

**A Brief Exploration of the History of
ISKCON's Social and Ideological
Conflicts and their Significance for
ISKCON's Emerging Constitution**

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Preface

This essay broadly reflects the views and concerns of a significant section of Vaishnavas who can fairly be called ISKCON's traditionalists. Although there is diversity of opinion among traditionalists themselves on the topics presented herein, among them there is also much consensus on this essay's arguments and conclusions. All the defects in this essay belong to me. Despite its defects, it is hoped that this presentation will provoke a much needed, extended public discussion about ISKCON's social direction in general and ISKCON's emerging constitution in particular.

Krishna-kirti das (HDG)

On the Appearance Day of Sri Advaitacharya, 13 February 2008
Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA.

Introduction

ISKCON is about to write its own constitution. What does this mean, and why is this important? Although most countries today have constitutions, some do not. Britain, for example, does not have a constitution, yet its society seems to function smoothly without one. Unlike Britain, newer countries generally cannot rely on history and a deeply entrenched culture to define themselves as coherent societies. If ISKCON feels it needs a constitution, then it is less like an old country and more like a new, emergent country.

Although some societies form their constitutions amidst peaceful circumstances, other countries must form their constitutions after a protracted, existential struggle. The United States declared independence from Britain in 1776 and fought a brutal war to remain separate; in 1787 the final draft of the U.S constitution was completed. After a protracted struggle, India likewise gained its independence from Britain in 1947; in 1949 India's Constituent Assembly completed the draft of India's own constitution. Only after victory is clear and final can the patriots and freedom fighters go about the business of nation-building.

Likewise, the immanent formation of ISKCON's constitution comes at the end of a similar pattern of difference, conflict, and revolutionary victory. Understanding this chain of historic events as they have transpired within ISKCON is essential to understanding ISKCON's emerging constitution.

Although most public discussion about ISKCON's constitution will likely focus on the constitution's pragmatic development, this essay will focus on ISKCON's history of ideological struggle and the outcome of that struggle, which has made ISKCON's constitution immanent.

Ideology

The Hare Krishna movement outside of India started in North America, and from there it branched out to Britain, to other European countries, and to the rest of the world before it returned to India, where it started from. Because ISKCON started in North America, the importance of the English language within ISKCON and the fact that many of ISKCON's most senior devotees and leaders today are American or British, Anglo-American culture exerts a strong influence on ISKCON's world-wide organization and society. If Anglo-American culture is influential in ISKCON, then so are the philosophies that underlie Anglo-American culture. Some of the more prominent of these philosophies will be briefly summarized here.

Empiricism

The three great British empiricists, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, had in common a belief that all knowledge is founded on direct experience. Locke in particular refuted the notion of innatism, or the idea that there are innate ideas that exist outside of experience and need only be discovered. Closely related to empiricism is nominalism, or the notion that all universals are simply names that organize our direct experience. As per nominalism, similarities between different categories are in the names themselves and have no objective existence. Essentially, this means there are no such things as universals, there are only particulars. Nominalism and empiricism deny the existence of universals as distinct entities. As a theory of knowledge, empiricism underlies much of scientific thinking and Western culture today.

Consequentialism

Another classically British philosophical movement is consequentialism, of which the utilitarian philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are perhaps the best known. Consequentialism in particular is most concerned with ethics and social theory. Since the time of its emergence in the 19th century, consequentialism has evolved as a group of related ethical theories that continue to dominate the ethical and political thinking in modern Western society.

As the name consequentialism implies, the moral fitness of any action is ascertained in its likely results—does any particular action result in the most benefit for the most people? Statements such as this one from Mill are intuitively familiar to Westerners:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. . . .

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle. . . the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable . . . is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who in consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This, being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has

been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation.¹

Mill's utilitarianism is a hedonistic philosophy. However, his conception of pleasure is not strictly epicurean. It also includes higher sentiments and "nobler feelings." For Mill, no one with a higher education would be willing to again, if it were possible, be uneducated. It is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.

Although the Greatest Happiness Principle stipulates that the greatest happiness is to be had by the greatest number of people, Mill believed that utilitarianism taken too far results in a tyranny of the majority. This conclusion appears to stem from his inclusion of "nobler feelings" in his definition of pleasure. As per Mill, there are qualitatively higher pleasures. A society generally devoid of such "nobler feelings" would be quite a miserable society and hence not be in accord with his Greatest Happiness Principle.

Another of consequentialism's presumptions is the basic goodness of human nature. Like the British empiricists, Mill did not believe that ideas (hence, morality also) were innate. He believed that people acquired morality through experience and education. Although Mill admits that through education and external influence morality can become something quite terrible, he nevertheless felt that goodness, though not innate, is nevertheless a natural outgrowth of human nature, much as how humans have a natural gift for language and for building dwellings. This line of thinking implies that if people are given the right education, given a positive social context, and provided adequate opportunity, they will flourish, just as a plant given adequate water and sunlight will naturally grow. Consequentialism thus presumes that [conditioned] human nature is fundamentally good.²

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is America's best known contribution to the enterprise of philosophy. Pragmatism's three greatest proponents were Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, and John Dewey. It was Pierce who first enunciated the Pragmatic Principle in 1878, in the *Popular Science Monthly* of January of that year. As per James, after noting that beliefs are rules for action, Pierce said that

To develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or

¹ J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861), Chapters 2 and 3, qtd in *Philosophy: History and Problems*, Stumph and Fieser (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003) 304, 307

² Some will often describe consequentialist precepts as close to the Vedic conception of the self (*jivatma*) as being fundamentally pure yet contaminated by *maya*. However, consequentialist philosophers such as Mill typically do not distinguish between an outer-self (*ahankara*) and an inner-self (*jivatma*), and their approach to knowledge is empirical. From the perspective of Vedic philosophy, utilitarian and consequentialist conceptions of the self are generally considered to refer only to *ahankara*, not *jivatma*.

remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.³

In other words, the “cash-value” of any particular thought, course of action, or object existing in the world lies in whatever effects it is liable to produce. Beyond that, whatever other claims that may be made about its object, origins, purpose, etc., need not be considered since in the end they neither add to nor subtract from the object’s tangible “cash-value.”

Pragmatism itself is a method and an attitude directed at settling metaphysical disputes that have otherwise been irreconcilable and acrimonious. For example, if a theistic explanation for the origin of the world and an atheistic explanation were to be judged, and each advocate succeeded in his presentation, then both positions would be deemed inconsequential. Since they both arrive at the same conclusion—the world as we see it today—they both have the same “cash value.” For all practical purposes, the theories are considered equivalent. This is what is meant by “conduct is for us its sole significance.”

Because pragmatism is subjective, experiential, it does not presume to have answers to metaphysical questions. It is a means by which our understanding of the world—“existing realities”—can be changed. As per James, “*theories become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.*”⁴ To this end, pragmatism channels several allied philosophical approaches:

[Pragmatism] agrees with nominalism, for instance, in always appealing to particulars; with positivism in its disdain for verbal solutions, useless questions and metaphysical abstractions.

All these, you see, are *anti-intellectualist* tendencies. Against rationalism as a pretension and a method, pragmatism is fully armed and militant. But, at the outset at least, it stands for no particular results. It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method.⁵

The pragmatic theory of truth lies in empirical verification. According to the pragmatic theory of truth, something true at one time can always be untrue at some other time:

*True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. . . . Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events.*⁶

Pragmatism is therefore openly opposed to innatism (the notion that certain ideas are innate and discoverable through some rational method) and is skeptical of wisdom received through tradition, through disciplic succession, holy books, etc. In its own charitable way, pragmatism sees the body of religious authority, the “word of God,” as a collection of pragmatic, “common sense” dictums that evolved over time and whose truth—however much it may seem to be Absolute at any given time—is always contingent on “time, place, and circumstance.” Pragmatism rejects the notion that true knowledge can be obtained or verified through any means other than through direct sense perception or through conformity with other truths that somewhere along the way had been so verified.

³ William James, Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking (New York: Longmans Green And Co. 1907) 46.

⁴ James 53.

⁵ James 53.

⁶ James 201.

Since pragmatism is especially concerned with effects and consequences, it is characteristically consequentialist. In his book, James's dedication speaks highly of the debt pragmatism owes to utilitarianism:

TO THE MEMORY OF JOHN STUART MILL
From whom I first learned the
pragmatic openness of mind
and whom my fancy likes to picture as
our leader
were he alive to-day.⁷

Pragmatism is empirical in its approach to knowledge, nominalist in its repudiation of universals, and consequentialist in its approach to ethics. Pragmatism repudiates rationalistic and theistic notions of objectivity and transcendence. As an attitude, as a method, and as a theory of truth, pragmatism underlies much of modern-day ethics, political thought, and social science.

Existentialism

One of the most significant markers of existentialist and phenomenological thought in contemporary Anglo-American society today is the prominence of humanistic psychology. In an article published on the American Psychological Association (APA) website, free-lance writer Rebecca Clay makes this observation about its success:

For many humanistic psychologists, the recent positive psychology movement is simply humanistic psychology repackaged. Similarly, crisis counseling's emphasis on empathic listening finds its roots in [Carl] Rogers's work. In the wider culture, the growing popularity of personal and executive coaching also points to humanistic psychology's success. And Moss believes humanistic psychology's tenets will only become more relevant as the nation ages, creating a culture preoccupied with facing death and finding meaning in life.

In fact, humanistic psychology has been so successful at influencing mainstream psychology and American culture that the field recently suffered what Maureen O'Hara, PhD, calls an "identity crisis." Had humanistic psychology permeated the culture so completely that the movement itself was no longer necessary?⁸

This prominent approach to psychology is significantly based on existentialist philosophy and phenomenology. Beginning with Søren Kierkegaard, philosophers regarded as existentialists have been concerned primarily with the individual and his relationship with either the universe or with God. This concern with the individual and his view of himself and the world, fundamentally from *his* point of view, arose from dissatisfaction with metaphysics, which attempted to explain the whole of reality yet failed to account for man's existence as each man or woman experiences it. Existentialist philosophy has thus been focused on uncovering or developing one's "true self" as distinguished from false self-identities imposed by society or by one's desire to become something that one is not.

All existentialist philosophers have been concerned with despair, its causes, and its amelioration. As per Kierkegaard, despair arises from denying what one truly is:

⁷ James Dedication.

⁸ Rebecca A. Clay, "A renaissance for humanistic psychology: The field explores new niches while building on its past," Monitor on Psychology, 33.8 (2002): 42, Monitor on Psychology, 8 Sep. 2002, American Psychological Association, 12 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.apa.org/monitor/sep02/renaissance.html>>.

That self which he despairingly wills to be is a self which he is not (for to will to be that self which one truly is, is indeed the opposite of despair); what he really wills is to tear his self away from the Power which constituted it.⁹

It is this phrase “to will to be that self which one truly is” that has been foundational to the development of humanistic psychology.

Reading Kierkegaard, wrote [Carl] Rogers, had a “loosening up” effect, encouraging him to trust and to express his own experience. He thought that Kierkegaard’s insights and convictions expressed views he himself had held but was unable to formulate. One of these insights was found in the passage from *The Sickness unto Death*, in which Kierkegaard argued that the aim of life is “to be that self which one truly is.” Rogers interpreted the passage to mean that the most common despair is created not by being responsible for becoming what one truly wants to be, but rather by desiring to be something else. In other words, Rogers understood the passage to mean that one ought to allow one’s innermost nature to surface. This idea was, indeed, a cornerstone of Rogers’s thought on the self and on therapy.¹⁰

Jean-Paul Sartre, perhaps the best known existentialist philosopher, argued that despair¹¹ is not only caused by not being what we truly are but also by our inability to know in advance the consequences of our actions, which we are nevertheless fully responsible for. Even if our dealings are with God Himself, the beginning point of all our decision-making begins with our own experience and with whatever situation we find ourselves in.

Referring to Kierkegaard’s own scenario of Abraham being ordered to sacrifice his son on God’s command, Sartre points out that “everyone might first wonder, ‘Is it really an angel, and am I really Abraham? What proof do I have?’”¹² For Sartre, anguish (despair) is caused by the freedom to choose between one action and another; by the limitations of one’s knowledge of one’s own situation in which that choice must be made; and by the consequences one is not able to fully anticipate.

This analysis of thought, decision, and consequence common to all existentialist philosophers begins from the point of view of the person making them. As per Sartre, all existentialist philosophers, whether Christian or atheist, “think that existence precedes essence, or . . . that subjectivity must be the starting point.”¹³

Phenomenology

If subjectivity is the starting point for all thought, choice, and action, then the means for acquiring knowledge must also be fundamentally subjective. Beginning in the early 20th century with Edmund Husserl, phenomenology, like existentialism, arose from dissatisfaction with regnant modes of thought at that time. However, the dissatisfaction that gave birth to phenomenology was not with idealism but with empiricism.

⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954, p. 29

¹⁰ Roy José DeCarvalho, *The Founders of Humanistic Psychology* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1991) [Questia](http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=14229715). 11 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=14229715>> page 65.

¹¹ Sartre uses the word “anguish” but also indicates that he uses it synonymously with despair: “This helps us understand what the actual content is of such rather grandiloquent words as anguish, forlornness, despair.” (From “Existentialism is a Humanism” 1946.)

¹² Jean Paul Sartre, “Existence is a Humanism” (1946) qtd. in *Philosophy: History and Problems*, Stumph and Fieser (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003) 43.

¹³ Sartre 40.

Phenomenology begins where the empirical sciences fail to adequately describe the world as we experience it, our “being-in-the-world.” For example, science cannot adequately describe the very act of the scientist doing science. Stones do not weigh each other. A living being weighs them for some ulterior, unscientific purpose. Husserl designated the world of our experience untouched and ignored by scientific investigation as the “transcendental realm”—transcendental because it transcends empirical methods of investigation. Husserl sought to liberate the philosopher from a point of view dominated by the natural sciences.¹⁴

His assistant and, later, successor was Martin Heidegger, who extended Husserl’s foundational work in phenomenology. Heidegger postulated a concept that he calls *Dasein*, which roughly means “being there.” *Dasein*, however, does not simply mean being in some location, as water is contained in a glass, but in the sense of something like “being in love”—in other words, one’s state of being. Being not only locates one in time and space but also describes the structure of one’s existence, which to begin with makes it possible for someone to thinking meaningfully about the world.

Since we are so concerned with purposes, with things and their utility, concern was therefore a central concept to Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*. Because concern for others is such a fundamental aspect of *Dasein* (“being in the world”), understanding *Dasein* means understanding the nature of this concern.

Heidegger divides this concern for others into three parts. The first part is “facticity,” which represents our past. We exist in this world, we are not here by choice. The next aspect is “existentiality,” which is about our future because it represents our freedom to make choices. We are responsible for transforming our lives by making appropriate decisions. The final aspect of concern is “fallenness,” which represents our present, “inauthentic” existence. Authenticity (who we really are) requires that an individual recognize and affirm his or her unique self and responsibility for every action. Our existence is considered inauthentic when we do not do this. An inauthentic existence is a “public self” shaped by social obligation and explanation. It is not who we really are.

Nevertheless, the man living an inauthentic existence cannot indefinitely avoid confronting his own true self. Anxiety always intrudes. As per Heidegger, this anxiety is not the same as fear experienced in relation to some object, like a snake or an enemy, but over nothing in particular. This “no-thing” from which anxiety arises is the cessation of existence that comes with death. Because living inauthentically distracts one from the facts of his temporality and impending death, one must affirm his true, “authentic” existence in order to see transparently what and who he really is. The consequent revelation that comes from knowing one’s true inner self is that the inauthentic existence attempts the impossible, namely to hide the fact of one’s own limitations and temporality.¹⁵

¹⁴ Husserl’s “transcendental realm” is not what devotees know as the transcendental realm. The Krishna conscious conception of the transcendental realm is something that exists quite apart from our mundane “in-the-world” experience—*na tad bhasayate suryo na sasanko na pavakah, yad gatva na vivartante tad dhama paramam mama*. (Bg 8.16) That transcendental realm stands apart from our own experience and exists independently of it. Husserl’s “transcendental realm” is the realm of materially conditioned experience that science can neither investigate nor explain.

¹⁵ Devotees will recognize how closely Heidegger’s notion of inauthentic existence and the anxiety it produces resembles our Srila Prabhupada’s description of the predicament of the conditioned soul: “*every one of us is full of anxieties because of this material existence. Our very existence is in the atmosphere of*

Phenomenology has been particularly influential in the development of existentialism. Heidegger's phenomenology significantly influenced a number of existentialist philosophers, including Sartre. Although Heidegger himself rejected the label of existentialist, Sartre nevertheless designated Heidegger as an existentialist philosopher. Phenomenology and existentialism compliment each other and continue to strongly influence Western society's approach to happiness, self-actualization, and mental well-being.

There are innumerable instances of existential and phenomenological patterns of thinking in modern life. The hippie buzz-word "*be here now*" is a pithy expression of Dasein. Not to be outdone by the hippies, U.S. Army recruiters in the 1970s and 1980s came up with their own existentialist recruiting slogan: "*Be all that you can be.*" This slogan persisted for more than 20 years in Army advertising, outlasting the hippies themselves. Modern corporate trainers prolifically use terms such as "*self-actualization,*" and they promise to help course participants realize their "*full potential.*" The professionally administered counseling and "life skills seminars" that have become popular within ISKCON emphasize finding one's "*inner self,*" or "*inner vaishnava,*" and try to help their participants drop the façades of their "*inauthentic*" existences.

Feminism

Feminism has been very influential within Western culture. Although there are many different approaches to feminism, all approaches agree that feminism at the very least means that women as individuals and a class are entitled to the social, political, and economic rights and privileges equal to those held by men as individuals or as a class. At the very minimum, achieving this equality between men and women in society at large is the goal of all feminist thought and activism.

Feminists believe that hierarchical social structures (superior and inferior statuses and classes) and cultural norms that support them are the cause of inequality and that inequality is the cause of oppression. Feminists say that a society controlled by men (patriarchy) will necessarily oppress women. In a society that privileges men, women will seldom get the opportunity to develop their full potential.

Achieving gender equality and ending oppression means replacing all cultural norms that create inequality with cultural norms that create equality. For example, feminists say that using "he" as a gender-neutral pronoun privileges the male gender in language and thus perpetuates the idea of male privilege in society. Feminists have therefore gone to great lengths to replace "he" with the gender-neutral construction of "he or she."

But why would using "he or she" instead of "he" make any difference at all? Central to almost all types of feminist thought is the concept of gender. Although the terms sex and gender are related, within social science and feminism they mean different things. Sex refers to biology, or the fact of one's male or female physiognomy. Gender, however, refers to the culturally defined norms imposed on males and females in any given society. In the Western countries, for example, it is considered socially unacceptable for men to hold each other's hands in public. In India, however, it is socially acceptable and does not at all mean that they are homosexual. The sex (male) is the same across the cultures, but hand-holding (gender) in different cultures means different things. Sex is fixed and

nonexistence. Actually we are not meant to be threatened by nonexistence. Our existence is eternal. But somehow or other we are put into asat. Asat refers to that which does not exist." (Bg. Intro)

unchangeable; it is fundamentally physical. But gender is indeterminate and can be changed; it is fundamentally cognitive.

If gender is cognitive, then how we think about gender and how we define it matters. Except for the most basic physiological differences such as superior bodily strength in men and the fact that only women can bear children, men and women are considered to have more or less the same aptitudes and abilities. If men and women are more or less equal in terms of their physical and intellectual capabilities, then the pronounced lack of social, political, and economic privilege that women have endured throughout history *has not been imposed by biology but has been imposed by culture*.

If culture is fundamentally cognitive, then it can be changed through social action. Although most feminists will agree that there is some biological basis for human behavior, all feminists believe that gender discrimination can be remedied through changing our ways of thinking. Feminists have therefore strongly advocated that all signs of gender bias be struck from culture and especially language. Mainstream feminists are therefore social constructivists. They believe that society can be molded, or constructed, to whatever ideal any particular society comes to accept.

As an ideology, feminism has moved some of ISKCON's members to avoid language that feminists generally perceive as biased against women. Although the use of "mata" or "mataji" (mother) is still widespread as a respectful term of address in ISKCON, some of ISKCON's members nowadays try to avoid its use. Instead they use the word "prabhu" (master), a term traditionally reserved for males. Others sometimes use the presently awkward sounding word "prabhvi." As reported on the website Dandavats¹⁶, all of the daily reports on the 2007 GBC meetings used the term "prabhvi" when referring to women by name; none of them used the terms "mother," "mata," or "mataji."¹⁷ Although in Sanskrit grammar "prabhvi" is the feminine vocative form of "prabhu", it is still neologism in the context of present-day ISKCON, and it contrasts strongly with Srila Prabhupada's own instructions that "mother" in whichever language is the preferred term of address for all women except one's wife.¹⁸

¹⁶ <http://dandavats.com>

¹⁷ See "Day Seven of the GBC Meetings," 11 Feb. 2007 [Dandavats](http://www.dandavats.com/?p=2886) 26 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.dandavats.com/?p=2886>>; and "Day Eleven of the GBC Meetings," 11 Feb. 2007 [Dandavats](http://www.dandavats.com/?p=2886) 26 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.dandavats.com/?p=2886>>

¹⁸ This is a sample of some of Srila Prabhupada's instructions on how to properly address women: A brahmachari is advised to go begging alms door to door, addressing all women as mother, and whatever he collects goes to the benefit of the guru. (SB 7.6.9 purport) Generally a man should not have sexual relations with any woman other than his wife. According to Vedic principles, the wife of another man is considered one's mother, and sexual relations are strictly forbidden with one's mother, sister and daughter. If one indulges in illicit sexual relations with another man's wife, that activity is considered identical with having sex with one's mother. This act is most sinful. (SB 5.26.20 purport) And they used to call every woman from the beginning of life, "Mother." This is training. Matrivat para-daresu. From the very beginning of life, all women they are treated as mother. That is the system, Vedic system. Everyone will call a woman as "Mother." Never mind whether she is younger or older. It doesn't matter. Woman has to be addressed as "Mother." (Bhagavad-gita 4.16 -- Bombay, April 5, 1974) Similarly, if a brahmachari is taught from childhood, from boyhood address all woman as "mother," he cannot see otherwise. "S(he) is my mother." I remember, it is an example. Long ago, say, in 1925, long ago, so we were in a cinema house. So my eldest son, as soon as he would see one woman in the picture, "Here is another mother! Here is another mother!" (laughter) he would cry. Because a small child, he does not know any woman except mother. He knows everyone as "my mother." So if we train from the

Old-Fashioned Theism

In the course of explaining pragmatism, William James compared the philosophical idealism prominent in his day with what he termed “old fashioned theism.” As per James, this theism “*was bad enough, with its notion of God as an exalted monarch, made up of a lot of unintelligible or preposterous ‘attributes.’*”¹⁹ “Old-fashioned theism” implies a simple and to some a too straight-forward a way of reading scripture. This “literalist” method of reading assumes that what is written in scripture is without error.

Literalism has its counterpart in the Vedic tradition, which considers canonical works such as the Gita, the Bhagavatam, Vedanta-sutra, the Four Vedas, and other scriptures to be without defect. Because they are considered to be without defect, literalists take statements from scripture at face-value unless an indirect meaning is warranted. In his criticism of Gandhi’s interpretation of the Gita’s first verse, Srila Prabhupada commented that Gandhi’s allegorical interpretation of “Kuruksheetra” as one’s own body is unwarranted. Srila Prabhupada asserted that there is an actual place “Kuruksheetra,” and that this verse refers to that historical site. This can fairly be called “literalism.”

Srila Prabhupada himself taught this literalist, “old-fashioned theism” to his disciples. He even titled his Gita translation and commentary, *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*. Literalism continues to be influential within ISKCON, though not as influential as it once was. Since Anglo-American culture significantly permeates ISKCON, old-fashioned theism in ISKCON typically takes on a “Protestant” flavor.²⁰

Although there are some newer ideologies that also significantly influence modern Western culture, the ideologies described herein—empiricism, consequentialism, pragmatism, existentialism, feminism, and old-fashioned theism—are a good starting point for further exploration. A basic understanding of these ideologies can help shed light on thought and behavior that we encounter among ISKCON’s members today.

childhood that “You should treat all woman as mother,” then where is the question of anomalies? No. There is no question. (Lecture: Srimad-Bhagavatam 1.3.13 -- Los Angeles, September 18, 1972)

¹⁹ James 70.

²⁰ This will be more fully explained in the section on ritvikism.

Conflict

Even in Srila Prabhupada's presence there have been significant, internal controversies. The controversy between the sannyasis and the householders in 1976 is but one example, and many more came after Srila Prabhupada's departure in 1977. Although ISKCON's most infamous controversies are usually credited to immaturity, pride, or ambition, rarely have they been credited to prior conditioning—"normal" social attitudes and patterns of thinking that devotees developed before they came to ISKCON. If the Western countries are filled with impersonalism and voidism, then Western patterns of thought and their underlying ideologies have played an important yet invisible part in bringing about these controversies. The clash between ideologies underlying Western culture and ideologies underlying traditional Indian Vaishnava culture has been at the heart of these controversies.

Time, Place, and Circumstance

Since the notion of time, place, and circumstance is such a key term in ISKCON, some brief comments about how it is variously understood are in order. There are two main understandings current in ISKCON: one understanding is based on philosophical pragmatism and the other understanding based on traditionalist literalism. The pragmatic understanding sees time, place, and circumstance as an indefinite license to innovate. Trying to understand the present circumstances as far as possible and using reasoning to calculate the most likely consequences of any particular policy or action is the pragmatists' primary means of reasoning about any situation or issue, trivial or non-trivial. Some in ISKCON refer to this as consequentialism. Devotees who understand the phrase "time, place, and circumstances" in this way generally see all but the highest, most abstract shastric injunctions as utilitarian, or circumstantially a means to some higher end.

ISKCON's pragmatists often quote the following the following statement of Srila Prabhupada's to support innovations in preaching and sometimes in ethics:

An acarya who comes for the service of the Lord cannot be expected to conform to a stereotype, for he must find the ways and means by which Krsna consciousness may be spread. Sometimes jealous persons criticize the Krsna consciousness movement because it engages equally both boys and girls in distributing love of Godhead. Not knowing that boys and girls in countries like Europe and America mix very freely, these fools and rascals criticize the boys and girls in Krsna consciousness for intermingling. But these rascals should consider that one cannot suddenly change a community's social customs. However, since both the boys and the girls are being trained to become preachers, those girls are not ordinary girls but are as good as their brothers who are preaching Krsna consciousness. Therefore, to engage both boys and girls in fully transcendental activities is a policy intended to spread the Krsna consciousness movement. These jealous fools who criticize the intermingling of boys and girls will simply have to be satisfied with their own foolishness because they cannot think of how to spread Krsna consciousness by adopting ways and means that are favorable for this purpose. Their stereotyped methods will never help spread Krsna consciousness. Therefore, what we are doing is perfect by the grace of Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, for it is He who proposed to invent a way to capture those who strayed from Krsna consciousness.²¹

²¹ CC Adi 7.31-32 purport.

The traditionalist understanding, however, sees shastric injunctions as fundamentally normative, not utilitarian. Traditionalists therefore believe that “time, place, and circumstance” can sanction no more than a temporary detour from the precepts and standards described in shastra and tradition. Traditionalists limit the application of “time, place, and circumstance” to short-term situations or to situations where larger issues do not play a significant role. Where time, place, and circumstance are applied, traditionalists usually insist that there be some explanation as to how the innovation will return practice to the course prescribed in shastra. Traditionalists believe that “time, place, and circumstance” should never be a license for indefinite innovation. They believe that real-world action, non-trivial issues, long-term policies should as far as possible represent the literal understanding of shastra.

ISKCON traditionalists quote the following verse and purport to remind their pragmatist counterparts that rules and regulations set aside for the sake of a higher purpose are not to be set aside permanently:

An acarya should devise a means by which people may somehow or other come to Krsna consciousness. First they should become Krsna conscious, and all the prescribed rules and regulations may later gradually be introduced. In our Krsna consciousness movement we follow this policy of Lord Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. For example, since boys and girls in the Western countries freely intermingle, special concessions regarding their customs and habits are necessary to bring them to Krsna consciousness. The acarya must devise a means to bring them to devotional service. Therefore, although I am a sannyasi I sometimes take part in getting boys and girls married, although in the history of sannyasa no sannyasi has personally taken part in marrying his disciples.²²

Traditionalists argue that if the various prescribed rules are also meant to bring us to the perfectional stage, then indefinite disregard for them is ultimately against our best interests. Time, place, and circumstance innovations are supposed to bring the devotee to the prescribed standard, and following the prescribed standard in the vast majority of instances is what elevates him or her to the perfectional stage. Disputes between ISKCON’s pragmatists and traditionalists are significantly rooted in these two different understandings of time, place, and circumstance.

Exploiting Women

Western philosophical patterns of thought are prominent in some of ISKCON’s better known controversies. Pragmatism’s instrumental notion of truth is evident in this example:

One of the popular means to distribute books is by women’s party. A party of women will travel under the care of a man devotee. But in taking care of the women, we have noted that some of these parties have been preaching a false philosophy of the relationship of the man who’s taking care of the women, and that philosophy is that the sankirtana leader is the eternal husband and protector of the women in the party. We want that this philosophy should be rejected. If a man is taking care of a number of women in a sankirtana party, he should be regarded as the son as well as a representative of the spiritual master, of Srila Prabhupada, and not the husband of these women.²³

²² CC Adi 7.37 purport.

²³ Room Conversation with GBC members March 2-3, 1977, Mayapura

In this context, the end is distributing as many books as possible, and a small complication like observing strict celibacy should not get in the way of that. The solution? As imagined by those being criticized by the GBC in the above statement, it goes something like this: Create a new theological precept to fit the time, place, and circumstance, and voila! The male sankirtana leader becomes the eternal husband of the ladies distributing books. *Because* the notion of truth that generated this idea was instrumental, theology, philosophy, and ethics could be so casually tailored to the perceived time, place, circumstances, and hoped-for outcome.

How Srila Prabhupada himself dealt with this issue raises the question as to whether Srila Prabhupada himself was philosophically a pragmatist, or consequentialist. Although allowing so many women to travel in such close company with a man unrelated to them would have been roundly criticized in Indian society and by Srila Prabhupada's god brothers in particular, Srila Prabhupada himself did not object outright to such an arrangement. The rest of the conversation with the GBC shows that Srila Prabhupada himself seemed to encourage a pragmatic approach to such matters:

Prabhupada: Husband, but why he does not marry them? (laughter)

Satsvarupa: Well, sometimes there may be as many as twenty women in a party.

Kirtanananda: They would like to.

Prabhupada: We have no objection if one marries more than one wife. That I have stated.

But law does not allow it. So do the needful.²⁴

In ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada's "do the needful" approach is generally referred to as preaching according to "time, place, and circumstance." Since philosophical pragmatism itself considers "truth" to be subjective and circumstantial, instrumental—nothing more than a means for changing existing realities or of reaching some desired end—it is easily characterized, viscerally if not explicitly, as a product of philosophically pragmatic patterns of thinking. Yet Srila Prabhupada himself throughout his time in the West frequently reminded his disciples that such arrangements were not according to the standards mandated in the shastras (scriptures) and carried significant risk.

Either your mother or sister, or daughter. No, nobody becomes lusty with mother or sister or daughter. But sastra says: "Even your mother or sister or daughter, you should not live in a solitary place." Then one may question that "How it is possible?" No. The sastra says: *balavan indriya-gramah*. The senses are so strong that it becomes polluted. "Now it may be, some rascal fools may be polluted like that." No. Sastra... *Vidvams api karsati*. Even the most learned, he can be polluted. So sometimes in India, I am criticized that I keep women and men in the same temple. In India, that is not allowed. No women can live at night. They can come and go. But I defend myself that this is the system of the country, the women and men, they intermingle. How can I check it? Then the women, shall I not give them any chance for chanting Hare Krsna? No, I shall do this chance, I shall give this chance to woman even at the risk. That is my reply.²⁵

Two classes of ISKCON devotees will view this statement in fundamentally different ways: one class will view this along the lines of philosophical pragmatism and the other from the vantage point of literalist traditionalism. Both classes of devotees agree that this is a statement of policy based on the principle of preaching according to time, place, and circumstance. However, those in ISKCON who lean more toward philosophical pragmatism believe that such an arrangement could be maintained indefinitely, and those

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lecture: Bhagavad-gita 1.40 -- London, July 28, 1973.

who lean closer to traditionalism believe that the shastric standards must eventually be followed, or the highest religious objectives will generally remain unattainable. On account of their differing perspectives, pragmatists and traditionalists in ISKCON may forever disagree about the intent and duration of Srila Prabhupada time, place, and circumstance instructions.

Rather than settling the question about the nature of Srila Prabhupada's time, place, and circumstance instructions through dialectic, this question may in the short-term be settled through politics. For the most part, ISKCON's members presently seem more inclined toward pragmatism than they are toward traditionalism, and the majority can and usually does assert its beliefs over the rest at some point.

Nevertheless, politics is usually an inadequate substitute for critical thought. Despite their current popularity, ethical systems based on empirical modes of thought are limited in their ability to predict all but short-term outcomes. The final outcome of any time, place, and circumstance adjustment is often enough not known until long after all its short-term consequences have played themselves out.

As late as 2000, almost 25 years after the above-mentioned issue, a woman who was a former member of that party testified before the GBC body that since so many women since that time had been abused in other similar situations, ISKCON needed to extend institutional and ecclesiastical privileges to women in order to prevent further abuse.²⁶ Some of her other colleagues reasoned that such abuses demonstrated that in ISKCON men as a class by themselves are unlikely to ever have the best interests of women in mind.²⁷ ISKCON's women therefore had to have the social and institutional means to stand up for themselves. Agreeing with this line of reasoning, the GBC body expanded ISKCON's institutional and ecclesiastical privileges to its female members.

As this example shows, these events were remembered long after the short-term consequences had ceased to matter. Those who made a time, place, and circumstance decision to have women's parties did not foresee that their decision 25 years later would significantly affect ISKCON's social structure. Pragmatic patterns of thought have influenced the future course of ISKCON in ways these same patterns of thought could never have predicted.

Child Abuse

Pragmatism has also contributed to the infamous child abuse scandals in ISKCON's schools. Again, the desired end was recruitment and keeping book distribution numbers high. Decisions made with this desired outcome in mind unwittingly led to what has turned out to be ISKCON's most shameful episode to date. These decisions were ultimately justified by the pragmatic notion of "time, place, and circumstance."

In his book *Hare Krishna Transformed*, E. Burke Rochford, Jr., describes how ISKCON leaders justified withholding resources from ISKCON's gurukula system at two

²⁶ Sudharma Dasi, "Presentation [to the GBC]," Jun. 2000, *ISKCON Communications Journal*, 18 Nov. 2007 <http://www.iskcon.com/icj/8_1/sudharma.html>

²⁷ Rukmini Dasi, "Presentation [to the GBC]," Jun. 2000, *ISKCON Communications Journal*, 18 Nov. 2007 <http://www.iskcon.com/icj/8_1/rukmini.html> and also Radha Devi Dasi, "Participation, Protection and Patriarchy: An International Model for the Role of Women in ISKCON," C/S Vol. 1, No. 1 2001, *Cultic Studies Review*, 18 Nov. 2007 <[http://www.culticstudiesreview.org/csissueidx/toc2001.1/grprept2001.1_harekrishna/grprept_hk_women/ahda_devi_dasi_p1.htm](http://www.culticstudiesreview.org/csissueidx/toc2001.1/grprept2001.1_harekrishna/grprept_hk_women/rahda_devi_dasi_p1.htm)>

different times and for two opposite reasons. “Until the early 1980s,” says Rochford, children born in ISKCON were believed to have progressed spiritually to the point that they had had the good fortune of being born into a devotee family.”²⁸ ISKCON leaders thus “saw no reason to invest resources in the gurukula because it could not fail.”²⁹

But by the mid-1980s, when ISKCON’s children were becoming teenagers, many saw that ISKCON’s second generation was not comprised of pure souls. Few of them were interested in leading a life of renunciation and dedicating themselves to ISKCON’s mission. Some of ISKCON’s members began to describe them as being little better than karmis. As a result of this change in perception, some of ISKCON’s leaders began to openly question the need for having a gurukula at all. Rochford points out that at this point, resources continued to be withheld from the gurukula not because the children were guaranteed to be devotees but because of their failure to become devotees, or at least become committed to ISKCON’s mission.³⁰

Not only did these two very different views of ISKCON’s second generation share their end result, namely the neglect of the education and development of children born within ISKCON, they also shared underlying patterns of thought. Devotees responsible for the big decisions unconsciously relied on a fundamentally instrumental notion of truth in making their decisions. Back then and still today, for many devotees, the phrase “time, place, and circumstance” signifies pragmatic, consequentialist patterns of thought, which happen to be deeply ingrained in Western culture.

Zonal Acharyas, Guru-Reform, and Ritvikism

ISKCON’s best known internal theological dispute is the ritvik controversy, and that controversy grew from persistent, widespread disappointment with the attempts of ISKCON’s leadership to provide qualified initiating spiritual masters after Srila Prabhupada’s departure.

Srila Prabhupada’s first successors were called “zonal acharyas.” They were the devotees listed in what is today known as “the July 9th letter” [1977], which designated 11 devotees who would perform initiations on behalf of Srila Prabhupada. After Srila Prabhupada’s departure, it was presumed that they would then become full-fledged gurus in their own right and accept disciples, just as Srila Prabhupada himself had done. They were, after all, Srila Prabhupada’s hand-picked men.

The excesses of these zonal acharyas, however, almost destroyed ISKCON. Most of the zonal acharyas at one time or another became slack in standard spiritual practices. They used wealth and resources that came their way for personal enjoyment. Eventually, most were caught engaging in morally sinful activities (e.g. having illicit sex). Furthermore, their behavior with devotees under them was in many instances cruel and mean-spirited.

The visible demise of the zonal acharyas’ authority began in 1982, when Jayatirtha, a zonal acharya, fell down and left ISKCON. His falldown was the first incontrovertible evidence that the zonal acharyas were not, after all, replicas of Srila Prabhupada, whom to the rest of ISKCON was unquestionably a liberated and pure devotee of Lord Krishna.

²⁸ E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Hare Krishna Transformed (New York: New York University Press, 2007) 80.

²⁹ Rochford 83.

³⁰ Ibid.

It is likely that this event made possible the expansion of gurus outside the originally chosen eleven zonal acharyas. In that same year, three senior sannyasis (Gopal Krishna, Pancadravida, and Svarupa Damodara) were given official permission to accept disciples. Once it was seen that the original eleven gurus were not infallible, the emergence of gurus outside of them was perhaps inevitable.

Other zonal acharyas soon enough also fell down. When around 1986 three more zonal acharyas (Rameshvar, Bhavananda, and Bhagavan) fell down and left ISKCON, the authority of the zonal acharyas had completely collapsed. Those devotees who had been zonal acharyas and who had not fallen down had no choice but to relinquish their former status, and the widespread expansion of gurus within ISKCON became inevitable.

In the mid 1980s, near the end of a decade of these excesses, two parallel reform movements in ISKCON arose to correct them. One movement, known as the guru-reform movement, successfully built a consensus among mid-tier ISKCON leaders (temple presidents, non-guru sannyasis, and non-guru GBCs), ended the zonal acharya system, and then allowed other senior members of ISKCON to themselves become gurus and accept their own disciples. The guru-reform movement greatly expanded the number of initiating spiritual masters in ISKCON, and some of the leaders of this movement themselves became ISKCON's top leaders.

The second reform movement paralleled the first and advocated what was then called the proxy-initiation theory, later called ritvikism. Ritvikism's proponents said that since Srila Prabhupada was a pure devotee and therefore incapable of making such a great mistake, he knew that the men he picked to initiate on his own behalf were unfit to act as guru on their own behalf—and these were supposed to have been Srila Prabhupada's best disciples. If this was true, then Srila Prabhupada never intended any of his disciples to act as gurus on their own behalf at any time, before or after his departure in 1977. The ritviks presented this alternative: Srila Prabhupada himself would continue to initiate new disciples, and others who act as gurus do so only his behalf as proxies (ritviks). Under this system, the newly initiated disciples would be Srila Prabhupada's disciples and not the disciples of the proxy guru.

Between these two reform movements, there was an unintended race for the control of ISKCON. The guru-reform movement in the late 1980s and early 90s essentially "finished first"; the ritvikists were behind the guru-reform movement in winning approval for their views. The early ritvikists eventually found themselves in the position of challenging ISKCON's new status quo, which now included the leaders of the successful guru-reform movement. ISKCON's new leadership soon branded ritvikism as a deviant ideology and excommunicated some of its leaders. This put ritvikism to rest, but only temporarily.

Like zonal-acharyaism before it, the guru-reform movement itself had its own decade of trial. Although most devotees acknowledged that it was an improvement, it did not deliver as promised. Like most of the zonal-acharyas before them, gurus that ISKCON's GBC sanctioned continued to fall down regularly and in alarming numbers.³¹ Whenever a guru fell down, his former disciples often found themselves barred from services such as cooking for the temple Deities or worshipping Them on the altar. At different times, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of disciples all of a sudden found themselves officially

³¹ An internal GBC tally conducted in the late 1990s calculated that ISKCON's number of fallen sannyasis ranged anywhere from 35% to 50% of all sannyasis. Most gurus happened to be sannyasis.

cut off from the parampara. For some time, ISKCON's official policy required them to find a new ISKCON-approved guru and again go through the process of initiation in order to reconnect themselves to the parampara.

However, this proved to be no solution. In time, there were many devotees who had taken initiation from two gurus, three gurus, or more, yet each successive new-but-not-improved guru they took initiation from also fell down. By the mid-1990s, many felt that the guru-reform movement itself needed to be reformed or abolished.

But how should it be reformed, or what would replace it? At that time, the conditions were ripe for yet another guru-reform movement, and ritvikism, somewhat changed from its earlier manifestation, rose to the occasion. Around 1995 or 1996, there appeared a document titled "The Final Order." This document not only presented an updated notion of ritvikism, it also bolstered its case by mounting a spirited attack on the old guru-reform movement. One ISKCON sannyasi who read the document infamously remarked that no one who read it would take it seriously. How wrong he was.

ISKCON leaders on the GBC did not fully appreciate the extent to which their own decade of guru-reform had been a failure until some ISKCON temple presidents started promoting ritvikism among their own temple devotees and congregations. The prestigious new ISKCON temple in Bangalore, India, adopted ritvikism and quickly seceded from ISKCON. For some time so did ISKCON's temple in Calcutta, until ISKCON forcefully repossessed it. Some other lesser-known temples around the world also adopted ritvikism, and elsewhere, ritvikists have started their own temples.

Today, a number of mid-tier ISKCON leaders continue to accept ritvikism in some form or another. That New York's Long Island temple was recently taken over by a ritvikist management and taken out of ISKCON has prompted ISKCON leaders in North America to try to centralize their control over ISKCON temple properties. This shows that ritvikism as an ideology and as a reform movement still exerts a significant influence on ISKCON's culture and institution.

Ritvikism's Western Cultural Roots

Ritvikism is Protestant ISKCON-ianity. It is, after all, a protest movement. It defines itself in terms of reform, much as how, for example, some Lutheran denominations see themselves as working towards future reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church.

Whether ritvikists are affiliated with the politically successful IRM (ISKCON Revival Movement) or remain apart from it, they all prefer a "literalist" reading of Srila Prabhupada's statements. Being a literalist does not mean the literalist always accepts the literal, or direct, meaning of any particular passage and rejects all other understandings. When there is some conflict between one or more authoritative passages, the literalist will proffer indirect meanings instead of literal meanings. Yet their preference is for the literal meaning of any particular statement Srila Prabhupada made. Because of their literalism, ritvikists are squarely in the conservative camp.

Yet although ritvikists are conservative, they are not traditionalist. Like many evangelistic, "low church" denominations, ritvikists eschew tradition, or they at least maintain a utilitarian view of it. In modern ritvikism's foundational manifesto, *The Final Order*, Krishnakant Desai makes this statement [bolding in original]:

It is a distinguishing feature of *acaryas* in our line that, practically without exception, they set their own historical precedents. As *acaryas*, it is their prerogative to do this;

albeit in accordance with *sastric* principles. As already stated, the use of *ritviks* without the guru's physical presence on the planet does not violate any *sastric* principle. Srila Prabhupada's books contain all essential *sastric* principles, and since there is no mention in his books of the guru needing to be on the planet at the time of initiation, it cannot be a principle. Thus the historical precedent of continuing to use *ritviks* after his departure can only be a change in **detail**, not in **principle**.³²

The above passage also conveys a ritvikist version of the Lutheran doctrine of *sola scriptura*, "by scripture alone." Ritvikists reject the use of references from previous acharyas wherever they oppose ritvikist doctrines. Desai rhetorically asks, "What is wrong in consulting previous *acaryas*?" and then answers, "Nothing, as long as we do not attempt to use them to add new principles which were not mentioned by our own *acarya*."³³ As with *sola scriptura*, with ritvikism it is by the corpus of Srila Prabhupada's instructions alone.

A key difference between a traditionalist and a ritvikist is that although both prefer a literalist reading of Srila Prabhupada's statements, the traditionalist sees Srila Prabhupada as the representative of an unbroken tradition whereas the ritvikist sees Srila Prabhupada as the founder of a new tradition. The traditionalist sees time, place, and circumstance adjustments as temporary measures on the way to reestablishing the unbroken tradition they believe Srila Prabhupada represents. Ritvikists, however, see time, place, and circumstance adjustments made by Srila Prabhupada as if they were set in stone—changeable only by Srila Prabhupada and inviolable for the rest. For the ritvikist, Srila Prabhupada's time, place, and circumstance adjustments are the new way of doing things and always will be for the faithful disciple.

Given the Protestant character of ISKCON's Anglo-American cultural roots, ritvikism's striking resemblance to Protestant Christianity has been more of a likelihood than a coincidence. In terms of ideology and culture, Ritvikism is ISKCON's version of Protestant "low church" evangelical Christianity. The ritvikists are ISKCON's Pentecostals and Southern Baptists, and it was perhaps inevitable that ISKCON would eventually have them.

Oddly enough, ritvikism's reliance on a utilitarian notion of time, place, and circumstance ideologically aligns ritvikists with ISKCON's pragmatist and socially progressive status quo—the differences between them being more in attitude than in patterns of thought. The slight differences between them may make reconciliation something that could happen sooner than expected, though not necessarily in ways either group may be able to presently imagine.

Women's Roles and Status

Most controversies in ISKCON seem to either directly or indirectly involve women. The clash between householders and renunciates in 1976 indirectly involved women, because at that time a man's connection, or distance, from women was a strong marker of his social status. At some point, nearly every single guru or sannyasi that has fallen down to date has been involved in an improper relationship with a woman. Although in each of these controversies women's involvement has been indirect, women have nevertheless been involved.

³² Krishnakant Desai, *The Final Order* (Bangalore: Rajhan's Enterprises, 2001) 29.

³³ Desai 79.

Their direct involvement in ISKCON controversies has been most prominent in ISKCON's own women's rights movement. Because it has nicely paralleled other feminist movements in Western culture in the matter of establishing social equality between men and women, it can therefore be described as an ISKCON-specific expression of feminism. The women who headed it up were, after all, Westerners. Not only did this movement heighten awareness of maltreatment, often perpetrated in the name of tradition, it successfully lobbied for expanded rights and privileges of women within ISKCON.

It is in the controversy over women's status and roles in ISKCON that Western culture has directly conflicted with traditional Vaishnava culture. Some cultural conventions directly tied to shastra have perpetually annoyed many of ISKCON's converts. Arranged marriage positively rubs most Westerners the wrong way, yet Srila Prabhupada regularly criticized the Western custom of women deciding on their own whom they shall marry. He encouraged his Western disciples to have their marriages arranged by authorities. Yet some devotees in ISKCON have on occasion said that encouraging arranged marriage among Westerners has been the cause of many problems.

The conflict between feminism and Vaishnava tradition is also fundamentally ideological. Western culture, and hence feminism, is strongly consequentialist in its patterns of thought and presumptions about human nature. As discussed before, consequentialism presumes that conditioned human nature is fundamentally benevolent. Consequentialist ethical systems thus generally presume that if given the right circumstances and opportunities, people will flourish. Denying people the circumstances and opportunities that can help them flourish is therefore considered the cause of oppression and leads to exploitation.

ISKCON feminists employed this consequentialist precept when they made their case for expanded rights for ISKCON's female members. If women are capable of performing all of the most significant tasks that men can perform, then denying women the same opportunities provided to men is therefore oppressive and leads to their exploitation. This line of reasoning resonated with top ISKCON leaders because they were, for the most part, Westerners. They were already accustomed to thinking in this way.

Traditional Vaishnava thought and practice, however, begins with a different set of presumptions about conditioned human nature. Traditional Vaishnava thought considers human nature to be perverse, gravitating toward behavior that mires it in the material world. Despite whatever activities women can equal men in, men and women in close proximity can and will create social disturbances, just as putting butter next to fire will cause the butter to melt. Because these disturbances are detrimental for any individual's material and spiritual progress as well as that of the rest of society, the structure and duties of a varnashrama society purposefully keeps men and women significantly at a distance from one another in their social and occupational roles. Varnashrama subordinates opportunity for social and occupational advancement to sexual restraint.

As we learn from the history of the *Mahabharata*, or "Greater India," the wives and daughters of the ruling class, the *ksatriyas*, knew the political game, but we never find that a woman was given the post of chief executive. This is in accordance with the injunctions of *Manu-samhita*, but unfortunately *Manu-samhita* is now being insulted, and

the Aryans, the members of Vedic society, cannot do anything. Such is the nature of Kali-yuga.³⁴

So these regulative principles are there. So what is, what is the big plan behind these regulative principles? The big plan is: here is the attraction, *pumsah striya mithuni-bhavam*-to cut down this attraction between male and female. This is the big plan. Otherwise there is no need of the *varnasrama*.³⁵

Although Srila Prabhupada's above two statements are themselves controversial, nearly all of ISKCON's devotees agree that these statements accurately reflect the culture in which Vaishnavism has been traditionally practiced. They also agree that Srila Prabhupada always spoke highly of this bygone culture.

Srila Prabhupada's Authority Questioned

Those of ISKCON's members who are usually the most sympathetic to Western ideals have been the sole source of sustained, internal criticism of Srila Prabhupada's own authority. E. Burke Rochford, Jr., has documented these attacks at length in his recent book *Hare Krishna Transformed*, in the section "Prabhupada on Trial."

Some pro-change women, in partnership with a number of academically trained ISKCON intellectuals, began to raise questions about Prabhupada's writings on women. This challenge led to a questioning of Prabhupada's authority as a "pure devotee [who] only repeats Krsna's message as Krsna directs him to do so" (Das, Ameyatma 2002:2). Should Prabhupada's commentaries about women be considered eternal truths or products of his education and upbringing in India? Should Prabhupada's collective teachings be considered infallible, or were they subject to human error? . . . One influential ISKCON leader suggested that the conflict over women's rights had placed "Prabhupada on Trial."

³⁶

Criticism of Srila Prabhupada was new only in the sense that it had newly become public. Other controversies wherein Srila Prabhupada's judgment was openly questioned soon followed, and these controversies were also centered on Srila Prabhupada's numerous statements about women that conflicted with modern Western attitudes.

Srila Prabhupada's own statements about women that some of his followers disagreed with were too direct and too numerous to quietly ignore. For example, in his commentary on the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, Srila Prabhupada wrote, "*In Kali-yuga, people are extremely liberal, but mixing with women and talking with them as equals actually constitutes an uncivilized way of life.*"³⁷ In an essay that empirically evaluated Srila Prabhupada's statements in his commentary on the Bhagavad-gita and 664 purports in his commentary on the Bhagavatam, Ekkhard Lorenz, an academically trained former member of ISKCON who rejected such statements wrote (italics in original),

If the frequency of a particular type of statement exceeds a certain magnitude, then the context in which each particular statement appears loses relevance. What remains is the overall impression created by the sheer number of repetitions. In this particular case, that impression might very well be: *the spiritual master is good, beyond sexuality, and*

³⁴ Srila Prabhupada. *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 10.4.5 purport.

³⁵ Srila Prabhupada. Lecture, *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 5.5.8, Vrindavan Oct 30, 1976.

³⁶ Rochford 153.

³⁷ *Srimad-Bhagavatam* 7.12.18 purp.

*superior to all; Mayavadins are dangerous and bad; women and sex are dangerous and bad.*³⁸

Although most of ISKCON's members have continued to accept as authoritative Srila Prabhupada's controversial statements about women, an increasingly vocal section of ISKCON did not. They felt that Srila Prabhupada as an authority on Vaishnava theology was credible in some areas but not in others—particularly as regards to women and sex.

The attitudes of this later group, who only provisionally accepted Srila Prabhupada as an authority, have been increasingly reflected in the attitudes of ISKCON's own top leadership. Rochford offers evidence of this change:

There is also evidence suggesting that at least some of ISKCON's North American leaders tried to quietly disassociate themselves from Prabhupada's controversial writings about women, given the movement's past history of abuse. As one GBC member acknowledged, Prabhupada's statements are "under currently established norms of business, government, and academics, labeled 'sexist,' and regarded on the same moral level as anti-Semitic or racist utterances" (COM 2000a). Another suggested that leaders, though "not wanting to talk about Prabhupada's mistakes," also found it important to

*distinguish between what Prabhupada says about the tradition and what he said about contemporary issues. To say that Prabhupada is a pure devotee, which I believe he is, doesn't mean that he is materially omniscient. What Prabhupada said about World War II or women's intelligence, he himself didn't represent as absolute truth. He had a human side; he gave his opinions that go beyond quoting and commenting on scripture itself. We have to place these opinions in a different box from his commentaries directly addressing matters of scripture. . . . There has been a gradual and peaceful shift in ISKCON, in the Prabhupada hermeneutic. Given the extreme sensitivity of some of these issues, I think the GBC is relieved that this shift has occurred. (interview October 2005)*³⁹

Yet many of Srila Prabhupada's most controversial statements about women were not off-the-cuff remarks casually made in the private company of his most trusted disciples. Many of these statements are in his books, especially the *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, which he considered his life's work. In his essay, Lorenz found that

Eighty percent of all statements that Bhaktivedanta Swami makes about women in the six works investigated are negative statements, in the sense that they involve restrictions, list bad qualities, group women in socially inferior classes, or treat them as sex objects that have to be avoided.⁴⁰

In order to "place these 'opinions' in a different box," as one GBC member had suggested, one would have to also believe that Srila Prabhupada's most important works are themselves only provisionally authoritative. This occasional non-acceptance, or rejection, happens to cover some fundamental theological precepts, which in this instance involves sex and the relationships between men and women.

From the differing views of the appropriate status and social roles of women in ISKCON have emerged two different views of Srila Prabhupada's status and authority. Most of ISKCON's devotees still accept Srila Prabhupada's teachings *in their entirety*, or, in the lexicon of ISKCON, "As It Is." Yet another camp, which represents ISKCON's

³⁸ Ekkehard Lorenz, "The Guru, Mayavadins, and Women," *The Hare Krishna Movement: The Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant*, Ed. Edwin Bryant, Maria Ekstrand (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 124.

³⁹ Rochford 157 – 158.

⁴⁰ Lorenz 122.

most secularly accommodated members and, increasingly, its top leadership, only accepts those teachings provisionally.

Mean-Spirited Dealings

Omnipresent in all the controversies described here are mean-spirited dealings with devotees, particularly subordinates. Mean-spirited dealings have been a significant impetus, perhaps the primary impetus, for practically every self-identified victim group or reform movement ISKCON has seen to date. A senior member of ISKCON commenting on the resurgence of ritvikism made this remark:

. . . the ritvik leaning temple presidents in India are not actually Ritviks but are in fact frustrated with the misbehavior of gurus and sannyasis, a separate issue distinguishable only by those who are sober. The TPs [temple presidents] in question have been blinded by their frustrations and emotions and consequently they can't see the fallacy of the ritvik concoction. And so they let their unintelligent emotions drag them into the dangerous waters of not cooperating with GBC decisions.⁴¹

The issues surrounding abuse in ISKCON's gurukulas, past treatment of women, and the exodus of married devotees from ISKCON's ashramas were also exacerbated by mean-spirited dealings. Although as an influence they unquestionably loom large in nearly every one of ISKCON's greatest controversies, we wish to focus here on the ideological dimension of these conflicts.

Other Controversies

The secession of New Vrindavan under Kirtanananda Swami and the various splinter groups that have coalesced around Sridhdhara Swami or Narayana Swami as alternative authorities to Srila Prabhupada have also been influential in ISKCON's history and development. Yet because these other groups always presumed Srila Prabhupada would never be the central authority, the followers of these different groups gradually moved outside the orbit of ISKCON's managerial and theological controversies. They became outsiders proper and presently have little say in ISKCON's long-term prospects as a coherent society and organization, although in the future this may change.

Nevertheless, ISKCON's internal social conflicts continue to arise from differences between devotees who gravitate toward either pragmatism or traditionalism, or between utilitarian and normative understandings of shastra and tradition. The pragmatist camp includes both ISKCON's socially progressive devotees as well as ritvikists both within and outside of ISKCON. In a significant sense, ritvikists and ISKCON's progressives are more humanistic in their orientation than traditionalists.

Although ISKCON's pragmatists far outnumber ISKCON's traditionalists, Srila Prabhupada's own teachings, which are strongly traditional in attitude and advocacy, help shore up the traditionalists' numeric disadvantage. Indeed, in public debates, both ritvikists and ISKCON progressives have in numerous ways tried to either discount or obfuscate significant sections of Srila Prabhupada's teachings. Because the differences between ISKCON's pragmatist and traditionalists run deep, conflict between them will likely contribute to further significant chronic social unrest if not ISKCON's further splintering.

⁴¹ Private email 1999 (name withheld).

Victory

If ISKCON's internal conflicts have been fundamentally ideological, then victory means that one of the warring ideologies has finally come to predominate over the others. In a recent essay, long-time ISKCON observer and well-wisher Dr. Thomas J. Hopkins thinks that ISKCON's ideological battle is about to begin, or at least come to occupy the forefront of ISKCON's struggle to settle its enduring questions of authority and identity. Hopkins writes,

There are still many problems to be faced, however, not the least of which is defining ISKCON's identity more clearly in terms of both its past history and its future goals. This is not primarily an organisational issue to be solved by management decisions, but rather a basic theological concern that can only be resolved by intensive intellectual effort and spiritual insight over a period of time. At stake are ISKCON's fundamental values and basic commitments, the core identity or self-identity that must be understood and accepted by all of its members before the central mission can be properly carried out.⁴²

Although Hopkins may turn out to be right, there is presently more reason to believe that the ideological battle has already been won. The ideological victor is Western culture, with its attendant ideologies, and the reasons to believe this are to be found in ISKCON's present state of cultural alignment and in statements made by intellectuals who have the ear of ISKCON's management. Here are some of the most significant signs:

1. *The proliferation and widespread use of modern psychology within ISKCON.* Twenty years ago, it was an unchallenged dogma that *bhakti-yoga* was both the best means and sufficient in and of itself to mitigate any material or spiritual problem. Today that has changed. Over the years, a significant number of devotees have returned to universities in order to acquire advanced training in modern psychology and therapy. These therapists in turn have ministered to a growing number of devotees who live outside of ISKCON centers. Their services, programs, and seminars have become quite popular, and they are for the most part based on the humanistic approach to psychology. Not only do the new devotee therapists provide counseling to other devotees, they promote life skills and self-improvement. Furthermore, some ISKCON leaders have recommended making the training offered by these devotee therapists mandatory for ISKCON leaders. Two important ISKCON offices primarily rely on modern psychological theory and practice: the Child Protection Office and the North American Grihastha Vision Team.
2. *The high value ISKCON now places on post-doctoral education.* Twenty years ago or more, the status of anyone who came to ISKCON, devotee or not, would have mattered little in terms of their prior educational achievements, with the exception of those trained in the hard sciences. Nowadays the PhD is practically a must-have in order to be taken seriously as an intellectual within ISKCON. Higher education in the humanities and social sciences has now

⁴² Thomas J. Hopkins, "ISKCON's Search for Self-Identity," *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change*, Ed. Graham Dwyer, Richard J. Cole, (London: I.B. Taurus & Co. 2007) 186.

become fashionable. When a number of influential ISKCON leaders used time and resources available to them to earn their own PhDs, many of their disciples followed suit. ISKCON higher education projects, such as the Bhaktivedanta College of New Mayapur, France, have sought accreditation and affiliation with established universities so that members of their program can earn credentials recognized by the university system. Even ISKCON's conservative members have found the pull of a university education and the PhD difficult to resist.

3. *ISKCON's lack of its own internal economy.* For some time now, ISKCON has not possessed any significant means of generating its own economic resources that can be used for its mission or for maintaining its full-time members. It instead relies on the donations and patronage of life members and former temple residents. Now that most of ISKCON's initiated members reside outside of an ISKCON temple, ISKCON's cultural "center of gravity," as Rochford described it, has shifted outside the institution. Because their needs, demands, expectations, and attitudes toward religion are in many ways more significantly shaped by the outside world than by ISKCON, ISKCON leaders have found themselves accommodating their demands and expectations, if only for the sake of ensuring their continued patronage. ISKCON in the Western countries cannot have its own alternative culture and life-style quite simply because it cannot afford one.
4. *ISKCON's social and political commitment to gender equality.* Although this primarily covers women's rights and status within ISKCON, it also covers the issue of homosexual and other queer relationships as receiving institutional recognition, support, and encouragement. ISKCON has been following a pattern of development very common among mainstream Protestant Christian denominations in the West. These denominations have followed a pattern of opening up their institutional and spiritual positions to the equal inclusion of women and later moving toward opening the same positions for those who are in active homosexual relationships.

Although in each of these denominations this pattern of development has unfolded over several generations, within ISKCON this pattern is unfolding much quicker. In 2004, only four years after the GBC endorsed policies granting equal social and political rights for women, some senior ISKCON leaders publicly proffered that ISKCON also grant some measure of public recognition and encouragement for non-married, binary homosexual relationships—referred to specifically as "gay monogamy." Although there is evidence that a number of ISKCON's top leaders have found the recommendation questionable, ISKCON's top leadership as a whole has not objected. Indeed, after three years, ISKCON's GBC has offered no public rebuttal or censure of the recommendation. This indicates that ISKCON has been gradually coming in line with mainstream secular values and attitudes towards sex.

5. *An increased emphasis on worldly activities.* ISKCON was formerly quite “other-worldly” in its outlook and emphasis on spiritual as opposed to pious activity. Over the years, activities like book distribution declined and more conventional forms of religious outreach like food distribution increased. Although within ISKCON the food distributed must be sanctified (prasadam), the shift towards activities that mainstream society would likely have more sympathy with suggests a program of accommodation with the outside world. An increased emphasis on worldly education in ISKCON’s primary and secondary school systems also seems to reflect this increased emphasis on worldly activity.

Some influential ISKCON members as well as scholars both within and outside of ISKCON have made statements that underscore the conquest of Western culture. One sign of this is the shift in emphasis away from confrontation with ISKCON’s Western host culture. In the book *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change*, ISKCON devotee and director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies Shaunaka Rishi Das is quoted thus:

The greatest jewel in the crown of ISKCON is the deity worship. . . but the devotees don't yet know it. . . Krishna, Lord of senses, is worshipped with the senses. It is deity worship rather than book distribution or any other activity that that [sic] is the real jewel of ISKCON.⁴³

Srila Prabhupada’s books contain innumerable criticisms of modern civilization. No matter how nicely these books are distributed, at some level distributing them is necessarily confrontational. A shift in ISKCON’s emphasis away from book distribution toward Deity worship significantly avoids confrontation with ISKCON’s Western host culture and ends ISKCON’s primary identity as a preaching mission.

Furthermore, the direction of intellectual and religious change in ISKCON has significantly been from the direction of Western culture to ISKCON but not significantly from the direction of ISKCON to Western culture. In her recent essay “For Love of Krishna, Dr. Anna S. King observes that within ISKCON,

scholarly devotees whose faith is undisputed have for a decade or more been applying perspectives derived from the wider society—postmodernist, feminist, pluralist, textual-historical, etc.—to Prabhupada's transplanted and literalist tradition (e.g. Goswami and Valpey 2004).⁴⁴

This statement is also interesting because of the opposition King sets up between “perspectives derived from the wider society” and “Prabhupada’s transplanted and literalist tradition.” This opposition is significant because the perspectives King mentions (and others she implies) variously emphasize the subjective point of view more so than literalist traditions. The opposition is between the subjective and the objective, between humanism and theism.

As an example of a non-literalist Western perspective applied in the context of ISKCON, King specifically refers to an essay by Tamal Krishna Goswami and Krishna Kshetra Das. Their essay suggests ways ISKCON and its members can move away from

⁴³ Anna S. King, “For Love of Krishna,” Ed. Dwyer and Cole 151.

⁴⁴ King 167.

“naïve realism”—unsupportable by a one-to-one correspondence with the world of empirical facts—and move towards an understanding of their religious tradition that is more consistent with modernity.⁴⁵ Although the essay is concerned with answering outsider critics, it is more focused on resolving insider doubt about the tradition itself—doubt that the authors suggest underlies many of ISKCON’s most significant internal conflicts.⁴⁶

In order to resolve these doubts and internal conflicts, Goswami and Das have recommended adopting a higher degree of subjectivity than what Srila Prabhupada’s own literalism would allow for. They state [bold emphasis added],

ISKCON members often inadvertently distance themselves from Narottama Das’s *verse* [*sadhu-shastra-guru bakya, hridaye koriya aikya*], failing to recognize that the living practitioner, as a recipient of tradition, is the implied “final arbiter” among these three representatives of traditional authority. **Indeed, the practitioner is not simply a passive recipient of tradition; rather, through active engagement, she or he participates in and inevitably reinvents tradition.**⁴⁷

This notion of the practitioner being the implied “final arbiter” (final interpreter among other interpreters) and being an active agent that “inevitably reinvents tradition” stands in stark contrast to Srila Prabhupada’s notion of the practitioner as a submissive recipient of tradition. In his introduction to *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, Srila Prabhupada describes the method of submissive acceptance through the analogy of taking medicine:

If we want to take a particular medicine, then we have to follow the directions written on the label. We cannot take the medicine according to our own whim or the direction of a friend. It must be taken according to the directions on the label or the directions given by a physician. Similarly, Bhagavad-gita should be taken or accepted as it is directed by the speaker Himself.

Srila Prabhupada also described himself as such a submissive recipient. Indeed, he considered that to be his specific qualification.

If I have any credit in this connection, it does not belong to me personally, but it is due to my eternal spiritual master, His Divine Grace Om Visnupada Paramahansa Parivrajakacarya 108 Sri Srimad Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Goswami Maharaja Prabhupada. If personally I have any credit in this matter, it is only that I have tried to present Bhagavad-gita as it is, without any adulteration.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Tamal Krishna Goswami and Krishna Kshetra Das, “Re-Visioning ISKCON,” *The Hare Krishna Movement: The Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant*, Ed. Edwin Bryant, Maria Ekstrand (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 418.

⁴⁶ Goswami and Das use Bhaktivinoda Thakura’s essay “Sri Krishna Samhita” as a starting point for developing exegetical methods that they hope will appeal more to the modern mind. Bhaktivinoda Thakura wrote “Sri Krishna Samhita” especially for the *bhadralok*, a Bengali term used variously to refer to those in 19th century Indian society with a modicum of (Western) education and who to some degree or another had adopted Western (especially British) values. Sri Krishna Samhita attempts to build a case for the respectability of traditional Vaishnava religion through appealing to empirical and consequentialist ideologies, which significantly informed the values of the *bhadralok*. ISKCON’s members, of course, are Westerners or are significantly Western-educated and thus appear to nicely resemble the *bhadralok*. Goswami and Das use this essay as evidence for the authority of their recommendations.

⁴⁷ Goswami and Das 422.

⁴⁸ Srila Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, Preface.

Goswami and Das, however, respond to anticipated objections to their alternative notion of the practitioner as a fourth, implied authority who inevitably reinterprets and reinvents tradition.

To the objections that our proposed reassessment of guru and *sadhu* will wither before the stipulations of Narottama Das's third source of authority, namely, *shastra*, our basic claim is that interpreting scripture is a perpetual process of reappraisal by the reader or hearer. Practitioners must admit this openly for tradition to serve a vital, liberating function in their lives. That for the disciple the guru is the central interpreter and that *sadhus* are secondary interpreters cannot obscure the fact that the "end user," the practitioner, is the final interpreter. As "Protestant" as this may sound, it simply recognizes that although scripture maintains boundary structures to delimit those qualified to interpret, the very nature of print culture and mass distribution democratize the system.⁴⁹

But what would reinterpretation, or reinvention, by the "final interpreter" actually entail? If the patient were to significantly inject his interpretation into the meaning of a prescription (e.g. his "interpretation" would make a difference in dosage) then we have an instance of the patient's intentions substituted for the intentions of the physician, who originally prescribed the medicine. If the patient believes the words of the prescription now mean "take two tablets once a day" instead of "one tablet once a day," then the meaning of the words on the medicine bottle now belongs to the patient—their meaning no longer belongs the doctor. Meaning is always there for the words on the label, but the meaning ascribed to them, and hence intentionality, shifts from doctor to patient. The origin of meaning shifts from author to reader.

In the same way, if tradition's "end user" is also granted a significant say in what the words left behind by guru, *sadhu*, and *shastra* mean, then it is possible that "legitimate" interpretations of tradition may not necessarily reflect the authorial intent of the guru, the *sadhus*, or of authors of *shastra* itself.

Indeed, Goswami and Das's reinterpretation of Gaudiya Vaishnava theology was undertaken especially for the sake of rectifying some of ISKCON's internal social problems. This purpose appears to have been the starting point for their own reinterpretation of tradition, and arriving at some of their conclusions would have been impossible through Srila Prabhupada's own approach.

Can our agenda be pushed further? A radical discontinuity with Chaitanya Vaishnava theology within the realm of *sambandha* might mean, for example, blurring the divide that separates personalists from impersonalists. Traditionally, Vaishnavism has defined itself over and against Advaita Vedanta. . . . [Within Vaishnava tradition] only faint praise is given *brahmavadins*, while *mayavadins* are censured with the harshest rhetoric. Indeed, Prabhupada defines his mission in terms of their defeat. . . . For ISKCON, at times this has meant alienating many in its diasporic Indian congregations, who feel confused, if not deeply offended, by what they perceive to be sectarian conflict in ISKCON's condemnation of revered people, past and present, because of impersonal beliefs.⁵⁰

In this example, the authors entertain a "radical discontinuity with Vaishnava theology" in order to avoid "alienating many in its diasporic Indian congregations." Not only does this suggestion elevate the subject position (the feelings of congregants over

⁴⁹ Goswami and Das 424.

⁵⁰ Goswami and Das 420 – 421.

tradition), this suggestion is philosophically pragmatic. This example reaffirms the philosophically pragmatic, instrumental notion of truth—truth as a means for changing existing realities.

If such radical changes to theology can be accommodated to achieve secondary organizational objectives, then this represents essentially the same pattern of thought that generated the idea that the male sankirtana leader is the eternal husband of the women on his sankirtana party. In both cases, “time, place, and circumstance” has been the implied if unspoken justification. The only significant difference between the two propositions has been their acceptability within the prevailing cultural norms of mainstream society. That this utilitarian, instrumental view of truth seems to be widely employed within ISKCON and in this instance has been advocated by “devotees whose faith is undisputed” is a prominent sign that Western values have prevailed over traditional Vaishnava values.

Another prominent sign that Western values have prevailed within ISKCON is that ISKCON’s only politically successful opposition movement, the IRM, is also deeply pragmatic in its doctrine and hence differs little from ISKCON’s status quo. Even though these two statements differ in content, they are nearly identical in form and share a presumption that the prescriptions of shastra and tradition are in essence utilitarian, not normative:

The important point is that although the ritvik system may be totally unique, . . . it does not violate higher order sastric principles. It is testament to Srila Prabhupada's genius that he was able to mercifully apply such sastric principles in new and novel ways according to time, place, and circumstance.⁵¹

Vedic life, as extolled in our scriptures, is highly interpretive. Understanding what is truly Vedic is elusive. Srila Prabhupada, taught us about Vedic society and the role of varnashram in elevating society, but he did not practically speaking, engage his spiritual daughters within such a system. They were active preachers, pujaris, cooks, etc. Srila Prabhupada in fact, introduced a new model with new standards; one based on preaching.⁵²

The first statement is from *The Final Order*, which argues for a doctrine that has been officially declared a heresy in ISKCON, and the second statement was made by some of ISKCON’s senior women devotees and represents a view that enjoys much popularity within ISKCON. The second statement does not bring charges of heresy. Both statements claim that Srila Prabhupada established something new and unprecedented and that the new thing he established is to be practiced indefinitely.

Both rely fundamentally on the pragmatist notion of time, place, and circumstance—explicitly in the first statement and implicitly in the second—and both have the effect of either discounting or obfuscating tradition or significant sections of Srila Prabhupada’s own life-work, his books. In the first statement, evidence from previous acharyas is discounted. As long as ritvikism supposedly follows “higher order sastric principles,” tradition need not be consulted. Tradition and the statements of previous acharyas are rendered irrelevant.

In the second statement, wide swaths of Srila Prabhupada’s own teachings themselves become incomprehensible. The word “varnashrama” (varnasrama) occurs more than 1000

⁵¹ Desai 31.

⁵² Email: Meeting of senior Vaishnavis. Feb 18, 2004, Mayapura.

times in Srila Prabhupada's published works, but if understanding it is "truly elusive," then that leaves much in Srila Prabhupada's life work that is incomprehensible. If varnashram is incomprehensible, then it becomes impossible to implement Srila Prabhupada's order that varnashram be established within ISKCON. In both statements, using a pragmatic mode of reasoning for non-trivial issues has had the effect of overriding and undermining the very authority these statements claim to represent.

Another prominent sign of victory for secular Western values within ISKCON comes from Rochford's book *Hare Krishna Transformed*, wherein he notes that Srila Prabhupada's authority in ISKCON "no longer was absolute."

The debate about women's roles and place in ISKCON led to critical questioning of Prabhupada's scriptural commentaries, as well as his overall authority as Krishna's pure representative. The fact that the leadership failed to act decisively on Prabhupada's behalf [when his authority was being openly challenged] was an acknowledgement that his authority no longer was absolute. Given ISKCON's increasingly pluralistic membership, it was perhaps inevitable that Prabhupada's teachings would be questioned, especially in light of their past misuse resulting in the abuse of devotee women and children. As one ISKCON leader expressed it, "There is irreducible diversity within ISKCON. It is a mistake trying to find the straight line. What is important is whether a devotee fits within the boundaries of Prabhupada's teachings." Yet as these teachings become reframed as guides for thought and action, in place of being "absolute truths," traditionalism will continue its march to the margins of ISKCON. As it does, the goal of creating a viable cultural alternative to mainstream American culture will cease to exist.⁵³

If Rochford's assessment is accurate, then Srila Prabhupada and his legacy are further away from ISKCON's center than at any other time in its history. Western culture has emerged victorious from ISKCON's internal struggles, and its champions now have the privilege of writing ISKCON's constitution.

⁵³ Rochford 160.

ISKCON's Constitution and Future

ISKCON is about to write its constitution not primarily because of the practical, social benefits a constitution might confer on its members. Instead, ISKCON will write its own constitution because it now can.

Could ISKCON have produced a constitution during the time of the zonal-acharyas' excesses, while ISKCON's children were being abused in gurukulas, or during the massive, public lawsuit that followed? Could ISKCON have seriously entertained writing a constitution during the resurgence of ritvikism in the 1990s, when ritvikists made impressive strides in both successfully creating their own institutional identity and in challenging the GBC's authority? Could a constitution have emerged while an influential section of its women were openly questioning the legitimacy of ISKCON's patriarchal leadership? Could ISKCON have peacefully embarked on constitution building when its internal economy collapsed and the majority of its members consequently migrated from ISKCON ashrams to mainstream society?

The answer to all these questions is "no." ISKCON could not have produced a constitution during this period. Like any other group engaged in an existential struggle, its first concern was survival. Only after prevailing could a constitution emerge, not before. Now that these conflicts are for the most part over, ISKCON's constitution will enshrine the values of the victors and, like America's own constitution, become the basis of a new "civic religion" for ISKCON.

But what happens after victory and the constitution comes into being? Like all struggles, victory itself is only temporary. If the ideological victory is one of secular Western culture and values, what might ISKCON's post-constitutional future look like?

Dr. Anna S. King's recent essay "Theologizing Radha: the Feminine and Feminist Dimension of Deity"⁵⁴ and Western mainstream religious denominations that have followed a trajectory similar to what King has recommended may provide a glimpse of ISKCON's immanent future. King's essay proffers a feminist reinterpretation of Srimati Radharani in ways that translate the Vaishnava notion of spiritual equality into social equality between the sexes.

Feminist and feminine perspectives of Radha would lead to re-readings of Prabhupada's hagiography and texts in ways that support the spiritual concerns of women as lovers, mothers and friends. If it is true that Radha and Krishna are equivalent then this truth should effect political and social transformation.⁵⁵

Feminist doctrine generally presumes that a fundamental, ill-motivated male bias against women is the cause of social and political inequality, and this inequality is presumed to be the cause of mistreatment and oppression. These presumptions form the basis of King's remedy:

Theological theory should be embedded in practice. ISKCON's valorisation of the feminine dimension of the divine has often coincided with extreme religious orthodoxy and staunch support for male authority. The critical task then for feminists would be to

⁵⁴ Anna S. King, "Theologising Radha," *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change*, Ed. Graham Dwyer, Richard J. Cole, (London: I.B. Taurus & Co. 2007) 193.

⁵⁵ King 225.

confront the Chaitanya tradition wherever the historical perpetuation of unjust, exclusionary practices that have legitimated male superiority are found.⁵⁶

Yet King's solution presents a dilemma: how do you challenge "male superiority" in the Chaitanya tradition without discrediting the entire tradition itself? If criticism is limited to contemporary ISKCON, then the pre-ISKCON Gaudiya tradition remains a powerful support for patriarchy. Making an exception for the tradition that existed prior to ISKCON would strongly perpetuate the notion that a patriarchal society does not necessarily oppress women or treat them unfairly. This conclusion is unacceptable to feminist perspectives.

If the pre-ISKCON Gaudiya tradition is tainted with male bias, then the legitimacy of the entire disciplic succession itself is called into question. With some very few exceptions, all preceptors and acharyas recognized in Gaudiya Vaishnavism and in other major Vaishnava traditions have been male. The disciplic succession listed in Srila Prabhupada's *Bhagavad-gita As It Is* is comprised entirely of male acharyas. If the virtual absence of women in leadership positions (e.g. gurus and acharyas) is positive evidence of male bias, and hence positive evidence of oppression of women, then charging the entire disciplic succession with perpetuating "unjust, exclusionary practices" cannot be avoided.

If all or even many of the historic and widely recognized Vaishnava acharyas are understood to have been biased against women, then that means they were not liberated souls. If they were not liberated souls, then the disciplic succession itself loses its authority. If the disciplic succession itself is seen as unauthoritative, or not particularly so, then the parampara's authority becomes almost a dead letter. King's insight that a feminist hermeneutic would "challenge the foundations of ISKCON's theology" appears to be cogent.⁵⁷

For this reason, King believes that "it is unlikely that feminist approaches would be acceptable to devotees." King's assessment, however, is questionable, for there is evidence that ISKCON has to some extent already adopted a feminist hermeneutic. In March 2000, members of ISKCON's Women's Ministry argued before the GBC body that the lack of women in important positions in ISKCON had contributed to their mistreatment. As one of the presenters stated:

Our Vaisnava society suffers when women are excluded from its public life, from decision-making, management and formation of policy. Our institution is then off balance, with too much weight given to legalistic concerns and not enough to human ones, just as a family without a mother may lack a warm and nurturing centre.⁵⁸

This claim ties the mistreatment of ISKCON's women to their absence from positions of social and political influence. The GBC body agreed with this claim and others related to it. They consequently passed resolutions that reflected this understanding⁵⁹ and implemented policies that have significantly expanded the number of women occupying

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ King 226.

⁵⁸ Rukmini Dasi, "Women in ISKCON, Presentations to the GBC, March 2000", 1 Jun. 2000, ISKCON Communications Journal, 23 Jan. 2008 <http://www.iskcon.com/icj/8_1/rukmini.html>

⁵⁹ GBC, "Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the ISKCON GBC Body Society," 2 Mar. 2000, Governing Body Commission, 23 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.iskcongbc.info/download/81/ISKCON-GBC-Resolution-2000.html>>

positions of institutional authority. This in itself has been a remarkable change, especially in light of the fact that in 1977, the year Srila Prabhupada departed, not one woman was a temple president in any of ISKCONs more than 100 temples and no woman at that time was a member of the GBC.

Of course, there are many who see ISKCON's new social direction as a change for the better. Nevertheless, this change reflects the acceptance of certain ideas, and accepting these ideas has consequences that cannot be avoided. If ISKCON accepts that its female members suffered in part because they lacked representatives in positions of social and political influence, then ISKCON faces the same dilemma King's essay faces.

As an institution and as a society beyond the ashram walls, ISKCON has to choose between a) the anti-feminist yet traditionalist stance that a patriarchal society is not necessarily unfair to women, or b) that a patriarchal society is by definition always unfair to women. The evidence suggests that ISKCON has already chosen the latter stance.

Because ISKCON has accepted that a patriarchal society is necessarily an unfair society, it is inevitable that ISKCON will come into conflict with its traditional sources of authority—its parampara. Indeed, this would nicely explain why ISKCON's top leadership, as described by Rochford, decided not to defend Srila Prabhupada when he was being publicly criticized.

Whatever the original intention of ISKCON legislators, enacting laws that at heart presume the parampara is in some way inherently defective will eventually lead to its loss as a source of authority. This is because the effect of discrediting the parampara on one issue inevitably leads to discrediting it on other issues. If the parampara is wrong about the position of women in society, then it is also just as likely to be wrong about other issues as those too become controversial.

Many historic Western religious denominations have traveled far down the path of fostering indifference or hostility to their own historic traditions. If ISKCON is following a similar trajectory, and it seems to be the case, then it is likely that ISKCON's future will be something like what political philosopher Clifford Orwin has called the "unraveling of Christianity" in America:

Since the late nineteenth century and the emergence of the Social Gospel, the typical response of the mainline churches to the challenge of secularism has been to capitulate to it. Every one of these churches has been advancing (or retreating) from Christian orthodoxy down the road of secular progressivism. They have not done so without hesitation or confusion, which have sometimes brought them to the brink of schism. Nonetheless, within each of these churches, certainly at the national level, progressivism has eventually prevailed across the board.

. . . within the pastoral realm, the discourse of psychotherapy and personal fulfillment appears to have established itself as thoroughly in the mainline churches as in the lay world. Those who are looking for something different in church than is on offer outside it are increasingly less likely to find it there. Each of these denominations has by now alienated its more traditionalist members, especially during these recent decades of increasing cultural polarization, and many have voted with their feet.⁶⁰

As an example of secularization Orwin refers to, progressive religious institutions in America have across the board legitimized birth control—contraception and abortion—as a moral choice consistent with Judeo-Christian principles. On the issue of birth

⁶⁰ Clifford Orwin. "The Unraveling of Christianity in America." Spring 2004. The Public Interest, Number 155. page 22 - 23

control, the official statements of all these institutions portend a final destination that an ISKCON similarly indifferent to its own tradition may be unable to avoid:

BE IT RESOLVED: That the 1978 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association once again affirms the 1973 decision of the Supreme Court of the United States on abortion and urges the Association and member societies and individual members of member societies to continue and to intensify efforts to insure that every woman, whatever her financial means, shall have the right to choose to terminate a pregnancy legally and with all possible safeguards.⁶¹

The decision to terminate pregnancy may be an affirmation of one's covenant responsibility to accept the limits of human resources. Because we understand the morality of abortion to be a question of stewardship of life, the responsible decision to choose abortion may arise from analysis of the projected resources for caregiving in a specific situation. (1983 Statement – *Presbyterian Church, USA*)⁶²

When through contraceptive or human failure an unacceptable pregnancy occurs, we believe that a profound regard for unborn human life must be weighed alongside an equally profound regard for fully developed personhood, particularly when the physical, mental, and emotional health of the pregnant woman and her family show reason to be seriously threatened by the new life just forming. (*United Methodist Church, Book of Discipline*)⁶³

We affirm that the goodness of sexual intercourse goes beyond its procreative purpose. Whenever sexual intercourse occurs apart from the intent to conceive, the use of contraceptives is the responsibility of the man and of the woman. (*Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – Social Statement on Abortion*)⁶⁴

Resolved, That the Episcopal Church, in order to improve the quality of life for all, commend to the several dioceses and agencies of the Episcopal Church as well as to the relative structures of the Anglican Communion programs and projects to provide information to all men and women on the full range of affordable, acceptable, safe, and non-coercive contraceptive and reproductive health care services, utilizing educational programs which start with parents and their children. (*Episcopal Church, USA*)⁶⁵

The UAHC [Union of American Hebrew Congregations] reaffirms its strong support for the right of a woman to obtain a legal abortion on the constitutional grounds enunciated by the Supreme Court in its 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 and *Doe v. Boston*, 410 U.S. 179, which prohibit all governmental interference in abortion during the first trimester and permit only those regulations that safeguard the health of the woman during the second trimester. This rule is a sound and enlightened position on this sensitive and difficult issue, and we express our confidence in the ability of the woman to

⁶¹ "Abortion: Right to Choose," (1978 General Resolution) 26 Mar. 2007, [Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations](#), 30 Jan. 2008

<<http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/socialjustice/statements/20271.shtml>>

⁶² Social Policy Compilation, "Chapter Twelve: Health - Abortion," 30 Jan. 2008

<<http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll/socialpolicy/chapter00213.htm/section00215.htm>>

⁶³ "Responsible Parenthood," [Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church — 2004](#), qtd. in [_United Methodist Church_](#), 30 Jan. 2008 <http://archives.umc.org/interior_print.asp?ptid=4&mid=991>

⁶⁴ "ECLA Social Statement on Abortion," Sep. 1991, [_Evangelical Lutheran Church in America_](#), 30 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.elca.org/SocialStatements/abortion/>>

⁶⁵ General Convention, *Journal of the General Convention of...The Episcopal Church*, Indianapolis, 1994 (New York: General Convention, 1995), pp. 281-82. qtd in [_Archives of the Episcopal Church_](#), 30 Jan. 2008 <http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=1994-D009>

exercise her ethical and religious judgment in making her decision. (*Union for Reform Judaism*)⁶⁶

Nearly all of these historic religious institutions at one time have unequivocally rejected contraception and abortion. Yet today all of them have embraced modern birth control. The reason they have been able to do this is that, as Orwin has noted, over time each of them had gradually rejected tradition in favor of secularism.⁶⁷

Their adoption of mainstream secular values was for each of these denominations a Faustian bargain. Although their gradual capitulation to secularism was a pragmatic strategy for expanding their congregations, in the end each of these historic religious institutions became secular and thus their core values became hardly distinguishable from those of mainstream society. Hence Orwin's observation, "Those who are looking for something different in church than is on offer outside it are increasingly less likely to find it there."

ISKCON has adopted a similar course of accommodation with secular Western society. If ISKCON maintains its present accommodationist trajectory, it will not be able to avoid becoming as thoroughly secular as progressive, mainstream Judeo-Christian religious institutions in the West have become. It cannot avoid this outcome because, as we have seen, Western culture itself is strongly rooted in ideologies that privilege the subject position, or the self, above all other sources of authority. Privileging the subject position inevitably leads to a shift in understanding from author to reader, where a reader may interpret any passage in shastra or any acharya's statement with a meaning that is the reader's own and not that of the statement's author.

Throughout his published works, Srila Prabhupada has sternly warned against such a subjective way of understanding spiritual topics.

Lord Krsna first spoke Bhagavad-gita to the sun-god some hundreds of millions of years ago. We have to accept this fact and thus understand the historical significance of Bhagavad-gita, without misinterpretation, on the authority of Krsna. To interpret Bhagavad-gita without any reference to the will of Krsna is the greatest offense. In order to save oneself from this offense, one has to understand the Lord as the Supreme Personality of Godhead, as He was directly understood by Arjuna, Lord Krsna's first disciple. Such understanding of Bhagavad-gita is really profitable and authorized for the welfare of human society in fulfilling the mission of life.⁶⁸

As Srila Prabhupada states above, the prescribed way of understanding the Bhagavad-gita is to understand it in the same way it was originally understood by Arjuna from Krishna—through the disciplic succession, *evam parampara praptam*. In Sanskrit, the word "parampara" itself is a synonym for tradition.

⁶⁶ "Abortion," (Adopted Resolutions) Nov 1975, Dallas Texas, 53rd General Assembly, *Union for Reform Judaism*, 31 Jan. 2008 < http://urj.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=7443&pge_prg_id=29601&pge_id=4590 >

⁶⁷ All of the above mentioned institutions have either adopted resolutions affirming what has been called "gay marriage" or are have been moving in the direction of adopting it. At this time, the Anglican Communion is in turmoil over this very issue and moving toward a global schism. It should also be noted that in ISKCON some top leaders have also publicly proposed that ISKCON similarly publicly encourage homosexual relationships.

⁶⁸ Srila Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, Preface.

परंपरा f. an uninterrupted row or series, order, succession, continuation, mediation, tradition . . . - *prâpta* (Bhag.), -*°yata* (*°rây°*, Var.), mfn. received by tradition. ⁶⁹

Spiritual topics are properly understood only through the *parampara*, or through tradition. This necessarily implies that tradition itself must be privileged over all other subjective means of understanding. Ideologies deeply rooted in Western culture, such as empiricism, consequentialism, pragmatism, existentialism, feminism, etc, all have the defect of taking the opposite stance of privileging the subject's position over tradition.

Traditionalists, however, are distinguished from others by their deliberate privileging of tradition in matters of scriptural interpretation. An ISKCON bereft of traditionalism, and hence its traditionalists, will find it very difficult to avoid becoming as thoroughly secular as mainstream Judeo-Christian institutions in the West have already become.

Although most ISKCON devotees probably disagree that ISKCON is headed in this direction, this disagreement is a denial of what has already taken place. The cost of marginalizing ISKCON's traditionalists has already been great. Indeed, as already mentioned in this essay, Rochford, a long-time observer and well-wisher of ISKCON has argued that as traditionalism continues "its march to the margins of ISKCON. . . the goal of creating a viable cultural alternative to mainstream American culture will cease to exist."⁷⁰

Is this really what ISKCON's leaders in North America or elsewhere in the world want? Do they want to create an international society that, in the name of coexisting amicably with their secularist neighbors, has little of substance to offer that cannot also be found outside of ISKCON? If at the end of their lives ISKCON's leaders came before Srila Prabhupada and informed him that they no longer presumed it important to create a "viable cultural alternative to mainstream American culture," would they present this to him as an accomplishment or as a failure?

Although it is not impossible for ISKCON to turn back from this self-destructive course of accommodation with Western culture and values, an ISKCON constitution bereft of the traditionalist perspective will all but make it impossible for ISKCON to turn back, much as how one cannot "unring" a bell or "unjump" off a cliff. Once established, ISKCON's constitution will not go away. It is for this reason that ISKCON should, at this time, postpone writing its constitution and instead deeply reflect on its present direction.

⁶⁹ M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Pvt. Ltd: Delhi, 1999) 587.

⁷⁰ Rochford 160.