SRI RADHASHTAMI 2012
His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Founder-Acharya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, came to America in 1965, at age 69, to fulfill his spiritual master’s request that he teach the science of Krishna consciousness throughout the English-speaking world. In a dozen years he published some seventy volumes of translation and commentary on India’s Vedic literature, and these are now standard in universities worldwide. Meanwhile, travelling almost nonstop, Srila Prabhupada moulded his international society into a world wide confederation of ashrams, schools, temples and farm communities. He passed away in 1977, in Vrindavana, the place most sacred to Lord Krishna. His disciples and followers are carrying forward the movement he started.
Victory Over Death

Though beautiful, the setting sun represents the passing of our days and the steady march to our final appointment.

By His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada
Founder-Acharya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness

A lecture given in Los Angeles, June 12, 1972

ayur harati vai pumsam udyann astam ca yann asau
tasyante yat-ksano nita uttama-sloka-vartaya

"Both by rising and by setting, the sun decreases the duration of life of everyone, except one who utilizes the time by discussing topics of the all-good Personality of Godhead."

—Srimad-Bhagavatam 2.3.17

The sunrise and sunset decrease our life. This is a very nice example. The sun's business is to take away a portion of your span of life. But it cannot take away the life of a devotee, because a devotee is going to live. The Krishna consciousness movement is meant to give the living entity a permanent span of life.

When a man becomes diseased, the physician tries to get him relief from the infection. Our material body is an infection. Actually, we spiritual souls have no death. Death is due to this infection, the body. This infection is called "dirty things." Actually the body is dirt. "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." That's a fact. Because as soon as I, the soul, leave this body, it will be immediately decomposed, and after a few days it will be earth, dust. So actually it is dirt. And we have to cleanse this dirt from our real identity—spiritual life. The cleansing is very nicely done simply by hearing the message of Uttama-sloka, or Krishna. You haven't got to scratch the soul with some machine. No. It will automatically be cleansed if you simply give aural reception to the message of Uttama-sloka, which is called krishna-katha.

Krishna-katha means the words of Krishna. Katha means words. In the Bhagavad-gita, Krishna is personally giving us words of instruction. If we simply read the Bhagavad-gita, then the sun cannot take away our duration of life.

What is the proof? We find the proof in the Bhagavad-gita, where Lord Krishna says, janma karma ca me divyam evam yo vetti tattvatah: "Anyone who understands My birth and appearance does not take birth again." The Lord Himself does not take birth. He is Aja, "one who never takes birth—ever-existing." But still we see that Krishna is taking birth. We are observing the birth anniversary of Lord Krishna. This is a mystery. Krishna does not take birth, and still we are observing the birth anniversary of Krishna, Janmastami. So this is to be understood in truth—tattvatah.

The Vedas say, na tasya karyam karanam ca vidyate: "The Supreme Lord has nothing to do." Why should He have to do anything? Yet we see that from the day of His appearance at His maternal uncle's prison till His going back to His own abode, Krishna was always active, especially in killing the demons. But the demons could be killed without the presence of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. If there is a little earthquake, millions of demons can be killed. It is not a very difficult job. If the Pacific Ocean floods this city, millions of people can be killed. If there is a war, millions of people can be killed. If there is an epidemic, millions of people can be killed. So Krishna does not come to kill the demons. Rather, Krishna's many agents can kill the demons without any difficulty.

But He comes. Lord Narasimha did not appear in order to kill the demon Hiranyakasipu. He could have been killed otherwise. But the Lord appeared for Prahlada. Prahlada Maharaja was being so much teased and tortured. The Lord could not tolerate it. He wanted to show His devotee, "I shall kill your torturer in front of you." That was His purpose. He did not appear for killing Hiranyakasipu. He appeared to give encouragement to Prahlada Maharaja. As Lord Krishna says, kaunteya pratijanihi na me bhaktah pranasyati: He asks Arjuna, "My dear Arjuna, you declare that My devotee will never be vanquished." So therefore He comes. These are the understandings of the Supreme Personality of Godhead in toto.

We were discussing krishna-katha, the words of Krishna. Every Vedic literature is krishna-katha. But two books are especially krishna-katha: Bhagavad-gita—Krishna directly speaking; and Srimad-Bhagavatam—directly spoken about Krishna.

Here it is said uttama-sloka vartaya. Varta means message, words. If we pass our time simply by reading and talking about Krishna, then the sun will not be able to take away our life. This is the secret. If you want to become
immortal, then always be engaged in krishna-katha. Always, twenty-four hours—think of Krishna. This is Krishna consciousness.

Everyone is dying, but those who are engaged in krishna-katha, in Krishna consciousness, those who are busy in Krishna’s business, they are not dying. They are living. How? Because the span of life of the ordinary man is being taken away by the sunrise and sunset every day. If a man is fifty years old, fifty years has already been taken away by the sun. It will never come back.

“But what about the devotee? He is also the same. His life is being taken away.”

No. His life is not being taken away, because he is going to live. Superficially we see that the body of a devotee is also taken away. But this is not the real body. The real body is the spiritual body. Krishna says, tyaktva deham punar janma naiti mam eti: “After giving up this body, he does not take birth. He comes to Me.” So who comes to Him? The self.

Materialistic persons, so-called scientists, philosophers—they do not know that the body is the cover of the self. The real self, the real person, goes to Krishna to live forever. Those who are devotees, those who are in Krishna consciousness, they are giving up this infected body and getting their original, spiritual body.

Therefore, as soon as you get the spiritual body, the sun has no power to take it away. That is explained in the Bhagavad-gita: “Fire cannot burn it, weapons cannot kill it, water cannot moisten it ...” Spirit cannot be destroyed by anything material. This body is matter. It can be cut into pieces. But the spirit soul cannot be. The body can be burnt into ashes, but the spirit soul cannot be.

The modern scientists say there is no life on the sun planet. But that is not a fact. What is the sun? It is a fiery planet, that’s all. But the spirit soul can live in the fire, and on the sun he gets a fiery body. Here on this planet, on earth, we have these earthly bodies. They may be very beautiful, but they are earth. Someone showed me some plastic trees, exactly resembling real trees. But they are not trees. Similarly, this body is as good as a plastic body. It has no value.

Krishna speaks of our giving up the body, but the body is like a plastic body. “Giving up the body” is like giving up a cotton shirt or a plastic shirt. That does not mean you die. That is also explained in the Bhagavad-gita: vacamsi jirnani yatha vihaya... As one gives up an old garment for a new one, similarly, death means to give up this plastic body and take another plastic body. And with that plastic body you have to work again. If you get a nice body, then you can work nicely. If you get a dog’s body, then you act like dog.

Krishna says, “Anyone who understands Me in truth will not take birth again.” So how will you understand Krishna? Simply hear about Him; then you will understand. Hearing is not difficult. But you must hear from the realized soul. If you hear from a professional man, that will not be effective. Hearing must be from a sadhu, a devotee, just as Maharaja Parikshit heard from Shukadeva Gosvami.

Even if you read books, you will save your life. If you simply read Krishna book or the Bhagavad-gita or Teachings of Lord Chaitanya, then the sun is unable to take your life. If you constantly read, where is the opportunity of the sun’s taking your life? That means you are becoming immortal.

People are very much anxious to become immortal. Nobody wants to die. Everyone knows, “I shall die.” But if there is some danger—say, fire—immediately everyone will go away from this room. Why? I do not wish to die. I know I must die, so why do I go away? I could think, “Oh, let there be fire. I have to die today or tomorrow. Let me die.” No. I do not wish to die. Therefore I go away. This is the psychology.

Everyone wants to live forever. That’s a fact. So if you want to live forever, then you have to take to Krishna consciousness. This verse confirms it. Ayur harati vai pumsam udyann astam ca yann asau. The sun is rising early in the morning. As it is rising, gradually it is taking your life. That’s all. That is its business. But if you want to defeat the sun ... The sun is very powerful. It is very difficult to fight. But you can fight with the sun. How? Simply by reading krishna-katha, the words of Krishna.

This is the simple process. Don’t waste your time talking nonsense. Rupa Gosvami has advised,

atyaharah prayasas ca prajalpo niyamagrahah
jana-sangas ca laulyam ca saddhir bhaktir vinasyati

Our devotional life can be finished, or baffled, by six things. Those in devotional life, Krishna consciousness, are fortunate. This fortune can be ruined by six things. Be careful. Atyahara means eating more than necessary or collecting more than necessary. Ahara means collecting. We require to collect some money, but we should not collect more than necessary. Because if I get more money, then immediately Maya will say, “Why don’t you spend
Ahara also means eating. Don't eat more than necessary. Actually, we have to come to the point of nil—no eating, sleeping, mating, and defending. Of course, that is not possible because we have the body, but we must try to keep these activities to the minimum.

Prayasah means unnecessarily spoiling our energy. We should not take great risks so that we have to work very seriously. We must accept something which can be easily done.

Prajalpa means talking nonsense. This is the nature of the living entity in the conditioned state. Just as when crows gather together—caw caw caw caw ... [Laughter.] The frogs—any living entity—as soon as they gather, they talk all nonsense. Don't do that. We have a great assembly. We have facility for mixing. But don't take advantage of this assembly and talk all nonsense—"What is the politics?" "What is this?" "What is that?" That is called prajalpa.

Niyamagrahah means not accepting the rules and regulations. Niyamagrahah also means blindly following the rules and regulations.

So, one, atyahara; two, prayasa; three, prajalpa; four, niyamagrahah; five, laulyam, greediness; and six, janasangah. Jana-sangah means to associate with ordinary men, those who have no sense of Krishna consciousness—the so-called karmis, jnaris, and yogis. They do not understand Krishna. Or scientists and philosophers—we should not associate with them. Because we know, harav abhaktasya kuto mahad-guna. Anyone who does not understand Krishna and Krishna's service, even though he may be very big man in the ordinary estimation, we don't give him any value. Because persons such as him are mental speculators. They have no value. They have value in their own way, but according to our line of thought, they have no value.

There is a tendency to talk, so talk of Krishna. That is Krishna consciousness. We assemble together, a few friends, and we want to vibrate some sound. The child is also vibrating sound. That is nature. A bird will vibrate; a beast will vibrate. So we have to vibrate transcendental sound. Then we shall be saved from the plundering business of the sun.

This is the secret. Always talk of Krishna, and you must know that you are saving yourself. You are not dying. Because talking of Krishna means you will understand Krishna. And Krishna says, "Anyone who understands Me rightly, then after giving up this body he comes to Me." And as soon as you go to Him, back to home, back to Godhead, your life is eternal, blissful, and full of knowledge.

Why should we lose this opportunity? The most rascal persons give up this opportunity. They do not take advantage of krishna-katha. Therefore the scriptures say, smartavyah satatam vishnur vismartavyo na jatucit. We have to remember Vishnu always, everywhere.

This is the process of Krishna consciousness. We have to hear about Krishna, we have to chant about Krishna, we have to remember Krishna, and we have to worship Krishna. This is our movement. We are worshipping Krishna in the temple, we are thinking of Him, we are talking about Him, and we are hearing about Him.

These things do not require any monetary exchange or any high education. Everyone can hear about Krishna. After hearing, everyone can talk about Krishna. And while hearing and talking, everyone can remember Krishna. And everyone can worship in the temple. Where is the difficulty? By prosecuting these four principles of Krishna consciousness, you become immortal. No austerity, no penance, no education, no riches. Simply by following these four principles, you become immortal.

This verse is very important. If you have spare time, don't sit idly. If there is no facility for reading books or talking about Krishna, chant Hare Krishna. Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare. Always be busy with Krishna. The sun will not be able to kill you. You are going to live forever.

Thank you very much.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fasting</th>
<th>Festivals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oct 11</td>
<td>Ekadashi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 12</td>
<td>break fast</td>
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<td>Oct 25</td>
<td>Ekadashi</td>
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<td>Oct 26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 10</td>
<td>Ekadashi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 11</td>
<td>break fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 24</td>
<td>Dusshera Festival (in Mysore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 25</td>
<td>Fourth month of Chaturmasya begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fasting from Urad dal for one month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 25</td>
<td>Karthika month starts, Deepotsava begins</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 14</td>
<td>Govardhana Puja, Go Puja</td>
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The Vedic Definition of "Demon"

Here we continue an exchange between His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and some of his disciples. It took place in Los Angeles, on the morning of December 13, 1973, during a walk along the Pacific shore.

Srila Prabhupada: Human life is meant for realizing the inner self, the soul—and for realizing the Supreme Self, Krishna. But thanks to your scientists and politicians, this great prerogative of human life is being denied to human society. So these hindrances should be stopped, because human society is being ruined.

That is why I was inquiring, "Why has America gone to Vietnam?" You replied, "To stop communism." But that sort of stopping will not make any solution. We have to stop this demoniac civilization. Then human society will be happy and in its normal condition.

Disciple: But, Srila Prabhupada, as soon as we define what demoniac civilization is, then people will be offended. They'll see that by the Vedic definition, people who gamble, have illicit sex, take intoxicants, and eat flesh—people like themselves—are demons. So they'll be offended.

Srila Prabhupada: Yes. Because people have themselves become demons, they cannot understand what a demon is.

For instance, a Christian priest went to preach to some mine workers, and he was explaining, "If you do not worship Lord Jesus Christ, you will go to hell." So the mine workers asked, "What is hell?"

But when the priest explained—"Hell is wet and dark, with no sufficient air," and so on—the mine workers could not understand how horrible hell is. Why? Because by working in the mine, they were already agreeing to be in hell. So they no longer had the discretion to realize, "Oh, always wet and dark, without enough air—that is a very horrible thing."

Similarly, in today's world these demons no longer have the discretion to realize what demonism is. Asurasam bhavam asritah: they have already agreed to live in the mood of demonism. What is this asura-bhava, this mood of demonism? Not to accept God. This is asura-bhava.

This is the basic principle of demonism. Ignore the soul and God and God's laws; gamble, take intoxicants, have illicit sex, and slaughter God's other creatures and eat their flesh. So in this way, nearly all people have agreed to deny God. Therefore, they have become demons.

Disciple: These days, Srila Prabhupada, people don't want to hear a bona fide spiritual authority. They don't care much about what you're offering: the science of the soul and the Supreme Soul. Most prefer to hear some mundane, so-called scientist and make him their authority.

Srila Prabhupada: Yes. But the so-called scientist does not understand, "What is that special thing which, when missing, makes this body dead?" Still, he is holding himself up as a big authority, and foolish people are accepting him as such. This is demonism.

When somebody is dying, this great scientist cannot actually explain why. He may advocate various scientific countermeasures,
whether oxygen or heart massage or injections or this or that. But despite all these things, he finds that suddenly the man is dead.

When you ask the great scientist, "In spite of all your scientific countermeasures, why is the man dead?" he can say nothing. And still, he has become a great authority—even though he is so foolish that he cannot explain why, despite all his countermeasures, the man is dead. Now, what will he answer? He has seen all his scientific countermeasures applied—but the man is dead. So let him explain why the man is dead. Can he explain?

**Disciple:** Not to our satisfaction.

**Srila Prabhupada:** Satisfaction or no satisfaction. What will the great scientific authority answer? What he will say?

**Disciple:** He will say, "Counteracting death is beyond my means."

**Srila Prabhupada** *(as if to the great scientist):* Therefore, you are a fool. How can you dare to hold yourself up as an authority?

**Disciple** *(in the role of the scientist):* I have tried my best to counteract death, but I cannot.

**Srila Prabhupada:** All right. That means you do not know. A child also tries his best to do things but cannot. This does not mean he becomes a big authority.

**Disciple:** Well, Srila Prabhupada, the great scientist will say that for the sustenance of life, there are certain conditions.

**Srila Prabhupada:** That is not an answer. What are those "certain conditions"? That answer is vague. You must tell us, Mr. Scientist: What, precisely, are those "certain conditions" that sustain life? Only then are you an authority.

**Disciple** *(again playing the scientist):* Well, for one thing, there has to be an electrical charge in the heart.

**Srila Prabhupada** *(to the scientist):* Then provide the electrical charge. Do it. Electricity is available.

**Disciple:** Well, for some persons whose hearts have stopped, medical personnel apply electrical nodes to the heart and seemingly bring the persons back to life.

**Srila Prabhupada:** "Back to life." For how long?

**Disciple:** Life can continue.

**Srila Prabhupada:** Continue forever?

**Disciple:** Well, no.

**Srila Prabhupada:** So? The person will still die. This brief continuing of life—that is another thing. The person will still die.

Now, why will he die? What is that condition which produces death? If you say, as a chemist, "Well, death comes about because the chemical condition has changed," then we shall reply, "Essentially, the chemical condition has remained unchanged. After all, immediately after someone's body has died, life will still come out. So many germs and worms—they will come out."

So how can you say, "The chemical condition that produces life has changed"? How can you say that? The thing is, the specific life we called "Mr. John" has gone away and is not coming back. That "Mr. John"—that specific living entity—is not coming back. Therefore, that specific living entity is totally different from matter; he is a totally distinct, totally spiritual entity, a soul.

**Disciple:** So, Srila Prabhupada, we can distinguish that the soul who goes away from the material body has nothing to do with the worms and germs that go on living in the body after death. But before the soul goes away from the material body, does he have something to do with the innumerable souls who live within the body's cells? I think that in the past you've said each cell contains a distinct and individual soul.

**Srila Prabhupada:** Yes, I said that.

**Disciple:** So, during the time before the "main soul" goes away from the body, could we say that these other souls living in the cell structures are supporting that one particular soul?

**Srila Prabhupada:** No. They are living their own individual lives, irrespective of that particular soul. For instance, there are many germs living in some person's, say Mr. John's, stool. Why are those germs living there? Simply because stool is their ideal place for living; that's all. But those germs have nothing to do with that particular soul, Mr. John.

**Disciple:** But it looks as if I am the proprietor of these other souls living in my body's cells.

**Srila Prabhupada:** No, no. You are not the proprietor. No one here is a proprietor. Even if your current condition may seem like that of a proprietor, you have been placed into that condition by God. So the real proprietor is God. You are simply placed into that somewhat privileged condition; that's all. You are not the proprietor—you are dependent on the condition offered by God.

**Disciple:** But for example, Srila Prabhupada, in an office the boss is working and there are various secretaries and clerks helping him.

**Srila Prabhupada:** Yes. But in your example, the real boss is the chief man who is assigning the work: "You work like that. You work like this. You work in this other way."

**Disciple:** So I am the boss.

**Srila Prabhupada:** No. You are not the boss. You are also one of the workers.
In Vivekananda Swami's famous lecture on Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions in 1893, he began by outlining some of the salient features of traditional Hinduism. He mentioned karma, reincarnation, and the problem of evil in the material world. He went on to explain that the solution to this problem depends on seeking refuge in God. God is that one “by whose command the wind blows, the fire burns, the clouds rain, and death stalks upon the earth.” He is the source of strength and the support of the universe. He is everywhere, pure, almighty, and all-merciful. And we are related to God as a child to a father or mother and as a friend to a beloved friend.

Vivekananda said that we are to worship God through unselfish love, and he pointed out that the way to achieving love of God was “fully developed and taught by Krishna, whom the Hindus believe to have been God incarnate on earth.” Through love we are to perfect ourselves, reach God, see God, and enjoy bliss with God. On this, he said, all Hindus are agreed.

But he went on to say that in the final stage of realization, God is seen to be impersonal Brahman. The individual then ends separate existence by realizing his identity with Brahman. Making an analogy with physical science, he said, “Physics would stop when it would be able to fulfill its services in discovering one energy of which all the others are but manifestations, and the science of religion [would] become perfect when it would discover ... One who is the only Soul of which all souls are but delusive manifestations.”

The Pros and Cons of Pure Monism
Vivekananda’s strictly monistic concept of God has a long history. The idea has always been linked with the rational, speculative approach to reality. For example, in the fifth century B.C., the Greek philosopher Parmenides concluded by speculative arguments that “only One Thing can possibly exist and that this One Thing is uncreated, unchangeable, indescribable, and immovable. Plurality, creation, change, destruction, and motion are mere appearances.”

Parmenides argued that the One must have no parts distinct from one another, for otherwise it would be not One but many. Thus he concluded that the One must be a sphere of perfectly uniform substance. But even a sphere has an inside and an outside, and so it is marked by duality, not oneness. The idea of absolute oneness, or pure monism, may seem alluring, but it requires us to discard from the One as unthinkable Absolute sometimes turns out useful in the modern age. Vivekananda was born in Calcutta in 1863 as Narendranath Datta, and he grew up during the high noon of British dominance in India. During this period, European rationalism, based on the famous French Enlightenment, made a strong impact on India. Reformers like Rammohan Roy and Devendranath Tagore founded the Brahmo Samaj in an effort to revive Hinduism and make it compatible with modern Western thinking. This effort required the solving of two problems: (1) the problem of religious plurality and (2) the problem of the clash between modern science and old religious beliefs.

The old philosophy of pure monism, or advaita, is well suited to solve these problems. First of all, if religious imagery has only a symbolic meaning that refers to something inconceivable, then many different systems of symbols should work equally well. In this way, all major religious systems can be reconciled. This was Vivekananda’s idea, and he greatly stressed the equality of all religions.

Likewise, if religious imagery is simply symbolic, then there is no question of a conflict between religion and science. A religious story that seems to conflict with established scientific facts can simply be interpreted as a symbolic clue pointing to the One beyond the grasp of the finite scientific mind. Vivekananda also mentioned that the stark simplicity of the impersonal Brahman fits with the simplicity sought by physicists in their hoped-for Grand Unified Theory of nature.

But in pure monism, what becomes of love of God, or indeed, love of anyone? If the ultimate reality is pure oneness, and personal existence is illusory, then love is also illusory. Love requires two, and not just two of anything. Two persons are needed for a relationship of love. If such relationships do have spiritual reality, then at least two spiritual persons must eternally exist. In traditional Hindu thought, there are, in fact, two categories of eternal persons: (1) the jiva souls that live in individual material bodies and (2) the original Supreme Personality of Godhead and His countless spiritual expansions. As Vivekananda pointed out, Hindus believe that the Supreme Being incarnated on earth as Krishna, who expounded on the ways of loving devotional reciprocity between Himself and individual jiva souls.

Unfortunately, after making this point, Vivekananda rejected both Krishna and the individual soul as illusory. In his monistic approach to religion, all conceivable features of the Absolute are ruled out. Beingness, knowledge, and bliss are three, and they must be discarded from the One as earthbound misconceptions. The same is true of the might and mercy of the Lord. Likewise, if the real truth is absolute oneness, all personal relationships of admiration, friendship, parental love, or conjugal love must be given up as delusions.

The Vaishnava Alternative given by Bhaktivinoda Thakura
It is natural then to ask if some other solution is available to the problems posed when modern rational thought meets the multiplicity of religious systems. To explore this, I now turn to the life of Bhaktivinoda Thakura, a contemporary of Swami Vivekananda.
able to obtain the commentary Chaitanya had given on the Bhagavata to the advaita Vedantists of Benares. This created in him a great love for the devotional teachings of Krishna as presented by Chaitanya. In due course he achieved an exalted state of spiritual realization by following Chaitanya's teachings, and he wrote many books presenting those teachings to people both in India and abroad.

A Historical Interlude

Before we go into Bhaktivinoda Thakura's spiritual teachings, let me give an explicit idea of the intellectual climate in which he was operating in late nineteenth-century Bengal. To do this, I will quote a passage from the writings of Sir William Jones, a jurist who worked for the British East India company and was the first president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. In an article on Hindu chronology written in 1788, Jones gave the following account of the close of Dvapara-yuga, the Third Age of the Puranas and the Mahabharata:

"I cannot leave the third Indian age, in which the virtues and vices of mankind are said to have been equal, without observing, that even the close of it is manifestly fabulous and poetical, with hardly more appearance of historical truth, than the tale of Troy, or of the Argonauts; for Yudhisthira, it seems, was the son of Dherma, the Genius of Justice; Bhima of Pavan, or the God of Wind; Arjun of Indra, or the Firmament; Nacul and Sahadeva of the Cumars, the Castor and Pollux of India; and Bhishma, their reputed great uncle, was the child of Ganga, or the Ganges, by Santanu, whose brother Devapi is supposed to be still alive in the city of Calapa; all which fictions may be charming embellishments of an heroic poem, but are just as absurd in civil History, as the descent of two royal families from the Sun and the Moon."

What Jones is referring to here is the story in the Mahabharata of events in India at the time of Krishna's advent. According to Hindu tradition, these events took place about five thousand years ago, when the Dvapara-yuga gave way to the present epoch, called the Kali-yuga. Yudhisthira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva are the five Pandava brothers who figured in many of Krishna's pastimes.

We can see from Jones's comments that he does not regard the story of the Pandavas as true history. Why not? For many of us, the problem is that the story contains elements simply not credible to a person trained in the modern rational viewpoint. We know that people don't descend from demigods. All documents putting forth such nonsense are rejected by responsible historians, so objective historical accounts hold no such absurdities. Such things never happened, and our history books abundantly confirm this.

Sir William Jones was clearly thinking along these lines, but he was not exactly a modern rationalist. Jones was a Christian who believed fully in the Mosaic chronology of the Bible. Jones attempted to reconstruct Hindu chronology to bring it in line with Christian. Jones, it seems, was able to scorn Hindu myths as absurd while at the same time accepting as true the supernatural events of the Bible.

It is perhaps poetic justice that the same scornful treatment Jones applied to the Mahabharata was soon applied to the Bible. During Jones's lifetime, the "higher" scientific criticism of the Bible was being developed in Germany, and it was unleashed in England in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1860, the Anglican theologians Benjamin Jowett and Baden Powell stole attention from Darwin's newly published book On the Origin of Species by a controversial essay that rejected miracles, on scientific grounds. The Darwinists and the higher Biblical critics quickly joined forces, and Darwin's supporter Thomas Huxley began quoting German Biblical scholars in his essays on the interpretation of Genesis. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, rational, scientific skepticism became the only acceptable path for a scholar or intellectual in any respectable field of study.

The Bhagavata

Bhaktivinoda Thakura was confronted with this hostile intellectual climate in his efforts to present spiritual knowledge to the young Bengali intellectuals of his day. After drinking in from their British teachers the ideas of William Jones and other Western orientalists, these young people were not at all inclined to give credence to old myths. How then could the teachings of Krishna on love of God be presented? Bhaktivinoda Thakura judiciously chose to give a partial picture of the truth that would introduce important spiritual ideas without invoking rejection due to deep-seated prejudices.

In a lecture delivered in Dinajpur, West Bengal, in 1869, he focused on the Bhagavata, or Bhagavata Purana, as the preeminent text on the nature of the Supreme and the means of realizing our relation with the Supreme. Rejecting pure monism as a useless idea, he held that God is an eternal person. Thus he said, "The Bhagavata has ... a Transcendental, Personal, All-intelligent, Active, absolutely Free, Holy, Good, All-powerful, Omnispresent, Just and Merciful and supremely Spiritual Deity without a second, creating, preserving all that is in the universe." The highest object of the soul, he went on to say, is to "serve that Infinite Being for ever spiritually in the activity of Absolute Love."

Bhaktivinoda described the material world as the product of maya. Here maya means not illusion but the eternal energy of the Supreme that He uses to bewilder souls who desire to live outside of harmony with Him. The creation of the material world through maya is actually an aspect of the Lord's mercy, since He thereby allows
independent-minded souls to act in a world from which God is apparently absent.

All these ideas are taken from the Bhagavata without modification. But in describing what the Bhagavata says about the details of the material universe, Bhaktivinoda Thakura adopted an indirect approach. Thus he said, "In the common-place books of the Hindu religion in which the Raja and Tama Gunas have been described as the ways of religion, we find description of a local heaven and a local hell; the heaven is as beautiful as anything on earth and the Hell as ghastly as any picture of evil. ... The religion of the Bhagavat is free from such a poetic imagination. Indeed, in some of the chapters we meet with descriptions of these hells and heavens, and accounts of curious tales, but we have been warned in some place in the book, not to accept them as real facts, but to treat them as inventions to overawe the wicked and to improve the simple and the ignorant."

In fact, the Bhagavata does ascribe reality to hells and heavens and their inhabitants. It describes in great detail the higher planetary systems and the various demigods who live there, including Brahma, Shiva, and Indra. Not only does the Bhagavata say that these beings are real, but it gives them an important role in the creation and maintenance of the universe. It also gives them a role in many of Krishna's manifest pastimes (lilas) within the material world. For example, in the story of the lifting of Govardhana Hill, it is Indra who creates a devastating storm when Krishna insults him by interfering with a sacrifice in his honor.

Bhaktivinoda Thakura chose to sidestep these "mythological" aspects of the Bhagavata in an effort to reach an audience of intellectuals whose mundane education ruled out such myths as absurd fantasy. Indeed, he went even further. In 1880 he published a treatise entitled Sri Krishna Samhita in which he elaborately explained the philosophy of Krishna consciousness. In this book he also put forth a reconstruction of Indian history similar to the one introduced by Sir William Jones to bring Hindu chronology into line with the Mosaic timetable of the Bible. This involved converting demigods and Manus into human kings and reducing their total span of history to a few thousand earthly years.

I should point out clearly that Bhaktivinoda Thakura did not personally accept the modified version of the Bhagavata he presented to the Bengali intellectuals. He actually accepted the so-called myths of the Bhagavata as true, and he presented them as such in many of his writings. For example, in his book Jaiva Dharma, Bhaktivinoda said this:

"I have said that the Vaishnava religion came into being as soon as the creatures came into existence. Brahma was the first Vaishnava. Sriman Mahadeva is also a Vaishnava. The ancient Prajapaties are all Vaishnavas. Sri Narada Goswami, who is the fancy-born child of Brahma, is a Vaishnava.... You have seen the Vaishnava religion of the beginning of the creation. Then again when Gods, men, demons, etc., have been separately described, we get Prahlada and Dhuvara from the very start.... Manu's sons and Prahlada are all grandsons of Prajapati, Kashyapa.... There is no doubt about it ... that the pure Vaishnava religion began with the beginning of history. Then the kings of the solar and lunar dynasties and all great and famous sages and hermits became devotees of Vishnu."

This passage was written in response to challengers who argued that Vaishnava dharma is a recent development. The passage takes it for granted that beings such as Brahma, Mahadeva, Narada, and Prahlada literally exist as described in the shastras, or Vedic scriptures. Many similar examples can be found in Bhaktivinoda Thakura's writings.

Now, if Bhaktivinoda Thakura accepted the literal truth of the shastras, how could he justify making presentations in which he denied it? His grand-disciple Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada has pointed out that there is a precedent for making such indirect presentations of shastra. An interpretation of a text that adheres directly to the dictionary definitions of its words is called mukhya-vrtti, and an imaginary or indirect interpretation is called laksana-vrtti or gauna-vrtti. Srila Prabhupada pointed out, "Sometimes ... as a matter of necessity, Vedic literature is described in terms of the laksana-vrtti or gauna-vrtti, but one should not accept such explanations as permanent truths." In general, one should understand shastra in terms of mukhya-vrtti.

The Theology of Visions

One might grant that Bhaktivinoda Thakura was justified in modifying the shastras to reach out to intellectuals trained to scorn old myths. But serious questions can still be raised: What is the scope for making such a presentation of religion today, and to what extent can such a presentation be regarded as true? Is the mythological material in the Hindu shastras unimportant, so that one might present it as true to people who believe in it and false to people who disbelieve? Or should we accept from modern knowledge that Hindu myths really are false and try to formulate a philosophy that preserves the essential idea of love of God while dispensing with superannuated ideas?

To answer these questions, let us see how we would have to reformulate Vaishnava philosophy to make it readily acceptable to Western intellectuals in the late twentieth century. To do this we must deviate to some extent from the prevailing materialistic framework of modern science. Physical scientists tell us that the mind, with all its conscious experiences, is simply a product of the brain. If we accept this, then all religious
experience, whether it be the bliss of Brahman or prema-bhakti, love of God, is simply hallucinatory. If this is true, we can forget about religion—unless, of course, we like hallucinations.

For an alternative viewpoint, I will turn to the psychologist William James. Although James was a man of the nineteenth century, he was a Western scientist who applied the methods of empirical scientific research to the phenomena of religion. Thus his observations are still relevant today.

As a result of his studies, James reached the following conclusions:

“The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely "understandable" world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose.... Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects with-in another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal.”

One could take this idea of a mystical or transcendent dimension and arrive at the following version of Vaishnava philosophy: Such a transcendent region does exist, and it is the eternal abode of Krishna. Advanced souls can perceive that realm in meditation by the grace of Krishna, and so they are able to enter into Krishna's eternal loving pastimes. But all Puranic descriptions of events within the material world have to be understood rationally through modern scientific knowledge. On the whole, the myths in the Puranas are not literally true. But the stories of Krishna's pastimes are not simply fantasy. Rather, they are spiritual transmissions into the meditative minds of great souls, and they refer not to this world but to the purely transcendental domain.

This is a philosophy that might appeal to many, and I will refer to it as the theology of visions. It allows one to retain the idea of love of God, while at the same time avoiding disturbing conflicts between mythological tales and modern knowledge. It also appears implicitly in the work of some modern scholars of religion who study the bhakti tradition.

To illustrate this, I will briefly consider an article, "Shrines of the Mind," by David Haberman, Assistant Professor of Religion at Williams College. In this article, Haberman argues that Vraja, the traditional place of Krishna's manifest lilas, is first and foremost a mental shrine, a realm that can be entered and experienced in meditation. He argues that the physical Vraja, a tract of land near the North Indian city of Mathura, has only been a major center for the worship of Krishna since the sixteenth century, when the followers of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and other Vaishnavas "rediscovered" the lost sites of Krishna's pastimes. In fact, says Haberman, these sites never really existed before the sixteenth century, and so they weren't rediscovered. Rather, they were projected onto the physical landscape of Vraja from the transcendental landscape perceived in meditation.

Haberman gives a number of interpretations of what happens when a person meditates on a mental shrine. These range from the contemplation of imaginary scenes in the ordinary sense to entry into "an eternal transcendent world which is perceptible only to the mind's eye and is reached through meditative technique." Since Haberman seems to lean toward the latter, it could be said that he is hinting at a version of the theology of visions: One can enter into Krishna's transcendent world by meditation, but Krishna never had any actual pastimes in the physical world. Physical, worldly history followed the lines revealed by modern scholarship. This means that many centuries ago in Vraja there may have been various primitive tribes following animistic cults, but there was no Krishna literally lifting Govardhana Hill.

Although this religious theory allows one to avoid certain conflicts with modern scholarship, it does have a number of drawbacks. A few of these are the following:

1. This theory is contrary to Vaishnava tradition, so it calls into question the thinking of the many great souls who have supported the tradition. Since those great souls are the very meditators who have seen visions of Krishna, how can those visions be real? In other words, why should persons who see the absolute realm believe in the truth of myths that even worldly scholars see to be false?

2. This theory doesn't explain why the worship of Krishna should be a recent affair, as scholars claim. If there is an eternal realm of Krishna that can be accessed by meditation, why did people begin to access it only recently?

3. What does this theory say about the multiplicity of religions? Are the visions reported in other religious traditions real? If not, then why is it that Vaishnava visions alone are real? If so, then are there many transcendental realms, one for each religion? Or is it that people see in one transcendental realm whatever they are looking for?

4. This theory greatly limits the power of God. If God only appears in visions, what becomes of His role as the creator and controller of the universe? If we let modern science explain the material world, God's role is whittled down to practically nothing.
5. The theology of visions can easily be transformed into a purely psychological theory of religious experience. After all, this is the view that will be overwhelmingly favoured by psychologists, neuroscientists, and physical scientists of all varieties.

In view of objections (1) through (4), objection (5) is almost unavoidable. We are left with a totally mundane theory that explains religion away. In the case of Krishna's *lilas*, this line of thinking leads us to especially unpleasant conclusions. Thus Haberman describes meditation on Krishna *lila* as follows: "The desired end is a religious voyeurism and vicarious enjoyment said to produce infinite bliss." Such sad conclusions are avoided in the more balanced approach taken by traditional Vaishnavas, who stress Krishna's roles as the supreme creator and the performer of humanly impossible pastimes on earth.

**Shifting the Boundary Between Myth and Science**

Yet if we start from the theology of visions and proceed in the inductive manner of scholars, we can see how it could serve as a steppingstone toward a more satisfactory theory. A starting point for developing such a theory can be a story related by Haberman about the Vaishnava saint Narottama Dasa Thakura.

It seems that Narottama was once meditating on boiling milk for Radha and Krishna. When the milk boiled over in his meditation, he took the vessel off the fire with his bare hands and got burned in the process. When Narottama awoke from his meditation, he discovered that his hands were actually burned. There are many stories like this, and I will briefly mention two more. In the second story, Srinivasa Acharya, a contemporary of Narottama Dasa Thakura, was meditating on fanning Lord Chaitanya. In Srinivasa’s meditation, Lord Chaitanya placed His garland around Srinivasa’s neck. When Srinivasa awoke from meditation, the unusually fragrant garland was actually there, around his neck.

In the third story a Vaishnava saint named Duhkhi Krishna Dasa was sweeping the site of Krishna’s *rasa* dance in Vraja. He found a remarkable golden anklet and hid it, since he thought that it was very important. Later, an old lady came to him and asked for the anklet. It turned out that the old lady was really Lalita, one of the transcendental maidservants of Radha and Krishna. The lady finally revealed that the anklet belonged to Radha Herself, and then she disclosed her true form as Lalita.

What are we to make of such stories? The story of the burned hands might be accepted by many scholars. After all, it is well known that Catholics meditating on the crucifixion of Christ sometimes develop stigmata, in which the wounds of Christ appear on their hands and feet. If meditation can somehow cause bleeding wounds, then maybe it can also cause burns.

The story of the miraculous garland goes one step further. Here a tangible object is said to materialize. This may seem fantastic, but it turns out that there is an extensive literature on materialization. For example, Stephen Braude, a professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, has argued that many cases of alleged materializations produced by spirit mediums are backed up by solid empirical evidence that deserves serious study. If materializations by spiritualists might be factual, why not materializations of beautiful garlands by saintly persons?

This brings us to the third story. Although this story seems “far out,” there are many similar stories in which a transcendent person seems to step into our material continuum, perform some action, and then disappear. Another example would be the story from *Chaitanya-charitamrita* in which Krishna, as a small boy, approached the saint Madhavendra Puri, gave him a pot of milk, and then mysteriously disappeared. Madhavendra Puri drank the milk, thus showing that it was tangible. Later that night he had a dream in which Krishna revealed the location of the Gopala Deity, which had originally been installed by Krishna’s grandson Vajra and had been hidden during a Muslim attack.
The stories of the burned hand, the miraculous garland, and the transcendental visits are progressively harder and harder to accept from a conventional scientific standpoint. But it is hard to see how to draw a line between such stories that might possibly be true and ones that definitely cannot. And all the stories seem to hint at energetic exchanges between spiritual and material energy that might add an important new chapter to our scientific knowledge, if only they could be properly studied.

When we study a body of empirical evidence, we always evaluate it with our limiting assumptions. In the end, the conclusions we derive from the evidence may reflect our limiting assumptions as much as they reflect the evidence itself. If the assumptions change, the conclusions will also change, even though the evidence stays the same.

Consider what might happen if all the available evidence about the history of human experience were to be studied not through nineteenth-century rationalism but through a new science in which spiritual transformations of matter were considered a real possibility. The result might be a completely different picture of the past from the one now accepted by scholars.

For one thing, the objections that Sir William Jones expressed about the story of the Pandava brothers might not seem so weighty. If higher beings can step into our continuum from another realm, then humans might well descend from such beings. The new picture of the past might prove much more compatible with traditional spiritual teachings than the one that now prevails.

In the late twentieth century there are signs that a broader approach to science may be developing. In the days of Vivekananda and Bhaktivinoda Thakura, mechanistic, reductionistic science appeared to be marching unimpeded from triumph to triumph, and many people believed that it would soon find explanations for everything. But in the late twentieth century this triumphant march has been checked on many different fronts.

For example, physics in the 1890s looked like a closed subject, but in the early decades of the twentieth century it entered a phase of paradox and mystery with the development of relativity theory and quantum mechanics. The mysteries of quantum mechanics continue to inspire scientists to contemplate ideas that would have seemed outrageously mystical at the turn of the century.

But now physics has encountered an even more serious obstacle. The bold architects of universal physical theories are now realizing that these theories can never be adequately tested by experiment. Thus the Harvard physicist Howard Georgi characterized modern theoretical physics as “recreational mathematical theology.”

In the mid-twentieth century, computer scientists believed they were on the verge of proving that thought is mechanical, thereby fulfilling La Mettrie’s eighteenth-century dream of man as a machine. But in more recent years, even though computers have become more and more powerful, the dream of simulating human intelligence has seemed to recede further and further into the future.

With the discovery of the DNA spiral helix by Watson and Crick in 1953, many scientists thought that the ultimate secret of life had been revealed. Since then, molecular biologists have had tremendous success in shedding light on the mechanisms of living cells. But as molecular biology unveils the incredible complexity of these high-precision mechanisms, the goal of explaining the origin of life seems progressively more difficult to attain.

These are just a few of the many areas in which the programme of mechanistic reductionism seems to be reaching ultimate limits as the twentieth century draws to a close. Perhaps as a result of these developments, many professional scientists are now showing a willingness to consider theoretical ideas and areas of research that have traditionally been taboo.

For example, we now find organizations of professional scientists who openly study phenomena lying on the edge between physical science and the realms of mysticism and the paranormal. Examples are the International Association for New Science (IANS), the Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE), the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS), and the International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine (ISSSEEM). These all sponsor regular scientific conferences.

Some of the phenomena these groups study seem similar to the "mythical" phenomena so often reported in old religious texts and in recent accounts of religious experiences. A synergistic interaction between scholars of religion and these new scientific organizations might prove to be a valuable source of new insights for both groups of researchers.

The Direct Presentation of Vaishnava Teachings

We have discussed how Bhaktivinoda Thakura found it necessary to present a modified version of the Vaishnava teachings to young Bengali intellectuals at the high noon of British political and ideological imperialism. But as the sun began to set on the British empire, his son and successor Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati began a vigorous programme of directly presenting the Vaishnava conclusions throughout India. This programme was taken abroad by his disciple Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who boldly celebrated the ancient Rathayatra festival of Jagannath Puri in London’s Trafalgar Square.
In the changing climate of scientific opinion in the late twentieth century, the time may have come to openly introduce the traditional teachings of bhakti to the world’s intellectual communities. The once jarring conflicts between rationalism and traditional religion may progressively fade as science matures and becomes open to the study of mystical phenomena. This opens up the possibility of an approach to religion that is intellectually acceptable and at the same time satisfies the soul’s inner desire for love in a transcendental relationship.

This leaves us with one possible objection. Could it be that the Vaishnava teachings, with their specific emphasis on Krishna as the Supreme, are guilty of sectarian disregard for other religious traditions? The answer is that, of course, any doctrine can be put forward in a narrow, sectarian way. But as Bhaktivinoda Thakura pointed out in his essay on the Bhagavata, the Vaishnava teachings are inherently broad-minded and acknowledge the value of all religious systems.

The following prayer shows the approach to other religions taken in the Bhagavata:

O my Lord, Your devotees can see You through the ears by the process of bona fide hearing, and thus their hearts become cleansed, and You take Your seat there. You are so merciful to Your devotees that You manifest Yourself in the particular eternal form of transcendence in which they always think of You.

This verse states that God appears to His devoted worshipers in many different forms, depending on their desires. These forms include the avatars of Krishna described in traditional Vaishnava texts, but are not limited to those forms. Indeed, it is said that the expansions of the Supreme Personality of Godhead are uncountable, and they cannot be fully described in the finite scriptures of any one religious community.

The following verse gives some idea of the different religious communities in the universe, as described by the Bhagavata:

“From the forefathers headed by Bhrigu Muni and other sons of Brahma appeared many children and descendants, who assumed different forms as demigods, demons, human beings, Guhyakas, Siddhas, Gandharvas, Vidyadharas, Charanas, Kindevas, Kinnaras, Nagas, Kimpurusas, and so on. All of the many universal species, along with their respective leaders, appeared with different natures and desires generated from the three modes of material nature. Therefore, because of the different characteristics of the living entities within the universe, there are a great many Vedic rituals, mantras, and rewards.”

This statement is explicitly “mythological,” and one can well imagine how Sir William Jones might have reacted to it. But it offers a grand picture of countless races and societies within the universe, all given religious methods suitable for their particular natures. Here the word “Vedic” cannot be limited to particular Sanskrit texts that now exist in India. Rather, it refers to the sum total of religious systems revealed by the infinite Supreme God for the sake of elevating countless societies of divinely created beings.

As always, the distinguishing feature of the Vaishnava teachings is that God is a real person and His variegated creation is also real. Thus the Vaishnava approach to religious liberality is to regard all genuine religions as real divine revelations. Likewise, the Vaishnava teachings of love of God aim to set in place a relationship of loving service between the real individual soul and the Supreme Personality of Godhead, the performer of real transcendental pastimes.

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At a small function in the Collector’s office on September 5, all the organizations who helped the Govt in disaster relief were presented with certificates of appreciation by the District Collector.
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Bangalore

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Abhisheka

Pallakki utsava

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