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Reflections on the Relation Between Religion and Modern Rationalism

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In Vivekananda Svami'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 reincarnation, karma 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.'<sup>[1]</sup> He is source of strength and the support of the universe. He is everywhere, pure, almighty, and all-merciful. 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 should worship God through unselfish love and pointed out that the way to achieving love of God was, 'fully developed and taught by Krsna, whom the Hindus believe to have been God incarnate on earth.'<sup>[2]</sup> Through love we are to perfect ourselves, reach God, see God, and enjoy bliss with God and that on this all Hindus are agreed.'<sup>[3]</sup> However, he went on to say that in the final stage of realisation, God is seen to be impersonal Brahman and the individual terminates its separate existence by realising its identity with Brahman. Making an analogy with physical science he commented, 'Physics would stop when it would be able to fulfil 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.'<sup>[4]</sup>

### **The advantages and disadvantages of pure monism**

Vivekananda's strictly monistic concept of God has a long history and it has always been associated with the rational, speculative approach to reality. For example, in the fifth century BC 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.'<sup>[5]</sup> Parmenides argued that the One must have no parts distinct from one another, otherwise it would be not One but many. 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 characterised 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 and conceptualisation itself.

Vivekananda recognised this problem and he argued that in Hindu philosophy specific forms of gods and goddesses serve as symbols to help us visualise the inconceivable. Thus he said, "The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realised, 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.'<sup>[6]</sup>

The idea of religious imagery as a symbol for the inconceivable absolute

has some useful applications 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 Brahma Samaj in an effort to revise Hinduism and make it compatible with modern Western thinking.<sup>[7]</sup> This effort required solving two problems: (1) religious plurality, (2) the incompatibility 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 symbolical meaning that refers to something inconceivable then many different systems of symbols should work equally well for this purpose. In this way, all major religious systems can be reconciled with one another. This was Vivekananda's idea, and he greatly stressed the equality of all religions. Likewise, if religious imagery is simply symbolical 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 representation of the One lying beyond the grasp of the finite scientific mind. In addition, Vivekananda pointed out that the stark simplicity of the impersonal Brahman is compatible with the simplicity that physicists seek 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 undifferentiated oneness, and personal existence is illusory, then love is also illusory. Love requires two, and not just two of anything. Two persons are required for a relationship of love. If such relationships actually have spiritual reality then there must exist at least two eternally existing spiritual personalities. In traditional Hindu thought there are, in fact, two categories of eternal persons: (1) the *jiva* souls that inhabit individual material bodies, (2) the original Supreme Personality of Godhead and His innumerable spiritual expansions. As Vivekananda pointed out, Hindus believe that the Supreme Being incarnated on earth as Krsna, Who expounded the principles of loving devotional reciprocation between Himself and individual *jiva* souls. Unfortunately, after making this point, Vivekananda rejected both Krsna and the individual soul as illusion. According to 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, all relationships of personal reciprocation admiration, friendship, parental or conjugal love must be given up as delusions if the real truth is absolute oneness.

### **The Vaisnava alternative given by Bhaktivinode Thakura**

It is therefore natural to ask if some other solution is available to the spiritual problems posed by modern rational thought and the multiplicity of religious systems. To explore this possibility, I now turn to the life of Bhaktivinode Thakura, a contemporary of Svami Vivekananda.

Bhaktivinode 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 often exchanged thoughts on literary and spiritual topics with Devendranath Tagore, the Brahma Samaj leader and early teacher of Vivekananda. In due course, he studied law, and for many years supported

his family as a magistrate in the British court system.

Bhaktivinode Thakura deeply studied the religious thought of his day. He scrutinised 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 describing devotional service to the Supreme Lord, Krsna. Indeed, he wrote that the *Bhagavat*, one of the main texts describing Krsna, 'seemed like a repository of ideas scarcely adopted to the nineteenth century.'[\[8\]](#)

However, at a certain point he read about the great Vaisnava reformer Lord Caitanya, and he was able to obtain Lord Caitanya's commentary on the *Bhagavat* given to the *advaita* Vedantists of Benares. This created in him a great love for the devotional teachings of Krsna as presented by Caitanya. [\[9\]](#) Eventually he achieved an exalted state of spiritual realisation by following Lord Caitanya's teachings and wrote many books presenting these teachings to various classes of people, both in India and abroad.

### **A historical interlude**

Before discussing Bhaktivinode Thakura's spiritual teachings it will be useful to 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 in the chronology 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 Yudhishthira, 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 the events occurring in India at the time of Krsna's advent. According to Hindu tradition these events took place about five thousand years ago, at the time when the *Dvapara-yuga* gave way to the present epoch, the *Kali-yuga*. Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva are the five Pandava brothers who appeared 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 that are simply not credible to a person trained in the modern rational viewpoint. We know that people don't descend from demigods. All documents containing such nonsense are rejected by responsible historians and consequently objective historical accounts do not contain such absurdities. Such things never happened and our history books abundantly confirm this. 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 based on the *Bible*. Table 1 shows how Jones attempted to reconstruct Hindu chronology so as to bring it in line with Christian chronology. It appears that Jones was able to scorn Hindu mythology as palpably absurd, while at the same time accepting as true the supernatural events recorded in the *Bible*.

**Table 1. Reconstruction of Hindu chronology**

by Sir William Jones[11]

<b>Occidental History</b>	<b>Hindu History</b>	<b>Years from 1788 AD</b>	<b>Date</b>
Adam	Manu I, Age I	5794	4006 BC
Noah	Manu II	4737	2949
Deluge		4138	2350
Nimrod	Hiranyakasipu, Age II	4006	2218
Bel	Bali	3892	2104
Rama	Age III	3817	2029
Noah's death		3787	1999
Pradyota		2817	1029
Buddha, Age IV		2815	1027
Nanda		2487	699
Balin		1937	149
Vicramaditya		1844	56
Devapala		1811	23 BC
Christ		1787	1 AD
Narayanapala		1721	67
Saca		1709	79
Walid		1080	708
Mahmud		786	1002
Chengez		548	1250
Taimur		391	1397
Babur		276	1512
Nadirshah		49	1739 AD

Ages I, II, III, and IV are the Satya-, Treta-, Dvapara-, and Kali-yugas. Manu I is Svayambhuva Manu. Manu II is Vaivasvata Manu.

It is perhaps poetic justice that the same scornful treatment that 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 scepticism became the only acceptable path for a scholar or intellectual in any respectable field of study.

## *The Bhagavat*

Bhaktivinode Thakura was confronted with this hostile intellectual climate in his efforts to present spiritual knowledge to the young Bengali intellectuals of his day. After imbibing the ideas of William Jones and other Western orientalists from their British teachers, these young people were not at all inclined to give credence to old mythology. How then could the teachings of Krsna on love of God be presented? Bhaktivinode Thakura judiciously chose to give a partial presentation of the truth which would introduce important spiritual ideas without invoking rejection due to deep-seated prejudices.

In a lecture delivered in Dinajpur, West Bengal in 1869, he strongly stressed the *Bhagavat*, or *Bhagavata Purana*, as the pre-eminent text describing the nature of the Supreme and the means of realising our relation with the Supreme. Rejecting pure monism as a useless idea, he pointed out that God is an eternal person: 'The *Bhagavat* 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.'[\[14\]](#) He believed the highest object of the soul was to 'serve that Infinite Being for ever spiritually in the activity of Absolute Love.'[\[15\]](#)

Bhaktivinode described the material world as the product of *maya* (the eternal energy of the Supreme which He uses to bewilder those souls who do not desire to live in 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 carry out their activities in a world from which God is apparently absent. All these ideas are taken from the *Bhagavat* without modification. However, in describing what the *Bhagavat* says about the details of the material universe, Bhaktivinode Thakura adopted an indirect approach:

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 *Bhagavat* 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 *Bhagavat* say that these beings are real, but it gives them an important role in the creation and maintenance of the universe as well as appearing 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 honour.

Nonetheless, Bhaktivinode Thakura chose to side-step these 'mythological' aspects of the *Bhagavat* in an effort to reach an audience of intellectuals

whose mundane education ruled out such mythology as absurd fantasy. Indeed, he went even further than this. In 1880 he published a treatise entitled *Sri Krsna Samhita* in which he elaborately explained the philosophy of Krsna consciousness.<sup>[17]</sup> In this book he also presented 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* (see Table 1). This involved converting demigods and Manus into human kings and reducing their total span of history to a few thousand earthly years.

I should clearly point out that Bhaktivinode Thakura did not personally accept the modified version of the *Bhagavat* presented to the Bengali intellectuals, but rather accepted the so-called mythology of the *Bhagavat* as true. He presented it as such in many of his writings, for example *Jaiva Dharma*:

I have said that the Vaisnava religion came into being as soon as the creatures came into existence. Brahma was the first Vaisnava. Srīman Mahadeva is also a Vaisnava. The ancient Prajapatis are all Vaisnavas. Sri Narada Goswami who is the fancy-born child of Brahma, is a Vaisnava ... You have seen the Vaisnava 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 Vaisnava 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.<sup>[18]</sup>

This passage was written in response to challengers who argue that Vaisnava dharma is a recent development. The passage presumes that beings such as Brahma, Mahadeva, Narada and Prahlada literally exist as described in the *sastras*. Many similar examples of this can be found in Bhaktivinode Thakura's writings.

If Bhaktivinode Thakura accepted the literal truth of the *sastras*, how could he justify making presentations in which he denied it? His grand-disciple Srīla 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 which adheres directly to the dictionary definitions of its words is called *mukhya-vrtti*, whereas an imaginary or indirect interpretation is known as *laksana-vrtti* or *gauna-vrtti*. Srīla 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.'<sup>[19]</sup> In general, therefore, one should understand *sastra* in terms of *mukhya-vrtti*.

### **The theology of visions**

One might accept that Bhaktivinode Thakura was justified in modifying the *sastras* in an effort to reach intellectuals trained to scorn old mythology, but serious questions still need to 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? Could it be that the mythological material in the Hindu *sastras* is unimportant, so that one might present it as true to people who believe in it and as false to people who don't? Or should we accept, on the basis of modern knowledge, that Hindu mythology really is 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 reformulate Vaisnava philosophy so as to make it readily acceptable to intellectuals today in late twentieth-century America. 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*, is simply hallucination. 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, a nineteenth century scientist who applied the methods of empirical scientific research to the phenomena of religion. Thus his observations are still of relevance 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 within 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 transcendental 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 this realm in meditation by the grace of Krsna and so they are able to enter into Krsna's eternal loving pastimes. However, all Puranic descriptions of events within the material world have to be understood rationally on the basis of modern scientific knowledge. On the whole, the mythological stories in the *Puranas* are not literally true. But the stories pertaining to 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 persons 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. By way of illustration I will briefly consider an article, *Shrines of the Mind*, by David Haberman Assistant Professor of Religion at Williams College[\[21\]](#), which 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. According to Haberman, the physical Vraja, a tract of land in the vicinity of the North Indian city of Mathura, has only been a major centre 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. Haberman states that these sites never really existed before the sixteenth century and weren't 'rediscovered' but

'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 somewhat towards 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 it allows one to avoid certain conflicts between religion and modern scholarship, this theory has a number of drawbacks: 1. It is contrary to Vaisnava tradition, and thus it challenges the thinking of the many great souls who have fully supported the tradition. Since these great souls are the very meditators who have seen transcendental visions of Krsna, the reality of such visions is called into question. In other words, why should persons who see the Absolute realm believe in the truth of myths which even worldly scholars deem to be false? 2. It 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 it 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, 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. It 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, which is reduced to practically nothing if we let modern science explain the material world.

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 favoured by psychologists, neuroscientists and physical scientists.

In view of the statements contained in the first four points, the conclusion drawn in the final one is almost unavoidable: we are left with a totally mundane theory that explains away religion. In the case of Krsna's *lilas*, this line of thinking leads us to particularly unpleasant conclusions. Thus Haberman characterises 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 stepping stone for the development of a more satisfactory theory. The starting point for this development is a story that Haberman related 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 was burned in the process. When Narottama awoke from his meditation, he discovered that his hands were actually burnt.

There are many stories like this, and I will briefly relate two others. In the second story, Srinivasa Acarya, a contemporary of Narottama dasa Thakura, was meditating on fanning Lord Caitanya. In his meditation, Lord Caitanya placed His garland around Srinivasa's neck. When he awoke from meditation, the unusually fragrant garland was actually 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, thinking it very important. An old lady subsequently 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 manifested her true form as Lalita. [26]

What are we to make of such stories? The story of the burnt 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 perhaps it can also cause burns. The story of the miraculous garland goes one step further: here a tangible object is said to materialise. This may seem fantastic, but it turns out that there is an extensive literature on materialisation. For example Stephen Braude, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Maryland, has argued that many cases of alleged materialisations produced by spirit mediums are backed up by solid empirical evidence which deserves serious study. [27] If materialisations by spiritualists could be factual, why not materialisations by saintly persons?

This brings us to the third story. Although this story seems 'far out', there are many similar stories in which a transcendental personality appears to step into our material continuum, perform some action and then disappear. Another example would be the story from *Caitanya-caritamrta* in which Krsna, 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 Krsna revealed the location of the Gopala Deity which had been originally installed by Krsna's grandson Vajra and had been hidden during a Mohammedan attack. [28]

The stories of the burnt hand, the miraculous garland and the transcendental visits are progressively harder to accept from a conventional scientific standpoint. But it is hard to see how to draw a line between stories of this kind that might possibly be true and ones that definitely cannot be. In addition, 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.

In studying a body of empirical evidence, we always evaluate that evidence on the basis of 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 limiting assumptions change, then the conclusions will also change, even though the body of evidence remains the same.

Consider what might happen if all the available evidence regarding the history of human experience were to be studied, not on the basis of nineteenth-century rationalism but of a new science in which spiritual transformations of matter were considered to be a real possibility. The result might be a completely different picture of the past than the one now accepted by scholars. For one thing, the objections that William Jones expressed about the story of the Pandava brothers might not seem so weighty as they do from a conventional scholarly viewpoint. If higher beings can step into our continuum from another realm, then humans might well be descended from such beings. This new picture of the past might prove to be much more compatible with traditional spiritual teachings than the one that now prevails.

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

For example, physics looked like a closed subject in the 1890s, 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.<sup>[29][30][31]</sup> Physics has now encountered an even more serious obstacle: the bold architects of universal physical theories are beginning to realise that these theories can never be adequately tested by experiment.<sup>[32]</sup> Thus the Harvard physicist Howard Georgi characterised modern theoretical physics as 'recreational mathematical theology'.<sup>[33]</sup>

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 machine. However, in more recent years, even though computers have become more and more powerful, the dream of simulating human intelligence seems 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 elucidating the molecular 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.<sup>[34]</sup>

These are just a few of the many areas in which the programme 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 scientists are now showing a willingness to consider theoretical ideas and areas of research that have been traditionally taboo in the scientific community. For example, we now find organisations of professional scientists openly studying phenomena lying on the interface 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 organisations all sponsor regular scientific conferences. Some of the phenomena studied by these groups seem very similar to '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 organisations 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 Bhaktivinode Thakura found it necessary to present a modified version of the Vaisnava teachings to young Bengali intellectuals at the height of British political and ideological imperialism. However, as the sun began to set on the British empire his son and successor, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, began a vigorous programme of directly presenting the Vaisnava conclusions throughout India. This programme was taken abroad by his disciple, Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who boldly celebrated the ancient Ratha Yatra festival of Jagannatha Puri in London's Trafalgar Square.

With the changing climate of scientific opinion, 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 be progressively reduced as science matures and becomes open to the study of mystical phenomena. There may even exist the possibility of establishing 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 presented in a narrow, sectarian way. However, as Bhaktivinode Thakura pointed out in his essay on the *Bhagavat*, the Vaisnava teachings are inherently broad-minded and acknowledge the value of all religious systems, as illustrated in the following prayer from the *Bhagavat*:

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.[\[35\]](#)

God appears to His devoted worshippers in many different forms, depending on their particular desires. These forms include the different

*avatars* of Krsna described in traditional Vaisnava texts, but they are not limited to these. Indeed, it is said that the different 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 *Bhagavat*:

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.

This statement is explicitly 'mythological', and one can well imagine how Sir William Jones might have reacted to it. However, it presents a grand picture of innumerable races and societies within the universe, all of whom are given different religious dispensations suitable for their particular situations and natures. Here the word 'Vedic' cannot be limited to particular Sanskrit texts that may be existing in India at the present time. Rather, it refers to the sum total of religious systems revealed by the infinite Supreme God for the sake of elevating innumerable 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 establish a relationship of loving service between the real individual soul and the Supreme Personality of Godhead, the performer of real transcendental pastimes.

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## Notes

[1] Swami Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, p. 11.

[2] Swami Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, p. 13.

[3] Swami Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, pp. 14.

[4] J. N. Jordan, *Western Philosophy from Antiquity to Middle Ages*, p. 27.

[5] Swami Vivekananda, *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, p. 17

[6] R. C. Majumbar, *Swami Vivekananda: An Historical Review*.

[7] Bhaktivinode Thakur, *The Bhagavat: Its Philosophy, Its Ethics and Its Theology*, p. 5.

- [8] Bhaktivinode Thakur, *The Bhagavat: Its Philosophy, Its Ethics and Its Theology*, p. 6.
- [9] W. Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, p. 302.
- [10] W. Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, p. 313
- [11] J. R. Moore, 'Geologists and Interpreters of Genesis in the Nineteenth Century', *God and Nature*, p. 334.
- [12] J. R. Moore, 'Geologists and Interpreters of Genesis in the Nineteenth Century', *God and Nature*, p. 344.
- [13] Bhaktivinode Thakur, *The Bhagavat: Its Philosophy, Its Ethics and Its Theology*, p. 30.
- [14] Bhaktivinode Thakur, *The Bhagavat: Its Philosophy, Its Ethics and Its Theology*, p. 30.
- [15] Bhaktivinode Thakur, *The Bhagavat: Its Philosophy, Its Ethics and Its Theology*, pp. 24-5.
- [16] Rupa-vilasa Dasa, *The Seventh Goswami*, pp. 138-9.
- [17] Bhaktivinode Thakur, *Jaiva Dharma*, pp. 155-6.
- [18] A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Caitanya-caritamrta*, *Adi-lila*, Vol. 2, p. 95.
- [19] W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 515-6.
- [20] D. Haberman, 'Shrines of the Mind', *Journal of Vaisnava Studies*.
- [21] D. Haberman, *Journal of Vaisnava Studies*, p. 31.
- [22] D. Haberman, *Journal of Vaisnava Studies*, p. 26
- [23] D. Haberman, *Journal of Vaisnava Studies*, p. 33.
- [24] S. Rosen, *The Lives of Vaisnava Saints*, pp. 63-4.
- [25] S. Rosen, *The Lives of Vaisnava Saints*, pp. 119-139.
- [26] S. Braude, *The Limits of Influence*.
- [27] A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Caitanya-caritamrta*, *Madhya-lila*, Vol. 2, pp. 12-19.
- [28] D. Bohm, *Wholeness and Implicate Order*.
- [29] R. Penrose, *The Emperor's New Mind*.
- [30] Jahne and Dunne, *Margins of Reality*.
- [31] S. Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory*.
- [32] R. Crease and C. Mann, *The Second Creation*, p. 414.

[33] J. Horgan, *Scientific American*.

[34] A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, 3.9.11.

[35] A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Srimad Bhagavatam*, 11.14.5-7.

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