

---

# *Journal of Religious Culture*

## *Journal für Religionskultur*

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber  
Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik  
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935 - © E.Weber – Email: [irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de)

---

No. 11 (1997)

### The Religion of the ISKCON Vaishnavas in the Perspectives of Diacritical Theology

By

Edmund Weber

In Germany, theological studies on the Hindu religion of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness and its Vaishnava theology are still only just beginning. Previously this relevant task was left mostly to religio-political polemics, resulting in a politically highly problematic research deficit which seriously impeded the necessary social and clerical confrontation with these new religious impulses in the German society. But theological passiveness and polemic activism actually reduce the chances for religiously relevant analyses and socially acceptable solutions of philosophical and spiritual problems. Ignorance rather than dialogue, and polemics inimical to dialogue, have directly or indirectly stabilised the destructive forces in the new religious communities for decades, and consequently favoured a diminution and isolation of reformative tendencies. Due to an increasing respect for the freedom of religion as a human right, the profane alliance of the aggressive forces of both sides has recently ended, and a public, and differentiating, discussion of participants and persons concerned has cautiously started, reinforcing a freer and more competent inter-civil dialogue about spiritual affairs.

Clear signs may be seen, not only of a reform within the ISKCON religion, but also in the churches setting about discussing the multi-religious topic on a higher level. A so-called broader theological research, partly transcending the borders of Christianity, is developing in the universities, and the free science of religion in Germany is receiving a surprising impetus. It was the suppression of the science of religion that had been impeding a constructive discussion in society of the new religious situation in Germany.

The rejection of an inter-civil dialogue of spiritual affairs, however, contradicts an effective democracy which subsists on the continuous confrontation of free citizens with their common culture, especially with the ultimate questions of human existence. But the success of this inter-civil confrontation is solely guaranteed if the participants in the dialogue respect their mutual freedom as citizens and take the mutual dialogue among citizens for granted. This is the only way to attain a reasonable range of solutions concerning the ends of our existence and its proper means.

As a contribution to this inter-civil dialogue a theological analysis is to be made of the religious culture practised by citizens of this country engaged in the ISKCON religion and from there desiring to exert an impact on our civil culture.

### I. Subject and Aim of Diacritical Theology

Because of the diffuse understanding of theology it is necessary to explain what it is, where it should and should not be engaged.

Theology is not a religious ideology of a particular community that argues the interests of social organisations, but a universal science. It is not limited to a certain religious culture or form of society but is committed to its specific subject (1).

Such an autonomous theology has the task of *discrimen inter legem et evangelium*—the diacritical analysis of Law and Gospel according to the description of its function by Martin Luther.

We will follow these basic categories of diacritical theology and explain them here (2).

#### *1.1 The Law: Man's Relationship to God and to his Neighbours*

In the traditional theological ethics Law is described as the absolute demand as it is written Matthew 22, 37-40: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbour as you love yourself." In case this demand is reasonable it presupposes that which Martin Luther calls the human possibility of free love (3). This freedom of loving God and man is not the subjective freedom of making a decision to love but rather its objective natural quality of absoluteness and self-esteem—its actual ability to satisfy human existence. According to theological ethics man owns the natural force to love unconditionally and to experience in it the perfection of his existence. Perfection is nothing but the pure effulgence of natural energy.

The continuous task of religion is the liberation of love from being an instrument to allow its experience as a fulfillment of life. The enforcement of charitable work, whether done from free or conditioned motivation, however, is the task of politics. But the only means to realise religion and policy is through the mind, that is, by means of the universal wholeness of all human faculties.

The fact that Law is manifested as a claim in man's social and individual existence is due to the factual dominance of the idea of conditional love, the righteousness by work. Law in the sense of theological ethics does, however, not just demand the realisation of love, but its free realisation; or in other words it demands the renunciation of the existential determination of the righteousness by work. Law contradicts the realisation of free love by challenging its claim and, in that, profoundly, the truth of retaliating karmic world views.

### *1.2 The Gospel: God's Relationship to Man*

The Gospel, however, does not contain any claim or aim; no human condition is meant other than, theologically speaking, God's reality: God's free love of his creation. This internal Divine reality is transferred by the Gospel, the subject of theological dogmatism. By the agency of the Gospel God states that He was free, is free and will be free in His love to the world. Considering God's free love man doesn't need to do anything in his relationship to God except the alternative of faith, which is free of any karmic result. The Gospel reveals its power in that way that it reveals the paradox of the use of human works to reach perfection in God's relationship to man who by no means can neither reduce nor enforce this relationship.

### *1.3 The Distinction*

The distinction between the both *Verba Dei*, the two basic concepts of theology, is necessary because otherwise in the human mind the idea of the freedom of love would be suspended. Martin Luther calls this suspension "righteousness by work". This is the fundamental idea that the sense of human life may be constituted by works alone. The result of this imagined self-made dependence on one's own works results in a transubstantiation of free love into religious prostitution in the human mind. This commercial loving relationship relegates God to free love, and makes man capable of freely loving only the goddess of commercial righteousness. Thus God becomes an agent of this righteousness, and man either its beneficiary or its victim.

The existential catastrophe of this concept of man and God is that because God's free love is distorted, consciousness is deprived of the only opportunity of overcoming the lack of freedom. Using human works for unnatural purposes represents a closed system of views, from which there is no possibility of escape. It is through this system of irreducible, contingent revelation of the absolute freedom of God's love and its unconditioned truth, that the determination of living life

without changing the actual living practice may be overcome. Whereas the Law wants to change man's possibilities, the Gospel shows him that God's love remains free and unconditioned, even if man holds on to the concept of conditional love and righteousness by work (and according to that criterion should have lost the sense of his existence).

The functional distinction of these two Divine words guarantees that the final value of human existence is not determined by the realisation of conditional as well as free love. According to the Gospel, the value of existence is protected in the sacred realm where it remains taboo. Law then properly serves as stimulation to a perfection that is irrelevant for eschatology. Thus the essential discrimination between Law and Gospel is that the one shows human creative abilities and the other Divine reality.

If Law challenges the general human ability of love, yet at the same time the universally valid Gospel is free for every culture, it becomes urgent for theology to reckon with the universal research project of discriminating between Law and Gospel. The religions of the world can act as research teams, studying this thesis from various perspectives. However, without a free exchange (the so-called inter-religious dialogue) of the respective methods and results of research within the respective religious culture being mutually examined by inter-religious criticism, the research will be incomplete. In this sense, inter-religious research is a touchstone of universal theology.

## *II. The ISKCON Religion*

### *II.1 Preamble*

In this theological field of distinction the question arises of the importance and contribution of the ISKCON religion to the relationship and formation of both Law and Gospel.

The ISKCON religion is not a substantially new religion, a mere product of modern mind detached from the primeval stream of the human quest of the utmost truth. The ISKCON religion is a branch of the millenary Krishna religion of Hindu culture in its Bengali form. The Gaudiya Vaishnavas appeal to Krishna Caitanya who is Martin Luther's contemporary. It therefore belongs to the broad bhakti movement in India which receives an immense impetus in the regions influenced by the Hindu culture today (4).

ISKCON is doubtlessly a Hindu denomination; it is ISKCON that uniquely propagates the Hindu culture as a universal and modern form of constructing the world. The impression could almost be taken that primarily it is not the religious enthusiasm but rather the enthusiasm for the Hindu culture and its mission, in- and outside India, that is the particular character of the ISKCON religion.

Against this background the question should be answered how the ISKCON religion may appear in the above mentioned theological perspective.

## *II.2 Law: The Essence of Dharma is Bhakti*

First the influence and construction of Law in ISKCON religion is to be examined.

The central question of the ethics of theology addressed to ISKCON religion is: How does it understand and confirm service for God and charitable work for our neighbours, conditioned or free, that is, as a free choice of the human being?

There is no doubt that the development of Law is extremely strong in ISKCON religion; it may rightfully be said that this religion represents a highly differentiated judicial piety. The concept used and highly appreciated in Vaishnava religion (and not only by it) is bhakti. Bhakti is the highest form of human existence. Bhaktivedanta Swami describes this bhakti in a purport of Bhagavad-gita with the words from the eight stanzas of Krishna Caitanya as follows, "O almighty Lord, I have no desire to accumulate wealth, nor do I desire beautiful women, nor do I want any number of followers. I only want Your causeless devotional service, birth after birth"(5).

Free love, the true way of Law abiding piety, the true love of God is rather perfectly expressed. Bhakti is pure worship of God; it is not a self-constituent action as it is created by God's mercy. Through the theory of a merciful gift the freedom of God's love is confirmed. Bhakti, free love of God, is the sense of our existence, the unique reason which Krishna Caitanya claims for his existence, it is itself and solely the purpose of life. But this bhakti does not deliver man from the circle of reincarnations; in no case it is a means of liberation; it is liberation in itself. It is not from reincarnation that man wants to be liberated, but from non-bhakti, from the senselessness of not realising free love.

### *II.2.1 Liturgical Ethics: Love of God, Bhagavata-prema, as Puja and Liturgy*

ISKCON doubtlessly belongs to the avant-garde of worshipping God in our society. I might guess that this opulent and elaborate cult has decisively pushed forward the ritualistic movement in that it is on the way to gradually become the dominant force in the spiritual mass movement in Germany, a movement neglected so far by the science of religion. It is not by accident that the so-called eastern religions play a progressive part.

Since the Second Vatican Council, initiated by the hierarchy, the destruction of the Holy Liturgy of the Western church, especially of the ancient Latin Rite has begun. The abolition of the sacral language was not the only means of the anti-liturgical revolution from above; it was the fundamental liturgical averting from serving God, from the service to God, that was decisive, and the pseudo-liturgical turn to the so-called people of God, serving the congregation which then had become the object of cultivation, according to the proper logic of liturgy (6). Consequently the old altars are abandoned, new tables—without any liturgical logic—have been forced into the churches, the priests turning their backs to the Divine.

Liturgy and choirs direct prayers and songs to the people present. The pseudo-liturgical revolution of the Second Vatican Council placing man in the centre of the so-called liturgical action, and the corresponding tendencies in the sister churches transforming the Holy Communion into a sociable bread and wine supper, this veritable profanation of the Holy Liturgy has continued the anthropologisation of theology, of the science of God, on the level of liturgy and service.

And just at the same moment when the liquidation of the Holy Liturgy started in the West, a seventy-year-old man, a Bengali Vaishnava monk, arrived in New York City and immediately began with a puja with the liturgical counter-offensive, and the construction of temples where uniquely the Divine is worshipped (7). The success of this revival of service is, in my eyes, based on the fact that the traditional western mainstream churches yielded to the one-sided social moralism not noticing the enormous need for an intense immediate worship of God. Since the Sixties, the liturgical changes were counter-productive: instead of confirming progressively the traditional service it has been more and more mutilated.

Puja is liturgy—service to the Divine and the Holy; it sustains the hagio- or theo-centredness of human existence. The ISKCON religion has effectively reminded us of the necessity and the beauty of dedicating oneself to the inner base of preserving one's own existence and of cultivating it in all conceivable forms. It reminds us of the fact that service to God is the basis of the service to our neighbour.

A further contribution of the ISKCON religion in re-establishing a rich culture of serving the Lord is to be seen in the central importance of glorifying the name of God in the cultural practice and in the theology of worship. According to the general Vaishnava teachings, the chanting of the Holy Name, the nama-sankirtana, is the only possibility in this time to sustain the basis of one's existence. For in kali-yuga, when people cannot surrender to an elaborate form of religion the chanting of the Holy Name is the direct method to attain perfection in spiritual life (i.e. bhakti, bhagavata-prema) (8) according to Bhaktivedanta Swami, and it even is the sole method, "Lord Caitanya has given the greatest boon: in this age one simply has to chant the holy name of God to attain perfection in spiritual life"(9). By emphasising the chanting, the ISKCON religion shows us that the function of Lady Music, who has been placed immediately behind theology by Martin Luther obviously is not only to offer relaxation to the stressed careerists but above all to prepare the way to love God, to bhakti. Who may, however, believe in the power of the chanted glorification of the name of God in order to awake free love of God and to one's neighbour when listening to the church songs to-day? The ISKCON religion reminds us of the hidden power of hallelujah, of the glorification of the Divine Nama.

### *II.2.2. Pastoral Ethics: Guru and Confessor*

The religious changes in the Catholic Church produced by the adherents of the Second Vatican Council have reversed the liturgical order and de facto liquidated private confession. Thus the last remains of a millennial spiritual authority, the confessor or spiritual father, the serious individual guide, the critical and committed companion of the spiritual and moral life of a person disappears. The demand for spiritual advice and guidance is shifted to social work or therapy, the desire of spiritual companionship to the psychosomatic or psycho-social emergency. Thus more and more priests feel and consider themselves primarily as therapists respectively social workers or they obviously escape from their original task by turning to policy and administration.

But what happens to the ordinary person, who does not need special aid; who is rather searching a companion for the spiritual borderline realm, for the existential quest which is everybody's affair and which not everybody is able to answer by him- or herself, not only due to the stronger and stronger psychic pressure by family and job?

If it is the spiritual guide's business to support the individual—according to his individual possibilities—in turning to the sacred faith and in showing honour to it properly, an immediate reform of our clergy is necessary. Their duty to guarantee a durable and responsible spiritual guidance which links two lives in general is not fulfilled today. For the mass of the people as well as for an overall majority of the congregationalists the clergy is nothing but executing some not really favoured old ritual structures. It is no wonder that the ancient institution of the personal often lifelong spiritual teacher, the lama or guru meets much sympathy.

The institution of a guru is self-evident in many religions and consequently well accepted. Teacher and disciple know what might each of them expect, and the incorporation into the traditional culture secures the effectiveness and reliability of the relationship. There are, however, again and again public scandals with such teachers in India, e.g. just now with a Jain-Digamber monk (10); but it is the scandal that shows us that teachers are not allowed to do what they want. If they are convicted of illegal behaviour as a rule they are defeated.

In the Hindu-Buddhist tradition gurus are, however, well respected and searched for, without people submitting blindly to the authority of spiritual teachers.

It is known that in the western ISKCON gurus misused their authority, equally due to gurus and devotees. Based on my own observation I may say that often the disciples' exaggerated wish to surrender with the gurus' overestimate resulting from that have led to the irregular behaviour. The seduction by the guru and the seduction by the disciples might in most cases be due to a mutual weakness of the ego if there is no criminal intention. The excessive attempts of compensating as well as the virtually unbelievable ability of the western people to pretend, to cheat themselves—by a perfect training of changing the roles—and, under that condition the temporary reinforcement of exclusively orthodox tendencies in the new community leads to a still extremely high number of ISKCON members who break up or leave the movement.

Regardless of these faults of the existing ISKCON history there is no doubt that the guru system has a future especially for the development of spiritual culture. The territorial, congregational and authorised pastoral system is deprived of the continuity of individual companionship and, linked with it the selectivity of guru and disciples. Both are necessary elements of a durable relationship between teacher and disciple in a situation in which the persons concerned are not only extremely mobile seen from outside but also highly sensitive from inside. Vivekananda Swami, the Bengal Hindu reformer has clearly realised this new pastoral situation rather early. He sees the duty of a spiritual father, the guru, to help the disciple to find out and cultivate just that kind of religion which corresponds to the disciple's svadharma, not his own. Hence with exorbitant consequence he can request the quasi infinite multiplication of religion. According to him, the mere adoption of generalised standards leads to the destruction of every spirituality (11).

It is said that the territorial or congregational pastoral system is being made obsolete by the modern individual's spiritual sensitivity, and the local priests are left with the life cycle of stiff and shortened casual occurrences. On the other hand, the spiritual sensitivity undermines the traditional guru-oriented relationship between master and disciple.

Only that guru or spiritual father survives in the long run who is able to adjust to the highly sensitive disciple, and to respond to his singularity in a creative way. To my eyes, here the traditional ISKCON guru has reached a limit. His patriarchal self-understanding as well as the transmission of standardised patterns of a generalised religious culture do not let arise the sensitivity which is required today. Nevertheless: the modern and sensitive guru's free territorial practice of caring for the disciples is a pattern especially for modern urban societies.

There is the controversial statement that everybody needs a guru to develop love of God and love to one's neighbour although nobody can deny the fact that he could survive without teachings and education.

The polemic attack against the guru's authority is genuinely the attempt to obstruct the spiritual way of those people who want and need spiritual advice and guidance to be attached to the materialistic way of life and its really expensive gurus.

### *II.2.3. Ministerial Ethics: Brahmins and Priests*

ISKCON itself does not present a perfect social counter pattern. It is rather a brahminical society. What is new with it is that participation in this class organisation is enabled not by birth or child baptism but by free decision and public initiation. Hence ISKCON is a branch of the neo-brahminical movement in modern Hinduism which decisively rejects Gandhi's physical conception of maintaining the castes (12). ISKCON does not share the conception of physical birth determining man's religious dignity, as e.g. the sayyids in Islam, the cohanim and levites in Judaism. It is rather a society of people especially commit-



ted to spiritual practice by dedicating their lives to an intense worship of God through puja and sankirtana, and helping other people engaged in worldly affairs by giving them spiritual advice and instructions.

Such spiritual communities may be found in all religions: the monk and nun-orders, the Sikh-khalsa, the community of Taizé, the Sufi-order, etc. etc. But ISKCON is not self-centred, but altruistically directed to its counterpart, to God or the world.

Considered the radical division of work, the mobility and decline of worldly collectives need people who representatively dedicate their lives to devotional service and intensely care for those working in material jobs. As a rule the priests are only able to do this if they are backed up by a brotherhood, or, if necessary, live together in a community (*vita communis*). The fact that in between more and more Christian communities are founded using this way of operating and living to preach—as they say—and to live their faith, shows us that ISKCON has been drawn into the pastoral vacuum left by the previous general religious ecclesiastical culture for the aim of propagating the worship of God.

It has been observed, however, that the *vita communis* is more and more declining in ISKCON and that at its place a community of more independent brahminical families is established, pushing forward inevitably the plurification of ISKCON.

#### *II.2.4 Inter-religious Ethics: God's Universal Glorification or the ISKCON-Religion and other Religions*

Let us turn to a further question about the position of the ISKCON religion towards Law: will the ISKCON religion be able to spiritually integrate the different individual cultures of life, right now? Or in other words: Is it ready and capable to overcome theological barriers for the increase of God's praise?

In the community of the overwhelming Christian majority the Roman Catholic Church has made a tremendous change in the last decades. In the explanation about the freedom of religion the Second Vatican Council announces not only that every human person and every religious community has the right of freedom of religion, even if the truth is only one, but also that especially based on this truth, the Christians have the duty to respect the freedom of their neighbours (13).

On the occasion of their Ramadan fasting the Holy Father has sent greetings to the Muslims in the world for several years. He does not address them as fundamentalists or cursed followers of a cheat, but as religious brothers and sisters who adore the same God together with the Catholics.

The Pope just draws the consequences of the explanation which reads very clearly and doubtlessly, "With great respect the Church considers the Muslims who adore the only God, the Living Being existing by Himself, the Merciful and Almighty Creator of heaven and earth who spoke to the people ... They (also)

appreciate a moral attitude of life and worship God by prayers, alms, and fasting" (14).

But Hinduism also is said to endeavour for the sacred, not for its imitations or perversions. About Hindu religions to which ISKCON is affiliated it is said, "In Hinduism, people search for the Divine secret and express it in an infinite number of myths and in profound philosophical attempts and seek liberation from our narrow and restricted condition (15) by living a life of renunciation, or deep meditation or by lovingly taking shelter of God"(16).

This acceptance of love of God, of bhakti, or other efforts for the sacred made by other religions is based on the idea of God's truth transgressing the limits of the church, "Everything that is true and sacred in other religions is not rejected by the Catholic church." For "not very rarely they let us see a beam of the truth which enlightens all men"(17). Thus the Catholic church no longer denounces and blasphemes the love of God in other religions, especially in Vaishnavism not dating back to Abraham, but tunes them into the choir of genuine glorification of God.

Considering the newly acquired religious openness in Rome the question arises whether the ISKCON religion with the single aim of worshipping and loving God is able to acknowledge a multi-religious worshipping of God or to even virtually support it, whether it will be able to integrate into the movement of all those who want to praise God, or whether it has given up its Hindu character in favour of the older Christian sentence: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* or Outside the Church there is no salvation!

Some sentences of the ISKCON religion point to the latter direction. In BG 9.23 it is said: "Those who are devotees of other gods and who worship them with faith actually worship only Me, O son of Kunti, but they do so in a wrong way"(18). Bhaktivedanta comments on his translation as follows, "The demigods are, so to speak, different officers and directors in the government of the Supreme Lord ... In other words, Krishna does not approve the unnecessary worship of the demigods"(19). In my eyes, Bhaktivedanta Swami has inadmissibly sharpened the sentence from BG; for the clue of the sentence is that even wrong worship ultimately reaches Krishna, the true God.

In a conversation with P. Emmanuel Jungclaussen, a Benedictine monk of Byzantine rite from Niederalteich, Bhaktivedanta Swami can say, " 'Christus' is a different way to say 'Krishto' and 'Krishto' is another way of pronouncing the word 'Krishna, the name of God"(20). In this statement, Bhaktivedanta Swami replaces untruth with difference of worship; a little but radically different concept: for now the object of worship is identical and the different worship is considered equal—similarly to the Pope when he says, "Jesus Christ means Jesus, Christ's or Krishna's son. He has called himself son of God. Therefore, whether they call God 'Krishto' or 'Krishna' or 'Christus'— there is no difference"(21).

Bhaktivedanta Swami declaring Jesus the son of Christus/Krishna is an interesting annotation to Christology but does not impede the basic idea of a positive integration of the Christian worship of God into the ISKCON religion, for he

adds, "There is no difference, Krishna or Christus, there is the name, and, according to the Vedic scriptures, we recommend to chant the name of God in this age"(22).

Then Bhaktivedanta Swami develops his multi-religious theology of the names comprising many religions, "We are limited, but God is unlimited, absolute, He has infinite names and energies, and every name is God. We can understand His names as far as our understanding reaches" (23). If this is true, i.e. if worshipping other names of God means worshipping the unique true God, the question arises, why Bhaktivedanta Swami has come to the West for evangelisation. The answer is surprising: not that worshipping God was wrong here, but that he was not worshipped at all (24). Thus it is the duty of the "Krishna-conscious movement", "to teach people to revitalise their forgotten love of God"(25).

Bhaktivedanta Swami does not want to replace an existing religion with a new one; therefore he can claim to revitalise love of God in other religious traditions, "'Christo' or 'Krishna'—there is no difference. Let us co-operate and chant, and if you are prejudiced to chant the name 'Krishna', then chant 'Christo' or 'Krishto'"(26).

Obviously Bhaktivedanta Swami is open to other names of God and worshipping them, and to other religions because the actual practice of glorifying God is the highest aim of religion, not the abolition of one religion for to expand another religious organisation, "I think the Christian priests should co-operate with the Krishna consciousness movement. They should chant the name Christ or Christos and should stop condoning the slaughter of animals. This program follows the teachings of the Bible: it is not my philosophy. You have your Christian teachings, follow them ... !"(27)

The essence of the ISKCON religion is the all-embracing awakening of love of God. Considering the lack of motivation to love God in the western societies this Hindu reminder of revitalising the first sentence of the Law, of free love of God is of great benefit.

### *II.2.5 Social Ethics: Institutionalised Charity as Policy and Diaconate*

In general it is believed that charity is not the business of Hindu culture and their religious communities. This belief is doubtlessly a product of colonial self-justification. As every society, the Indian society has a sophisticated system of political organisation and diaconate help.

In this respect, the ISKCON religion is in the tradition of Vaishnavism. The acceptance of the BG as source of religious truth in which the institution of authority as executor of justice is theologically founded by God Himself should be mentioned. Thus the politicians have the necessary duty to assert justice even against own interests e.g. laws of solidarity of the clan and the caste.

In his purport to the BG 2.32, Bhaktivedanta Swami quotes a sentence from Parashara concerning this topic, "The kshatriya's duty is to protect the citizens from all kinds of difficulties, and for that reason he has to apply violence in suit-

able cases for Law and order"(28). If the holder of authority did not fulfill his duty he would go to hell (29). The reason, "Arjuna's proposal not to fight was based on sense gratification.

Forgetting his prime duty, he wanted to cease fighting because he thought by not killing his relatives and kinsmen he would be happier than by enjoying the kingdom after conquering his cousins and brothers, the sons of Dhritarashtra (30). At a closer look, Arjuna's concept of happiness does not appear selfless, "Happiness derived from conquering them and happiness derived by seeing kinsmen alive are both on the basis of personal sense gratification, even at a sacrifice of wisdom and duty"(31). The administrator must fulfill his duty, "Everyone has his proprietary right in regard to prescribed duties, but should act without attachment to the result"(32). I.e. the administrative actions ordered by the respective svadharma must not be done or not done as a means for a different end. The Law of justice is to be upheld i.e. to be enforced in free love among people.

This political theory approaches the Lutheran doctrine of authority very closely, when, according to the reformer, the individual conscience must not triumph over the official duty. The office requires free love not bound to interests outside of the general welfare.

As to Bhaktivedanta Swami, charity towards one's neighbour is implied in the love of God, when he says that a mystic yogi practising yoga with half-closed eyes strives, however, for any kind of self-interest or some personal satisfaction, but a Krishna conscious person, a devotee is free from every desire of personal satisfaction because his criterion of perfection is the satisfaction of Krishna, i.e. love of God (33).

In this passage, Bhaktivedanta Swami directly connects free love of God with free love of one's neighbour: as free love of God is the final fulfillment of human existence, free love is the only solution for social relationship. What sense should a selfish motivation make?

According to Bhaktivedanta Swami dharma whatever worldly function it may have can only be properly fulfilled if it is fulfilled in the state of bhakti. Thus, every secular action of dharma becomes an act of serving God. An idea we know clearly from the Reformation.

Diaconate is an essential element of the ISKCON religion; it is intensively and world-wide practised (34). After the foundation of Christiane Rückert's charitable society 'Golden Lotos' in the eighties which has proved the charitable power of the ISKCON religion, in between the somewhat normal diaconate work 'Food for Life' was registered in Germany (35).

ISKCON is by no means restricted to the propagation of the first part of the Law; to love one's neighbour as an expression of love of God is rather an integer constituent element of its religious program. Worldly accomplishment of duty should not be evaded, for, "Such disinterested obligatory duties doubtlessly lead one to the path of liberation"(36), i.e. to love of God. That is that Bhaktivedanta Swami may say that love of one's neighbour is the basis of the existence

of genuine love of God, and that not only a mere monastic application may bring it about.

If we confirm a clear theological connection of accomplishing worldly duties and spiritual love of God: due to circumstances, the strength of the ISKCON religion is mainly shown in the re-cultivation of love of God

### *II.3 Gospel*

For a Protestant theology of traditional origin the most relevant question is, whether in the ISKCON religion a difference between Law and Gospel can be found. Our question is whether the ISKCON religion realises that the sacred exists before and independent of every work, even of free love, and turns to people in free love.

To a high extent, the ISKCON religion has developed the Law. This cannot be denied. To describe its evangelical aspect, however, a more profound inter-theological hermeneutic is required which does not come to a dead end for religious signs as especially the Hindu tradition does not know the terminological differentiation of Martin Luther's theology. That does not mean that there is no basis.

The main reason for the theological unwillingness to co-operate on an inter-theological level is not only the fault of the dialectic theology but also of the anti-Lutheran understanding of the science of interpreting the Bible which today is mostly understood as that what Luther considered as settled: as a better Law. Consequently Law differing from Gospel cannot be found in other religions because it is no longer known in one's own religion.

Nevertheless I would like to make an attempt of identifying evangelical aspects in the ISKCON religion. In the texts of the ISKCON religion again and again it is said that God turns to those persons who practise bhakti, and that love of God is the condition for God's love to a human being. Or, in other words that God has implanted the possibility of free love in man who does not realise it.

In my eyes, this view of the relationship between God and man is widespread reflecting the general moralistic attitude of modern society which is also shared by the religious culture of ISKCON.

The ISKCON religion, however, transmits the alternative conception namely in the basic document of the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, the above mentioned 'Eight stanzas' of Krishna Caitanya. There He demonstrates his trust in Krishna being and remaining His Lord even if He, Krishna Caitanya, cannot feel "ecstatic love" and has fallen "into the ocean of birth and death", i.e. He has not realised free love of God, bhakti, but is obsessed by selfish motives. This confidence transcending into that quality of faith leading to free love of God is present when Krishna Caitanya confesses His lack of bhakti, "I am so unfortunate that I have no attraction for Your name", although Krishna reveals His name in various ways, fills them with all His shakti, and does not give prescriptions how to worship His name (37). Having fallen into the ocean of reincarnation, i.e. having

become a prey for selfish desires he cannot realise free love of God, bhakti being so easy to attain, as I believe, Krishna Caitanya draws an evangelical conclusion, "I am Your eternal servitor, yet somehow or other I have fallen into the ocean of birth and death. Please pick me up from this ocean of death and place me as one of the atoms at Your lotus feet"(38).

This faith in Krishna's mercy is the utmost horizon of the existence of bhakti freeing itself from the hallucination that the Supreme Reality attaches the sense of human existence to the achievement of Law and righteousness. Through Krishna Caitanya's verses the evangelical logic of Law permeates that man's free love of God is only possible with the presupposition of God's free love; that God's free love loves the person regardless of his or her achievements and works.

There are hints of an evangelical character as well as in the monistic psychology of the teachings about Krishna.

The verse from the BG quoted by Bhaktivedanta Swami receives evangelical value if it is clear that Krishna cannot hate Himself, "All living entities are minute parts of My energy"(39). Whereas the living entities feel separated from God due to maya's energy and believe that they have to win God's love back, the devotees know that they can never be separated from Him, and can never get lost because they belong a priori to Him as any other living entity. If Bhaktivedanta Swami decisively emphasises that God and man are different, that man even may become a demon through attachment, the con-substantialised God's love to man is a real existing fact. Persons aware of this fact are happy; those who do not know this do not have a different nature.

The strongest expression of Gospel may be, in my eyes, prasadam, God's free gift among the material kinds of physical food, distributed unconditionally to all men. These material elements do not require the adherence to a certain religion, a certain moral standard or theological insight. When a farmer with his family from Rajasthan surrounded by a swarm of flies enters the Krishna-Balarama-temple in Vrindavan, and opens his hands for prasadam, he is not asked whether he has fulfilled this or that Law or prescription by the pujari distributing prasadam. The distributor does not care for the terrestrial disguise of his guests. Maybe he feels a special affection for his devotees, as they say.

### *III. Summary and Result*

An diacritico-theological analysis of the ISKCON religion comes to the conclusion that it does not only know free love as prescribed by Law but places it into the worship of God to a high and exemplary extent and calls it the essence of charitable love.

The consequence drawn from the concept of free bhakti, God's free love to man, the Gospel, is transmitted as an alternative of human existence by Krishna Caitanya. This motive has, however, not yet been systematically and theologically developed, not only because of the pressure of modern moralism.

Nevertheless: Law as well as Gospel, and their distinction are to be found in ISKCON religion but they are not equally represented there.

It can be said with full right that the ISKCON religion theologically and practically makes an obvious contribution to the topic of God's love and man's love, i.e. religion and politics, but that concerning the theological explanation of the Gospel and distinction between the two *Verba Dei* (i.e. the two words of God) a stronger profile is necessary not only because the cultural and hermeneutic barrier seen as self-evident even today between the western and eastern way of understanding of these two theological issues could be overcome.

## NOTES

1) Religious ideology, however, is necessary because every social organisation as supreme civil authority has to justify publicly its actual ends and means even for the sake of inter civil dialogue. Dominant religious organisations, however, try again and again to use the autonomous theology as their ideological solicitor—to legalise present pursued interests of a union, and to transcendently confirm the motivation of conformist actions.

2) See Edmund Weber, *Discrimen inter legem et evangelium. Vergegenwärtigung der Sache protestantischer Theologie*, in: [THEION](#) - Annual for Religious Culture, vol. III, Frankfurt/Main 1994.

3) See Edmund Weber, *Freie Liebe und bhakti. Zur Konvergenz der Gottesliebe Martin Luthers und Krishna Caitanyas*, in: [THEION](#) - Annual for Religious Culture, vol. II, Frankfurt/Main 1993; resp. *Free Love and Bhakti, A Dogmatic Identification*, in: [STUDIA IRENICA](#) 33, Frankfurt/Main 1988.

4) See Edmund Weber (Ed.), *Krishna im Westen*, in: [STUDIA IRENICA](#) 30, Frankfurt/Main 1985.

5) Bhaktivedanta Swami, *Bhagavad Gita wie sie ist*, BBT 1987 (=BG), S. 288

6) The Second Vatican Council recommends *linguae vernaculae usurpatio* in disfavour to the sacral language (Constitution of the Holy Liturgy, art. 36, *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 2. Auflage, 12, 1986, S. 41 f.) In article 128 (*ibid.* p. 105f), the widespread change of position of the main altar is addressed to. The commentator refers to the *instructio* 26–9–1964, in which the celebration versus *populum* is verbally recommended, but that in between the change had been done (*comment annot.* 5 *ibid.* p. 105). The instruction about the main altar reads, "It is good to establish the main altar separated from the wall, for circumambulating and appropriate for the celebration with the face to the congregation" (*ibid.*). The reason "is to be found in the preference of the Eucharist as a meal, and more general, in the newly awakened sense for community" (*ibid.*). Favoured by the Council, the communicationalization of the liturgy has established the main altar in the *pro-fanum*, what is not demanded in the instruction. Altars with a certain distance from the wall have been common in many churches. But the commentator has no doubt that the shift of the altars manifests a radical break with the past: "The prevailing solution in the tradition of the orient and occident underlines the sense of the Eucharist as *ob-latio, pros-fora*, i.e. approaching God, the celebrant's movement towards God" (*ibid.*). The modern theologians were very well aware of the fact that the *oblatio* was reversed into its liturgical opposite by their alterations—despite all contrary affirmations.

7) Satsvarupa Dasa Goswami, *Prabhupada*, BBT 1983

8) "Devotional service, or engagement in Krishna consciousness is the direct method, and all other methods although recommended, are indirect. In this age of Kali the direct method is especially more feasible than the indirect because people are short living, their intelligence is poor, and they are poverty-stricken and embarrassed by so many miserable disturbances." (Bhaktivedanta Swami, *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, 3.21.7, BBT 1982)

- 9) Ibid.
- 10) Sunday, July 2–8 1995
- 11) See Edmund Weber, Natürliche und kongregationale Religion. Grundsätze und Konsequenzen der irenischen Religionsethik Swami Vivekanandas, in: [THEION](#) III, Frankfurt/Main 1993; resp. Swami Vivekananda's Ethics of Religion, in: *Journal of Religious Culture*, [No. 04](#), 1997.
- 12) James Massey, The Mahatma's views on caste hurt Dalits. In: *One World*, Dec. 1994, p. 5
- 13) Erklärung über die Religionsfreiheit (Declaration on Religious Liberty), Art. 2ff, in: LThK 13, p. 715-747
- 14) Erklärung über das Verhältnis der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to the non-Christian Religions), 1965. Ibid. p. 491
- 15) Ibid., p. 489
- 16) i.e. bhakti
- 17) Ibid. p. 491
- 18) BG, p. 454
- 19) Ibid.
- 20) Bhaktivedanta Swami, Die Schönheit des Selbst (The Science of Self-Realisation) BBT 1979, p. 103
- 21) Ibid. p. 104
- 22) Ibid.
- 23) Ibid. p. 105
- 24) Ibid.
- 25) Ibid. p. 106
- 26) Ibid.
- 27) Ibid. p. 109
- 28) BG 2.32 purp.
- 29) BG 2.33
- 30) BG 2.39
- 31) Ibid.
- 32) BG 2.47 purp.
- 33) BG 6.1
- 34) E.g. Jayapataka Swami, How ISKCON's International Food for Life Program Began. *Mayapur Journal*, Spring 1995.
- 35) Dayarama Dasa, Food for Life - ISKCON's World-wide Mercy Program, *ibid.*
- 36) BG 2.47 purp.
- 37) Walther Eidlitz, Krsna-Caitanya. Sein Leben und Seine Lehre. Stockholm 1968, p. 496
- 38) Ibid.
- 39) Die Schönheit des Selbst, p.253