



**Tamal Krishna Goswami, author, Graham M. Schweig, editor, *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential Teachings of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada***

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TAMAL Krishna Goswami's *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti* is a unique analysis of the theological teachings of Bhaktivedānta Svāmi (Prabhupāda), the founder of the Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON), and his “dance as a dextrous hermeneute,” to borrow a phrase from the author. The dance, in this case, is the hermeneutical and exegetical strategy adopted by the Svāmi to remain faithful to a sixteenth-century Hindu devotional tradition, Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, but also to transplant what he considered to be the essentials of this tradition to the completely alien cultural and intellectual landscape of America in the 1960s.

There have, of course, been numerous studies of ISKCON, but Goswami is correct in pointing out that almost all of these have concerned themselves with the movement as a sociological phenomenon—prompted, in large measure, by the cult scare initiated by the tragedy of Jim Jones in the 1970s. With surprisingly few exceptions, academic engagement with the movement has had difficulty breaking free of the binding and almost hegemonic narratives of counter-culture and cult controversy. There has been very little serious or extensive attention directed towards the theological pedigree of the tradition, any such referencing being tangential to other concerns rather than attempting serious theological explication. *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti* is an outstanding contribution towards redressing this.

But first Goswami must address the standard associations connected with ISKCON. While acknowledging some of the ways in which ISKCON and Bhaktivedānta Svāmi have contributed to this occlusion in terms of their sociocultural and intellectual attitudes, he constructs a narrative order that as much situates ISKCON's critics and observers within their locational contexts in culture and history as they have done to ISKCON. The book presents a fair and accurate survey of the entire gamut of scholarly literature on the movement. There is no defensiveness here, no attempt at

sidestepping or whitewashing the controversies and excesses of ISKCON's immature heyday (even as Goswami does on occasion correct errors), but there is a determination to create a level playing field. By exposing methodological and theoretical biases that have neglected Bhaktivedānta Svāmi's actual thought and its historical antecedents, Goswami argues that much academic scholarship has strayed from its own methodological commitments to neutrality and objectivity by allowing anti-cult critics to set the agenda of discourse. Again, he is not out to undermine or refute cult controversy discourse, but rather demonstrate that it is only one aspect of a multi-faceted phenomenon. And the aspect that the author seeks to excavate and reclaim for his teacher is its theology and praxis. Goswami's prime motivation for his work, then, is this excessive partiality in other studies—the paucity of scholarship engaging the tradition that Prabhupāda transplanted and brought to life in the West—and the wish to create a conceptual platform for reclaiming the theological Prabhupāda.

The result is an apology for the teachings of Bhaktivedānta Svāmi, but one encompassing a unique combination of perspectival lenses. At its theological core, *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti* is a sophisticated, historicized analysis of the movement's teachings on *Bhāgavata bhakti* through the adoption of a hermeneutical schema inherent in the tradition itself. This features the schematic categories of the sixteenth-century Gaudiya theologian Jīva Gosvamin—*sambandha*, *abhideya*, and *prayojana* (*bhakti* as relationship, practice, and goal). In this regard, Bhaktivedānta Svāmi was theologically conservative. The Svāmi's originality was not doctrinal, but transmissional—a negotiation between the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism expressed in sixteenth-century literary sources and a brand new audience vastly different in time and space. When it came to preservation and praxis on the other hand, Bhaktivedānta Svāmi was creative. He stretched boundaries and probed for porosity (allowing women to perform *arcana* in the temple, for example) thereby striving to enhance *bhakti*'s already eminent accessibility in its new environment.

Nonetheless, his *dhōṭi*- and *sāri*-clad followers were undoubtedly the most “orthodox” of the Hindu traditions that were transplanted to the West, and they certainly made the least concessions to its modern intellectual and cultural landscape. What is important here is the vast cultural and intellectual divide separating Bhaktivedānta Svāmi from his host communities in the West. The author rightly stresses that this striking foreignness is a pivotal methodological determinant when considering his theology.

In order to get a clearer sense of the formative influences on Bhaktivedānta Svāmi's choice of theological vocabulary and conceptual translation when communicating his orthodox tradition to this foreign audience, the author touches upon the initial colonial/missionary context of Hindu studies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here he pays specific attention to Prabhupada's missionary teacher Urquhart, whom the former respected greatly and by whom he was influenced in various ways. The revisionistic Hindu apologetic strategies of response that these associations provoked are well known, but the important role Bhaktivedānta Svāmi's immediate lineage predecessors played in the reclaiming and remarketing of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition—his *guru* Bhaktisiddhānta

Sarasvatī, founder of the Gauḍīya Maṭh in colonial Bengal, and the latter's father, Bhaktivinoda Thākura—have only very recently begun to receive scholarly attention. Goswami uncovers all such progressive layerings of formative influences on Bhaktivedānta's orientations, especially given the neo-*advaita* inclinations of his and his predecessors' contemporaries. And, of course, he also analyzes the counter-culture context Bhaktivedānta encountered in the West, with its Abrahamic-derived conceptual structure in matters of religion, as well as the neo-*advaita* associations of transplanted Hinduism in America.

Goswami traces the effects that these contexts and associations had on the language Bhaktivedānta uses in translating certain key terms and concepts from the centuries-old tradition into English, and highlights the aspects he chose to emphasize. In particular, Goswami identifies and probes the semantic rational underpinning of what he considers to be the underlying root metaphor expressed in the (at first glance rather inelegant) phraseology: "Krishna the Supreme Personality of Godhead." This functions as a *mahavākya* key element in Bhaktivedānta's systematics that is ubiquitous in his writing. He identifies its source as what the sixteenth-century theologians of both the Gauḍīya and Vallabha schools considered to be the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s key ontological verse (*parībhāṣa sūtra*), as it is upon this that the ultimate supremacy of Kṛṣṇa over other Īśvara candidates rests: Kṛṣṇa's *tu bhagavān svayam* (1.3.18). But the author's main concern is to excavate how Bhaktivedānta, as composer of such phrases, is very meticulously crafting their semantic segments in response to his environment. In this case, the phrase is a loaded theological response to Christian monotheistic exclusiveness on the one hand, coupled with the disproportionate over-representation afforded to *Advaita Vedānta* as the impersonal public face of Hinduism on the other.

While Goswami is very clear about his own insider location, he has engaged the academic encounter and its ideals of scrupulous objectivity with committed integrity. I think it is important to note with regards to status that Goswami's role is perhaps the most influential of Bhaktivedānta's direct disciples. At the same time, he has had impeccable academic training at Cambridge University, and it shows: he navigates effortlessly through current literary theory on the topic of metaphor when theorizing Prabhupada's *mahavākya*, to cite just one example, with admirable penetrative insight. As he notes, he is on the "inside, though trained to look from the outside in." Goswami's untimely demise is thus a loss for both the tradition and our academic field of religion. I trust it will not be deemed inappropriate if this review has some epitaphic flavorings, as Goswami tragically died before completing the concluding chapter of the book (in lieu of which his friend and academic colleague Graham Schweig graciously penned some conclusory reflections, in addition to an appropriate introduction). The Hare Krishna Movement, although the most publicly visible of the Hindu sects to arrive on Western shores in the 1960s, was ironically—at least in its early decades—probably also the most intellectually insulated. Goswami stepped outside of the security of his traditional paradigm, and it is clear he hoped scholars would do likewise and engage with the movement's theology—as heir to a long-standing and vital living tradition—and not just the sociocultural excesses of its early immature transplantation phase. Just

as importantly, by fully applying with scholarly integrity and rigor the normative vocabularies, theoretical systems, and methodological structures of the academic study of religion to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, Goswami sets a superlative example for other intellectually inclined members of the movement interested in communicating with any mainstream academic field of knowledge.

Goswami too, like his master, was a “dextrous hermeneute,” mediating between two radically disparate spheres (in his case, intellectual ones) and exhibiting great integrity in his dedication towards bringing them into dialogue. He was a constant fixture at the American Academy of Religion, where he engendered respect for his openness to scholarly dialogue and for his sheer intellectual acumen. As a spokesperson for ISKCON, he had equipped himself with the academic language and theoretical conceptual tools with which to carve out a clearer access through the maze of sectarian discourse associated with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and create a respectable niche for the tradition in the community of scholars of religion.

His intention was also to build theological bridges with other traditions, especially those of theistic temperament (27). The provincial idea, for example, that monotheism is an exclusive preserve of the Abrahamic traditions is still widely prevalent, despite having long outlived its shelf life, but part of the reason for such myopia is the absence of spokespersons and dialog partners from the Hindu monotheistic traditions willing to open channels of communication within the field of religion and to equip themselves with the requisite academic training to do so. *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti* makes an outstanding contribution in this regard, representing a sophisticated example of how rigorous historical and contextual work can be conducted by practitioner scholars. The author hoped his study would “lay the foundation for a future constructive scholarship that, while selecting and exploring questions, acknowledges the theology from which they emerge.” This his book certainly has done, and we can only lament that the author will not continue constructing the edifice for which it provides such a solid cornerstone.

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