



ISKCON AND INTERFAITH

*ISKCON in Relation to People
of Faith in God*

ISKCON
INSIGHTS SERIES

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*ISKCON in Relation to People
of Faith in God*



INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS

Founder-Ācārya: His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda

ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) belongs to the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* (denomination or tradition), a monotheistic tradition within Vedic or Hindu culture. Hindu culture is vast, and the term 'Hinduism' encompasses numerous theologies, philosophies, religious traditions, and spiritual cultures. Thus, dialogue with Hindu traditions is often difficult. There are no official representatives of Hinduism, as the term Hinduism does not imply a single spiritual tradition. This statement therefore is representative of Hindu culture and religion as it is manifest in ISKCON, a Vedantic, monotheistic, Vaiṣṇava tradition.

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Foreword

ISKCON COMMUNICATIONS INTERNATIONAL AND ISKCON Communications Europe are pleased to present the first book in the ISKCON Insights Series, which offers Caitanya Vaiṣṇava perspectives on various contemporary issues. Together with the *ISKCON Communications Journal* and the ISKCON Communications Conferences, this series is another means for devotees and scholars to address, analyze, debate, and critique ideas and thoughts on a variety of weighty topics, issues, and dilemmas — e.g., education, environment, ethics, Hinduism, identity, interfaith, religious freedom, science, sexuality, veganism, youth, etc. — presently confronting ISKCON.

ISKCON may be a young spiritual organization but the spiritual tradition it represents — Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism — isn't. Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism is a tradition inspired by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1533) and was based upon ancient scriptures such as *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*), and the *Upaniṣads*. Still, despite ISKCON's theological pedigree, ISKCON faces contemporary moral, social, and ethical issues and dilemmas, which require fresh approaches and applications for it to retain its relevance. To sustain its spiritual tradition and honor its many theologians and saints, ISKCON Communications felt the need to engage with contemporary issues and explore what new approaches and applications might look like. Hence this new series.

The difference between the *ISKCON Communications Journal* and the ISKCON Insights Series is mostly in the arrangement and length of their content. Typically, the *ISKCON Communications Journal* features articles by several authors and covers more than one topic, while the ISKCON Insights Series focuses on one particular topic and explores it in greater depth. Thus, an issue in the ISKCON Insights Series may be a booklet of less than a hundred pages or a full-fledged book either written or edited by a single person (even if others contribute chapters or sections).

The current issue in the series is a new edition of a successful

booklet edited by Shaunaka Rishi Das on how ISKCON understands and engages in interfaith dialogue.* In it Shaunaka Rishi Das, in broad consultation with ISKCON's Interfaith Commission and many respected Vaiṣṇavas, eminent scholars, and religious representatives, offers a thorough analysis of how ISKCON engages in dialogue with persons of different faiths, both from a theological and a practical perspective. ISKCON members and faith leaders from other traditions alike have found in it a clear basis for engaging in interfaith dialogue and have come to understand how and why ISKCON approaches persons of different faiths. Indeed, several of the responses to this document by respected religious leaders and scholars are also featured in this booklet, which has been reprinted several times in English and has been translated, among other languages, into Spanish, Italian, French, German, Dutch, and Hungarian.

A future issue in this series (scheduled for 2024) will concern itself with ISKCON and ethics. Rāsamaṇḍala Dāsa (editor) and several leading ISKCON devotees will present not only ISKCON's moral philosophy but also applied ethics and specific ethical issues.

I want to especially thank Shaunaka Rishi Das, the current issue's author and editor, who has put so much effort, time, and thought into this publication. He also edited *ISKCON Communications Journal* for many years and established and directed ISKCON's Communications Department in Europe before I had the honor to succeed him.

May the ISKCON Insights Series contribute to a better understanding of vital contemporary issues from a Caitanya Vaiṣṇava and ISKCON perspective. And may countless ISKCON devotees, scholars, and adherents of other faiths benefit from these publications.

MAHĀPRABHU DĀSA

Director of ISKCON Communications Europe

* The main text was first published in *ISKCON Communications Journal* (ICJ) 7.1 (June 1999) and the responses in ICJ 7.2 (December 1999) and ICJ 8.1 (June 2000). Cracknell's article "ISKCON and Interfaith Dialogue" also appeared in ICJ 8.1 (June 2000).

INTRODUCTION

ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God

Shaunaka Rishi Das

THIS DOCUMENT SERVED AS THE FIRST OFFICIAL STATEMENT by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) concerning the Society's relationship with other people of faith in God. It has been developed by the ISKCON Interfaith Commission and authorised by the GBC Executive Committee.

The process of development included broad consultation with many respected devotees, eminent scholars, and religious representatives.¹

For ISKCON this statement represents an important step in the path of social integration and maturation. As ISKCON grows, it is broadening its membership base and its influence, and therefore it must also accept a more global responsibility. ISKCON is the first global Vaiṣṇava movement and as such feels that it has a need and a responsibility to address its relationship with other faith communities.

This statement will serve ISKCON's members by providing clear principles, guidelines and perspectives for relationships with members of other faiths. For non-ISKCON members it provides a declaration of purpose and a significant basis for relationship.

Our specific reference to 'people of faith in God' is based on recognition that everyone, whether adhering to spiritual or

- 2 materialistic philosophies of life, leads a life of faith. In this statement, however, we direct our concern specifically to those who have faith in a personal divinity, by whatever name.

ISKCON belongs to the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* (denomination or tradition), a monotheistic tradition within Vedic or Hindu culture. Hindu culture is vast, and the term Hinduism encompasses numerous theologies, philosophies, religious traditions and spiritual cultures.

Thus, dialogue with Hindu traditions has been difficult for many seeking such dialogue. There are no official representatives of Hinduism, as the term Hinduism does not imply a single spiritual tradition. This statement therefore is representative of Hindu culture and religion as it is manifest in ISKCON, a Vedantic, monotheistic Vaiṣṇava tradition.

PART ONE

ISKCON's Interfaith Statement

IN ISKCON we consider love of a Supreme personal God to be the highest form of religious expression, and we recognise and respect this expression in other theistic traditions. We respect the spiritual worth of paths of genuine self-realisation and search for the Absolute Truth in which the concept of a personal Deity is not explicit. Other communities and organisations advocating humanitarian, ethical, and moral standards are also valued as being beneficial to society.



ISKCON views dialogue between its members and people of other faiths as an opportunity to listen to others, to develop mutual understanding and mutual trust, and to share our commitment and faith with others, while respecting their commitment to their own faith.



ISKCON recognises that no one religion holds a monopoly on the truth, the revelation of God, or our relationship with God.



ISKCON's members are encouraged to be respectful to people of faith from other traditions and to see the need for people of different

- 4 faiths to work together for the benefit of society as a whole and for the glorification of God.



ISKCON affirms the responsibility of each individual to develop his or her relationship with the Supreme Lord.

PART TWO

ISKCON's Mission

WHEN A. C. BHAKTIVEDANTA SWAMI PRABHUPĀDA (1896–1977), the founder and *ācārya* of ISKCON, first registered ISKCON as a legal entity in New York in 1966, he stated that his primary aim for the movement was: “To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world.”²

In pursuance of this aim, members of the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement value charity, non-violence, spiritual education, moral thought and action, devotion and service to God.

We further value qualities such as humility, tolerance, compassion, cleanliness, self-control, simplicity, steadiness, knowledge, honesty, and personal integrity.

We value and respect the right to life of all other living beings, be they human, animal, aquatic, or plant life. We value the environment and our natural resources as being God's property, which we have a responsibility to respect and protect.

We recognise the institution of the family to be an essential element in maintaining social stability and promoting spiritual values. We consider respect for parents, teachers and government representatives important for maintaining a stable society. Respect and protection for elders, women, children, weak and dependent

- 6 living beings, and persons dedicated to the welfare of others and to the service of God, are also important elements in the development of a healthy and secure society.

We understand that many spiritual, altruistic and humanely inspired people share these principles and values. We respect and value any tradition or culture trying to promote, maintain, and develop such qualities and behaviour.

Śrīla Prabhupāda's mission is further elaborated in his *praṇāma-mantra*³, in which it is stated that he came to deliver the Western countries from godlessness. Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura (1838–1914), a revered Vaiṣṇava *ācārya*, explained that the enemy is not other religions, but atheism.⁴ The mission of Śrīla Prabhupāda and the *sampradāya* (or religious tradition) he represented, promotes both morality and practices that support the development of individual and social spirituality, but it raises a challenge to atheistic and materialistic principles and values.

ISKCON: Dialogue and mission

Some may feel that for a missionary movement, a dialogue with those who may not share the same spiritual or religious views may seem a contradiction in purpose. Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava teachings, however, support dialogue and cooperation with other religious traditions as a means of mutual enrichment, through discovery of both the unique and universal virtues of the various theistic and ethical traditions.

Historically, members of our tradition have been in contact with members of other faith communities since the time of Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1534), although systematic attempts at dialogue with other faiths began only with Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura.

Relationships of trust can develop from sincere dialogue among people of faith. These relationships can inspire religious people from all traditions to work together to establish theistic conclusions that will lead to a God-conscious ethos in our modern world. Thus, dialogue and respectful working relationships with other faith communities are consistent with ISKCON's mission and important for social harmony.

In the 1950s, Śrīla Prabhupāda confirmed this approach in an appeal to the leaders of the world's religions: 7

Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and the members of the other sects that have convincing faith in the authority of God must not sit idly now and silently watch the rapid growth of a Godless civilisation. There is the supreme will of God, and no nation or society can live in peace and prosperity without acceptance of this vital truth.⁵

While cherishing our own spiritual culture and working to proclaim our faith in Kṛṣṇa in Vrndavana, we consider it inappropriate and unbecoming for a Vaiṣṇava to try and attract people to the worship of the Supreme by denigrating, misrepresenting or humiliating members of other faith communities.

In relation to this, Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura has written:

But it is not proper to constantly propagate the controversial superiority of the teachers of one's own country over those of another country although one may, nay one should, cherish such a belief in order to acquire steadiness in a faith of your own. But no good can be affected to the world by such quarrels.⁶

Śrīla Prabhupāda also discusses this in his purports in *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*):

Another important point mentioned in this connection is *anindayā* [avoiding blasphemy] — we should not criticise others' methods of religion . . . A devotee, instead of criticising such systems, will encourage the followers to stick to their principles.⁷

Vaiṣṇavas strive to inspire and enhance the relationship between the Lord and His devotees. In this attempt, devotees meet others, whose approach to the Supreme is different in their flavour of worship, variegatedness in service and expression of love. During a public lecture in 1969, Śrīla Prabhupāda stated:

Everyone should follow the particular traditions or *sampradāya*, the regulative principles of your own religion. This is required as much

as there are many different political parties, although everyone is meant to serve one country.

Thus, diversity is accepted, but not to the exclusion of unity. Religions do not have to become homogeneous or merge together, but they can develop respectful and practical relationships with one another. With this understanding, ISKCON does not have a mission to proselytise members of other faiths.

ISKCON does see it as its mission to accept with open arms any sincere soul who declares a need for spiritual shelter and guidance. There is a definite missionary spirit in Vaiṣṇavism and Hinduism, but its practice is not governed by an exclusivist conversion model.

From a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava perspective, we work not at 'conversion' but spiritual development. Therefore 'conversion' is an individual experience, a personal spiritual journey, a journey that transcends religious institution and sectarian affiliation. Conversion models that depend on exclusivist demands of affiliation may often do so without considering the Lord's supremacy and independence.

Through dialogue, people of different faiths and traditions can work together to share principles and areas of concern. Together they can then engage their individual spirituality in addressing such problems as war, violence, moral decline, crime, intoxication, poverty and hunger, social instability, and environmental degradation.

Through dialogue, theistic people and those engaged in the pursuit of the Absolute Truth can encourage one another to be more true to their own practice. Many traditions prescribe the disciplines of self-control, sacrifice, austerity and charity for developing spiritual enlightenment but we all need encouragement and inspiration in our endeavours.

To fulfil the requests of our spiritual teachers and to provide good examples to society, we need to encourage one another to be faithful to the principles of our own traditions.⁸

Dialogue offers a challenge of faith to devotees of every tradition. This challenge is a necessary and welcome part of spiritual life in a multifaith world. Such dialogue can help strengthen the faith and character of individuals, the integrity and vision of institutions

and the support and appreciation of those who expect enlightened spiritual leadership. 9

Thus dialogue can lead to a profound realisation of mission, in the broadest sense of the term.

PART THREE

ISKCON: A Theological Basis for Dialogue

Vaiṣṇava theology and the concept of religion

In common with many followers of Vedantic tradition, devotees of Kṛṣṇa distinguish between Kṛṣṇa consciousness, or pure love of God, and what is commonly understood as religion. In his introduction to *Bhagavad-gītā*, Śrīla Prabhupāda explains:

Sanātana-dharma does not refer to any sectarian process of religion. It is the eternal function of the eternal living entities in relationship with the eternal Supreme Lord. . . . The English word religion is a little different from *sanātana-dharma*. Religion conveys the idea of faith, and faith may change. One may have faith in a particular process, and he may change this faith and adopt another, but *sanātana-dharma* refers to that activity which cannot be changed. (*Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, p. 18)⁹

Vaiṣṇavas regard Kṛṣṇa consciousness, or *sanātana-dharma*, as non-sectarian, although those practising *sanātana-dharma* may individually attach themselves to specific religious traditions. Love of God is defined for Vaiṣṇava devotees in *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*) 1.2.6¹⁰ and *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* 1.1.11¹¹. Śrīla Prabhupāda also writes, 'We do not advocate any sectarian religion. We are concerned to invoke our dormant love for God. Any method

12 that helps us in reaching such a platform is welcome.¹² In his commentary on Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Upadeśāmṛta*, Śrīla Prabhupāda further elaborates:

In all parts of the world, however downtrodden human society may be, there is some system of religion. . . . When a religious system develops and turns into love of God, it is successful. (p. 44)¹³

Vaiṣṇavism therefore recognises the inherent spirituality of all living beings and their individual relationship with the Supreme Lord, known by many names. Vaiṣṇavism maintains that each individual's satisfaction is to be found in service to the Supreme, and 'such devotional service must be unmotivated and uninterrupted to completely satisfy the self' (*Bhāgavatam* 1.2.6). Without such service, we seek enjoyment elsewhere and worship demigods, great persons, natural phenomena, or idols, according to taste and circumstance.

The Lord consistently recognises and maintains His relationship with the individual soul and recognises our attempts to know and understand Him, even though imperfectly or improperly performed. Kṛṣṇa asks the individual soul, 'Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear' (*Gītā* 18.66). Therefore, He emphasises that a personal exchange between Himself and the individual soul is superior to any institutional or sectarian claim to His favour.

Vaiṣṇava theology and a basis for dialogue

Caitanya Mahāprabhu left only eight written verses, called *Śrī Śrī Śikṣāṣṭaka*. The third of these verses reads:

One who thinks himself lower than the grass, who is more tolerant than a tree, and who does not expect personal honor but is always prepared to give all respect to others, can very easily always chant the holy name of the Lord.¹⁴

This verse leaves no doubt about the standard of humility, respect and devotion expected from a Vaiṣṇava who is surrendering to Lord Kṛṣṇa with a pure heart. The term ‘offering all respect to everyone’ can, of course, apply directly to people of other faiths. It is incumbent on devotees of the Lord to offer all respect especially to people sincerely trying to love and serve God.

Such respect, tolerance, and humility form the basis of proper Vaiṣṇava relationships. The Eleventh Canto of *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* describes three progressive stages in the development of spiritual relationships: neophyte (*kaniṣṭha*), mature (*madhyama*) and advanced (*uttama*). The *Bhāgavatam* presents these developments as a universal phenomenon to be seen among devotees of every religious tradition.

The neophyte usually expresses the sentiments of fanaticism and exclusivism. The neophyte does not know how to behave in the assembly of devotees. He or she cannot correctly distinguish between a devotee and a non-devotee¹⁵ and cannot be effective in dialogue, regardless of the tradition to which he or she belongs. Śrīla Prabhupāda warns, ‘but if someone is a dogmatic and a blind follower then avoid to discuss [*sic*] with him.’¹⁶

The mature devotee, very much concerned with proper relationships,¹⁷ can recognise devotees of God by their qualities and sentiment; he does not judge them by religious affiliation.¹⁸ Where devotion is manifest, he or she recognises a devotee.

The mature devotee will recognise devotion to God by the presence of any of the nine devotional processes outlined by the Vaiṣṇava authority Prahāda Mahārāja.¹⁹ Śrīla Prabhupāda has stated that although two of these nine processes, namely hearing spiritual sound (*śravaṇam*) and chanting the name of God (*kīrtanam*), are specifically recommended as the most effective methods of spiritual practice for this age, each of the nine remains effective in every age.

When mature, a devotee develops the mature vision necessary for sincere and trusting relationships with members of other faith communities.

The advanced stage of faith, the *uttama* platform, brings transcendental realisation. The advanced devotee sees all living beings as eternal servants of Kṛṣṇa and treats them as such.

He or she will have no interest in sectarian designations of race, caste, sex, or religion and will renounce all worldly and materialistic association, in favour of associating with those dedicated to pure devotional service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

Vaiṣṇavism recognises that spiritual or religious life essentially pertains to a personal and individual relationship between an eternal individual soul and the eternal Supreme Soul.

Though a devotee performs various services that may please the Lord, the Supreme Lord grants spiritual realisation and pure devotional love by His own sweet will. Thus, adherents of Vaiṣṇavism reject the idea that any one religion or organisation can hold a monopoly on the truth or on a relationship that is governed solely by the Lord. Vaiṣṇavas accept that Kṛṣṇa, God, is free to enter into loving exchanges with whomsoever He wishes, without considering colour, caste, or creed.

PART FOUR

Principles and Guidelines for Approaching People of Faith in God

Principles

The following principles will help members of ISKCON in approaching members of other faith communities. The principles are given here in a condensed form and require careful consideration.

- 1 HUMILITY
Our tradition establishes that this is the key to building spiritual relationships. It is also the principle quality of a Vaiṣṇava.
- 2 THE UNLIMITED NATURE OF KṚṢṆA
The Absolute Truth is universal. No individual or organisation has a monopoly on the Lord. He reveals himself wherever, whenever, however, and to whomever He pleases.
- 3 HONESTY
Always be honest and truthful. This is the basis for trust in successful relationships.

4 RESPECT

Always remain respectful, even if you do not receive the same respect in return. Lord Caitanya has said, '*amāninā mānadena*': one should be ready to offer all respects to others, without expecting any respect for oneself.

5 TOLERANCE

When you interact with people who are disrespectful or insensitive toward our tradition and culture, perhaps because they have made uninformed assumptions about us, you will have to be tolerant, explain yourself politely, and forgive their misunderstandings.

6 CONSIDERATION OF TIME, PLACE AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Use your common sense and discretion to develop relationships. Be sensitive to your partner in dialogue or your audience.

7 MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Be prepared to listen to others, to understand their language, assumptions, culture, and values. Therefore, do not judge others' practice by our ideals.

8 PERSONAL REALISATION

We must sincerely cultivate our own spiritual realisations in Kṛṣṇa consciousness if we are to effectively represent the *saṅkīrtana* movement.²⁰ Try to speak from personal example and realisation. Sharing will be more effective if it comes from personal realisation.

9 PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Vaiṣṇava tradition rests on sincere personal relationships. We can live without the

philosophy, the ritual and the institution, but we cannot live without our loving and serving relationship with Kṛṣṇa and His devotees.

17

10 GOOD BEHAVIOUR

Śrīla Prabhupāda writes, 'A devotee's behaviour establishes the true purpose of religious principles.'²¹

Guidelines for approaching members of other faiths

- 1 The main aim is to form genuine friendly relationships that promote understanding between ourselves and members of other religions.
- 2 Listen to and value presentations by members of other faiths with respect.
- 3 Give members of other faiths the opportunity to freely express their sincerely held beliefs and convictions.
- 4 Allow members of other faiths to define themselves in their own language and own culture without imposing definitions upon them, thus avoiding to compare their practice with our ideals.
- 5 Respect the choice of diet, dress, rituals, and etiquette of others.
- 6 Recognise that we can all fall short of the ideals of our respective traditions.
- 7 Do not misrepresent or disparage the beliefs or religious practices of others. If you want

to understand their beliefs, enquire politely and humbly.

- 8 Respect that others have a commitment to their chosen faith as we do to ours.
- 9 Be honest and straightforward about your intentions. This will be appreciated by those you meet.
- 10 Be sensitive and courteous to all you meet, even if you do not get a chance to interact on a deeper level.
- 11 Respect the right of others to disagree and their desire to be left alone.
- 12 There is never a need to compromise our philosophy or values.
- 13 When in dialogue with religious people, you do not have to feel the need to convert them.
- 14 You will meet fundamentalist religionists and atheistic scholars. Offer them due respect and move on. Sincere dialogue on spiritual matters will not be possible with them.
- 15 Do not be afraid to answer a question with 'I don't know'. Honesty is better than speculation.

PART FIVE

Responses

JOHN BORELLI

The value of a statement of purpose

A statement of mission is a valuable document. To accompany their many gestures of goodwill in the arena of interreligious relations, ISKCON members can now present to their partners in dialogue the document *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God*.

Those of us who meet ISKCON members in our work, ministry and everyday lives are grateful to Shaunaka Rishi Das, the ISKCON Interfaith Commission and the GBC Executive Committee for developing and issuing this first official statement concerning the Society's relationship with other people of faith in God.

Readers seeking clear statements of definition and purpose for ISKCON, and those members of the Society engaged in interreligious relations, dialogue and cooperation, will not be disappointed. The document offers reassurances of good intentions and respectful actions on the part of ISKCON members and presents goals similar to those of other religious groups for relating to all members of society.

ISKCON defines itself as a Vedantic, monotheistic Vaiṣṇava tradition and a missionary movement seeking to spread love of God. Thus, its membership must grapple with the uncertain relationship

between mission and dialogue — a problem that Christians, Muslims, and others must also face.

The text observes candidly: ‘Some may feel that for a missionary movement, a dialogue with those who may not share the same spiritual or religious views may seem a contradiction in purpose.’ That the two seem contradictory is only part of the issue. Some may feel that missionary activity overshadows any outreach to peoples of other faiths. Indeed, in certain regions of the world today including India, religious leaders confront Christians with the suggestion that any widespread desire for interreligious dialogue is nothing but a disguised programme for missionary activity.

ISKCON members may experience similar reactions. History, the mistakes of the past, and the untrue impressions people have of our religious traditions need to be addressed, and this statement is an important step for ISKCON. Many Christians will feel a kindred spirit with ISKCON’s explanation of how bearing witness to the love of God in the world implies openly and respectfully entering interreligious relationships.

The strength of ISKCON’s position on the relationship between mission and dialogue lies in the distinction between conversion as an individual experience, and spiritual development as the overall purpose for all activities. Thus, on the one hand, ISKCON can say that through dialogue people of different faiths can share principles and address areas of common concern, engage together in the pursuit of truth and encourage one another in their spiritual practices, as an outgrowth of their mission; and, on the other, state that its members will accept with open arms any sincere soul that declares a need for their spiritual shelter and guidance, conversion being part of a personal spiritual journey. Mission and dialogue appear to be distinct, yet related, aspects of a single overriding purpose, which ISKCON designates as spiritual development; however, these explanations do not bring an end to discussion.

In fact, how religious communities live these distinctions between conversion and spiritual development, and mission and dialogue, seems to lead to considerable comment and even disputation.

Our explanations may never seem completely satisfying, even to ourselves, as we stumble with heavily laden words such

as 'proselytise' and 'conversion'. We try to flee the negative connotations of expressions like 'religious institution' or 'sectarian affiliation', and attempt to set ourselves apart from failures and shortcomings, the exclusivist demands or narrow-mindedness of other people, times or places. The reason we never quite seem to state our purpose once and for all is because interreligious relations are actually the encounter of peoples of faith.

Religions do not dialogue; people dialogue. Religions are not the partners of joint actions; people constitute the relationship. Religious persons mediate to one another their practices and beliefs.

Every interreligious encounter takes on the character of the people listening and speaking in it, and so our principles, which ground our mission and witness in the world, can also be expressed and heard by one another differently in each particular relationship.

Thus, ISKCON's statement reiterates the importance of charity, non-violence, humility, compassion, respect, honesty, spiritual education, and personal integrity. In practising these virtues in dialogue and relationship with people of other faiths, the members of ISKCON are confident that they and their partners will strengthen in faith, that the integrity and vision of their institutions will benefit, and they will be spiritually enriched, leading to a profound realisation of mission.

In addition, they will continue to raise a challenge to those who espouse atheistic and materialistic principles and values. These are insightful observations that many others have concluded based on their experience of interreligious dialogue.

There are certain actions that according to the statement are inappropriate or unbecoming — actions that do not witness the love of God in the world, such as denigrating, misrepresenting or humiliating members of other faith communities.

The statement quotes Śrīla Prabhupāda, who urged his students not to criticise others' methods of religion. By following this advice, trust and friendship have an opportunity to take root so that the larger purposes of interreligious dialogue can be achieved — spiritual knowledge, moral thought and action, devotion, and service to God.

As the discussion becomes more and more profound, and as

the friendship deepens among the partners in dialogue, the opportunity for candid studies of each others' methods will present itself.

Christians make a distinction between ecumenism and inter-religious relations. Ecumenism is the widespread effort among Christians to heal the divisions that exist among them.

They believe that full and complete unity, expressed in numerous ways and ultimately for the sake of the message of the Gospel, is the will of Christ. The topic of diversity is addressed in particular ways by Christians in the context of their efforts to overcome disunity, restore unity, and appreciate the gifts of various Christian communities. Diversity and unity have different meanings in the context of interreligious relations. When ISKCON's statement says, 'Thus diversity is accepted, but not to the exclusion of unity', it is not suggesting the goal is to merge all religions into one.

That would be a misrepresentation of interreligious relations, which does not mean that one must compromise one's fundamental mental beliefs. Anyone who has engaged in interreligious dialogue knows that there is no compromise nor is there a desire to merge all religions into one.

The unity about which ISKCON's statement speaks and which ISKCON's members join others in promoting, is none other than that human unity that is the basis for confidence in relations. We see ourselves in one another and recognise the enormous potential of every person.

ISKCON is to be commended for this statement and its clarifications, guidelines, purposes, and other dimensions.

MARCUS BRAYBROOKE

God's love has no limit

FATHER MURRAY ROGERS, a pioneer of Christian-Hindu dialogue, told me when I visited his ashram in India more than thirty years ago, that the 'external' dialogue has to be matched by an 'internal' dialogue. In 'external' dialogue you learn about the faith of others and share your own, whereas in 'internal' dialogue you reflect on what you have learned in communion with the Lord.

How does the faith of the other compare with your own faith? Where is there disagreement? Where does it correct your own misunderstanding? This 'internal' dialogue is also a necessary task for a faith community. Do others have a genuine experience of the Divine? If so, can one claim for one's own faith a monopoly of the truth?

In recent years, there has been considerable discussion among Christians about the theological basis for dialogue — perhaps because many Christians want to move away from an exclusive position. There has been less discussion among Hindus — perhaps because many Hindus, as I was told when I first visited India more than thirty years ago, believe that all religions are the same, or at least paths up the same mountain. If that is the case, differences are only superficial and there is no urgency for dialogue, because questions of truth are not at stake. ISKCON, however, regards 'love of a Supreme personal God' to be the highest form of religious expression.

Whilst respectful of other positions, once you recognise one way as 'the highest form of religious expression', you have the possibility of disagreement and also of dialogue about the truth.

The ISKCON document, *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God* is, therefore, a valuable and important document.

It is first of all an internal reflection of the ISKCON community and, as it says, will provide members with 'clear principles, guidelines and perspectives for relationships with members of other faith communities'. It is also a significant document to members of other faiths who participate in dialogue with members of ISKCON.

There are many motivations for, and approaches to, dialogue and it is helpful when participants clarify their approach as this ISKCON document does. This is particularly the case as, initially at least, ISKCON was seen as a proselytising body keen to recruit new members.

Part Two of the document addresses the issue of 'Dialogue and Mission'. When A. C. Bhaktivedanta first registered ISKCON, he said its primary aim was 'to systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large'.

It is clear that he did not claim a monopoly on the truth. It is good, however, that this is now made clear in an official statement

as some of his first followers may not have had this breadth of vision. Indeed, it is a puzzle to any new believer why the amazing truth that he or she has discovered is not equally apparent to everyone else.

The early Christians could not understand why the good news of Jesus was not as self-evident to others as it was to them. They felt that they had been specially chosen to receive ‘the secret of the kingdom of God’ (Mark 4:11).

They felt that others, who rejected their message, were blind, wilfully disobedient, wicked or even ‘children of the devil’. The ISKCON statement refers to a passage in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* that says the neophyte — or new believer — usually expresses the sentiments of fanaticism and exclusivism.

The new truth is so amazing that everything else must be wrong. The mature devotee, however, recognises other devotees by the quality of their lives. He or she does not judge them by religious affiliation.

This liberating discovery can, however, be difficult if one’s fellow believers are still at an immature and exclusive stage of discipleship. Wesley Ariarajah, who did much to develop the dialogue programme of the World Council of Churches, tells in his new book *Not Without My Neighbour*, which arrived in the same post as the *ISKCON Communications Journal*, of his childhood in Sri Lanka, where he grew up with devout Hindu neighbours. ‘I was aware . . . that their prayer life was for them profoundly meaningful. Perhaps what impressed me most was that their prayer life appeared to bear fruits.’

Yet he had to listen to ‘hardnosed’ gospel-preachers who described Hindus as ‘idol worshippers’ bound for hell, while Christians were destined for heaven. ‘It was inconceivable to me; it was clearly unfair. I wouldn’t want to be in heaven where our neighbours were not.’ Meeting in friendship with sincere members of other faiths shatters an exclusive theology.

The ISKCON statement affirms a mature relationship to people of other faiths. It is respectful of those who do not share belief in a supreme personal God, and welcoming to those who do. It recognises the need for people of faith to work together for a better world.

The *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* also recognises a third stage. ‘The advanced devotee sees all living beings as eternal servants of Kṛṣṇa

and treats them as such. He or she will have no interest in sectarian designations of race, caste, sex, or religion.'

This was the awareness of Francis Young's husband, who founded the World Congress of Faiths, and of many of its leading members. I doubt, however, whether it can be the position of a faith community, which, insofar as it is organised, seeks to develop its own institutional life.

This is why, perhaps, although some great religious leaders recognise this advanced stage, religions as such — and indeed many interfaith organisations — operate at the second stage. That is a great advance on the immaturity that has so often characterised relationships between religions.

Most of us need a faith community by which we are nourished and to which we contribute. Yet we also need to be disturbed by the advanced devotees who remind us that God is free to enter into loving exchanges with whomsoever He wishes.

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GAVIN D'GOSTA

I AM HONOURED at being invited to respond to this important landmark document. As a Roman Catholic concerned with interreligious relations, I welcome and admire this statement. It is simple, lucid, moving, and theologically convincing and seems to make explicit much that I have already experienced and respected in members of ISKCON.

Historically, the statement is important for two particular reasons. 'Hinduism' is such a broad label encompassing a very complex phenomenon, so that to have a statement that has been institutionally agreed as representing one segment of this vast religious tradition is quite a triumph. It can only be welcomed in helping to clarify some of the issues involved in understanding Hinduism and

interreligious dialogue. Second, it is also important in indicating the sociological significance of Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava Hinduism, in the West and internationally. Shaunaka Rishi Das says, in his introduction to the statement, that it reflects a 'more global responsibility', and this is to be welcomed, for the relation between religions is vital to the future of our planet.

What I found particularly commendable about the statement is the clear theological underpinning of the views advanced. They come in part 3, but are the rationale for parts 1 and 2, and lead very naturally to part 4. Part 3, then, is the most important section by which to judge the coherence and integrity of the rest of the document. It provides a powerful rationale for the distinction between 'pure love of God, and what is commonly understood as religion' (p. 11).

This distinction thereby allows for a fundamental unity of persons in their devotion to a personal deity, be they Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or Muslim.

This authentic devotion is recognised 'by the presence of any of the nine devotional processes outlined by the Vaiṣṇava authority, Prahāda Mahārāja' (p. 13). In effect, the document develops the ancient tradition to apply it to modern problems and questions. The two most recommended processes of the nine are hearing spiritual sound and chanting the name of God, but we are not told of the other seven in this document.

This is a failing, for it does not provide a rationale for the affirmation given to those from non-theistic traditions and nonreligious traditions stated in the opening paragraph. (part 1, (1), p. 3) This also underscores the slight ambiguity present in the document: it says it deals with those who have faith in a personal divinity (p. 3), and yet it then continuously deals with these further two categories (nontheistic religions and humanism).

I think it is important to address non-theistic and non-religious movements, but then one has to do this more carefully in the light of the Vaiṣṇava tradition and clarify the conceptual differences between theistic traditions explicitly involved in devotion to God (which is the only linking point provided in part 3) and those not involved in devotion to a personal deity at all — even if they are involved in good works and seek to follow the truth as they see it.

For example, nowhere in part 3 do we find a justification of why: 'Other communities and organisations advocating humanitarian, ethical, and moral standards are also valued as being beneficial to society' (p. 3). From a Vaiṣṇava point of view, devotional relationship to God and cultivation of God consciousness is the proper prerequisite to ethics and right action. However, the document seems to overturn this element in the tradition, and this requires more careful justification than is given.

The spirit of respect, dignity, and openness pervades this document, both in style and content. It clearly indicates that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Hinduism takes other (theistic) religions seriously and does not dismiss them. It acknowledges that it has much to learn from them, and, if they are willing to listen, much to offer. It indicates that this willingness to learn does not in the least mitigate against the missionary nature of Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava Hinduism.

This makes the document credible and indicates its clear roots and commitment as well as its openness. In Part 2, however, the mission seems to be exclusively directed towards 'atheistic and materialistic' traditions (p. 6) for they, apparently, are the most challenged by Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava Hinduism. While this may be true, it seems to me that a more historical orientation to the question might show that many (theistic) religions have as bad, or worse, records than atheistic and materialist traditions.

The point is that if Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava Hinduism's mission is to challenge the godlessness of society, it should not assume a priori that godlessness is to be found outside of religions. What is required is a more differentiated analysis of 'religions'. As an aside, I should say that this is also a weakness in the major Roman Catholic document on relations between religions (1965: *Nostra Aetate*).

I want to end with a question. Part 4 deals with principles and guidelines. These are very attractive, realistic, and helpful. There is one point in both the principles and guidelines that does not make sense to me in the light of Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava theology. 'Be prepared to listen to others, to understand their language, assumptions, culture, and values. Therefore, do not judge others' practice by our ideals' (p. 16, principle 7). 'Allow members of other faiths to define themselves in their own language and own culture without

28 imposing definitions upon them, thus avoiding comparing their practice with our ideals.' (p. 17, guideline 4).

It is absolutely right to try and understand the 'others' in their own terms, but it makes no sense to then suspend a critical judgment especially if one is a Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava Hindu (at least in my own reading!).

In Part 3, it makes it clear that there are nine devotional processes that measure the presence of true devotion, and this is therefore making judgements about others on one's own criteria.

Furthermore, there are huge judgments made upon others based on Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava principles such as: the poverty of materialism and atheism; and that 'no one religion holds a monopoly on the truth' (p. 3)—presumably even if they think they do.

Why make these latter claims and then in the last part of the document say that such claims should not be made? It is important to be respectful and attentive to others, but not at the cost of being attentive to the truth.

These questions are raised out of respect and are, I hope, intra-systematic questions. That is, they arise from the internal logic of the document and are not posed from a specifically Roman Catholic point of view. From a Roman Catholic point of view, I think the two main difficulties with the document are first, the relativization of 'religion' and the historical process of 'true devotion' that seems to transcend 'religion'.

In this respect, the questions have some analogy with the debate between liberal Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Second, there is a commendation of love and devotion without specific reference to the meaning of suffering and redeeming love, as found in the cross of Christ.

This would require a more differentiated accounting of the meaning of 'love' and 'devotion'. In many respects both 'difficulties' are matters that call for more serious dialogue between Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava Hinduism and Christians — which is precisely what the document demands and, most importantly, facilitates. For this, Christians should be most grateful.

FOR SOME YEARS NOW, having been in contact with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), particularly with its Berlin chapter, it has been of interest to me to observe and experience a process of opening to honest communication.

ISKCON, in sharp contrast to some other movements, has been ready to dig into its own past and identify dark points, expose them to the greater public and bear the consequences in legal and personal regards.

On top of that, the departure of Harikeśa Swami in 1998 threw ISKCON into unprecedented dynamics close to the danger of a major split. This certainly must have been a painful process.

ISKCON has advanced into a new stage of opening itself up with this paper by Shaunaka Rishi Das. The paper clarifies ISKCON's relation to people of faith in God, including a concise 'Statement on Relating with People of Faith in God', and supplies theological arguments, mostly from the writings of Śrīla Prabhupāda. My comments shall focus on a couple of points.

When ISKCON expresses that other approaches to God, other ways of faith, need to be recognised and respected as bearing spiritual worth, ongoing encounters are encouraged. This is emphasised in Part One of the Statement regarding a broad range of potential partners in dialogue, not necessarily religious movements. When, in Part Three, it is stated that no one religion holds a monopoly on the truth, this is an insight that could well be written into the diary of some Christians. Anyway, we will have to see the concrete encounters and have verified statements in daily life!

The respect towards people of other faiths (mentioned in Part Four) also includes the recognition that other faiths are such and not just shades of Kṛṣṇa consciousness, as was suggested by the Rettershof talks (Christ, Kriśhto, Kṛṣṇa).

Identifications of Christ with Kṛṣṇa, or other forms of embracement, will not be accepted by (most) Christian counterparts (certainly not by the author of this article), and will have to give way to realistic dialogues and exchanges on various theological issues, which will result in fruitful revelations of differences and commonalities. Exchanges like these are possible, as the Wiesbaden

conference of January 1994 has shown. The decisive differences of the various religious traditions need to be named and affirmed.

I see the preparedness to this attitude in the following (from the 'Guidelines for Approaching Members of Other Faiths'): 'Give members of other faiths the opportunity to freely express their sincerely held beliefs and convictions.'

'Allow members of other faiths to define themselves in their own language and own culture without imposing definitions upon them, thus avoiding comparing their practice with our ideals.' This, in my understanding, expresses a clear progress from former positions. Moreover, there is a need to clarify ISKCON's position within Vedic and Hindu culture. The paper stresses the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* tradition, a monotheistic one, and will have to update its arguments towards the Advaita Vedanta.

It needs to clarify whether the previous polemic by Śrīla Prabhupāda regarding Vedanta monism is still valid or not. In case there is still a critical line, the first partner for 'interreligious dialogue' might be a Vedantic theologian. What kind of God do we encounter in ISKCON? Isn't Kṛṣṇa consciousness very close to Advaitic *ātman-brahman* ideas? These are questions that I will be looking for in future encounters offered by Shaunaka Rishi Das.

ISKCON stresses in its 'Seven Purposes' as well as in the Statement 'the aim to cooperate to the benefit of society at large'. This aim can only be welcomed.

Yet there are quite a few steps to be taken towards that purpose. The compatibility of social visions needs to be clarified, the degree to which ISKCON is prepared to leave behind Indian social concepts such as *varṇāśrama* ideas of a stratified society will have to be the subject of dialogue.

Christian ethics basically accept the equal rights of all human beings and the right to self-determination that are laid down in the German constitution. Dialogue with ISKCON in the context of a Western society will ask for an affirmation of these values (as a matter of fact, the Indian constitution offers basically the same ethical standards as Western nations do!).

In the encounter, it will always be a moving element to question each other as to how far transparency, democratic structures, the individual freedom of every single devotee, the right to come

and leave again, etc., are respected. This is a vice versa demand, a challenge to the Christian partner as well. It is part of every religious identity to affirm its respective faith and creed, often to the extent of claiming absoluteness (not to be confused with monopoly).

In encounters we will be challenged to recognize our respective absoluteness claims. Some may consider this a contradiction in itself. It is not. It is the way, perhaps the only reasonable way, religious people meet. In Shaunaka Rishi's paper I see a step towards acceptance of this way.

The encounter shall be open for many clarifications. Still there are sceptical voices claiming that ISKCON, like the famous Janus, has two faces — the smiling face in dialogues with their external partners, and the strange, repressive face towards its own members — preaching wine to the dialoguing world and water to their devotees.

Those who support a constructive encounter with ISKCON — I am one of them — are longing for an honest dialogue and honest partners. The paper in question gives me hope that this is what ISKCON wants too.

MICHAEL IPGRAVE

I HAVE TO CONFESS that my first reaction on reading this document was a rather unworthy one: a feeling of envy. There is, as far as I am aware, no generally agreed statement in the Christian tradition corresponding to this document, but it would be enormously helpful if there were, for two reasons.

Firstly, *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God* surely does fulfil the objective, described by Shaunaka Rishi Das, of 'providing clear principles, guidelines and perspectives for relationships with members of other faiths'. It does so as an authorised text, setting out a practically oriented path for devotees to follow in their interfaith relations.

Lying behind the text there is clearly the accumulated wisdom gained through a broad process of consultation, a wisdom that will continue to grow as ISKCON members put into practice the recommendations here, and further reflect on the patterns of insight that emerge from their encounters.

In other words, while this is an official statement of the Society, it also seems to me that it has the potential to function very much as a living text, part of a continuing process in which experience and reflection are intertwined.

This suggests to me a concern with orthopraxis — a term much used in modern Christian theology — ‘right action’ in the way we express our faith.

A second reason for valuing this document so highly is that it also grounds this orthopraxis in a serious orthodoxy, ‘right belief’ about the way in which God may be apprehended in the Vaiṣṇava tradition. Over the last few decades, there has been a serious Christian effort to find an adequate theological grounding for our practice of dialogue, yet Christian diversity and the complexities of our history are such that there is no agreed text to which we could point.

In fact, it is interesting to observe that the most influential of all Christian documents in this regard is now more than 30 years old: The Second Vatican Council’s declaration *Nostra Aetate*, calling for Christian ‘discussion and collaboration with members of other religions’ was issued in 1965.

Given then that this seems a valuable document for ISKCON to have produced from a Vaiṣṇava perspective, how as a Christian do I respond to what I read here? Certainly, there is much in *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God* that I can recognise as convergent with my own Christian understanding of religious plurality, and with the guidelines to which, as a Christian, I would aspire to in interfaith meeting and dialogue.

Of course, there is always a danger here of making an easy but misleading assumption: namely, that words taken from the Vaiṣṇava tradition are being used in the same way that they would be in a Christian discourse.

We need to be aware, for example, that all of us fill out the meaning of such expressions as ‘mission’, ‘spirituality’, ‘worship’ with references taken from our own religious paths.

Even more centrally important terms like ‘personal God’ or ‘religious faith’ may be interpreted by Christians and Vaiṣṇavas in subtly different ways. Nevertheless, with these cautions in mind, I am convinced from reading this Vaiṣṇava statement that its

theological vocabulary has enough resonance with ours to enable a serious shared conversation. 33

I want to briefly trace, through the document's four parts, some common concerns, as well as some outstanding questions.

Part One

The actual statement on 'Relating with People of Faith in God', underlines the centrality for ISKCON of 'love of a Supreme personal God', and on the basis of this extends a generous recognition and respect for 'other theistic traditions' where that love is to be found. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement of other religious paths and of the contributions of all people of good will. I was interested here to think further about the finely crafted language in which the statement describes three successive levels of response: 'recognising and respecting' (theistic ways), 'respecting the spiritual worth' (of nontheistic religious paths) and 'valuing as beneficial to society' (humanitarian initiatives).

Christianity is one of the faith traditions where God is recognised and adored as personal, though the precise understanding of personality in relation to a Trinitarian account of God has always been a matter of some debate. Christian spirituality, which emphasises the love of God, therefore, would seem to fall into the 'recognising and respecting' group.

In this sense, we could say that Christians are closer to Vaiṣṇavas than to followers of non-theistic paths. At the same time, most Christians would also want to affirm respect for Buddhists, non-theistic Hindus, and other religiously committed people who do not share a theistic perspective.

What we seem to be facing here is the difficult question of how to emphasise our closeness to some patterns of spirituality without devaluing others. This challenge also faced the Fathers of the Vatican Council; *Nostra Aetate* addressed this through implying a series of concentric circles — from the outside in: (1) the community of all humanity, with a certain religious sense; (2) 'the religions which are found in more advanced civilisations' (Hinduism and Buddhism are singled out by name); (3) Islam; (4) Judaism.

Something like this concentric schema is quite common among Christians today; yet I have doubts about its applicability. I think more in terms of a Venn diagram, where a series of circles have different areas of overlap.

Christianity and Buddhism, for example, seem doctrinally to be as far apart as is imaginable; yet the inter-monastic encounter of Christian and Buddhist religions is one of the liveliest areas of interfaith dialogue today.

Whatever approach we adopt, it is surely significant that the underlying issues for Christians and Vaiṣṇavas are so similar. Equally, the attitudes of respect, understanding, humility, and cooperation, which the statement commends, are those that Christians today would want to endorse.

It has been no easy position for the churches to reach this position. In the past, the zeal of many for the truth of the Christian message easily slid, by means of the dangerous doctrine that 'error has no rights', into a rigorous intolerance of religious difference. We have had to learn, with difficulty, to respect the integrity of other faith traditions and to safeguard the principle of religious freedom for all. Still today, Vaiṣṇava and Christian believers, in different ways and in different countries, have stories to tell of freedoms denied.

From those experiences, perhaps we can together affirm wholeheartedly the value of that freedom which is implicitly commended in this statement. But our relating with faithful people of other ways also needs to join up in some way with the core affirmations and activities of our own faith.

In this connection I was very interested to read the next two parts of the text, dealing with dialogue in the contexts of mission and of theology.

Part Two

'ISKCON in Dialogue and Mission', will certainly resonate for any Christian who has been involved in the many discussions around the same subject within the churches.

Vaiṣṇavas and Christians share a deep-seated instinct for mission, which is both spiritually required by the very core visions of

our respective faiths and also historically written into the development of our respective communities.

The contents of those visions are quite distinct, and so are the patterns of our missionary development, yet both traditions face the same challenge of relating a missionary imperative with a commitment to dialogue. The churches have not come to any kind of consensus on how to meet this challenge. This situation is not helped by the characteristic Christian habit of different people using the same words to mean different things, and different words to mean the same thing.

‘Evangelism’, ‘evangelisation’, ‘mission’, ‘witness’, ‘conversion’, ‘proselytisation’, and so on, are all important terms in the debate, but Christians find it extraordinarily difficult to agree even on their respective meanings, let alone on how they should be correlated.

I personally do not think that this is entirely a matter of regret; confusion and fluidity are often signs of life, and certainly the mission-dialogue debate is very lively within the Christian community at present.

It has been suggested that one sharp way of posing the underlying theological issue for Christians is to ask us the question: ‘Do you think that the existence of a continuing diversity of religions is according to the will of God?’ As I read this second part of ISKCON’s text, it implies to me that Vaiṣṇavas would probably want to answer that question in the affirmative. I notice, for example, the quotation from Śrīla Prabhupāda’s 1969 lecture:

Everyone should follow the particular traditions or *sampradāya*, the regulative principles of your own religion. This is required as much as many political parties.

This is certainly a position that would closely describe the attitude that many Christians would take in an ecumenical context with respect to the existence of different Christian denominations. The number prepared to adopt a similarly pluralist approach in a multi-faith context is smaller.

However, even those in the churches who do not share this statement’s attitude to other faiths will have to take seriously another dimension which is present here: the sense of a shared

36 mission to be jointly owned by the faith communities in addressing society.

In the ISKCON tradition, as represented in this text by references to Śrīla Prabhupāda and to Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, this mission is seen in quite confrontational terms as facing the ‘enemy’ of atheism, of growing influence in a ‘Godless civilisation’.

In relating specifically to western culture, the churches of Europe and North America have generally taken a more nuanced approach, recognising not only the increasingly secularised character of the official structures of society, but also the persistence of attitudes and aspirations which owe much of their inspiration to Christian values in the broad sense of that term. Yet the fundamental religious motivation of ‘establishing a God-conscious ethos in our modern world’ seems to me close to the Christian project of working towards the realisation of the ‘Kingdom of God’. Insofar as other traditions share similar motivations, the idea of a ‘shared mission’ among our faiths is surely one that deserves further exploration, in dialogue with wider society.

Part Three

This part provides a theological basis for dialogue in two related ways: through pointing to the fundamental categories by which Vaiṣṇava theology interprets the reality of religion (or, more properly, of *sanātana-dharma*, which is explicitly distinguished from ‘any sectarian process of religion’); and through outlining the progressive stages in the development of Vaiṣṇava spirituality which enable dialogical participation on the part of the devotee. It is more difficult to draw obvious parallels with Christian thought here, precisely because the ISKCON text so successfully provides this double anchorage of interfaith involvement within the distinctive grounding of the Vaiṣṇava vision of ultimate reality. This reality is expressed in terms rather different from those of Christian theology and spirituality. Even so, as I read these words quoted from Śrīla Prabhupāda’s commentary on Rūpa Gosvāmī’s *Upadeśāmṛta*:

In all parts of the world, however downtrodden human society may be, there is some system of religion . . . When a religious system develops and turns into love of God, it is successful. . . .

I found myself calling to mind the words ascribed to St Paul when he addressed the Athenians on the hill of Areopagus:

God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live to all the nations, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17.26–27)

More than tracing parallels in thought between our two faiths, though, the challenge which this part of the ISKCON text presents to us as Christians is to formulate a way of grounding our interfaith involvement firmly in the central affirmations which our Christian faith wants to make about God.

If we do not achieve that, there is the real, ever-present danger of a dissociation between, on one hand, the language we use in our confessional gathering, sacramental worship, and intimate prayer, and, on the other, the language we use in our encounter, dialogue, and cooperation with people from other faith traditions. So I read *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God* as an exemplar of the integration of interfaith involvement with a committed exploration of the central affirmations of one's own faith.

What might be the starting-point for Christians seeking to find, in their own core-faith resources, the grounds for a generous and confident engagement with religious plurality?

It is interesting to observe that much of the energy in Christian theology today springs from a rediscovery of the centrality in doctrine and spirituality of the idea of God as a Trinity — Father, Son, and Spirit, three personal realities eternally distinguished but also united in a web of mutual love and service. Like Vaiṣṇava accounts of *sanātana-dharma* as 'Kṛṣṇa consciousness or pure love of God'; a Trinitarian approach involves an essentially relational understanding of ultimate reality; as such, it could be well suited to making sense both of multi-faith plurality and of interfaith encounter.

The recent report of the Church of England's Doctrine Commission, *The Mystery of Salvation* (1995), certainly thought so. In words that map out a major programme for Christian theologians, it affirmed that: The distinctive understanding of God as Trinity should be at the centre of any interfaith reflection.

Part Four

This part of the ISKCON document offers its readers practical 'Principles and Guidelines for Approaching People with Faith in God'. Although these are drawn up specifically with Vaiṣṇava devotees in mind, there is much in both 'principles' and 'guidelines' which would be equally useful for Christians or people of any other faith — this section constitutes in effect a code of etiquette for personal behaviour in interfaith relations.

Particularly important is the emphasis that 'approaching people with faith in God' is first and foremost a venture in interpersonal relationships, and therefore basic attitudes of honesty, understanding, trust, humility, and common sense are indispensable.

The penultimate guideline advises devotees as follows:

You will meet fundamentalist religionists and atheistic scholars.
Offer them due respect and move on. Sincere dialogue on spiritual matters will not be possible with them.

The situation envisaged here is of course that of interfaith encounter. However, the reality, in the Christian case at least, is that 'fundamentalist religionists' are to be met within our own communities also. I cannot say whether this is a pattern of behaviour to be encountered within ISKCON also, but I suspect that most religious groups number among their adherents those who are suspicious, hesitant, or downright hostile towards any idea of sharing openly with people from another tradition.

It may not in fact be very helpful to bracket such people under the general category of 'fundamentalists'. That term originated in a Christian movement reaffirming what were seen to be 'fundamentals' of the faith, felt to be threatened by a sceptical attitude; but

people in any faith tradition will rightly object to any suggestion that they should take lightly matters that they regard as being of fundamental importance to their beliefs. The significant problem, in any case, is not how liberal or how conservative people are in their theology, but how open or how closed they are in their attitudes to others.

To encourage openness in interfaith relations, our communities must themselves be models of dialogue in their intrafaith structuring.

That is to say, we need to be engaged as Christians, not only with Vaiṣṇavas, but also with our fellow Christians, especially those who find the idea of another faith threatening or offensive.

In fact, having in mind the possibilities of a 'shared mission' outlined in Part Two, it is possible to say that Christians (or Vaiṣṇavas, or people of any faith) are involved in three simultaneous dialogical processes, each of which can be identified by a preposition: We are in primary dialogue with people of other faith traditions; supporting that dialogue within our own faith community is a dialogue about other faiths; growing from the primary dialogue is a dialogue alongside other faith communities addressed to wider society.

ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God is undoubtedly a very useful resource for the primary dialogue of Vaiṣṇavas with Christians (and people of other faiths). It would be interesting to know to what extent its reception within ISKCON generates an intra-Vaiṣṇava dialogue about approaches to other faith communities.

The document encourages us to take more seriously the possibilities of a shared approach to wider society as Vaiṣṇavas and Christians alongside people of other faith traditions.

FELIX A. MACHADO

VEN. SHAUNAKA RISHI DAS, Director of the Oxford Centre for Vaiṣṇava and Hindu Studies, has published a document, *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God*, inviting people from various religious traditions to respond to it.

Representing the Catholic Tradition and committed to promoting respectful and friendly relations with people of different faiths,

40 I wish to share how the Catholic Church understands its dialogue with other religious traditions.

I would like to state here that although the Catholic Church considers its relations with various Hindu religious traditions an important aspect of her mission it has, so far, not entered into any direct, formal dialogue with ISKCON. In recent years, several ISKCON members have made sporadic visits to the PCID (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) and the staff have always received them in a friendly spirit. The result of these informal but friendly meetings has been positive. I am struck by the title of the document, namely, *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God*.

The first point in Part 1 of the document clearly states that ISKCON considers love of a supreme personal God to be the highest form of religious expression, and recognises and respects this expression in other theistic traditions:

In ISKCON we consider love of a Supreme personal God to be the highest form of religious expression, and we recognise and respect this expression in other theistic traditions.

We respect the spiritual worth of paths of genuine self-realisation and search for the Absolute Truth in which the concept of a personal Deity is not explicit.

Other communities and organisations advocating humanitarian, ethical and moral standards are also valued as being beneficial to society. (Part 1, 1)

Christianity is essentially a religion founded on faith in God. The divine mystery, fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, is central to the Christian faith.

The Church, which is also part of that divine revelation, continues, like a sacrament, to communicate this revelation in history. Consequently, because of their search for the divine mystery, religious traditions, particularly those that explicitly acknowledge his existence, hold a special place in the Church's relations. In this context I would like to quote St. Paul's dialogue with a group of people belonging to another religious tradition that acknowledged the existence of God. Paul said:

Men of Athens, I have seen for myself how extremely scrupulous you are in all religious matters, because, as I strolled round looking at your sacred monuments, I noticed among other things an altar inscribed: To An Unknown God. In fact, the unknown God you revere is the one I proclaim to you.

Since the God who made the world and everything in it is Himself Lord of heaven and earth, He does not make His home in shrines made by human hands. Nor is He in need of anything, that He should be served by human hands; on the contrary, it is He who gives everything — including life and breath — to everyone. From one single principle He not only created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire earth, but He decreed the times and limits of their habitation. He did this so that they might seek the deity and, by feeling their way towards Him, succeed in finding Him.

Indeed, He is not far from any of us, since it is in Him that we live and move and exist. As some of your own writers have said: We are all His children.

Since we are the children of God, we have no excuse for thinking that the deity looks like anything in gold, silver, or stone that has been carved and designed by man. (*Acts of the Apostles, 17:23–9, The New Jerusalem Bible*)

Through its document, *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church launched an official call ‘in our times’ to all its faithful to enter into positive relations with people of different religions.

It was promulgated in Rome in 1962–5, during the Second Vatican Council, a decisive and major event in the life of the Church, as an official teaching concerning relations with other religions. *Nostra Aetate* makes the search for and belief in the existence of God by people of different religious traditions as the principal motive for the Church’s dialogue with them:

Throughout history even to the present day there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life.

At times there is present even a recognition of a supreme being, or still more of a Father. Such an awareness and such a recognition instil the lives of these peoples with a profound religious sense.

Religions bound up with cultural advancement have struggled to reply to these same questions with more refined concepts and in more highly developed language.

Thus in Hinduism men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an unspent fruitfulness of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek release from the anguish of our condition, through ascetical practices or deep meditation or a loving, trusting flight toward God. (*Nostra Aetate*, 2)

However, I wish to make it clear that

. . . belief in (God) is the easiest and, at the same time, the most difficult starting point in Hindu-Christian dialogue. It is the easiest starting point because Hinduism is saturated with a rich and profound reflection on the existence, nature and the presence of God; Hinduism speaks of the practice to reach God in innumerable ways. But the question of God is also the most difficult starting point for dialogue with Hinduism because of its ambivalent, syncretistic and absorbing nature. (F. Machado, *Pro Dialogo*, 93, 1996/3)

The second point in Part 1 of the ISKCON document speaks about a basic principle which is important in the dynamics of inter-religious dialogue; namely, a certain openness towards the dialogue partner while at the same time the obligation to uncompromisingly hold on to one's own essential religious identity and respect that of the other:

ISKCON views dialogue between its members and people of other faiths as an opportunity to listen to others, to develop mutual understanding and mutual trust, and to share our commitment and faith with others, while respecting their commitment to their own faith. (Part 1, 2)

Part 2

This part of the ISKCON document speaks about this when it states that:

... diversity is accepted, but not to the exclusion of unity. Religions do not have to become homogenous or merge together, but they can develop respectful and practical relationships with one another.

The same document further states:

... we need to encourage one another to be faithful to the principles of our own traditions.

In its commitment to and practice of interreligious dialogue, the Church has considered, on the one hand, adherence to one's own religious identity and, on the other hand, a trustful openness to other religious traditions, as two important elements.

To be rooted in one's own faith means, first of all, an uncompromising obedience to God as believed in faithfulness to one's own religious tradition. It means to be familiar with the essential precepts, doctrines, teachings, duties, etc. of one's own religious tradition. It also means to be committed to the duties and responsibilities that are consequences of belonging to a particular religious tradition.

In short, it means to enter into dialogue with the integrity of his or her own faith.

Dialogue begins, grows authentically and bears fruits, despite difficulties, when it stands on the solid foundation of mutual trust between partners. If fear of the other is the enemy of dialogue then lack of trust should be said to be at the root of fear. Trust inspires and cultivates eagerness to know the other, not superficially but in depth; trust helps overcome fear of hurting the other.

This obligation, with a double dimension concerning interreligious dialogue, is beautifully expressed in one of the documents from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, which states:

That they may be able to give this witness to Christ fruitfully, (Christians) ought to be joined to the people of their time by esteem and love, and acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of people among whom they live. . . . They ought to know well the religious and cultural traditions of others, happy to discover and ready to respect the seeds of the Word which are hidden in them.

... As Christ himself ... so also His disciples should know the people among whom they live and should establish contact with them, to learn by patient and sincere dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth. At the same time, let them try to illuminate these treasures with their Saviour. (*The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions*, Vatican, 1984, n. 27)

The third point of Part 1 of the ISKCON document merits careful response on the part of the Catholic Church:

ISKCON recognises that no one religion holds a monopoly on the truth, the revelation of God or our relationship with God. (Part 1, 3)

The Catholic Church firmly believes that, created in the 'image of God', human beings have the possibility of knowing God. Only in God will they find the truth and happiness they never stop searching for.

The Catholic Church further holds that in many ways, throughout history down to the present day, human beings have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behaviour: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth.

However, the Catholic Church's self-understanding is also formed by her unshakeable faith that there is another order of knowing God, which one cannot possibly arrive at by one's own powers: the order of divine revelation. Through an utterly free decision, God has fully revealed Himself and given Himself to mankind by sending us His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and by giving the Holy Spirit.

However, the Church considers dialogue with other religions indispensable because the Catholic Church acknowledges that the fullness of truth received in Jesus Christ does not give individual Christians the guarantee that they have grasped the truth fully. The Church admonishes the Catholic faithful to remain open to truth:

In the last analysis truth is not a thing we possess, but a person by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed. This is an unending

process. While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions. . . . Through dialogue they (must allow) the understanding of their own faith to be purified. ('Dialogue and Proclamation, Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ', *P.C.I.D. Bulletin*, 77, 1991)

Christian understanding of the truth, which is defined as the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, must not become an occasion for Christians to be self-complacent, righteous and judgemental of others. The official teaching of the Catholic Church states:

Truth, however, is to be sought in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature.

The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue. In the course of these, men explain to one another the truth they have discovered or claim to have discovered in order to help one another in their search for the truth. Moreover, as truth is discovered, it is by personal assent that men are to adhere to it. (The Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 4)

The Catholic Church proposes different forms of dialogue so that all may have the possibility of promoting it according to his or her ability. Among these forms, dialogue of collaboration is mentioned. This corresponds to the fourth point of Part 1 of the ISKCON document:

ISKCON's members are encouraged to be respectful to people of faith from other traditions and to see the need for people of different faiths to work together for the benefit of society as a whole and for the glorification of God. (Part 1, 4)

Catholics are encouraged to work with people of different religious traditions to confront together the problems of the world and for goals of a humanitarian, social, economic, or political nature which are directed towards the liberation and advancement of mankind.

The most outstanding and concrete example of this form of dialogue is found in the coming together of different religious leaders in Assisi in 1986, at the invitation of Pope John Paul II, to pray for peace in the world. The clarion call in the 1950s of the founder of ISKCON to the leaders of various religions, in the midst of the growing indifference to the religious nature of the human person, not to sit idly and silently watch the rapid growth of a Godless civilisation, merits our serious consideration.

Notwithstanding the points of convergence between different religions, it must also be said that religions also essentially differ in their fundamental beliefs, doctrines, and manner of living. Consequently, there are different ways of understanding the divine mystery, distinct ways of approaching it, characteristic ways of conceiving and expressing beliefs, definite ways of responding to moral and ethical questions, etc.

These questions need to be reflected upon by experts and specialists. Yet, in the pluralistic world of today, all believers face the same existential problems.

Thus dialogue of collaboration becomes a necessity. The Catholic Church encourages its faithful throughout the world to seek collaboration among various religions to address such problems as war, violence, moral decline, crime, intoxication, poverty and hunger, social instability, and environmental degradation.

In the fifth point in Part 4 of the document, ISKCON proposes that each individual develop his or her relationship with the Supreme Lord:

ISKCON affirms the responsibility of each individual to develop his or her relationship with the Supreme Lord. (Part 4, 5)

According to the Christian tradition, God reveals Himself as the Father of all in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. As the third person of the Blessed Trinity, the mystery of divine love, the Holy Spirit, inspires and enables each individual to relate to God the Father by associating in a mysterious way through the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Thus, every individual has the possibility of accepting this relationship with God, the Supreme Lord. What is to be emphasised

here is the characteristic of the Christian faith, namely, it is not so much the initiative of the human person to develop a personal relationship with the Supreme Lord as simply to go on accepting, through an act of faith, the initiative of God in the course of his or her life.

Of course, far from being inert, uninvolved, and passive, every person is called to responsibly inculcate this relationship through God's grace, which is constant and unfailing.

But there is another dimension to this relationship, namely that love of God cannot be separated from the love of one's neighbour. According to the Christian tradition they go together inseparably like two wings of a bird.

One grows simultaneously in one's relationship with God and one's neighbour. In other words, the whole of religious experience cannot be reduced to just a personal relationship between an individual and the Supreme Lord. One cannot claim to love God while hating his brother or sister.

This is why *caritas* or *agape* (unselfish love) has been the constitutive dimension of the Christian faith. Commitment to bring, not just better life, but fullness of life, to every person, particularly the poor and the downtrodden, is an intrinsic part of the *sādhana* for growing into a personal relationship with the Supreme Lord.

We find the essence of this Christian teaching in the first letter of St. John. He says:

My dear friends, let us love one another, since love is from God and everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever fails to love does not know God, because God is love.

This is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent His only Son into the world that we might have life through Him. Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved and sent His Son to expiate our sins. . . . Let us love, then, because He first loved us. (*The First Letter of John*, 4:7–10, 19)

For Christians, dialogue means all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths. Enterprise of dialogue must be carried out in obedience to truth and respect for freedom.

Through their dialogue with other religious traditions and their adherents, Christians wish to understand themselves better, to get to know others justly and fairly, to dispel fears and misunderstandings, to be influenced, inspired, and enriched mutually with their partners in dialogue and to accept the new self-understanding which may emerge as a consequence of dialogue. For Christians, dialogue is a sacred act because 'by dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God.' (Pope John Paul II, Madras, 1986) Respect, tolerance, mutual understanding, good behaviour, etc., form part of one's spirituality of dialogue.

The guidelines for approaching members of other faiths in the ISKCON document are a fine summary of what the Catholic tradition has been proposing and communicating through the official teaching of the Church (through the Pope and the Bishops) in our times.

I wish to conclude by presenting some challenges that are generally faced by Christians in their dialogue with Hindus.

The Catholic Church has high esteem for Hinduism, the family of religions in which a reflection of that truth which enlightens all men is found. All the traditions of Hinduism (*sampradāyas*) manifest the quest of the human person for the Absolute Truth.

This quest instils the lives of Hindus with a profound religious sense.

This is what Pope John Paul II publicly declared to the Hindus:

I hold in esteem your concern for inner peace and for the peace of the world, based not on purely mechanistic or materialistic political considerations but on self-purification, unselfish love and sympathy for all. (Address at Los Angeles, 16 September 1987)

Christians need to know this complex tradition well. Hinduism as such has no identity. The most appropriate approach to this tradition is to know the particular *sampradāya*, such as Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava — a monotheistic tradition within Hinduism. Given the well-organised structure of the Catholic Church, its members wish to find a credible, suitable, and representative dialogue partner in Hinduism. There are devout and practising individual Hindus who are not necessarily part of any institution, organisation, or

community. It is important to enter into dialogue with these rather than wait for a representative of an institution or an organisation or a community. Hindus in dialogue with Christians must also realise that the mystery of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, and the living community of the Church are distinct but inseparable.

Of course, the Church is not merely the sum total of all Christians, neither is it a purely human institution. As a transcendental mystery, the Church is the living 'Body of Christ' (*The First Letter of Paul to the Church at Corinth*, 12:12–30). Thus every individual Christian is at the same time his or her entire community. In other words, every individual's essential identity is the Church.

According to the particular nature of Hinduism, Jesus Christ is accepted, loved and revered by most Hindus. This fact makes it easy for a Christian to enter into dialogue with Hindus. However, dialogue also becomes difficult and appears to have reached a dead end for Christians when Jesus Christ is seen by Hindus only as one of the many manifestations (*avatāras*) of the Absolute Mystery; because, for the Christian there is no other Saviour outside the person of Jesus Christ.

The Church accepts that people in other religions could be saved in and through their respective religious traditions; however, that salvation is never independent of Jesus Christ.

The Catholic Church teaches that all religions, as far as they uphold truth, holiness, and goodness, are related to the mystery of Jesus Christ. This is why Christian theologians speak of 'participatory' ways rather than 'parallel' ways of salvation, which are always related to the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all. Based on the revelation of God in history, Christianity gives history a paramount importance:

Christianity has its starting point in the incarnation of the Word. Here, it is not simply a case of man seeking God, but of God who comes in Person to speak to man of Himself and to show him the path by which He may be reached. . . . The Incarnate Word is thus the fulfilment of the yearning present in all the religions of mankind: this fulfilment is brought about by God Himself and transcends all human expectations. (John Paul II, *Tertio Adve niente*, n. 6)

A Christian enters into dialogue with people of different religious traditions because he or she is aware that the action of Christ and his Spirit is already mysteriously present in all who live sincerely according to their religious convictions.

BRIAN PEARCE

AS IN PREVIOUS ISSUES, the *ISKCON Communications Journal* for June 1999 contains a number of most interesting articles which show how the movement is tackling in an open and determined way the challenges which have to be faced in ISKCON's future development both internally and in its external relationships. In view of my involvement in interfaith work, I was particularly interested in the article by Shaunaka Rishi Das on *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God*, which sets out the Society's first official statement on its relationship with those of other faiths.

I am not qualified to comment on the theological exposition that it offers as the basis for the guidelines it puts forward, but I found this part of the document both helpful and illuminating. It will, I am sure, help to encourage others to have confidence in their dialogue with the movement.

It is welcome that the prologue to the document refers to the need to be aware of the different strands within a religious tradition as ancient and as wide as Hinduism.

These observations apply not only to the Hindu tradition but to other major world faiths as well. We always need to bear in mind that in dialogue we are meeting people — and people come from a particular part of their tradition and speak out of their personal experience of it. We do not dialogue with conceptual categories or concepts — even if we often spend our time together discussing them!

People may meet in dialogue as 'representatives' of a tradition. They may be authorised to speak on behalf of their communities, but more often the hope will be that they can articulate the positions which 'most' members of their community would take. It is always important, for the benefit of their dialogue partners, for individuals to make it clear when they are expressing personal

views which are not in accord with the majority view within their community.

The ISKCON statement rightly recognises that if we are to build a better society together then there is a need to build wide ‘coalitions’ of people of moral purpose and integrity who hold key values in common, even if they look to different sources for these. It is very encouraging that the statement encourages ISKCON members to think in these broad-ranging terms.

The distinction the document draws between seeking ‘conversion’ and ‘spiritual development’, in encounters with those who do not follow the same path, is a valuable one.

Again, it is a distinction that can usefully be considered by those in other religious traditions. The notion of mutual challenge and the need to listen to one another in the hope of mutual enrichment is central to the document.

I was delighted to find in the text a number of echoes of the Inter Faith Network’s own document on ‘Building Good Relations on People of Different Faiths and Beliefs’. I hope that other religious communities and groups will produce their own statements of this kind.

It would be encouraging if these confirmed, as I believe that they would, that there is much common ground between us on what characterises appropriate and fruitful encounters between people of different faiths.

JACQUELINE TABICK

FOR FROM THE RISING OF THE SUN even to the going down of the same My Name is great among the nations and in every place offerings are presented to My Name, even pure obligations, for My Name is great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts.

So wrote the prophet Malachi around 2,500 years ago, expressing the Biblical Jewish understanding, adopted by many modern Jews, that there are many valid paths to communion with the One God that we have each chosen to worship in our own particular way.

So it was with deep, spiritual delight that I read in the ISKCON

Declaration that 'no one religion holds the monopoly on the truth, the revelation of God or our relationship with God.' It seems that there are three different views that religious people might hold of other faiths.

The first view, presented in *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God* as the position of the neophyte, is one of 'exclusivism and fanaticism'.

There are many Jews, sadly locked into this position, who regard other faiths as inferior or idolatrous and therefore religious abominations. Mind you, they often also regard their fellow Jews, who inhabit the more liberal wing of our faith, in the same, if not even crueller, negative way! One eminent Reform rabbi was described by a leading Orthodox rabbi as a 'destroyer of the Faith'.

Then there is the relativist view, held by many in the modern world, of 'pick your own' religions. This includes those who believe that it does not matter which religious path you follow, provided it helps you lead a good ethical life with a spiritual dimension, and also those who pick the bits they like from different faiths and follow a mixture of their own choosing.

The relativist approach may sound good, but I suspect that few truly religious people feel it applies to their own faith. If all paths are equally valid for all then why teach about and encourage others to follow one particular path?

It is very hard to be enthusiastic about such a relativist system of beliefs or to have any success in transmitting this to the next generation. The answer must be that you feel the path you are on has something special, unique and valuable to offer.

So the third view seems 'truest' to experience. To understand that there are truths to be found in other religions, and many values and practices that can help you with your own faith questions, but to accept that, just as you believe that your religion is best for you, so others have the right to believe that their religion is best for them.

To me the image is one of a wheel. We live on the hub, God is at the centre, there are many spokes leading to that centre and usually, the best spoke is the one that starts near you!

Here comes the nub, the question of conversion. Judaism, some 2,000 years ago, went through a conversionary period, and found

that mass conversion was not helpful. In the intervening period, conversion to Judaism was a dangerous business. (In Christian medieval Europe those converting to Judaism were often liable to execution, as was the rabbi who helped, and the community was liable to expulsion. This did not tend to encourage the community to be open to such things!) In the modern world, the orthodox Jewish community is still very suspicious of those who wish to join us, but small numbers do, every year. However, we do not go out seeking converts, that is not part of our culture. We believe that good people of all faiths will have a place in 'The World to Come' and therefore we do not feel any religious need to pursue a proactive role in conversions.

On the other hand, we are a tiny group. We have not yet made up the numbers lost in the Holocaust. In Great Britain, we number about 200,000 souls. Any attempts made to convert our young and vulnerable are therefore met with dismay.

And, with the appalling level of Jewish education in this country, and because of the open nature of the society in which we live, there are many young Jews who are attracted to the religions of the East, unaware that they could find almost everything they seek within their own rich heritage, if only they knew where to go.

So I am afraid that the early activities of the Hare Krishna movement have led to a great deal of suspicion in the Jewish community, and this may take some time to dissipate.

True dialogue can only take place among those who have no conversionary agenda, and those who are secure in their own faiths. I note with relief and delight that this is recognised in your declaration.

God is so great. One of the Hebrew names for God is *Ayn Sof*, 'Without End'. How can any religion imply that we know all there is to know, that we have the one true path. We must acknowledge that there are different paths that suit and/or challenge different people or cultures.

Let us thoroughly explore our own particular faiths and then in friendship and respect, we can learn much from each other.

WHILE REPRESENTATIVES OF ALL WORLD RELIGIONS participate in interreligious dialogue, there do seem to be more Christian statements about the value of dialogue than there are Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or Jewish pronouncements.

Perhaps Christians, more than others, need to espouse dialogue as a way of relating to people of other faiths. Be that as it may, there is a need to also assess within other religious traditions the value of interfaith dialogue as the preferred way of relating to people of other faiths in our world today.

It is therefore with a sense of curiosity that I discovered that the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) has recently developed a document that addresses the question of relations to people of other faiths.

The document is prefaced with a request to ISKCON members to 'accept a more global responsibility'.

This document will help not only ISKCON members, it will also help those outside ISKCON to relinquish prejudices and stereotypes about the Hare Krishna movement.

It is a document that recognises and respects other theistic traditions and that clearly states that 'no one religion holds a monopoly on the truth, the revelation of God or our relationship with God'.

It calls upon its followers to reconsider their life in mission, stating that it is 'inappropriate and unbecoming . . . to try and attract people to the worship of the Supreme by denigrating, misrepresenting, or humiliating members of other faith communities.'

ISKCON does not have a mission to proselytise members of other faiths. In an age of dialogue, one often comes across a tendency to harmonise all religions, disregarding actual differences between our religious traditions. There is always, in every multi-faith gathering, someone looking for every possibility to affirm that we are all the same, all mean the same, all say the same, that we are all on the same path leading to Rome. This may sound like a pleasant way of providing space for everyone, but actually reflects a fear of religious diversity.

By streamlining our religious differences, we may arrive at a superreligion of universal love, global friendliness, and cosmic

consciousness modelled for the 21st century, but it will be a religion similar to a blend of ice cream and jelly: easy to swallow, but of no substance. 55

In this document, I read that 'diversity is accepted, that religions do not have to become homogenous or merge together, but develop respectful and practical relationships with one another'.

I am inspired by this document. It is a challenge to many in my own constituency.

I wish followers of ISKCON many opportunities to walk with this document as a *vade mecum* in a world of religious plurality, respecting the other as other in his or her God-given dignity.

PART SIX

ISKCON and Interfaith Dialogue

Kenneth Cracknell

THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS (hereafter ISKCON, or the Society) is increasingly putting other communities of faith in its debt because of its recent contributions to the theory and the practice of interfaith dialogue. At the theoretical level it has recently published its guidelines statement, *ISKCON in Relation to People of Faith in God*, and is currently engaged in soliciting responses to these.

The Society's scholarly periodical, the *ISKCON Communications Journal*, Vol.7, No 2, carries eight important commentaries from members of other faith communities, each of which is a contribution to further theorising about the nature of interfaith dialogue. But the production of 'guidelines on dialogue' is not the beginning of dialogue.

Far from it. The Society has, in a relatively short period of time, acquired a very respectable amount of practical experience in interfaith dialogue, and the new guidelines most certainly reflect ISKCON's energetic and wholehearted engagement in this field. As a Christian observer of ISKCON's life and development, and as a frequent participant in the dialogues, I want to pay tribute to all who have been involved in this activity.

It was, of course, not always so, and I therefore use the phrase 'relatively short period of time' advisedly. Only a decade ago, the

devotee overseeing ISKCON's interreligious relationships was lamenting the paucity of opportunity for genuine encounters between Christians and his community.

He mentioned particularly the lack of officially sponsored interfaith conferences and symposia, pointing to the absence of any official exchanges of monastic personnel, the lack of co-operative humanitarian ventures, and the absence of joint declarations on the moral and political issues of the day.

'There have been, to be sure,' he wrote, 'critiques, assessments, constructive and non-constructive criticisms, reactions, condemnations, and testimonials, but little serious, patient, face-to-face, soul-to-soul dialogue.' (Gelberg, pp 138–9, p. 155)

The reasons for this state of affairs from the Christian side are complex and varied. Perhaps the most obvious is the suspicion with which ISKCON was treated in the earliest years of its existence.

Notwithstanding a long and honourable historical pedigree as part, generically, of the great Indian *bhakti* movement, and, specifically, as a Vaiṣṇavite tradition tracing its roots to the Bengali religious reformer Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1534), ISKCON was seen at best as a 'New Religious Movement' (hereafter NRM) and at worst a 'cult.' This latter term, still, alas, in use among the uninformed, carries with it notions of brainwashing, forcible detention, bizarre belief systems, and megalomaniac leadership, and gave rise to the sinister activities of the self-styled 'de-programmers'.

The anti-cult groups for a short time gained the ears of politicians and, both in Europe and the United States, considerable efforts were made to limit, if not to proscribe altogether, NRMs of whatever kind. Unhappily the mission of ISKCON's founder, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977), to the West coincided exactly with the outburst of anti-cult activity in the 1960s and 1970s, and the new devotees, dressed in their Indian costumes, attracted an inordinate amount of pejorative attention. Dialogue with ISKCON could not happen until this particular climate changed.

This happened in or about the years 1984 to 1986. From the European point of view, 1984 signalled a sea change in the way in which ISKCON was viewed. In that year the anti-cult movement overreached itself by persuading an obscure British member of the European Parliament in Strasbourg to instigate a series of proposals

which would control all new religious movements, opening them up to inspection by religious health authorities and limiting their freedom to make converts.

Unfortunately these 'Cottrell proposals' would also have had the effect of infringing the liberties of all older religious movements like the Churches, and would have been in direct violation of the articles on religious liberty of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the European Convention on Human Rights. National Councils of Churches throughout Western Europe were appalled and protested strongly.

The Strasbourg Parliament retreated from the brink of making a serious misjudgement. Similar concerns were being felt by people in the USA and again the leadership of the 'anti-cult' movement fell to staff members of the National Churches of Christ of the USA, assisted by many brilliant academic students of religion, both Protestant and Roman Catholic.

Thus the time was right for the World Council of Churches, together with the Lutheran World Federation, to hold a major consultation on New Religious Movements in Amsterdam in 1986. This gathering committed itself to the proposition that dialogue has no limits. NRMs were as much to be seen as dialogue partners as the venerable ancient faiths of the world.

One result of this struggle to deal justly with followers of NRMs on the part of the Christian establishment in the mid 1980s, was that many of us became welcome invitees to the headquarters of these movements.

So it was that I made my first visits to Bhaktivedanta Manor, and a few months later to the ISKCON centres in Ireland. For me, this meant a discovery of the deep spiritual life of the devotees, of their practical ecological concerns, and of the ability of the Kṛṣṇa message to transform former drug addicts and even people who had been caught up on either side of Ireland's culture of violence. I remember, too, sharing in an encounter between devotees and members of a nearby Cistercian monastery, and their mutual discovery of each other's traditions.

But I was not alone in these experiences, and at this time a series of scholarly and unprejudiced books and articles appeared, correcting the one-sided propaganda of the anti-cult movement.

Yet there was one other major obstacle to be overcome before Christians could throw themselves wholeheartedly into dialogue with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas. This lies in the history of Christian-Hindu relations in general. Both Catholic and Protestant scholars of Indian religions have preferred to acknowledge the monistic or non-dualistic school of Śāṅkara, known as Advaita Vedānta, as the essence or highest development of Hinduism.

For them this was the school most truly representative of Indian philosophy and therefore the one with which Christianity had most to reckon with.

To be sure these scholars were well aware of the existence of devotional and theistic traditions within Hinduism.

Yet a certain intellectual distaste seems to have crept into their description of the *bhakti* paths. On the protestant side, the early twentieth century Scottish Presbyterian missionary to India, Nichol McNichol, seems to have set the tone for this, describing Kṛṣṇa worship as 'incurably idolatrous', as 'sensuous' and as 'lacking a content of revelation.' (McNichol).

This judgement was reinforced by the leading missiologist of that period, Hendrik Kraemer, who asserted that the *bhakti* versions of Hinduism were 'exclusively individualistic and essentially eudaimonistic' (Kraemer, p. 160). In similar vein, leading Catholic writers have described *bhakti* as being a mere preparation for the 'higher', more universal Hinduism of Advaita. Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) and Bede Griffiths were widely perceived as seeking to reconcile Advaitic thought with Christian spirituality.

But there was always a paradox in this position, for such writers often felt that Advaita needed the corrective of 'personalist' understanding of both God and the human soul.

Thus Bede Griffiths once wrote that: 'Christians have to show the Hindu in the light of our faith, that in the ultimate experience of God, the absolute being, the world and the soul are not lost, nor is the personal being of God absorbed in the impersonal Godhead.' (Griffiths, p. 173). Griffiths writes here as though he had never heard of Rāmānuja, Vaiṣṇavism's outstanding theologian.

Other students of India and indeed Christian missionaries and their converts in India, knew better, and I cite first the work of the German Protestant theologian Rudolph Otto.

He wrote in 1930 of India's religion of grace, which affirmed a salvation that is 'offered to all and to the "poor in spirit" in particular.' This salvation, he wrote, 'comes not by mystic experience, by the loss of personality in the impersonal primal cause of all being, but by *bhakti*, that is by surrender in simple, trusting appropriation of the "grace" of the "Lord" and in love to Him.'

This salvation is the free gift of grace and is given through 'the saving might of the Lord.' Otto declared that in 'this Indian *bhakti*-religion there is presented, without a doubt, a real, saving God, believed, received, and — can we doubt it? — experienced.' (Otto, pp. 16, 18, 21). Otto's scholarly perceptions were those of the Methodist missionary and early dialogue pioneer, E. Stanley Jones, who recorded the words of a Bengali goswami at one of his round table conferences in the 1920s:

I believe in Śrī Caitanya. I practise both *bhajana* . . . and *kīrtana* . . .
I feel that God is very near me. I have this experience almost every time I have *kīrtana* in the morning. The name of Hari gives happiness. (Jones, pp 30–1).

Bishop A. J. Appasamy, an Indian church leader in the 1920s, wrote of the *bhaktas* 'who speak of God, adore His goodness, worship Him with bowed heads and clasped hands as seeking in all possible ways to establish a relation with Him which will grow into a mystic union.'

Appasamy believed that only such people could appreciate the inner spirit of Christianity and the inner spirit of India's religious thought. (Appasamy, pp. 2, 21).

It seems that it took nearly sixty years for most of us to wake up to the implications of such sentiments. Could it really be that our best partners in Christian-Hindu dialogue are those of the *bhakti* traditions?

Could we not, from our Christian point of view, deem it as providential that Śrīla Prabhupāda so brilliantly preached among Westerners? Might we not say that God has through this man's teaching, raised up a new generation of interpreters of *bhakti* devotionism? Could this not even be a new *kairos*, or turning point, in the long and chequered history of Christian-Hindu relations?

It will be no surprise to learn that my own answers to these far from rhetorical questions are positive. I offer the following eight reasons why Christians should rejoice to see this day.

1 The willingness of our partners

It is striking how much material written in the 1980s, and even before, by ISKCON devotees demonstrates a yearning to contribute towards mutual understanding of Christians and Vaiṣṇavas.

We may note two important and scholarly articles from this time. In 1986 Kenneth Rose asked ‘Has ISKCON Anything to Offer Christianity Theologically?’ (*ISKCON Review* 2, 1986).

Though at that time no longer a member of the Society, Rose affirmed that Christians can find a tradition ‘no less vivid and profound than Christianity, in which an Absolute providence is experienced in a variety of personal relationships.’ Dialogue with this tradition might persuade Christians to lay aside ‘the proud and false claim of having, along with Judaism, the only historical and scriptural relationship with God.’ If we were to do that, perhaps we might be better able to contribute towards a world theology of God’s universal redemption.

Similarly Stephen J. Gelberg, writing as Śubhānanda Dāsa, was moved to write ‘An Invitation to Dialogue’ directed to the Catholic Church in 1986 (‘The Catholic Church and the Hare Kṛṣṇa Movement: an Invitation to Dialogue’).

This was a response to an official ‘Vatican Report on Sects, Cults and New Religious Movements’, in which this sentence appears: ‘There is generally little or no possibility of dialogue with the sects.’ Śubhānanda Dāsa marshalled all his considerable rhetorical skill to refute such a view as it might be applied to ISKCON.

He particularly wished to stress the benefits that might come to the Catholic Church through this dialogue, and we shall take up some of his points shortly. He equally forthrightly laid out some answers to the question ‘What’s in it for ISKCON?’

The benefits to ISKCON, he suggested, were fourfold. ISKCON members would be enabled to confront religious pluralism; would learn from the Catholic Church’s broad history; would receive

constructive criticism, and, overall, the dialogue would serve as a 'reminder to take deeply to the contemplative side of religious life.'

Since Rose and Gelberg's responses, the *ISKCON Communications Journal* has published many personal testimonies of devotees who are excited by the notion of interfaith dialogue, especially with Christians.

I take but two examples. Ranchor Dāsa reflected in 1993 that it was sad that ISKCON had gained a reputation in many circles for being a 'type of fundamentalist organisation, always on the lookout for converts and self-advancement.' 'I do not believe,' he wrote, 'that this is what Prabhupāda wanted of us. Nor do I believe it is what we ourselves originally chose. Many devotees, like me, came to Kṛṣṇa consciousness because it embodied the universal principle of Love of God in a way which embraced, not excluded, other religions.' (Ranchor Dāsa, 1993). Like many others in ISKCON, Ranchor Dāsa is a former Roman Catholic, but sees himself not as converted away from Roman Catholicism, but rather sees himself as having built on his original faith.

The Christian church remains for him a holy place 'where I intuitively feel at home.' For him, as for many others, the dialogue is internal as well as external, and it is a joy to speak about Jesus and Kṛṣṇa in the same discourse.

Other devotees have come rather more slowly to their commitment to dialogue, especially those of Jewish or secularist backgrounds. A report from one of the earliest residential interfaith conference records Vaiṣṇavas as being moved by the 'openness and humility of all the members of the Christian churches present', and indeed some expressed not a little amazement at the 'lack of false ego' in these participants.

They expressed gratitude for the 'real willingness to understand' the Vaiṣṇava philosophy. According to this report, several devotees said that they had discovered a real increase in 'respect, appreciation, and esteem' for Christians and Christianity, calling the conference time 'essential and extremely productive work.'

As a result of this groundswell of concern on the part of devotees, the ISKCON Interfaith Commission was formed in 1995. We know that we do indeed have willing partners for the dialogue.

2 The accumulating experience of Christian-Vaiṣṇava dialogue

When the first initiatives on the part of ISKCON were received by members of the Christian community in the mid 1990s there was a ready response.

Thus the very first of a now considerable series of residential meetings, which was held in Wales in January 1996, drew a distinguished group of Christian participants: church leaders, university teachers, interfaith experts, clergy, and laypeople, all exceedingly busy people, to discuss 'The Nature of the Self.' Why was this so easily achieved?

As I wrote at that time, it had dawned on all of us that the scholars and sages of ISKCON were highly trained and immensely acute exponents of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, so much so that they could represent the highest form of that philosophy extraordinarily well to their fellow Westerners.

We were to have the opportunity to discuss with these men and women ideas and concepts with which we were more or less familiar through our reading and study. We were eager to learn from those who embodied these teachings in their life and practice.

This pattern has now been repeated on many different occasions in the United States. In September 1996, in East Freeport, Massachusetts, nine Christian theologians, Catholic and Protestant, devoted a weekend to speaking with Vaiṣṇava scholars and other devotees about 'The Destiny of the Soul.' In April 1998, a similar group of nine devotees and nine Christians met for the first time in Potomac, Maryland, this time focusing upon 'The Everlasting Soul.'

In September 1999, a new group from the Detroit area met with the theme 'The Millennium and Beyond: Christian and Vaiṣṇava Perspectives.'

In each case a momentum has been created which has led to further engagements. In the Boston area a group of lay people (rather than scholars) is carrying the dialogue.

The Maryland group has met each year since 1998, and its rapporteur has commented, 'There is something to be said for continuity in a dialogue group; this session seemed to build upon the mutual trust and affection of previous years.'

There was rich personal sharing as well as fruitful intellectual investigations: not only learning about or from one another but learning with, as well.' (Trapnell)²⁵

It appears that we have found a formula that works. In every case there has been the warm, open-hearted hospitality of ISKCON devotees as the hosts (necessarily so, since only they could prepare their delicious Vedic food).

In every case there have been excellent scholarly presentations. I may mention the names of Keith Ward, Klaus Klostermaier, Peter Phan, and John Saliba on the Christian side, and Tamal Kṛṣṇa Goswami and Ravindra-Svarūpa Dāsa on the Vaiṣṇava side, to give some indication of the quality of this input. But the main ingredient has always been the readiness of all participants to listen and to share their spirituality and their worship.

Michael Barnes once commented of his experience of this dialogue that, 'it was one of those rare occasions when head and heart seemed somehow to be united'; and his fellow Jesuit Francis Clooney speaks elsewhere of the Massachusetts meeting in 1996 as 'a rich and complex event.'

We turn now to explore why heads and hearts have been so united, and the reason for such richness and complexity.

3 A community of learners and teachers

However paradoxical it may seem to some, Christians and Vaiṣṇavas draw very close to one another because of their sense of mission. At the heart of each faith is a sense that it bears good news for everyone. We are all preachers with a Saviour to commend. It is this devotion and commitment that we recognise in one another.

At the same time, each of our theologies recognises that God has come to other men and women in different modes and forms. In Christianity, we look to the teaching of God's universal wisdom, and speak of Spirit or Logos Christologies.

The sense that Christ will have spoken within other religious traditions is increasingly common among us. In any case, we are called to be obedient to the Holy Spirit who is Lord of all things.

Only through the Holy Spirit are people led to God. We are not

66 in control of conversions! For their part, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas teach that all souls are created by and are eternally related to Lord Kṛṣṇa, regardless of religious or cultural orientations.

We have learnt that conversion in Vaiṣṇava tradition depends on the assumption that Kṛṣṇa, not the missionary devotee, is Īśvara, the controller. Such teachings give space for others to be themselves and indeed Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in its Indian context has always recognised religious diversity as normal and healthy.

Furthermore, though some Indians do define Hinduism as a religion of birth, Vaiṣṇava tradition has almost always had a more universalistic outlook, welcoming non-Indians and non-Hindus into its fold for hundreds of years. In these ways, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava teachings support dialogue and cooperation with other religious traditions.

But we Christians may also recognise a new factor, namely that ISKCON is the first global Vaiṣṇava movement, which is just now coming to understand its vocation to enable Westerners to understand Indian philosophy and spirituality. Since the ISKCON devotees are for the most part Westerners themselves, they have a unique opportunity to ensure a true understanding of Vaiṣṇavism in the West. For our part, we must open up all doors so that as many Christians as possible take advantage of such opportunities of learning.

In this, Christians need not be fearful that it would be just a one-way process. The ISKCON guidelines make it clear that they, too, feel they have much to learn about Christian life and practice.

But it is not only the guidelines that make this plain. It is the devotees' already well proven receptiveness to their Christian guests. Julius Lipner, for example, reports on a visit to Radhadesh, the ISKCON centre in Belgium, for a communications seminar in which he describes a 'genuine openness':

I was taken in friendly trust, and I rejoiced in that honour. I was free to go where I wished, to converse with whomsoever I desired, to say whatever I wanted . . . the devotees themselves seemed to shake off all constraints, as if realising the significance of the opportunity. In a communications seminar, it was vital to communicate, to reach out to one another, to grasp the moment and to shape the future.'
(Lipner, p. 22)

Julius Lipner demonstrated his own ability to speak his mind as he challenged the Society to face the problems of the status and role of female devotees, and to consider the place of children in the Movement. But we who have taken part in formal dialogue sessions have also sensed a willingness to be challenged not just about practice but also about belief.

4 A dialogue into mutual theological challenge

The consultations in Wales, in Massachusetts, in Maryland, and in Detroit, have all demonstrated this openness.

Here, as one example of readiness to reconsider apparently entrenched positions is a listing of questions thrown up by the Welsh weekend:

- How central to Vaiṣṇava philosophy is reincarnation?
- Can reincarnation never be on the Christian agenda and can Vaiṣṇavas do without it on their agenda?
- What do we mean by eternity?
- Will all souls be liberated, or is it possible that some souls never gain liberation?
- What happens at the resurrection?
- What is the relationship between, and nature of, the body, the soul, and the subtle body?
- What is the distinction between the subtle body and the 'I' we identify with?
- What is it that remains and experiences things after the liberation?

- What is the kingdom of God?
- Is there an end of time or is time cyclical?
- Does the 'new heaven/new earth' encompass a corporate liberation or is it purely individual?
- How does the concept of reincarnation and spiritual equality fit in with our observation of the caste system?
- If we consider that the soul is not separate from the body, do we not lose out on a socio-political dimension in our dealings with others? Does that view not make us anthropocentric? Does it not impact upon ecological implications of stewardship?
- How do Vaiṣṇavas speak of death to others?
- What sort of bedside language would we use in comforting a dying person?
- What is our pastoral approach to death? Is that different if we were counselling a child or old person? (Cracknell, p. 80)

That such questions were raised indicates an unusual level of trust. That such questions, and many others, remain on the agenda offers a serious programme for both our communities well into the future.

5 A mutual stimulus to dedication in worship and spirituality

Intense interest in each other's forms of worship and spirituality has also marked the recent Christian-Vaiṣṇava dialogues. Indeed it has repeatedly been demonstrated on both sides of the Atlantic

that theological dialogue cannot proceed fruitfully without the participants also drawing on the communal and personal religious resources of their traditions. Gavin de Costa puts this well in his commentary on the dialogue conference in Wales: 'I was particularly struck by the way in which European ISKCON devotees were bound together in their liturgical celebration. Whether in Sanskrit or Bengali, they knew their songs of devotion and chanting, and danced for Kṛṣṇa in a beautiful and moving fashion,' and later reflects that he had learnt much in theory and practice that 'commends a less paper-giving orientation to such gatherings.'²³

The opportunity to see each other at prayer and play makes for a wholeness of our encounter. Francis Clooney also notes the profound drawing together in the dialogue community when we turn together to God in worship. His record of the Boston meeting notes how all participants 'seemed to thrill to God's grace running through us when we prayed and sang together the Christian verse:

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.'²⁴

Such experiences truly enable Christians and Vaiṣṇavas to speak heart to heart and remind both traditions of the importance of the contemplative side of spiritual life.

As Stephen Gelberg wrote some years ago,

For devotees in a highly activist missionary organisation like ISKCON, the active, 'busy' side of institutional life can come to overshadow (and in some cases almost eliminate) the interior and contemplative aspect of spiritual life without which external activity becomes unreflective, mechanical and self-centred.

He thought then that the systematically introspective and contemplative life, such as that found in Catholic monasteries, could act to remind devotees of the critical necessity of devotional reflection and prayer in the life of Kṛṣṇa consciousness. We Christians, too, are no less likely to fall into an over-active busy-ness.

6 Dialogue for the sake of the world

One significant result of the Christian-Vaiṣṇava dialogue is the recognition (sometimes to the surprise of both parties) of a common concern for this world.

To be sure, neither of us would have a sense of evangelistic mission if we were not profoundly moved by the lost soul of humanity. Jesus expressed concern for the ‘sheep without a shepherd’ and Śrīla Prabhupāda and the *sampradāya* (or religious tradition) he represents is profoundly compassionate to all those men and women who have no sense of God and the joy that brings.

The atheistic materialism of the West needs to be challenged at all levels. This was the message, too, of the *vaiṣṇava-ācārya* Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura (1836–1914), who taught that the enemy of Vaiṣṇavism is not other religious traditions, but atheism. Here Christians and Vaiṣṇavas can draw very close.

But we realise it is no easy task to restore faith in God to Western societies, and we have shared in our dialogues a sense that we need each other as we challenge the West’s prevailing values. Klaus Klostermaier points to some of the findings of the first Massachusetts meeting when he writes:

Both Vaiṣṇavas and Christians have to rethink their traditional teachings on the background of contemporary psychology and neuroscience, and have to restate their metaphysics in a contemporary idiom.

They must recognise the historico-cultural conditioning of traditional teaching without giving up the timeless insights expressed in them. Vaiṣṇavism was always perceived to be close to Christianity in its theology and its ritual practices. It may be possible to find a common language to speak about the soul and its destiny that could religiously inspire late-20th-century women and men. (Klostermaier, p. 83).²⁶

Now that the century has turned, it seems the urgency is even greater. We have a new millennium before us. We may profoundly hope that the initiative in Oxford, England²⁷ will take us more deeply into new thinking for the sake of the world.

This is the year of the death of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (b. 1916), one of the great Christian thinkers about interfaith relationships. In a seminal paper about the study of comparative religion written as long ago as 1959, Smith described the traditional form of Western Scholarship as being ‘an impersonal presentation of an “it.”’

But then came a great innovation, what he called the ‘personalization of the faiths, so that we find a discussion of a “they.”’ ‘Presently,’ he continues, ‘the observer becomes personally involved, so that the situation is one of a “we” talking about a “they.”’

The next step is a dialogue when “we” talk to “you.” If there is listening and mutuality, this may become that “we talk” with “you.” (Smith, pp. 31–58) At that point dialogue partners are saying to each other ‘this what we have seen of the truth, this is what God has done for us; tell us what you have seen, what God has done for you.’ It appears that ‘we Christians’ and ‘we Vaiṣṇavas’ have undoubtedly attained this stage.

But there is one further stage to move towards. In Smith’s terms, it is when ‘we all’ are talking with each other about ‘us’, and when we are able to formulate the beginning of a theology which talks about the same Lord’s dealings with all his servants, the same parent dealing with all his or her children throughout world history.

Perhaps religious people in general are far from being able as yet to construct a world theology. But if such a theology were ever to come into being certainly those Christians and Vaiṣṇavas who have drawn close to each other, will be among the great catalysts of a radical change in humanity’s understanding of itself in the next millennium.

When that day comes, we will rejoice to see how God has been dealing with the whole of humanity.

8 For the sake of friendship – dialogue as an absolute value

We have tried to list some of the reasons for engaging in interreligious dialogue. We have seen among its benefits the dissipation of religious narrow-mindedness, the breaking down of insularity, and the destruction of xenophobia.

We have emphasised that the increased understanding of another religious tradition must in itself lead to the development of a more introspective and critical approach to one's own faith and a deepening of one's own spirituality.

We have stressed, too, that dialogue heightens the awareness of, and appreciation for, God's universal saving grace. Yet there is one last thing to be said. It is this: that interfaith dialogue has its absolute value, and should be engaged in for its own sake.

Dialogue is about friendship, the highest human aspiration, as the mid-twentieth century British philosopher John Macmurray wrote: 'All meaningful knowledge is in order to action, and all meaningful action is in order to friendship.' (Macmurray, 1961) Both communities have sensed this, rightly so, for the theology on both sides sees love as the essential attribute of God.

Thus the ISKCON author and teacher, Ranchor Dāsa, entitled his presentation to an Interfaith Conference at Bhaktivedanta Manor in 1994 'Searching for the Dearest Friend', and he movingly portrays the relationship with God in this terminology (Ranchor Dāsa, 1994).

Christians remember the words of Jesus, as recorded in St John's Gospel, 'Henceforth I call you not servants, for a servant does not know what his lord does, but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known to you.' (*John* 15.14).

If Christians are friends of Jesus, it follows that we are friends of all people. Devotees speak in the same language and the 'Principles' of the new ISKCON guidelines are explicit, in that the friends of Kṛṣṇa are honest, truthful, respectful, and tolerant in personal relationships: 'We can live without the philosophy, the ritual, and the institution, but we cannot live without our loving and serving relationship with Kṛṣṇa and His devotees.'

By extension this, as Ranchor Dāsa makes plain in a second article, means friendship with followers of other ways and paths in what Śrīla Prabhupāda called 'a league of devotees.' (Ranchor Dāsa, 1993) it is, for many of us, a sign and a wonder of the new era of interreligious relationships that deep and true friendships have been formed between Vaiṣṇavas and Christians.

May this new century see this friendship grow and increase.

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APPENDIX

The Seven Purposes of ISKCON

- 1 To systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all people in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world.
- 2 To propagate a consciousness of Kṛṣṇa (God), as it is revealed in the great scriptures of India, *Bhagavad-gītā* and *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*.
- 3 To bring the members of the Society together with each other and nearer to Kṛṣṇa, the prime entity, thus developing the idea within the members and humanity at large, that each soul is part and parcel of the quality of Godhead (Kṛṣṇa).
- 4 To teach and encourage the *saṅkīrtana* movement (congregational chanting of the holy name of God), as revealed in the teachings of Lord Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu.
- 5 To erect for the members and for society at large a holy place of transcendental pastimes dedicated to the personality of Kṛṣṇa.
- 6 To bring the members closer together for the purpose of teaching a simpler, more natural way of life.

7 With a view towards achieving the aforementioned purposes, to publish and distribute periodicals, magazines, books, and other writings.

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Notes

Introduction

- 1 Some of the consultants involved included Prof. Frank Clooney, Prof. Kenneth Cracknell, Hṛdayānanda Dāsa Goswami, Mukunda Goswami, Tamāla Kṛṣṇa Goswami, Prof. Klaus Klostermaier, Dr. Julius Lipner, Shaunaka Rishi Das, Prof. John Saliba, Prof. Larry Shinn, and Ravindra-Svarūpa Dāsa.

Part Two

- 2 The seven purposes of ISKCON, as penned by Śrīla Prabhupāda, are reproduced in full in the Appendix (pp. 71-2).
- 3 A *praṇāma-mantra* is a mantra (prayer) of respect and glorification. It is traditional for disciples of a spiritual teacher or holy person to chant a *praṇāma-mantra* specifically composed for his glorification. The second of Śrīla Prabhupāda's *praṇāma-mantras* offers the following praises: 'I offer respectful obeisances to you, the servant of Sarasvatī Goswami [the spiritual master of Śrīla Prabhupāda], who are preaching the message of Lord Caitanya and who are delivering the Western countries of voidism and impersonalism.'
- 4 Ṭhākura, Bhaktivinoda, *Shri Chaitanya-shikshamritam*, Madras, India: Sree Gaudiya Math, 1983, p. 9.
- 5 Ṭhākura, Bhaktivinoda, *Light of the Bhagavat*, Madras, India: Sree Gaudiya Math, 1983, p. 20.
- 6 Ṭhākura, Bhaktivinoda, *Shri Chaitanya-shikshamritam*, p. 7.
- 7 Bhaktivedanta Swami, A. C., *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 4.22.24, purp.
- 8 In this connection, Śrīla Prabhupāda has written, 'It doesn't matter which set of religious principles one follows: the only injunc-

tion is that one must follow them strictly. . . . Whether one is a Hindu, a Mohammedan or a Christian, one should follow one's own religious principles.' *Bhāgavatam* 5.26.15, purp. 77

Part Three

- 9 Bhaktivedanta Swami, A. C., *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*, Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1987, p. 18, also see pp. 19–20.
- 10 'The supreme and eternal occupation [*para-dharma*] for all humanity is that by which men can attain to loving devotional service unto the transcendent Lord. Such devotional service must be unmotivated and uninterrupted to completely satisfy the self.'
- 11 'When first-class devotional service develops, one must be devoid of all material desires, knowledge obtained by monistic philosophy, and fruitive action. The devotee must constantly serve Kṛṣṇa favorably, as Kṛṣṇa desires.'
- 12 Letter to Rūpānuga Dāsa, 3 June 1968.
- 13 To understand this development of religion, both individually and collectively, one may study Vaiṣṇava philosophy in terms of the *karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti* paradigm. The fundamentals of this perspective are well presented by Ravindra-Svarūpa Dāsa, in his article 'Religion and Religions,' *ISKCON Communications Journal*, 1993.
- 14 *Śrī Śrī Śikṣāṣṭaka*, verse 3, *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, *Antya-līlā* 20.21.
- 15 *Bhāgavatam* 11.2.47, purp.
- 16 Letter to Toṣaṇa Kṛṣṇa Dāsa, 23 June 1970.
- 17 *Bhāgavatam* 11.2.46.
- 18 To illustrate this point, Śrīla Prabhupāda has observed that 'there is no difference between a pure Christian and a sincere devotee of Kṛṣṇa.' Room Conversation, Bombay, 5 April 1977.
- 19 *Bhāgavatam* 7.5.23–24.

Part Four

- 20 Śrīla Prabhupāda has explained what is meant by realization. 'Personal realization does not mean that one should, out of vanity, attempt to show one's own learning by trying to surpass the previous *ācārya*. He must have full confidence in the previous *ācāryas* and at the same time he must realize the subject matter so nicely that he can present the matter for the particular circumstance in a suitable manner.' (*Bhāgavatam* 1.4.1, purp.)
- 21 Śrīla Prabhupāda has also outlined the basic knowledge a preacher must have to convey his or her message. One must understand that the Lord is '... the Supreme enjoyer, that He is the proprietor of everything, and that He is the best wellwisher and friend to everyone.' (*Bhāgavatam* 7. 6. 24 purp.)
- 22 Bhaktivedanta Swami, A. C., *Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā* 17.195, Los Angeles: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1990.

Part Six

- 23 For a record of the conferences see Gavin de Costa, (Wales, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 11 (3) 1996, pp. 72–8).
- 24 Francis Clooney (Massachusetts, *ISKCON Communications Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, December 1996, p. 73).
- 25 See also: Judson Trapnell (Maryland, *ISKCON Communications Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1, June 1998); Gerald Carney (Maryland II, *ISKCON Communications Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2, December 1999).
- 26 Extended comments by Klaus Klostermaier in his paper 'The Soul and its Destiny' (*ISKCON Communications Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, December 1996).
- 27 The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS). An independent academy for the study of Hinduism and Vaiṣṇavism at Oxford University.

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THIS DOCUMENT is the first official statement by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) concerning the Society's relationship with other people of faith in God.

It represents an important step in ISKCON's social integration and maturation. As ISKCON grows it is broadening its membership base and its influence, and therefore it must also accept a broader responsibility. ISKCON is the first global Vaiṣṇava movement and, as such, it has a need and a responsibility to address its relationship with other faith communities.

This statement serves as a declaration of purpose and a significant basis for relationship with ISKCON's dialogue partners. For ISKCON's members it provides clear principles, guidelines, and perspectives for relationships with members of other faiths.



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