

**ISKCON's GBC**  
**By Hridayananda das Goswami**  
**July 23, 2016**

**Table of Contents**

<u>Introduction</u>	4
Historical Moments for Non-GBC Help	4
Unity in Diversity	4
Prabhupada's Will and the GBC	4
Danger on Both Sides	5
Engaging Scholarship to Understand ISKCON	5
The Term <i>Political</i>	6
<u>Routinization of Charisma</u>	7
Three Forms of Social Authority	7
Charismatic Authority	7
Routinizing Authority	8
Traditional and Rational-Legal Authority	8
<u>GBC as Heirs</u>	11
GBC Self-Understanding	11
Problems with GBC Self-Understanding	11
<u>GBC Traits</u>	15
Interpreting the Mandate	15
Danger of Bureaucratic Tyranny	15
Management Hierarchy and Spiritual Hierarchy	16
Decreasing Empathy	17
The Iron Law of Oligarchy	17
Sadhu Burnout	17
Austere and "Pious" Tyranny	18
Follow vs. Imitate	19
<u>Justice</u>	21
Justice Needed for Social Stability	21
Justice Linked to Ethics, Morality	21
Justice linked to Equality	21
Kṛṣṇa Acts Justly	21
Equality and Hierarchy	22
Types of Justice	24
Blindfolded Justice	25
<u>ISKCON/GBC Law</u>	26
Law and Language	26
Equality	26
Other Key Words	26

Justice in GBC Law	27
GBC Law 4.4.2 Justice Ministry	27
GBC Law 17.1-2 Justice	28
<u>Unequal Law</u>	30
Discipline of Devotees in General	30
Discipline of Lesser ISKCON Leaders	30
Discipline of Regional Secretaries and RGB	30
Discipline of GBCs, Compared to TPs	30
Conduct and Discipline of Dīkṣā Gurus	31
Regional Governing Board (RGB) Members	33
GBC Conduct	33
Compare Laws for GBCs and Gurus	34
<u>Appeal in GBC Laws</u>	38
Recourse and Appeal for Ordinary Devotees?	38
GBC Admission of Flawed Law Doesn't Fix It	39
Stifling Debate Through Outdated Law	39
GBC Does Not Publish Self-Disciplinary Rules	40
<u>Understanding ISKCON Lines of Authority</u>	41
Introduction	41
Public Reason	41
Two Visions of ISKCON	42
UILA Seems to Favor Controlled Society	43
GBC Subordinating Language	44
Nourishing Bhakti	45
UILA Undermines Preachers' Autonomy	46
Sannyāsīs not in Management Hierarchy	47
Freedom in Devotional Service	48
Feudal ISKCON?	50
<u>GBC and Philosophy</u>	52
Fanaticism	52
Corruption	53
Incompetence	54
Avoiding the "GBC Word"	54
Social Contract vs. Tyranny	55
The Vanishing Reference Point	56
<u>Constitution</u>	57
Prabhupada Calls for an ISKCON Constitution	57
What Is a Constitution?	57
Purpose Six, Devotee Rights, Unfulfilled	57
Four Conflicting Core Principles	57
Other Articles Give No Rights	58

Limited Call for Feedback	59
Proposed Social Contract	59
<u>IR and IDRO</u>	61
ISKCON Resolve (IR)	61
IDRO ISKCON Dispute Resolution Office	61
<u>Conclusion</u>	63
Summary of <i>ISKCON's GBC</i>	63
Why Justice?	64

## **Introduction**

### **Historical Moments for Non-GBC Help**

ISKCON's history shows that at times in crucial situations, non-GBC devotees can provide the impetus and logic needed to motivate and even guide the GBC Body. In the zonal acarya issue, the Narayan Maharaja issue, and the abusive Gurukula issue, non-GBC devotees powerfully brought the GBC's and ISKCON's attention to areas of vital concern, resulting in essential correction, compensation, and progress.

I believe that such a historical moment is upon us again—a moment in which good and faithful ISKCON devotees, respecting Prabhupada's GBC system, must petition the GBC to correct a critical problem with ISKCON leadership, including the GBC itself.

Having served for many years as a GBC member, including four years under Srila Prabhupada's direct training, and one year as GBC chairman, and serving now as a loyal yet concerned member of ISKCON, I here present my case to the loyal servants of Prabhupada, for their sober consideration. My sincere desire is to strengthen Prabhupada's GBC system, and not to injure it.

### **Unity in Diversity**

In convoking the first annual Mayapura GBC meeting, which took place in 1974 [not 1975 as stated on the GBC website], Prabhupada clearly indicated that the GBC should govern in cooperation with other senior devotees: "With all GBC *and senior men* present we should discuss how to make unity in diversity. But, if we fight on account of diversity, then it is simply the material platform. Please try to maintain the philosophy of unity in diversity. That will make our movement successful." [Letter to Kirtananda Swami—October 18, 1973]

Accordingly, there must be dialogue between the GBC and senior devotees that disagree with them on practical points, or that advocate reform within Prabhupada's principles, as I do here. After all, Prabhupada speaks of *unity in diversity*. He knew there would be different views. Prabhupada did not ask the GBC to eliminate bona fide diversity by punishing those who disagree with them, but rather to search for unity in diversity with other faithful devotees.

### **Prabhupada's Will and the GBC**

The first article of Prabhupada's final *Declaration of Will* states that "the Governing Body Commission (GBC) will be the ultimate managing authority of the entire International Society for Krishna consciousness."

Prabhupada often warned his disciples not to follow the tragic example of the Gauḍīya Maṭha which disintegrated because Prabhupada's godbrothers did not follow their Guru's order to form a GBC.

"Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, at the time of his departure, requested all his disciples to form a governing body and conduct missionary activities cooperatively. He did not instruct a particular man to become the next *acarya*. But just after his passing away, his leading secretaries made plans, without authority, to occupy the post of *acarya*, and they split in...factions over who the next *acarya* would be." [CC 1.12.8-10 Purport]

Prabhupada himself diligently developed the GBC system in ISKCON, after introducing it in 1970. Given the dissolution of the Gauḍīya Maṭha, and Prabhupada's personal crafting of the GBC to prevent history from repeating itself, it is natural that ISKCON has always aimed its radar at any possible challenge to the GBC system.

### **Danger on Both Sides**

However, we must keep in mind that one can veer off any road to the right or left. Thus history teaches us that there are two dangers to Prabhupada's GBC system:

- a) not accepting GBC authority;
- b) giving oppressive power to the GBC.

Failure to follow the GBC system will sabotage Prabhupada's ISKCON. But an unjust or oppressive GBC can itself damage and even destroy Prabhupada's GBC system. Consider the following.

History and social science demonstrate that a political or managerial extreme will breed its opposite extreme. This dynamic is often called the *pendulum effect*. First described by Galileo in 1602 within the physical realm, the *pendulum effect* is the law that a movement in one direction eventually causes an equal movement in the opposite direction. Newton presents a related idea as his third law of motion: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

Social and political science often cite the *pendulum effect* to show that cultural, social, and political trends, when brought to one extreme, will tend to swing back to the opposite extreme. Thus throughout history, tyranny has often led to anarchy or democracy. A classic example is the oppressive French monarchy that led to the chaotic French Revolution. A current example is seen in Libya.

Prabhupada himself said that in the West, monarchy fell and gave way to democracy because it grew corrupt and oppressive. The opposite is also true: anarchy leads to tyranny, as seen in Germany after World War I.

I will argue in this paper that ISKCON has diligently guarded against one extreme: rejecting the GBC system. But ISKCON must also guard itself from the opposite extreme: tyranny. The GBC must take care not to claim, beyond Prabhupada's mandate, an extreme power that will ultimately destabilize and undermine Prabhupada's GBC system. Dictatorial authority may lead to a collapse of that authority, as with the Gauḍīya Maṭha, or to strong institutional democracy that jeopardizes the descending authority of the paramparā system.

As Newton said, "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." Thus moderate, balanced authority will generate moderate, balanced opposition. Judicious, moderate rule is stable and sustainable over the long term, and that is what ISKCON needs from the GBC.

### **Engaging Scholarship to Understand ISKCON**

ISKCON governance, with its achievements and failures, does not take place within a vacuum, but within a specific historical context. An objective consideration of that context reveals much about where we are, how we got there, and where we need to go.

In ISKCON's early days, with youthful zeal we often thought that a sincere devotee is beyond the laws of nutrition, psychology, medicine, or sociology. We now know that even sincere devotees still live within human bodies and human communities. To be free of *karma* is not to be free of all of nature's God-given laws, be they laws of gravity, nutrition, psychology, or sociology. Therefore, we can and should rationally study and engage those fields in a spirit of *yukta-vairāgya*, literally *engaged detachment*.

In his purport to the *Bhāgavatam* 1.5.22, Prabhupada states: "Human intellect is developed for advancement of learning in art, science, philosophy, physics, chemistry, psychology, economics, politics, etc. By culture of such knowledge the human society can attain

perfection of life. This perfection of life culminates in the realization of the Supreme Being, Viṣṇu...When advancement of knowledge is applied in the service of the Lord, the whole process becomes absolute...Therefore, all the sages and devotees of the Lord have recommended that the subject matter of art, science, philosophy, physics, chemistry, psychology and all other branches of knowledge should be wholly and solely applied in the service of the Lord.”

In that spirit of using knowledge in Kṛṣṇa’s service, let us see what social science and history can teach us about the present state of ISKCON governance. While appreciating the sincere efforts and accomplishments of ISKCON’s governing body, we must also consider how Prabhupada’s GBC system can more effectively, fairly, and rationally govern his society. In that spirit, I turn now to the sociology of religion.

### **The Term *Political***

In this paper, I sometimes use the term *political*. Prabhupada often used this word in its derogatory sense: acting to achieve status or power within an organization, rather than acting on higher principle.

However, the term *political* also has a primary, neutral sense that refers to the government or public affairs of a society. ISKCON has a government, and ISKCON has public affairs, issues that concern devotees in general. Therefore, ISKCON has a political dimension.

Also, since individuals and groups manage ISKCON, power is wielded in ISKCON. In this way too, in the neutral sense, ISKCON has a political sphere. I suggest it is healthier to acknowledge this fact. We can then rationally study how power is, and should be, engaged in ISKCON.

We must consider how, within Prabhupada’s parameters, power can be engaged more consciously, rationally, and effectively for the good of ISKCON, in a spirit of informed *yukta-vairāgya*.

## **Routinization of Charisma**

### **Three Forms of Social Authority**

In every society, including ISKCON, some individual or group exercises power over others. Max Weber (1864-1920), one of the founders of sociology, and seminal thinker in the sociology of religion, identified three forms of social power or authority: charismatic, traditional, and legal/rational. Let us consider how these three forms of authority manifest in ISKCON.

### **Charismatic Authority**

In the sociology of religion, *charisma* (from the Greek *kharisma*, “gift of grace”) indicates *divinely conferred power or talent*, and is thus synonymous with the Sanskrit *śakti-āveśa*. Weber showed that it is often a *charismatic leader* who founds a new religion, or a new religious movement. That religious leader possesses *charismatic authority*, defined as a “certain quality of an individual...by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman...powers or qualities...not accessible to the ordinary person, [and] regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary...”<sup>1</sup>

In that sense, Prabhupada is clearly a *charismatic leader* whose extraordinary personal qualities “inspire loyalty and obedience from followers.”<sup>2</sup>

A charismatic religious authority is often considered to have the power to communicate directly with God, and to then relay God’s will and message to followers. Thus in the language of social science, Prabhupada possessed *charismatic authority*. His followers accept his unique purity, and spiritual connection with Kṛṣṇa.

His followers, as is normal with charismatic leaders, accept that ultimate authority resides in and emanates from his person. Thus, as scholars point out, a charismatic leader is often revolutionary, redefining authority, and thereby, subverting traditional, unenlightened, profane authority. For his young followers, Prabhupada’s divine authority transcended all mundane cultural norms, such as mundane family or career obligations.

Similarly, when Prabhupada’s disciples went out to steal flowers for Kṛṣṇa, or sell his books, they often ignored, indeed laughed at, rules and laws that governed ordinary people. In our minds, we served a higher spiritual law that Prabhupada alone revealed. His pleasure was our law. (Of course in our immaturity, we ignored Prabhupada’s pleas that we not disturb the public.)

Many of us went straight from the revolutionary political movements of the 60’s to revolutionary ISKCON. Our youthful understanding of Prabhupada’s radical critique of the world and its customs gave us all the justification we wanted to *do the needful* to execute our service. The world was illusion, its rulers fools, its laws corrupt and mundane, and our cause absolute and always self-justifying.

In religious movements throughout the world, we find that followers claim absolute, *exclusive* authority for their charismatic leader. Thus for many, Prabhupada’s exclusive authority as a charismatic leader even extended internally to our *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava* tradition. Yet, as an enlightened spiritual leader, Prabhupada always faithfully taught the traditional system of tripartite authority—*guru*, *sadhu*, and *śāstra*, i.e. one’s own guru, revealed texts, and previous

---

<sup>1</sup> Weber, Maximilian. 1947 [1922]. *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. "The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization" translated by A. R. Anderson and Talcott Parson. Originally published in 1922 in German under the title *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, chapter III § 10.

<sup>2</sup> Kendall, Diana, Jane Lothian Murray, and Rick Linden. 2000. *Sociology in Our Time* (2nd ed.). Scarborough, On: Nelson, 438-439.

spiritual authorities in our tradition. He insisted that it was precisely our balanced system of *guru*, *sādhu*, and *śāstra* that distinguished us from other movements.<sup>3</sup>

Of course in some religious movements, so-called leaders openly claim and demand exclusive, *independent* authority, a claim that Prabhupada rejected.

In any case, as Prabhupada well knew, charismatic authority is as precarious as it is powerful, in two ways.

1. A person or community that doubts the charismatic leader's authority can reject all his teachings more easily and quickly than a society will reject long tradition, or established law.

2. A new religious society led by a charismatic leader faces an even bigger challenge when the leader passes away. Because the charismatic leader's personal presence and authority sustained the society, the society must find a way to maintain that essential authority in the leader's personal absence, lest the society unravel.

### **Routinizing Charisma**

History and social science show that new religious movements survive when a departed leader's charismatic authority is successfully channeled into a stable, enduring institutional structure, a process called the *Routinization of Charisma*. Prabhupada was keenly aware of this need to safely perpetuate his authority by investing it in a stable enduring structure after his passing. He had witnessed the collapse of the Gauḍīya Maṭha, when its own charismatic leader, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī Ṭhākura, passed away.

In social science language, Sarasvatī Ṭhākura ordered his disciples to *routinize* or stabilize his own powerful charisma, his spiritual authority, by forming a governing body. Instead, his disciples tried to perpetuate their guru's charismatic authority by investing it in an unqualified *successor Ācārya*, with disastrous results.

### **Traditional and Rational-Legal Authority**

To understand the process of routinizing charisma, we will look at the other two forms of social power or authority—traditional and rational-legal.

The *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion* states:

“According to Weber, the two principal types of routinization are traditional and rational-legal. In the traditional structure, a person is understood to inherit charisma in some way, often with mystical sanction (e.g., kingship). In rational-legal authority structures, a set of laws or rules serves this purpose. Real-world authority structures are usually of mixed character.”<sup>4</sup>

Again, Prabhupada understood this, and he acted to perpetuate his movement through both tradition and law:

1. He personally established and trained the GBC body during his life, and named them in his will as ISKCON's ultimate *managing* authority. Prabhupada thus created a *tradition* of GBC management, a form of *office charisma*, in which spiritual authority is attached to an office, such as GBC member or temple president.

2. He instructed that the GBC govern not by whim, but by reasonable, constitutional law. Thus Prabhupada provided for both traditional authority, and rational legal authority.

The GBC's own *ISKCON Constitution Committee* states, “Sri Prabhupada began the creation of ISKCON's constitution in 1966...” The committee cites Prabhupada as follows:

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://vaniquotes.org/wiki/Sadhu\\_Sastra\\_and\\_Guru\\_\(Lectures\)](http://vaniquotes.org/wiki/Sadhu_Sastra_and_Guru_(Lectures))

<sup>4</sup> <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/Routinization.htm>



“We are in the experimental stage but in the next meeting of the GBC members they should form a constitution how the GBC members manage the whole affair.” [August 12, 1971]

“As far as your proposals are concerned the real thing is that *we must make broader constitution* of... management by GBC. But the difficulty is that our GBC men are falling victim to maya.” [December 16, 1974]

Prabhupada understood that the rule of rational law, joined to tradition, would save ISKCON from the caprice and corruption of rulers who do not possess the spiritual purity and power of the Founder-Ācārya. The Constitution committee states that the GBC has worked on a constitution, off and on, for over forty years, yet a final constitution does not yet exist. This fact is both a symptom and cause of many problems within ISKCON, as I will show later.

The GBC will maintain their power to govern and inspire the devotee community, and not just the small minority that lives in temples, to the extent that the GBC demonstrates their ability to govern by reasonable laws. Devotees need to see that they are governed by objective, fair principles, not the preferences of imperfect leaders.

The GBC must also show their ability to dynamically spread Prabhupada’s mission, since Prabhupada equated divine empowerment with that ability.

History teaches us that new religious movements, and even older established movements, face real danger of schism, deviation, or disintegration. Thus, in Prabhupada’s absence, ISKCON needs an empowered, inspiring GBC that governs according to Prabhupada’s scientific administrative principles.

As stated above, too little, or too much, power will undermine Prabhupada’s GBC system. We must balance our fear of anarchy with an equally rational fear of tyranny and corruption. In other words, tradition must be united to rational law.

For example, consider how *office charisma* works in ordinary life: a police officer stops a driver on the road. The officer may not be personally charismatic, but his or her traditional authority, symbolized by a police uniform, a badge, a police car, and traditional ways of speaking and acting, all evoke the power of tradition and law.

This power is positively perceived in a well governed society. In corrupt or oppressive societies, the traditional symbols of police power evoke the specter of oppression, threat, hypocrisy, and corruption. Appeals to patriotism, loyalty, and civic pride do not mitigate the negative impression caused by bad government. All these factors operate analogously in other realms of government, whether military, judicial, legislative, or executive.

The same principles operate in ISKCON governance. Without rational, fair, effective administration, the GBC’s traditional symbols of power, and their claims to sacred authority, will come to symbolize oppression, injustice, and inability to spread our global mission.

In contrast, the combination of hallowed tradition and rational law is stable, effective, and enduring. The judicial tradition does not die with the judge’s death or impeachment, nor does police authority collapse with the loss of a police officer. Similarly, the GBC system will endure as long as it stands for justice, purity, and dynamic leadership of the sankirtana movement.

The danger of losing balance between tradition and rational law can be seen in the current Roman Catholic Church. Current studies show that in America, for every person that joins this church, six people leave. This trend is mirrored in other first world areas, such as Western Europe.

Educated Catholics often see the Church as clinging to archaic, irrational traditions, such as restricting the priesthood to unmarried males despite massive evidence that women or married people can be excellent priests. Strong attachment to an irrational tradition prevents the Church

from reversing its downward slide, and the much anticipated “Francis-effect” of a popular pope has failed to solve the problem.

Yet even as the Catholic Church shrinks in the first world, it does relatively well in the third world, where education levels, and expectations of good governance, are significantly lower. One wonders if something similar is taking place in ISKCON.

I now proceed to a more detailed analysis of the GBC, in which I cite evidence from their own declarations, laws, and essays.

## **GBC as Heirs**

### **GBC Self-Understanding**

It seems that an error in the GBC's self-understanding affects their ability to govern ISKCON effectively. I base my analysis on a GBC self-description on the official GBC website. I first cite the relevant portion of this GBC self-definition, and then analyze the problem.

“Traditionally, the acarya, or head of a spiritual institution would appoint such a position [of successor acarya] to one individual, an advanced student, who would, in turn, become the next leader of the institution upon the demise of his teacher. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakur broke from this tradition, opting instead for a council of leading disciples, a governing body, to cooperatively guide and manage the spiritual institution...Traditionally, the will of an acarya first names an heir, a successor of the institution, in effect passing on the institution to a leading disciple who would then act as the next acarya. Srila Prabhupada's will does not name an individual, however, but rather states “The Governing Body Commission (GBC) will be the ultimate managing authority for the entire International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness.” By naming the GBC as the heir to ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada again affirms the position of the GBC as the ultimate managerial head of ISKCON.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Problems with GBC Self-Understanding**

The above statement contains various problems:

1. The GBC claims that Bhaktisiddhānta *broke from the tradition* that “the ācārya or head would appoint such a position to one individual, an advanced student, who would, in turn, become the next leader of *the institution* upon the demise of his teacher.”

This is a rather dubious claim since we have little historical evidence that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas ever formed an institution in the modern sense, until Bhaktisiddhānta formed the Gauḍīya Maṭha. Thus it unclear *what tradition* Bhaktisiddhānta rejected. Let us review the history. Note that the GBC does not merely state that a guru would appoint a student to succeed him or her as guru, but to *become the next leader of the institution*.

a. During Lord Caitanya's personal presence in this world, He acted as the quintessential charismatic leader. His followers recognized Him as God, and thus accepted Him without question as the perfect, absolute authority. At this time, we do not find a formal institution, nor an official governing body.

b. In the century after Lord Caitanya, His movement continued to spread without an official institution with an official institutional leader or *managing* body. In the time of Lord Caitanya, and in the following years, many exalted devotees, appeared in this world, pure souls who did not need to be *managed* as in today's world. We do find then senior *saṅgas*, spiritual leaders, and joint decisions. But as scholars note, there is no formal, structured, institution with an official leader or governing body.

c. Then at the time of Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa (born in the 1660's, and active in Jaipur in the early 1700's) when Aurangzeb's persecutions forced the Vaiṣṇavas to make their center in Jaipur, rather than Vṛndāvana, history shows that the Jaipur king, not a Vaiṣṇava ācārya, nor a governing body, made key decisions about the status of the Gauḍīya community. It was there in Jaipur that Baladeva famously proved the validity of our tradition by winning public debates and writing his celebrated *Vedānta* commentary. One might argue that the king's power over the

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://gbc.iskcon.org/srila-prabhupadas-vision/>

devotee community is comparable to the power of modern governments to accept or reject ISKCON as a bona fide religion. However, it is clear that the king's examination of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism was theological and religious, far beyond the legal interests of modern secular states. Further, there is no evidence at that time of a significant, formal Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava institution ruled by an ācārya, or a governing body.

d. We know that Bhaktivinoda revived Lord Caitanya's mission in the modern age. Like Prabhupada, he did not inherit an institution, nor did anyone declare him to be the Ācārya. We have no evidence of a serious Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava institution anywhere in India when Bhaktivinoda began his mission. Indeed, the history of Lord Caitanya's movement shows no evidence of any formal, centralized institution before Bhaktisiddhānta.

Bhaktivinoda did not establish an *institution* in the sense that his son and Prabhupada did. Bhaktivinoda certainly played an invaluable, glorious role in reviving and organizing Lord Caitanya's movement. But it seems that he did not establish a network of permanent centers, nor purchase significant institutional property, nor engage a body of full time missionaries or sannyāsīs.

e. Upon his father's passing, Bhaktisiddhānta himself revived the order of Vaiṣṇava sannyāsa by taking it before a picture of his departed guru. He then opened his first center in Calcutta. He did not inherit a center. The GBC do not provide evidence of Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura willing an institution to his son as the successor Ācārya.

Prabhupada often used the term "men and money" to indicate institutional resources. Bhaktisiddhānta did not inherit significant institutional resources of men, money, or property from his father. I am not aware of any formal, legal declaration from Bhaktivinoda,

Apart from the united Gauḍīya Maṭha of his youth, Prabhupada never referred to an earlier Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava institution that was formally willed from one Ācārya to another, or to a governing body.

Therefore, since we have no clear evidence that Lord Caitanya or His followers before Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura established formal institutions and that one Ācārya legally inherited an *institution* from the previous Ācārya, nor that Bhaktivinoda willed a formal institution to his son, we cannot say that Bhaktisiddhānta *broke with tradition* by not naming a successor to lead his institution, the first of its kind in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava history.

One may argue that Lord Nityānanda's divine wife, Śrī Jāhnavā, was accepted as the leader of the Vaiṣṇavas. But, her position was neither *institutional* nor *managerial*, since there was no formal institution to lead. Further, in his will, Prabhupada names the GBC as the *ultimate managing authority* of ISKCON, giving them precisely the type of duties that Śrī Jāhnavā never performed. Nor can the GBC imitate the wife of God. The analogy fails.

As mentioned before, the GBC provide no evidence of a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition in which the Ācārya names a successor Ācārya to lead a formal, centralized institution.

2. The GBC also state: "Traditionally, the will of an acarya first names an heir, a successor of the *institution*, in effect passing on the *institution* to a leading disciple who would then act as the next acarya."

I am not aware of any surviving *will of an acarya* in our line that names an individual as heir to a significant institution. More problematic is the use of the word *heir*, and the claim above that Ācāryas, in their wills, *pass on* the institution to their heir.

The English word *heir* means, "a person legally entitled to the property or rank of another on that person's death." An heir is also one who inherits and continues the *legacy* of a

predecessor, a legacy being either money or property left in a will, or simply *anything handed down* from the past.

The GBC make two related claims:

- a. normally an Ācārya bequeaths his *institution* to a successor who becomes the *heir* to the *institution*, i.e. the new owner;
- b. “Traditionally”, an Ācārya will name the heir in the first clause of his Will.

Again, I have no idea what the historical evidence for this might be. Judging from the literal meaning of English words, the GBC does seem to consider itself be heir to ISKCON and thus to *possess* ISKCON in the same way that Prabhupada did.

Of course Prabhupada never called the GBC his *heir* in his will, nor did he use a synonym of *heir*. Prabhupada did say, “I want that all of my spiritual sons and daughters will *inherit* this title of Bhakti-vedanta, so that the family transcendental diploma will continue through the generations. Those possessing the tide of Bhakti-vedanta will be allowed to initiate disciples.” [Letter to Hansaduta—February 1, 1969]

Since the GBC claims on their website to take the place of the so-called *traditional heir-Ācārya*, the GBC de facto declares, or at the very least strongly insinuates, itself to be the collective successor Ācārya of ISKCON.

To make this clear, the GBC claims in the text above not merely to inherit Prabhupada’s managing authority, but, as they state above, to inherit ISKCON itself. The English word *heir* has this primary sense: *a person legally entitled to the property or rank of another on that person’s death*.

Since the GBC does not in any way qualify or limit their use of the word *heir*, and since they use the word in the context of a legal will, the word must be taken in its primary sense: the GBC claims they inherited ISKCON, making them the lords of all of us who are not GBCs.

Further, the GBC directly and explicitly equate *ultimate managing authority* with being ISKCON’s *heir*:

“By naming the GBC as the heir to ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada again affirms the position of the GBC as the ultimate managerial head of ISKCON.”

In fact, Prabhupada does not name the GBC as the *heir* to ISKCON. In the GBC sentence above, we find, “Prabhupada *again* affirms the position of the GBC” as the ultimate managing authority. In other words, the mere fact that the GBC is named in Article 1 of Prabhupada’s will means, according to a tradition for which the GBC provides no evidence, that they are the successor Ācārya. And being the successor Ācārya, they are the ultimate managing authority. I will outline the GBC’s logic:

Premise 1: In his will, Prabhupada explicitly names the GBC as the ultimate managing of authority of ISKCON.

Premise 2: Prabhupada does so in the first clause of his will. According to undocumented *tradition*, an Ācārya names his successor ācārya, and bequeaths his institution to that successor, in the first clause of his will. Thus Prabhupada *explicitly* names the GBC as the ultimate managing authority, but he also *implicitly* names them as his heir and successor.

Premise 3: As ISKCON’s heir and successor, the GBC is automatically ISKCON’s ultimate managing authority.

CONCLUSION: Prabhupada explicitly names the GBC as ultimate managing authority, and *again implicitly* names them as such through a series of two inferences stated above.

As we will see later in the section on ISKCON's constitution draft, there are other, more sober voices among the GBC who take a more realistic view of things.

In the 1980's ISKCON rejected an Ācārya system. Sadly, as I show here and elsewhere in this essay, it seems from the GBC's words and laws, that the GBC sees itself a group Ācārya, rather than a mere *ultimate managing authority*. As I will explain, the difference is profound. If I am right, then ISKCON again confronts the danger of an Ācārya system.

To recapitulate, Lord Caitanya's movement has centuries of tradition, but a significant formal institution seems to begin with Bhaktisiddhānta. And a collective ultimate managing authority, an official oligarchy, has no clear historical antecedents in Gauḍīya tradition.

Thus lacking a venerable tradition, or rational constitution, to justify and moderate its power, the GBC relies on its only source of legitimacy: Prabhupada's mandate. And to bolster that mandate, they over interpret it to mean that they are the collective successor Ācārya.

Seeing themselves in that way, it is no wonder that the GBC sometimes acts as if their divine authority cannot be encumbered by the limiting formalities of fair process, comprehensive laws, or justice itself.

For example, consider GBC law 7.4.4.2 which decrees how dīkṣā gurus should relate to the GBC. The first part of this law declares that gurus, "must respect the GBC as Srila Prabhupada's *chosen successor* as the ultimate managing authority of ISKCON and maintain a *respectful serving attitude* towards the GBC."

Here again, the GBC equates ultimate managing authority with being Prabhupada's chosen successor. Prabhupada was many things, not just a manager. In his final will, after years of praising and chastising the GBC, increasing and decreasing their authority, Prabhupada made his final decision. He defined the GBC as ISKCON's "ultimate managing authority."

The GBC seems to believe that with this mandate, Prabhupada made them his "chosen successor," and transformed all other Vaiṣṇavas, even very senior ones, into subordinate servants of the managers, an attitude reaffirmed in GBC law, and a recent GBC paper, as I will show later.

Thus the GBC declares, here and elsewhere, that just as senior preachers respectfully served Prabhupada, so we must also respectfully serve the GBC.

The GBC's claim to have inherited ISKCON is not mere careless composition. It matches the behavior of some GBC members and occasionally of the GBC body. It is also consistent with ISKCON laws and papers, as I will show in detail. I will next analyze other conceptual and structural problems facing ISKCON governance.

## **GBC Traits**

### **Interpreting the Mandate**

No one can dispute that Prabhupada appointed the GBC as the ultimate managing authority of ISKCON. The GBC itself often parades that mandate to justify their actions. However, we find embedded in their acts and claims a particular interpretation of Prabhupada's mandate. I will argue in this paper that the current GBC interpretation of their own mandate is a bit flawed and does not perfectly reflect Prabhupada's original intent. I base my conclusion on a careful analysis of GBC actions, laws, and papers.

I will present my general analysis, and then show how GBC laws and papers confirm that analysis.

### **Danger of Bureaucratic Tyranny**

History shows that unrestrained bureaucratic power can be just as oppressive as the power of emperors, religious despots, or zonal Ācāryas. ISKCON's ultimate managers do not all sit on thrones, or accept opulent worship and gifts. Crowds of disciples may not throw themselves at their feet. Nonetheless, three factors make the GBC's potential accumulation of unrestrained power just as dangerous, or more, than the zonal Ācārya system ever was:

1. In sociological terms, the GBC wields *traditional* power. Prabhupada himself, with his great charismatic authority, established the GBC *tradition*. Prabhupada also spoke of a guru's spiritual authority, but he never explicitly authorized the zonal acarya system, and thus devotees could challenge and overthrow that system.

But Prabhupada did establish, empower, and defend the GBC *system*. Thus ISKCON devotees tend to think that to defy GBC authority is to defy Prabhupada's will, even when the GBC does not perform well. Thus the GBC *system* has a sacred traditional authority that the zonal acarya *system* never possessed.

2. Traditional authority tends to be more stable and enduring than living charismatic authority. A managing body tends to accumulate power over time, as I explain below, whereas a guru's living charismatic power ends over time, either by the guru's passing, his malfeasance, or with the bureaucratic domestication of gurus as we see in GBC law and papers, as I will show.

3. During the days of *zonal acaryas*, there was a balance of power in ISKCON that does not exist now. The GBC body confronted and disciplined four of the eleven original acaryas. Indeed, in every case where the power of a big guru confronted GBC power, the GBC emerged as the ultimate authority in ISKCON. Most zonal acaryas were also GBCs and they faithfully backed the GBC in every serious conflict with a zonal acarya. The zonal *acaryas* did have much power, but the GBC effectively balanced and restrained that power, as history shows.

But in today's ISKCON, there is nothing to reliably and regularly balance or moderate GBC power, even when it exceeds the limits of justice, Vaiṣṇava etiquette, or Prabhupada's guidelines.

GBC tyranny, as well as rejection of the GBC, both threaten Prabhupada's GBC system. And history has long shown that unbalanced power tends toward corruption and tyranny. That is why Kṛṣṇa Himself created a system of four varṇas in which the power of rulers is balanced by the power of brāhmaṇas. But the GBC claims both powers, that of the ruler and sage.

This presents a serious and interesting challenge to ISKCON: how can we faithfully preserve Prabhupada's GBC system, and at the same avoid the real dangers of unrestrained, unbalanced power? How can we ensure that ISKCON management is expert, fair, and honest?

Prabhupada himself gave the answer: ISKCON's leaders must act under the restraint of a constitution. In *Bhagavad-gītā* 3.17-26, Lord Kṛṣṇa declares that self-realized souls, and Kṛṣṇa Himself, follow the principles of civilized life, to set an example for people in general. Civilized societies recognize the need for the rule of fair, reasonable law and ISKCON's leaders must show an example of lawfulness in their own lives and duties.

History, social science, Prabhupada, and Śāstra all tell us that the rational authority of fair laws—justice well enforced—must balance the power of managers. Prabhupada wanted the GBC to work *under* a fair and reasonable constitution that clearly defines and regulates managerial power in ISKCON.

On their current website, the GBC admits the need for “a constitution for ISKCON, which Srila Prabhupada asked the GBC to put together in the early seventies.”

Now, over forty years after Prabhupada requested it, the GBC must finally do their duty and make proper laws so that devotees who follow those laws, including leaders, will not disturb other devotees or projects, nor be unfairly disturbed by them, as Prabhupada desired.

Kṛṣṇa Himself states in the *Bhagavad-gītā* 12.15, that “one who does not disturb the world, and whom the world does not disturb...is dear to me.”

We need a proper constitution and laws precisely because ISKCON cannot just depend on the purity and pure wisdom of the GBC. I will give four reasons why this is true.

### **1. Management Hierarchy and Spiritual Hierarchy**

The history of religions, including ISKCON, clearly shows that those who follow the basic rules of a religious institution, and show skill in management, often rise to high positions of managerial power in that institution. Some GBCs are undoubtedly spiritually advanced, but all of ISKCON's ultimate managers are not *necessarily* our most advanced devotees. In any society, religious or secular, the strongest are not always the wisest.

Therefore, we cannot ignore Prabhupada's call for a constitution and simply trust ISKCON to the purity of managers, because as Prabhupada knew, all managers are not pure. They certainly are not pure simply because they hold a high managerial office.

Indeed, there are two logical possibilities:

1. All GBC members are fully pure devotees.
2. Some GBCs are conditioned to some extent.

If the latter is the case, then we can conclude that, as Prabhupada teaches, the main conditioning will be the desire to lord it over others. So to the extent that GBC members are conditioned souls, they will to that extent use their power to lord it over others.

To repeat, the minimum qualifications that may propel one to ISKCON leadership are:

1. basic faith, with or without philosophical depth;
2. ability to follow basic principles, with or without strong spiritual advancement;
3. managerial ability.

In cases where powerful managers are not highly advanced, power will diminish their empathy, as I show below, and with it their concern for justice. When flawed leaders influence the GBC body, injustice and unfair decisions can result. This in turn alienates many devotees from ISKCON management and weakens our mission.



## 2. Decreasing Empathy

Recent science shows how a sense of power often diminishes a person's capacity for empathy, and actually shuts down a part of the brain that helps us connect with others.<sup>6</sup>

Thus "...the balance of the [scientific] literature suggests that people in positions of power tend to act in a self-interested manner, and display reduced interpersonal sensitivity to their powerless counterparts."

In the years following Prabhupada's passing, we found that some ISKCON leaders who wielded great power displayed little empathy for the less powerful. This disparity shook ISKCON and resulted in major reform. It should not surprise us to again find that some of ISKCON's powerful leaders seem to lack empathy with devotees who are loyal to Prabhupada but do not blindly submit to these leaders on various issues.

Sadly, the disconnect between many GBCs and devotees has reached the point where it is a cliché in ISKCON, at least in the West, to say that the local or plenary GBC "is not relevant to my life."

One eminent scholar who has long studied ISKCON, comments, "I have heard from many devotees over the years that the GBC simply has no relevance in their lives. This may be the worst possible outcome."

Reliable science shows that a sense of power tends to weaken the empathy of leaders, resulting in injustice and loss of faith in an institution.

## 3. The Iron Law of Oligarchy

The GBC is an oligarchy, a relatively small group of people who govern an organization or institution. History and social science show that a ruling oligarchy tends to be concerned with its own power and dignity, often at the expense of justice. This brings us to the *Iron Law of Oligarchy*, which can be stated as follows:

"Any large organization...has to create a bureaucracy in order to maintain its efficiency as it becomes larger. Many decisions have to be made daily that cannot be made by large numbers of disorganized people. For the organization to function effectively, centralization has to occur and power will end up in the hands of a few. *Those few—the oligarchy—will use all means necessary to preserve and further increase their power.*"<sup>7</sup>

To the extent that GBC members are pure, they will transcend these tendencies. To the extent that they are still conditioned, they will succumb to them.

My own long experience as a GBC member, including one year as GBC chairman, showed me how easy it is, when one holds power in the GBC oligarchy, to believe that only GBC power can protect ISKCON from deviation, chaos, and dissolution. In this mindset, any increase of GBC power strengthens ISKCON, and any decrease of GBC power threatens ISKCON.

One might reply to all these points that the sheer number of advanced devotees on the GBC protects the body from significant errors. However, this argument faces two challenges:

1. History shows that the GBC has in fact made significant and damaging errors.
2. As I explain in the next paragraph, the iron law of oligarchy functions even within the GBC body, to limit the number of GBCs who actively engage in some major decisions.

## 4. Sadhu Burnout

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/356229>

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron\\_law\\_of\\_oligarchy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_law_of_oligarchy)

We know that some devotees become GBCs by their potent preaching and spiritual purity. But they are often the first to *burn out* with heavy management. Yet, when saintly preachers decrease their management, and focus instead on preaching and spiritual practice, they usually remain on the GBC. Thus hands-on managerial power falls into the hands of fewer members. This defeats Prabhupada's GBC vision in which a sufficient number of senior leaders actively manage and guide ISKCON.

On some important issues, those leaders who are comfortable with the passion of management may act without serious scrutiny from burned out GBC sādhus, confirming the *iron law of oligarchy*. The most active managers tend to be the most inclined to management, and thus the most passionate, according to the principles of *varṇa*. Being more passionate, they are less objective, according to *Bhagavad-gītā* 18.31. Thus the quality of decisions declines from goodness to passion.

When flawed, passionate decisions are pushed through by the few, devotees leave ISKCON or distance themselves from direct ISKCON affairs, since GBC law and tradition offer few practical, reliable procedures for regular devotees to challenge or redress GBC blunders or injustice.

For these reasons, ISKCON cannot depend only on the purity of GBCs to ensure that Prabhupada's mission is managed with justice, efficiency, and transparency. As Prabhupada stated, ISKCON needs a proper constitution. And even the GBC must obey it. Such a constitution would authorize emergency measures in cases of true emergency. Thus constitutional management would preserve the agility necessary to deal with extreme cases.

Given these facts—that ultimate managers are not always ultimately pure; that power tends to lessen empathy; that saintly GBCs often avoid heavy GBC issues and cede power by default to passionate managers; that oligarchies tend to seek ever greater power—ISKCON must guard against the corruption and tyranny that ruin a free brahminical society.

History, śāstra, social science, and Prabhupada himself all teach us that to avoid or at least lessen the above problems, ISKCON must establish a proper constitution that all ISKCON members must follow.

### **Austere and “Pious” Tyranny**

We should also note that personal ambition for power is not incompatible with an ascetic or religious lifestyle. The evil Mughal ruler Aurangzeb who attacked Vṛndāvana around 1670, forcing the transfer of Deities like Govindaji to Jaipur, rejected the lavish lifestyle of his Mughal predecessors. In the name of Muslim purity, he spent little for himself and chose to be buried in a plain, unnamed tomb. Yet his fanatical ambition cost the lives of over four and a half million people, nearly bankrupt India, starved South India, and ruined the Mughal empire.

Although he spread Mughal power farther than any other ruler, “within decades of Aurangzeb's death, the Mughal Emperor had little power beyond the walls of Delhi...The highpoint of imperial centralization under emperor Aurangzeb coincided with the start of the imperial downfall.” [Wikipedia] Here is a good example of the political pendulum effect.

Thus oppressive power does not always garb itself in opulence and pomp. The austere bureaucrat or the pious tyrant can be the most oppressive of rulers. The brutal French Revolution leader Maximilien Robespierre, the father of modern terrorism, was a puritanical bureaucrat obsessed with establishing “virtue” among the people. He was known as “the Incorruptible.” Here again we find a deadly mix of austere piety and cruel tyranny.

No one can accuse the GBC of such extremes. But as Plato points out in *The Republic*, the optician shows us oversized letters so we can easily read them. Similarly, extreme historical examples show us human tendencies that operate among us to lesser degrees, but nonetheless with damaging effect.

### **Follow vs Imitate**

For the GBC, to work under a fair constitution is to follow Prabhupada. To act above and outside the law is to imitate Prabhupada.

Consider this analogy: Prabhupada began ISKCON's guru tradition. Yet Prabhupada was not merely a guru. He was and remains ISKCON's Founder-Ācārya, with special powers and rights. When Prabhupada departed, ISKCON's gurus took some time to understand how to follow Prabhupada the guru, but not imitate Prabhupada the Founder-Ācārya.

Similarly, Prabhupada acted as ISKCON's supreme managing authority, a power he transferred to the GBC. Yet like gurus, the GBC must learn to follow Prabhupada the ultimate ISKCON manager, but not imitate him in his role as the Founder-Ācārya.

As Founder-Ācārya, Prabhupada appointed and removed devotees at his will, adjudicated disputes, and generally managed with summary power and freedom, unfettered by administrative or judicial formalities.

Lacking Prabhupada's purity, vision, and authority, the GBC must respect due process, obey a rational constitution, and treat every devotee with measurable justice. Prabhupada was above ISKCON law. The GBC must submit to the rule of law.

We find in *Śāstras* such as *Mahābhārata* and *Bhāgavatam*, that the Vedic political system was constitutional, not absolute, monarchy. Even kings were expected to follow *dharma*, rational law, enacted by God and sages for the good of all. Prabhupada often said that monarchy fell in Europe when the kings became corrupt. Again, we see the political pendulum effect.

In verses 10.33.29-32. the *Bhāgavatam* clearly explains the difference between following and imitating. King Parīkṣit asked how Kṛṣṇa, who came to this world to restore *dharma* by His own example, could violate *dharma* by intimate contact with so many women in the Rasa dance. In reply, Śukadeva Gosvāmī, beginning at 10.33.29, taught the difference between following and imitating the Lord. Here is a literal translation of these key verses.

10.33.29 “Transgressing of *dharma*, and also audacity, is observed in Lords. Among the very powerful, this does not lead to harm, just as Fire consumes all.”

10.33.30 “A non-Lord should never do this, not even mentally. Foolishly behaving so, one is ruined, just like [one who imitates] Rudra who drank the poison ocean.”

10.33.31 “The speaking of Lords is true [for us], and so too, in some cases, is their behavior. The wise do what they [Lords] do [when] it is supported by their speaking.”

10.33.32 By their pious or [apparently] impious acts, Lords have no selfish interest, and no setback, for they have no false ego.”

These verses teach that we should act as great souls act *only when* they order us to do so. [10.33.31] As Founder-Ācārya, and a pure devotee, Prabhupada could dispense with judicial formalities and constitutional limits, both of which constitute basic social principles, *dharma*, even in ancient Vedic society, as well as our world. For Prabhupada, that was not a fault.

But the GBC cannot imitate that behavior [10.33.30], since Prabhupada did not directly order them to do so [10.33.31]. In fact, he ordered the GBC to do the opposite—to form a constitution and, as I will show later, to respect the reasonable freedom of ISKCON devotees.

Prabhupada was free of false ego [10.33.32], and was empowered by Kṛṣṇa to act as he did. We are not free of personal desire on Prabhupada's level, and thus our transgressing of dharma, justice, will harm us and those whom we lead.

The GBC must follow, not imitate, Prabhupada by governing ISKCON within the boundaries of due process and justice, under a proper constitution.

In the next section I will discuss traditional and contemporary Western notions of justice, and show how these closely agree with Lord Kṛṣṇa's own teachings on justice in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. We will then see to what extent GBC law embodies those universal principles of justice.

## **Justice**

### **Justice Needed for Social Stability**

I will first very briefly review key Western notions of justice. “As the ethicist John Rawls has pointed out, the stability of a society—or any group, for that matter—depends upon the extent to which the members of that society feel that they are being treated justly. When some of society's members come to feel that they are subject to unequal treatment, the foundations have been laid for social unrest, disturbances, and strife. The members of a community, Rawls holds, depend on each other, and they will retain their social unity only to the extent that their institutions are just.”

### **Justice Linked to Ethics, Morality**

“...no idea in Western civilization has been more consistently linked to ethics and morality than the idea of justice. From the *Republic*...by Plato, to *A Theory of Justice*...by the late Harvard philosopher John Rawls, every major work on ethics has held that justice is part of the central core of morality.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Justice linked to equality**

“Moreover, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant and others have pointed out, human beings are all equal in this respect: they all have the same dignity, and in virtue of this dignity they deserve to be treated as equals. Whenever individuals are treated unequally on the basis of characteristics that are arbitrary and irrelevant, their fundamental human dignity is violated.” Indeed, “justice means giving each person what he or she deserves.”<sup>9</sup>

The notion that equality is the basis of justice is not new. The ancient Stoics held that God is everywhere and in everyone. Moreover, the divine spark in everyone enables us to live in accord with God’s will, manifest as *natural law*. Justice is to honor the equal presence of soul and God in every body, and thus follow the natural law.

### **Krishna Acts Justly**

But is *justice*, based on the equality of souls and fair reciprocation with each, a Western concept or invention? Not at all. Throughout *Bhagavad-gītā*, Lord Kṛṣṇa gives the very same idea of justice—the equality of all souls, and fair reciprocation with each soul.

For example, “As everyone approaches me, I precisely reciprocate.” [4.11]

Echoing Kṛṣṇa’s language at 4.11, *yathā...tathā eva*, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, in his famous song *Gurudeva*, prays to his spiritual master, *sakale sammāna korite śakati deho nātha yathāyatha*, “O master, grant me the power to honor everyone *as they deserve*.”

In fact, the equality of souls is a major topic in *Bhagavad-gītā*. Just as in Western moral and political philosophy, equality is the core of Kṛṣṇa’s own teaching on justice.

Here is a sample of what Kṛṣṇa says about equality:

*A truly wise person sees all creatures with equal vision.* [5.18]

*To fix the mind in equality is to conquer material life. To stand in equality is to stand on the spiritual platform.* [5.19]

*The highest yogī empathizes with all souls.* [6.32]

*To truly see is to see Kṛṣṇa in all beings.* [13.28]

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/justice-and-fairness>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/justice.html>

*Seeing Kṛṣṇa equally in all things, one does not harm oneself. [13.29]*  
*Being equal to all beings, one attains the highest devotion. [18.54]*

Further, Kṛṣṇa Himself sets a perfect example of justice, based on fair reciprocation with all souls. Thus He sees and treats everyone equally and fairly, in perfect reciprocation and justice. [4.11, 9.29, 13.28]

Kṛṣṇa demands justice of earthly leaders, and even comes to this world to reestablish justice when it wanes. [4.7-8] Keep in mind that *dharma* is a primary Sanskrit word for justice and Kṛṣṇa comes to reestablish *dharma*.

Kṛṣṇa teaches justice in another important way by fairly rewarding the virtue of one who does not worship Him. To understand this principle of detached justice, let us consider a famous example from Western philosophy. In the Platonic dialogue called *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks a brilliant question to the self-righteous and hypocritical Euthyphro:

“Do the gods love good acts because *they are good*. Or are they good *because the gods love them*?” [*Euthyphro* 10a]

There is a long tradition of posing the monotheistic version of this question: Does God love the good because it is good? In other words, does God impose his whims and personal tastes on human beings, or is God a fair, rational creature who gives each soul what they deserve according to objective standards of good and evil?

Kṛṣṇa emphasizes in the *Gītā* that the latter is true: He is equal and just with all souls, fairly reciprocating with each of them.

In *Bhagavad-gītā*, we see Kṛṣṇa’s impartial justice in action. He states that if a person does not worship Him but still acts virtuously in the ordinary sense, Kṛṣṇa will reward that person. Here is the evidence:

1. Those in the material mode of goodness worship demigods [17.4]
2. Yet those in goodness are elevated. [14.18]
3. Goodness manifests in happiness. [14.9]
4. Goodness brings happiness. [14.17]
5. That is because goodness is relatively pure, enlightening, and free of malady. [14.6]

Thus Kṛṣṇa teaches, with perfect impartial justice, that those who worship demigods, but act virtuously, receive mundane happiness, wisdom, and elevation.

Similarly, Kṛṣṇa even rewards the impersonalists who do not initially recognize His supreme personality. [12.1-5] Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa whether those who worship Kṛṣṇa as a Person, or those who devote themselves to an impersonal truth, are the greatest knowers of yoga. Kṛṣṇa replies that the personalists are the greatest yogīs. But the impersonalists too, despite all the extra trouble they take on, eventually achieve Kṛṣṇa, *if they are dedicated to the good of all creatures*.

### **Equality and Hierarchy**

Despite this emphasis on universal equality, Kṛṣṇa teaches another fact of this world that stands in tension with equality: hierarchy. Kṛṣṇa personally created the hierarchical system of four vocational classes or *varṇas*, called *cāturvarṇyam*. [Bg 4.13]

Indeed, in every society, including Vedic, we find political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual hierarchies. There are ubiquitous hierarchies between parents and children, teachers and students, rich and poor, strong and weak, learned and unschooled. Yet both contemporary principles of human rights, as well as *Bhagavad-gītā*, insist that despite these hierarchies, ultimately there is a natural equality of all souls. Of course the *Gītā* goes beyond

modern principles and extends that equality to all living beings.

The *Bhāgavatam* emphasizes that to identify with *varṇāśrama*, or any other bodily hierarchy, is to bind oneself to illusion. Hierarchy is needed, but it is never ultimate truth.

Even in ISKCON, those who stand atop a social hierarchy, as gurus, GBCs, sannyāsīs, temple presidents etc., will be tempted to identify with their position. After all, we all come to this world to lord it over, and we are not yet fully pure like Prabhupada. Only pure Krishna consciousness frees us from all attachment to social position, even in a spiritual movement.

Since we cannot expect that all ISKCON managers, including GBCs, will be fully pure devotees, ISKCON must have comprehensive rational law, as in all civilized societies, to protect devotees from possible occurrences of personal ambition, bullying, vengeance, corruption, cronyism, or favoritism among leaders who are not yet pure in Krishna consciousness.

Kṛṣṇa, the Ācāryas, and a long, wise tradition of political philosophy, all teach us about the equal ultimate dignity of every person, not to speak of every Vaiṣṇava. This is the essence of justice, and ISKCON cannot thrive without justice. Kṛṣṇa Himself comes to this world when justice, dharma, wanes.

An important part of ISKCON’s mission is to teach and demonstrate that Krishna consciousness brings the highest justice, dharma, to the world. ISKCON must have consistent justice or we will be transparent hypocrites.

Lord Kṛṣṇa teaches both equality and hierarchy in perfect balance. We find echoes of His universal teachings in Western thought. To illustrate this, I will compare the teachings of John Stuart Mill, and Émile Durkheim, two of the greatest modern Western thinkers on the role of the individual and society.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states: “John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), British philosopher, moral and political theorist, and administrator, was the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the nineteenth century. His views are...are generally recognized to be among the deepest and certainly the most effective defenses of...a liberal political view of society and culture.” And also, “Mill’s conception of liberty justified the freedom of the individual in opposition to unlimited state control.” [Wikipedia]

Mill believed that society is the result of a social contract between intrinsically free and equal persons. In his famous *On Liberty*, Mill wrote, “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” Social and moral psychologist Jonathon Haidt adds that, “Mill’s vision appeals to many liberals and libertarians.”

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), known as the “father of sociology,” believed that thinkers like Mill had overemphasized the individual and neglected the key role of society. “Chief among his claims is that society is a *sui generis* reality, or a reality unique to itself and irreducible to its composing parts [individual persons].” [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy]

Haidt states that for Durkheim, “the basic social unit is not the individual, it is the hierarchically structured family, which serves as a model for other institutions.” [*The Righteous Mind* 2012] He quotes Durkheim: “man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs. To free himself from all social pressure is to abandon himself and demoralize him[self].”

We may roughly say that Mill espoused the *Gītā* principle of equality, whereas Durkheim emphasized the *Gītā* principle of hierarchy, “duty over rights.” [Haidt]

Prabhupada expertly taught *Bhagavad-gītā*’s perfect balance of equality and hierarchy. Prabhupada taught that we must offer profound respect to all devotees, and all life, and at the

same time, we must faithfully respect natural and necessary hierarchies.

To effectively govern ISKCON, the GBC must maintain Prabhupada's balance between equality and hierarchy. An impartial review of GBC law, papers, and conduct, will all show the need to find a better balance in ISKCON. Within ISKCON, there are *pockets of tyranny*, zones and temples ruled dictatorially in the name of Vedic culture. And at times there is flagrant managerial disregard for justice, including due process.

The duty of ISKCON managers is to facilitate and serve a *brāhmaṇa* society, not as in in some temples and zones, to treat the Lord's servants as dependent *śūdras*, incapable or unentitled to hold their own views within Prabhupada's broad parameters.

My paper is not a typical liberal argument against conservative views. It is a plea for moderation, justice, and balance.

### **Types of Justice**

To better understand justice, and to what extent it exists in ISKCON, let us consider four standard types of justice.

1. Distributive justice: fair distribution of benefits and burdens (heavy duties) to society's members.

2. Retributive justice: fair and just punishment, i.e. the punishment fits the crime.

3. Compensatory justice: those who injure others give fair compensation to those they injure.

4. Procedural justice, also called *due* or *fair process*. Clearly, the process or procedure that determines the other forms of justice must itself be fairly conducted.

There is a relationship of mutual dependence between the first three forms of justice, and the fourth. Without due process, there is no vehicle or method to arrive at the other three forms of justice. And without clear laws ensuring those three forms of justice, due process is rendered impotent, for it can only ensure that published laws are honored.

Since in my view, the GBC has been particularly remiss in due process, I will provide here the basic principles of due process as given by the ISKCON Dispute Resolution Office and approved by the GBC.

#### *ISKCON's Definition of Fair Process*

1. *Notice to the accused; right to know the charges or at least all the major elements of the charges. The right to know the rules and policies in ISKCON that are relevant; Generally, the right to know who is the accuser, what are the consequences if found guilty;*

2. *Timeliness of the process and of each step of the process;*

3. *Right to present one's own evidence; generally, the right to question the evidence brought by the other side; generally, the right to face or meet with the accuser; the right to respond to the concerns that are raised;*

4. *A fair and impartial fact-finding; a fair and impartial hearing;*

5. *Right to a decision that is not unreasonable or arbitrary in nature;*

6. *Notice of the decision, and generally the right to a written decision with a statement of the reasons for the decision;*

7. *The right to request an appeal;*

8. *Freedom from retaliation, especially when one has raised a complaint in a responsible manner and in good faith;*

9. *The right of privacy, as far as possible, for all concerned.*



Many ISKCON leaders are saintly Vaiṣṇavas who foster peace and justice in their areas. But there is a problem in other places, the *pockets of tyranny*. Lack of fair process also surfaces at times in the collective actions of the GBC body.

We can attribute a fairly common disregard of due process to a belief among some of ISKCON's ultimate managers that they are now the collective Ācārya of ISKCON, with the right to govern their zones and ISKCON without the constraints of due process. And among some regional and temple leaders, we see a type of junior autocracy, always in the name of Vedic culture and *paramparā*.

No one in ISKCON—whether a guru, sannyāsī, GBC, temple president, or whatever—has the right to mistreat anyone, or to deny anyone justice, in the name of Prabhupada or Kṛṣṇa. No one in any position can claim divine authority to treat anyone unfairly.

### **Blindfolded Justice**

Courthouses and halls of justice around the world symbolize justice with a statue of the Roman goddess of justice, holding a punishing sword in one hand and the scales of justice in the other. Generally, the scale hand is above the sword hand, since fair, objective weighing of evidence, must precede any punishment, reward, or settlement. The goddess of justice is often blindfolded showing that in her weighing of evidence, she disregards arbitrary and irrelevant factors, such as race, ethnicity, gender, rank, or the private wishes of the judge. Indeed, to be swayed by such factors would offend the equal dignity of souls and their equal right to justice, and would thus perpetrate injustice, *adharmā*.

I will next analyze ISKCON/GBC law, to determine whether or to what extent GBC law embodies justice for devotees in general.

## ISKCON/GBC Law

### **Law and Language**

In his Preface to the published body of ISKCON Law, the late, lamented Suhotra Swami, who was then [1997-98] the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice Chairman of the GBC, wrote, “there are undoubtedly areas that our laws do not cover sufficiently.”

He was certainly correct. A perusal of ISKCON law shows few if any laws guaranteeing justice to regular ISKCON devotees, who constitute most of our movement.

On its current website, the GBC hedges Suhotra Swami’s statement by declaring that “...there *may be* some areas that our laws do not cover sufficiently.”

I begin my analysis of published ISKCON/GBC law by studying its language. Does ISKCON law contain the very language of justice? Read and judge for yourself.

### **Equality**

*Equality* is a key concept in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, and it stands at the core of justice. Yet the word *equality* does not appear in ISKCON Law. *Equality* cannot be taken as a merely Western concern. Indeed, Prabhupada uses the word many hundreds of times in Vedabase, often with a philosophical and moral sense similar to the Western sense.

The word *equal* appears once in forty years of GBC law, in this sentence: “The devotional service of the women is considered *equal* by Lord Kṛṣṇa and the spiritual master.” Given the status of women in ISKCON, and the wording of this sentence, and the absence of any ISKCON law guaranteeing equal justice to women, this one use of the word *equal* in ISKCON law can only refer to the internal pleasure of Kṛṣṇa and guru. It guarantees Vaiṣṇavīs no equal justice in the visible world.

### **Other Key Words**

Published ISKCON law does mention *rights* of devotees, but only as follows:

1. Law 7.1.1 Disciples have a *right* to worship their guru, to accept instruction and initiation, to associate with other gurus, and to aspire for shelter and initiation.

But what if a leader mistreats them in some way? In that case, ISKCON law gives disciples no *right* to justice or compensation.

2. Law 3.4.1.4.d states that Regional Governing Bodies must define the *rights* and responsibilities of RGB members. ISKCON law does not define those *rights*, nor do those undefined *rights* apply to non-RGB members.

3. Law 15.4.2.3: Congregational programs must negotiate sankirtana *rights* with local temples.

Conclusion: ISKCON law says nothing about the rights of *regular* devotees to be treated with justice by their superiors.

Are *rights* a purely Western idea? No. Kṛṣṇa states in *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.47, “You have a *right* to your duty.” Kṛṣṇa teaches that our duty is born of our nature [3.33, 18.41-44], and that we achieve perfection by working according to our own nature [18.45-46], and that we must not perform another’s duty [18.47], for it is dangerous to do so [3.35].

We may therefore conclude that this vital right to perform the service or duty born of our nature entails a clear right within ISKCON: the right, the necessity, to perform service according to one’s nature.

Any leader who denies a devotee, man or woman, the right to serve Kṛṣṇa according to his or her nature is preventing that devotee from obeying Kṛṣṇa's order, and is forcing that devotee, man or woman, into a spiritually dangerous situation. [3.35]

Thus Kṛṣṇa's declaration of our right to serve Him according to our nature has serious social consequences, and is ultimately the foundation of all our other rights. So the notion of *rights* comes from Kṛṣṇa Himself. But the word does not appear in forty years of GBC law.

The word *fair* occurs once in ISKCON law, in the phrase, "the fair market value for such property." The word *fair* is not used in ISKCON law to express ethical, moral, or spiritual concern for the treatment of devotees.

The word *fairness* does not occur in ISKCON law.

The word *just*, as a synonym of *fair* occurs once in ISKCON law, to say that a GBC's annual report should include: "...debts which with *just* cause could not be avoided..." The word *just* is not used in ISKCON law to express ethical, moral, or spiritual concern for devotees.

The word *impartial* occurs once in ISKCON law, to describe an investigation into whether a property should be sold or not. GBC law does not use the word *impartial* to express ethical, moral, or spiritual concern in the treatment of devotees.

ISKCON law uses the terms *fair*, *just*, and *impartial* only to describe management concerns, never to speak of the treatment of devotees. *Equality* and *fairness* do not appear in ISKCON law. And the word *rights* is used in ways that offer devotees no significant protection from mistreatment.

The terms *due process* and *fair process* do not appear in ISKCON law.

What about the word *justice* itself? Here too, those seeking guarantees of justice in ISKCON law will be disappointed.

### **Justice in GBC Law**

Published ISKCON law has two sections on justice:

1. Section 4.4.2 establishes and defines the so-called Justice Ministry.
2. Section 17 defines ISKCON justice itself.

### **GBC Law 4.4.2 Justice Ministry**

The 2011 GBC resolution establishing the ISKCON Dispute Resolution Office (IDRO, to be discussed later) contains this telling phrase, "Whereas previous attempts to create a judicial process in ISKCON never took hold..."

"...never took hold..." is a polite way of saying that the GBC's Justice Ministry has been essentially defunct for many years. And nothing substantial has been done to replace it. Nonetheless, we should examine what ISKCON law says about the Justice Ministry to better understand the GBC theory of justice.

In 2002, the GBC authorized, and then supported, ISKCON Resolve, an often effective mediation program. More recently, in 2011, the GBC established IDRO, as stated above.

However, neither program provides a system of justice for ISKCON, as I will show later. For now, let us examine what GBC law says, and does not say, about the phantom Justice Ministry.

I begin with the unsaid: no GBC Resolutions—that is, no ISKCON law—dealing with the Justice Ministry says anything about individual devotee rights, nor makes any reference to any other text, including GBC papers, that guarantees the rights of *regular* devotees to justice in ISKCON.

Moreover, as stated above, for decades none of the GBC resolutions about the Justice Ministry have been executed. Thus for decades the GBC knowingly allowed a situation in which ISKCON has no program dedicated to justice.

It is sad and ironic that the first ISKCON law about the Justice Ministry states:

“4.4.2.1 Definition: The Ministry of Justice is...fully authorized by the GBC, ...*given assurance of the participatory support of each GBC member* which will be necessary to successfully execute the mandate described herein, and *given sufficient resources to efficiently and effectively deal with grievances and complaints which arise within ISKCON.*”

Of course, apart from mediation, none of this has really taken place for decades. Also this section of GBC law does not give guidelines, definitions, or descriptions of what justice actually is within ISKCON.

### **GBC Law 17.1-2 Justice**

One might hope that section 17 of ISKCON law, titled *Justice*, would explain what justice is for devotees in general. But that hope would be in vain.

ISKCON law’s tiny section 17 on *Justice* basically states that a devotee with grievance against a temple president may appeal to the GBC zonal secretary, and meanwhile follow orders.

Note that according to this *Justice* section of ISKCON law, a devotee cannot appeal a decision of a GBC zonal secretary. Only a temple president can do that. Nothing has been added to this section on *Justice* in twenty-three years.

Besides resolutions establishing the phantom Justice Ministry, and a tiny section telling us how to appeal the actions of a temple president, the word *justice* does not appear in published ISKCON law.

In all published ISKCON law, there is no description of justice itself, nor a clear declaration of the rights of individual devotees.

Yet though GBC law does not efficiently protect devotees from injustice, it does efficiently punish them. To use the preferred GBC word, the laws *discipline* the devotees.

Sadly, however, GBC law lacks both the language and spirit of equal justice based on the equality of souls, a concept taught in *Bhagavad-gītā*, and in the West. Thus it is not surprising that GBC law presents a system of hierarchical justice: heavier on the powerless, and those with limited power; heaviest on those with competing power: and most lenient with those who make the laws.

I will first list the ranks in this hierarchy, and then survey the hierarchical justice system by citing GBC law.

The ISKCON power hierarchy is as follows:

1. The powerless tend to be devotees in general who hold no position in ISKCON, and have little influence on decisions that shape Prabhupada’s mission.

2. Those with limited power are what GBC law 5.5. calls *ISKCON officials*, with the titles of President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Temple Management Council Member, Project Director, Congregational Preaching Director etc. Law 5.5 stipulates that this group does *not* include Regional Secretaries, gurus, or GBCs.

3. Those with competing power are gurus. As I will show, the GBC goes to extraordinary lengths to control this potentially dangerous group. More than managers, gurus tend to be charismatic leaders. And sociologists point out that charisma by nature threatens bureaucratic authority.

4. At the hierarchical summit is the ruling GBC, with their closest colleagues: regional secretaries, and members of regional governing boards whose members include some GBC representatives.

## **Unequal Law**

Next, a study of GBC law, especially those laws that set standards, and punish deviation, reveals the hierarchical, unequal, nature of justice for various groups. Beginning with the powerless, devotees in general, we will proceed through the four groups till we reach the legal pinnacle: GBC members, the lawmakers themselves.

### **Discipline of Devotees in General**

In Section 8.4 of GBC law, we find *two full pages* of crimes and punishments aimed at those who *participate* in ISKCON, but are not necessarily leaders of any kind. This section lists seven kinds of misconduct and failure to follow authority, followed by five kinds of escalating punishment—censure; probation; suspension pending investigation; suspension; and excommunication (also called expulsion).

An appeal process is mentioned but with no clear instructions or information about how one actually files an appeal. There is no mention of due process. Thus an appellant has no stated right to know the charges against him or her; no stated right to a timely decision; no stated right to present evidence; no right to a fair and impartial fact-finding or hearing, no right to a fair decision, nor to freedom from retaliation, nor to privacy.

### **Discipline of Lesser ISKCON leaders**

Section 5.5 of ISKCON law, titled *Discipline and Conduct of ISKCON Leaders*, gives *over two pages* of rules and procedures to discipline, censure, place on probation, suspend, and remove ISKCON leaders.

But the law adds a caveat: none of these rules apply to ISKCON's top leaders:

“Sections concerning tenure and discipline of Regional Secretaries, Gurus and GBC members are to be included in *different sections*.”

Sections 5.5 aims at temple presidents, and also “Vice-President, Treasurer, Temple Management Council Member, Project Director, Congregational Preaching Director, etc.”

### **Discipline of Regional Secretaries, RGB**

We find here a curious distinction: section 5 of GBC law lists many dozens of duties and standards for temple presidents, but almost none for Regional Secretaries, other than to assist the zonal GBC secretary, and help the temple presidents set up a zonal exhibition booth for the annual Mayapur-Vrindavan festival.

Further, there are no laws that explain when and how to discipline deviant Regional Secretaries, nor does GBC law provide any descriptions of the spiritual character and conduct that Regional Secretaries should manifest. In other words, GBC law gives page after page of rules on these very subjects for Temple Presidents, but nothing for Regional Secretaries, who stand above Temple Presidents.

Moreover, GBC law says virtually nothing about standards of character and conduct for members of Regional Governing Boards. There is no law telling us when and how RGB members are to be disciplined?

### **Discipline of GBCs, Compared to TPs**

GBC law states that a GBC member cannot break the regulative principles, commit a crime, or criticize other GBC members. Apart from that, there is no explicit GBC law telling us why and how a deviant GBC member is to be disciplined.

GBC law 3.5.3.1 states, “a GBC member should be an ‘acarya’ by teaching by personal example the path of Krsna consciousness in its purity.”

This is a nice idea, but with little practical, detailed articulation in ISKCON law. To illustrate, let us compare the standards of conduct for Temple Presidents and GBC members. We cannot include Regional Secretaries and RGB members in this comparison because GBC law does not enjoin any explicit standards of conduct for them.

GBC law 5.6.2.2 lists five spiritual standards and three service standards for temple presidents. So let us compare the specific, detailed qualities expected of Temple Presidents to those expected of GBC members. “TP” here indicates Temple Presidents.

**TP:** “avoid intimate dealings with the opposite sex.”

**GBC:** No such rule.

**TP:** Must be...honest, and trustworthy. [Able to] manage, organize, and conduct meetings.

**GBC:** No such rule.

**TP:** Has a service attitude, respects all devotees and is able to work with others.

**GBC:** No such rule.

**TP:** Can communicate well and is able to motivate and inspire people.

**GBC:** No such rule.

**TP:** Cares for people.

**GBC:** No such rule.

**TP:** Must be expert in his or her area of service or possess a willingness to learn.

**GBC:** No such rule.

**TP:** Must follow an entire section 5.6.2.5.6.3, titled *Care [of devotees]*:

**GBC:** No section on *Care of devotees*.

**TP:** His mood is as servant of the community members.

**GBC:** No such requirement.

We have seen that GBC law prescribes many rules, and threatens many punishments, for temple presidents, and other junior leaders, but very few for members of the GBC, and none for the RGBs, and regional secretaries. What does GBC law say about gurus? Are there many rules and punishments for them, or very few, as for ISKCON’s top managers and lawmakers?

### **Conduct and Discipline of Dīkṣā Gurus**

Having promised in law 5.5 that different sections of law will give standards and discipline of top leaders, the GBC does not disappoint us in the case of dīkṣā gurus. Indeed, the

section covering the conduct and discipline of dīkṣā gurus, 7.4-7.5, is the largest section of its type in all of GBC law. Therein, we find dozens and dozens of GBC laws to restrict, regulate, discipline, and punish, dīkṣā gurus.

These laws include nine general standards; three more standards in relation to the GBC; three standards in relation to GBC zonal secretaries; eight standards in relation to “ISKCON Spiritual Authorities; and four standards in relation to temples, for a total of twenty-seven. There is a host of other laws regulating many aspects of a guru’s life. All of these myriad standards and laws trigger a barrage of punishments when not followed.

Here is just a sample of GBC laws regulating dīkṣā gurus:

7.2 Qualifications of Gurus in ISKCON

7.2.1 Twelve Mandatory Qualifications

7.2.2 Four Discretionary Qualifications

7.3 Eligibility of Devotee to be Guru in ISKCON

7.4.1 Procedure for Commencing the Service of Diksa-Guru

7.4.1.1 Endorsement of an Area Council

7.4.1.1.2 Principles of Evaluation

7.4.1.1.4 Communication of Objection

7.4.1.2 Provision for “No Objection” Letters

7.4.1.4 Requests for Further Review

7.4.1.4.4 Further Direction to Guru Candidate

7.4.3 Seven Vows of Guru (over half of these involve obedience to the GBC and its laws)

7.4.4.1 Nine General Standards of Guru Conduct

7.4.4.2 Three Standards in Relation to the GBC Body

7.4.4.3 Three Standards in Relation to GBC Zonal Secretaries

7.4.4.4 Eight Standards in Relation to ISKCON Spiritual Authorities

7.4.4.5 Four Standards in Relation to a Temple

7.4.5 Monitoring of Gurus by the GBC

7.4.5.2 Annual Reports from Gurus

7.4.5.2 Emergency Reports about a deviant Guru

7.4.6 Discipline of Diksa-gurus, including:

- Nine kinds of Misconduct and Failure to Follow Religious Principles or Higher Spiritual Authority
- Two kinds of Improper Discharge and Neglect of Duty
- Four kinds of Spiritual Discrepancy
- Five ways to censure a dīkṣā-guru
- Two ways to place on probation, suspend, or rescind the power to initiate, of a dīkṣā-guru
- A statement that none of the above *limits* the power of “*any Regional Governing Body, Divisional Council, National Council, or other local authority to withhold permission for a...diksa-guru to [initiate] within their jurisdiction.*”
- Definitions of Censure and Probation
- Details of Suspension Pending Investigation
- Details of Suspension
- Details of Rescindment

7.4.8.1.4 Restriction of times for Vyaspuja

7.4.8.5 Five ways to restrict a Guru under suspension



### 7.5.1 Five circumstances in which one rejects a fallen guru.

In the past many gurus had problems, and so have many GBC members. So just as the GBC provides many dozens of rules to control gurus, so that they cannot seriously harm ISKCON, one would expect a similar long list of rules for those who claim and wield ultimate power in ISKCON: GBC members, and their closest colleagues: Regional Secretary and Regional Governing Board members. But as we saw there are no GBC laws on the conduct and discipline of Regional Secretaries. Let us look more closely at the RGB members.

#### **Regional Governing Board (RGB) Members**

In 2002, the GBC passed an amendment, GBC law 3.4.1, to establish ISKCON RGBs. With a 2010 update, this section fills *three pages* of GBC law. Law 3.4.1.2 defines the power given to RGBs:

“If the GBC Body delegates a particular function to a Regional Governing Body, then any decision of the RGB within the scope of that function is binding within the Region *as if the decision had been made by the full GBC Body*, but it may be overruled by majority vote of the GBC Body.”

Note that in GBC law, a single GBC member may overturn the will of a temple president, or guru. But a majority of the entire GBC body is required to overturn the will of an RGB. Thus we may say that the RGBs are second only to the full GBC in their power and authority.

*And yet GBC law says not a word about disciplining an RGB member, nor their standards of conduct.*

3.4.1.2.1 lists *Minimum Delegated Functions* for an RGB (Regional Governing Body). There is no mention of justice for devotees, nor of expanding the preaching.

There is no list of standards of conduct for RGBs. Unlike temple presidents, RGBs are not told to care for the devotees, nor to inspire people, nor to act as servants of other devotees. ISKCON law says nothing about the discipline, conduct, or character of RGBs, though it says a great deal about these for temple presidents and gurus.

But what of ISKCON’s ultimate managing authority, the GBC? The GBC claims to be Prabhupada’s heir and successor, so it would seem most vital that the GBC monitor and verify the excellent character and conduct of its own members. What then does GBC law say about the character, conduct, and discipline of GBC members?

#### **GBC Conduct**

As with RGB members, there is no requirement, or even suggestion, in GBC law that a GBC member see himself or herself as a servant, feel deep concern for devotees in general, or guarantee them justice. Instead, here are the GBC laws regulating GBC members.

Law 3.1.4.2 states that “the GBC Body is responsible for establishing the proper standards of conduct for its members and others to whom it delegates authority. If an individual...fails to perform his mandated duties or acts in a manner contrary to ISKCON Law or principle, then the GBC Body is responsible to correct or remove the deviant.”

This law states that a GBC may be corrected or removed for two reasons:

1. Failure to perform a mandated duty.
2. Acting contrary to ISKCON Law or principle.

Since ensuring justice to all devotees is not a mandated duty in any GBC law or paper, neither of the two points above provides any recourse or protection to *ordinary* devotees from GBC injustice. Indeed, according to the strict terms of the GBC statement above, a GBC member could be removed for failing to impose upon a devotee an unjust arrangement mandated by the GBC. This is the reality of a society without sufficient laws or a fair constitution.

Let us look further for practical standards of GBC behavior.

GBC law 3.5.3.1 is titled, *Standard for Sadhana and Spiritual Practices*

This law states that a GBC should strictly practice bhakti-yoga: “A GBC Member must be an exemplary practicing devotee who follows daily *sadhana* and full morning program, demonstrably chants sixteen rounds, follows strictly the four regulative principles, regularly gives classes, and participates in temple festivals and *harinama* parties. A GBC Member must live in or near a Krsna conscious temple community so as to regularly, on a daily basis, participate in devotional activities and associate with devotees.”

Obviously, this law is not enforced. For various reasons—health, traveling, a human need to relax and get away, or spiritual laxity—many, if not most, GBCs do not attend a full temple program on a daily basis.

Also, even this unenforced rule says nothing about the character of a GBC, nor how the GBC treats other Vaiṣṇavas. Rūpa Gosvāmī warns us in *Upadeśāmṛta* 2, that external principles are necessary but insufficient.

Gurus and Temple Presidents have specific rules that regulate their exercise of power and their treatment of other devotees. ISKCON’s most powerful leaders need similar guidelines.

GBC law, 3.5.3.2 begins with this bold declaration: “A GBC member [must] be an “*acarya*” by teaching by personal example the path of Krsna consciousness in its purity.”

There is no clear explanation of what this means in practice. Clearly not all GBC members teach by personal example the path of Krishna consciousness *in its purity*. Again, we have a broad general rule with no specifics or detailed rules, like those for temple presidents and gurus.

We have only 3.5.3.2: “No GBC can...permit his men or himself to engage in illicit, illegal activities.”

It is encouraging to know that a GBC member may not perform or permit illicit or criminal activities.

Finally, “GBC members should not speak in a derogatory way of other GBC members in public.”

A GBC cannot defame another GBC in public, but there is no law against publicly defaming a non-GBC member, such as a guru.

Nothing has been added to the very short list of GBC behavior and character standards for *twenty-four years*. None of these rules specifically requires a GBC member, or the body, to treat other devotees fairly or kindly.

### **Compare Laws for GBCs and Gurus**

Section 3 of ISKCON law is titled *Governing Body Commission*, and it is here we find most of the laws that define, describe, and regulate the GBC body and its members. To help us compare how the GBC deals with gurus and how it deals with GBC members, I will again list categories of law for regulating gurus, and compare them to analogous laws, or the lack of them, for GBC members.

**Gurus:**

7.2.1 Twelve Mandatory Qualifications

7.2.2 Four Discretionary Qualifications

**GBC:** No similar list for GBC members in ISKCON law. I will illustrate my point that rules for Gurus are far more specific than rules for GBC with examples from Law 7.2.1 and 7.2.2:

7.2.1.1 A dīkṣā guru must be twice-initiated for at least ten years. No such rule for GBCs.

7.2.1.3 A dīkṣā guru must be in good standing in ISKCON. No such rule for GBCs.

7.2.1.6 A dīkṣā guru must have substantial knowledge and realization of sastra, including a Bhakti-sastri degree. No such rule for GBCs.

7.2.1.7 A dīkṣā guru must preach according to Srila Prabhupada’s teachings. No such rule for GBCs.

7.2.1.8. A dīkṣā guru must work cooperatively with local authorities. No such rule for GBCs.

7.2.1.10. A dīkṣā guru must have no loyalties that compete with or compromise one’s loyalty to Srila Prabhupada, to his teachings, and to ISKCON. No such rule for GBCs.

7.2.2.1. Spiritual degrees—Bhakti Sastri, Bhakti Vaibhava, and Bhaktivedanta (when available)—shall be a strongly recommended qualification for being granted no objection status to serve as a guru in ISKCON. No such rule for GBCs.

Please note that there are no rules for GBCs that do not also apply to gurus. But there are many rules for Gurus that find no parallel in rules for GBC.

3.5.3.3 gives *one GBC disqualification*: a devotee who divorces a devotee wife cannot be a GBC.

Here are more examples to show that the mandatory qualifications for gurus are far more specific than the general call for GBCs to set an ideal example.

**Gurus:** 7.4.1.1 Endorsement of the Guru by an Area Council. Note: no less than *eight* sections of GBC law (7.4.1.1; 7.4.1.1.1; 7.4.1.1.2; 7.4.1.1.3; 7.4.1.1.4; 7.4.1.2; 7.4.1.4.3, and 7.4.2) stress the need for local community support for a would-be guru.

**GBC:** No local endorsement or support required for a GBC to take control of an area.

**Gurus:** 7.4.1.1.2 Principles of [Local] Evaluation of the Guru

**GBC:** No local evaluation of a zonal GBC.

**Gurus:** 7.4.1.2 Provision for “No Objection” Letters for Guru

**GBC:** Not required for a zonal GBC.

**Gurus:** 7.4.4.1 Nine General Standards of Guru Conduct—plus all of the following:

7.4.4.2 Three Standards in Relation to the GBC Body

7.4.4.3 Three Standards in Relation to GBC Zonal Secretaries

7.4.4.4 Eight Standards in Relation to ISKCON Spiritual Authorities

7.4.4.5 Four Standards in Relation to a Temple

Total: twenty-seven required standards for gurus

**GBC:** 3.5.3 In comparison to the 27 standards for Gurus, GBCs must 1) practice Krishna consciousness; 2) not permit or perform illicit or illegal activity; and 3) not publicly criticize other GBC members.

**Gurus:** 7.4.5 Monitoring of Gurus by the GBC

**GBC:** No provision to monitor GBC members

**Gurus:**

7.4.6 Discipline of Diksa-gurus, including:

- Nine kinds of Misconduct and Failure to Follow Religious Principles or Higher Spiritual Authority
- Two kinds of Improper Discharge and Neglect of Duty
- Four kinds of Spiritual Discrepancy
- Five ways to censure a diksa-guru
- Two ways to place on probation, suspend, or rescind the power to initiate, of a diksa-guru
- A statement that none of the above *limits* the power of “*any Regional Governing Body, Divisional Council, National Council, or other local authority to withhold permission for a...diksa-guru to [initiate] within their jurisdiction.*”
- Definitions of Censure and Probation
- Details of Suspension Pending Investigation
- Details of Suspension
- Details of Rescindment

7.4.8.5 Five ways to restrict a Guru under suspension

7.5.1 Five circumstances in which one rejects a fallen guru.

**GBC:** No specific GBC laws to discipline GBCs. No circumstance given in which one may reject a GBC member’s order.

A few ISKCON laws describe discipline of leaders in general, but never mention the GBC.

Thus, all of the following are found in GBC law for gurus, *but never* for GBCs:

- Improper discharge and neglect of duty.
- Spiritual discrepancy (four kinds given for gurus)
- Ways to censure (five ways given for gurus)
- Ways to place a guru on probation, suspend, or rescind power (two ways given for gurus)
- Details of censure and probation
- Definitions of Censure and Probation (Large paragraph provided for gurus, nothing for GBC)
- Details of Suspension Pending Investigation (Large paragraph on this for gurus, nothing for GBC)
- Details of Suspension (only for gurus, not GBCs)
- Details of Rescindment (only for gurus, not GBCs)

To conclude this topic, I juxtapose here two GBC laws that show clearly how GBCs see themselves as standing far above other devotees.

Compare these two statements:

3.5.3.2.1 “A GBC member should be an ‘acarya’ by teaching by personal example the path of Kṛṣṇa consciousness in its purity.”

7.4.7.1 “No guru should declare himself or allow himself to be declared an ‘acarya’...”

Based on the above, we would assume that GBC law would set a higher spiritual and moral standard for GBC members, the only members of ISKCON declared to be Ācāryas in ISKCON law. But we have seen that this is not the case. Indeed, higher standards are reserved for a) lower leaders; and b) Gurus.

It is often said that even stronger than sex desire is the lust for power. And we have all heard the adage that *power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely*. Yet in ISKCON, precisely where there is greatest power, we find least legal restraint.

It is natural for us to assume and expect that those in higher positions, those who make decisions that affect all our lives, will set a higher standard. Yet this reasonable principle finds no practical, detailed articulation in GBC law.

One might argue that the flood of GBC laws that restrict gurus are the result of past guru excess. There is truth in this assertion, but real ISKCON history is also more complex. We ignore the complexities at the risk of repeating historical mistakes. Consider the following.

During the zonal acarya system, virtually all of the gurus who caused serious problems were also GBCs. I do not recall a single major problem with a zonal acarya who was not also a zonal GBC. Thus it was not just a zonal acarya system that disturbed ISKCON. It was the combined power of GBC and acarya invested in a single immature leader, fostering an autocratic regime.

Today, we still have many Guru-GBCs in ISKCON. And precisely because ISKCON has externally reformed the guru system, lingering Guru-GBC dictators no longer attract the attention they once did.

Even today, we see GBC zones where a GBC-Guru uses this combined power to monopolize control, impose the leader’s views, and virtually persecute those who dare to hold other bona fide views.

Just as some zonal-acaryas, even if immature, acted sincerely, and thus survived in Krishna consciousness, so some GBC-Gurus today are advanced devotees who lead happy zones. Indeed, many ISKCON leaders at all levels are advanced devotees, selflessly dedicating their lives to Prabhupada’s mission.

But we do have a lingering problem with autocracy in GBC zones and temples, that can be traced back to the early days of ISKCON.

As a liberated devotee, and the charismatic Founder-Ācārya of ISKCON, Prabhupada wielded absolute authority in ISKCON. Kṛṣṇa teaches in the *Gītā* 3.21, that people follow the example of the greatest person. And the young and immature follow immaturely, without discrimination.

Thus a dictatorial, often oppressive, management culture arose in ISKCON in GBC zones and temples, in crude imitation of Prabhupada. And even today, there are remaining pockets of tyranny. We must now cleanse ISKCON of the remnants of the old dictatorial management culture, a product and residue of our past immature imitation of Prabhupada. We need a constitutional leadership culture worthy of a spiritual society of Vaiṣṇava brāhmaṇas.

In the next section, I will conclude my discussion of GBC law.

## Appeal in GBC Laws

### **Recourse and Appeal for Ordinary devotees?**

An important principle of justice is the right of appeal. For ISKCON devotees, this means that a devotee who believes that he or she has suffered injustice has the right to present their case to an appropriate ISKCON authority, with full confidence that the case will be handled strictly according to fair process. Clearly, this right of appeal is needed to help eliminate injustice based on poor adjudication, or simple tyranny.

I will review here the forms of appeal offered by ISKCON law.

4.4.2.4.3.2: The GBC, at its discretion, may accept appeals of decisions made by the (defunct) Justice Ministry, with no guarantee of fair process.

5.5: A disciplined “ISKCON Official” may appeal a ruling to an RGB, or if there is none, to the GBC, with no guarantee of fair process.

7.4.2: Similarly, diksa-guru candidates may appeal their rejection by a Local Area Council, with no guarantee of fair process.

7.4.6: Disciplined, i.e. punished, gurus may appeal, with no guarantee of fair process.

8.4: An “ISKCON participant” not allowed to participate may also appeal, with no guarantee of fair process.

17.1-2: Generally, decisions of lower authorities may be appealed to higher authorities, the process ending of course with the GBC body, with no guarantee of fair process.

All the above appeals involve alleged misconduct by an ISKCON leader below the GBC. What if you believe that a GBC member acted badly? What can you do? We find two GBC laws to guide us:

#### *3.5.5.1.4. Guidelines for evaluating GBC Zonal Secretary*

“That if a Temple President or local Temple Council thinks that an assigned GBC Zonal Secretary is not fulfilling the responsibilities of that position, he should communicate with the GBC Executive Committee.”

If you are not a temple president, nor member of a temple council, or if you are a council member but cannot convince the other members to join you, then even if you are sure that a GBC zonal secretary is acting badly, you have no clear recourse in ISKCON law. And even if you are a temple president or council member with council support, you have no guarantee of fair process.

#### *8.2.2 Difficulties with a GBC member*

“When there are significant difficulties with a GBC member, one should state his problem in writing and forward to the GBC Executive Committee for necessary consideration.”

Needless to say, neither GBC law 3.5.5.1.4, nor 8.2.2., guarantees that the GBC Executive Committee will read your communication, act upon it, or give you timely justice. The GBC here as everywhere in GBC law, does not commit to fair process, whether you are the appellant, or the accused.

Further, if the GBC body allows one of its members to seriously harm a temple or project, the GBC body is not responsible for the damage it permitted, according to GBC law:

3.1.4.2 “If it is demonstrated that the GBC Body did not function in a timely manner to rectify one of its representatives, and as a result, an individual ISKCON temple or project *suffers inordinately*, then the GBC Body is to consider how to help the local temple or project overcome its difficulties, *but the GBC Body cannot be held liable in any way.*”

Note that this law only covers harm to an ISKCON temple or project. The law does not consider a case where the GBC Body allows one of its members to seriously harm you as an individual. GBC law does not concern itself with that. Indeed, the GBC is not even required to “consider how to help” a devotee damaged by the actions of a GBC member.

Moreover, if you have been harmed by the GBC body, or if you believe the GBC body caused serious harm to other individuals or projects, then ISKCON law forbids you to privately discuss your concerns with a member of the GBC, as stated here:

3.5.4.1.6 “[A] GBC member shouldn't *indulge* with non-GBC men in criticizing the GBC Body.”

Sadly, it seems that whatever the good intentions of some GBCs may be, GBC law recognizes two distinct levels of devotees:

1. Above: GBC members (and their RGB and Regional Secretary colleagues.)
2. Below: Everyone else.

### **GBC Admission of Flawed Law Doesn't Fix It**

On their website, the GBC acknowledges the need to update their laws, “to address laws that may be outdated, unneeded, ambiguous or unclearly worded.”

Based on that statement, one might argue that I have unfairly cited laws that the GBC itself sees as outdated or unclearly worded. However, I believe that I have been reasonable in my citations for two reasons:

1. I have quoted laws that reflect the way that many, GBC members behave in the real world. These laws may seem outdated or unneeded to some saintly GBCs, but those laws are implicitly deployed by other members to stifle opposition and impose their will.
2. Ultimately, law is law. Until those laws are repealed or changed, present and future GBCs may impose those laws at their pleasure.

### **Stifling Debate Through Outdated Law**

I will give a practical example of a GBC law which is clearly outdated in one sense, but is still deployed in another dangerous sense, and therefore needs to be cited here. I refer to GBC law 8.2.2, titled, *Support and Adjust to GBC Decisions*. It states:

“The authorized forum for GBC policy is the annual GBC meeting, annual ISKCON Leaders meeting, annual sannyasis assembly, and similar official meetings held after the Gaura-purnima festival at Sri Mayapur. Outside of these meetings it is the duty of all ISKCON members and leaders to support and adjust to GBC decisions. Srila Prabhupada's principle was to meet once a year, make decisions, and follow them during the year. Activities contrary to this, shall be considered as a serious breach of etiquette and discipline.”

This law is both outdated and dangerous.

1. Outdated: This 1986 law claims that Prabhupada's “principle” was for the GBC to meet once per year, and that to do otherwise is “a serious breach of etiquette and discipline.”

The GBC now has at least two annual meetings, and no one considers this “a serious breach.”

Also, the law states that the GBC meets after the Gaura-pūrṇimā, festival when in fact they now meet before it. So those parts of the resolution are outdated.

2. Dangerous: The real point of this law is its title, the command to *Support and Adjust to GBC Decisions*. The intention is clear: the real *serious breach of etiquette and discipline* is to question or criticize GBC decisions *outside of these meetings*. Since *inside* the meetings, it is

very hard for devotees in general to gain admittance, and nearly impossible to get quality time to speak, this GBC law effectively criminalizes free speech and open debate in ISKCON regarding the laws that control our lives.

This is perfectly clear from the opening words of this GBC law: “The authorized forum for GBC policy...” A forum is “a place, meeting, or medium where ideas and views on a particular issue can be exchanged.” Thus according to this law, outside of GBC related meetings, there is no authorized place, meeting, or medium (including email, personal conversation etc.) to exchange ideas on GBC policy. This does sound rather totalitarian, based on the literal meaning of the words in GBC law 8.2.2.

GBC resolution 3.5.4.1 has a similar message: “A GBC member shouldn't indulge with non-GBC men in criticizing the GBC Body.” This means:

1. In the company of non-GBC devotees, a GBC member can never admit any fault on the GBC's part.

2. Thus non-GBC members can never discuss GBC problems with a GBC member, at least not if the GBC member agrees with the criticism.

### **GBC Does Not Publish Self-disciplinary Rules**

The GBC also discourages possible challenges to GBC conduct by concealing GBC laws that speak in detail of possible GBC misconduct.

For example, at the 1988 Mayapur meetings, on February 26, the GBC passed a resolution explicitly stating under what circumstances a GBC member may be censured, put on probation, suspended, or removed. But this resolution was not published in ISKCON Law.

Rather, in ISKCON Law 5.5, the word GBC has been everywhere deleted from this elaborate text, and replaced with the words, “an ISKCON official.” GBC published law thus refers only indirectly to a GBC member.

Although technically, “an ISKCON official” could be a GBC member, the GBC is shy to ever publish laws that explicitly spell out possible GBC misconduct.

The GBC is not shy about explicitly mentioning other leaders, especially dīkṣā gurus. Basically, the same rules to censure, put on probation, suspend, or remove a dīkṣā guru, by name, are found in section 84 of ISKCON law. The GBC did not soften the laws on dīkṣā gurus by, for example, replacing the word dīkṣā guru with *spiritual authorities*. But they did remove the name GBC from all detailed disciplinary laws.

We have already seen much of this in our study of ISKCON Law, and we will see more in the next section, in our analysis of the major GBC paper, *Understanding ISKCON Lines of Authority*.



## Understanding ISKCON Lines of Authority

### **Introduction**

An official GBC paper, *Understanding ISKCON's Lines of Authority* (UILA), affirms the admirable goal of stating principles by which managers and spiritual leaders can work together peacefully for the good of ISKCON and the world.<sup>10</sup>

UILA has special significance. Unlike GBC law, which sprawls over four decades, with the voices of different leaders, UILA explains with a united voice the current GBC concept of ISKCON governance, how authority should be exercised, especially as it relates to ISKCON's two greatest powers: gurus and managers. UILA locates both within a single, orderly hierarchy of authority, with the full GBC at the top.

It is precisely in this process of outlining ISKCON's hierarchy of power that the GBC puts forward its own interpretation of Prabhupada's mandate that the GBC is ISKCON's *ultimate managing authority*. I explain here that a) there is more than one plausible way to interpret that mandate; and b) the GBC interpretation, as found in UILA, must be refined and brought closer in line with Prabhupada's teachings on ISKCON governance.

Let me emphasize that any valid interpretation of Prabhupada's mandate to the GBC must accept that the GBC is indeed ISKCON's *ultimate managing authority*. To question some aspect of the GBC's interpretation of that mandate is not to challenge the mandate itself. My critique does not attack the core GBC system, nor does it support those who oppose the GBC system. Rather, I am trying to restore a better balance in ISKCON between hierarchy and equality.

Let us first consider how Prabhupada's vision for power relations in ISKCON corresponds to the Western notion of *public reason*.

### **Public Reason**

Prabhupada emphasized that ISKCON devotees volunteer their services, and therefore must be respected and treated kindly.

"...things must be done very nicely by *cooperation*. That is wanted. Everyone should remember that we are serving Krsna, and everyone should remember, *the other person is serving Krsna. And because he is serving Krsna, he is not my servant; he is my master*. That should be always in view. Therefore, we address, prabhu: *You are my master*. We never address, *You are my servant*. [Room conversation—November 24, 1976]

Similarly, "Our leaders shall be careful not to kill the spirit of enthusiastic service, which is spontaneous and voluntary. To draw out spontaneous, loving spirit—*that is the art of management*...But where are so many expert managers?" [Letter to Karandhara—December 22, 1972]

Prabhupada also taught that the GBC should govern under a fair constitution, and act in a reasonable way.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines *public reason* as a principle that "requires that the moral or political rules that regulate our common life be, in some sense, justifiable or acceptable to...those persons over whom the rules purport to have authority."

Clearly ISKCON needs peace and balance between those inside ISKCON's power structure—those who wield power—and those outside the managerial system—those upon

---

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.scribd.com/doc/97336272/Understanding-ISKCON-651AE1>

whom, and even against whom, managerial power is exercised. Naturally the managers and the managed will at times have different perspectives, needs, and priorities.

*Public reason* is the concept that those who govern should persuade the governed that the rules and laws “that regulate our common life” are reasonable and justifiable. Failing to do this, rulers act as mere tyrants, ruling by threat and coercion. *Public reason* holds that rulers have a duty to convince reasonable citizens that the society’s laws are fair and necessary restrictions on individual freedom. This is especially so in a society like ISKCON that claims, or aspires, to be a *brahminical* society.

UILA tries to persuade us to accept a specific concept of authority within ISKCON. In that sense, we should applaud the GBC’s sincere effort to engage *public reason*. And just as the GBC has done their duty to the best of their ability, so now I will do mine, as a member of the ISKCON public, by responding to their claims.

It is the GBC’s duty to show us that their rules, that a priori limit our freedom, are necessary, reasonable, fair, and beneficial. The GBC tries to do this in UILA. How far they succeed is the topic of this section of my paper.

In UILA, the GBC state, “When we use the word ‘authority’ in the context of the managerial structure, we do not mean an absolute, infallible authority—such as the authority of scripture—but the mandate to organize the preaching movement so that it is aligned with the instructions of Srila Prabhupada.”

There is much of value in UILA, but there are also problems that need to be discussed. In doing so, I am engaging with the GBC in the process of public reason. This is necessary because in regard to the exercise of power in ISKCON, this dialogue combines and balances the insider and outsider perspective, and so helps leaders come to objective conclusions about what is best for the society, what the leaders’ mandate really is, and how they can best fulfill that mandate.

## **Two Visions of ISKCON**

Consider two different visions of the proper relationship between devotees, and the GBC:

1. ISKCON is a, brahminical society in which mature devotee-citizens who follow ISKCON law are free to serve according to their inspiration, as long as they don’t cause significant harm to other devotees or projects. ISKCON law itself, when followed, guarantees that in pursuing one’s own service, one will not interfere with the service of other devotees.

This is analogous to a free society in which the citizens are not servants of the government, but they respect the law of the land, and thereby respect other citizens. This was also Prabhupada’s vision, as shown in his famous letter to Karandhara, December 22, 1972 (and elsewhere): “The Krishna Consciousness Movement is for training men to be *independently* thoughtful and competent in all types of departments of knowledge and action, not for making bureaucracy. Once there is bureaucracy the whole thing will be spoiled. There must be always individual striving and work and responsibility, competitive spirit, not that one shall dominate and distribute benefits to the others and they do nothing but beg from you and you provide. No.”

Prabhupada also said, “GBC is to see that things are going nicely but not to exert absolute authority. That is not in the power of GBC.” [Letter to Giriraja—August 12, 1971]

It is the natural role of Vaiṣṇava brāhmaṇas to constructively critique management for the good of society. Thus within Vaiṣṇava etiquette, devotees in good standing speak on ISKCON affairs, voice their views, and wisely observe how ISKCON is being governed.

But there is another, very different vision of the relationship between Vaiṣṇavas and the GBC:

2. In an unfree society, the leaders have absolute authority to tell everyone what to do, and what to think. Thus conservative leaders may forbid non-conservative views, even if taught by Prabhupada, from being spoken or discussed in temples or anywhere in ISKCON. All devotees serve their masters, the managers. Everyone needs permission to act, or even to think. It is not enough to act within ISKCON law, and not interfere with the service of others. In this model, even if the GBC or other managers act unjustly, unkindly, or incompetently, the saintly brāhmaṇas have no right to speak out.

### **UILA Seems to Favor Controlled Society**

UILA seems to lean towards vision #2. Here are some examples of UILA's vision:

“Indeed, all disciples should follow their ISKCON authorities in the same way that all initiating and instructing spiritual masters should follow their own authorities within ISKCON.”

Let us explore this analogy. A devotee serving a Krishna conscious temple, center, or project works under the direct, personal authority of the local leader. The GBC here claims that *in the same way*, all gurus in ISKCON, even the most senior, *follow* GBC members, who presumably tell them what to do and where to go. After all, GBC law states that *a guru cannot even change his address without GBC permission*. [Law 7.4.4.3.2] A guru may not merely follow ISKCON law and cooperate with others.

We also find this statement in UILA: “Both [gurus and managers] are *authorized by the full GBC* to give shelter to devotees under their care.”

I always thought that *Prabhupada* authorized us to preach and give shelter. The GBC's duty is to verify that we do so within the Founder-Ācārya's guidelines, in cooperation with other ISKCON preachers and projects. This does not mean that conservative GBC members may use political power to suppress other bona fide views, or harass those who hold them.

UILA's claim that the GBC *authorizes* us to give shelter is consistent with theories found in GBC law. For example, in ISKCON law 7.4.4.2, the GBC is not merely ISKCON's managing authority, but also *the personal authority* for all gurus and all devotees.

Law 7.4.4.3 states that gurus “must act under the supervision...of GBC zonal secretaries.”

And as stated above, Law 7.4.4.3.2 even wonderfully commands that gurus cannot “change residence without consulting the local GBC zonal secretary beforehand...”

This idea of GBCs as personal monitors of senior preachers strays far from Prabhupada's vision. In UILA's vision, it is not enough to be a good citizen of ISKCON and follow its laws. It is not enough to do one's work peacefully. A guru must be supervised by the GBC zonal secretary, who is his superior, regardless of seniority or actual spiritual advancement.

Consider this GBC law defining the GBC-guru relationship:

7.4.4.2 “[A guru] must respect the GBC as Srila Prabhupada's *chosen successor* as the ultimate managing authority of ISKCON and maintain a *respectful serving attitude towards the GBC*.”

This bizarre law claims that even the most advanced brāhmaṇa gurus must respectfully serve the managers. This language does not reflect the mood of Vedic culture, or of Prabhupada, as I will show. Of course, GBC law does not require, or suggest, that GBC managers serve other spiritual leaders.

But are these merely outdated laws? A product of the old, hard-fought Guru Reform movement?

They are not for two reasons:

1. Some of the above rules come from a very recent GBC paper, UILA.
2. These nanny state laws describe how many senior preachers are treated even now.

### **GBC Subordinating Language**

I will give more examples of UILA’s subjugating language, and then contrast it with Prabhupada’s own language.

UILA states:

“...the authority bestowed upon [a guru or other leader] is complete only if he or she follows Srila Prabhupada’s instruction to serve in ISKCON *under* the authority of the full GBC.”

“Those who are submissive to our sampradaya and who serve *under* the authority of the full GBC are authorized to give shelter in this spiritual line...”

“Those serving as spiritual masters in ISKCON are meant to follow the instructions of Srila Prabhupada and work *under* the full GBC.”

Prabhupada uses a different language: “I hope the GBC *in cooperation with the sannyasis* in their touring program will be able to keep vigilance systematically in order to keep the Society as pure as possible.” [Letter to Bali-mardana—August 25, 1970]

Similarly, “...*our main business* is to train up men to be self-sufficient and competent in many ways to carry on the preaching work, not to...minimize their responsibility by centralizing everything.” [Vedabase, Letter—December 1973]

To justify itself, the GBC states in UILA, “The basic premise of this essay is [that for] ...anyone in a position of authority within ISKCON, the authority bestowed upon that devotee is complete only if he or she follows Srila Prabhupada’s instruction to serve in ISKCON *under* the authority of the full GBC...*To establish this premise, we feel we need do no more than emphasize that His Divine Grace consistently and clearly established this principle...*”

But did Prabhupada *consistently and clearly* state that we must all serve *under the GBC*?

I cannot find a single instance in Vedabase where Prabhupada uses the phrase “*under the GBC*” or “*under GBC [authority]*.” Prabhupada does speak of being *under* the authority of Śāstra, of kings, of Ācāryas, of Vedic injunctions, but Prabhupada never states directly that we all serve *under*, or *under the authority of* the GBC. Perhaps Prabhupada really wanted the GBC to be just an ultimate managing authority and not a successor acarya.

We have no evidence that Prabhupada wanted the GBC to subjugate other Vaiṣṇavas, but rather to engage ultimate managing authority in a spirit of *servicing* the devotees. This is not a challenge to the GBC’s role as ISKCON’s ultimate managing authority. But it is a direct challenge to UILA’s subjugating language and style.

Ironically modern leaders of free countries are often seen, and describe themselves, as *servants of the people*. ISKCON is a *spiritual* society whose ultimate leader, Lord Caitanya, taught that we are all servants of the servants of the servants of Kṛṣṇa. Yet UILA does not state that ISKCON’s top leaders aspire to serve all the devotees.

Under *Conduct of gurus*, UILA states that gurus should ask local managers how the guru “*may serve that yatra*.” Gurus should also ask GBC zonal secretaries how the guru could *serve the local vision*.

But UILA does not say that GBCs should ask how they may *serve* senior devotees or devotees in general. Although UILA states that all leaders, including GBCs, should serve ISKCON, UILA never states that a GBC member should specifically serve other devotees, no matter what their rank.

Indeed, the *Conduct of gurus* section, which twice states that gurus should serve managers, is followed by a supposedly balancing list of *Duties of Managers*. This list of managerial duties does not explicitly state that managers should serve gurus. Item 1 simply suggests that managers should be *receptive* to a guru's advice on devotee care, but not on any practical preaching matter. I will discuss this last point at length below.

UILA states: "If a disciple has the mistaken conviction that his or her spiritual master is above the full GBC and ISKCON's laws and policies, that should be corrected by the spiritual master and other authorities."

True. But what if a GBC secretary, or indeed the GBC body, has the *mistaken conviction* that they are above ISKCON law, or above obvious principles of justice, such as the rules of fair process that the GBC formally accepted in establishing the ISKCON Dispute Resolution Office (IDRO)? Who will correct them? I have personal experience of this problem.

UILA features a large bold header: **SPIRITUAL MASTERS ARE NOT INDEPENDENT**

UILA does not clarify that the GBC are not independent of ISKCON law, nor that they must follow their own rules of fair process, which they do not always do.

The GBC tells us what we must do to be worthy of the authority bestowed on us – we must follow the GBC. But the GBC never says what *they* must do to be worthy of their authority. I suggest that the GBC must establish and obey reasonable laws that ensure justice for all ISKCON members. Prabhupada did not authorize the GBC to act above the law, and he certainly did not declare that the GBC is his "successor Ācārya," standing as Prabhupada did *above* ISKCON law.

### **Nourishing Bhakti**

Upadeśāmṛta 4, speaks of six loving exchanges between devotees. In his purport, Prabhupada states: "The International Society for Krishna Consciousness has been established to facilitate these six kinds of loving exchanges between devotees...The life of the Kṛṣṇa conscious society is nourished by these six types of loving exchange among the members."

Prabhupada here states that loving exchanges among devotees *nourish* ISKCON. In contrast, UILA states that hierarchical managerial structure *nourishes* ISKCON.

"...Sriila Prabhupada established ISKCON as a spiritual institution with a managerial structure. The purpose of this structure is to maintain the standards he established, to offer shelter and *spiritual nourishment to the devotees*,"

Loving devotee exchanges and managerial structure can both nourish a healthy spiritual society. And UILA admits that management flourishes only when based on spiritual principles. But UILA does not speak of the key Vaiṣṇava principle of loving exchange, nor of the need, in a spiritual society, for GBC members to treat non-GBC devotees with kindness and dignity, and assure them of justice within ISKCON. The GBC's constant assertion that they are *above* us and we are *below* them, does not nourish preaching through loving reciprocity, as Prabhupada teaches in his purport to *Upadeśāmṛta* 4. Rather UILA claims that we will all be nourished by subjugating ourselves to managers, seeing and treating them as superiors, whatever their spiritual qualifications may be.

The GBC has a duty and right to clarify ISKCON's management system. But they should do so in a way that reflects Vaiṣṇava culture and Prabhupada's teachings and language. For example, Prabhupada states:

“...everyone should remember, *the other person is serving Kṛṣṇa. And because he is serving Kṛṣṇa, he is not my servant; he is my master. That should be always in view.* Therefore, we address, prabhu: *You are my master.* We never address, *You are my servant.* [Room conversation—November 24, 1976]

We discussed earlier in this paper that ISKCON must maintain a balance between the two principles of equality and hierarchy. UILA emphasizes a hierarchy which places them above everyone, and everyone under them as their servants. UILA is not balanced. I will now give another example of this imbalance.

### **UILA Undermines Preachers’ Autonomy**

Ultimately, ISKCON is a preaching movement that must be well managed, not a management movement that allows preaching. Sadly, however, UILA omits preachers from a meaningful role in planning preaching strategy. I will explain.

Under *Conduct of Gurus*, UILA states that “every spiritual master should...before planning a visit to a zone or region where there is no local temple or preaching center, first ask the Zonal GBC if there is a vision local leaders have for that place or region which he (the spiritual master) could serve.”

In the corresponding *balancing* section on the *Conduct or Duties of Managers*, managers are *not* encouraged or required to ask the guru about his or her vision for preaching, even in an area where there is no temple, even if the guru is a successful preacher. There is thus a tacit assumption that a manager will always know best how to preach in a zone, even where there is no preaching. UILA does not mention that a dedicated preacher may have special insights or effective strategies for preaching in such a place.

The paper lists seven duties of managers toward gurus and spiritual guides. But managers have no duty to inquire or take any advice from a senior preacher about preaching methods. A manager’s duty to a guru is limited to giving spiritual care to the guru’s disciples.

Similarly, the paper’s *Summary* states: “The goal of the *managerial structure* is spiritual: to facilitate the spiritual advancement of ISKCON’s members through association with devotees, opportunities for service, and *effective preaching strategies*. Simultaneously, ISKCON affirms the fundamental importance of accepting initiation from a bona fide spiritual master.”

In UILA, only managers plan preaching strategies. Gurus initiate and encourage disciples to love Kṛṣṇa and obey managers. Thus UILA authorizes only managers to develop effective preaching strategies.

Prabhupada says something very different:

“So now the factual administration will depend on the Governing Body Commission and the *sannyasis are entrusted for making propaganda work.*”

With UILA’s doctrine, that only managers organize preaching strategy, a dangerous new policy, reminiscent of the zonal acarya concept, has appeared in parts of Europe, and perhaps elsewhere: in order to preach in a country or region, a sannyasi must fit into a GBC’s *national vision* for that country or region.

In verified practice this means that a GBC need not prove that a sannyasi is doing any objective harm, nor breaking ISKCON law. A GBC may simply state that he or she has a different preaching *vision* for a vast area where little or no preaching takes place. A sannyāsī must submit to the *vision* or leave. Thus a faithful ISKCON preacher may be banned from bringing Kṛṣṇa to a large country where few ISKCON devotees preach.

This is very different from Prabhupada's standard. I know because when Prabhupada was here, I preached for two years all over America as a non-GBC sannyāsī. I respected other ISKCON projects, and usually preached in cities without temples, I was not under the authority of any GBC member. Prabhupada never asked or expected it and the GBC never requested it.

Prabhupada speaks of a relationship of *cooperation*, not *subordination*, between GBC and sannyasi preachers. Just nineteen days after creating the GBC, Prabhupada wrote this: "So now the factual administration will depend on the Governing Body Commission and the *sannyasis are entrusted* for making propaganda work. I wish to remain on the background to give you some directions." [Letter to Bali-mardana—August 16, 1970]

Similarly, "I hope the GBC *in cooperation* with the sannyasis in their touring program will be able to keep vigilance systematically in order to keep the Society as pure as possible." [Letter to Bali-mardana—August 25, 1970]

This language of *cooperation*, not subservience, is consistent with Prabhupada's placing sannyāsīs outside ISKCON's management hierarchy, as I will now show.

### **Sannyāsīs Not in Management Hierarchy**

UILA makes another unfortunate argument that begins with this Prabhupada quote: "...we are managing our Krishna Consciousness Movement by the Governing Body Commission, GBC. ... above the GBC I am there. Below the GBC there are the temple president, secretary, treasurer in every center. So the temple president is responsible to the GBC and the GBC is responsible to me. In this way we are managing."

UILA adds: "In Srila Prabhupada's physical absence the structure is now somewhat different." They mean that Prabhupada did not include gurus in this management hierarchy because Prabhupada was the only guru in ISKCON then.

This argument neglects a key fact. Prabhupada made this statement in 1976, at a time when many sannyāsīs, including myself, served ISKCON. *Yet Prabhupada does not include sannyāsīs within this management hierarchy.*

UILA argues that everyone serves *under* the GBC, and suggests that Prabhupada did not mention gurus because they did not exist. But *sannyāsīs* did exist and Prabhupada does not include them. Prabhupada uses here words like *above* and *below*, to rank managers. But he does not insert sannyāsīs within a managerial hierarchy. He does not say that sannyāsīs are *below* the GBC, or that the GBC is *above* the sannyāsīs.

Again, I took sannyāsa in 1972 and for two years I traveled and preached as a non-GBC. Prabhupada never asked me to work *under* a GBC secretary, nor *under* the body. He did expect me to follow ISKCON rules and respect other projects.

If managers constantly emphasize, as the GBC does in UILA, that they are above all the preachers, that they *authorize* the preachers to preach, that all preachers are *under* them, they distort Vaiṣṇava culture, and weaken the spirit of individual preaching initiative that was the heart of Prabhupada's method. Prabhupada was deeply troubled by the tendency of leaders to rob devotees of their individual freedom and initiative.

Clearly sannyāsīs and other preachers must always cooperate with ISKCON's managers and respect other projects. In this way, as good, law-abiding citizens of ISKCON, they *cooperate* with the GBC

In a small section titled, "Defining the Point of Divergence," UILA explains how spiritual leaders and managers, may interfere with or discourage each other. Here too, the paper says nothing about a manager who ignores advice about preaching from a proven preacher, or

who fails to properly engage a devotee in preaching, or who does not respect a preacher's successful work in the same region. Nothing in UILA paper gives an official or meaningful role to preachers and gurus in the planning of preaching.

### **Freedom in Devotional Service**

I explained earlier in this essay that Vaiṣṇava śāstra balances the eternal reality of equality of souls, with the need in this world for hierarchy. Unfortunately, UILA does not contain this balancing spiritual language. But Prabhupada does use such balancing language.

Prabhupada warned us against the dangers of bureaucracy. He criticized as *bureaucracy* the tendency of ISKCON leaders to assume excessive power over other devotees in his famous letter to Karandhara, December 22, 1972. Here and elsewhere Prabhupada insists that freedom is a key component of ISKCON culture:

“The Krishna Consciousness Movement is for training men to be *independently* thoughtful and competent in all types of departments of knowledge and action, not for making bureaucracy. Once there is bureaucracy the whole thing will be spoiled. There must be always individual striving and work and responsibility, competitive spirit, not that one shall dominate and distribute benefits to the others and they do nothing but beg from you and you provide. No.”

Prabhupada also criticized as *bureaucracy* the tendency to criticize others when things don't go well.

Prabhupada disciple: But again they have made the same mistake with these cauliflower and cabbage.

Prabhupāda: *They* mistake. You say, "*They* mistake." Who are *they*? You [should] say *you* do mistake. Don't say *they*. This is *bureaucracy*."

Thus the GBC is personally responsible to see that our Western preaching is successful, and the GBC is personally responsible if Western preaching does not flourish.

GBC members are appointed for life, and the GBC is notoriously inefficient in monitoring the productivity of its members. If a zonal secretary is not seen to commit a crime, or break our regulative principles, then he or she holds power for life, even if his or her performance is lethargic or mediocre, or their dealings oppressive. This is typical of bureaucracies.

Next, Prabhupada explains that *bureaucracy* kills the spirit of spontaneous devotional service, which is, after all, the goal of *bhakti-yoga*. Note here that Prabhupada links *bureaucracy* with a tendency to centralize power.

“...our leaders shall be careful not to kill the spirit of enthusiastic service, which is individual and spontaneous and *voluntary*. They should try always to generate some atmosphere of fresh challenge to the devotees, so that they will agree enthusiastically to rise and meet it. *That is the art of management*: to draw out spontaneous loving spirit of sacrificing some energy for Krishna. But where are so many expert managers? Krishna Consciousness movement must be always a challenge, a great achievement to be gained by *voluntary* desire to do it, and that will keep it healthy. So you big managers now try to train up more and more some competent preachers and managers like yourselves. *Forget this centralizing and bureaucracy.*” [December 22, 1972]

GBCs, temple presidents, and other managers should govern ISKCON with a sincere wish to serve us all, to maximize our individual freedom, and promote our common good. Mature devotees should study GBC policies and ponder whether they truly serve ISKCON's best interest. When doubts arise, we must talk to each other. All of us, GBC or not, should submit to



the rule of just law, the rule of spiritual reason, which Kṛṣṇa calls *buddhi-yoga* in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

A ruling power cannot abrogate people's natural freedom without carefully showing due cause. Might does not make right in ISKCON. Prabhupada called for dialogue between the GBC and senior devotees when he convoked the first annual GBC meeting in Mayapura, which took place in 1974.

One may argue that in Krishna consciousness, we should aspire to serve others, so why not serve the GBC?

This argument cuts both ways. Even Lord Caitanya, acting as a perfect devotee, declared Himself to be the servant of the servant of the servant of Kṛṣṇa. Shouldn't the GBC, on spiritual grounds, declare themselves to be servants of all the devotees, and mean it?

Certainly, in free societies, rulers may restrict the citizens from acting in certain ways, or require them to act in other ways, through reasonable laws created by the legitimate exercise of explicitly circumscribed powers. This does not mean that in all matters citizens are *managed* by rulers. Such a totalitarian system would be incompatible with the principles of a free society. In Vedic culture, a brahminical society is a free society.

Here is a standard definition of *totalitarian* from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: "a form of government that ...seeks to subordinate all aspects of the individual's life to the authority of the government."

We know that that the GBC does not normally try to control every aspect of a devotee's life, but sometimes some leaders do try to exercise inappropriate control over other devotees. Thus there is no general security for devotees. Further, UILA does not clearly limit the GBC's power over us. UILA repeatedly declares that in general, we all live and work in ISKCON under GBC authority. No specific principle of justice, freedom, or human dignity is given. We have only this general statement of limits:

"In a spiritual society a manager cannot fulfill his or her duty to manage simply by declaring and enforcing rules. The rules themselves must have a spiritual foundation, and their implementation and enforcement must be applied in accordance with Vaiṣṇava principles."

Three doubts emerge about this statement:

1. As regards GBC power over us, the limiting force of *spiritual foundation* and *Vaiṣṇava principles* is not defined. Thus we cannot measure GBC behavior against an explicit standard, to know if a particular GBC action is appropriate or not.

2. In fact the spiritual principle invoked may be a call to submit to the GBC. The Vaiṣṇava principle may be the principle of humility on our part (not theirs).

3. The statement mentions *managers* but does not specifically speak of GBC secretaries. This continues a pattern we see frequently in GBC law: the GBC avoids publicly and *explicitly* discussing the limits of their power over us, or the consequences *to* GBCs if they violate those limits.

ISKCON governance is a collective exercise in *buddhi-yoga*. We must govern ourselves, and our society, through *buddhi*, rational, spiritual intelligence. Devotees will *submit* to the GBC to the extent that the GBC *submits* to the rule of fair, constitutional government. I state this to support, and hopefully clarify, UILA's own statement above, that managers must act on discernible Vaishnava principles.

Prabhupada emphasized individual dignity and autonomy in devotional service, within reasonable limits. To fully appreciate and apply this, the GBC must clearly understand that to wield ultimate managing authority is not to become Prabhupada's successor Ācārya, and to thus

stand above the principles of justice and fair process. The GBC seems to equate these two posts – ultimate managing authority and successor Acarya—in a GBC law already quoted above: GBC Law 7.4.4.2 “[A guru] must respect the GBC as Srila Prabhupada's *chosen successor* as the ultimate managing authority of ISKCON and maintain a *respectful serving attitude towards the GBC.*”

A true successor Ācārya, which Prabhupada did not appoint, presumably holds the same authority as the previous Ācārya. In fact, the GBC is not equal to Prabhupada in two important ways:

1. Prabhupada combined managerial and spiritual authority in a way that the GBC does not. We do not seek spiritual enlightenment and salvation from the GBC in the same way we sought it in Prabhupada.

2. Lacking Prabhupada's purity and *charismatic* authority, the GBC is not above the law as Prabhupada was, a fact that to my knowledge the GBC has never clearly articulated.

Devotees cannot be subjected to the unbridled will of managers who may or may not be pure. Thus Prabhupada insisted that the GBC formulate a constitution.

### **Feudal ISKCON?**

ISKCON will not flourish in a managerial feudal system wherein even senior preachers become vassals of the local GBC, serving at their whim, forced to conform to their subjective style. This is not what Prabhupada established or wanted in ISKCON.

ISKCON's ultimate managing authority should be a force for freedom, not subjugation. For example, in the American civil rights movement, the federal government protected the rights of blacks when state and city leaders withheld them. Similarly, Prabhupada often intervened to protect the freedom and dignity of his disciples when a local or regional leader, or a GBC, tried to excessively limit them.

In the hands of bad leaders, ultimate managing authority is used to degrade brāhmaṇas into śūdras, exactly the opposite of what Prabhupada wanted. And of course all this is done in the name of Prabhupada. Some prominent temple presidents behave in this way.

This critique certainly does not apply to all GBCs or temple presidents, many of whom do excellent service with great sincerity and devotion. But the number of leaders who exploit their ISKCON position is sufficient to make this a real problem.

Managing authority, ultimate or intermediate, can be used to maximize the freedom of others, or to suffocate that freedom. Managing authority can be used to inspire devotees to act as brāhmaṇas, or to batter them into a miserable śūdra state, from which many retreat, giving up the preaching battlefield in frustration.

Whether one sits on a high seat as a zonal ācārya, or in an office chair as a despotic manager, the exercise of unrestrained power corrupts the ruler, and demoralizes those who are subjugated.

Let us recall Prabhupada's words and intention:

“The Krishna Consciousness Movement is for training men to be independently thoughtful and competent in all types of departments of knowledge and action, not for making bureaucracy. Once there is bureaucracy the whole thing will be spoiled. There must be always individual striving and work and responsibility, competitive spirit, not that one shall dominate and distribute benefits to the others and they do nothing but beg from you and you provide. No.”  
[Letter to Karandhara—December 22, 1972]

“...*our main business* is to train up men to be self-sufficient and competent in many ways to carry on the preaching work, not to...minimize their responsibility by centralizing everything.” [Vedabase, Letter—January 1973]

Using managing authority to expand individual freedom and autonomy is “our main business,” indeed it is the very purpose of ISKCON. Sadly, in the name of Prabhupada, some leaders around the world have done exactly the opposite, expanding their own power, and suppressing the freedom and autonomy of those under them—and *always* in the name of Prabhupada and *Vedic culture*.

I will next discuss UILA’s assertion that the GBCs are the guardians of Prabhupada’s teachings, the ultimate protectors of our philosophy.

## **GBC and Philosophy**

UILA cites a 1976 Room Conversation in which Prabhupada tells a reporter that the GBC members will succeed him “as the primary teacher of the movement.”

Reporter: “Is there anyone who is designated to succeed you as the primary teacher of the movement?”

Srila Prabhupada: “I am training some, I mean to say, advanced students so that they may very easily take up the charge. I have made them GBC.”

Unfortunately, of the seventeen “advanced” GBC members of whom Prabhupada speaks, about two-thirds of them, eleven, fell down and left the GBC.<sup>11</sup>

We must be cautious. Clearly ISKCON’s ultimate managers should guard the society from false teachings, and protect ISKCON’s philosophical integrity. History shows the grave danger of philosophical deviation in a religious movement.

But history also shows that if the GBC is to fulfill their grave philosophical mandate, they must avoid three obstacles, which I will now explain.

### **1. Fanaticism**

Philosophy does not mean to merely memorize a dogma or doctrine, but also to have the power to reason *logically* about it.

Prabhupada confirms this in his discussion of the philosopher Hume with Hayagrīva: “religion without philosophy and *logic* is simply sentiment.”

Similarly, in his purport to *Bhagavad-gītā* 3.3, Prabhupada writes, “Religion without philosophy is sentiment, or sometimes fanaticism.”

A fanatic is “a person with extreme, *unreasoning* enthusiasm,” or “with extreme and *uncritical* enthusiasm or zeal, as in religion or politics.” (Uncritical here means “forming a judgement without objective analysis and evaluation.”)

Prabhupada confirms this sense of philosophy as the ability to reason, and the opposite of fanaticism, in a *Bhagavad-gītā* class [December 20, 1968]:

“You should be religious, but should understand everything philosophically. Otherwise one becomes fanatic, religious fanatic. In the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* it is clearly said that *śrī-kṛṣṇa-caitanya dayā karaha vicāra* [CC 1.8.15] ...try to understand the gifts of Caitanya Mahāprabhu by your philosophical understanding.”

Prabhupada here translates the words *karaha vicāra* as “...understand...by...philosophical understanding.” The original Sanskrit word *vicāra* means “pondering, deliberation, consideration, reflection, examination, investigation.” The standard *Samsad* Bengali dictionary gives synonymous or identical meanings for *vicāra*: “consideration, deliberation; argument; discussion; decision; inference.”

Note that *inference* is “a conclusion reached on the basis of evidence and reasoning.”

Thus Prabhupada’s famous teaching that one must combine religion with philosophy, and Lord Caitanya’s own words, both indicate that one should not merely memorize a doctrine, but that we should actually be able to reason faithfully and logically about the Absolute Truth. Prabhupada steadily teaches this:

---

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dandavats.com/wp-content/uploads/GBCresolutions/GBCRES76.htm>

“Science must be based on logic and philosophy. Science means that. And religion means sometimes sentiments. So religion without philosophy is sentiment, and philosophy without religion is mental speculation. Both must be combined. Then it is perfect.

“*You cannot have religion without philosophy. That is sentiment, fanaticism. And if you simply take philosophy without religion, without sense of God, this is mental speculation. So religion must be on the basis of science and logic. That is first-class religion.*” [September 10, 1973]

I raise this topic because it is my sad experience that some senior, ultra-conservative GBC men, having failed, in fair debate with me, to establish the exclusive validity of their version of philosophical orthodoxy, then tried to impose their same view through overt and clandestine political maneuvers. I will not give names here as a courtesy to those involved. But such dealings hardly engender confidence in the GBC as the caretakers of right thinking.

Clearly, to circumvent philosophical reasoning, and yet insist on one’s exclusive orthodoxy, fits the classical definition of fanaticism as defined by Prabhupada and standard dictionaries. If the GBC are to fulfill their duty to safeguard Prabhupada’s philosophical teachings, they themselves must be reasonable.

Otherwise, as Prabhupada states, this movement will be unable to attract, or retain, intelligent people:

“Religion should be combined with philosophy; then intelligent persons will stay with it.” [August 13, 1971]

As in all societies, ISKCON has liberal, moderate, and conservative views. Yet in some parts of ISKCON, despotic leaders suppress free discussion of bona fide views that differ from their own, forbid devotees to think independently, or to think at all, or to initiate valuable new programs, even within reasonable boundaries. In such areas, brāhmaṇas are treated like sūdras.

As the guardian of Prabhupada’s teachings, the GBC must ensure philosophical freedom, within Prabhupada’s boundaries, to all ISKCON devotees. The duty of the GBC is not to passively allow ultra-conservative GBCs to suppress other views, but rather to protect devotees from unreasonable, and often irrational, philosophical bullying.

## **2. Corruption**

There seem to be instances where the GBC sacrifices a precise understanding of certain aspects of our teachings, due to political pressure.

Here is a report from a learned Prabhupada disciple regarding a senior GBC, whom I refer to here as “SG”:

“I asked SG... whether it's ethical of the GBC to disallow Vaisnavi diksa-gurus, given what the verse and purport said. He responded ‘I'm a member of the GBC who agrees with the two SAC [Śāstra Advisory Council] papers that establish the bona fides of Vaishnavi diksa-gurus.’

“But for him [SG] the unity of ISKCON takes precedence; he said that, ‘there's a likelihood ISKCON will split if the GBC votes in line with the śāstra.’ Even though the party opposing Vaisnavi diksa-gurus lacks a sastric basis to support its opposition, he admitted, still he defers to it out of managerial expediency; other GBCs are probably doing the same.”

There are many similar stories. If these stories are true, even to some extent, then a small group of ultra conservative leaders holds Prabhupada’s GBC hostage on a key issue, imposing their own will on ISKCON through threats and coercion.

The title of this section, *corruption*, refers not to SG, but to a situation. In fact, I know SG to be very sincerely devoted to Prabhupada's mission. I know what a sacred, at times frightening, duty it is to keep ISKCON united.

Still if such stories are true, then Prabhupada's GBC system, on this and perhaps other vital issues, has been compromised. The collective wisdom of the GBC does not manage this philosophical issue. Rather, one or more bullies, in the name of *purity*, undermine Prabhupada's system with political intimidation. This is a challenge to the GBC's ability to manage philosophy in ISKCON.

Further, this incident shows that GBCs themselves believe their duty is to defend our *basic philosophy*, and that details, such as Vaiṣṇavī gurus, can be negotiated or traded away if necessary for what they believe to be a higher purpose. I assume that neither SG nor any other serious GBC would trade away a basic philosophical tenet such as the eternal soul, or that God is Kṛṣṇa. If the GBCs interpret their mandate to guard our philosophy, to refer only to basic philosophical points, then they should not use their political power to oppose details with which they may not agree.

### **3. Incompetence**

The third problem is simple incompetence. In the last few years several senior GBCs have posted essays or talks on controversial issues. The lack of philosophical acumen in some of those texts is evident.

Further, I tried to show that even UILA presents some good points but also noteworthy imprecisions. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates states that if the Delphi oracle was right, and he, Socrates, really is the wisest man, it is only because Socrates, unlike most men, knows what he doesn't know.

#### **Avoiding the "GBC Word"**

At the end of my analysis of GBC law, I mentioned that after passing a series of laws on February 26, 1988, detailing why and how errant GBCs are to be disciplined, the GBC then removed all explicit mention of the GBC when they published those laws as ISKCON law 5.5.

I stated there that, "we will see more [of this] in our analysis of the major GBC paper, UILA." I will now give that additional evidence by quoting UILA.

"In a spiritual society a manager cannot fulfill his or her duty to manage simply by declaring and enforcing rules."

Note that the GBC never says, "a GBC cannot fulfill his or her duty...etc." The GBC may argue that they are included among the *managers*. But they never explicitly define GBC limits, by directly naming the GBC.

Similarly, "If the spiritual master...strongly feels that the...care for his disciples within the *local* management structure is inadequate..., he may appeal on their behalf to the higher levels of management, the local GBC member, or other ISKCON avenues of appeal, as listed later in this paper."

This rule speaks of *local management*, indicating that the inadequate manager is *not* a GBC secretary. Also, one appeals *to* the local GBC, not *against* him or her.

"If the spiritual masters act in a contrary way, they will erode the faith of others. Conversely, those in the managerial line of authority should manage, preach, and behave in such a way that they build and sustain the trust of those in the spiritual line of authority and their disciples."

Again, spiritual masters are mentioned by name, GBCs are not. They are, as always, *implied* within the category of managers. But UILA, like GBC law, is shy to ever say that a *GBC* must or must not do something in relation to “lower” devotees.

UILA gives six principles to be followed by gurus in training their disciples, and three principles of guru conduct. This is followed by seven duties of managers.

There is no list of duties or rules of conduct that is specifically, explicitly for GBC members. They are of course included in the general term *manager*, but just as in ISKCON Law, so here in UILA, the GBC is reluctant to publicly state, by name, the limits of GBC power.

UILA once states that GBC power is not absolute or infallible, but only in the sense that GBC edicts are not *Śāstra*. But the paper does not state how we can know that a specific GBC action is wrong, or what we should do about it. UILA does not give clear, reasonable rules by which we can evaluate and judge GBC conduct.

History shows that it is harder to appeal against a GBC member than a lower devotee. Yet UILA gives us no special guidance or instructions in this difficult case of an appeal *against* a GBC member.

We see in GBC law, and UILA, a consistent pattern: the GBC does not explicitly deal with the case of a GBC member mistreating a non-GBC devotee, even though alleged cases of this are numerous. In contrast, GBC law and UILA speak directly, in detail, about the misconduct of gurus and everyone else.

We have duties to the GBC, and they have duties to us. UILA emphasizes our duties to the GBC, but apart from general duties of managers, UILA says almost nothing about the GBC’s specific GBC duty to each of us.

As Prabhupada stated, the GBC should work in consultation with other senior members of ISKCON. Thus the law will reflect the collective wisdom of the devotees, who will understand that they are serving their own self-interest by following the law. I hope my essay will be a step in that direction.

### **Social Contract vs. Tyranny**

Earlier, I introduced the concept of *public reason*, a principle requiring “that the moral or political rules that regulate our common life be, in some sense, justifiable or acceptable to...those persons over whom the rules purport to have authority.”

This principle of rational accord between rulers and the ruled entails a *social contract* between them. Perhaps John Locke articulated most relevantly for us the idea of the *social contract*.

“The Law of Nature, which is on Locke’s view the basis of all morality, and *given to us by God*, commands that we not harm others with regards to their ‘life, health, liberty, or possessions.’ Because we all belong equally to God, and because we cannot take away that which is rightfully His, we are prohibited from harming one another. So, the *State of Nature* is a state of liberty where persons are free to pursue their own interests and plans under God’s laws..., where persons recognize the Law of Nature and therefore do not harm one another. [But] the state of war begins between two or more men, once one man declares war on another, by stealing from him, or by trying to make him his slave.”<sup>12</sup>

Formally enslaving is a radical extreme, however a governing power may usurp by lesser degrees the God-given freedom of a society and its members. And to the extent, great or small,

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/>

that a ruling power unnecessarily suppresses or revokes the natural freedom of its citizens, to that extent there will be conflict and unrest.

But are the related principles of *public reason* and *social contract* compatible with our Vaiṣṇava process of descending authority coming from Kṛṣṇa, through the great *ācāryas* in the divine succession of *paramparā*?

In fact, Prabhupada taught principles quite similar to those of Locke. In his purport to ŚBh 1.6.37, Prabhupada confirms Locke's thesis that our natural state is one of freedom:

“Every living being is anxious for full freedom because *that is his transcendental nature*. And this freedom is obtained only through the transcendental service of the Lord.”

Prabhupada explains further that this freedom is not merely internal freedom from, say, lust and greed, nor is freedom a factor only in the final, most advanced stages of Kṛṣṇa consciousness: “...in *all spheres* of devotional service, freedom is the main pivot. Without freedom *there is no execution of devotional service*. The freedom surrendered to the Lord does not mean that the devotee becomes dependent in every respect. To surrender unto the Lord through the transparent medium of the spiritual master is to attain complete freedom of life.”

Similarly: “The need of the spirit soul is that he wants...complete freedom...He wants to see the free light and the spirit.” [ŚBh 1.2.8 Purport]

By the way, the word *freedom* occurs in Vedabase over three thousand times. That is a lot.

Prabhupada also said these things:

“Because here everyone is giving voluntary service. *Nobody is servant*. So if he doesn't like something, at any moment he can go away.” [September 5, 1976]

“But one test is that *all the devotees should be satisfied*. They have given their lives to Krishna, so we should see they are always happy. Their service is voluntary. It is not that we can force anyone to do anything. If we do, they will go away and that is a great loss. Everyone must be encouraged to do what he likes to do for Krishna.” [November 30, 1971]

Apply Prabhupada's criteria above, can we say that ISKCON devotees in general *satisfied* with the GBC? Are ISKCON devotees *always happy* with the GBC, or even often happy with the GBC? In other words, does the GBC pass Prabhupada's “one test?”

### **The Vanishing Reference Point**

UILA states that, “This essay is not a detailed or definitive analysis of ISKCON's management system...”

Neither is the Constitution Draft (CD), as I will show next. For practical details, both UILA and CD defer to GBC law. But as we saw, that law gives such meager protection to devotees, that justice itself often starves in ISKCON.



## Constitution

### **Prabhupada Calls for an ISKCON Constitution**

“We are in the experimental stage but in the next meeting of the GBC members they should form a **constitution** how the GBC members manage the whole affair.” [Letter to Giriraja—August 12, 1971]

“...the real thing is that we must make broader **constitution** of the management by GBC. But the difficulty is that our GBC men are falling victim to maya.” [Letter to Jayatirtha—December 16, 1974]

Thirty-five years after Prabhupada called for an ISKCON constitution, after many inconclusive attempts, the GBC resolved in 2006 to answer the call. Ten years later—forty-five years after Prabhupada’s original request—the GBC has produced a relatively short draft of a proposed constitution, which I will refer to here as CD (Constitution Draft).

CD tells its readers: “We need your feedback.” I will provide mine here.

### **What is a Constitution?**

A constitution is a system of fundamental principles or established precedents according to which a nation, state, corporation, or society is governed. Laws without a constitution are like a ship without a rudder.

### **Purpose Six, Devotee Rights, Unfulfilled**

The preface to CD gives its six *primary purposes*. The sixth is “To protect the rights of [ISKCON] individuals and entities.” This sounds good, but sadly, that is the last we will hear of “the rights of individuals.” CD itself, ten years in the making, says nothing about the rights of individual ISKCON devotees.

Section IV is titled ISKCON Organizations, and Section IV.3, “Rights,” lists three rights of ISKCON Organizations. There is no section on individual devotee rights. Thus CD does not fulfill, nor even address, its ostensible Purpose 6.

Although in the past ten years, the GBC has been unable to articulate the rights of individual devotees, the GBC has been able to publish an official paper, and pass laws that forcefully affirm the GBC’s rights and powers.

As quoted above, Prabhupada seemed to attribute the lack of a proper constitution to the spiritual weakness of the GBC:

“...the real thing is that we must make broader **constitution** of the management by GBC. But *the difficulty is that our GBC men are falling victim to maya.*”

The goal of the constitution committee was to ratify a constitution by 2016. That will not happen.

In any case, let us explore further the GBC’s latest attempt to draft a constitution.

### **Four Conflicting Core Principles**

A separate PowerPoint introduction to CD lists four “Core Principles.” The first two are promising:

1. Establish the foundational principles that govern, guide and inspire ISKCON.

2. Address both structure and values.

But the last two core principles go to an extreme that defeats the purpose of the first two:

3. Be more inspirational, less legalistic.

4. Leave details to ISKCON Law.

As we shall see, in its attempt to be “less legalistic,” and “leave details to ISKCON Law” (which we saw to be inadequate to ensure justice) this draft provides far too few legal principles and details. Thus it will not fulfill the purpose of a sound constitution—to guide, delimit, and inform a society’s legislative and judicial process, to guarantee justice and good governance to all ISKCON members.

I have given a practical example, Purpose 6, to show how CD, in its concern not to be overly legalistic and detailed, fails to provide adequate legal principles and details.

### **Other Articles Give No Rights**

There are more problems. Article V discusses the GBC, and V.3 gives the “scope and responsibilities” of GBC members. V.3 lists nine GBC duties, such as “delegating authority, managing resources,” etc. But V.3 does not list protecting the rights of ISKCON members, or ensuring them justice as a GBC responsibility.

Another example: Article V.3 states that the GBC is responsible to do “all things necessary and proper to facilitate the success of ISKCON’s mission.” This means that if ISKCON is not successful in some parts of the world, the local GBC or the GBC body, are responsible. Those who accept power, also accept responsibility. But there is no hint of what is to be done if the GBC fails to facilitate the success of ISKCON’s mission. CD gives no legal principle and no details.

As stated, CD’s Primary Purpose 6 is “To protect the rights of individuals and entities.” However, Article VI discusses “Principles of ISKCON Governance,” without ever using words like *justice, rights, fair process* etc.

Having announced individual rights as a primary purpose of the draft, CD never explicitly mentions it again.

Article VI.3 on *Purpose of Governance*, and VI.4 on *Ethos of Service*, list the qualities of ideal management, but fall far short of guaranteeing anything like justice to individual members of ISKCON. The very notion of fair process, a cornerstone of a just society, does not appear in a proposed ISKCON constitution. Keep in mind that a constitution is a system of fundamental principles or established precedents according to which a nation, state, corporation, or society is governed. Thus if CD were to be approved, ISKCON would be a society *not* governed by fair process.

VI.5 states that ISKCON devotees “who have accepted responsibility within ISKCON are entitled to a process of review when administrative decisions are made that affect their service.” But what are the codes of that review? And what of faithful devotees who do not hold responsible positions? In either case, we find not a word here on fair process.

Indeed, the tiniest section of CD is Article VII on ISKCON Dispute Resolution. CD merely states that the GBC “shall establish both formal and informal dispute resolution methods...” Again there is no mention of fair process or justice.

The draft authors provide their own commentary or “Explanations” on CD. For Article VII, mislabeled in the explanation section as Article VI, the authors say what the Article already says, “This article simply requires the GBC to have both formal and informal dispute resolution systems,” adding that this Article “leaves the details to ISKCON law.”

Remarkably, this explanation says nothing of fair process, of justice, of individual rights. Whatever system the GBC may devise seems alright with CD. As we will see in my discussion of the ISKCON Dispute Resolution Office, having created it, the GBC did almost nothing to inform ISKCON devotees that this facility even exists, nor has the GBC seriously funded IDRO. CD does not address such eventualities.

Article VI.4.3 is another example of a promising CD statement whose promise is emasculated by the official explanation of it.

VI.4.3 states: The GBC is responsible “to establish an environment where...the respect, value, and safety of individuals is maintained.”

**Explanation:** “This article simply requires the GBC to have both formal and informal dispute resolution systems and leaves the details to ISKCON law.”

Rather than provide robust constitution protection for devotees, this section, and its “explanation,” offer only vague, idealistic language, easily circumvented by the GBC, as ISKCON history abundantly attests.

CD leaves details to ISKCON law, which itself gives little if any details on justice or devotee rights. Did the CD authors carefully study ISKCON law before they confidently invoked it as an adequate source of details for ISKCON justice?

In fact, CD concern with justice seems limited to dispute resolution groups, that historically have often been unable to prevent, rectify, or compensate injustice perpetrated by ISKCON leaders against subordinate devotees.

### **Limited Call for Feedback**

CD seems to fulfill few of its lofty goals. Its own Core Principles prevent that, since this draft provides neither clear legal protection for our rights, nor details of those rights.

The Constitution drafters seek input, but not from devotees in general, who are perhaps the group that most needs constitutional protections. Rather CD’s authors “strive for consensus amongst ISKCON *leaders*.” Indeed, the “Feedback process focused on the ISKCON Leadership Sanga in 2016.”

The 2016 ILS meeting came and went and we hear nothing of a breakthrough in establishing a constitution. In fact, I have not met a single devotee outside present ISKCON leaders who even knows about the constitution draft process, or the call for feedback.

Still, we must praise the following section of CD which shows real wisdom.

### **Proposed Social Contract**

Article II, Section 1: “ISKCON...is...given in stewardship to his followers who are organized as an international society under the governance of the ISKCON Governing Body Commission (GBC).”

CD explains this as follows:

“ISKCON is not entrusted to any individual but to the collective body of Srila Prabhupada’s followers organized as a society as he instructed, including his instruction that the ISKCON GBC body created by him would in his absence be the “ultimate managerial authority.”

“Stewardship of ISKCON is therefore not the exclusive domain of the GBC body but is shared in some capacity among all of Srila Prabhupada's followers organized as a society in accordance with his instructions, including members and affiliates.”

This is clearly a different voice than we heard in the GBC claim to have *inherited* ISKCON.

CD also states: “The above definition of ISKCON suggests limits to the authority of the GBC, for example: the GBC cannot change the core mission of ISKCON as defined by Srila Prabhupada.”

The body of ISKCON devotees are not a *managing* authority. But, consistent with Article II.1, they can and should act as a moral and spiritual force. The vigilance of the saintly Vaiṣṇavas will help to save ISKCON from corruption, tyranny, and injustice. Prabhupada perfectly captures this mood of cooperation:

*“Now all my disciples must work combinedly and with cooperation to spread this Sankirtana Movement. If you cannot work together then my work is stopped up. Our Society is like one big family and our relationships should be based on love and trust.”* [Letter to Upendra—August 6, 1970]

Since CD repeatedly reduces devotee rights to the right to appeal to an ISKCON dispute resolution body, we will next consider what the GBC currently offers in that regard.

## **IR and IDRO**

### **ISKCON Resolve (IR)**

ISKCON is blessed with an excellent mediation program, ISKCON Resolve (IR), led by highly trained devotees. Throughout ISKCON, IR has facilitated peace and cooperation where there was strife and conflict.

Yet as IR explains on their website, mediation works within strict and limited boundaries. I will list these in IR's own words:

1. "Mediation is a *voluntary* process that helps two or more people in conflict clarify their issues and goals... and try to reach a constructive resolution."

Thus if an ISKCON member believes that he or she has been mistreated or denied justice by a leader, the leader may simply refuse to enter into mediation, which is voluntary on both sides. Result: there is no mediation.

2. "Mediators do not make decisions about who is right or wrong or how things should be resolved—all decisions are made by the parties."

Thus a mediator cannot rule that an ISKCON leader acted improperly no matter what the circumstances.

3. "The Mediator is not a judge and will not impose a solution on either party."

The mediator cannot enforce justice.

Conclusion: IR is a valuable program that does much good within ISKCON. But by its own rules, and the very nature of mediation, IR cannot ensure justice, including fair process, to those who feel they have been treated unfairly in ISKCON.

### **IDRO ISKCON Dispute Resolution Office**

The GBC Resolution establishing IDRO admits that ISKCON's justice ministry was long defunct:

"Whereas previous attempts to create a judicial process in ISKCON never took hold..."

There is clear evidence that though allowing IDRO to exist, the GBC made no serious commitment to justice in ISKCON, as shown by the following:

1. A senior non-GBC devotee lobbied for IDRO.

2. After authorizing IDRO, the GBC took *three years* to appoint a director.

3. To enable IDRO to promote justice in nearly a thousand ISKCON projects in over a hundred countries, a task requiring a competent staff, global communications, international investigative travel etc., the GBC provides IDRO about \$250 per month. This amount provides for about \$20 per year per country, or one dollar and sixty cents per month, per country. ISKCON spend tens of millions of dollars on opulent temples and, literally, pennies on justice.

4. Having taken three years to appoint an IDRO director, and having provided almost no funding for IDRO, the GBC did virtually nothing to let ISKCON devotees know of IDRO's existence. A search of the official GBC website produced no information of its existence. A search of Iskconnews.com produced no information. A search of Dandavats.com shows one brief article on IDRO posted over a year ago.

Still, IDRO does exist, and it could provide hope for ISKCON justice. In that spirit, I point out here what I see as IDRO's main structural problems. All quotations below are from IDRO's own documents.

1. IDRO will only accept a case that "concerns a violation of ISKCON law." I showed earlier the grave inadequacy of ISKCON law in regard to justice for individual devotees. And

without adequate law, many, probably most, cases of injustice will not qualify for resolution by IDRO. Indeed, there are so few laws protecting basic devotee rights, that many forms of injustice in ISKCON are consistent with ISKCON law. IDRO cannot act in those cases of *legal injustice*.

2. IDRO does not accept a case “when the substance of the complaint is theological.” I discussed this in detail in my review of UILA’s claim that the GBC is to manage philosophy in ISKCON. At times, theological views sanctioned by Prabhupada are forbidden by local ISKCON authorities, including GBCs. IDRO could not act in such a case.

3. IDRO states that in a case of dispute, “Individual parties pay for arbitration.” In the past, the high cost of justice ruined the Justice Ministry, which essentially could only offer justice to the rich. This same danger stalks the IDRO, unless the GBC funds justice. Presently, this is not the case.

4. IDRO also rejects a case as inappropriate “when the matter requires an ISKCON authority’s decision. This system does not circumvent standard managerial decisions by ISKCON leadership nor is it meant to allow leaders to neglect their duties.”

This rather opaque rule seems to allow the GBC, or lesser authorities, to declare a matter to be a managerial decision, and thus outside IDRO jurisdiction. Of course a complainant could allege that the managerial decision was abusive, unfair etc., but we have no clear guidelines for such cases, assuming ISKCON law, which is weak on justice, is not violated.

The intersection of managerial responsibility and justice is not clear. This rule requires explication.

IDRO could be a significant step toward ISKCON justice. Yet to fulfill its potential, IDRO must receive much more GBC support. Years ago, the GBC invited senior, learned devotees to form a *Śāstra Advisory Council* (SAC) to counsel the GBC on theological matters. But the GBC later ignored key findings of the SAC, such as their conclusion that a qualified Vaiṣṇavī has the right to accept disciples. This and other GBC neglect of the SAC demoralized several important members who then resigned. The SAC at present plays a very limited role in ISKCON.

We can expect something similar with IDRO, unless the GBC takes justice in ISKCON far more seriously.

## Conclusion

### **Summary of ISKCON's GBC**

I began this essay explaining that although the GBC is ISKCON's ultimate managing authority, there have been crucial moments in ISKCON's history when non-GBC devotees provided the impetus and logic for urgent action taken by the GBC.

Further, Prabhupada wanted us all to work together, as he made clear when he first convoked the annual GBC meeting in Mayapura.

Using the word *political* in its neutral sense to indicate the exercise of authority in a society, I described the political *pendulum effect*, whereby one administrative extreme, be it anarchy or tyranny, produces its opposite extreme. This should caution us to avoid administrative extremes in ISKCON.

I showed how Prabhupada wanted us to engage all fields of advanced knowledge, including social sciences, in the Lord's service, and in that spirit I engage scholarship in my attempt to analyze ISKCON governance.

I began with standard sociology of religion, which speaks of the three forms of authority in a religious movement: charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational.

We saw that to survive and flourish, a religious movement must channel the spiritual power and authority of its charismatic founder into sustainable institutional traditions and rational laws. Indeed, the Gauḍīya Maṭha disintegrated because it failed to perform that process.

I then analyzed a GBC self-description from the official GBC website and concluded that at least in this statement, the GBC had mistakenly concluded that in his will, Prabhupada had appointed them the successor *ācārya* of, and heir to, ISKCON.

I argued that in fact, Prabhupada did exactly what he said he was doing: naming the GBC as the ultimate managing authority of ISKCON, not as a successor Ācārya that stands above ISKCON law. The GBC failed to provide historical evidence for their argument that Prabhupada implicitly named as his full heir and successor, simply naming them in the first clause of his will.

I then discussed the dangers to ISKCON of this mistaken self-understanding, in which imperfect souls claim the authority of a perfect soul. Imperfect souls suffer loss of empathy in proportion to their increase of power. Also, the GBC is an oligarchy and the iron law of oligarchy explains the tendency of ruling groups to increase their power at the expense of the citizens; and the tendency of power to fall into ever fewer hands.

The tendency of saintly GBCs to avoid heavy management adds to this problem.

We then saw that history is replete with cases of austere, pious tyrants who acted cruelly. The GBC is not cruel but its members who are not fully pure will be affected to some extent by general human tendencies.

Perhaps the most significant manifestation of this error is the GBC's tendency to act above and outside the rules of justice, such as fair process. I argued by obeying reasonable laws, the GBC follows Prabhupada. To act outside those laws is to imitate Prabhupada.

I then discussed Western and Vedic notions of justice and showed that both traditions link justice to the equality of souls, and the need to govern in a way that maximizes human freedom.

Kṛṣṇa Himself teaches justice and equality in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

I explained that Kṛṣṇa also teaches hierarchy in terms of the *varṇāśrama* system He created, and that a virtuous society must balance the spiritual equality of all souls with the need

for functional hierarchy. This concern finds close echoes in Western philosophy, as in the ideas of Mill and Durkheim.

I then surveyed the categories of justice, and the special importance of fair process.

A study of GBC/ISKCON law showed that the very language of justice—words like equality, *justice*, fair process, rights etc.—is missing from ISKCON law. Also the GBC allowed the Justice Ministry to lapse into total dysfunction, and did not take the initiative to revive or replace it.

I then showed that restraint and punishment in GBC law is heaviest on those with little or no power and lightest on those with ultimate power. This has obvious implications and perils.

I gave special attention to the dramatic disparity in the rules, restraints, and punishments placed on ISKCON's two most powerful groups: GBC and Gurus.

An examination of the appeal process in GBC law showed it to be seriously deficient. This matters, since the right to fair appeal is a pillar of justice.

I next examined the important GBC paper titled *Understanding ISKCON Lines of Authority*. The essay aims to define and clarify the relationship between ISKCON managers, such as GBCs and Temple Presidents, and ISKCON Gurus and Sannyāsīs.

I appreciated the intention of the paper, to persuade devotees that the GBC is reasonable and justified in its policies. However, I pointed out a number of serious problems in UILA, such as the tendency to exaggerate GBC power and minimize the role of other ISKCON authorities. We saw this in UILA's virtual exclusion of gurus and sannyāsīs from the planning of preaching strategy.

UILA also tends to strongly subordinate all devotees to ISKCON's ultimate managers. Prabhupada stressed cooperation. The GBC stress subordination. Prabhupada also stressed the importance of individual freedom and dignity among the Lord's servants. There is little of such language in UILA.

UILA quotes Prabhupada saying that the GBC will be ISKCON's *primary teacher* when he is gone. I then suggested what the GBC must do, and not do, to fulfill this mandate. For example, GBCs must not use political power to exclude ideas they cannot objectively refute, nor to impose ideas that they cannot reasonably show to be exclusively valid. This has been a problem in ISKCON.

Since Prabhupada urged the GBC to write a constitution, I next examine the latest constitution draft. I showed that this draft is well-intentioned, and wise on some points, but that it ultimately fails to inspire, mandate, or explain justice in ISKCON. Thus it does not fulfill its stated purpose -- to protect our rights, and establish a constitutional foundation for a rational, just ISKCON.

Finally, I show that ISKCON Resolve, an effective mediation program, and the more recent ISKCON Dispute Resolution Office, cannot, by their own charters and rules, ensure justice to ISKCON devotees.

### **Why Justice?**

Without justice, any managing authority will rule within a culture of impunity, in which mediocrity, tyranny, and injustice go unaddressed.

The more devotees are convinced that the GBC governs with justice, compassion, and strategic ingenuity, the more devotees now estranged from ISKCON bureaucracy and hierarchy will consider more direct involvement in ISKCON's mission. Only thus can the GBC fulfill their obligation to Prabhupada -- to unite ISKCON and dynamically spread his movement.



There exists between GBC and non-GBC devotees a relationship of mutual obligation, mutual duty. The GBC receives its authority from Kṛṣṇa through Prabhupada. That authority requires them to treat devotees with respect and fairness.

It is the GBC's duty to do what is right, fair, and beneficial for ISKCON. And they must persuade the devotees that they are doing so.

Hierarchy and equality must be kept in balance. The GBC must not overemphasize hierarchy so that it obscures our ultimate equality. Nor can we overemphasize equality so that it obscures legitimate hierarchies. Extreme equality and extreme hierarchy both threaten Prabhupada's balanced vision for ISKCON. We must avoid the political pendulum effect.

Ultimately, ISKCON needs a strong, wise, inspiring GBC if we are to flourish as a society and fulfill the brilliant, ambitious hopes and prophecies of our Founder-Ācārya.

I wrote this paper as a sincere attempt to address needed reforms in ISKCON governance. I hope the GBC and other ISKCON devotees will accept it in that spirit. To all those who read these words, may we work together to fulfill Prabhupada's vision for his movement, ISKCON. The world depends on us.