

UNIVERSAL AND CONFIDENTIAL LOVE OF GOD: TWO ESSENTIAL THEMES IN PRABHUPĀDA'S THEOLOGY OF BHAKTI

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Introductory Remarks

It has been almost thirty years since A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (hereinafter simply referred to as Prabhupāda) arrived in New York City, where he introduced the devotional path of serving and loving Krishna (God) to Americans, which ultimately led to the pervasive worldwide movement that it is today. Prabhupāda brought with him from India a spiritual vision and practice that espoused certain fundamental principles of religiosity and devotion that he observed as the very heart of religion: God is the supreme loving object, humans are meant to love him and serve him, and between God and humans is the ultimate loving relationship. Prabhupāda did not accept the idea of a merely exclusive revelation or a chosen people or a singular savior. Rather he claimed that God appears in various forms at various times and in different places on this earth, to speak a language of religion to every culture, in order to establish different aspects of his law and his love. For Prabhupāda, God's love for humanity and his capacity for appearing before finite human creatures were far too powerful to be restricted or limited to a particular time, place, or culture.

Prabhupāda taught that God has been accessible to all peoples in varying religious traditions, as long as the principle of loving service to God has been taught and practiced sincerely. This principle, according to Prabhupāda, is indeed universal and he preached this principle actively. However, the same tradition that gave Prabhupāda this universal, open and inclusivistic vision, also gave him a more esoteric, confidential and lofty

vision of the highest realm of religion: a vision of God as the supreme lover. From Prabhupāda one learns that loving intimacy with the supreme Lord is not only possible, but is the ideal and ultimate attainment of religion. Although Prabhupāda always stressed that we are eternally servants of God, a relationship which is fundamental to even the most intimate of relationships with Him, for the devotee, God was no longer that majestic King, nor was He that jealous God, nor was He any longer that supreme “creditor” of sins to whom we were to become eternally indebted. Rather, for Prabhupāda and the tradition out of which he came, intimacy with the divine constituted religious perfection.

The ultimate goal and perfection of all religion is to become a confidential lover of God.¹ Prabhupāda prescribed a practice of rigorous spiritual and moral discipline to realize a love for God in our everyday activities that is intensely intimate and mystical. It was this spiritual discipline that became so attractive to persons from religious traditions and cultures everywhere. Prabhupāda’s openness to other diverse religious traditions as forms of *bhakti* (“loving devotion and service to God”) on the one hand, and his emphasis on the depth of confidential or intimate love for God on the other, I believe, is one of Prabhupāda’s most significant theological contributions. Below I will review Prabhupāda’s statements on the universality of religion and the trans-sectarian accessibility of God, along with his statements on the ethical and theological particularity of Vaishnava religion, and further, a confidential vision of God which both inclusively reveals and exclusively conceals intimacy with the divine.

With the founding of ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness) in 1966 by Prabhupāda,² the Vaishnava movement has spread around the globe. This worldwide diffusion has radically increased the interaction between Vaishnavism and other religious traditions. Such an encounter is not something new, however. The Caitanya Vaishnava movement, from which ISKCON emerged, has encountered other religious traditions, both indigenous and foreign, throughout its 500 year history.³ In this century, since Caitanya Vaishnavism has been transplanted into virtually every major culture of the world, the opportunity to experience a plurality of traditions has become great. Certainly, Vaishnavism had never encountered, as a unified movement confined primarily to the South Asian subcontinent, the sheer breadth of cultural and religious diversity that Prabhupāda did when he inaugurated the worldwide spread of Vaishnavism three decades ago. Therefore, the Vaishnava “view” of other traditions

tions has been developing over some time and has reached a new level of understanding due to Prabhupāda's influence.

The best sources for revealing Prabhupāda's view of other religions are his own written and recorded words. For this study, Prabhupāda's scriptural commentaries, recorded lectures, conversations and interviews, as well as the writings of some of Prabhupāda's disciples, have been used. Specifically, I will focus primarily on Prabhupāda's scriptural commentaries here, since Prabhupāda himself stressed the ultimate importance and authority of these teachings to his disciples. Also, these commentaries contain essential teachings from the traditional commentaries of previous *ācāryas*, or saintly scholars of the Vaishnava traditions, such as Śrīdhara Swāmī, Jīva Goswāmī, Viśvanātha Cakravartī, Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa and others. Thus Prabhupāda's scriptural commentaries are an essential source of information because they link the Vaishnava movement of the past with the present global manifestation of Vaishnavism, while revealing what was important to him theologically as a powerful religious leader of this century.⁴

Definition of Religion as “*Bhakti*”

Prabhupāda spoke a universal language of religion. This is reflected in the way he used the word “religion” itself. He rarely identified his Vaishnava teachings as a “religion,” and he characteristically spoke or wrote of the “principles” of religion, rather than merely religion. Religion in the abstract singular, which he corresponded to the Sanskrit word *dharma*, is generally presented in the “universal” sense of religion, or as an expression of the unity of religion. Prabhupāda referred to “religions” (in the plural) very infrequently as compared with his use of the word religion in the singular. He used the plural form of the word in discussions involving the sectarian particularities of religion, or the imperfections of religion. *Religions* were temporary and worldly designations. But *religion*, in the singular, was eternal and spiritual.

In his introduction to the *Bhagavad Gītā* and in many other places, Prabhupāda emphasizes that “devotional service” to God is genuine religion. “Devotional service” is Prabhupāda's unique translation of the Sanskrit word *bhakti*, which signifies his definition of religion, or *dharma*.⁶ *Bhakti* is often translated by others simply as “love,” “worship,” or “devotion”⁷—but here devotion is an adjective describing the substantive “service.” In order to appreciate the significance of this translation of *bhakti*, one must consider

Prabhupāda's discussion on *dharma*.

Dharma is explained as the essential irreducible quality of the living being, which is *service*.⁸ This ontological sense of the word *dharma* as "service" is related to the translation of the important word *bhakti* as "devotional service": When a person's natural inborn quality of service is transformed back into one's original manifestation of service to God, this is called *bhakti*. Therefore, *bhakti* is the perfection of this essential quality of servitude in human nature.

This definition of *bhakti* forms the basis for a very inclusivistic view of other traditions since the tendency to ultimately serve God is the natural inborn quality of everyone.⁹ This inclusivistic view of religion also relates to God, the object of *bhakti*. God is one and does not belong to any particular religion. Prabhupāda expresses this non-sectarian approach in the following words:

God is one, and God does not belong to this or that religion. In Kali-yuga, different religious sects consider their God to be different from the God of others, but that is not possible. God is one, and He is appreciated according to different angles of vision. In this verse the word *kaivalyat* means that God has no competitor. There is only one God. In the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (6.8) it is said, *na tat-samaś-cābhyaadhikāś-ca dṛṣṭaye*: "No one is found to be equal to Him or greater than Him." That is the definition of God.¹⁰

Realization of our relationship with God can emerge from any religion: Christianity, Islam, etc.¹¹ Prabhupāda states that "gold is gold whether possessed by a Hindu, a Muslim or a Christian."¹² When the personal aspect of God is worshiped, it is *bhakti-yoga*,¹³ i.e., establishing a connection with God through devotional service and developing a loving, devotional relationship with Him. Throughout his writings Prabhupāda repeatedly states that all true religion establishes certain principles: the knowledge of the personal aspect of God, our position in relation to God, the means by which we can surrender to God and return to Him, and our ultimate, eternal loving relationship with God.

Elsewhere Prabhupāda presents statements on the nature of religion which are even more inclusivistic. In numerous places he states that any practice or religious system which leads to the devotional service of the Lord can be called religion,¹⁴ and that religious rites prescribed in scriptures are meant for gradually leading humans from material existence to

the devotional service of God.¹⁵ He thus implies that *all* religious traditions (theistic or non-theistic) are capable of leading to *bhakti*.¹⁶

The actual realization of the individual is the primary concern for the Vaishnava, and not the particular religious designation. To be born or identified as a Christian, Muslim or Jew does not make one religious, and these designations are temporary and fleeting along with the body. In a conversation with a Catholic priest, Prabhupāda states that in *bhakti-yoga* one becomes free from designations such as Christian, Hindu, Muslim, etc., and serves God only:

To practice *bhakti-yoga* [loving service to God] means to become free from designations like “Hindu,” “Muslim,” “Christian,” this or that, and simply to serve God. We have created Christian, Hindu, and Muhammadan religions, but when we come to a religion without designations, in which we don’t think we are Hindus or Christians or Muhammadans, then we can speak of pure religion, or *bhakti*.¹⁷

Included in this *bhakti* concept of religion are several exclusivistic aspects as well. Traditions that do not accept a supreme, personal God and human devotion to and relationship with that God, would be excluded from the category of true religion, because, as aforementioned, religion is solely devotion to God. *Bhakti* is not just devotional service to anything or anyone, but requires the supreme, personal God as its object:

Bhakti-yoga means connecting ourselves with Kṛṣṇa, God, and becoming His eternal associates. *Bhakti-yoga* cannot be applied to any other objective; therefore in Buddhism, for instance, there is no *bhakti-yoga* because they do not recognize the Supreme Lord existing as the supreme objective. Christians, however, practice *bhakti-yoga* when they worship Jesus Christ, because they are accepting him as the son of God and therefore accepting God. Unless one accepts God, there is no question of *bhakti-yoga*. Christianity, therefore, is also a form of Vaishnavism because God is recognized. Nonetheless, there are different stages of God realization. Mainly, Christianity says, “God is great,” and that is a very good assertion, but the actual greatness of God can be understood from *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*. Accepting the greatness of God is the beginning of *bhakti*. *Bhakti-yoga* also exists among Muhammadans, because God is the target in the Muslim religion. However, if there is no recognition of a personal God—in other words there is only impersonalism—there is no question of *bhakti-yoga*. *Bhakti-yoga* must include three items:

the servitor, the served, and service. One must be present to accept service, and one must be present to render service. The *via media* is the process of service itself, *bhakti-yoga*. Now, if there is no one to accept that service, how is *bhakti-yoga* possible? Therefore if a philosophy or religion does not accept God as the Supreme Person, there is no possibility of *bhakti-yoga* being applied.¹⁸

Although *bhakti* may be present in many religious traditions, Prabhupāda asserts that there are “different stages of God realization.” Here he states that “accepting the greatness of God is the beginning of *bhakti*,” which is known as *aiśvarya*. The highest stages of *bhakti* involve the experience of God’s “sweetness” or intimacy with the divine, which is known as *mādhurya*. These beginning and advanced stages of God realization, comprising the full range of experiences available to the devotee, are both universal and accessible on the one hand, and yet confidential and esoteric on the other, as I will discuss in some detail below.

Exclusivistic statements can be found among various religious traditions of *bhakti*. Such statements can also be made by followers to others within specific *bhakti* traditions with regard to confidential levels of perfection. Prabhupāda states in numerous places that religion means devotional service and that perfection of religion means to be constantly engaged in devotional service to God. He emphasizes elsewhere that without devotional service, so-called religious principles are only cheating. Prabhupāda insists that the individual must simply accept the sublime position of the Supreme Person and render spontaneous loving service to Him.

Following in the footsteps of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu, we are trying to convince everyone that the devotional service of the Lord is enjoined in every scripture. If a person is religious, he must accept the supreme authority of the Lord, become His devotee and try to love Him. This is the real principle of religion. It does not matter whether one is Christian, Mohammedan or whatever. He simply must accept the sublime position of the Supreme Personality of Godhead and render service unto Him. It is not a question of being Christian, Mohammedan or Hindu. One should be purely religious and freed from all these material designations. In this way one can learn the art of devotional service.¹⁹

Religious Unity and Diversity

It is important to review how Prabhupāda explains the unity and diversity

of religion, as this will shed more light on the nature of Prabhupāda's inclusive and exclusive statements. The variety in religion arises according to differences in body and mind, differences of time and place, the culture of the people and their ability to understand.²⁰ This is one explanation given by Prabhupāda. But he provides another, perhaps more important dimension: a variety of religions exists because all religions are not on the absolute level of *bhakti*, which is understood as the essence of all true religion.

There are many different religions throughout the world because they are not all on the absolute platform of devotional service....On the material platform, religious systems are different....The genuine religious system is that which enables one to become a lover of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. In the words of *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (1.2.6):..."The supreme occupation [*dharma*] for all humanity is that by which one can attain to loving devotional service unto the transcendent Lord. Such devotional service must be unmotivated and uninterrupted in order to completely satisfy the self." On this platform there is nothing but the service of the Lord. When a person has no ulterior motive, there is certainly oneness and agreement of principles. Since everyone has a different body and mind, different types of religions are needed. But when one is situated on the spiritual platform, there are no bodily and mental differences. Consequently on the absolute platform there is oneness in religion.²¹

Prabhupāda further accounts for the variety of religion by analyzing each according to the qualities of material nature, or *guṇas*, as they are explained in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.²² Prabhupāda writes on the devotee's proper attitude toward these varieties of religion which are influenced by material qualities:

...we should not criticize other's methods of religion. There are different types of religious systems operating under different qualities of material nature. Those operating in the modes of ignorance and passion cannot be as perfect as that system in the mode of goodness. In *Bhagavad-gītā* everything has been divided into three qualitative divisions; therefore religious systems are similarly categorized. When people are most under the modes of passion and ignorance, their system of religion will be of the same quality. A devotee, instead of criticizing such systems, will encourage the followers to stick to their principles so that gradually they can come to the platform of religion in goodness.²³

Religion and worship varies according to the quality of human faith, as it is influenced by the modes of material nature.²⁴ And as is indicated by the above passage, the duty of a devotee is to encourage individuals engaged in various religious practices, to apply the principles they have received sincerely, in order to become gradually elevated to religion in the mode of goodness.

While Prabhupāda acknowledges that all religion recognizes God, whether known as Allah, Krishna, etc.,²⁵ he plainly states that people generally do not know the highest perfection of religion is the attainment of devotional service.²⁶ Prabhupāda states that the ultimate goal of all religions is to satisfy the Lord,²⁷ and claims that most people are simply unaware of or unable to achieve religion's ultimate end, which is *bhakti*. He states that one may follow the religious principles of his own tradition, but such practice must lead to *bhakti* in order to accomplish the true goal of religion, which is to love God: "One may be very expert in following the religious principles of his own sect, but if he has no tendency to love the Supreme Personality of Godhead, his observance of religious principles is simply a waste of time."²⁸ Thus, Prabhupāda states that there cannot be any religious principles without devotional service to the Lord,²⁹ and that real religious unity exists only at the level of devotional service.³⁰

When we are on the material platform, there are different types of religions—Hinduism, Christianity, Mohammedanism, Buddhism, and so on. These are instituted for a particular time, a particular country, or a particular person. Consequently there are differences. Christian principles are different from Hindu principles, and Hindu principles are different from Mohammedan and Buddhist principles. These may be considered on the material platform, but when we come to the platform of transcendental devotional service, there are no such considerations. The transcendental service of the Lord (*sādhana-bhakti*) is above these principles. The world is anxious for religious unity, and that common platform can be achieved in transcendental devotional service.³¹

Prabhupāda also makes further distinctions. Religion contains or is influenced by these external aspects of time, place, culture, etc., while it still may possess *bhakti*. However, religion can also be false—if its purpose or result is other than devotional service. There is true religion and false religion, which includes pretentious religion and irreligion. True religion is created by God, not humans, as seen in the verse from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *dhar-*

manī tu sāksāt bhagavat pranītam: the principles of religion are directly established by the Supreme Lord.³² Religion consists of God's revealed order, or his laws or codes.³³ Prabhupāda states, "...*dharma*, or religion, cannot be manufactured by a human being. Religion is the law or code of the Lord. Consequently, religion cannot be manufactured even by great saintly persons..." Pretentious religion is the outward show of standard religious practices or rituals, such as attending church or temple services, while the practitioner remains preoccupied with material intentions.³⁴ Irreligion can be of many varieties, but essentially applies to one who has forgotten one's eternal relationship with God and engages in activities other than devotional service.³⁵ Voluntaristic or subjectivistic creations of religion fall under the heading of irreligion. Self-made religion, i.e., wherein one thinks that whatever practice one concocts is the path of salvation, is another form of irreligion. Any new or fashionable "religion" which opposes the eternal principles of religion as related in the world's traditional religious scriptures is unacceptable, for true religion is not manufactured; rather, it is revealed by God. Prabhupāda emphatically states that "no one can manufacture actual law at home, nor can one manufacture actual religion."³⁶ Intentional misinterpretation through manipulation or modification of the word of God is also rejected because it is a deceptive or cheating form of religion.³⁷ Furthermore, Prabhupāda states that most people in this age will not know the difference between what is religion and what is "defective" religion,³⁸ and that many pseudo-religions will be introduced.³⁹

The order or law of genuine religion is established by God, who appears at will, at different times and in various places and forms. The ideal human response to those established laws is to follow them and surrender to God. Prabhupāda states the following:

It is not a fact that the Lord appears only on Indian soil. He can manifest Himself anywhere and everywhere, and whenever He desires to appear. In each and every incarnation, He speaks as much about religion as can be understood by the particular people under their particular circumstances. But the mission is the same—to lead people to God consciousness and obedience to the principles of religion. Sometimes He descends personally, and sometimes He sends His bona fide representative in the form of His son, or servant, or Himself in some disguised form.⁴⁰

Once the Lord manifests Himself in order to establish the laws of religion

(*bhāgavata-dharma*), humans have the opportunity to surrender lovingly unto God. Prabhupāda defines religion as surrender, and states that the only religion and the highest religion is to surrender unto the supreme Lord.⁴¹ In numerous places, Prabhupāda states that surrender is what Krishna requires, as supported by his final instruction to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* to completely give up all varieties of religion, and just surrender (*mām ekam śaraṇam vraja*)⁴² to Krishna, i.e., God.

We have seen that the essential ingredient of religion according to Prabhupāda is *bhakti*, the *sine qua non* of religion. Without *bhakti* there is no religion. Everyone, regardless of place or time, is capable of achieving pure devotional service or *bhakti*, and *bhakti* is ultimately the only religion. All genuine religious traditions can lead to or practice a form of devotional service, but the mere designations or identities of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, etc., are rejected, because without sincere application of the laws of God through these traditions in the lives of the practitioners, such designations become meaningless and part of false self-conceptions. Thus, according to Prabhupāda, God Himself establishes and reveals religious principles at anytime, in any place, either personally or through His representative. The human creation of religion, and the misapplication or misinterpretation of religion, all designate false religion.

The Encounter with Christianity

One can observe Prabhupāda's principle of universal *bhakti* at work when he looks at Christianity. More than any other religion, Prabhupāda comments on the thought and practice of Christians. As we have already seen above, Christian traditions can be accepted as genuine religion. Furthermore, Jesus Christ is accepted as the son of God, and sincere Christians are accepted as devotees of the Lord. Prabhupāda has great respect for Jesus Christ and his true followers. He states that Jesus is a Vaishnava,⁴³ and that he is "our *guru*,"⁴⁴ since he is God's representative.⁴⁵ If one actually becomes Christ conscious, one becomes Krishna conscious.⁴⁶ Elsewhere, he states that one who is actually guided by Jesus Christ attains liberation.⁴⁷

A theological criticism that Prabhupāda puts forward is that Jesus Christ is God's representative and son, but he is not the Father, nor is he the only son. Prabhupāda reasons that even an ordinary man may have many sons, so why should God be limited to having only one?⁴⁸ As for the homogeneity of the Father and the son, Prabhupāda explains that although the

Father and the son are one, because the son is the representative of the Father, the son is never accepted as being equal to or identical with the Father.⁴⁹ Jesus Christ revealed himself as the son of God and Krishna revealed Himself as God, the Father of all living beings.⁵⁰

Prabhupāda criticizes certain aspects of the modern day practice of the Christian faith. First and foremost, Prabhupāda stresses that the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” applies to all living creatures and not just to humans. This biblical commandment he considers to be the perfect law of non-violence, and finds unacceptable the notion that the word “kill” was intended to mean “murder,” thus applying only to humans.⁵¹ The argument that the killing of animals is acceptable because they have no soul simply demonstrates, according to Prabhupāda, that many Christians possess incomplete knowledge of scripture.⁵² Therefore, Prabhupāda states that many Christians are unfaithful to Jesus Christ, since they continue to sin (i.e., kill living beings) while allowing him to accept suffering on their behalf.⁵³

Religious Practice

As we have seen, *bhakti* is a universal quality of religion which is, theoretically, available to anyone. But there is a requirement, and that is, according to Prabhupāda, the sincere and steadfast application of religious principles in an individual’s life. Prabhupāda consistently emphasizes that one must accept and strictly practice the religious principles prescribed in one’s particular tradition.⁵⁴ Prabhupāda states that one must follow what the scriptures say, and emphasizes the importance of practicing one’s chosen process.

Real civilization is not concerned simply with man’s animal needs but with enabling man to understand his relationship with God, the supreme father. One may learn about his relationship with God by any process—through Christianity, through the Vedic literatures or through the Koran—but in any case it must be learned. The purpose of this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement is not to make Christians into Hindus or Hindus into Christians but to inform everyone that the duty of a human being is to understand his relationship with God. One must learn this, otherwise he is simply wasting his time by engaging in animalistic propensities. We must all try to love Kṛṣṇa, or God. If one has a process, he should practice it, or he can come and learn this process.

One should not begrudge the selection of one process over another.⁵⁵

Any religious tradition is accepted as a means but it is the sincerity and practice of the individual that are essential for understanding one's relationship with God. At the same time, Prabhupāda explains clearly that genuine religion must contain certain required and regulated practices which are essential. In the universal practice of *bhakti*, or devotional service, there are nine processes: hearing, chanting, remembering, serving the lotus feet, worshipping, praying, serving, becoming a friend of the Lord, and surrendering everything to Him.⁵⁶ Of these, "chanting" the names of God is essential for advancement.⁵⁷ For this age, Prabhupāda teaches, there is no other way than the chanting of the names of God.

The chanting of the holy names of Krishna, or Vishnu, is the central practice of the Hare Krishna movement and the historical Vaishnava traditions. But this process is not limited to certain names of God, nor to a particular tradition:

The Lord is the proprietor of all the universes, and therefore He may be known in different places by different names, but that does not in any way qualify the fullness of the Lord. Any nomenclature which is meant for the Supreme Lord is as holy as the others because they are all meant for the Lord. Such holy names are as powerful as the Lord, and there is no bar for anyone in any part of the creation to chant and glorify the Lord by the particular name of the Lord as it is locally understood.⁵⁸

The universal practice of the repetition of God's names is not limited by time, place, culture, etc.

...everyone, the learned and the foolish, the rich and the poor, the Hindus and the Muslims, the Englishmen and the Indians, and the *candalas* and the *brahmanas*, can all hear the transcendental sounds and thus cleanse the dust of material association from the mirror of the heart. To confirm the Lord's mission, all the people of the world will accept the holy name of the Lord as the common platform for the universal religion of mankind.⁵⁹

Yet Prabhupāda has explained that different names of God invoke different aspects of His presence and reflect varying degrees of intimate or distant relationships with Him. The name of Krishna, according to

Prabhupāda, is one of the most intimate names of God.

There are other practices that are seen as essential to all true religion. Prabhupāda states that religious principles depend upon and begin with the following of four basic restrictions which result in the development of four corresponding spiritual qualities. These four restrictions are: no intoxication, no eating of meat, no illicit sex, and no gambling. A person who is not intoxicated can develop the qualities of discipline and austerity; mercifulness or compassion develops in a person who does not eat flesh; by refraining from illicit sexual activities the quality of cleanliness or purity develops; and in one who does not gamble, the quality of truthfulness can be found.⁶⁰

Prabhupāda emphasizes the importance of each of these four prohibitions in various places in his writings. But of these four, the prohibition against meat-eating is repeatedly emphasized. Prabhupāda acknowledges that animal killing is sometimes part of religious practices, but he completely denounces animal-killing and meat-eating, stating that it is essentially an act of ignorance, religious or non-religious.⁶¹ Animal-killing (which Prabhupāda equates with meat-eating) must be given up in order to attain true religiousness.⁶² In pure spiritual traditions such as Vaishnavism there is no place for meat-eating or animal sacrifice.⁶³

Levels and Stages within *Bhakti* Religion

Prabhupāda delivered the universal message of *bhakti*, that all humans everywhere can learn to love and serve God. He accepted that adherents to various religious traditions can attain love of God. However, he also presented the most confidential theology of *bhakti*, which is rarely accessible to anyone. Because realization of the most confidential and intimate aspects of Godhead requires the highest levels of advancement and realization in *bhakti* practice, it is less often achieved than the earlier stages of realization of God's majesty and greatness. Furthermore, very few traditions, if any, can offer knowledge and vision of the intimate activities of the Supreme the way Vaishnava sources do. One religion may cultivate a certain stage of *bhakti* realization, and a second tradition may cultivate a more or less advanced level. The highest and most confidential knowledge of God's most intimate love and activities is found in the scriptural revelations of Vaishnavism, specifically that of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The first stages of God realization are the inclusive and accessible levels of religion, levels of

the worshipable majesty of God that are common to other devotional and theistic traditions of the world. The more advanced stages of God realization are the more intimate and confidential levels of religion which are found only in more esoteric and exclusive forms of religion.

The idea of confidentiality is not Prabhupāda's original idea, for this idea is expounded upon in the sacred texts of the tradition. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Prabhupāda translates the word *guhya* as "confidential." As Prabhupāda points out in his commentary to the Ninth Chapter of the *Gītā*, Krishna discloses "the most confidential knowledge" (*guhyatamam*) to Arjuna.⁶⁴ Arjuna later acknowledges this confidential knowledge by stating, "By my hearing the instructions You have kindly given me about these most confidential spiritual subjects, my illusion has now been dispelled."⁶⁵ Krishna explains to Arjuna that his "supreme secret" (*paramam guhyam*) should be given to others: "for one who explains this supreme secret to the devotees, pure devotional service is guaranteed, and at the end he will come back to Me."⁶⁶ On the other hand, Krishna explains that confidential knowledge of him is not possible for "those who are not austere, or devoted, or [those who are not] engaged in devotional service, nor to one who is envious of Me."⁶⁷

Prabhupāda's focus on this confidential relationship between the soul and God is expressed in his unique translation of several Sanskrit words for "God." Prabhupāda rarely uses the word "God" to translate the many words or phrases that refer to the supreme Lord. The most common Sanskrit word found for God in the Vaishnava texts that Prabhupāda translated, is the rich term *bhagavān*. The meanings for this word span the range of God's majesty and intimacy. The word consists of the stem *bhaga*, which literally means "excellence," "beauty," "dignity," "majesty," as well as "love," "affection," "amorous pleasure," etc., and the possessive suffix *-vat*. A literal translation might be simply the "one who possesses all excellences." Prabhupāda at times will translate the word *bhagavān* by the phrase "Supreme Lord," or "Supreme Person." Most often, however, the somewhat protracted and uniquely illuminating phrase "the Supreme Personality of Godhead" appears throughout his writings, translations, and recorded lectures and discussions. In this theological phrase, the greatness of God is communicated by the word "supreme," intimacy with the divine is indicated by the word "personality," and the ultimate theism, or "the divine nature" or "essence" of divinity⁶⁸ or this "supreme personality" is indicated by the otherwise rarely used English word "godhead." The profuse application of this

phrase throughout Prabhupāda's writings is itself an expression of the theocentric focus of *bhakti* in its universal and confidential senses.

God is indeed the “supreme personality” because he alone can reciprocate with each and every individual soul in any form of divine affection. The confidential theology of *bhakti* involves five levels or stages of intimacy in the relationship between the soul and God. These five stages of *bhakti* indicate five general categories of experiences or dynamic relationships, or *rasa*, with God, possessing different degrees of intimacy and intensity of love.⁶⁹ These five types of relationships or *rasas* of love for God are the following:

1. ***Śānta-rasa***: The word *śānta* means “peace.” This *rasa* is the passive love of awe and reverence for a great and powerful person. The devotee experiences the majesty or greatness of God either in his direct personal presence or in his presence throughout everything. This experience of God can include the fear of God and his power as well. The loving connection or attachment (*āsakti*) to God at this first stage is described as appreciation of God’s greatness (*guna-māhātmya*), attachment to God’s beauty (*rūpa*), and attachment to the remembrance of God (*smaraṇa*). The passive experience of pantheism and God’s omnipresence is found at this level. However, *śānta* is an inactive, passive, more contemplative relationship with God, unlike the other more intense, active, and dynamic forms of love that follow. At this stage, one is fully aware of one’s finite existence and is fully in awe of the Lord’s greatness.

2. ***Dāsyā-rasa***: The word *dāsyā* means “servitude.” This *rasa* is the active love of a devotee expressed by dedicated acts of devotion. The experience of devotion at this stage is likened unto a devoted servant with his or her master. The attachment or loving connection with God here is one of obedient but loving service for him. At this stage, God is often identified in various religious traditions as the divine “Father,” or the “King” of the universe, or the divine “Mother.” The experience between the devotee and God is active and dynamic, that of a servant with a superior, like a parent or a master. At this stage, the great distance between the soul and God experienced in *śānta-rasa* is lessened through dynamic service.

3. *Sākhyā-rasa*: The word *sākhyā* means “friendship.” Here the relationship with God is hardly passive as in *śānta-rasa*, nor is it the experience of love for a superior. Rather it is the reciprocal love existing between very dear and intimate friends. The loving dynamic between the devotee and God at this level of *bhakti* is one of reciprocal equality. This *rasa* of loving exchanges between friends found between the devotee and God, constitutes the first truly intimate relationship with the divine, since intimacy was absent at the prior two levels of *bhakti* in which the experience of God’s majesty prevailed. At this stage, there is no longer any distance of majesty or formality; rather, this distance is replaced with the reciprocal sharing of intimate dealings.

4. *Vātsalya-rasa*: The word *vātsalya* means “paternal love.” At this level the intensity of intimacy has increased so much so that the devotee possesses feelings of caring and nurturing for God the way an affectionate parent cares and nurtures for the dependent child. Here the dynamics within the formality of the *śānta* and *dāsyā* relationships are reversed, and the intimacy of love has intensified to such an extent that a devotee feels as though God were dependent on him or her, as a child is on its parent. At this stage, intimacy reaches a new level of intensity in which the soul cares for God in a nurturing way.

5. *Mādhurya-rasa*: The word *mādhurya* means “amorous love.” This highest and most intense form of intimacy with the divine is characterized as the feelings of intimacy that lovers have for each other (*kānta*). Here the attachment to God is experienced in total self-surrender of love (*ātma-nivedana*), and further, by being filled up and overflowing with and drowning in God’s love (*tat-maya*), overwhelming the lover with affectionate feelings for the beloved. Here the qualities of reciprocation in *sākhyā* and the caring and nurturing in *vātsalya*, are both blended with utter self-surrender. At this most advanced level of intimacy, the devotee becomes a confidential lover of God.

Each of these five *rasas* are to be viewed as progressively greater stages of experiences of intimacy up to the highest, *mādhurya-rasa*, yet they are

also recognized as diverse perfectional levels of love for the divine. It is also possible to view these stages collectively as various qualities in the natural human experience with God: Prabhupāda taught that for the devotee in true *bhakti* religion, it is ultimately possible and very natural to appreciate God's greatness, to serve God, to share with God, to care for God, and to be utterly filled with God's love and to love God with one's whole being.

The most sacred revelation of the highest intimacy or *mādhurya-rasa* with God is known by the Caitanya tradition of Vaishnavism as the *rāsa-līlā*, which connotatively refers to the divine display of a dance-in-the-round of love between Krishna, who is the supreme Lord in his most intimate form as a cowherd boy, and his divine counterparts the Gopīs, cowherd girls. The *rāsa-līlā* episode is narrated in five chapters within the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. A quick summary of these five *rāsa-līlā* chapters, or *rāsa-līlā-pañcādhyayī*, is the following: (1) The Gopīs or cowherd maidens leave their homes, duties, virtually everything, to meet with Krishna at night in the moon-lit forest. (2) The Gopīs look everywhere for Krishna after he disappears from them, and they find only the one special Gopī (who is identified by the later tradition as Rādhā) who, like the others, is abandoned. (3) They experience intense emotions and feelings of separation and longing for Krishna. (4) After reappearing before them, Krishna expresses his gratitude and appreciation for them. (5) And finally, Krishna dances with each one of them simultaneously, each Gopī believing that she has the exclusive affectionate attention of Krishna during the dance, while heavenly beings joyously look upon this divine marvel from the sky, showering flowers down upon all of them. The married and unmarried milk-maidens of Vṛndāvana, or Gopīs, are considered the most intimate associates of the Lord, and therefore are themselves the paradigmatic exemplars of *mādhurya-bhakti* with Krishna.

Prabhupāda presented these revelations of divine intimacy with great caution and warning. He consistently expressed throughout his writings and in his discussions, concern that persons hearing the confidential and intimate dimensions of Godhead must be capable and qualified to appreciate episodes like the *rāsa-līlā* of Krishna. He was concerned that persons would not misinterpret the *rāsa-līlā* in a way that was disrespectful. For example, in his introductory remarks when presenting a summary study of this treasured episode, he states that less advanced devotees or persons outside the tradition might mistake the *rāsa* dance to be "like the ordinary dancing of young boys and girls."⁷⁰ Prabhupāda states that descriptions of the higher

stages of *bhakti* are not prevalent in many traditions the way the lower stages of *bhakti* are. Indeed, this higher stage of *bhakti*, even within the Vaishnava tradition itself, is uncommon since it is so confidential and elevated. Prabhupāda states that, “The Lord’s activities in confidential love are very rarely disclosed to the general devotees who are attracted by devotion mixed with knowledge and mysticism. Such activities are the inconceivable pastimes of the Lord.”⁷¹

Throughout his writings and discussions, Prabhupāda gives his students repeated warnings about taking such sacred and confidential knowledge of Krishna cheaply. He refers to the “professional readers of the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*” who “plunge into the confidential topics of the pastimes of the Supreme Lord, which they seemingly interpret as sex literature.”⁷² He remarks further about such readers in the following words:

Such men usually go to the most confidential part of the literature without undergoing the gradual process of understanding this grave subject. They usually plunge into the subject matter of the *rāsa* dance, which is misunderstood by the foolish class of men. Some of them take this to be immoral, while others try to cover it up by their own stupid interpretations. They have no desire to follow in the footsteps of Śrila Śukadeva Gosvāmi.⁷³

Prabhupāda goes so far as to say that any outsider who misinterprets the confidential knowledge of the *Bhāgavata* should not have any access to this literature.⁷⁴ Prabhupāda insists over and over that the only way one can understand the confidential messages of God concerning the intimate activities of the Lord and loving relationships with his devotees is by engaging in the process of *bhakti*, and by receiving this literature directly through genuinely advanced and confidential devotees. “It is stated here that this confidential knowledge is extremely difficult to understand, yet it is very easy to understand if one takes shelter of a pure devotee....anyone who attains the spiritual platform by the grace of the spiritual master can also understand this confidential knowledge.”⁷⁵ Thus Arjuna could receive the confidential knowledge from Krishna because Arjuna was Krishna’s very dear friend.⁷⁶

The conditioned soul within the material world can neither understand nor appreciate how the devotee in the material world can render confidential service to the Lord out of feelings of ecstatic love

and always engage in pleasing the Supreme Lord's senses. Although seen within this material world, the pure devotee always engages in the confidential service of the Lord. An ordinary neophyte devotee cannot realize this; therefore it is said, *vaiṣṇavera kriyā-mudrā vijñāne-ha nā bujhaya*. The activities of a pure Vaiṣṇava cannot be understood even by a learned scholar in the material world.⁷⁷

It is clear from the foregoing discussion on the confidentiality of *bhakti* that a person must become qualified and spiritually worthy in order to understand the intimate knowledge of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Moreover, one must be qualified by the right persons and from the right sources. The intimate knowledge of God remains confidential and secret in the same way that a graduate studies text book on science is readable by anyone but truly understandable only by a specialist. However, even among the Vaishnava specialists, who are the most honored and worshipped, the most intimate knowledge of God should sometimes remain concealed. An example of this is when Caitanya Mahāprabhu inquires from Rāmānanda Raya about confidential topics of Rādhā and Krishna, and at a certain point Rāmānanda hesitates to go any further. Caitanya insists that Rāmānanda delve further into the topic, then suddenly realizes that no more should be said as he quickly covers Rāmānanda's mouth with his hand.⁷⁸ This interaction between Caitanya and Rāmānanda is significant: the Vaishnava tradition preserves the dignity of the deity in its innermost confidential life. At a certain point, there are just some things that can only be shared between the soul and God, and no one else. Thus Prabhupāda cautions us about attempting to prematurely jump to the intimate knowledge of Krishna's interactions with the Gopīs in the *rāsa* dance:

The activities of Kṛṣṇa are not ordinary but divine. If we can understand this, we immediately become liberated. We need only understand the pastimes of Kṛṣṇa with the *gopīs*. These pastimes are not ordinary. In the material world, a young man wants to dance with many young girls, but Kṛṣṇa's dancing with the *gopīs* is different. Because people cannot understand Kṛṣṇa, when they hear about Kṛṣṇa's dancing with the *gopīs*, they take this as some kind of concession, and say, "Now let us dance with young girls." In this way they go to hell. Therefore we have to learn from the proper person about Kṛṣṇa's activities. We should not immediately try to understand Kṛṣṇa's dealings with the *gopīs*, for they are very confidential. These dealings are given in the Tenth Canto of *Śrimad Bhāgavatam*, and this indicates that we have to understand Kṛṣṇa as He

is by first reading the preceding nine cantos. When we have understood these nine cantos, we can go on to the tenth. In this way we can understand that Kṛṣṇa's activities are not ordinary but divine, and we can immediately become liberated.⁷⁹

Prabhupāda's contribution is in his genuine application of this paradox within *bhakti*: it is both broadly inclusivistic and exclusivistic at the same time. This idea of maintaining both a very inclusivistic, universalistic approach to religion on the one hand, while maintaining the lofty exclusivistic and personalistic intimacy of Godhead on the other, is a balance that expresses the accessibility of the deity and yet preserves the dignity of the deity at the same time. Indeed, the genuinely earned, spiritually developed and truly realized state of intimacy with the divine is an experience rarely achieved by those in theistic traditions, including specifically the *bhakti* traditions of Vaishnavism. Thus the revelations of intimacy with the divinity are presented by Prabhupāda to all in a way that is absolutely respectful and yet utterly attractive that it instills in the devotees of his tradition a sense of worship and honor for the supreme divinity who, in his innermost sanctum of the spiritual world, engages in such wondrous exchanges with his dearest associates. There is no place in Prabhupāda's thought and practice for relating to these intimate revelations of God with a cheap familiarity in the form of blasphemous imitation or premature contemplation found among unqualified or insufficiently advanced souls. All of us can recognize and honor God's supreme life of intimacy, yet most of us will do so from a distance that is both respectful and ultimately conducive to a spiritual exaltation in these private revelations of God.

Concluding Remarks

Vaishnavas accept those religions and those parts of religions that lead to or directly promote *bhakti*, and that other religious traditions which do not possess any qualities of *bhakti*, i.e., devotional service to a supreme personal God, are not genuine forms of religion. Certain religious practices, such as the chanting of God's holy names, are an essential part of *bhakti*. Also, certain ethical codes are considered prerequisite to any genuine religious practice. Prabhupāda acknowledges that it is rare to find someone who is able to follow all these ethical codes. Nevertheless, he stresses their importance. He also emphasizes that if certain religious practices are taken up,

such as the chanting of the holy names of God, one will become capable of following these preliminary ethical codes.

It was not the object of this paper to present in any detail the theology of Vaishnavism. Here I have only touched upon two essential themes that Prabhupāda emphasized in the theology of *bhakti* and have only scratched the surface. But it should be noted that within the *bhakti* theology of Vaishnavism, there are different degrees of intensity and intimacy in the possible relationships between God and His devotee. Moreover, there are different degrees in the development of *bhakti* from one religion to another. Prabhupāda states that Vaishnava *bhakti* is the richest presentation of *bhakti* theology: “The cult of Caitanya philosophy is richer than any other, and it is admitted to be the living religion of the day with the potency for spreading as *viśva-dharma*, or universal religion.”⁸⁰ This understanding of Vaishnava *bhakti* represents the most exclusivistic position of Prabhupāda.

Although there are requirements for *bhakti*, giving it its own theological and ethical exclusivistic feature, *bhakti* is not limited to any particular culture, time, place, gender, race, etc., and can be found in other genuine religious traditions. Prabhupāda states that “...there is no religion save and except the devotional service of the Lord, though this may be presented in different forms.”⁸¹ As I have pointed out, even religious traditions which may not possess a pure form of *bhakti* are accepted by Vaishnavas in that their sincere followers can gradually be elevated to a point where they can take up pure devotional service.

Finally, the Vaishnava *bhakti* religion of Prabhupāda is neither heavily exclusivistic nor overly inclusivistic. Rather, I find a balance between these two. This balance of the exclusivity and inclusivity within the universality of *bhakti* and within the confidentiality of *bhakti* is significant, because it suggests the deeper elements of a true theological science—a balance and a healthy tension between the universal and the particular. Prabhupāda presents a formula for this balance when he states that “religion without philosophy is sentiment, or sometimes fanaticism, while philosophy without religion is mental speculation.”⁸² In the same way, religious exclusivity without philosophy and reason is imbalanced. Philosophic inclusivity without religious faith and devotion is also imbalanced. The former is sentimentalism without understanding, and the latter is abstract speculation without application.

True theological science achieves such a balance between these two dynamics, especially when it can be witnessed in one who “practices what he

preaches.” The theological vision and the spiritual disciplines that Prabhupāda brought to New York City were carried from the sacred pilgrimage town of Vrindaban, near Agra in Northern India, especially sacred to those who worship the supreme Lord as Vishnu in his most intimate and ultimate form as Krishna. Prabhupāda was a kind of spiritual ambassador of Vaishnava *bhakti*, or the religion of loving devotion to Krishna. Indeed, among the five primary sects of Vaishnava *bhakti*, the Gaudiya Vaishnava, or the Caitanya school, represented by Prabhupāda, was the first in the history of religion to introduce the world to the philosophy and practice of Vaishnavism to the extent that he did, around the globe to nearly every cultural corner of the earth, within the short span of twelve years. Prabhupāda’s contribution cannot be dismissed by asserting the cultural readiness of Americans during the ’60s or by the rise of modern technology and the increasing ease of global communications and transportation. Indeed, Prabhupāda utilized these to assist in the transmission of his message, but it was ultimately the message itself that possessed a power that went beyond anything that modern thought and technology could provide. India’s ancient past was suddenly speaking to the world about intimate, selfless love for the supreme. Prabhupāda’s message also survived negative media attention, prejudice and social oppression, as the movement continued to flourish and the serious lifestyle of Vaishnavas grew and persisted.

But it goes beyond this, because Prabhupāda, despite the apparently “sectarian” or “ethnic” appearances of the practices and ideas of Vaishnavism, connected with people everywhere. Prabhupāda’s path, involving the wearing of traditional religious garb of Vaishnavas, and various “sectarian” practices such as the modes of ritual and worship involving the feeding, dressing, and worshipping of divine images, could easily promote the particularity or sectarian dimensions of his importation. Indeed, the strict recitation of hymns and chanting of God’s names in the original classical Sanskrit language could also be seen as still another sectarian practice. Yet, like the other practices, the recitation of Sanskrit hymns is enchanting to people everywhere, and the singing of God’s names in the streets of major cities throughout the world is so anachronous and yet so right at the same time. All these would seem to indicate anything but a universal language of religion by the mere strict adherence to traditional and cultural forms of the sect. Paul Tillich, the renowned Protestant theologian of this century, has suggested that religion becomes lasting and universally powerful by penetrating “into the depth of one’s own religion, in devotion, thought, and

action.”⁸³ Prabhupāda has achieved just this for the Vaishnava tradition, and his contribution has not been in adding or compromising or inventing, but rather has been in the practicing, exemplifying and establishing of *bhakti*.

These questions are concerned with the relationship between the particularity and the universality of Prabhupāda’s teachings. Paul Tillich suggests that “a particular religion will be lasting to the degree in which it negates itself as a religion.”⁸⁴ How a religion “negates” itself Tillich explains in the following:

In the depth of every living religion there is a point at which the religion itself loses importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man’s existence.⁸⁵

Perhaps Tillich had not encountered one such as Prabhupāda, for Prabhupāda did not “negate” his religion to be universally attractive. Quite the contrary. Neither the outward cultural or inner confidential particularities of the Vaishnava tradition was sacrificed or negated for the universal. He, along with his disciples, held the universality and particularity of the Vaishnava tradition in a certain dynamic tension which kept both vibrant and alive. In the celebration of the particularities of the Vaishnava tradition he hit a universal chord in persons everywhere. Indeed, acts of devotion conveying the universal and the particular of *bhakti* were regularly celebrated by Prabhupāda and his disciples around the globe: the willingness of Western and Oriental devotees who were originally raised in other religious traditions, to dance on street corners, celebrating love of God and exclaiming to all, often more passionately and more boldly than any lover does for a beloved, is an act that is testimony to the absolute attraction that Prabhupāda’s universal and particular message has had and continues to have in this world.

ENDNOTES

¹ Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Gosvāmī. *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (17 Vols.). Original transliterated and Sanskrit and Bengali Text Translated, and Commentary by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1974-75). See Madhya-lilā 17.84. (References to this text and/or Prabhupāda’s commentaries to

this text will be made by first citing the name of the *līlā* section, then chapter and verse numbers when verse and commentary are both important. Or, just volume and page number will be provided if just commentary is important.)

² The best single source for examining the life and mission of Prabhupāda is the *Śrīla Prabhupāda-līlāmṛta*, in six volumes, by Satsvarūpa dāsa Goswāmī (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1980-83). The first volume, “A Lifetime in Preparation,” covers Prabhupāda’s seventy years before coming to the West, and the other five are devoted to tracing the development of the movement worldwide.

³ In medieval times, the Islamic and Buddhist traditions were encountered; later, the presence of various Christian traditions were felt. Moreover, even in earlier periods of *bhakti* history, the confrontation of religious diversity was always present by specifically indigenous Indian religious traditions, India being one of the most religiously diverse cultures of the world.

⁴ How much and to what extent Prabhupāda’s view of other religious traditions compares to the view of the original teachers of the Caitanya school is an intriguing and important topic. But it is not possible to explore this topic here. I would say, though, that such a study would find that Prabhupāda’s view is very much continuous with and reflective of the original *bhakti* tradition and philosophers.

⁵ A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, translation and commentary, *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1989), 28-31.

⁶ I have written about the relationship between *dharma* and *bhakti* in Prabhupāda’s writings in the article entitled, “*Dharma*: Nature, Duty, and Divine Service,” *Back to Godhead Magazine*, Vol. 15, No. 12, 7-13.

⁷ I have written about the complex meanings of the word *bhakti* in my thesis, entitled, “Axiological Analysis in Phenomenological Method: The Hermeneutic Task in Comparative Religion,” Harvard Th.M. Thesis, 1984.

⁸ See *Bhagavad Gītā*, 19-20.

⁹ Prabhupāda writes, “The real religion of the living being is his natural inborn quality, whereas pretentious religion is a form of nescience that artificially covers a living entity’s pure consciousness under certain unfavorable conditions. Real religion lies dormant when artificial religion dominates from the mental plane. A living being can awaken this dormant religion by hearing with a pure heart” (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Ādi-līlā, Vol. 1., 76).

Prabhupāda also writes that true religion is the “...Reinstatement of the living entity in his original position of transcendental loving service to the Supreme Lord, which is free from the infections of desires for sense gratification, fruitive work, and the culture of knowledge with the aim of merging in the Absolute to become one with the Supreme Lord” (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Ādi-līlā, Vol. 1., 78).

10 *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, with translation and commentary by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, Cantos One through Ten in 30 Volumes (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1976-80), Canto 5, Vol. 1, 132.

11 A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, *Kṛṣṇa Consciousness: The Matchless Gift* (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1974), 70.

12 *ibid.*, 70.

13 This topic is discussed further below and reviewed in Prabhupāda's quotation from *The Path of Perfection* (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1979).

14 Prabhupāda states that, "Anything which does not lead to the devotional service of the Lord is irreligion, and anything which leads to the devotional service of the Lord is called religion" (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 3, Part 2, 141). We find a similar statement: "In *Bhagavad-gītā* also we find that the Lord condemns all forms of religion other than that which entails the process of surrendering unto the Supreme. Any system which leads one to the devotional service of the Lord, and nothing else, is actually religion or philosophy." (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 3, Part 2, 16)

15 "Religious rites prescribed in the scriptures are meant to purify the mundane qualities of the conditioned souls to enable them to be gradually promoted to the stage of rendering transcendental service unto the Supreme Lord. Attainment of this stage of pure spiritual life is the highest perfection, and this stage is called *svarūpa*, or the factual identity of the living being" (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 1, Part 2, 183-4).

"Christians and Muslims are also Vaishnavas, devotees, because they offer prayers to the Lord. 'O God,' they say, 'give us our daily bread.' Those who offer this prayer may not know very much and may be at a lower stage, but this is a beginning, because they have approached God. Going to church or mosque is also pious... Therefore those who begin in this way will one day become pure Vaishnavas." (*Teachings of Queen Kuntī*, 135-6)

"According to the devotional process, one should simply accept such religious principles that will lead ultimately to the devotional service to the Lord....Anything that does not lead to the perfectional stage of Kṛṣṇa consciousness should be avoided." (*Bhagavad Gītā*, 8.51)

16 "The conclusion is that all pious activity, fruitive activity, religious principles and renunciation must ultimately lead to devotional service." (*Caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā, Vol. 7, 102)

17 A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, *The Science of Self Realization*, pb., (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1977), 126.

18 *The Path of Perfection*, 118.

19 *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā, Vol. 9, 306.

20 "...there are many different types of religious systems according to the place, the disciples and the people's capacity to understand." (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā,

Vol. 7, p. 325) Prabhupāda also states that “since everyone has a different body and mind, different types of religions are needed. But when one is situated on the spiritual platform, there are no bodily and mental differences. Consequently on the absolute platform there is oneness in religion” (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā, Vol. 7, 100).

Other, similar explanations for the diversity of religion can be found both in the Vaishnava scriptures and in Prabhupāda’s writing. See *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 1, Part 1, 71; and Part 3, 56; Canto 6, Part 2, 167).

²¹ *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā, Vol. 9, 99-100. See also *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā, Vol. 7, 363.

²² See *Bhagavad Gītā*, Chapter 17, “The Divisions of Faith,” 769.

²³ *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 4, Part 3, 175.

²⁴ “Thus we find different types of faith in this world, and there are different types of religions due to different types of faith. The real principle of religious faith is situated in the mode of pure goodness, but because the heart is tainted we find different types of religious principles.” (*Bhagavad Gītā*, 773)

Prabhupāda discusses the differences of religion according to the modes of material nature, *guṇas*, in numerous other places. See *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 1, Part 3, 214; *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 4, Part 3, 175.

²⁵ *The Science of Self Realization*, 164. There are numerous other statements acknowledging the oneness of God and oneness in conceptions of God throughout Prabhupāda’s writings.

²⁶ “The highest goal of all religion is devotional service....Religious people generally do not know that the highest perfection of religion is the attainment of devotional service.” (*Bhagavad Gītā*, 453)

²⁷ “...sacrifice means to accept the supremacy of the Lord and thereby perform acts by which the Lord may be satisfied in all respects....There are different countries in different parts of the world, and each and every country may have different types of sacrifice to please the Supreme Lord, but the central point in pleasing Him is ascertained in the *Bhāgavatam*, and it is truthfulness. The basic principle of religion is truthfulness, and the ultimate goal of all religions is to satisfy the Lord” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 1, Part 3, 275).

²⁸ *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 8, Part 1, 305.

²⁹ “...there cannot be any religious principle without devotional service to the Lord....there cannot be any religion or system of genuine philosophy for the advancement of the living entities without the principle of devotional service.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 3, Part 2, 15)

“Therefore, from all the evidence the conclusion is that without *bhakti*, devotional service, there is no question of religious principles. God is the central figure in the performance of religious principles.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 7, Part 3, 30)

³⁰ “As far as religious principles are concerned, there is a consideration of the

person, the country, the time and the circumstance. In devotional service, however, there are no such considerations. Devotional service is transcendental to all considerations.” (*Caritamṛta-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā, 25.121)

31 *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā, Vol. 9, 363.

32 This verse is *Bhāgavatam* 6.3.19 (Canto 6, Part 1, 162).

33 *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-līlā, Vol. 4, 262. “According to Vedic literature, religion consists only of the codes of law given by God” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 4, Part 3, 95).

34 “Nondevotees may make a show of religion, but it is not very effective because although they ostentatiously attend a temple or church, they are thinking of something else....But a devotee who commits sinful acts, which he may do unwillingly or accidentally because of his former habits, is excused” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 6, Part 1, 176).

35 Prabhupāda states that “any so-called religious system that is not in the line of devotional service is called *adharma-saṁsthāpana*. When people forget their eternal relationship with God and engage in something other than devotional service, their engagement is called irreligion” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 3, Part 3, 346).

36 “To create a new type of *dharma* has become fashionable in this age. So-called *svāmīs* and *yogīs* support that one may follow any type of religious system, according to one’s own choice, because all systems are ultimately the same. In *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, however, such fashionable ideas are called *vidharma* because they go against one’s own religious system. The real religious system is described by the Supreme Personality of Godhead: *svā-dharmān parityajya mām ekāṁ śāraṇāṁ vraja*. The real religious system is that of surrender to the lotus feet of the Lord....real religion is that which is given by the Supreme Personality of Godhead, just as real law is that which is given by the government. No one can manufacture actual law at home, nor can one manufacture actual religion....” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 7, Part 3, 210-11)

“Even most people who claim to belong to the Vedic system of religion are actually opposed to the Vedic principles. Every day they manufacture a new type of *dharma* on the plea that whatever one manufactures is also a path of liberation. Atheistic men generally say, *yata mata tata patha*. According to this view, there are hundreds and thousands of different opinions in human society, and each opinion is a valid religious principle” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 6, Part 2, 78-9).

37 “...the real religious system is that which leads one to become a devotee of the Supreme Lord. Therefore, anything opposed to this religious system of progressive Kṛṣṇa consciousness is called *vidharma*, *para-dharma*, *upadharma* or *chala-dharma*. Misinterpretation of *Bhagavad-gītā* is *chala-dharma*. When Kṛṣṇa directly says something and some rascal interprets it to mean something different, this is *chala-dharma* —a religious system of cheating—or *śabda-bhīt*, a jugglery of words. One should be extremely careful to avoid these various types of cheating systems of religion.”

(*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 6, Part 2, 211)

38 “The members of modern civilization manufacture defective religious principles through speculative concoction. This is not *dharma*. They do not know what is *dharma* and what is *adharma*....It may be concluded that *dharma*, religion, refers to that which is ordered in the Vedas, and *adharma*, irreligion, refers to that which is not supported in the Vedas.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 6, Part 1, 56-7)

39 “Now, in the beginning of Kali-yuga, many irreligious principles are in effect, and as Kali-yuga advances, many pseudo religious principles will certainly be introduced, and people will forget the real religious principles enunciated by Lord Kṛṣṇa before the beginning of Kali-yuga, namely principles of surrender unto the lotus feet of the Lord.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 6, Part 2, 78)

40 *Bhagavad Gītā*, 277.

41 “Therefore, the principles of *dharma*, or religion, are the direct orders of the Supreme Personality of Godhead...the highest principle of religion is to surrender unto Him only, and nothing more.” (*Bhagavad Gītā*, 2.27). In another place, “Actually the only religion is the religion of surrender unto the Supreme Personality of Godhead. We must serve the Lord in Kṛṣṇa consciousness.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 4, Part 2, 438)

42 This verse, 18.66 from the *Bhagavad-gītā*, wherein Krishna requests the surrender of his devotee, is repeatedly quoted by Prabhupāda as being the final instruction of all religion: “...Kṛṣṇa says, ...‘Give up all other duties and surrender unto Me.’ That is the last word in religion.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 6, Part 3, 134).

43 In the Chapter, “Jesus Christ was a Guru” (*The Science of Self Realization*, 134-6), much of Prabhupāda’s view of Jesus Christ is presented. Therein, Prabhupāda implies that Jesus was a Vaishnava. And as quoted earlier in this chapter, Prabhupāda refers to Christianity as a form of Vaishnavism.

44 See *The Science of Self Realization*, 136.

45 *ibid.*, 135.

46 In a recorded conversation, Prabhupāda was asked, “I would like to know, though, that when you say ‘Kṛṣṇa consciousness,’ is there any difference between that and Christ consciousness?” Prabhupāda replied, “No, there is no difference. Christ came to preach the message of God. If you actually become Christ conscious, you become Kṛṣṇa conscious.” (*The Science of Self Realization*, 299)

47 Prabhupāda states that, “Actually, one who is guided by Jesus Christ will certainly get liberation. But it is very hard to find a man who is actually being guided by Jesus Christ.” (*Perfect Questions, Perfect Answers*, 94)

48 See *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Ādi-līlā Vol. 3, 347; also see letter to Dāsārha, 3-4-72.

49 See Letter to Suchandra 12-8-69; also see Letter to Dāsārha 3-4-72.

50 See Letter to Suchandra 12-8-69.

51 See *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Ādi-lilā, Vol. 3, 348; also, *The Matchless Gift*, 32.

52 See *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Ādi-lilā, Vol. 3, 348; also, Letter to Suchandra, 2-8-69.

53 See *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 2, Part 1, 208; *The Science of Self Realization*, 135.

54 “It doesn’t matter which set of religious principles one follows; the only injunction is that he must follow them strictly....However, even if one takes up a different system of religion, according to this verse he must follow the religious principles he has accepted. Whether one is a Hindu, or a Mohammedan or a Christian, he should follow his own religious principles.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 5, Part 2, 449-50)

55 *The Matchless Gift*, 70.

56 “Prahlāda Mahārāja said: Hearing and chanting about the transcendental holy name, form, qualities, paraphernalia and pastimes of Lord Viṣṇu, remembering them, serving the lotus feet of the Lord, offering the Lord respectful worship with sixteen types of paraphernalia, offering prayers to the Lord, becoming His servant, considering the Lord one’s best friend, and surrendering everything unto Him (in other words, serving Him with the body, mind and words)—these nine processes are accepted as pure devotional service of Kṛṣṇa through these nine methods should be understood to be the most learned person, for he has acquired complete knowledge.” (*Bhāgavatam*, verses 7.5.23-4)

57 “Please hear the transcendental pastimes of Lord Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu with faith and devotion. Giving up envy of the Lord, everyone chant the Lord’s holy name, Hari.” (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-lilā 9.361)

Prabhupāda states that “if one actually wants to become religious, he must take up the chanting of the Hare Kṛṣṇa *māhā-mantra*.” (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-lilā 4, 262).

These are examples of very exclusivistic statements; but these must be seen in light of all the other statements on the universal process of chanting the holy names of God, as shall be seen below.

58 *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 2, Part 1, 20.

59 *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 1, Part 1, 7.

60 These four “regulative principles,” or “principles of religion” are discussed in many places throughout Prabhupāda’s writings. Prabhupāda writes, “The principles of religion, namely *austerity*, *cleanliness*, *mercy*, and *truthfulness*, as we have already discussed, may be followed by the follower of any faith. There is no need to turn from Hindu to Mohammedan to Christian or some other faith and thus become a renegade and not follow the principles of religion. The *Bhāgavatam* religion urges following the *principles of religion*. The principles of religion are not the dogmas or regulative principles of a certain faith. Such regulative principles may be different in terms of the time and place concerned. One has to see whether the aims of religion

have been achieved.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 1, Part 3, 273)

Prabhupāda also writes, “Irreligious persons are like animals, but in this Kṛṣṇa consciousness movement such persons can come to a sense of understanding things as they are and abandon the four principles of prohibited activities—namely illicit sex life, meat eating, gambling and intoxication. This is the beginning of religious life. Those who are so-called religious and indulge in these four principles of prohibited activities are pseudo-religionists. Religious life and sinful activity cannot parallel one another.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 4, Part 4, 98)

⁶¹ Some relevant passages on animal slaughter in religion are the following: *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 4, Part 4, 83, 142.

⁶² Prabhupāda states that, “one cannot continue killing animals and at the same time be a religious man.” (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 6, Part 2, p. 167) In this connection, Prabhupāda describes the purpose of the Buddha’s mission as the ending of animal killing in the name of religion (*Bhāgavatam*, Canto 6, Part 2, 167; Canto 4, Part 4, 142-3; and Canto 4, Part 2, 448).

⁶³ See *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 3, Part 2, 17; Canto 4, Part 4, 83, 143-4; Canto 8, Part 1, 305.

⁶⁴ *Bhagavad Gītā*, 9.1.

⁶⁵ *Bhagavad Gītā*, 11.1.

⁶⁶ *Bhagavad Gītā*, 18.68.

⁶⁷ *Bhagavad Gītā*, 18.67.

⁶⁸ These two meanings for “godhead” were given in the Oxford English Dictionary.

⁶⁹ The five *rasas*, or experiences in the divine relationship with God, are discussed in various places throughout Prabhupāda’s writings. For a brief discussion, see the introduction to the *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* (page 5). More elaborate discussions can be found in the *Nectar of Devotion*, and *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. In these varioius presentations of *rasa* throughout Prabhupāda’s writings, they are presented either in a progressive hierarchical arrangement, as steps toward the topmost *rasa* of *mādhurya*, or they are presented as five unique perfectional levels or goals. Thus even within the school itself there are diverse realizations allowed indicated by these different stages of *bhakti*.

⁷⁰ *Kṛṣṇa: The Supreme Personality of Godhead*, Vol 1, 189.

⁷¹ *Bhāgavatam*, 3.4.19 purport.

⁷² *Bhāgavatam*, 1.1.2 purport.

⁷³ *Bhāgavatam*, 1.1.3 purport.

⁷⁴ *Bhāgavatam*, 2.9.37 purport.

⁷⁵ *Bhāgavatam*, 7.6.27 purport.

⁷⁶ *Bhagavad Gītā* 6.30.20-21.

77 *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-lila 19.155 purport.

78 See *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Madhya-lilā Chapter 8, especially verses 160-193.

79 *Teachings of Lord Kapila*, vs. 29 purport.

80 *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, with translation and commentary by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, Introduction in Canto One (Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, [1987] 1993), 40.

81 *Bhāgavatam*, Canto 2, Part 2, 111.

82 *Bhagavad Gītā*, 166.

83 Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 97.

84 *ibid.*, 96-97.

85 *ibid.*, 97.