

Antinomianism and the Hare Krishna Movement: A cautionary tale from history

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In November 1973, I was living in Dallas while Dayananda Das Adhikary was temple president. During that time, the Bal Yogi “Guru Maharaj Ji,” was the current rage, attracting disciples at a rate that made ISKCON’s growth look tepid. A big convocation had been arranged at the Houston Astrodome for his followers, and the ISKCON temples from Texas and beyond sent numerous book distributors to the location in the hope of selling Prabhupada literature.

One of our Dallas Gurukul teachers had heard a statement of Srila Prabhupada about Guru Maharajji, in all likelihood “The so-called, pseudo guru, false guru, he should be killed.” (London, August 5, 1973) He made the big mistake of getting into an argument with one of Guru Maharajji’s premis in which he quoted this statement, and before we could say, “Jai Sachinandan! Please take a book!” the police had swooped down on us and we found ourselves in jail overnight until Dayananda bailed us out the next morning.

Srila Prabhupada did not make such statements only once, but several times. For instance, on a morning walk in Raman Reti with a group of disciples, Swamiji said,

Just like the Muslims converted people with a sword in one hand and the Koran in the other, we can approach people with the *Bhagavad Gita* in one hand and a gun in the other. “Do you accept Krishna?” “No.” Pow! Not now, but later when we are more powerful.

Archye vishnau...when we will teach military art, with tilak, soldiers will chant, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna..." (laughter) We want that. Marching with military band, "Hare Krishna." You maintain this idea. Is it not good?

When there will be military march of Krishna conscious soldiers. Anyone who does not believe in Krishna, "Blam!" (laughter) Yes. The same process as the Mohammedans did, with sword and Koran, we'll have to do that. "Do you believe in Krishna or not?" "No, sir." Blam! Finished. (laughter, Swamiji laughs) (Morning walk, March 15, 1974)

And indeed, when I was in New Vrindavan in 1974, we actually used to walk from Prabhupada's house to Madhuvan with my students, marching single file to the recitation of Hare Krishna. Even back then, a kind of militarism had set into New Vrindavan life.

Such things were greatly disenchanting to many, including my godbrother Subal Das (Steve Bohlert) who wrote: "Remember, the principle was that we could do anything for Krishna. The end justified the means. This resulted in fraud and con tactics, drug dealing, murder and prostitution being used by some devotees. Now some argue whether Bhaktivedanta was aware of these things going on or not. He certainly was pleased with the devotees who brought money and wasn't concerned with how they got it. The biggest wheeler-dealers became the biggest ISKCON leaders."

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After many years of intense dedicated effort, Hrishikesh Das (Henry Doktorski)'s book on the murder of Sulochan Das is finally out. I have been in communication with Hrishikesh for many years and received a review copy from him a couple of days ago. Full of exhaustive research, it is an extremely important historical document. Not at all sensationalistic, it is a sobering account that needed to be told. It is not a new story, but it needs to be told as a cautionary tale.

As a resident of New Vrindaban at the time, Hrishikesh tells the story, sorting out the truth-tellers from the liars, in as objective and unemotional way possible. He admits himself that his long emotional involvement with Kirtanananda and the New Vrindavan community made it disturbing to face the truths that came out in his investigation.

One thing that is clear: This event was a game changer in ISKCON. That is why reading this book should be considered for any devotee, or I would say, psychologist of religious cults, a worthwhile usage of time.

Perhaps the most important lesson is a philosophical one. The *Bhagavad Gita* approves killing in the name of God by one who is free from ego (5.10, 18.17), that Krishna himself is doing the killing and the mortal agent is nothing other than an instrument (11.33). This is a dangerous idea, which might be true, but is (as are many things) extremely difficult to put into practice. Thus better left unacted on, except in extreme cases. In a way, it may be said that if there is doubt, then you can be sure things will be messed up.

And that is what happened in this case [the 1986 assassination of Sulochan]. To act as an instrument of God's will, one must be genuinely free of doubt. But those who were involved in this incident were not. That was most apparent in Bhaktipada himself, who being always in search of plausible deniability, gave equivocal instructions and abandoned his support at the crucial moment that the assassin came to get money for his escape, a fatal error that made the whole New Vrindavan house of cards collapse. No part of the job was conducted professionally: as one detective is quoted as saying, "It was a professional hit conducted by amateurs."

Stupidity, and paranoia, cheapness about the money for the hit-man Tirtha when he needed to escape. It was as though they thought, "Let him be caught." As Sophocles said, "Evil appears as good in the minds of those whom the gods would lead to destruction," or, "Those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad."

And so when Tapahpunja Swami, while on the run, was asked by an Irish devotee, "Since when do we take the law into our own hands?" he could still answer, "It was completely Vedic. [Sulochan] had offended Bhaktipada."

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Could history repeat itself?

Antinomianism is the name given to the belief that those who have received God's grace or "the Truth" are beyond the restrictions of a socially established morality. Antinomianism finds a place in most of the world's religions, and has played a role in some of the worst horrors of human history, whether it is a religious or atheistic antinomianism. Indeed, the history of the 20th century can be considered a strong warning against the antinomian idea, which is especially prominent in religions where there is a strong martial spirit.

In the last world war, for instance, the famous Japanese popularizer of Zen Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki, published many works in Japan after the invasions of Korea and China in which he wrote repeatedly of the "unity of Zen and the sword."

Of greater interest to us is the love that the architect of the Holocaust, Heinrich Himmler, had for the *Bhagavad Gita*. He is said to have carried a *Gita* with him wherever he went. In a famous speech to SS officers at Posener in 1943, at the height of implementing the "final solution," he assured his audience as follows: "These deeds do not inflict any damage on our inner selves, our souls, and our characters. In the same manner, Krishna assured Arjuna that the latter's acts would not pollute his higher self by completing his murderous duty: Whatever I do, it cannot pollute me. [...] The one who merges with Me, frees himself from everything, and he is not bound by his deeds."

Brian Victoria, who has investigated this interesting detail from history, comments that Himmler thus "encouraged the members of the SS to conduct their murderous acts, unemotionally in a cool detached manner just as Krishna instructed the charioteer Arjuna... The speech was focused on the spiritual dimensions of war and the conduct of the warrior, which is the chief element of the Kshatriya philosophy of Hinduism."

One element that recurs through *Killing for Krishna* is the devotees' obsession with kshatriyaism. Srila Prabhupada first gave his instructions to implement Varnashram Dharma in ISKCON in early 1974. This is also when the obsession began in New Vrindavan, which was to be the showpiece of Varnashram implementation. Tirtha Das, the man who pulled the trigger on Sulochan, was a Vietnam veteran, and naturally considered himself a kshatriya, as indeed did Sulochan himself.

Of all the remarks made by Srila Prabhupada (and I cannot guarantee he was not joking) that comparing the spreading of ISKCON to that of Islam is perhaps the most troubling to me, especially in view of the strong component of fanaticism and totalitarianism in Islam. I found it very interesting that several of the protagonists in this drama used the Islamic term *jihad* ("holy war") to describe their mission.

I personally think, and have thought so for some time, that Islam is hardly the model we want to follow, and indeed that it was precisely the model that Chaitanya Vaishnavism reacted against. Mahaprabhu might have occasionally displayed anger, but on the whole, his followers believed that he did not punish the sinners and atheists, but changed their attitudes. In other articles I have been trying to make this point.

Another thing that Prabhupada communicated to his disciples was a bias towards Subhash Chandra Bose's militarism and against Gandhi's pacifism in the history of the Indian independence struggle. This was also an idea that Sulochan himself took hold of to strengthen his resolve.

Doktorski also cites Ramesvara (Robert Grant)'s testimony, which was also widely known when Srila Prabhupada was present, that he said that if we were in power, we could use the atom bomb by threatening people to become devotees or we would drop the bomb. Needless to say, these ideas are non-starters and those who hold them are doomed to repeat history due to not learning their lessons from it. In my view, that is the real lesson from this whole episode.

If the events of the last century and the dangers of totalitarianism and radical ideological thinking have not taught us of their dangers, events such as this should have.

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One of the great questions for adherents and critics of the Hare Krishna movement today is the role of Radhanath Swami, who was never inculpated for his role in making this murder happen, which even if it were merely passive knowledge is still enough to be incriminating, even if the courts have not pursued him.

In his investigation, after exhaustively examining court records and the notes of the various investigators, as well as decades long correspondence with many of the key players, Doktorski takes this issue on as objectively as possible and concludes that despite his denials, Radhanath was not only aware of the conspiracy, but aided and abetted the scheme.

It appears that Radhanath Swami has decided that covering up his role in this matter is the way he wants to deal with the situation. In view of his current important role in ISKCON, this is quite

understandable. But that does not make it right, not for him and not for ISKCON. If we don't want history to repeat itself, it is far more advisable to make a clean breast of it.

I have been reading and listening a lot lately to those Western thinkers who are pointing out the necessity of free speech. According to those who are currently speaking to this are people like Jordan Peterson and Jonatha Haidt, the essence of the Western tradition can be summarized in a devotion to truth (the Logos) and the recognition of the divinity of the individual. The fact is that the devotion to truth is also a part of the Hindu tradition as well, since God is identified with Truth. "Truth alone conquers." (*satyam eva jayate*) and the process of establishing the truth is inevitably the collective effort of humanity which is established not by suppression of the ideas we disagree with, but through dialogue or through synthesis.

Henry Doktorski in one place glorifies Sulochan as a truth-teller who was treated as a dangerous fanatic and made a martyr. Certainly he was an extremely flawed individual. But he spoke truths that made others afraid, precisely because they were afraid they might be true. Over the years, it seems that he was vindicated, as the events he set into motion did indeed result in at least a partial defusion of the fanatic tendency in ISKCON, but it is not altogether gone. The author himself says it took him years to face the truth about Kirtanananda and even now he has an inner conflict about the positive and negative aspects of his career.

Speaking the truth is not necessarily faultfinding. We must not be afraid of it. Rather we should be afraid of the kind ideological thinking that makes us believe prematurely that we are transcendental to ethics or morality. Recently a friend of mine told me he intended to start a religion, but that he was not interested in ethics. Indeed, he told me so in response to my suggestion that he was undertaking unethical actions. How can a religion be indifferent to morality? Until one has become disciplined by a moral or ethical view of life—*yamas and niyamas*—the rest of religion is merely ritual and story that serves no real function.

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Jagadananda Das (Dr. Jan K. Brzezinski) was formerly Hiranyagarbha dasa, a disciple of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who served as the headmaster for New Vrindaban's Varnashram College in 1974. Today he lives in Vrindaban, India, where he edits and translates Gaudiya-Vaishnava literatures for educational institutions. The photo above, taken by the author, depicts the half-finished samadhi of Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada on the Parikrama Marg in Pani Ghat, Vrindavan, India. "Antinomianism and the Hare Krishna Movement: A cautionary tale from history" was originally published on Facebook on March 31, 2018. See:

<https://www.facebook.com/notes/jagadananda-das/antinomianism-and-the-hare-krishna-movement-a-cautionary-tale-from-history/10155352059705983/>