dasa, Śrīla Prabhupāda Remembrances.

<sup>5</sup> Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 6.2.1–5, January 6, 1971, Calcutta.

The language, and moreover the purport of this statement, leaves no doubt that Śrīla Prabhupāda saw the power of the scientifically grounded practice of Kṛṣṇa consciousness in its ability to transform people’s lives, regardless of their ideological orientation or religious affiliation. The fate he wanted least for ISKCON was for it to become yet another dogmatic religion, itself sowing discord in this world.

## Part 2:

### What is Wrong with Religion?

What, after all, is wrong with religion? Throughout human history, religion has attempted to restrain people from wrongdoing and provide hope for a better future. Has it not? Śrīla Prabhupāda, however pointed out three flaws that typically characterize religion in this world:

1. **Religious affiliation tends to become part of a person’s false self-identification (false ego), thus giving rise to hatred, and even violence, against those of other faiths:**  
*“One must know his own identity. Everyone is identifying with his body: ‘I am Hindu,’ ‘I am Muslim,’ ‘I am Christian,’ ‘I am Indian,’ ‘I am American,’ ‘I am German,’ ‘I am English.’ This is why so much fighting is going on.”<sup>6</sup>*
2. **Religions usually overemphasize the necessity of faith, and often turn into a set of blind dogmas:**  
*“The instructions of Kṛṣṇa are not meaningless dogma. Religion often gives rise to dogmatism, but the author of Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Śrīla Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, urges us to try to understand Lord Caitanya and the philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness according to logic.”<sup>7</sup>*
3. **Without a solid philosophical foundation, religion breeds intolerance and fanaticism:**  
*“You cannot have religion without philosophy. That is sentiment, fanaticism. . . . So religion must be on the basis of science and logic. That is first-class religion.”<sup>8</sup>*

Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura spoke even more harshly about organized religion as a social institution:

“The church that has the best chance of survival in this damned world is that of atheism under the convenient guise of theism. The churches have always proved the staunchest upholders of the grossest form of worldliness from which even the worst of non-ecclesiastical criminals are found to recoil. The original purpose of the established churches of the world may not always be objectionable. But no stable religious arrangement for instructing the masses has yet been successful.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Quest for Enlightenment*, page 2.

<sup>7</sup> *A Second Chance*, page 14.

<sup>8</sup> Lecture on *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, 7.1, December 13, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> Essay by Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, “Pūtanā.”

At their inception, all genuine religions bring humanity the good news from the eternal spiritual world. The founders of such religions desire to give as many people as possible the opportunity to come into contact with the life-giving spiritual truths. This is a noble motive. However, over time, as they take on organized forms, spiritual movements adapt to the values of this world and transform into bastions of ritual and mundane sentimentality disguised as spirituality.

According to Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, even the very idea of giving a living spiritual movement an organized form is destructive:

“The idea of an organized church in an intelligible form, indeed, marks the close of the living spiritual movement. The great ecclesiastical establishments are the dikes and the dams to retain the current that cannot be held by any such contrivances.”<sup>10</sup>

In other words, a living spiritual movement cannot be stopped, just as the flow of the Ganges to the ocean cannot be hindered. It can, however, be transformed, misrepresented, and eventually destroyed. It ends up substituting the natural impulse of the soul to offer service to God with mechanical rituals. It exchanges the natural inclination to sacrifice personal material comfort in God’s service with dogmatic rules supposedly ensuring salvation. It replaces the desire to realize the truth contained in the scriptures by deep study with rote memorization and formal examinations. In this way, the spirit of a spiritual movement can be stifled.

## The Mechanism of Substitution

In the same essay, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī explains the reason and mechanism behind the transformation that occurs within religions when they adopt organized forms and become widespread:

“They [great ecclesiastical establishments], indeed, indicate a desire on the part of the masses to exploit a spiritual movement for their own purpose. They also unmistakably indicate the end of the absolute and unconventional guidance of the bona-fide spiritual teacher.”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the reason for this erosion, which, according to Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, no mass religion has been able to avoid, lies in the subconscious motive of the people. What are those motives and what is the mechanism of substitution?

Religions (including ideologies like communism, socialism, and other utopian theories<sup>12</sup>) have always played a significant role in people’s lives because they address a basic human need – the need for salvation. People understand that the world we live in is full of strife and suffering, but deep within, they believe there must be another life – free of suffering, untainted by poverty,

<sup>10</sup> Essay by Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, “Pūtanā.”

<sup>11</sup> Essay by Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, “Pūtanā.”

<sup>12</sup> Śrīla Prabhupāda often put these ideological systems on the same level as worldly religions. For example: “This is the secret. People are trying to bring in peace and prosperity in the world by so many activities – philanthropism, altruism, nationalism, socialism. And so-called religion also, they are trying to bring in. The whole idea is the human society should remain in peace and prosperity.” Lecture, June 7, 1972.

injustice, scarcity, squalor, disease, old age, and even death. This faith, absurd from a material point of view, is rooted in the very nature of the soul and always accompanies a person. Religion shows the weary soul the path “from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from suffering to eternal bliss.”<sup>13</sup>

Every true religion, at the time of its origin, represents a bubbling, living source of spiritual energy. It always arises in opposition to the prevailing culture, rebelling against the norms and orders of this world, disturbing the peace of the authorities and commoners alike. Those who join it risk becoming outcasts or objects of ridicule in the eyes of ordinary people. However, sincere seekers of truth are drawn to it, sensing its purity, authenticity, and strength, for anyone who encounters this source of spiritual energy receives a genuine spiritual experience.

The natural desire to share the experience of spiritual happiness with as many people as possible leads the followers of the charismatic founder of a spiritual movement to endeavor to make his teachings and revelations accessible to common people of this world. In this way the divine revelation, which is not of this world, is now being turned into sets of rules and restrictions, rituals and traditions, and theological systems that provide often unsatisfactory simplified answers to complex philosophical and social questions. This process, according to the famous sociologist and scholar of religion, Max Weber, is called the “routinization of charisma.”

Sarasvatī Ṭhākura writes about this: “Regulation is necessary for controlling the inherent worldliness of conditional souls. But no mechanical regulation has any value, even for such a purpose.”<sup>14</sup>

As a spiritual teaching begins to reach large masses of people, it starts to play an increasingly significant role in society. Generally, as this process progresses further, the message becomes more simplified and primitive. The original message is now adjusted to accommodate the masses of believers. Rituals and superstitions increase, while philosophical depth diminishes. To maintain a large following, the standards for members of the religion are lowered, making them less burdensome. This is the price religions pay for weight and influence in society. Additionally, as any denomination grows, it faces numerous tasks to manage new properties, productions, temples, and monasteries. Thus, organized religion develops a demand for business-minded people and efficient managers. Not all such individuals who naturally find their place in the church hierarchy possess spiritual maturity. For some, a spiritual organization becomes a place for career promotion, not spiritual growth. Because they play an important role in the organization, such individuals subtly shift the focus of the message, influencing the overall culture, and redirecting believers toward external goals.

It is no coincidence that Śrīla Prabhupāda, observing similar processes, spoke as early as 1972 about the need to “boil the milk”:

“Just like milk. We may thin it more and more with water for cheating the customer, but in the end, it will cease to be any longer milk. Better to boil the milk now very vigorously and make it thick and sweet; that is the best process. So let us concentrate on training our devotees very thoroughly in the knowledge of Kṛṣṇa consciousness

<sup>13</sup> *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.3.38.

<sup>14</sup> Essay by Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, “Pūtanā.”

from our books, from tapes, by discussing always, and in so many ways instruct them in the right propositions.”<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that Śrīla Prabhupāda was not chasing mass popularity at the risk in internal purity. He was not ready to endlessly dilute Kṛṣṇa consciousness to achieve superfluous results. If this process is not checked, the majority of followers will turn to a simplistic agreement: believers are required to follow certain prescriptive rituals (rules concerning the external aspects of their lives), and in return, the religion guarantees them salvation. This is a convenient and understandable form of relationship between a religious organization and people seeking cheap salvation. Religious organizations, in their turn, explicitly or implicitly, reinforce the notion that only they have received the exclusive right from God to “save” people – others, by definition, cannot do so. This notion becomes one of the main dogmas of the religion, overshadowing its rational philosophical foundation. This simple marketing strategy allows a once-persecuted organization to expand its influence in the world and increase its numbers.

Leaders of such spiritual organizations often accept the growth in membership and its influence on the greater society as the predominant measure of success. They turn a blind eye to the price paid for that “success” ignoring the fact that exponential growth most often leads to the degeneration and secularization of that religion. This is a natural process, and most participants are at least initially driven by good intentions. But as a result, the pure spiritual ideals on which the movement was founded are gradually eroded, and the ritual oaths of loyalty to the founding teacher who brought this knowledge to the people become meaningless formalities. Obedience to his instructions and vision ceases to be the principle by which his followers build their lives. This is why Sarasvatī Thākura writes:

“The great ecclesiastical establishments . . . indeed, indicate a desire on the part of the masses to exploit a spiritual movement for their own purpose. They also unmistakably indicate the end of the absolute and unconventional guidance of the bona-fide spiritual teacher.”

## **The *Sampradaya* of the Cheaters and the Cheated**

Our movement is growing. Numerous preachers are sowing the seeds of faith in people’s hearts, and there are many newcomers joining with their own motives, goals, and values. Among them, many – let’s be honest – come seeking guaranteed salvation or a chance to improve their material well-being. Therefore, now is the time to reflect and ask the question: What needs to be done to prevent Kṛṣṇa consciousness from turning into another worldly religion?

- How can we preserve the pure revolutionary spirit embedded in the very idea of ISKCON as intended by Śrīla Prabhupāda and the previous *ācāryas*?
- How can we avoid simplification, dogmatism, and the burden of meaningless rituals?
- How can we, ultimately, remain true to our goal without substituting pure love for God with mere salvation?

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to Hamsaduta dasa, June, 22, 1972.

Before we proceed, it is necessary to clarify something. Undoubtedly, there are many people in our movement (as in any spiritual organization) sincerely seeking the truth, unsatisfied with vague promises of otherworldly bliss. There are many preachers and mentors who teach their followers not to rely exclusively on the power of rituals but to practice consciously. However, this does not negate the presence of opposing tendencies and recurring attempts to turn Kṛṣṇa consciousness into a worldly religion or a mystical ritualistic cult. The clearer we understand how these mutations manifest, the easier it will be to counteract their influence. It will therefore be less likely for us to succumb to the temptation of replacing the often-laborious search for truth with cheap “salvation” – thereby becoming members of the *sampradāya* of cheaters and the cheated (*vañcita-vañcaka-sampradāya*).<sup>16</sup>

## Part 3:

### Two Approaches, Two Paths, Two Outcomes

In order to uncover the essence of the problem described above, it is necessary to clarify the distinct differences between the two approaches to seeking God. Let us call the first “religious” for convenience’s sake, and the other “scientific” or “spiritual.”<sup>17</sup> The most significant distinction between these two approaches lies in the practitioner’s primary motivation. The religious approach to spiritual life is based on the desire for liberation or salvation, whereas the scientific approach is based on the desire to discover the truth.

The desire for liberation is the desire to *have* or *acquire* something we currently lack. The desire to understand the Absolute Truth, on the other hand, is the desire to *realize* one’s spiritual potential and *become* wiser, purer, better, and closer to the Truth. These two motivations are fundamentally different yet easy to confuse, primarily due to the strong mechanisms of self-deception we have developed during our lives in the material world.

People dissatisfied with their current state often succumb to the temptation to solve their problems by acquisitions. Acquiring “stuff” is easier than changing oneself. This is exploited by all kinds of merchants and producers who offer substitute goods. Knowing that in this world everyone seeks happiness, love, health, and knowledge of the truth, entrepreneurs offer happiness in the form of a new house, a new car, or at the very least, a new washing machine. To those desiring love, they offer various forms of sex; to those seeking health, chemical medicines or dietary supplements; and to those seeking the truth, cheap recipes for guaranteed salvation. This brisk trade sustains the

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<sup>16</sup> Śrīla Prabhupāda. Lecture on *Bhagavad-gīta*, July 14, 1973.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to remember that we put into these terms (not having a more precise one) a slightly different meaning than is usual. One could have resorted to the more usual categorization of devotees into *kaniṣṭha-* and *madhyama-adhikārī*. Indeed, religious ritualistic approach is for the most part the province of the *kaniṣṭha-adhikārī*. *Madhyama-adhikārīs*, by definition, are more knowledgeable of scriptures and serious about spiritual life. However, familiar terms can play a bad joke, creating an illusion of understanding the problem without really defining it precisely. Besides that, we may have a mistaken idea that all *kaniṣṭhas* gradually evolve and become *madhyamas* in a natural process. Therefore, I deliberately avoid this categorization.



economy of the world of cheaters and those who wish to be cheated but never brings people true happiness, love, health, or genuine spiritual experience.<sup>18</sup>

The majority of people in this world, according to Śrīla Prabhupāda, belong to the category of either cheaters or cheated.<sup>19</sup> Due to the tendency toward self-deception, it is often difficult for people to discern their own motives let alone those of others. Therefore, there must be clear criteria to reveal what should truly drive a person who joins a spiritual organization and especially what motives guide those at the helm – preachers, teachers, spiritual guides, mentors, etc. Here are some external manifestations of the two approaches which can help us to distinguish them.

## The Price of Salvation

The first characteristic of the “religious” approach to salvation is the belief that it can be exchanged for the fulfillment of certain conditions, the main one being offered membership in a church or a circle of chosen people who “saw the light and truth.” In this case, spiritual practice turns into a mechanical process. You want eternal life? Fine, here is a set of rules and rituals. Follow them strictly and salvation is guaranteed. How will this practically happen? It doesn’t matter. God Himself or His representative has promised it. When will it happen? After death. What about my doubts? Have no doubt because since you’ve joined our religion you are already saved. This slogan is an essential part of religious messaging. Every time a preacher insists (directly or indirectly), “Join us and you will surely be saved (read: return back to Godhead) otherwise, you will surely go to hell,”<sup>20</sup> they are inviting you not to spiritual exploration but to a mystical religious metamorphosis where salvation is guaranteed by its founder, who was granted the exclusive rights to distribute this “product.”

Some may object: “Doesn’t Lord Caitanya promise the same?” Yes, Lord Caitanya came to this world to liberate conditioned souls. However, He didn’t distribute salvation but love, and He did so by revealing a scientifically grounded path leading to God. Lord Caitanya’s gifts are the offenseless chanting of the holy name and *rāgānuga-sādhana*, spontaneous devotional service. He does not offer a magical pill that grants liberation to all who believe in Him.<sup>21</sup> If we consider the spiritual path as a conscious search for truth rather than an automatic conveyor of salvation or a magical ritual, we will find that on this path no one can guarantee us automatic success.

Sometimes another version of such guarantees can be heard in our temples: Śrīla Prabhupāda promised that all members of the movement he founded would return to God in one lifetime. Yes, Śrīla Prabhupāda definitely talked about it to encourage us and to ignite our desire to achieve this lofty goal which seem to be unachievable. In letters Śrīla Prabhupāda made such promises. For

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<sup>18</sup> In *Sajjana-tosani* 10/11, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura writes, “Those who put on external signs of religion but do not follow the religious principles are imposters. There are two types of imposters: cheaters and fools, and cheaters and cheated.”

<sup>19</sup> On a morning walk in Mayapur on March 21, 1976, Śrīla Prabhupāda said, “ ‘Here is a spiritual master in disciplic succession, so we are indebted to him, to understand the original traditional knowledge.’ Everyone who is after truth will accept. And if you are bogus, want to be cheated and cheat others, then he’ll not. Ninety-nine percent are cheaters and cheated. This is the position. All these cheaters they are cheating and they accept to be cheated.”

<sup>20</sup> The threat of hell may not be explicit but implied for Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, but this doesn’t make it any less foreboding.

<sup>21</sup> Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī, in his commentary on the verse *anarpita-carīm cirāt*, describes Lord Caitanya’s gift in this way: “He comes to offer a wealth of bhakti. This wealth has three forms: silver and gold coins, sapphire gems and *cintāmaṇi*; or *sādhana*, *bhava*, and *prema*.”

example: “In this way be engaged in Krishna’s business 24 hours and you will be happy and, in the end, you will go back home, back to Godhead.”<sup>22</sup> Of course, attention should be given to the point that the engagement needs to be twenty-four hours a day. However, in the majority of letters and books, he adds several other important conditions. For example: “One simply has to become as serious and sincere as Dhruva Mahārāja; then it is quite possible to attain Vaikuṅṭhaloka and go back home, back to Godhead, in one life.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, there are also other statements in Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books, often forgotten: “It is not possible to go back to Godhead in one life, but in the human form one should at least understand the goal of life and begin Kṛṣṇa consciousness.”<sup>24</sup>

In reality, the primary guarantee we have in the movement founded by Śrīla Prabhupāda is that we will be assisted in seeking the truth. Whether we find that truth or not, largely depends on us, i.e., on the purity of our desire, sincerity, our willingness to change, and how well we understand the mechanism of transformation that must occur within us. It also depends on God’s mercy, which cannot be secured by mechanically following rules or by formal membership in a religious organization.

## **Burdensome Freedom and Comfortable Bondage**

Another significant difference between the “religious” and the “spiritual” approaches lies in the level of responsibility placed on the individual and the subsequent degree of freedom he or she perceives.

Those who come to ISKCON thinking of it as a religious organization that offers salvation often think that making the right choice once is sufficient. Once they make a choice or two that they think is fundamental (like joining ISKCON, getting initiated, etc.) then they no longer need to do anything because everything else should come automatically. Preachers and teachers often reinforce this view, overemphasizing submissiveness and obedience. In some cases, surrender is equated with turning off one’s intelligence and blindly following authorities. Such assurances encourage one to shed the burdensome responsibility for one’s internal change and shift it onto the shoulders of a mentor, a leader, or a spiritual master. Such a follower understands that he will lose a significant portion of his freedom, but many people willingly exchange the burdensome freedom of the constant need to make choices for firm “guarantees” of returning to God. They prefer to live in the comfort of blissful irresponsibility.

For such a person, spiritual life boils down to fulfilling obligatory duties: rising early, mandatory prayers, chanting *japa*, reading scriptures, and regular offerings in the form of donations (tithes, membership fees, etc.). By activating this mechanical program, the person turns into a robot. He may rejoice at the thought that with each completed ritual, he is getting closer to God, but the heart cannot be deceived – it will yearn and suffer behind the bars of obligatory rules and routine duties. In some case unfortunately we see that even this is not being done. Tedious spiritual practice is just replaced by getting a “spiritual name” and other external signs of allegiance.

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<sup>22</sup> Letter to Kirtika dasi, May 21, 1971.

<sup>23</sup> *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 4.12.43, purport.

<sup>24</sup> *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 3.15.24, purport.

If, however, we present spiritual life as a continuous search for truth, we will explain to people that the responsibility for their spiritual life lies with them – it cannot be shifted onto anyone else. We will emphasize that the soul always remains free in all circumstances, capable of making conscious choices, and not just once when one “surrenders,” but many times a day. We will also explain that surrender does not imply switching off one’s intelligence. Intelligence (*buddhi*) is the tool *through which* we surrender (as is derived from the very definition of surrender, *śaraṇāgati*<sup>25</sup>). People who understand this will not passively await “divine blessings” while begrudgingly performing spiritual obligations. On the contrary, they will strive to do as much as possible in their spiritual practice. Instead of limiting themselves to the “magical” sixteen rounds, they will dedicate as much time and resources as possible to spiritual endeavors like *japa* and *kīrtana*, doing so freely and joyfully.

Both cases outwardly appear as surrender, but these two types of surrender differ as much as blind submission differs from conscious obedience. The entire *Bhagavad-gītā* lies between two statements by Arjuna: “Instruct me, I am Your disciple and a soul surrendered unto You.” (Bg 2.7) and “All my doubts are now dispelled, and I am ready to act according to Your instructions.” (Bg 18.73) These two statements, so apparently similar in meaning, differ like day and night in their internal essence.

In both cases, people are bringing their resources – strength, intelligence, talents, money, etc. – to the organization. However, in the first case, the labor and resources offered will simply be appropriated “for the sake of God.” The benefit such “surrendered souls” receive will be measured either by proximity to the “representative of God on earth” or by certificates, memorial plaques, and other trinkets that flatter them. In contrast, in the second case, the labor and resources offered as a sacrifice will transform into genuine spiritual experience. This helps such people become humble, pure, and engaged in forming a new, spiritual identity as servants of God.

I wish to believe that no one in ISKCON deceives trusting individuals or exploits their initial enthusiasm for personal gain. Surely, this happens in other organizations. Somewhere else they exploit newcomer’s resources; somewhere else neophytes are exploited to perform menial labor for food and shelter under the pretext of “service.” Elsewhere recommendations for initiation are used as leverage; or “exclusive” consultations come with a price tag. But surely, such things cannot happen in ISKCON! Unfortunately, common sense and experience suggest that they can. This reality makes it crucial to repeatedly and openly speak about this, and in this way guarding potential cheaters from temptation, keeping honest people honest. It also protects the potentially cheated from bitter disappointment.

A religious organization that “guarantees” liberation inevitably leads to one of two scenarios. It turns into a cult where leaders fiercely protect their privileged positions and jealously guard against potential competition from among their followers. Or it becomes an overblown bureaucratic apparatus that channels the “surrender” of its members into material assets for the organization. In both cases the sincere and pure missionary spirit is hampered and ultimately destroyed.

## Consumers and Creators

<sup>25</sup> “The six divisions of surrender are the acceptance of those things favorable to devotional service, the rejection of unfavorable things, the conviction that Kṛṣṇa will give protection, the acceptance of the Lord as one’s guardian or master, full self-surrender, and humility.” (Cc, *Madhya*, 22.100)

Leaders of organizations or groups within ISKCON that cultivate unquestioning compliance often complain about the passivity of their members, not realizing that this passivity is a direct result of their very demand for compliance. In such organizations, paternalistic relationship models – those of the “all-powerful parent and immature child” – generally dominate. In these cases, the leaders are often not interested in the spiritual growth of their followers or their development into independent spiritual personalities. Instead, their goal is to keep subordinates perpetually dependent. These models are sometimes disguised as “devotee care.” However, this so-called care, or rather stifling overprotection, strips individuals of personal initiative and turns them into passive consumers of “spiritual benefits.” Persons who fall under such “care” remain infantile, spiritually immature, and unable to think independently and form their own opinions about what happens to them and around them.

In contrast, the mood of spiritual search, which one can catch from a genuine preacher, awakens initiative in followers. Leaders encourage this initiative and direct it into the proper channels. The systems of spiritual care they create ensure the development of their followers into mature individuals. And the followers of such leaders do not wait for someone to care for them and do not lament the lack of attention; instead, they gratefully accept what has already been given to them, striving to apply it in their lives. They also take responsibility for caring for those who are juniors. For them, the spiritual path is not one of passive consumption, but it is a joyful, creative process of self-realization. They initiate relationships with the *guru* and other seniors without bothersome demands for more personal attention but as a humble request: “Please tell me how I can serve you.”<sup>26</sup>

In paternalistically oriented religious organizations, creativity is, at best, not encouraged and, at worst, suppressed outright. On the other hand, a genuine spiritual organization shapes its members into individuals who are “*independently thoughtful and competent in all types of departments of knowledge and action.*”<sup>27</sup>

## Spiritual Practice: A Goal or a Means?

In this context, it becomes clear why “religious” preaching focuses primarily on outcomes, while “spiritual/ scientific” preaching places greater importance on the process. The prospect of eternal bliss in Vaikuṅṭha (the Vaiṣṇava version of heaven) and the fear of hellish suffering are the main driving forces for the religious person. In this perspective, heavenly pleasures and hellish punishments are *external circumstances* achieved by the righteous and the sinful respectively. Spiritual practices, unimportant in themselves, are merely temporary means to achieve the desired goal of heavenly pleasures or avoiding hell. Once the goal is achieved, these practices are no longer needed. Whenever a preacher places an undue emphasis on “the blissful final destination” without giving proper attention to the path leading to it, he pushes the karmic buttons in our minds, triggering the reflex for salvation. The subconscious message of such preaching is: “Yes, spiritual

<sup>26</sup> Śrīla Prabhupāda talked about his last letter to his spiritual master. “I wrote him letter, ‘My dear master, your other disciples, *brahmacārī*, *sannyāsī*, they are rendering you direct service. And I am a householder. I cannot live with you. I cannot serve you nicely. So I do not know. How can I serve you?’ Simply an idea, I was thinking of serving him, ‘How can I serve him seriously?’” Lecture from December 9, 1968.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to Karandhara dasa, December 22, 1972.

practice may be tedious and boring, but endure it a little longer – just make it up to death – and it will reward you with eternal bliss or, at the very least, a good birth in the next life.”

In contrast, spiritual science explains that the expected outcome of spiritual practice has nothing to do with external circumstance. It is the internal evolution of the soul – the realization of its blissful nature – which is to be achieved by spiritual practice, not simply better *external* conditions. Progressing toward this state brings satisfaction at every step and grows more profound with each stage of advancement: *prati-padam pūrṇāmṛtāsvādanam* (“at every step, a taste of complete nectar”).<sup>28</sup> *Bhakti* is not the means to achieve something else. It is not that we need something else, such as material prosperity or liberation, and that is why we practice *bhakti*. *Bhakti is the goal*.<sup>29</sup> Spiritual life is a continuous ascent on the ladder leading to God, and each step of this ladder is significant, both as a step itself and because it allows us to reach the next step.

When a person realizes this in practice, he ceases to aspire for liberation and instead prays for the opportunity to engage in devotional service birth after birth. As Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu states in his *Śikṣāṣṭaka: kāmaya mama janmani janmanīśvare bhavatād bhaktir ahaitukī tvayi* – “I have no desire for wealth, followers, a beautiful spouse; let me only have causeless devotion to You, birth after birth.”<sup>30</sup>

Unlike religious preaching, which relies on a miraculous transformation at the moment of death, spiritual preaching focuses the practitioner on the path itself, helping him consciously navigate it, overcome obstacles, and find joy in the journey. Both on the spiritual path and in religious practice, one may encounter doubt or despair, but these emotions differ as much as the lamentations of a prisoner differ from the tears of a lover separated from the beloved.

Both religious and spiritual people seek the association of saints. However, for the former, such association is a means to receive blessings and thus be effortlessly relieved from suffering, while for the latter it is an opportunity to receive valuable instructions to help them advance on the spiritual path.

## Idols and Ideals

Since we are speaking of saints, it is worth noting how they are perceived differently by customers of a religion and by spiritual seekers. Both groups need saints, as they confirm the validity of their chosen path and embody spiritual perfection. However, religious people feel much more comfortable with canonized saints of the past. Contemporary individuals who claim sainthood often do not fit into their cozy framework. Their uncompromising integrity unnerves religious people breaking their stereotypes and disturbing self-complacency of “the saved.”

<sup>28</sup> Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, “Śrī Śikṣāṣṭaka,” Verse 1.

<sup>29</sup>“ This second class of men believe the Supreme Brahman to be impersonal. They accept the cult of *bhakti*, in which hearing of *kṛṣṇa-kathā* is the first item, as a means and not the end. Above them are those who are pure devotees. They are situated in the transcendental stage above the mode of material goodness. Such persons are decidedly convinced that the name, form, fame, qualities, etc., of the Personality of Godhead are nondifferent from one another on the absolute plane. For them, hearing of the topics of Kṛṣṇa is equal to meeting with Him face to face.” *Bhāg.* 3.5.14, purport.

<sup>30</sup> Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, “Śrī Śikṣāṣṭaka,” Verse 4.

Canonized saints of the past, in the eyes of such individuals, are always flawless in every way – *nitya-siddhas* (eternally liberated souls). The notion of their eternal perfection is crucial because it spares their followers from the need to strive to become like them – a goal considered inherently unattainable. Zealous followers turn saints of the past into sugary icons and animated *mūrtis* and the descriptions of their lives are reduced to hagiographic accounts of miracles they performed or hints at their innate sanctity, manifested very early in their lives. This in turn leads to an inability of such religiously minded people to recognize and appreciate the genuine devotion in their contemporaries. As a result, we see continuous attempts to end our *sampradāya* by declaring Śrīla Prabhupāda the last *guru*.

This is one extreme which manifests in deprecation of contemporary devotees. There is another one, which is even worse. That is when immature followers with blind faith idealize their contemporary spiritual masters, preachers, or mentors. Psychologically dependent people feel a need to have an impeccable saint or mystic nearby, serving as the guarantor of promised salvation. It is painful for such followers to perceive any imperfections or even just human traits in their spiritual master.<sup>31</sup> This need drives them to idealize their superiors – attributing every conceivable virtue to them while turning a blind eye to any shortcomings.<sup>32</sup> In doing so, they disconnect from reality, and the imagined ideal person becomes an idol or icon to which they offer blind worship.

Very often, in order to prove to themselves and to everyone else the greatness of their *guru* or mentor, they begin to insult other Vaiṣṇavas. It is difficult for them to tolerate when Godbrothers of their *guru* are glorified or offered similar worship. Claims for saintliness of others outrage them because they shake their faith in the uniqueness of their *guru* and undermine their concept of being the chosen ones.

Such people often have no real relationship with their spiritual master; they prefer to keep their distance so that the master's words or actions do not inadvertently shatter their faith in him. For this reason, their idol usually exists as a smiling photo on their altar. In real life, the spiritual master is allowed to act only as a professional miracle maker.

A spiritual master or preacher who directly or indirectly encourages followers to idealize him as a flawless *uttama-adhikārī* also typically has no real relationship with disciples. Such a teacher often believes he is caring for his disciples' spiritual progress by "meeting" their expectations. Fearing to expose his human nature, he isolates himself in "an ivory tower" and dooms himself to loneliness. Enormous energy is spent maintaining the carefully constructed image of a great saint. Simultaneously, he feels alienated from his authentic self, losing touch with who he truly is. This is a steep price to pay for the artificial status of a "pure devotee."

Sooner or later, idealizations come to an end. Illusions crumble and the flaws or weaknesses of the idol (once ignored by followers) become evident and prompt the followers to label the idol a fraud. Those who once zealously worshipped their idol now just as zealously trample him into the dirt.

<sup>31</sup> One day, Hayagriva, Śrīla Prabhupāda's first editor, picked up courage and asked, "Śrīla Prabhupāda, how can I understand that you are perfect if all I do all day long is correct your mistakes?" In response, Prabhupāda said, "My perfection is not that I do not make mistakes, but that Kṛṣṇa accepts my service even when I make mistakes."

<sup>32</sup> In my memory, the fanatical followers of one such preacher explained – in all seriousness – that drunken appearances of the leader in public were due to the "difficulties of his transition from *bhāva* to *prema*."

Those who were idealized, now are demonized. All these phenomena are signs of a lack of understanding of the scientific principles underlying Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

For spiritual people, saints serve primarily as sources of inspiration and role models. Seekers of God look for and find manifestations of saintliness in their contemporaries. Virtues such as devotion, determination, kindness, humility, and modesty are sufficient evidence of saintliness for them. The human traits of a *guru* or preacher do not overshadow his genuine virtues. At the same time, sincere seekers of truth feel no psychological need to overlook their *guru*'s human traits or insult other teachers by viewing them as rivals to their own *guru*. Neither do they require validation of their faith in the form of miracles.

For such seekers, a saint is not merely a picture on the altar but someone they learn from – how to live, how to serve. A saint's example stands before them, guiding their behavior in all life's situations. As for saints of the past, it does not matter whether those saints were *nitya-siddhas* -- those who manifested their saintliness very early in their lives or could read minds. On the contrary, for them stories of saints battling temptations, overcoming obstacles, and learning lessons are far more valuable than tales of their mystical perfections.<sup>33</sup>

By learning to see the inner motivation of a *sādhū* rather than the external manifestations of his conditioned nature, seekers of truth gain the ability to recognize exalted qualities in others and learn from them, regardless of their formal position. In contrast, religious people or neophyte devotees, with their black-and-white vision, attribute all spiritual qualities exclusively to saints while seeing mainly flaws in those around them.

## Proof by Miracle

Both religious and spiritual people await miracles because “a miracle is God.” A miracle is a disruption of natural laws and thus serves as evidence of the existence of One who is above the laws and can intervene in the natural order of things. Religious people are dependent on miracles because their entire faith rests on them.<sup>34</sup> Miracles become their main criterion of truth and a crucial part of their preaching. When miracles fail to occur, they are sometimes fabricated – either to inspire followers or to justify the validity of their chosen path. These fabrications are then passed down to subsequent generations as canonical stories. In this way, philosophy is gradually replaced by fanciful tales and faith in the scriptures is reduced to a collection of superstitions.

The spiritual follower, however, *hopes* for miracles but *does not depend* on them. To such individuals, a miracle is not proof of the validity of their faith but rather a testament to God's care, an intervention in human affairs, or readiness to respond to the sincere prayers of His devotees. For a religious believer, a miracle is evidence of *God's existence*; but for the spiritualist, it is evidence of

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<sup>33</sup> For example, Rūpa Gosvāmī cites Bilvamaṅgala Ṭhākura, who faced many obstacles on his path, as an example of a devotee whose meditation on him helps to attain love for God.

<sup>34</sup> “Yoga practice is, therefore . . . It is more or less material activity. Because when they are powerful to show some miracles and people become captivated, ‘Oh, he is performing such miracle thing.’ In Benares in India there was a yogi. His business was anyone who will go there, he immediately produced two or four *rasagullās* and offer him. And many hundreds and thousands of educated men became his disciple simply for the matter, *rasagullā*, which is only four *annas* worth. So people want to see this jugglery. And those who want following some or some material achievement, they want to show . . .” Lecture on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 7.9.8 on July 2, 1968.

*His love.* In other words, to the spiritual seeker, miracles – and God Himself – are an aesthetic expression. The absence of miracles in their life does not demotivate them; rather, it strengthens their desire to improve their practice, making it purer and more selfless.<sup>35</sup> When miracles do occur, they are likely to keep them private rather than display them publicly, for love does not tolerate prying eyes. For such individuals, the proof of God’s existence lies in the effectiveness of the path -- in the transformative power of spiritual practice to change hearts. Śrīla Prabhupāda considered that change his greatest miracle.<sup>36</sup>

## How to Turn Seekers into Dogmatic Followers

Religious people often view scriptures as collections of stories about miracle-workers and their miraculous deeds are meant to bolster their shaky faith in their chosen path. Everything else in the scriptures – philosophical discussions, cosmological models, descriptions of subtle natural laws, prayers, and so on – bore them. They are usually content with a superficial acquaintance with the scriptures. They have little personal convictions, know the *śāstra* only second-hand, and are easily confused. They find it tedious to delve into philosophy and often struggle to see its relevance to their lives. They say things like “Studying scriptures is not for everyone; only *brāhmaṇas* should do that.”; “That is all *jñāna* and we are practicing *bhakti-yoga*. We don’t need to know all these complexities.”; “The *śāstras* dry up the heart.”

Is this what Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted? At the dawn of the movement, he wrote:

“I think you may have already heard that in January of 1970 we will be holding an examination among all of our students on this book, and those who will pass shall be awarded with the title of Bhakti-sastri. With these examinations, I wish to encourage all my disciples to very carefully learn this philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, because there are so many preachers who will be required to bring this message to all the corners of the earth.”<sup>37</sup>

He wanted his disciples to thoroughly know the scriptures so that their faith and understanding could be transmitted to everyone they spoke to and so that all could inherit the “family” title of Bhaktivedanta: “I want that all my spiritual sons and daughters will inherit this title of Bhaktivedanta, so that the family transcendental diploma will continue through the generations.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “O my Lord, I do not have any love for You, nor am I qualified for discharging devotional service by chanting and hearing. Nor do I possess the mystic power of a Vaiṣṇava, knowledge, or pious activities. Nor do I belong to a very high-caste family. On the whole, I do not possess anything. Still, O beloved of the *gopīs*, because You bestow Your mercy on the most fallen, I have an unbreakable hope that is constantly in my heart. That hope is always giving me pain.” (*Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.3.35).

<sup>36</sup> “When Prabhupāda had asked for questions at the end of his lecture, a challenging man came up to the microphone and said, ‘Can you show me a miracle?’ We thought he was demanding that Prabhupāda produce ashes in his hands like Sai Baba and others. Prabhupāda looked at the 150 devotees sitting on the stage in front of him, swooped his hand to indicate us and said, ‘This is my miracle. I have changed these *mlecchas* and *yavanas* into Vaiṣṇavas.’ ” (“Remembrances,” Volume 3, chapter 41, memory by Mahāmāyā dāsī.)

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Mahapurusha dāsa, February 7, 1969.

<sup>38</sup> Letter to Hamsadutta dāsa, January 3, 1969.



Unfortunately, sometimes in our temples, the explanation of the profound philosophy underlying the scriptures is replaced by entertaining stories, tales of imaginary miracles, or – worse yet – the promotion of current political agendas. Instead of thought-provoking statements from the *ācāryas*, we often hear mechanically repeated clichés and template slogans. Under the pretext of loyalty to Śrīla Prabhupāda the books of previous *ācāryas* are sometimes practically banned and anyone quoting them is reflexively viewed with suspicion. Śrīla Prabhupāda’s own opinion in this regard is thus overlooked.

“It is necessary, therefore, for the serious students of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* to follow the notes and comments of the great *ācāryas* like Jīva Gosvāmī and Viśvanātha Cakravartī. To others, who are not devotees of the Lord, the comments and explanations of such *ācāryas* may appear to be grammatical jugglery, but to the students who are in the line of disciplic succession, the explanations of the great *ācāryas* are quite fit.”<sup>39</sup>

Another problem is that confounding questions that preachers cannot answer are perceived by them as attempts to undermine their authority. Therefore, those who ask such questions are sometimes publicly ridiculed to deter others. This turns lectures into platforms for public humiliation rather than places for sincere inquiry and stimulating discussions.

Preachers who misuse their preaching as a device to control the minds of their listeners appeal not so much to a person’s intelligence but rather to his or her basic emotions like fear and guilt. Suitable quotes from the *śāstras* will be specifically chosen for this purpose. People who are incapable of independent thinking and afraid to deviate even slightly from the letter of the scripture become a convenient flock. With such followers, one can achieve greater external success. Thus, preaching turns into a conveyor belt, producing robot-like converts.

For the spiritual seekers of the truth, the scriptures are primarily a source of a comprehensive, logically substantiated worldview – a lens through which they can better understand themselves, dispel illusions and misconceptions, act correctly, and ultimately see God. They value the literal meaning of the scriptures but place even greater importance on their spirit. To them, studying the scriptures is an effective method of self-transformation. Such seekers find inspiration in repeatedly studying every story, delving into the commentaries, and discovering their interconnections and underlying themes. The books of past *ācāryas* help them better appreciate what Śrīla Prabhupāda has written. And Śrīla Prabhupāda’s words deepen their understanding of the teachings of the previous *ācāryas*, allowing them to see the teachings from new perspectives. As a result, they develop a holistic, coherent spiritual worldview that improves their lives. And they are able to convey this worldview to others without resorting to clichés or stereotypes.

Preachers and teachers of spiritual science emphasize the importance of systematic study of the scriptures rather than chaotic, fragmented study.<sup>40</sup> They also encourage unconventional questions,

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<sup>39</sup> *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 3.4.28, purport.

<sup>40</sup> “You have to go to the proper person. So that we are not doing. *Tasmād gururṁ prapadyeta. Tad vijñānārtham sa gururṁ evābhigacchet* [MU 1.2.12]. These are the Vedic injunctions. *Jijñāsu* is our natural instinct but we go to who has no knowledge. That is the difficulty. We are misled. But the knowledge is there already: the Vedic knowledge is there. There are so many Vedas, Upaniṣads, *Vedānta-sūtra* and *Bhagavad-gītā*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Purāṇas*. But there is no systematic study of this literature. We are neglecting.” Śrīla Prabhupāda, interview, August 17, 1976.

provided, of course, that such questions stem from a desire to understand and receive answers and are not merely intended to challenge authority.<sup>41</sup>

## The Lie Detector

The distinction between the religious and spiritual or scientific approaches to devotional practice can be observed in many aspects of life. Let us examine a few of the most apparent ones to better understand the motivation behind them and identify the seeds of faith they are planting in the hearts of their listeners.

### *Attitude Toward Rules and Restrictions*

On the one hand, religious people often display fanaticism in following rules, cluttering their lives with meaningless regulations, assigning divine will to every trivial detail, and then attempting to circumvent these restrictions by inventing all sorts of justifications and loopholes.<sup>42</sup> One example is the observance of Pāṇḍava (Nirjala) Ekādaśī. Śrīla Prabhupāda never singled out this specific day; for him, all Ekādaśīs were equally important. Yet, at some point, devotees read how Vyāsadeva permitted the insatiable Bhīma to observe fasting only on this Ekādaśī and decided the same applied to them. Thus, the cult of Pāṇḍava Ekādaśī arose in our society, while on other Ekādaśī days, “Ekādaśī feasts” prevail, where almost everything that can be excluded from the list of “prohibited” foods is served.

Those serious about spiritual practice first seek to understand the purpose of the rules, distinguishing principles from details.<sup>43</sup> Either on their own or with the help of seniors, they soberly assess their capabilities and adopt a manageable standard, constantly striving to raise it.

### *Attitude Toward Equals (Peers)*

To a religiously minded person, equals are competitors who hinder their approach to the one on whom their salvation depends – be it a *guru*, a great preacher, or at the very least the close associates of their *guru*. Their strategy for dealing with peers is simple: elbow everyone aside, strive to gain favor, and secure a position closer to the source of grace.

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<sup>41</sup> “And that, after that surrender, there are questions. One must be very intelligent to put questions to the spiritual master. Without questions you cannot make progress. So blind faith is never required, neither questions should be in a mood of challenge. That should not. Questions or answers should be just to understand. Lecture on *Bhagavad-gīta*, August 24, 1966.

<sup>42</sup> This phenomenon is so widespread that it prompted Noam Chomsky, one of the most prominent linguists of our time, to claim that “religion is based on the assumption that God is an idiot.”

<sup>43</sup> “Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī states that his elder brother (Sanātana Gosvāmī) has compiled *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* for the guidance of the Vaiṣṇavas and therein has mentioned many rules and regulations to be followed by the Vaiṣṇavas. Some of them are very important and prominent, and Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī will now mention these very important items for our benefit. The purport of this statement is that Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī proposes to mention only basic principles, not details.” (*Nectar of Devotion*, chapter 6)

On the contrary, people with a spiritual attitude view equals as friends and companions, whose perseverance inspires and supports them in moving forward.<sup>44</sup> Differences of opinion do not frighten them or deter them from cooperation. They see such differences not as obstacles but as sources of creative energy and opportunities to improve their shared mission.

### ***Attitude Toward Science***

Religiously minded people often fear science, as it threatens to dismantle their hastily assembled worldview based on religious dogmas. Paradoxically, this fear coexists with attempts to prove their faith's correctness using "the latest scientific discoveries." For example, they rejoice at headlines like "A Mathematician Proves the Existence of God"<sup>45</sup> or videos showing how the sound of "Om" creates the shape of the Śrī Yantra on a sand plate.<sup>46</sup>

Śrīla Prabhupāda, however, was never afraid to engage in discussions with scientists and never relied on dubious scientific arguments to prove his points. He emphasized that we must learn to speak to scientists in their language.<sup>47</sup> But at the same time, without currying favor with them, he wanted us to present the philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness on its own. This is one of the purposes of the Bhaktivedanta Institute he founded.

### ***Attitude Toward Other Religions***

In most religions, salvation is declared a privilege accessible only to their members – the chosen and initiated. Everyone else, who failed to choose the right path, is doomed to hell or rebirth in the material realm. Unfortunately, Vaiṣṇava preachers sometimes also attempt to prove the superiority of Kṛṣṇa consciousness by denouncing other religions. This form of apologetics, or defending a religious dogma, may inspire religiously minded individuals, but it often repels spiritual seekers of the truth. Those focused on the principles and laws of spiritual science, easily discern how these universal laws manifest in the teachings of other religions and distinguish them from recently introduced historical compromises.

Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura expressed this idea most beautifully:

“If one goes to someone else’s place of worship, one should think, ‘The people are worshiping my Lord, but in a different way. Because of my different training, I cannot quite comprehend this system of worship. However, through this experience, I can deepen my appreciation for my own system of worship. The Lord is only one, not two. I offer respect to the form I see here and pray to the Lord in this new form that He increases my love for the Lord in His accustomed form.’ Those who do not

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<sup>44</sup> “And when one meets an equal, instead of being proud of one's own activities before him, one should treat him as a friend.” *Bhāg.*, 4.8.34. purport.

<sup>45</sup> In fact, he didn't prove the existence of God.

<sup>46</sup> In fact, it doesn't create a Śrī Yantra.

<sup>47</sup> “That is the instruction of *Bhāgavata*; *avicyuto 'rthaḥ kavibhir nirūpito yad-uttamaśloka-guṇānuvarṇanam.*” (*Bhāg.* 1.5.22). “That I repeatedly said, Just like you are a scientist you explain Krishna by scientific language, so among the scientists’ Krishna will be appreciated.” (Morning Walk, September 25, 1972)

follow this procedure but instead criticize other systems of worship and show hatred, violence, and envy, are worthless and foolish. The more they indulge in useless quarreling, the more they betray the very goal of their religion.”<sup>48</sup>

### ***Attitude Toward Apostates***

Religious people, especially leaders, often display harsh negativity toward those who dare leave the “only true path to God.” This attitude reveals their inner insecurity. Leaders believe they must denounce defectors to protect their own fragile faith as well as that of their followers in order to maintain the follower’s loyalty to the exclusivity and infallibility of their chosen path. Detailed public blamestorming of the “traitors” is often held as warnings to those who stay.

In contrast, sincere seekers of truth approach those who have left with compassion. They strive to understand the problem and find ways to help them return to spiritual practice or at least maintain a favorable attitude toward God, which might one day inspire them to continue their spiritual journey.

### ***Attitude Toward Formal Initiation***

Those who join a religious organization or a spiritual movement begin to form a new identity, but this process unfolds differently. Religious organizations emphasize external markers of belonging – clothing, new names, diplomas, awards, privileges, titles, and ranks. These items are imbued with special symbolic significance and people strive to attain them, viewing them as indicators of spiritual progress. Consequently, in ISKCON, *dīkṣā* (first and second initiation) is often considered an almost magical act performed by a powerful *guru* who is likened to a magician. Unfortunately, people often forget that without *śikṣā*, *dīkṣā* is lifeless. *Dīkṣā* in strict terms is just recognition of the candidate’s eligibility for *śikṣā*. The pursuit of external recognition often obscures the need for inner transformation, which only occurs through a living relationship with the spiritual master based on following his instructions. Śrīla Prabhupāda was initiated eleven years after meeting his spiritual master. Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, a devotee from birth, was initiated at the age of thirty-seven, and in ISKCON a *bhakta* who is not initiated within three years after meeting the Vaiṣṇavas is considered “backward.” The rush for *dīkṣā* is often motivated by the need of formal recognition of our “chosen-ness.” Besides “the spiritual teacher at the moment of initiation takes upon himself all the sins of the disciple,” so we need to be in a hurry. Obsession with the magic of *dīkṣā*, and virtual deification of the *dīkṣā-guru* leads to a downplaying of the role of *śikṣā* and creates a host of problems that remain unresolved.

### ***Parallel Value Systems***

The disparity between the religious and scientific perspectives creates two parallel value systems within a spiritual organization: the declared and the actual. In the declared system, virtues and genuine spiritual experiences – manifested through detachment from matter and genuine compassion – are held in the highest regard. In the actual system, status and wealth take precedence. In the

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<sup>48</sup> Śrī Caitanya-śikṣāmṛta, 1.1

declared system, the level of spiritual development is measured by the intensity of practice and the depth of scriptural knowledge. In the actual system, it is gauged by one's rank in the organizational hierarchy and proximity to "spiritual leaders." Frequently, while humility is extolled from high pulpits, those who bring more money to the organization or excel in management are rewarded, glorified, and encouraged. Countless examples can be cited. Thus, "organized religion" breeds hypocrisy.

Let us stop here. Enough has been said to paint the picture and understand how easily, driven by noble motives, or desires for liberation, or success disguised as bhakti, ISKCON could become just another traditional religion.

Now, let us go further and examine the practical consequences of the "religious" worldview.

## Part 4:

### **Sad Consequences and How They Could Be Avoided**

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the religious approach is its almost inevitable result: burnout. A person joins our society and accepts the prescribed "rules of the game." Sooner or later, he attains a position within the community of devotees, chants his rounds, follows the principles, serves, and so on. His neck is adorned with a *brāhmaṇa* thread and three strands of *tulasī* beads, while his heart harbors hope for the promised miracle: all negative qualities will "automatically" vanish, and spiritual practice will naturally become easy and pleasant.

Years pass, all possible initiations have been received, all courses completed, all diplomas obtained, all stories heard – but the taste for the holy name has not come. Unfortunately, someone with a religious mindset does not try to understand the reasons for this. Instead, he convinces himself, "I just need to endure a little longer and the miracle will happen." Sometimes this stance is supported by quoting Śrīla Prabhupāda's words, "Just go on!" Go on what? Mechanically performing rituals? Reading books for the mandatory twenty minutes a day while suppressing yawns? Chanting *japa* on the way to work? Spending half of the Sunday program in the temple café or chatting with friends? What else should I do? I'm doing everything necessary – chanting sixteen rounds, reading the books, visiting the temple. Yet, the "result" stubbornly refuses to come.

Meanwhile, negative emotions accumulate in such devotees' heart. The Vaiṣṇavas, who seemed saintly to them in the early days of their spiritual journey, now appear as a gathering of hypocrites and misfits. Increasingly, such practitioners commit offenses, shifting responsibility for their lack of spiritual taste onto others – the community, ISKCON, or their spiritual master. Eventually, the tension that has been building for years releases in a burst of accumulated dissatisfaction, anger, and complaints.

The pretexts for such an outburst are plentiful: inappropriate behavior of some senior devotees, quarrels among Vaiṣṇavas, doubts about the philosophy of Kṛṣṇa consciousness sown by

disappointed devotees, insinuations from a multitude of social media addicts, anti-cult speculations, and more.

One rough statistical survey in Russia revealed that the average duration of devotional practice is approximately seven years. This timeframe is sufficient for the novelty and sense of wonder to fade, while accumulated disappointments and offenses rob a person of any taste for spiritual practice.

When initial enthusiasm fades, devotees often feel betrayed considering they were deceived. However, in truth, such a person deceived himself by turning off his intelligence and surrendering his freedom. Of course, part of the responsibility lies with the leaders – we cannot deny this. And that makes the pain even greater. It is likely the ISKCON’s leaders they trusted contributed to or did not prevent, their self-deception. By placing improper emphasis in their preaching, they failed to teach such people the scientific foundation of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

Leaving ISKCON takes many forms. Sometimes having lost faith in the promises they received a person begins seeking other paths to easy salvation. They might turn to Rādhā-kuṇḍa, where they are promised “enjoyment of *rasa* and ecstatic service in *siddha-svarūpa*” in this very life. Or they might simply “stop being fanatical,” or “harmonize” their lives through “practical Vedic success technologies.” They could turn to Christianity, with its fewer demands and more guarantees, or start taking psychedelics, or adopt shamanic practices, etc. Others might get professional training as psychologists or make their living conducting Hellinger constellations or past-life regressions. Each of these paths offers “real miracles,” far more impressive than the “sour grapes” of Kṛṣṇa consciousness.

The most common and perhaps saddest scenario, however, occurs when Vaiṣṇavas, seeing no tangible results from their practice, quietly lose faith in the possibility of success altogether. Recognizing the importance of spirituality, they retain the least burdensome rituals, performing them mechanically, hoping for a miracle at the moment of death. At best, they faithfully attend Sunday programs or temple festivals, respond to “Hare Kṛṣṇa” with habitual ease, wistfully observe the enthusiasm of newcomers, and struggle to resist the temptation to dampen their fervor with a dose of cynicism.

When the number of such passive believers with lifeless gazes accumulates, the revolutionary, vibrant, and pure Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement transforms into yet another mundane religion. We claim exclusivity but effect little change in people’s real lives.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the grim observation of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura is confirmed: “The original purpose of the established churches of the world may not always be objectionable. But no stable religious arrangement for instructing the masses has yet been successful.”

One way to safeguard ISKCON from degeneration is to simultaneously minimize the unconscious dogma-creating factors that plague us, while consistently emphasizing the rational foundation of the practice of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. We thus affirm Kṛṣṇa consciousness as a spiritual science rooted in universal principles. At the same time, it is crucial to “not throw the baby out with the bathwater” by

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<sup>49</sup> According to statistical studies, among believing people in Europe, the number of active seekers of truth is about 6%. 94% are passive consumers of pseudo-spiritual goods. Robert Manchin, *Religion in Europe: Trust Not Filling the Pews*. Gallup, 2004.

ensuring that Kṛṣṇa consciousness does not devolve into dry philosophical speculation. We need to leave room for the living miracle of encountering the transcendental reality.

We began this discussion by recalling Śrīla Prabhupāda’s mission to “systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world.” He envisioned ISKCON as an institution that would “achieve for the first time in human society a real peace and unity among the contending forces in the world today.”<sup>50</sup>

Instead, despite its impressive accomplishments, ISKCON today finds itself battling multiple organizations claiming to represent the “true” ISKCON. Even within the official ISKCON, there are alarming points of contention threatening split, not to mention the traditional tensions with the Gauḍīya Maṭha and other branches of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya*. Absorbed in these disputes, we have nearly forgotten that ISKCON’s primary task is to “*achieve unity among the contending forces in the world today.*”

Why did Śrīla Prabhupāda hope that ISKCON would not suffer the fate of other religions with their endless schisms, disputes, and struggles for dominance? One possible answer is that Śrīla Prabhupāda founded ISKCON on the universal principles of spiritual science. In doing so, he strictly followed Rūpa Gosvāmī, who articulated these principles in his *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*. The flawless logical and philosophical analysis presented by Rūpa Gosvāmī transformed *bhakti* from abstract theological concepts into precise scientific terms. It enabled us to identify and differentiate various forms and manifestations of *bhakti* and point the way to achieving their purest and most exalted form – *śuddha-bhakti*, or *uttama-bhakti*.

Essentially, all deviations that risk turning ISKCON into a compromised religion can be categorized either as contamination by *karma* (worldly, self-serving religiosity), or by *jñāna* (religiosity driven by the desire for liberation). Mass religions, through their long history in this world, have absorbed a multitude of ideas, beliefs, and prejudices. Catering to the needs of their members, they made compromises and concessions. Lacking a clear conceptual framework to distinguish pure *bhakti* from its hybrid forms, they canonized notions, practices, and customs that deviated from the ideal of pure devotion.

We, too, can follow this path and allow the “*masses to exploit a spiritual movement for their own purpose,*” thereby ending “*the absolute and unconventional guidance of the bona fide spiritual teacher.*” Or we can strive to positively affirm the need to keep the universal principles of spiritual science in ISKCON’s laws, traditions, culture, and organizational structures.

Universal principles, by definition, are valid everywhere at all times. They are not a subject of dispute or arbitrary interpretations. Rather they provide grounds for respectful discussion among those who know the *śāstras* and, most importantly, live according to them. Thus, if we set the goal of shaping our movement firmly on these principles, the first step would be to establish *a culture of*

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<sup>50</sup> “To educate the greater human society in the techniques of spiritual life as the basis for a balanced psychic and biological development and thereby achieve for the first time in human society a real peace and unity among the contending forces in the world today.” This is the wording of ISKCON’s first goal in the black version of the legal document drafted by Śrīla Prabhupāda on the eve of ISKCON’s registration. (Constitution of Association)

*transparency for all leaders and a culture of respectful dialogue* following strict rules of Vaiṣṇava etiquette, as was the case in Lord Caitanya's time.

Then, instead of accusing some leaders of hypocrisy and deviance behind their backs, we will try to create effective and tactful feedback and peer review mechanisms for leaders that will allow them to adjust their behaviour.

Instead of banning discussion of sensitive and controversial topics and forcing thoughtful people to look for interlocutors "from the outside" with whom they can exchange the ideas and freely discuss scriptural views, we will be able to organise open, respectful, and fruitful discussion of these topics within ISKCON.

Instead of fighting with the members of the Gauḍīya Maṭha and other Vaiṣṇava groups for followers, we will invest energy, money, and time in missionary programs teaching non-sectarian, scientifically based, universal principles of *bhakti* that will bring many sincere seekers of truth into our fold. Perhaps we will even find some areas of possible cooperation with those Gauḍīya preachers who recognize Śrīla Prabhupāda, or at the very least establish respectful relations with them. We will train preachers and organise a system of care for the spiritual growth of those who come to us. We will lavishly fund and support the Bhaktivedanta Institute, Śrīla Prabhupāda's last venture, which he considered one of his most important preaching projects.

Instead of looking at *brahmacārīs* and *brahmacārīnis* as cheap labor we will create enlivening educational programs for them, new opportunities for them to preach, and social security schemes for their care. Instead of creating cumbersome management structures with tedious accountability procedures, we will work to create a culture of empowering devotees at all levels and mechanisms of succession. And who knows, maybe someday we'll have a proper Vaiṣṇava university for leaders at all levels that Śrīla Prabhupāda spoke of.

Instead of focusing on adherence to the minimum *sadhana* given by Śrīla Prabhupāda (sixteen rounds and four regulative principles), we will create and promote programs to truly change the heart by offering a genuine experience of absorption in the holy name.

We will work to create systematic training programs to apply the philosophy of *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* in life and completely transform a participants' worldview, rather than provide formal academic courses that create the illusion of knowledge but change nothing in real life.

Instead of arguing about whether women can be *gurus* and whether *gurus* are even possible after Śrīla Prabhupāda, we will establish clear and concise *śāstra*-based criteria for what qualities *gurus* should possess and what categories of *gurus* are possible in our society. We will create training and mentoring programs to nurture future spiritual masters and invite people to such programs, rather than eyeing each new *guru* candidate with suspicion.

Rather than prohibiting Vaiṣṇavas from accepting disciples until their own spiritual master leaves his body, believing that it is the master's departure that magically qualifies the Vaiṣṇava to become *guru*, we will allow those deemed qualified and willing to become *gurus* to do so while their *dīkṣā*



*guru* is living. Thus, *gurus* can continue to guide and train their disciples who are now performing the service of spiritual master.

Instead of arguing to the point of hoarseness about how to establish *varṇāśrama*, we will determine the basic principles underlying this social organization that are compatible with *bhakti* and begin to implement them consistently in ISKCON's culture. We will create educational programs for the Varṇāśrama College as Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted and try to run them in all ISKCON temples turning them from Sunday churches into educational centres.

There are many other things that can and should be done if we want to establish *bhakti* as the science of God and ISKCON as an international educational institution dedicated to teaching this great science.

## Conclusion

I am well aware that it is much easier to write about all this than to actually realize it in practice. Everything that seems so beautiful on paper looks different in reality. This does not negate the need to try to see the ideal picture and work toward its realisation.

I am aware that there are many sincere leaders who are working hard to improve ISKCON and make it the society that Śrīla Prabhupāda wanted it to be. I hope that my words will not be taken as an attempt to offend anyone or belittle anyone's service.

Looking back, I understand that I myself was guilty of some of the mistakes described here – due to my inexperience or excess of enthusiasm to preach Kṛṣṇa consciousness far and wide.

In this article I shared my thoughts of what our society is currently going through. I am sure that many other Vaiṣṇavas more experienced than myself are also pondering this and doing everything within their power to avoid the sad scenario painted by Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, and to carry out the will of Śrīla Prabhupāda by making ISKCON a movement that will “*check the imbalance of values in life and achieve real unity and peace in the world.*”