

ISKCON AND THE STRUGGLE FOR LEGITIMATION

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Although the roots of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) go back to Caitanya in fifteenth-century India (and even before), it is considered a new religious movement because it was first introduced in western countries in the 1960s. In its early years in the United States ISKCON was perceived as a movement engaged in kidnapping, brain-washing, deceptive fund-raising, and aggressive proselytizing. My concern is not with the legitimacy or illegitimacy of these perceptions, but rather with the undisputed fact that such charges reflect a commonly accepted image of this religion which engendered hostile reaction on the part of numerous segments of American society.

In this context it is striking that during the lifetime of Swami Bhaktivedanta and increasingly since his demise (1977), ISKCON has sought legitimation through the courts, through courtship of the approval of scholars, and through an increasingly open or positive approach to other religious traditions. These attempts are not mutually exclusive. The attempt at legitimation in US courts was buttressed by an appeal to scholars and religious leaders who were sympathetic to the cause. Just as I am not attempting to assess the legitimacy of the general image of ISKCON, neither am I attempting to assess the relative success of their attempt at legitimation. It is the phenomenon of religious change within the movement that is under consideration.

LEGITIMATION IN US COURTS

In 1965 the founder of ISKCON, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, brought his message to New York City. He was then seventy years old. One year after his arrival in the United States, he founded the New York Temple. Committed to the thought and practices of Caitanya, he and his disciples engaged in preaching and chanting in parks and streets, and later engaged in solicitation of funds and the distribution of literature in airports, fairs and wherever they could engage people in religious discussion. Their simple life-styles were a confrontation to middle-class values, and their manner of dress, coupled with their rules against eating meat, gambling, use of drugs or stimulants, and illicit sex were in sharp contrast to the life-styles

followed by many who were part of the counter-culture of the 1960s. Their frequently aggressive manner and their early tendency to renounce family ties and values provoked a vigorous reaction on the part of family members and people in general. So strong was this reaction that some parents had their children (often of legal age) kidnapped with the purpose of having them deprogrammed. The charge was that ISKCON brainwashed their converts, who had to be deprogrammed in order to return to a more normal and acceptable life-style. When professional deprogrammers encountered legal difficulties they turned to the thirty-day conservatorship. During that time the deprogramming and neutralizing of the presumed mind-control took place. Converts were usually subjected to mental and physical violence with the intention of getting them to renounce their new-found faith. One of the arguments used against ISKCON members was that they were not entitled to the protection of the First Amendment of the Constitution since they were not part of a *bona fide* religion, only a 'cult.'

A celebrated case which has a bearing on the struggle to be considered a *bona fide* religion began with a Queens County (NY) Grand Jury hearing requested by the New York Temple of ISKCON because of the kidnapping of Merylee Kreshower (aged 24) and Ed Shapiro (aged 22). Both had been living in the Temple. Miss Kreshower's mother had arranged a kidnapping for the purpose of deprogramming. Ed Shapiro had requested \$20,000 from a fund of stocks and bonds set up for him by his father. Shapiro intended to turn the money over to ISKCON. His father committed him for psychiatric examination, but he was found to have no mental disorder.

Upon release, Kreshower pressed charges against her mother and the detective who had organized the kidnapping. The case went before a Queens Grand Jury which, instead of pursuing the circumstances of the kidnapping, inquired into the teachings and practices of ISKCON. This led to the arrest on 12 October 1976 of Adi Kesava (Angus Murphy) and Trai Das (Harold Connolly) who were charged with unlawful detainment by use of mind-control techniques. They were also charged with extortion, alleging a threat that Shapiro Senior would never see his son again unless he released the \$20,000. The direction of the grand jury investigation and the subsequent arrests indicate the high level of public hostility towards, and suspicion of, ISKCON. On 17 March 1977, however, the New York Supreme Court dismissed the charges and affirmed that 'The Hari Krishna movement is a *bona fide* religion with roots in India, that go back thousands of years.'¹ The court also stated that 'the entire and basic issue before this court is whether or not the two alleged victims in this case and the defendants, will be allowed to practice the religion of their

¹ *New York Law Journal*, 21 March 1977, 12, col. 4.

choice . . . and this must be answered with a resounding affirmation.²

In an attempt to strengthen their case as a *bona fide* religion, the movement sent representatives to the 1976 joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Society for Biblical Literature and American School of Oriental Research in St Louis. There they acquired the signatures of almost 200 scholars on a petition that affirmed that the movement was a *bona fide* religion and should be afforded freedom under the First Amendment.

A symposium was held at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University on 22 November 1976 at which issues relating to ISKCON and 'mind-control' were discussed by Harvey Cox (Professor of Theology, Harvard Divinity School), Jeremiah Gutman (Civil Liberties Attorney), Stephen Chorover (Professor of Psychology, MIT), Diana Eck (Lecturer in Sanskrit, Harvard) and two representatives of ISKCON. The tone of the symposium was supportive of the movement.

Statements were also issued in support of the movement by the World Fellowship of Religions, by James Redington, SJ (doctoral student in Indian religions), by Robert A. McDermott (Baruch College), by Joseph T. O'Connell (University of Toronto) and by a number of Indian professors. In a series of newsletters sent to academics following the 1976 meeting in St Louis, representatives of ISKCON thanked those scholars who had had an influence on the outcome of the Kreshower/Shapiro case.

A series of bills were to come before the state legislatures of Vermont, Massachusetts, Texas, Pennsylvania and Florida which would enable any citizen to gain custody of a person in a 'cult', and hold that person for thirty days while he/she was being deprogrammed. A strong appeal by scholars was influential in seeing that none of those bills were voted into law. But it was the New York Supreme Court that settled the issue of whether ISKCON was a religion and entitled to protection under the First Amendment.

In certain other areas the movement took a more aggressive stance in the courts, arguing that under the First Amendment they had the right to proselytize and solicit funds in airports, state fairgrounds, on city streets and on federal park land. On 21 March 1975, the US District Court in Dallas ruled on a request for an injunction against an ordinance enforced by the Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport Board that would prohibit solicitation of funds and distribution of literature in terminal buildings. The court did not say that the ordinance was free of constitutional defects, but considered the injunction improper at the time.³ On 30 January 1979, an opinion was filed in which a permanent injunction restrained the defendants from enforcing the

² Ibid., 13, col. 4.

³ ISKCON v. Dallas-Ft. Worth Regional Airport Board, 391 F. Supp. 606 (1975).

ordinance in question. The District Court judge felt it necessary to comment on the possible reception of his judgment. He commented on the view of many that the Krishnas were harassing airline travellers and that their views were not currently shared by many Americans. Nevertheless, he continued, it is the purpose of the Bill of Rights to protect holders of unpopular ideas.⁴

Between the time of the original request for an injunction (1975) and the final adjudication (1979), there were no less than eight other cases involving airport solicitation. Most of them were settled in favour of ISKCON. A civil rights suit and permanent injunction was filed to enable devotees to perform *sankîrtan* at the Kennedy, LaGuardia and Newark airports. The suit was dismissed because there were no prosecutions pending against the plaintiffs.⁵ On 17 January 1977, an injunction was granted against an ordinance prohibiting solicitation and distribution of literature without written permission of the Kansas City airport director. The fact that money was solicited in connection with the preaching of religion did not make it a commercial undertaking, and it was protected under the First Amendment.⁶

In a case involving the rights of devotees to solicit at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, it was ruled that a regulation that does not state standards to guide officials in granting permits suppresses First Amendment rights and is a means of censorship.⁷ A similar injunction was granted for the Houston Airport.⁸ Granting the same rights at the Greater Pittsburg International Airport, it was held that a ten dollar permit fee was unconstitutional, but that solicitation could be limited in cases of fraudulent solicitation and that devotees were not to engage in physical contact with a prospective donor unless the individual had already agreed to make a contribution.⁹ Requirement to acquire a permit to distribute literature and solicit donations at the Los Angeles International Airport was judged unconstitutional.¹⁰ A similar judgment was rendered for the Milwaukee Airport.¹¹ Regulations imposing a fee for a permit issuance based on the applicant's character coupled with prohibition of any solicitation within the New Orleans airport terminal was ruled unconstitutional on 1 August 1978.¹²

In keeping with its policy to go where one can encounter large numbers of people, another set of cases involved the rights of devotees to have access to state and county fairs. A series of injunctions was

⁴ Susan Fernandes v. Leonard Limmer et. al., US District Court for Northern District of Texas, Dallas Division.

⁵ ISKCON v. NY Port Port Authority 425 F.Supp. 681 (1977).

⁶ ISKCON v. Englehardt 425 F. Supp. 176 (1977).

⁷ ISKCON v. Rochford 425 F. Supp. 734 (1977).

⁸ ISKCON v. Collins 452 F. Supp. 1007 (1977).

⁹ ISKCON of Western PA, Inc. v. Griffin 437 F. Supp. 666 (1977).

¹⁰ People, Plaintiff and Respondent v. Fogelson Sup., 145 Cal. Rptr. 542.

¹¹ ISKCON v. Wolke 453 F. Supp. 869 (1978).

¹² ISKCON v. Lentini 461 F. Supp. 49 (1978).

handed down voiding regulations that would have restricted devotees from entering the pedestrian thoroughfares of the fair, talking to persons about their religion, distributing literature and soliciting donations. This was the situation for the Ionia Free Fair,¹³ the Wisconsin State Fair (August 1979), the State Fair of West Virginia (August 1978), and Erie County Fair (August 1978). In the latter case, certain restrictions limited the number of devotees soliciting at any time to ten, required them to conduct religious discussions on an individual basis with no more than one member confronting a member of the public at one time, and forbade them to leave literature unattended which would be conducive to litter. In some of the judgments it is stated that to confine devotees to a booth would be to inhibit their rights to practise their religion freely. But in a case regarding the Ohio State Fair it was ruled that to confine devotees to specific booths was not such an infringement on First Amendment rights. Here the ruling was that the state had the right to regulate such activities even though it could not prohibit them.¹⁴ On 1 September 1978, however, an injunction granted the right of unrestricted movement at the Nebraska State Fair, and a similar injunction was granted for free solicitation at the Indiana State Fair.¹⁵

On 9 September 1978, a restraining order was handed down to enable solicitation at the Kansas State Fair although in this case a number of conditions were attached. Members were to wear cards identifying themselves as solicitors for ISKCON. The number of members soliciting at one time was to be limited to twenty, and they were not to use the word 'fair' in such a way as to suggest sponsorship. They were not to touch unconsenting persons even for the purpose of pinning flowers on them. No more than two members were to engage a person in discussion at one time. There were seventeen rules to be followed. On 12 September, a temporary restraining order was granted for the performance of *sankīrtan* at the Eastern States Exposition in Massachusetts. A judgment relating to the State Fair of Texas ruled that devotees had the right to solicit donations and distribute literature outside the confines of a booth unless they concealed their identity. '. . . But if members of sect [*sic*] went in disguise and gave away flowers with no distribution of literature or disclosure of their religious purpose, they would be required to obtain a booth.'¹⁶ It seems that members were wearing wigs and street clothing in place of their traditional identifying garb and were not explicit about the purpose for the donations.

A number of judgments overturned restrictions on proselytizing

¹³ Anderson et. al. v. Ionia Free Fair Association, US District Court, Western District of Michigan, 7 August 1978.

¹⁴ ISKCON v. Evans 440 F. Supp. 414 (1977).

¹⁵ ISKCON v. Bowen 456 F. Supp. 437 (1978).

¹⁶ ISKCON v. State Fair of Texas 461 F. Supp. 719 (1978).

and soliciting donations on the public streets of major US cities. A New Orleans ordinance that made solicitations illegal in the French Quarter of the city was judged unconstitutional.¹⁷ An ordinance in Sacramento, California that required a prior permit to engage in charitable solicitation was deemed unconstitutional.¹⁸ A Chicago ordinance which made it unlawful 'for any person to engage in the business of a peddler without a license' was inapplicable since the solicitation of religious donations was not a commercial enterprise but a religious act and protected under the First Amendment.¹⁹

A state licensing law, applied to the devotees, that prohibited them from soliciting donations at rest-stops on state highways in Florida was judged unconstitutional.²⁰ But the regulation of certain areas as off limits to such solicitation in national park areas was indeed constitutional.²¹ Finally, ISKCON sought an injunction to enjoin arrest and prosecution of members who solicited on certain segments of the pavement leading to the entrance of Knott's Berry Farm (a popular amusement park in California). This was denied on the ground that the portion of the street, though resembling a public thoroughfare, was the private property of Knott's Berry Farm.²²

Overall, these cases from 1975 to 1979 were exceedingly successful in granting members of ISKCON protection under the First Amendment as a legitimate religion. The result was an extension of freedom to engage in distribution of literature and in solicitation of donations in a variety of forums where they might encounter a large number of people. Although the extent to which these cases changed public opinion is uncertain, ISKCON's legal place alongside other legitimate denominations was assured.

LEGITIMATION THROUGH APPEAL TO SCHOLARS

In tracing the attempt to achieve legal room for ISKCON, we have already noticed the role played by scholars as expert witnesses. But the use of scholars and scholarship to enhance legitimacy has extended beyond this legal purpose.

In a series of newsletters from ISKCON to scholars following the St Louis petition of 1976, several scholars offered their services as sources of information about the movement for concerned parents of converts. They also urged other scholars in metropolitan areas around the country to do the same.

In 1980–83, the six-volume *Śrīla Prabhupāda-līlāmṛta* was published by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. Each volume of this

¹⁷ ISKCON v. City of New Orleans 347 F. Supp. 945 (1972).

¹⁸ ISKCON of Berkeley v. Kearnes 454 F. Supp. 116 (1978).

¹⁹ ISKCON v. Conlisk 374 F. Supp. 1010 (1972).

²⁰ ISKCON v. Hays 438 F. Supp. 1077 (1977).

²¹ Liberman v. Schesventer 447 F. Supp. 1355 (1978).

²² ISKCON v. Reber 454 F. Supp. 1385 (1978).

authorized biography of Swami Bhaktivedanta contains a preface by a scholar whose name would be immediately recognizable in academic circles. This is regularly mentioned in advertising. In a footnote to a later article, Śubhānanda dās notes, 'Each volume of *Līlāmṛta* is introduced by a noted scholar of religion.'²³

In the editor's preface to *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna: Five Distinguished Scholars on the Krishna Movement in the West*,²⁴ Steven J. Gelberg (Śubhānanda dās) deals with caricatures of ISKCON and its devotees. He asserts that devotees can be rational, are not zealots or cultic zombies and should not be considered merely a part of pop culture. ISKCON is a legitimate religious tradition. But he recognizes that this assertion would be less convincing were it to come from a devotee than if it were to come from the mouth of a respected academic.

At one point, I realized that a collection of systematic dialogues with some of ISKCON's academic observers might serve as a useful introduction to the movement – an introduction that might be *more credible* than one attempted by a committed member with an apologetic motive. This book is the product of that realization.²⁵

Included are scholars who can be trusted not to wage an attack. Not every statement is laudatory. If Professor Shinn (then of Oberlin College) confesses his difficulty in relating to the role of the guru in the Vaiṣṇava tradition, and if Professor Basham says 'Although I could never belong to it myself,' (190) in reference to the movement, it makes many of their other statements even more forceful in the legitimation process.

Several themes are stated repeatedly by all of the scholars here interviewed. ISKCON is not a cult, not even a 'new' religious movement. Not only is this said by Harvey Cox (24), but also by Larry Shinn (63), by Thomas Hopkins (120ff), by A.L. Basham (180ff), and at length by Shrivatsa Goswami, an Indian Vaiṣṇava with an MA in Indian Philosophy from Banaras Hindu University (105ff). For Professor Basham to say that 'the Hare Krishna movement is very definitely a religion' (163) and to have that repeated by other scholars can do nothing but assist in the legitimation of ISKCON as a *bona fide* religion. And when Harvey Cox says that deprogramming is 'reprehensible, destructive to human personality, and in every way evil' (55), this is certain to be more effective than if it were to come from a devotee. This and also the accusation of brainwashing is also countered by Professor Shinn when he says, '... "brainwashing" – if

²³ *Iskcon Review*, 2 (1986), 50, note 3.

²⁴ *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna: Five Distinguished Scholars on the Krishna Movement in the West* (New York: Grove Press, 1983).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18–29, emphasis mine.

we mean by that “mind-control,” “coercive persuasion,” or “thought reform” . . . is clearly not, in any sense, an explanation of how people get into the Hare Krishna movement.’ (64)

This volume leaves the distinct impression that there are reputable scholars who hold that ISKCON is a *bona fide* religion, a movement that is rapidly becoming more of a denomination than a sect, which has a strong mystical dimension coupled with a strong intellectual base and a long and illustrious history in India. The scholars are afforded considerable freedom to express their views, but they are led by carefully crafted questions that direct their attention to topics that are of concern to the intellectual side of the movement today. On a few occasions when the view expressed is considered at least partially wrong, the editor takes the opportunity to clarify the issue, for example, on the guru-disciple relationship (79).

For a number of years the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust has made its presence known at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion through its book display. At the 1982 annual meeting of the AAR, an entire session was devoted to a discussion of ISKCON. There were four presentations, two by ‘outsider’ scholars and two by ‘insiders.’ The presentations were followed by a response, replies to the response, and a general discussion. By participating in this forum, the ‘insiders’ took the same rostrum as other scholars and hence participated in a form of legitimation.

A final use of scholars and scholarship for legitimation is the inauguration, in Spring 1985, of *Iskcon Review: Academic Perspectives on the Hare Krishna Movement*. The first issue was devoted to the above-mentioned session on ISKCON at the 1982 AAR meeting. The *Review* is an attempt to present the intellectual side of ISKCON, and it invites contributions from those within the movement, as well as academics. In describing the primary audience of this new journal, its editor, Śubhānanda dās, writes,

It is directed towards a wide, particularly academic and professional audience including Hindu studies scholars, sociologists and psychologists of religion, students of American religious history, theologians, mental health professionals, and clergy . . . as well as interested members of ISKCON.²⁶

Other ‘new religions’ have also made an appeal to scholars, most notably the Unification Church. They have held numerous conferences. The proceedings have often been published and the editing handed over to ‘outsider’ scholars. ISKCON has not gone quite so far and has maintained editorial control of such publications. But the growing relationship with scholars is another dimension of the legitimation of ISKCON.

²⁶ *Iskcon Review*, 1 (1985), no. 1, inside cover.

LEGITIMATION THROUGH IRENIC APPROACH TO OTHER RELIGIONS
 In a previous article, I examined Swami Bhaktivedanta's statements about other religions and sought to explain their predominantly critical nature in the light of his theology.²⁷ As the movement has matured, devotees have not only sought to engage scholars in discussion, but have developed a more ameliorating approach to other religions. This attempt at a more positive statement is another dimension of the struggle for legitimation.

In July 1985, ISKCON held a conference at New Vrindavan in West Virginia on the theme 'Krishna Consciousness in the West: A Multidisciplinary Critique.' Twenty-five scholars from colleges and universities in North America were invited, along with a number of devotees. Among the devotees was a Harvard graduate student in religion, Graham M. Schweig, who presented a paper on 'Bhakti, "The Living Religion of the Day": A Study of the ISKCON Vaiṣṇava View of Other Religions.' In his paper, Schweig makes an effort to construct a 'total' ISKCON view of how devotees view other religions. Basing his thought on the words of Bhaktivedanta, Schweig attempts to use the three levels of spiritual advancement in God-realization to present a 'total' ISKCON view. Although these three levels are discussed by Bhaktivedanta, he offers no systematic attempt to relate this to one's attitude to other religions. This, then, is a new theological development.

The lowest level (*kanistha*) is a devotee who has deep faith in God, but 'his vision is narrower and parochial, and he maintains an exclusivistic stance in relation to any other tradition because he cannot discern the religiousness of others.'²⁸ The intermediate level devotee (*madhyama*) combines an exclusive and inclusive stance. He has developed God-consciousness to the degree that he is able 'to distinguish between a God conscious person, a novice, an innocent person, and an irreligious person whether such a person is a Vaiṣṇava or not.'²⁹ The advanced devotee (*uttama*) has an inclusivist vision of other traditions. 'He, like the beginner devotee, is indiscriminate, but with his highly developed vision sees everyone as a devotee of God.'³⁰ All of these attitudes are seen as a total ISKCON view. This construction has the potential of enabling one to account for both positive and negative attitudes on the part of devotees by assessing their level of spiritual advancement. But this scheme is not systematically carried through in Schweig's paper.

Instead, what seems to take Schweig's attention is an examination of Bhaktivedanta's view in terms of inclusive and exclusive. 'We shall

²⁷ 'Swami Bhaktivedanta and the Encounter with Religions,' *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. Harold Coward (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

²⁸ Manuscript copy, 3.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

see how Prabhupada's every statement signifies or implies a very specific and particular balance between inclusivistic and exclusivistic stances.³¹ Since it can hardly be assumed that Bhaktivedanta is an intermediate devotee, one can only assume that his statements which operate on the lower or middle levels operate there for the sake of lower or middle devotees. Then the positive ones would be his higher view. But this is not worked out either. What is striking about this attempt, however, is that a devotee is seeking to emphasize a more positive approach without ignoring the exclusive dimensions. He sees that Bhaktivedanta distinguishes between true and false religion. But it is emphasized that true religion means devotion to God, and that can take place in any tradition. Of course, the Pali Canon and advaita are less instructive in this regard because of their denigration of the personal God.

Repeatedly in the works of Bhaktivedanta, advaitins are called 'the dead branch of a tree,' asuras, demoniacs and products of the Kali yuga, rascals and offenders. The model of Caitanya was conversion, not dialogue. Any religion that does not accept the Supreme Lord is a cheating religion (*kaitava-dharma*). Devotees are discouraged from worshipping other deities (demigods) or from reading scriptures other than Vaiṣṇava ones. There is a tendency to be more charitable to the founder of a religion than to his followers. This is true of Śankara, the Buddha, Christ, and Mohammed. Muslims and Christians violate the prohibition against killing (i.e. they eat meat).³²

What is striking about Schweig's construction is that none of this strong language is present. Moreover, there is a tendency to deal with the positive or inclusive statements first and at some length before moving to a less extensive treatment of the exclusive statements. Nowhere do terms like 'rascals,' 'offenders,' 'demoniacs,' or other such pungent words that abound in Bhaktivedanta's writings appear in Schweig's paper. Schweig's is a serious attempt at a balance between inclusive and exclusive attitudes. But, within the context of Bhaktivedanta's work, it is its emphatically affirmative tone that stands out.

Also in 1985, the first American disciple of Swami Bhaktivedanta and the founder of the New Vrindavan community in West Virginia, Kirtananda Swami Bhaktipada, published a book, *Christ and Krishna: The Path of Pure Devotion*.³³ In a question and answer format, Bhaktipada explores the essential unity of the message of Christ and Krishna. The book also contains six short chapters of his conversations with a variety of Christians. Early in the book he states,

I am not condemning any *bona fide* religion because the principles of *bona fide* religion

³¹ Ibid., 4.

³² All of these views are developed in 'Swami Bhaktivedanta and the Encounter with Religions.'

³³ *Christ and Krishna: The Path of Pure Devotion* (Bhaktipada Books, 1985).

are the same everywhere. Religion means the laws of God. One who abides by these laws is truly religious. The laws of God, as stated in all scriptures, demand surrender to God.³⁴

As the son of a Baptist minister, Bhaktipada believed that to accept Christ meant to condemn other religions. Now he sees that Christ, the perfect son of God, is not the only avatara. Krishna corresponds to God and tells people to 'love me.' Christ told them to 'love God.' There is no contradiction between the two. As for the Christian teaching that one can only come to God through Christ, Bhaktipada likens that to the need for a *jagad-guru*. Bhaktipada's openness does not extend to all views. Those who reject God or who are impersonalists are in error. But the emphasis in his book is clearly positive.

Bhaktipada is concerned primarily with the relationship between Krishna consciousness and Christianity. He sees no problem in affirming the virgin birth of Christ or the doctrine of the trinity. 'A follower of the Vedas can understand this mystery of "three in One" because we also speak of three aspects of God: the impersonal Brahman, the localized Paramatma, and Bhagavan, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Still, there is unity.'³⁵ Since reincarnation is taught by Christ and is found in the Bible, it is a short step to see the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body as a reference to reincarnation.³⁶

Bhaktipada is willing to engage in philosophical discussion, finding the arguments for God convincing. Particularly affirmed are the arguments from design and first cause. In the end, however, we learn the truth of God from the scriptures. But God has given scriptures to many peoples at various times and places. This includes not only the Vedic corpus, but also the Bible, Quran, and Buddhist sutras (54). The main difference between the Bible and the Vedic literature is not the difference between error and truth but the difference between a small and large dictionary. The Vedic literature is simply more complete. One can achieve consciousness of God even while remaining a Christian. ISKCON members chant the *mah-mantra*. But if chanting the name of Krishna is uncomfortable, one can chant the name of Christ, since they are the same anyway. Chanting any of the *bona fide* names of God will be effective (43ff).

An important chapter for our purposes is entitled 'The Universal Church.' Bhaktipada states that the real church is not an organization, but a 'spiritual unity composed of those who believe in God and love Him' (111). This church cannot be sectarian. While one can change

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁵ Ibid., 17.

³⁶ For a complete discussion of Bhaktivedanta's view on karma and rebirth, see Robert D. Baird, 'Swami Bhaktivedanta: Karma, Rebirth and the Personal God,' *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments*, ed. Ronald W. Neufeldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

one's faith, religion cannot be changed since it is one. It is '*sanatan dharma*, the eternal nature of things, which specifically indicates the inherent, changeless nature of the living entity: to render loving service to God' (112). The only limits placed on this universal church is a denial of God or unwillingness to serve him in loving devotion. Hence communists would be excluded. The subsequent chapters entitled 'conversations with Christians' are illuminating, but are less conversations than a continuation of the question and answer format.

Bhaktipada's wide range of knowledge of biblical texts and of western traditions is in striking contrast to the dearth of such knowledge in Bhaktivedanta.³⁷ Biblical texts and Vaiṣṇava texts are woven together to present a complete picture of *sanatan dharma* which is quite harmonious. The use of biblical texts by modern Indian religious thinkers to show the universal quality of their thought is often strained. But Bhaktipada frequently chooses just the right text to make his point. This book grew out of his encounter with Christians who visited New Vrindavan, and is another dimension of the struggle for legitimation.

Dialogue is something that Bhaktipada has not found instructive and is where he would draw the line. 'Such dialogues generally end up as so much impersonal hogwash. I don't know anything other than what I have learned from Srila Prabhupada' (146). It is thus a further step when Śubhānanda dās, formerly Director for Interreligious Affairs, ISKCON, writes a lengthy article entitled 'The Catholic Church and the Hare Krishna Movement: An Invitation to Dialogue.'³⁸ Śubhānanda reacts to the statement of the 'Vatican Report on Sects, Cults and New Religious Movements' (1986) that 'there is generally little or no possibility of dialogue with the sects' by pointing out that Swami Bhaktivedanta 'met and spoke at length with Sergio Cardinal Pignedoli, the second president of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, and with Jean Cardinal Daniélou of France (both now deceased) as well as with many Catholic clergy, religious and seminarians throughout the world.'³⁹ He continues by pointing out that members of ISKCON have repeatedly accepted invitations to speak at Catholic schools, colleges and seminaries, and that he himself has engaged in extensive dialogue with 'Benedictine, Cistercian, and Camaldolese monks at monasteries in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Ireland.' He concludes that ISKCON is quite open to dialogue.

The article seems to imply that the ball is in the court of the Catholic Church. Most of the remainder of the article deals with Catholic attitudes toward cults and with which attitudes are inappropriate. It also analyzes a series of generic criticisms of cults along with

³⁷ 'Swami Bhaktivedanta and the Encounter with Religions'.

³⁸ *Iskcon Review*, 2 (1986).

³⁹ *Iskcon Review*, 2 (1986), 2.

answers which are intended as a corrective. Each criticism is seen as somewhat stereotypical. But, to the extent that it is true, it is a belief or practice held in common with the Catholic Church. Even the anti-cult rhetoric is similar to that anti-Catholic rhetoric in the nineteenth-century United States which is not entirely dead today. Bigotry is attacked, and Catholic writers who are sympathetic to such dialogue are quoted extensively.

The first step to dialogue is the overcoming of ignorance and prejudice (36). Such is extensive among Christians, and how better to minimize it than to hear from authentic devotees. Since the essay is addressed to the Church, it concentrates on Catholic attitudes, theology and their ignorance of ISKCON. There is little discussion of what type of groundwork might be required of ISKCON for such dialogue. They are ready! One of the advantages to the Church will be 'increased awareness of an appreciation for God's universal saving grace; and a deepening of one's own spirituality' (39). That is, one will see ISKCON as a means of God's grace.

If entering into dialogue presupposes that each party treats the other as an equal, then ISKCON will be treated as a legitimate religious movement and not a mere cult. Śubhānanda contends that ISKCON will continue to exist with or without dialogue with the Catholic Church. It seems that Catholics have the most to lose by ignoring this sincere invitation. But he also recognizes that such dialogue would lend credibility to the dialogue partner,⁴⁰ and it is therefore a part of the struggle for legitimation.

ISKCON, then, has through the courts, through the influence of scholars and scholarship, and through an increasingly open approach to other religions, sought to enhance its image as a legitimate religion alongside others in a pluralistic society.

⁴⁰ *Iskcon Review*, 2 (1986), 49.

